

The Law Society of Ireland Library; Serving the Solicitors' Profession in Challenging Times

Abstract: Mary Gaynor gives a brief outline of the historical context of the establishment and development of the Law Society of Ireland library service. She describes core services to solicitor members and trainee solicitors. The impact of the economic recession on the number of solicitors entering, and staying within the profession, is discussed in the context of how the library has adapted to meet the changing needs of its users.

Keywords: law libraries; legal profession; Ireland

Historical context

The Law Society of Ireland library is a private library for solicitors and trainee solicitors. The solicitors' profession has had a library from as early as 1842. A comprehensive history of the development of the library and its services was published in *The Law Society of Ireland 1852–2002: portrait of a profession*¹. The library has gone through many phases in its history, including a total resurrection after the destruction of its location and entire stock during the Four Courts fire in April 1922. The ensuing decades saw a number of relocations of the library, most significantly in 1978 when the library moved from the Four Courts Building to the site of the former King's Hospital School at Blackhall Place and again in 2000 when the library was relocated within the Blackhall Place campus. This last relocation positioned the library in a former Lecture Hall which was extensively refurbished to suit the library's requirements. A mezzanine floor was added to extend shelving space. IT facilities were enhanced and library staff numbers were increased from three to five. A separate multiple copy collection was established for the first time to cater for the needs of a growing number of trainee solicitors.

2001 – 2011, a decade of rising and falling student numbers

In the last decade the library has settled into its current location and the collections and services have continued to be developed under the excellent stewardship of Margaret Byrne, Librarian 1974–2010, and under the overall umbrella of the *Policy, Communications and Member*

Services directorate. When the library was relocated in 2000 the solicitors profession was experiencing a boom in numbers, there were over 5,257 practising solicitors and the new Education Centre facilities were designed to accommodate over 460 students over Professional Practice and Advanced courses. The numbers continued to grow and by 2006 there were approximately 7,416 solicitors with practising certificates. Almost 2000 students attended the Professional Practice Courses 1 and 2 between September 2006 and September 2007². In order to physically accommodate the number of students on campus lectures were repeated to two separate groups and a night course was established to clear a backlog of students waiting for places on the Profession Practice Course 1. A second law school was opened in Cork and library facilities in UCC were provided for these students. Sadly due to the more recent dramatic decline in student numbers the Law School in Cork closed in July 2011.

During the period from 2002–2007 the professional practice courses were largely “assignment” driven and the library resources were extensively used by trainee solicitors. Key textbooks were in high demand and short loans from the student multiple copy collection were in constant circulation. Numbers of solicitors and trainee solicitors peaked in 2006 but by mid 2007 the Irish economy had begun to decline and the solicitors' profession did not escape the effects of the downturn. Between 2007 and 2010 the number of trainees dropped by 38%. Coinciding with the decline in numbers the professional practice course structure changed with a shift in focus away from written assignments and towards skills based learning. The Society's Education Centre, in collaboration with Oxford University Press, arranged for the publication of student manuals on various legal topics on the curriculum and this removed pressure from the



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library stock of practitioner textbooks in these areas. This led to a drop in student use of the library lending services and it was decided to merge the student multiple copy collection back into the main lending stock. Of course trainee solicitors do still read materials outside of the official manuals but the frenetic levels of borrowing key textbooks has abated in the last two years. Many students partake in Moot competitions, both at domestic and international level and the library assists in providing

resources and research advice to these students. The library also provides services to an increasing number of students pursuing a wide range of Diploma and Certificate courses, both attending on-site and via web-casting and other distance learning options. Subjects covered in Diploma Courses include employment law, insolvency and corporate restructuring, investment funds law and compliance, trust and estate planning etc. As many of these courses deal with very specific topics at an

advanced level the purchasing of materials and composition and updating of reading lists to support these courses has become part of the library function.

Library resources and services for members

Despite the decline in the number of newly qualified solicitors going on to become members of the Law Society, membership numbers have grown over the last few years. As at end of 2010 there were over 9,700 membership subscriptions, approximately 430 more than the previous year, but a significant portion of the increase was attributable to unemployed solicitors availing of free membership. Members are located throughout the country with an obvious demographic concentration around the Dublin area. Members in sole practice or in small to medium size practices might only purchase core textbooks and would rely heavily on the Law Society library services. Larger firms have access to the full range of legal databases available and have good collections of textbooks and other materials, and tend to use the library mainly for textbook loans and to source copies of case law for books of authorities.

In an effort to support the growing number of unemployed newly qualified solicitors and other solicitors who have lost their jobs due to shrinkage in the market, the Law Society has established a Career Support Service which offers career advice, briefings on employment opportunities, networking sessions and free Society membership to solicitors seeking employment. This includes an entitlement to continue using the library services. Unemployed solicitors use the library resources to assist them in preparing for interviews and to help keep up to date with new developments within a variety of practice areas. The library holds a reference set of the Law Society's Continuing Professional Development Seminar Papers which are a very useful up to date source of practical information on various topics and these are available to all members and trainees.

