

⁴ Webmaster Tools reports over 33 million external links or back links from other websites to legislation.gov.uk.

⁵ For more technical context see Tullo, *Online Access to UK Legislation: Strategy and Structure*, Biasiotti and Faro, *From Information to Knowledge*, IOS Press (2011).

⁶ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cabinet-office/series/good-law>

⁸ Martine Reicherts, Director-General of the Publications Office of the European Union, July 2013.

Biography

Director of Information Policy and Services at The National Archives, Carol Tullo is Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office which under Letters Patent is the Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament across the UK. This carries responsibilities for inter alia, the accuracy and integrity of legislation.

Legal Information Management, 13 (2013), pp. 224–230

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doi:10.1017/S1472669613000522

From Academia to the Office: New Professionals in the Workplace

Abstract: This paper written by Samuel Wiggins and Marie Cannon is drawn from their presentation at the 2013 BIALL Annual Conference. The article presents the findings of a survey conducted to explore the perceptions of New Professionals in the library and information sector, and the various challenges and issues they face on entering their first professional roles within law librarianship. The relevance of the professional library and information qualification within the legal sector is considered, as are potential barriers to working with legal information. The required skill sets and training needs for New Professionals and experienced professionals are also compared.

Keywords: information professionals; law librarianship; survey

INTRODUCTION

The term “New Professional” has been heavily referred to over the last few years, yet anecdotal evidence shows there are relatively few new entrants to law librarianship. The expectations of what library and information professionals across the sector believe a ‘New Professional’ to be, and what skills they should possess, appear to be highly subjective and widely varied. This insubstantial evidence has created a need to investigate how New Professionals are perceived within the legal sector, how these perceptions compare to new entrants to law librarianship, and how the challenges that New Professionals are now facing might discourage the next generation of library and information professionals from working with legal information.

THE SURVEY

To investigate perceptions of New Professionals, and the potential barriers they face, a survey was undertaken. A total of 275 responses were received – equating to approximately 27% of the sample size. The survey made use of both qualitative and quantitative questions, spread across four streams. The streams separated responses from those who had never worked with legal information, those who no longer worked in the legal sector, and divided those who still classed themselves as working with legal information into New Professionals, and established professionals.

The responses to the questionnaire were wide ranging, and reflected the truly global reach of law librarianship. 56%

of respondents came from the UK and Ireland, 19% from the USA and Canada, with the remaining responses coming from South Africa, Uganda, Ghana, Hong Kong, Australia, India and Lithuania. The responses demonstrate how law firms headquartered in the USA and UK have spread their networks across the world – representing the globalisation of the legal network. The predominant areas not represented in the responses received were South America, the Middle East, South East Asia and mainland Europe. It is suspected that this is due to linguistic barriers, and demonstrates areas that the main English-speaking legal information networks for librarians and information professionals have not yet connected with.

The broad array of responses received showed a strong cross-section of the information society. 68% had over 10 years' experience, with over one third of all respondents having over 20 years' experience. The majority of the replies came from those working for law firms, followed by those working with legal information in an academic library.

NEW PROFESSIONALS

The wider information community's perceptions of what they thought defined a New Professional were varied. To aid analysis, responses were codified using text analysis into categories containing similar views.

The largest category, 30% of the respondents, believed that a New Professional should have acquired a professional undergraduate or postgraduate library or information qualification within the last five years. This is a reasonable viewpoint, but would exclude those who have recently joined the profession without a qualification: graduate trainees, and library and information students who have not yet arrived at the end of their degree. This implies that the category feels that a degree in Library and Information Science is an important criterion in classifying oneself as a "professional".

17% of all respondents defined a New Professional solely as someone who has limited working experience in the library and information sector (LIS). 19% of responses felt it necessary to have both experience in a professional library or information role, as well as the qualification in their definition of a New Professional, even if the work experience is relatively minor. In total 34% of replies cited a requirement for work experience at some point in their definition (figure 1).

Just under a fifth of respondents perceived a New Professional to simply be someone who is new to the library and information profession, without any reference to qualifications or experience.

Surprisingly, 10% of the respondents did not know what a New Professional was; implying that it is possibly a recent term. More likely is that the phrase exists primarily within the UK and North America, with less prevalence outside of these countries.

