ZOOMING IN TO THE NEW 'NORMAL': LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Prior to 2020, access to the Supreme Court Library Queensland's collection and information services predominately occurred onsite in Brisbane. To ensure the continuity of our services during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, we harnessed the digital space to stay connected with our audiences. In this paper, we share six key lessons we have learnt over the past two years that have seen us improve our services and reach audiences in ways we would not have thought possible. As we shift into the 'new normal', we have discovered that our hybrid approach has had many strategic benefits.

Keywords: COVID 19, library services, online learning, digital access, training, legal research training, open access, inclusive technology, accessibility, awareness, user experience, new normal, legal research

Introduction

The Supreme Court Library Queensland (SCLQ)[1] was established in 1862 to serve the judiciary and legal profession in the administration of justice in Queensland. Over time, we have widened our reach and now support all Queenslanders to access legal information. One of our more unique features is that we deliver an education program that includes teaching approximately 1,000 high school students legal research skills each year.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our legal research program for students was delivered onsite in Brisbane. In response to ongoing lockdowns and restrictions that impacted the delivery of our program to this audience, we rapidly developed new digital products and services, including:

- developing the *Legal studies resources collection*[2] (an online, open source catalogue of legal information for Legal Studies students)
- producing five worksheets[3] with worked examples that assist students to develop fundamental research skills (for example, how to create an effective search string)
- creating an online legal research program (with worksheets and troubleshooting guide)
- producing six legal research videos[4].

Although this approach was initially developed to support students and teachers to access high-quality legal information and expertise, we have found that other audiences (such as Bar pupils,

1 *Supreme Court Library Queensland*, (Web Page) <https://www.sclqld.org.au/>.
2 'Legal studies resources collection', *Supreme Court Library Queensland* (Web Page) <https://sclq.tind.io/collection/Legal%20studies%20resources?ln=en>.
3 'Without fear or favour: Exploring Queensland's legal system', *Supreme Court Library Queensland* (Web Page) <https://legalheritage.sclqld.org.au/exhibitions/WFOF>.
4 'Citation tracking using casebase, firstpoint and lawcite', *Youtube* (Video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBcqirHggvU&list=PLGs5E1hjmtGADQ3ppFB6WO0U2g_2LpY0T>.

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Judges' Associates and emerging legal professionals) have also benefited from our new hybrid and digital approach.

This report will share six lessons we have learnt over the past two years that have allowed us to develop and strengthen our relationship with this key audience, increase accessibility and build awareness that we are Queensland's home of legal information. Lessons one to three focus on our *Legal studies resources collection*, with lessons four to six centred on our online legal research program.

Lesson one: embrace specialist knowledge when putting together a team

Creating a team with diverse expertise was critical to developing each facet of our new digital legal research education space. A central element of the space, the *Legal studies resources collection* was created by three core team members:

- *Kirsten Murray, Programs Manager (Community Education and Engagement):* Kirsten's curriculum knowledge and strong relationship with the teaching community was invaluable to ensuring the content chosen for the collection was relevant and useable.
- *Kat Lee, Legal Research and Customer Service Librarian:* Kat's legal research and learning design skills were essential for locating relevant sources and creating practical and age-specific learning material.
- *Pippa Shaw, Collection Management Technician:* Pippa's cataloguing expertise was fundamental for organising and cataloguing the sources for maximum discoverability.

Working on this collection allowed each team member to develop, expand and apply their knowledge and skills to new areas, which was rewarding personally and professionally. To ensure the team worked effectively and efficiently, it was important to establish clear roles and responsibilities at the beginning of the project and communicate openly during the collaboration process.

Lesson two: there is a demand for open-access resources

SCLQ plays a crucial role in providing Queenslanders with access to legal information. Ongoing lockdowns, the expense of legal materials and an inability to extend access to our Virtual Legal Library (VLL) service saw us create the *Legal studies resources collection*.

To create this collection, we gathered a list of topics from the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) curriculum[5] and teachers. Next, we located various freely available sources, including government reports, inquiry submissions, news articles, journal articles, websites, textbooks and statistical information. These resources were then catalogued in our Library Management System (LMS) TIND.

