

*Kati Syvälahti & Mbenae Katjihingua*

## THE INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF LAW STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA

### I. Introduction

How to design better library services for law students? How can the library support their information seeking processes? How should library professionals respond to law students' needs? With these questions in mind, we decided to conduct a survey among law students in the University of Namibia.

It is a well known fact that students are increasingly turning to the web, especially Google and Google Scholar, in their search for information. As for instance Makri (2008, 108–109) has argued, this happens among academic and practising lawyers, too. They use Google in order to have an overview of a certain area of interest. Who needs libraries when there is Google? Legal discipline is a conservative and traditional profession, which has relied heavily on printed sources (Otike 1999; Kuhlthau & Tama 2001). The young generation, the so-called Y generation, appears to differ in their willingness to accept and embrace technology.

We start our discussion by presenting our theoretical framework and a review of the literature on legal information seeking. Then we turn to our theoretical background and methodology. Next, we analyse the survey results. In conclusion, we look at the main findings and possible future directions for research.

## 2. The purpose of the study

The Faculty of Law at the University of Namibia consists of the following academic departments: Commercial Law, Private and Procedural Law and Public Law & Jurisprudence. This paper reports a study that examined the University of Namibia's law students' information seeking.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- What information resources are preferred by law students for academic tasks?
- According to the respondents, what is the role of the academic library in information seeking?
- What kind of problems and barriers do the law students face in information seeking?
- What role do the mediators play in the information seeking process?
- How do the students evaluate the usefulness of information sources of various types?
- How do the students assess their information literacy skills?
- How could the information services be improved to better meet student's expectations?
- How often do students use other libraries?

### 3. Theoretical framework

#### The concept of information literacy

Information literacy is a key concept in this article. It is very important to remember that information literacy is not identical with “library skills”. Information literacy is wider than traditional information skills. According to Johnston and Webber (2003, 336) information literacy is:

“... the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to obtain, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, together with critical awareness of the importance of wise and ethical use of information in society.”

At the University of Namibia Library the focus is still on library skills, but we are aiming in a wider direction. We see information literacy not as a discrete set of skills; it is important to emphasize the connection between information literacy and lifelong learning.

#### Models of information seeking behaviour

In our study, we are interested in the multifaceted process of information seeking and the role that librarians play in it. To interpret the survey results and design better library services, we need information seeking theories. For the present study, the most important information seeking theorists are Kuhlthau, Ellis and Wilson.

Kuhlthau’s model of the information search process (ISP) is one of the most important works in information seeking studies. The model shows the information seeker’s activities, thoughts and feelings over time while preparing, for example, an essay. (Kuhlthau 2004, 45.) According to Kuhlthau intervention is not necessary or

even helpful all of the time. The model of the information seeking process (ISP) helps librarians to know when not to attempt intervention. (Kuhlthau 2004, 143.)

According to Ellis the different behaviours constitute a single set of features. The six primary behaviour patterns in information seeking are starting, chaining, browsing, differentiating, monitoring and extracting. Ellis's model and Kuhlthau's model have been tested in several empirical studies. (Wilson 1999, 254.)

Wilson has presented numerous information seeking models. Those are very widely used. He emphasizes the importance of developing a general model of information seeking behaviour. (Wilson 1999, 250.)

#### 4. Literature review

There are seven works which we find particularly relevant (Otike 1999; Kuhlthau & Tama 2001; Wilkinson 2001; Haruna & Mabawonku 2001; Jones 2008; Makri 2008; Thanuskodi 2009). In addition, there is one study on the information seeking behaviour of social sciences doctoral students (Fleming-May & Yuro 2009).

Otike (1999, 29) investigated the information seeking habits of lawyers in England. He conducted semi-structured interviews with nine academic lawyers and found that legal information seeking depended on the type of work the lawyers undertook and the experiences they had in their particular work roles and legal areas. According to Otike delegation of information seeking is common in the legal profession. Delegation is more common for practising than for academic lawyers. (1999, 35–37).

