The Legal Information Sector: Designing and Delivering a Postgraduate LIS Module

Abstract: Last year **Jake Hearn,** Vice Chair of the LIM editorial board, created an elective module on the core components of and types of roles within the legal information profession, which was offered to postgraduate students at City, University of London, with the module being hosted at City, University of London and The Honourable Society of the Middle Temple. Here Jake gives the reasons for creating the module and tells us how it all came together and how it has progressed since then.

Keywords: education and training; legal information; information management

INTRODUCTION

Back in 2023, I designed and – with the help of two other legal information professionals and representatives from CILIP and CB Resourcing – delivered an elective module on the core components of and types of roles within the legal information profession. The module was hosted at City, University of London, and The Honourable Society of the Middle Temple back in May 2023, and was offered to postgraduate students on the MA Library and Information Studies course at City as well as those studying at University College London.

This article outlines my reasons for creating the module; how I created it; the delivery of it; and some thoughts and reflections from those who contributed. I use the term legal information profession, instead of law librarianship, by way of covering all library, information and knowledge roles across the sector.

BACKGROUND

In August 2021, I started a new role at the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, I had given a talk a month before to the Cambridge Libraries Group on Artificial Intelligence in the legal information sector, and had just taken part in CILIP's research report: 'The impact of AI, machine learning, automation and robotics on the information profession'.[1] All three of these professional developments – albeit a welcome relief after the various lockdown restrictions earlier that year – highlighted an important issue that came to light during conversations with colleagues and other professionals: the effects lockdown had, and still has, on recruitment in the legal information sector.

In March 2022, I renewed my association with University College London, where I had been a student myself, having been invited to give a talk on Artificial Intelligence. It was here that I noticed there were no modules that focused solely on legal information, Knowledge Management, or the work of information professionals in the legal sector. Conversations with students about their thoughts on entering the legal information profession highlighted that several of them were interested, although did not know much about the types of roles out there, but were also concerned by their own lack of legal and commercial knowledge. It soon became apparent that library school curricula in the United Kingdom scarcely covered the legal information profession.

In delivering this sector-specific module, the main outcome I was hoping for was to bring to students' attention an area of the libraries, information and knowledge profession that offers a vast number of opportunities, career developments and competitive salaries and benefits. By increasing awareness of this area of the profession, students, upon completing their studies, are more likely to engage with job adverts for information professionals in various legal organisations and not only help break the recruitment logjam but encourage a new generation of qualified information professionals into the legal information sector.

CREATING THE COURSE

Having met and spoken to the course director of the MA Library and Information Studies in April 2022 at an unrelated event hosted for University of London students at Middle Temple, work began on designing an

elective half-module focused on the legal information sector. As a pilot module, it was decided that it would be an intensive one taught over three days and split into six themes. The first step was to have the module ratified by the relevant leadership team at the university.

Having received the necessary approval from the faculty's Dean, I began mapping out which areas of the profession I wanted to cover in the module: I wanted as broad a coverage as possible but was also aware that I only had three days in which to do so, therefore finding a balance between detail and breadth was important. Given the vastness of the legal information sector, and the range of roles and types of work available to graduates, I decided to focus on areas where recruitment was high, and sectors and roles that drew upon a vast range of skills needed.

Coupled with this, I did not want the module to be purely theoretical or academic; instead, I wanted to create something vocational, whereby students received practical advice on how to apply for roles, and insight into what employers look for when hiring legal information professionals. Students were encouraged to ask candid questions about salaries, benefits and working culture by way of dispelling any misconceptions about legal information work.

I decided to set legal research tasks that would require students to use a range of subscription and open-access databases to undertake legislation and case law searches. I wanted practical workshop sessions on big themes, such as Artificial Intelligence, where they would use Generative AI software, and considered wider questions around the impacts of AI on the libraries, information and knowledge sector. In my experience of interviewing for various roles throughout the course of my professional career, those hiring often asked my thoughts on current trends, issues and developments within the legal world. I was mindful to encourage discussion between students on big topics such as legal technology, copyright, open access, and library funding.
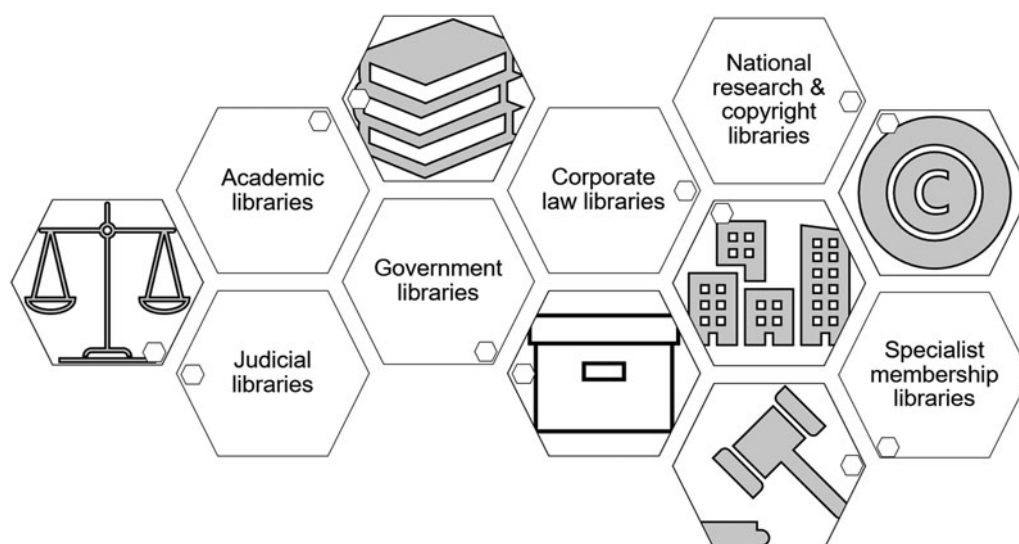
Finally, although I was sharing my own experiences of working in the legal information sector, I was keen for other voices, experiences and representatives from the sector to be heard. I invited a CILIP representative to talk about the practicalities and benefits of Chartership and the recently established Knowledge Management Chartership. I also wanted students to have the opportunity to hear from a recruitment specialist and receive advice and practical guidance on the next step after their studies: finding a new job or continuing professional development. The agreed schedule of study looked as follows.