5 'Legal Studies General Senior Syllabus 2019: Syllabus', *Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority* (Web Page) <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/senior/senior-subjects/humanities-social-sciences/legal-studies/syllabus>.

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Over twelve months, the collection has been searched 5550 times (Figure 1). This is almost on par with our subscription collection, which has been searched 6967 times in the same period (Figure 1).

After accessing this collection, one School Librarian commented, *'These are wonderful, it must have taken many months/years to create and then add all of these. Terrific to see law librarians thinking of and helping (we hope) colleagues.'*

Since its launch in late 2019, we have found that the collection:

- contains sources that are more relevant and better suited to the specific needs of Legal Studies students, as opposed to our print and online collection, which is targeted towards legal practitioners and judicial officers
- has provided us with a way to become part of students' legal research journey
- has created a stronger partnership with teachers and students.

Lesson three: promote, promote and promote your resources and services

It is not a matter of 'make it, and they will come'. To share the *Legal studies resources collection* with our target audience over the past two years we have used:

- social media (Twitter and Instagram)
- our e-newsletter
- continuing professional development (CPD) programs, including attending industry conferences
- word of mouth.

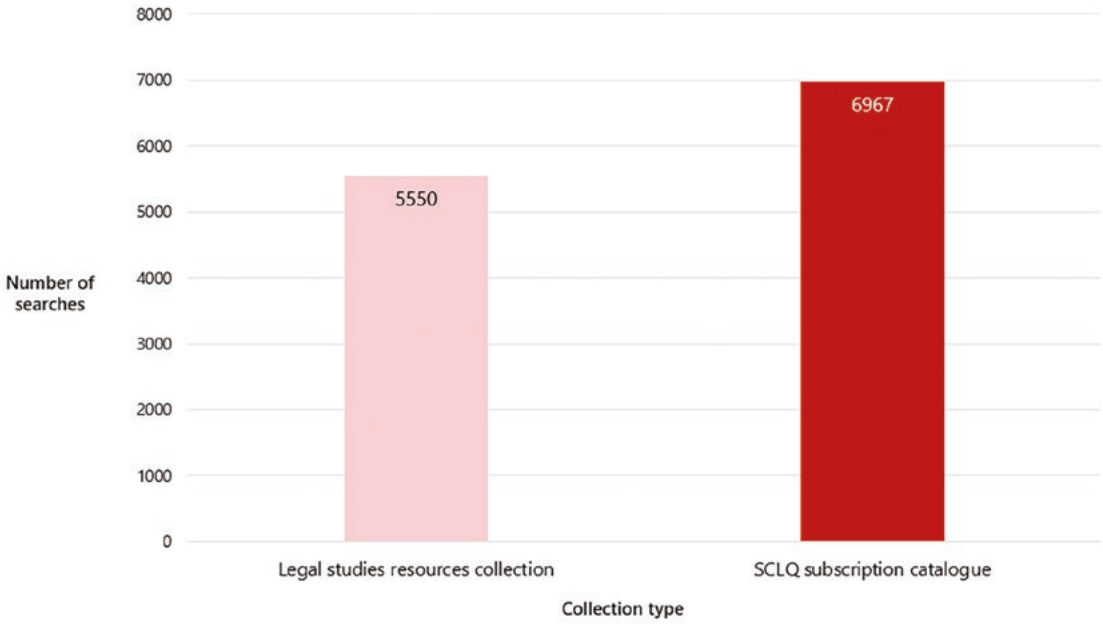

Figure 1: Number of times our *Legal studies resources collection* and SCLQ subscription catalogue were searched in the last 12 months.

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We have also showcased the collection by integrating it within existing programs. Each time we promote the collection, we use the same key messages but place them within a different and ever-changing commentary. For example, at the start of the school year, in our e-newsletter, we encouraged Year 11 teachers to share our collection with their students so they had a place to start their legal research journey. A survey of teachers found that the most common way they discovered the collection was by attending a CPD session, then followed by reading our e-newsletter and then via word of mouth. Our next goal is to find ways to share the collection with other professional networks, such as the Australian Teacher Librarian Association (ATLA) to create relationships with a broader network of potential users.