Kuhlthau and Tama (2001) studied lawyer's information seeking behaviour in a study that was part of the development of the Information Search Process model (ISP). They focused on the variety of

information tasks that lawyers undertake. The participants worked in small to medium sized law firms. One of the purposes of this study was to ascertain what role mediators play in the process of legal information seeking and use (2001, 38). In our study we are also interested in the role of librarian in students' information seeking process.

Wilkinson (2001) investigated more than 150 practising lawyers' information seeking. She found that lawyers working in larger law firms relied more on internal information sources, while lawyers working in smaller firms or practising privately used external information sources in their information seeking.

Haruna and Mabawonku (2001, 72) examined the information seeking behaviour of 361 lawyers in Lagos, Nigeria. They found that the most important information for lawyers were the latest judgements of the superior courts.

Jones' (2008, 99) study examined Villanova University School of Law students interacting with legal information systems. Students were observed in the law clinic setting as they located legal materials. Legal research is traditionally taught as an individual activity. Jones' findings showed the deeply collaborative nature of research in the law clinic environment. (Jones 2008, 350.)

Makri (2008, 48) used Ellis's information seeking model as a lens to analyse the information-seeking behaviour of 27 academic lawyers. The aim of his study was to support both the design of new digital law libraries and to improve the design of existing electronic research tools (Makri 2008, 10).

Thanuskodi (2009) used a questionnaire to investigate the information-seeking behaviour of academic lawyers at Central Law College, Salem. In this study respondents were asked to provide a self-assessment of their library skills. Thanuskodi found that the academic lawyers use IT-based library sources and facilities less frequently than printed sources. Thanuskodi observed that, although respondents perceived the library as effective in meeting their information needs, they preferred to consult their personal collections first.

Fleming-May and Yuro (2009) investigated information seeking behaviour of social sciences doctoral students. The authors note that librarians should not expect to serve doctoral students in the same way as undergraduates or master's level students. Postgraduate students' problems in information seeking are unique and their schedules are tight. Therefore they are more selective when choosing services.

## 5. Design and methodology

The results of earlier studies motivated the development of this research. In designing the questionnaire we have taken earlier studies into account. In our research we have attempted to make a comparison with earlier studies. Our important themes are the same as e.g. Kuhlthau and Tama (2001), Makri (2008), Thanuskodi (2009) and Fleming-May and Yuro (2009). The key topics are the role of mediators in the information seeking process, problems in information seeking and how students assess their information literacy skills.

The present study was conducted using a quantitative method. The empirical material consists of data gathered by a questionnaire. The data were collected in autumn 2011. Information seeking behaviour was measured with multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. The study was carried out at the University of Namibia.

The questionnaire was pre-tested among ten individuals. The aim was to identify any confusing questions and to gain the feedback from the pre-test respondents. The questionnaire consisted of four parts. First, personal information was elicited, such as age, gender, degree, level of studies. The second part focused on habits when seeking legal information and using libraries. The third part focused on the students' information literacy skills. At the end of the questionnaire the students were invited to make any additional comments.

The questionnaires were anonymous and participants were guaranteed confidentiality. Voluntary participation with the option to withdraw at any stage was guaranteed. The questionnaires were given to the students during lectures in October 2011, with the help of a student from the Faculty of Law.

## 6. Participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate and postgraduate law students at the Faculty of Law. It is useful that postgraduate students are included in the study, because only few studies have focused specifically on researchers (Fleming-May & Yuro 2009, 204). A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed and 77 were returned.

The majority of the respondents were undergraduate students (40) and 37 were postgraduate students. Of the respondents, 39 were studying for the degree of B Juris and 38 for the LLB degree, 44 were doing course work only, 19 course and research projects and 14 course work and theses. Most of the respondents were full-time students (66) and 11 were part-time students. The data shows that 33 of the respondents were male and 44 of respondents female.

The respondents were grouped into five age groups (18–25, 26–30, 31–35, 36–40, 41+). Most were in the age group 18–25 years (64), followed by 26–30 years of age (6), 31–35 years of age (3), 36–40 years of age (2) and 41+ years of age (2).