DELIVERING THE COURSE

The first two days of the module were delivered at City, University of London, in its teaching rooms. The final day's sessions were delivered at Middle Temple – the reason behind this was so students could see the workings of a modern legal reference library, its collections, and have the opportunity to engage with some of the Inn's historical printed legal materials. Each day consisted of a lecture, a workshop task, and a guest speaker, to ensure that sessions were practical, vocational in style, and enabled students to engage and ask questions throughout.

One session in particular that was well-received by students was the workshop on Artificial Intelligence. The session opened with a talk on the impacts of Artificial Intelligence across various areas of the legal profession; it then explored the role of legal information professionals and included case studies on how AI was being used in law libraries in the UK and US. The session then led into a workshop where students were set a legal research task and asked to use ChatGPT to see what answers they could find. Whilst completing the task itself, students also completed a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) grid regarding the impacts of AI on legal information work. Students presented their answers and work back to the rest of the class, which was more of a conversation than a structured session.

	Day 1 – City, U. of London	Day 2 – City, U. Of London	Day 3 – Middle Temple
AM	History / overview of the legal information profession	**Part 1**: Corporate legal libraries **Part 2**: Artificial Intelligence workshop	**Part 1**: Specialist and membership libraries **Part 2**: Legal rare books workshop
PM	**Part 1**: National deposit libraries. Workshop on how to market library services **Part 2**: Guest speaker, Greg Bennett, academic law libraries	**Part 1**: Knowledge Management **Part 2**: Guest speaker, Catherine McClaren, CILIP KM Chartership	**Part 1**: Legal research task and feedback session **Part 2**: Guest speaker, Tim Palmer, CB Resourcing

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Slide from the first session

The three guest speakers presented on various topics. On Monday, Greg Bennett, Academic Liaison Lead Librarian at BPP University, spoke on his work as an academic law librarian, his experience creating a law library from scratch, and his unique perspective of working as a law librarian and studying the Legal Practice Course (undertaken by those wishing to become a solicitor) in tandem. CILIP representative Catherine McClaren spoke about the recently established Knowledge Management Chartership and the benefits of CILIP membership to early-career professionals. And rounding off the module, Tim Palmer from CB Resourcing spoke about the practicalities of recruitment after graduation: from types of roles on offer to graduates, formatting CVs, and things to note and prepare for before and during the interview process.

REFLECTIONS

The module was an intensive one, where a lot of information was presented in a short timeframe, and I was keen to strike a balance between giving students as much information as possible but ensuring that they were not overwhelmed. One of the main points I wanted to highlight was not just the range of organisations open to legal information professionals, but also, as emphasised by Tim Palmer, the recognition and value of legal information professionals within those organisations: "Organisations typically see KM, Libraries and Research as a means of gaining a competitive advantage, so the functions are heavily supported in terms of innovation and investment," Tim said.