Lesson four: embrace the hybrid model

Despite being back to 'normal' there is still a demand for online training and services. As schools can be located anywhere in Queensland, having a digital program means we can offer regional and remote students the same experience as those based in Brisbane. In 2021, we delivered 72 legal research talks, with 29 delivered online. Of the 20 unique schools we spoke to, 12 were located outside the Greater Brisbane Area (Figure 2).

From January to June 2022, 60% of schools we have spoken to about legal research have been online. Teachers love the flexibility and tailored approach with one teacher commenting, *'Relevant and task specific every time. Catered for Year 11 and 12 topics... Availability is always great, and I have been able to book*

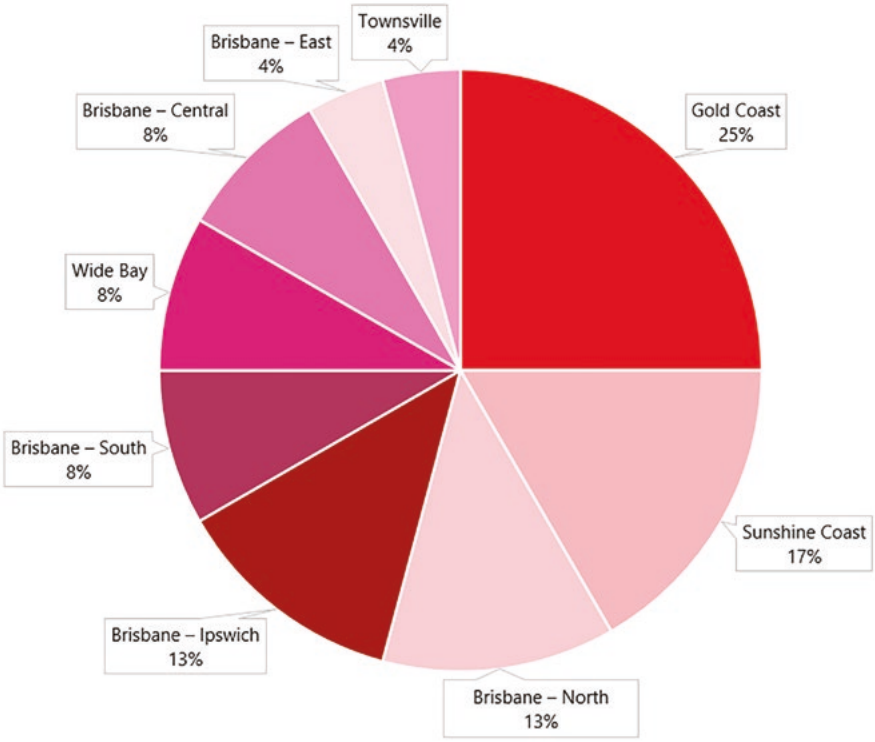

Figure 2: Schools by QCAA geographical regions.

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on the day requested every time. I will do this every year for my students'. As a result of the positive feedback we have received from teachers, coupled with the growth of our digital skills, SCLQ now offers training online for Judges' Associates, Bar pupils and legal practitioners. This has been invaluable for ensuring we can reach those based in regional areas and can offer training at any point in time.

Lesson five: moving online can increase your engagement

While our onsite programs remain popular, moving online has allowed us to reach more people (Figure 3).

The benefits of having an online program include being able to:

- provide a program to students during lockdown or periods when travel or density restrictions apply
- offer schools who have not visited SCLQ before (due to financial constraints or geographic location) the ability to connect with experienced law librarians and court educators
- speak with students more than once and at a time when they need support the most.

We do not perceive that our digital program will ever replace our onsite program. However, it has become clear that with the increased demand for hybrid options, we need to upskill more staff to deliver training and education programs across both environments.