## 7. Data analysis

The raw research data were processed in Microsoft Excel. The survey results were analysed using charts e.g. cross-tabulation and content

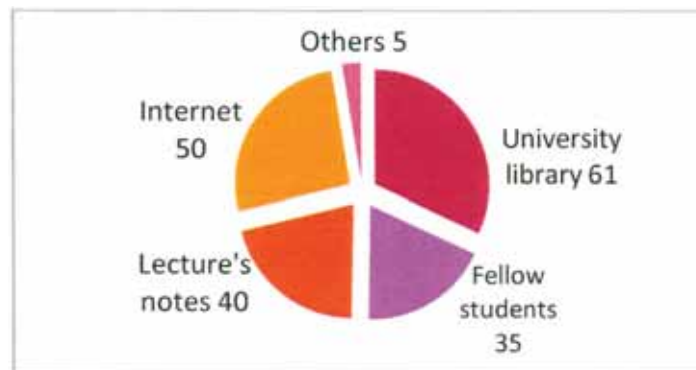
analysis. Frequency tables and percentages were used to examine all variables used in the study.

There were some limitations to the study. As data collection was by questionnaires, it is possible that respondents were unwilling or unable to respond to all questions. It is also possible that they failed to finish questionnaire due to lack of time or interest. In this study a few participants left some questions unanswered.

## 8. Findings

### Source preferences of the students

The respondents were asked to report where they found information for studying and research. Figure 1 shows that the four most frequently used information sources were the Library, Internet, lecture notes and fellow students.



**Figure 1.** Source preferences of the students (n=77, multiple responses were allowed)

Haruna and Mabawonku (2001, 75) found that the library was the most consulted information source for job related information.



According to Otike (1999, 32), Kuhlthau and Tama (2001, 37) and Wilkinson (2001, 271) lawyers have many ways to access new information, but at the top of the list was high regard for colleagues. Our study found the same. It seems that reliance on fellow students or human sources for information is high. Only five respondents reported others and mentioned their personal collections. Otike (1999, 35) and Thanuskodi (2009) found in their studies that lawyers have personal collections of legal information in their offices. They need to have basic information nearby.

### How often the students visit the University Library and why

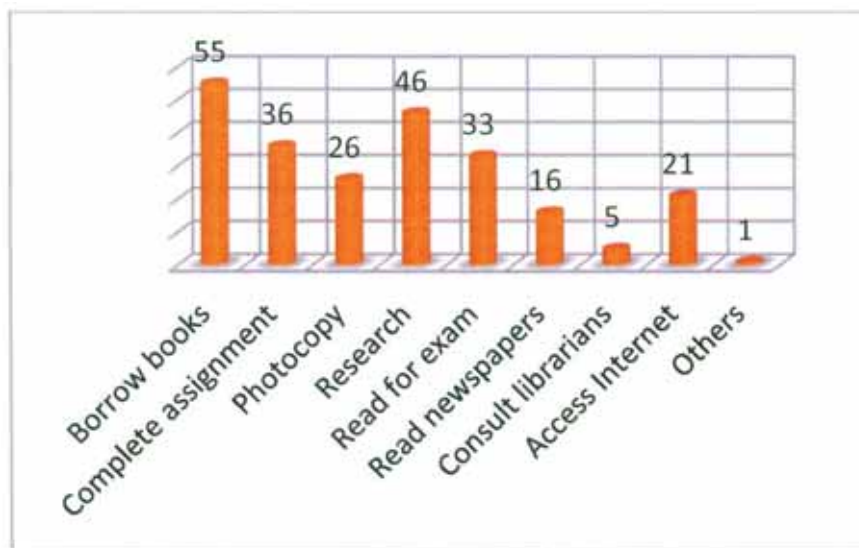
The use of a library can be measured in different ways. The frequencies of visits to a library are one index to judge the use of the library resources. The results (Figure 2) reveal that 31 of the respondents used the University Library daily, 25 once a week, 13 once a month' and only eight reported that they used the library more than twice a week. The survey showed that 31 of the postgraduate students visited the library daily.



**Figure 2.** How often the students visit the university library? (n=77)

Otike (1999, 34) found that 85% of lawyers did not visit or use a library on a daily basis and on a weekly basis 54% used the library three times a week. This indicates that lawyers find information elsewhere than in the library. Jones (2008, 336) argued that according to the lawyers “using libraries seems more like mountain climbing to some”. Fleming-May and Yuro (2009, 208) found that doctoral students rarely visited the physical library and they came to the library “as a last resource”.