Interestingly, the smallest group of responses felt that the term New Professional actually applied to a new, untraditional, and potentially unique role, possibly designed for a particular individual for a very specific purpose, rather than as a term applied to someone who is new in some way to the profession.

These responses can be explored further to understand an expected job level for a New Professional from respondents' definitions. 49% of all replies included having a library or information qualification – either before or after five years into their career – within their definition of a New Professional. Just over one third of responses included a need for limited work experience within the profession, but only two thirds of these descriptions specified that the experience be within a professional position. From these figures, it could be assumed that of the respondents who deemed the qualification important to the definition of a New Professional, only a small minority thought a New Professional would have secured a professional position, with the rest thinking of a New

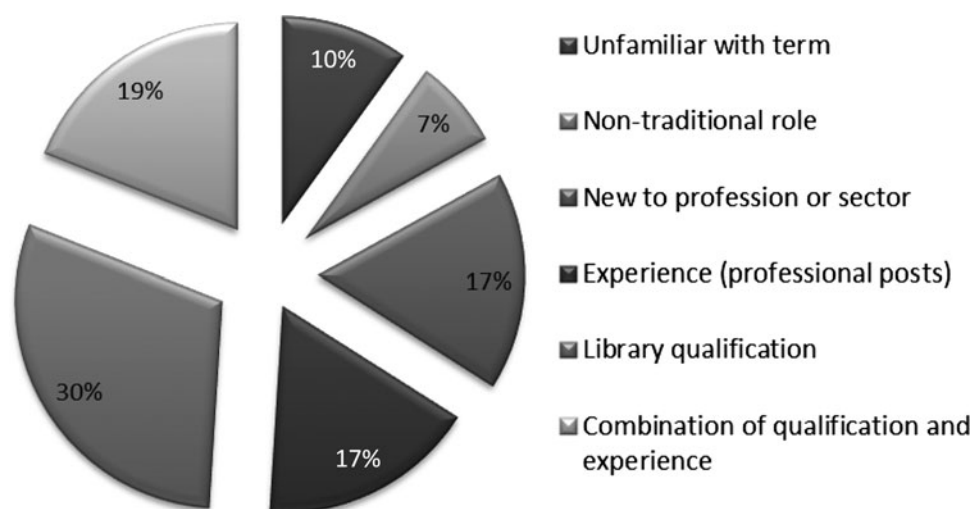


Figure 1: Definitions of a new professional.

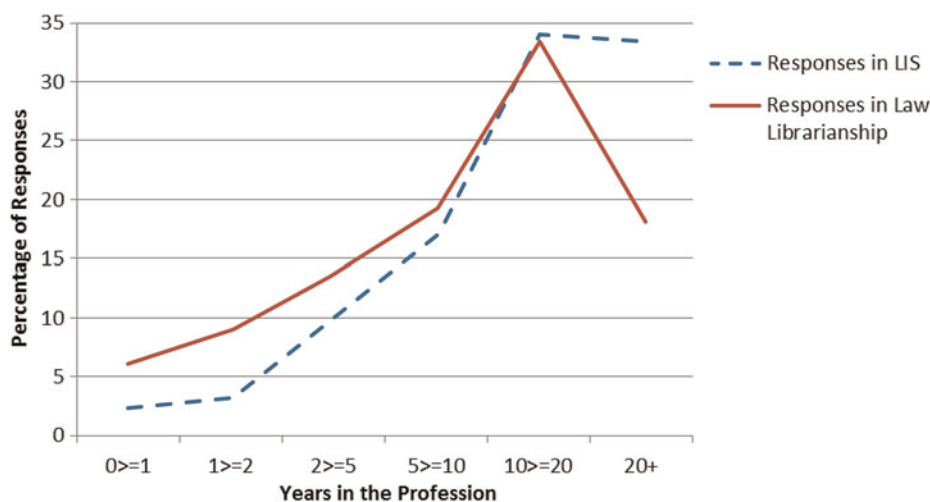


Figure 2: Time spent in the LIS sector against time spent in law librarianship.

Professional as someone who has very recently qualified but has not yet found a job above library assistant level.

After collecting the views of the respondents, the survey provided the following definition based on the authors' personal experiences of what a New Professional is: "someone with or without a professional library qualification, who has been working in the profession for less than 5 years". The predominant difference between this definition and that of the survey respondents' is that the authors feel a qualification should not be a prerequisite to classing oneself as a New Professional, rather it should be a fluid term to include those working towards qualification, graduate trainees, and those who have only recently joined the profession.