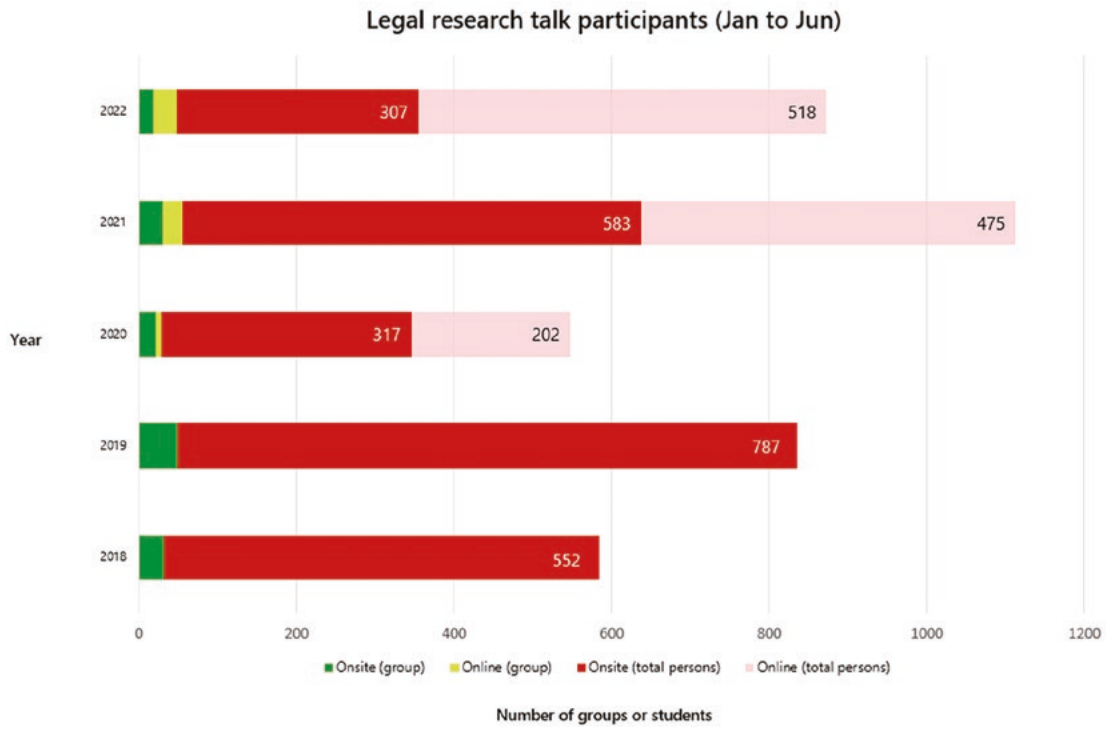

Figure 3: Legal research talk participants (January to June).

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Lesson six: there is no substitute for trial and error

Issues with technology and staff being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with presenting in an online environment have been our main challenges in shifting to the 'new normal'. Like many organisations, we have tried several different video conferencing platforms, including Zoom (both 'meetings' and 'webinar' modes) and MS Teams. Today you will find us using MS Teams the most – in June 2022, 77% of our talks had been presented through this platform. But, none of these programs are issue free. In 2021, 20% of teachers who participated in one of our online talks experienced an issue with technology. Constant experimentation has seen staff become more confident in responding to common issues (such as audio dropping out) when delivering services online, and we also find organising a test run an excellent way to minimise stress. We also use evaluative survey tools and hold regular review sessions to continue to refine the content, style and pace of our online services, as well as update a troubleshooting guide we provide teachers ahead of their program.

Conclusion

Although the pandemic largely drove this project, it was also guided by our strategic goals and for this reason, it has provided us with many benefits. It has increased access, awareness and user experience by:

- transitioning some of our services online;
- developing new digital products and services in response to shifting needs and opportunities;
- continuously improving our remote (digital) services;
- raising awareness of SCLQ among existing and new audiences;
- establishing (or reaffirming) our reputation as Queensland's leading legal information provider;
- increasing use of our online spaces, collections and services.

Looking to the future, we plan to keep piloting more innovative digital projects to help us support more Queenslanders to access legal information.