The respondents were asked what they used the library for. The study shows (Figure 3) that the highest percentage of students used the library to borrow books.



**Figure 3.** Why do you use the University of Namibia Library? (n=77)

### Finding information in the library

An important part of the library’s role is to help customers to find information effectively. Thus it is useful to know how they locate information in the library. In this study (Table 1) the library catalogue was the primary tool for postgraduate students. According to Otike

(1999, 35) lawyers prefer browsing through the bookshelves. In Makri's study (2008, 128) browsing behaviour was also found to be common among lawyers. Browsing was also popular in our study.

**Table 1.** Frequency of the use of information sources (n=77)

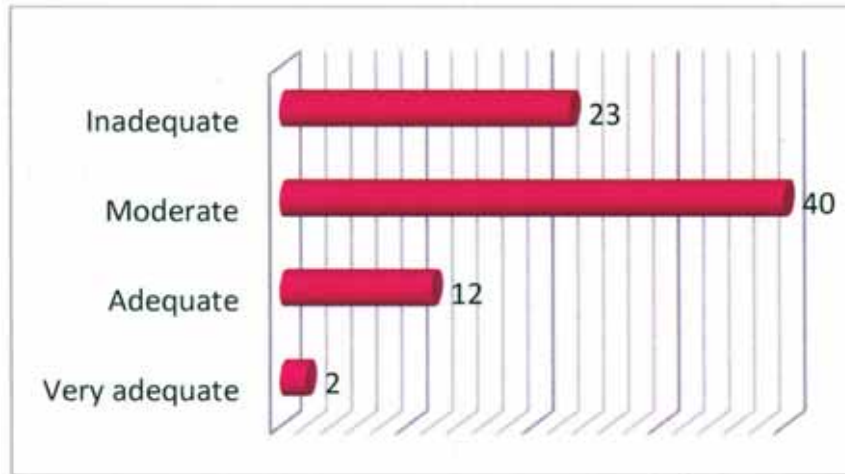
Source	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
OPAC	15	12	26	16
Reference librarian	6	9	15	27
Subject librarian	2	8	10	29
Browsing shelves	23	13	21	6
Browsing journal titles	11	8	21	11
Fellow students	24	14	16	8
Other(s)	1			1

### Adequacy of the law collection and students' information seeking problems

The adequacy of the collection is one factor determining how well the library meets customers' needs. Respondents were asked to assess the adequacy of the University Library's law collections in meeting their information needs. Figure 4 shows the results.

The majority of the responses showed that the Library's law collection met respondents' information needs moderately well. This was followed by inadequate, adequate and very adequate. Otike (1999, 34) in his study also found that the information available in the library was not adequate for lawyers' needs.

There seems to be some contradictions between the results. According to the respondents the law collections are moderately good, but students still have some problems in finding information in the Library. For example, 57 of the respondents reportedly could not find current statutes and law reports in the Library (Table 2).



**Figure 4.** Adequacy of library collection (n=77)

Furthermore, some respondents had problems finding law information sources and current law journals. These findings are important to the Library. Acknowledging the typical problems in information seeking helps the Library to develop better services. For example the Library could develop better information literacy courses to support students in their information seeking.

**Table 2.** Students' information seeking problems (n= 77, multiple responses were allowed)

Non-availability of current statutes and law reports	57
Inadequate law information sources	54
Inadequate supply of current law journals	41
Inadequate staff availability	0
Distance	2
Others	1

## Law students' preferences in information sources

Respondents were asked to indicate the type of information sources they trust. Table 3 shows that books were the most trusted information sources. According to Otike (1999, 36) law books were the most heavily used of all legal materials. Kuhlthau and Tama (2001, 40) found that print resources allowed lawyers to look at many resources at the same time and thus process their cases more easily. The study by Thanuskodi (2009) showed that books and law reports were the most important resources for teaching and research.

In our survey books were followed by short loan collection and statutes and law reports. It seems that law students trust print sources quite a lot.