MOVEMENT BETWEEN SECTORS

Anecdotally, many new entrants are put off applying for positions working with legal information due to a perception that they will quickly become pigeon holed in the sector and be unable to move on to other LIS positions. Other new entrants are concerned about the relatively flat progression structure. The survey therefore aimed to capture information on how long each respondent had spent working in the LIS sector against how long they had spent working specifically with legal information in order to monitor movement between the two. The data captured were broken down into year periods and displayed in a chart (figure 2). This graph showed that prior to 10 years the percentage of people working in the wider LIS sector is lower than the average percentage of total time spent working with legal information. After 10 years (at which these two data sets converge), the trend reverses; those answering the survey had on average spent a greater time working in the LIS sector as a whole than they had done working specifically with legal information.

The data therefore shows that individuals who have been working with legal information for less than 10

years will be most likely to have spent the majority of their career (if not all of it) working in the legal sector. Respondents that have spent longer than 10 years in the information industry, and are currently in the legal sector, will have spent most of their career in other areas before transitioning to working in the legal sector. This indicates that if New Professionals have not worked with legal information from the very initial stages of their careers, they will find it difficult to transition into working in law librarianship. Rather, individuals seem to wait until approximately after 10 years of experience, when they are able to transition into higher position roles such as managing information services. Where the two data sets converge therefore seems to indicate that if information workers wish to transition in to – or out of – the legal information sector, the 10 year mark would appear to be the average transition point.

This finding raises the issue of why there is so little transition between sectors prior to this point, and the difficulties of starting to work with legal information if it is not done so from an early stage in one's career.

The difficulty of moving into the legal sector is further backed up when considering the first roles that respondents had working with legal information. 30% started working with legal information as a library assistant, and 11% on a specific graduate traineeship. 26% transitioned in at a senior role, or as head of service. Only 7% started working as an Information Officer – which might be considered a mid-tier role. The remaining respondents came to work with legal information through other routes, for instance by switching from legal practice. This shows that the vast majority have either started at a low level, or entered at a high level. Very few individuals enter the sector in between.

Those who did transition into law librarianship came from a wide variety of backgrounds (figure 3). While the numbers transferring from what might be considered to be similar specialist sectors (finance, health and those covered by "other" such as science and engineering)

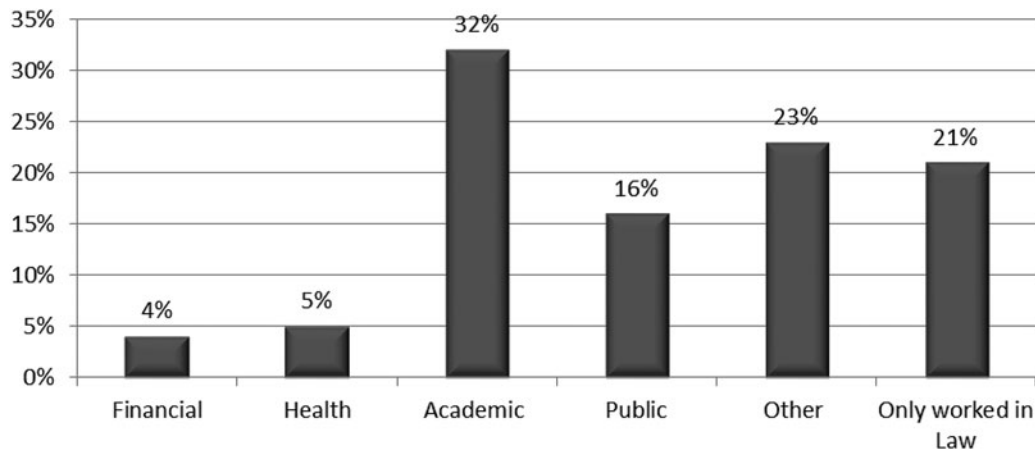


Figure 3: Information sectors worked in prior to working with legal information.

seem low considering the similarities in environments and demands placed on them, the numbers may simply reflect the spread of the number of roles available in the LIS sector. There are more entrants to legal librarianship from an academic setting simply because there are more academic positions to transfer from. There may also be little movement between specialist libraries since the roles and remuneration may be broadly similar – most people move jobs to gain variety in their role, which moving from academic or public libraries would provide.

