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Virtual Reality or really a Virtual Necessity? An evaluation of 'IOLIS' in the Modern
Law School

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Abstract:

This paper focuses upon recent research at Coventry University examining staff and student reaction to the introduction
of IOLIS as an integral element of the delivery of key elements on the LLB and BA (Joint Degree) law courses.

The introduction of the use of IOLIS to teach cohorts of over 200 LLB and 50 BA students represented a major step into
the unknown. Integrated within the seminars supporting the delivery of this programme, was a questionnaire inviting
structured responses to a variety of open and closed questions. Using the responses to the questionnaire, we evaluate our
use and abuse of IOLIS and formulate a "Next Step" programme.

Introduction

In his Statement to Court 12/12/96 the Vice Chancellor of the University of Leeds admitted that that University had been
in a "restructuring debate centred on a number of core issues"-

> academic objectives
> the financial context

the need to cut costs in areas like undergraduate teaching in response to the continuing and on going decline in the unit of
resource.

Emphasising the reduction of teaching costs, he anticipating a 15% cut in the teaching unit of resource in the next three
years. To accommodate these reduced Teaching costs, he commented: "We must have adequate IT support for teaching
and this will help both students and staff by providing more independent student learning - which has some advantages in
educational terms - and modified styles of teaching."

Such a statement epitomises the current debates and views dominating Higher Education, at all levels and disciplines,
and inexorably leads, in the context of law courses, to the utilisation of fresh methods to deliver core elements such as
Legal Method and System. Furthermore in that legal context, such a statement follows, and reinforces, the
recommendations of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct(1) that IT should be
used to greater effect. Admittedly the Committee's remit related to the education and training of those who provide legal
services, but as Professor Wilson's survey clearly demonstrated(2), the delivery of legal education at University Level
remains dominated by the requirements of the Professions. Thus the ACLEC recommendations can be seen as providing
the template for all legal education in the Higher Education sector. Within this "broad and intellectually demanding legal
education, attuned to the context and the needs of a modern European democracy"(3) research skills are an integral
element of the skills training now required (and delivered) at the academic, rather than vocational, stage of legal
education, and consequently, increasingly focuses attention upon Library and IT resources. In its deliberations, ACLEC
did not lose sight of the continuing problem of the limitations placed upon the available resources, by (at
recommendation No. 9) re-emphasising the need for adequate funding for legal education.

However in order to meet the desired outcomes, the Committee saw IT as a means of cost- effective resourcing (from the
academic stage through to professional practice), and consequently placed emphasis upon the students' ability 'to
demonstrate competence in retrieving assessing, analysing and using legal texts information and argument, including IT
skills.'(4)

Within, and to a certain extent in anticipation of, this environment of change and challenge, the Skills Team at Coventry
University had been examining ways of delivering the key elements of the Law on both BA (non-qualifying joint degree)
and qualifying LLB courses. The financial environment (and internal funding mechanisms) strongly encouraged the

exploitation of existing resources which included IOLIS: it is networked to all staff rooms (as well as to the teaching laboratories in the Law School) which enabled colleagues to explore, at their leisure, IOLIS 96. Concurrently, there raged the uncertainty and debate about the imposition of time use charges for other types of facility (e.g. Lexis). Thus attention became naturally focused upon exploitation of IOLIS, and the first year Skills and System team mused on how to use IOLIS in an effective and efficient way for the delivery of that and other Law subjects.

Identifying a Strategy

The academic Law staff at Coventry University number over twenty-five (FTE) all of who are engaged in some element of undergraduate teaching. In the course of the academic year 1994/5, all had received invitations to attend (and most had attended) "training sessions" on IOLIS, kindly and conveniently conducted in house on our campus by members of the CTI Law Technology Unit, Warwick University(5): furthermore, most colleagues followed up this exposition by experimentation and exploration of IOLIS "at own desk" through the Law Network. However, only one member of staff had "experimented" (without any attempt to measure effect) with using IOLIS as a positive tool in teaching a discreet group (on a joint degree programme). No other positive interest in IOLIS had been registered apart from two individuals who embraced the theoretical advantages but were unclear as to its implementation into the teaching programme. In addition, conversation amongst colleagues indicated that one major problem for this reluctance was uncertainty as to the method to employ in using IOLIS within the teaching.