The library currently has a stock of approximately 10,000 monographs, including books, conference proceedings, seminar papers and government reports. Over 9,000 Irish written reserved judgments since 1990 are indexed on the online catalogue, including abstracts supplied by the Incorporated Council for Law Reporting in Ireland and featuring url links to Bailii where available. Pre-1990 judgments are indexed in hard copy. It is hoped to back catalogue the entire collection of unreported judgments – back to mid 1960s – over the next year or two. A major project to scan the entire collection to soft copy is now underway. The Library holds a large collection of Statutes and Statutory Instruments in hard copy and there are catalogue records for these documents since 1997. The progress of Bills presented in the Houses of the Oireachtas is tracked on a daily basis. The Library subscribes to all Irish legal journals and a broad selection

of journals from UK, EU and other jurisdictions. Increasingly online subscriptions to journals are the preferable option but to date paper subscriptions have also been maintained. In future years it may be necessary to review the number of print subscriptions to non-Irish journals as the shelving space and external storage arrangements for such materials is finite. All of the major series of Irish and UK law reports are purchased and many of these are also available in pdf format via online subscriptions. The library also has an ongoing binding/preservation programme and is in the process of reviewing policies for electronic preservation of both archival and current materials.

The library's catalogue is on the SirsiDynix Symphony library management system with OPAC available online via the members' area on the Law Society website since 1997. It is now also searchable on i-phone/i-pad mobiles via a freely downloadable library App *BookMyne*. The App allows on-the-go library users the facility of searching materials and requesting loans/renewing loans without having to login to the members' area on the website. It is hoped to continue with further enhancements to the online catalogue to support a better and more accessible experience for online users.

Central to the library's activities are the services provided to members including textbook loans, precedent service (paper and electronic), article/case law research etc. During 2010 the library lent almost 6642 books to members and current statistics for 2011 suggest that this figure will reach 8000 by year end. The library staff provide advice on over 300 queries each month. Queries come from sole practitioners, medium and large firms and are varied across a broad spectrum of topics. They can range from straightforward requests for copies of law reports to more complex questions requiring subject searching or legislation status checking. In recent years there has been a significant emphasis on queries relating to employment issues, banking, bankruptcy, insolvency, debt collection and other subjects which reflect the troubled economic situation we find ourselves in. Documents are supplied mainly by email. There is a speedy turnaround time in dealing with queries where the library has relevant materials in stock. For materials not held in stock, the library has arrangements in place with the excellent services supplied by Trinity College Dublin's Information Service, the British Library and the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Library. The library also has developed informal arrangements with many other law libraries, in Ireland and overseas, over the years.

Conclusion

In recessionary times "value for money" in purchasing materials and services is of crucial importance. Assessing the value of resources and their likely usage is not an exact science and planning a development strategy can

become quite complicated when there is a noticeable contraction in purchasing power. Keeping a close watch on trends of library use is a good indicator of where resources need to be allocated and at present the library is pushing increased resources into particular areas such as book purchasing, to support the needs of practitioners, who for the moment may prefer to borrow than to buy books.

Despite the fluctuation in student numbers and the knock-on impact on numbers within the profession, the library has maintained its services and is committed to

continuing to support the research needs of the profession throughout the recessionary period and beyond. The library staff team are also actively examining what is the best model for the supply of legal information to our varied profile of users in future so that relevant and accurate materials are more easily accessible. Enhancements in library technology offer some indicators of the way ahead but like many other law libraries we are endeavouring to find the correct balance between satisfying the demands of all of our users and introducing innovation at an acceptable pace.

Footnotes

¹Byrne, Margaret. (2002) "The Law Society Library" in Hall, Eamonn G. and Daire Hogan (eds.) *The Law Society of Ireland 1852–2002: portrait of a profession*. Dublin, Four Courts Press. 197–208.

²*Annual Report of the Law Society of Ireland 2006/7*. 14–15.

Biography

Mary Gaynor is Head of Library and Information Services at the Law Society of Ireland Library.

From Law Library Society to Law Library: the First 180 Years, 1816–1996

Abstract: This article, by Jennefer Aston, outlines the origins of The Law Library, focusing on its librarians and the services that were provided for members in the first 180 years.

Keywords: law libraries; legal profession; Ireland

Introduction

No issue dealing with Law Libraries in Ireland would be complete without some mention of The Law Library in Dublin. The library is owned by and serves the practising Bar of Ireland (currently over 2,000 members). The present information services in the Law Library have

been highlighted in John Duffy's recent article¹ so I am going to concentrate on the past. I will deal briefly with the first 180 years of The Law Library, its library service and some of the librarians during that period.

Today the library is run by the Bar Council, funded entirely by subscriptions from, and is the centre of work for, the practising members of the Irish Bar. The Bars of Northern Ireland and Scotland² also use the library-based