Also of interest are the opinions of individuals who have left law librarianship. From the responses captured, of those who no longer worked with legal information, reasons cited for leaving the sector included the expiration of short term contracts, redundancies, better promotion prospects in other sectors, poor relationships with lawyers, and the wider opportunities that other sectors offered.

QUALIFICATIONS

The majority of New Professionals who answered the survey possessed a qualification, in line with many of the survey respondents' expectations that a New Professional would be newly qualified. This section will discuss the place and importance of a formal LIS qualification as it currently exists in its present form, without entering into the debate for and against its place within the future of Librarianship.

In the current economic climate, it is arguably difficult to attain a professional role in the library and information sector without having an LIS qualification. Whilst extensive, long-term experience in the field may provide an alternative route in some instances, for New Professionals just entering the job market the professional qualification is widely viewed as a prerequisite needed in order to advance.

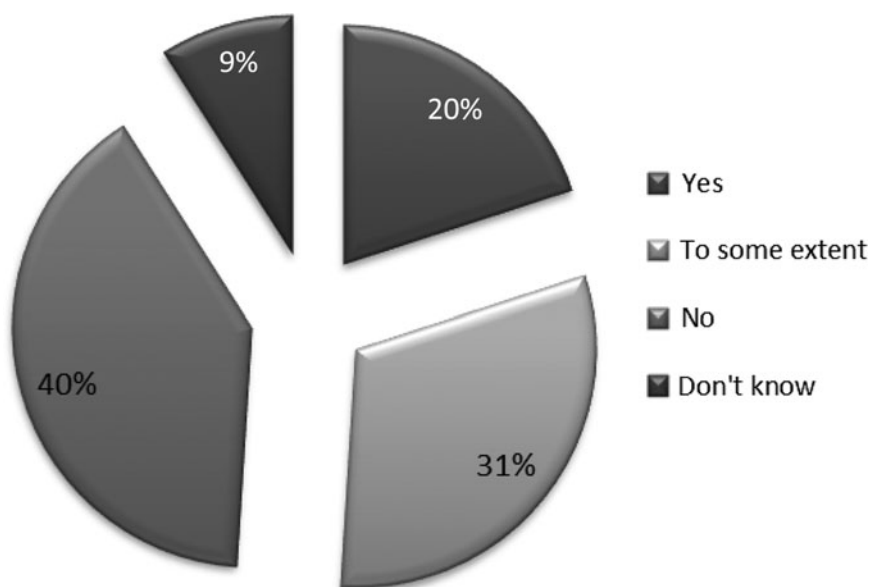


Figure 4: Does a professional qualification adequately prepare for work in the legal sector.

Considering this requirement for the academic qualification in professional library and information posts, it could be argued that the academic qualification is seen as providing vital knowledge to New Professionals – knowledge that is essential to learn before embarking on one's first professional role. Despite this supposition, the responses to the survey indicate that this is not the case. When asked whether they thought a professional qualification adequately prepared them for work in the legal sector, 40% of respondents stated no, 31% responded to some extent, with only 20% positively stating that the qualification prepared them for work in the legal sector (figure 4). The remaining 9% responded that they did not know, presumably from not having qualified, or not feeling sufficiently informed regarding the qualification in its current state.

As so many roles in the legal sector require a qualification, it is surprising and disappointing that it is not thought to prepare an individual particularly well. The majority of negative responses regarding the utility of the qualification can be grouped into two broad categories:

- The qualification is too general to be useful to those hoping to go in to the legal sector
- Practical experience in a working environment through graduate traineeships and work experience can provide much better preparation for work than an academic qualification

These responses are both valid points of view. Many of the academic courses are run by having a number of core compulsory modules that are general in their content, but applicable to some extent to everyone studying to become a library or information professional. More specialised modules are then offered to students as optional extras, and this is possibly where the academic qualification could better prepare students for the world of work in the legal sector. A module for those wishing to go in to specialised libraries, such as legal, financial, medical, or technical, could possibly be offered to provide students with an insight into the different sectors and an introduction to the specialised information and resources for these areas. It is appreciated that it may be impractical to offer such a module as it will require teaching expertise in many varied specialised sectors, and it is unknown how many students would be interested.