Recently asked to, assume responsibility for the first year skills and system course on both the BA and LLB programmes, the author embraced the philosophy of "use it or lose it", and proposed the bold strategy that, within his own first year module of Legal Skills and System, he would:-

(a) introduce IOLIS to all students,
(b) re-introduce IOLIS to all colleagues,
(c) use IOLIS as a teaching medium in at least one element of the Module,
(d) not use IOLIS on any assessable element of the Module,
(e) endeavour to obtain effective (if critical) reaction to the use of IOLIS in the Module, and;
(f) endeavour to quantify and qualify the results of using IOLIS in comparison with other teaching methods.

Whilst being only slightly more structured than simply a "fishing expedition in educational waters", the strategy did recognise that both within the subject area and within the institution, there was little immediate guidance as to an appropriate methodology. Thus, many very basic lessons were learnt on the way; but some interesting and unexpected lessons were also learnt. The remainder of this paper will outline the steps taken, the outcomes therefrom, and, finally the recommendations for next year.

Student Involvement

In order to ensure that all students received basic instruction to IOLIS, two cycles of seminars were timetabled at the very beginning of the first term, each student attending one seminar per cycle. On the assumption of nil prior IT knowledge, basic notes (i.e. less than one page of A4) on both IT and IOLIS were issued to the students prior to these seminar cycles. The first cycle exposed the students to the Teaching and Open Access IT Laboratories, to basic IT procedures such as Login and Password discipline, and basic word processing. The objective was to ensure that we could be sure that all students had a basic IT knowledge. The second cycle (a week or so later) built upon these principles and moved the students into both simple accessing of IOLIS, and its use in exploring substantive law. The timing of that second cycle was such that students had experienced introductory lectures on all their modules and were thus able to orient themselves (at a shallow level) within the legal material IOLIS database. "Tuition" took the form of student exploration in the teaching Laboratory in the presence of a Tutor who had a pre arranged simple problem (on the Court structure and which courts deal with Civil jurisdiction). Class size was limited by the facilities available in the Teaching Laboratory (16 students) but it was felt that "overload" classes of 20+ could have been accommodated because of the successful use of a linked Large Screen Teaching Monitor. Significantly, most students showed greater enthusiasm and confidence in the use of IOLIS than they had done so in the earlier basic IT class, and some evidence at the time pointed to students having used their spare time(6) to familiarise themselves with the system between the first and second seminar cycles.

Unfortunately, for external reasons, the substantive law seminar in which we had intended to use IOLIS could not take place until the second term, but at the beginning of that second term sufficient time (three weeks) was given for students to refresh their skills, obtain fresh copies of the introductory notes, and prepare. This also avoided the theoretical problem of "last minute panic seminar preparation". The seminar question was geared to known material available through the use of IOLIS Work- and Resource books; and consequently the questions and issues raised were based on that system. Whilst it would have been possible to obtain the information from other (i.e. non-IOLIS) sources, all recommended reading was focused around the IOLIS pages. Consideration was given to receiving seminar answers either through our network or via disc, but both were rejected out of caution. We felt that those were natural steps but

ones to be taken at a later date(7).

As part of the seminar (which was conducted in the usual "face to face" manner), students were invited to provide feedback through the completion of an anonymous questionnaire (see Appendix A).

Staff Involvement

In order to awaken staff interest, colleagues were invited to attend a single 45 minute "refresher session" in the teaching Laboratory at the end of the first term.. As we operate in teaching teams, the invitations to these "refresher sessions" were structured on 'interest' groups, so that all the "Crime Team" attended one session, and all the "Obligations Team" attended another. In this way interaction was facilitated between all the team members who were delivering a key module, and the individual members of the team could comment to each other and suggest developments. The result was that there developed a "team view" of whether, and how IOLIS could be used. Although Staff were far more relaxed, it was decided that the Staff were as much 'students' as anyone else and that the same anonymous questionnaire would also be the means by which they would be invited to provide feedback. 'Staff' questionnaires were identified as such by '[staff]' being printed at the end of the questionnaire.

The Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was to be distributed to all law staff and first year law students at Coventry University (who were defined as those on the mandatory/core "Skills and System" modules for BA (joint law) or LLB degrees). Distribution to students was effected through and at the seminars for those modules, and were to be completed in those classes. There was therefore almost complete recovery of all distributed questionnaires. However, the percentage of students completing the questionnaires was, as was expected , barely 50% of those registered on the appropriate modules because of non attendance (and one might speculate that the non attendance arose from their failing to have prepared the work via IOLIS). Furthermore, because of the method of distribution, students on franchised and other associated courses were not included: however, this was considered to be of no significance because the purpose of the survey was to examine our "on Campus" use of IOLIS.

The questionnaire endeavoured to establish three key facts:

Firstly, what was the IT awareness (or background) of the student. We sought to ascertain how much IT exposure the student had already received before arriving at Coventry, and therefore to what extent the student was approaching IOLIS with prior IT learning. Subsequent questions tried to identify whether this helped or hindered the student's use of IOLIS.

Secondly, we tried to relate this to the recruitment mode i.e. part-time or full time, age profile, etc. Integrated within the degree programmes are both full and part-time courses, and the student cohort is characterised by a blend of school-leavers and mature students. Whilst the mature part time students dominate the evening delivery, and full time school leavers dominate the day-time delivery, a simple division was not possible. Thus we sought to identify background with prior skills so that a more effective time allocation could be effected on introducing IOLIS. (e.g. that more IT/IOLIS sessions might be required for the mature part-timers). At this stage, we were also seeking to explore how the student saw IOLIS - as an adjunct to existing resources or as a substitute resource. Clearly the resourcing issue (and particularly staffing) was a substantial reason for introducing the students to IOLIS(8) but what we wanted to know was whether the students used IOLIS as well as (or instead of) the existing Library and book based materials. This would inform not just our resource strategy but also our commitment to such activities as annotating the IOLIS Resource Book. This line of questioning was established against the backcloth of some criticism of restricted Library opening hours (which had impacted primarily upon part time/evening students).

Thirdly, we were interested to know how effective the students thought our existing use of IOLIS to be. One central issue in our minds was - how far between the two extremes of educational involvement should we be? Should we "supervise" the students in IOLIS seminars, or should the students be free to explore IOLIS without even the existence of a directed reading guide. Our expectations were that the students would want some, albeit limited, assistance.

If they did require some assistance, we were asking them to identify how much, and in what way.

Fourthly, we sought information on the "content" of IOLIS. As IOLIS is authored by various experts, the style and exposition do vary. So, a student whose preference is to 'Black Letter ' law, may find difficulty with a chapter of IOLIS which is authored in a contextual manner. This was in no way to invite a value judgement on the authorship, but to identify areas where the IOLIS material was consistent with that already used within a module(9).

Finally, and slightly obliquely, we enquired as to any problems which they might have encountered in using the system.

That there had already been some problems(10), had already been identified by the Skills and System team. However, we were unclear as to the extent of these problems and the consequences on the usage of IOLIS. As we have no usage tracking procedure in place, we could not be certain as to the extent to which usage had been inhibited by such plannable interruptions as routine maintenance.

In designing the questions we had deliberately invited the students to make positive suggestions and tried to avoid any hint of any previously established agenda or desired outcome.

The questionnaire is reproduced below in Appendix A, and a full analysis of the responses will be available at the Conference.

Team Observations

Although the responses to the staff and student questionnaires have not yet been fully analysed, there are available the comments of the Skills and System team drawn from their own observations in devising and delivering an IOLIS based element of the teaching programme for this year. Whilst much of what the team has learnt and the problems of employing IOLIS in the classroom situation is self evident, certain issues will inform our planning of next years delivery.