He was also keen to highlight the vast number of benefits that a career in legal information brings: "These industries typically encourage innovation at an individual level too, which offers both variety and challenge to roles in the short, medium and longer term. If money is a motivating factor, law firms recognise and reward the value that information and knowledge management professionals offer, and in a market where demand exceeds supply, you will typically see salaries accelerate as firms seek to both hire and retain talent."
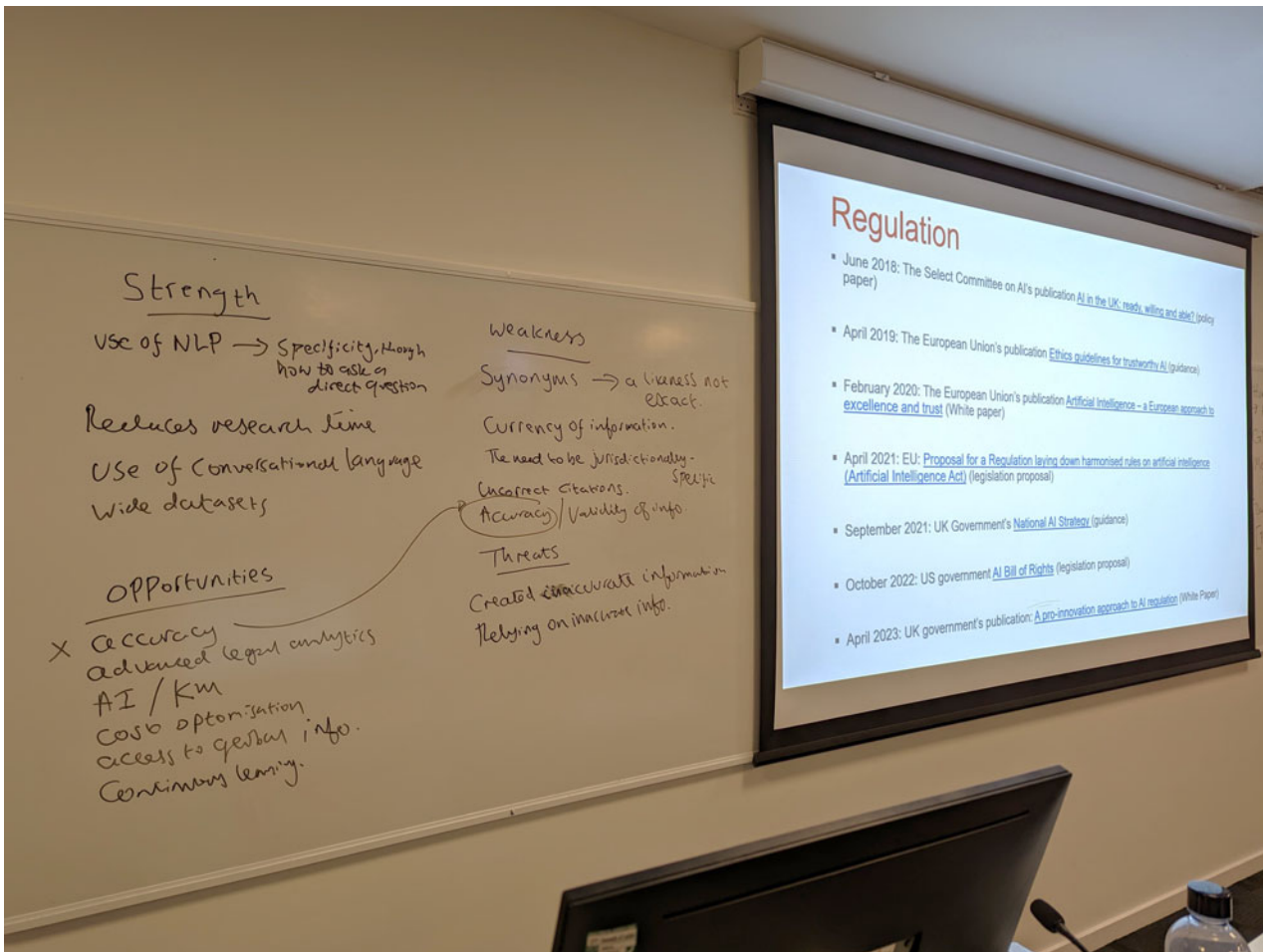
Similarly, another theme that emerged throughout the module was the range of skills and expertise developed, as highlighted by Greg Bennett in his talk: "I think the beauty of specifically law librarianship is that you can gain both the general skills of a librarian, but you also develop a very specific expertise that no-one else will quite have developed as much as a law librarian."

The future of the profession will only develop to meet new demands if it continues to attract new entrants in the form of graduates, graduate trainees, and apprentices. Professional organisations such as BIALL and CILIP in the UK, and their international counterparts, must work more closely with iSchools and universities offering degrees and PG Dips in library and information studies to champion the profession and encourage new professionals into it.

Note from the author

This pilot module, after having been taught at City, University of London, was then rolled out in November 2023 to students studying on the University of Manchester's newly established MA Library and Archive Studies. The module was adapted to include a large section on rare printed legal materials, the use of legal archives and rare books cataloguing in legal reference work.

If anyone has any questions, or would like to discuss this project further, please contact the author via LIM at Limeditor@biall.org.uk

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The AI workshop

Endnotes

[1] Andrew M Cox, *The Impact of AI, Machine Learning, Automation and Robotics on the Information Profession: a Report for CILIP* (Research Report) (CILIP, 2021) 25 <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip/research/tech_review/cilip_%e2%80%93_ai_report_-_final_lo.pdf>

Biography

Jake Hearn has worked in the legal information sector for six years in a variety of roles spanning commercial law, the Inns of Court, and parliament. In 2023, he was a visiting guest lecturer at City, University of London, and went on to guest lecture at the University of Manchester on their newly established MA Library and Archive Studies programme. He continues to teach ad-hoc sessions on Artificial Intelligence and legal resources at University College London. Presently, he is Vice Chair on the editorial board of Legal Information Management journal.