When considering the lack of practical preparation on the course, many academic courses offer one or two weeks of work experience within various libraries. This could be increased to include more than one work experience placement throughout the academic year, or a longer placement where students can become fully immersed and thoroughly learn about the work of a library or information professional. The difficulty is ensuring the variety of placements provide a consistent and high quality work experience for all LIS students, and persuading libraries – particularly in the legal sector – to offer work experience opportunities.

Despite the criticisms received, there were also positive responses as to how the academic qualification prepares New Professionals for work in the legal sector:

- It provides a theoretical grounding in the principles of librarianship which is vital, and which can be built upon with experience on the job
- It instils a sense of professionalism and gives New Professionals the confidence to apply for professional roles
- It helps to be highly qualified academically when dealing with very intelligent and highly qualified users, as is often the case in the legal sector

Studying an academic qualification does provide the opportunity to learn the theory underlying knowledge organisation and management, which is key to many professional roles within the legal sector. The fact that such roles require a high level of qualification indicates the high standards we expect of those within our profession, and calls for respect from our often highly distinguished users. However, it is widely thought that the qualification could be improved to further help those who wish to specialise in the legal sector, particularly through providing more practical work experience and possibly providing the opportunity to study legal information and resources.

SKILLS AND TRAINING

One of the perceived barriers to working with legal information is establishing – and keeping – required technical skills up to date. To explore how New Professionals met their training needs, their attendance on courses was compared to that of established professionals. Established professionals had, unsurprisingly, attended more courses than those entering the profession. This was to be expected due to having spent longer in the sector, therefore having more opportunities to attend courses.

New Professionals were asked what course they found to be the most useful out of those they had attended – the Legal Foundations Course run by BIALL came out as the highest rated course, but with a caveat: free text responses indicated that day to day experience on an enquiry desk was valued far more than any course. They also noted that the course does not teach you how to be a law librarian, rather it gives you a strong theoretical grounding in academic law. The timing of attending courses when first entering the sector also made a large difference to the impact they had. The Legal Reference Course run by BIALL was very highly rated and helped to get new entrants to the profession up to speed, but only if attended in the first few months of a first legal information position. Beyond this time frame, the course was felt to cover knowledge that should have been acquired through carrying out a role.

To better help New Professionals plan ahead, the skills they wished to develop were matched against

those that Established Professionals thought they would require further into their career based on their own experiences. When analysing these responses, however, there was not any overlap between the skill sets, with the exception of improving copyright skills, gaining a better understanding of how a law firm works, and mastering a basic understanding of legal terms. The training needs that were cited only focussed on users' current roles, and failed to look ahead. Experienced professionals cited skills such as budget management and contract negotiation, whereas New Professionals cited technical and cataloguing skills. Whilst it is important to develop in one's current position these requirements should have been reversed. New Professionals will have developed technical skills through their studies, and instead should be looking ahead to develop skills such as negotiation and budget management to better prepare for future roles. Too much focus is therefore placed on the immediate role, and not enough on planning for the future.

Difficulty in finding the time to attend training courses was mentioned. As a way around this, in-house training from peers and Learning and Development staff could be better exploited, especially in larger firms and universities. Alongside the problems in receiving training, staff at all levels cited the need for greater mentoring. Some information associations do offer a formal structure for this, such as CILIP, but too often mentoring is connected with a qualification or an end goal as opposed to developing an on-going relationship. Mentoring is something that could be better exploited within law librarianship, allowing professional bodies to draw out additional benefits from their members, for their members.

Experienced staff were asked what they thought would be the biggest hindrances to hiring newly qualified employees. A lack of commercial acumen, minimal experience, and an inability to manage lawyers' expectations were all cited, but technical skills were not seen as an issue, showing faith and recognition in New Professionals' skill sets. New entrants to the profession should therefore take heart that transferrable skills between sectors were valued, and it is primarily exposure to a corporate environment that is the biggest obstacle to transitioning into the sector.

PROFESSIONAL BODIES

Both new and experienced professionals had a high membership rate of professional bodies: 88% for New Professionals, and 91% of experienced professionals. However, as the survey was advertised through the emailing lists and social media outlets of a number of professional bodies, this may have swayed the sample group. It could also be argued that those who were willing to take the time to participate in the survey may have an active interest in the profession and may therefore be more likely to be a member of a professional body; these

high figures of membership should therefore not be taken as representative of the whole profession.