Firstly, if the class contains students who are weak or need substantial IT support, then it is essential that delivery takes place in a teaching laboratory with a mentor/tutor's monitor; in which case there are substantial timetabling difficulties unless law is prioritised as an IT dependent subject area.

Secondly for students to participate concurrently in a seminar/supervision, there needs to be sufficient access time to allow them to familiarise themselves with the hardware as well as the Law material. This favoured wider access i.e. campus-wide availability .

Thirdly, care needs to be taken to ensure that the relevant IOLIS material is sufficiently identified to enable students to synthesise the IT and "hard book" resources.

A fourth issue was that, in some cases, the material was either too definite or too discursive to integrate with the programme delivered. This was highlighted in tort where certain features were treated by IOLIS in depth commensurate with a level 2 or 3 Module whereas our Obligations team might cover the same areas more superficially, in a level 1 module.

Finally, some effort has been made to identify the extent to which *users* see IOLIS as covering what, as users, they perceive to be key ground, and identify other key ground areas for exploration within our delivery programme.

Results

At the time of drafting this paper, the final analysis of the anonymous questionnaire had not been completed, so that the final results are not available for inclusion in this draft of the paper. However, the final results will be available shortly (in printed format) for supply at the Conference.

In the meantime, the team remains amazed at the extent of the disparate attitudes of both staff and students - ranging from one student who actively sought details of the IOLIS disc in order to purchase a copy, to other students who flatly refused even to attend IT sessions.

Action

Even before the results of the questionnaire have been analysed, is it is possible to list some amendments to our teaching and learning strategy, arising from the teams own observations.

Firstly, students will still receive a set of our own brief outline set of notes on IT and IOLIS, but the small group (16 students max.) introductory seminars in which IT and IOLIS were introduced will not be repeated. Not only did they occupy the teaching laboratory for an excessive time, but they also required a disproportionate amount of staff time. Instead, we will have a large group session (e.g. of the full LLB daytime cohort of 160) introducing IT and IOLIS in the lecture theatre and illustrated by either our own instructional Video or a live projection of the Mentors screen. The disadvantage is that it may well require a reduced level of lighting which could impede student note taking, but it will achieve a substantial reduction in staff time, and would be supported by two or three staff 'surgery' sessions in a Teaching Laboratory to focus attention on specific student difficulties.

Secondly, students will be encouraged even earlier to explore the Introduction to Law sections of IOLIS during the induction week and initial teaching period (ie before the full cycle of weekly seminars is introduced in weeks 3/4). Not only will this familiarise students with basic concepts at a time when there is minimal use of the Open Access rooms, but it will do so, at a time when the students frequently have periods of time on Campus with no formal activity (particularly during Fresher week).

Thirdly, colleagues interested in integrating the use of IOLIS within their Modules will be encouraged to annotate IOLIS and even load Seminar Questions onto the system.

Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE on Your Views on IOLIS

About Your Previous Knowledge of Information Technology

1. In respect of the following Packages, how would you describe your level of previous experience?:-
(Please tick more than one if appropriate)

	High	Medium	Low
Word Processing			
Data Handling			
Information Retrieval			
Computer Assisted Learning			
CD - ROM database			
Other (please specify)			

....
....

2. Where have you previously experienced such packages?:
(Please tick more than one if appropriate)

at work
at home
at school
at college
Other (please specify)
....
....

3. How confident of using IT packages do you feel?
(Please tick one only)

Very Confident
Confident
Cautious
Nervous
No Confidence

About You as a Student.