It was encouraging to find that the professional body membership rates for both new and experienced professionals are very similar, supporting the view that New Professionals are as dedicated to the profession as more experienced professionals who would have had a longer time to experience the benefits of being a member. These benefits include building a strong network of professional peers, discounted or free training opportunities, applying for conference awards and, importantly, the opportunity to volunteer for a professional body and learn new skills as part of a team or committee.

The comparatively low expectations by managers of their staff to be members of professional bodies therefore sits at odds to the high rates of membership. Whether this is due to the financial difficulty of recent times and understanding that some members of staff may not be able to continue to pay membership fees, or a lack of belief in the utility and benefits of professional body membership, is not clear. The latter seems to be less likely considering the high membership rates stated above, but managers should be clearer to their staff that involvement in a professional body is valued, should they choose to become a member.

BARRIERS TO THE PROFESSION

On investigating barriers to New Professionals joining the legal sector, 75% of responses referred to a potential obstacle, although these were considerably varied. They can be grouped together as follows:

- Lack of legal knowledge or legal education
- High level of qualification required for roles in the legal sector
- Low availability of jobs, specifically entry level jobs in the legal sector
- Lack of legal sector experience
- Intimidating user group

Legal information and resources often seem unique and can be extremely difficult for a New Professional to become familiar with. The UK and EU legal systems are extremely complicated, case law and legislation are ever evolving, and there are a vast number of print and online resources that library and information professionals use to navigate legal information. New Professionals often mistakenly believe that they are required to have formally studied law before entering the legal sector, when in fact there are a number of training courses that New Professionals can take to learn the necessary basics of UK law, such as the BIALL Legal Foundations Course or the BIALL Reference Course for greater familiarity with key sources.

It has been mentioned that the legal sector usually requires experience of working with legal information

for a professional post, and in an economic climate that still challenges budgets, the number of entry level posts where law firms and law libraries can spare resources to develop and train pre-library qualification staff – or newly qualified students – are few and far between. This further amplifies the problems potential candidates experience in not having any legal sector experience. While it is important for an employer to know that a New Professional will be able to adapt to the challenging work environment, whether corporate or academic, examples of previous work experience solely from within the legal sector shouldn't be classified within the essential job criteria. Examples of experience from other challenging roles and environments could also be drawn upon to great effect, allowing greater learning across sector environments.

One of the major reasons why the legal sector is often associated with being challenging is because of its end users. Lawyers can be perceived as difficult to please, unintentionally disrespectful, highly intelligent, and demanding of high quality work. This barrier of working with intimidating lawyers is born through lack of experience with the user group and therefore can be easily overcome. Often, it is fear of the unknown to new entrants combined with horror stories from others' bad experiences. Although the users can often be challenging, this is part of what makes working in the legal sector so enjoyable, and encourages professionals to strive to produce work of the highest quality and for standards of excellence, something that would be expected in any workplace environment.

CONCLUSION

Working with legal information is challenging, demanding, and exciting, and presents those that work within it the opportunity to forge a career that requires a great many skills. It rewards those who invest in their own professional development and who engage effectively with their end users. It is vital that the sector and those that work within it strive to ensure that these benefits are transmitted to future employees within the sector and prevent a shortage of suitable applicants for future job positions. By identifying and demystifying some of the perceived barriers to working with legal information, the sector and its professional bodies are better informed to help tackle any reservations future law librarians may have.

Further research would still be beneficial. An investigation into why the ten year mark appears to draw others to the sector would assist in answering potential criticisms about a relatively flat job structure within law librarianship. Studying the different roles that exist under the same level and job title would also be of interest to demonstrate the breadth of roles available. The annual BIALL salary review¹ already helps to a certain extent, matching some job criteria and salaries to a title, but deeper investigation would still prove to be useful. Action should also be taken based on the barriers that have been identified to reach out to new entrants and ensure that facts about working with legal information are transmitted, rather than simply myths and supposition.

Footnote

¹ British and Irish Association of Law Librarians. (2012) *BIALL Salary Survey 2011/2012*. London: BIALL

Biographies

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