4. Are you a part-time Law Student?
(Please tick one only)

Yes
No

5. Predominantly, is your attendance daytime or evening?
(Please tick one only)

Daytime
Evening

6. How easy is it for you to have access to the library?
(Please tick one only)

Very easy
Easy
Easy in some areas
Quite Easy
Difficult
Impossible

7. How difficult is it for you to obtain text books or similar materials for which IOLIS material could be a substitute?
(Please tick one only)

Very easy
Easy
Quite Easy
Not really Easy
Difficult
Impossible

8. Please indicate your approximate age:
(Please tick one only)

18 - 21
22 - 25
26 - 30
31 - 40
Over 40

About Your Experience of IOLIS

9. Apart from the demonstration Seminar, how often have you used the IOLIS software?:-
(Please tick one only)

1-5 Times
6-10 Times
11-15 Times
More than 15 times

10. Do you have (e.g. at home) your own version of the IOLIS software?
(Please tick one only)

Yes
No

11 Have you been able to use the University's IOLIS software whenever you wished?
(Please tick one only)

Yes
No

12. If you have ticked No to Question 11, what was the reason?:-
(Please tick more than one if appropriate)

All Consoles in use
Programme not running
Access Rooms closed
Other (please specify)
....
....

13. How would you describe the role which IOLIS occupies in your learning process?:-
(Please tick one only)

Essential
Very Useful
Useful
Useful in some areas
Occasionally Useful
Not Useful

About Your Opinion of IOLIS

14. Does the IOLIS software cover areas relevant to your study of Law **in this current session**? Which five areas do you think are best covered?
(Please list in order: best coverage = 1, second best coverage = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

15. Which five areas relevant to your study of Law **in this current session** do you think are least covered?
(Please list in order: of least coverage = 1, second least coverage = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

16. Which five areas, relevant to your study of Law **in this current session** not already covered, would you like to see included?
(Please list in order: most important = 1, second most important = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

17. How easy do you find it to link the materials on IOLIS with other media e.g. Text Books, Lectures?
(Please tick one only.)

Very easy
Easy
Easy in some areas
Not really Easy
Difficult
No Link Possible

18. Which five features of the system have you found the easiest to use (e.g. Scrapbook, Bookmark)?
(Please list in order: easiest = 1, second easiest = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

19. Which five features (e.g. Scrapbook, Bookmark) of the system have you found the hardest to use?
(Please list in order: hardest = 1, second hardest = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

20. Which five improvements would you like to see in how the software itself operates?
(Please list in order: of most importance = 1, second most importance = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

21. Which five improvements would you like to see in the layout of the Software?
(Please list in order: of most importance = 1, second most importance = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

22. Which five improvements would you like to see in the hardware e.g. Computer Rooms Consoles?
(Please list in order:- of most importance = 1, second most importance = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

23. Which five improvements would you like to see in the way in which the software itself is used as a teaching medium
e.g. subject seminars to be held in the computer Rooms, seminar preparation sheets to refer to the Software pages?
(Please list in order: of most importance = 1, second most importance = 2 etc.)

1 ....
2 ....
3 ....
4 ....
5 ....

Your views as to how we can improve our use of IOLIS in other ways

24. How do you think we can improve the way we use IOLIS for teaching and learning?

....
....
....
....

25. Any other Comments

....
....

Thank you for your assistance.

References

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Notes

1 Commonly known as ACLEC
2 J. Wilson "A Third Survey of University Legal Education in the United Kingdom" Legal Studies Vol. 13 No. 2 July 1993 pages 143 et seq.
3 Card, Richard. The Findings and Provisional Conclusions of the Lord Chancellors Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct, The Law Librarian Vol. 26 No 4. December 1995 page 505 line 18.
4 Card, Richard. cit. line 28 page 507
5 Warwick University is situated on the outskirts of Coventry itself.
6 Seminars in other subjects had not as yet commenced.
7 See "An Experiment with Electronic Law Tutorials" Robin Widdison and Francis Pritchard, Pre-Proceedings of the 10th Bileta Conference
8 "The Resources of Law Schools" 1992, a report of the joint committee of the SPTL and CHULS. See also the decline in staff - student ratio reported in Table 14 of J. Wilson "A Third Survey of University Legal Education in the United Kingdom" in Legal Studies Vol. 13 No. 2 July 1993
9 It had been to identify any "Team bias in approaching the IOLIS material" that the staff sessions had been operated on a Team basis.
10 Access to certain of the open access rooms had had to be temporarily restricted. There had also been changes in Technical support personnel which had caused some elements of IOLIS to be temporarily disabled.