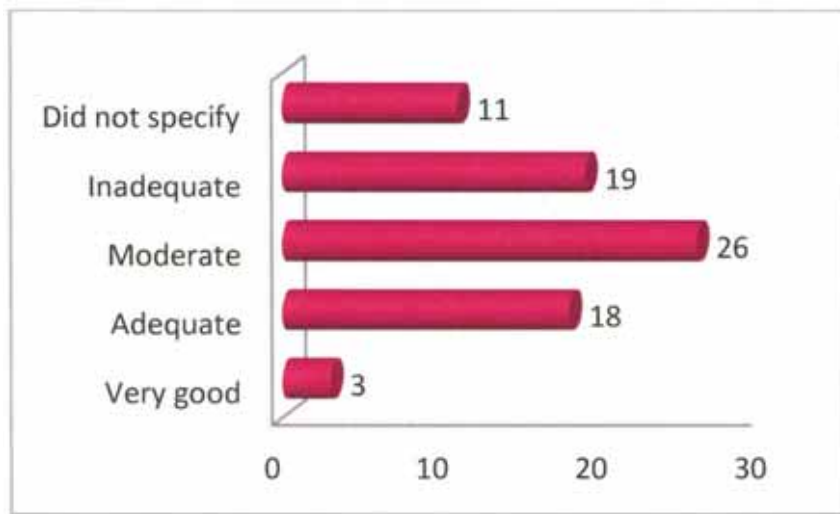
**Table 3.** What information sources do you trust (n=77, multiple responses were allowed)

Sources	A lot	Sometimes	Never
Books	50	22	2
Current journals	19	21	12
Bound journals	6	18	23
Electronic materials	31	7	12
Short loan	48	11	1
Special collection	21	35	3
Reference collection	10	31	18
Statutes and law reports	48	8	2
University archives	3	14	30

## Law students' information literacy skills

Students' self-assessment of their information literacy skills is shown in Figure 5. In our study 18 students (out of 77) reported that their information literacy skills were adequate, and three respondents as-

sessed their information literacy skills as very good. It was found that postgraduate students were more confident about their information literacy skills. Fleming-May and Yuro (2009, 207–208) found that doctoral students reported considerable confidence in their capabilities with research tools. The authors noted that doctoral students attempted to distinguish themselves from undergraduates in terms of information seeking skills. Doctoral students emphasized that their research process was much more systematic than those of undergraduates.

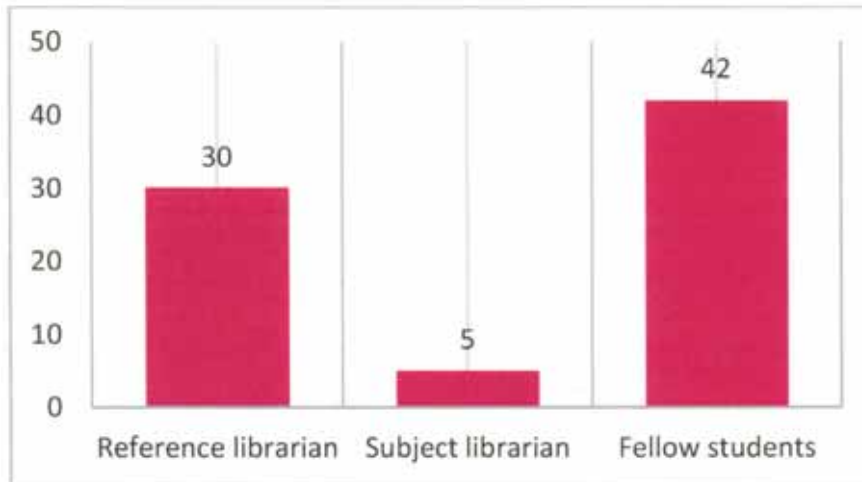


**Figure 5.** Law students' information literacy skills (n=77)

### The role of mediators

It is interesting to know if students need some type of assistance in information seeking. Students were asked how often they needed help when seeking information in the University Library. As many as 45 of the respondents reported that they very often and 15 often sought help in order to locate the information in the Library.

The students were asked whom they would contact when seeking assistance. Figure 6 shows that fellow students were the most famous mediators.



**Figure 6.** When seeking help to find information sources, whom do you go to? (n=77)

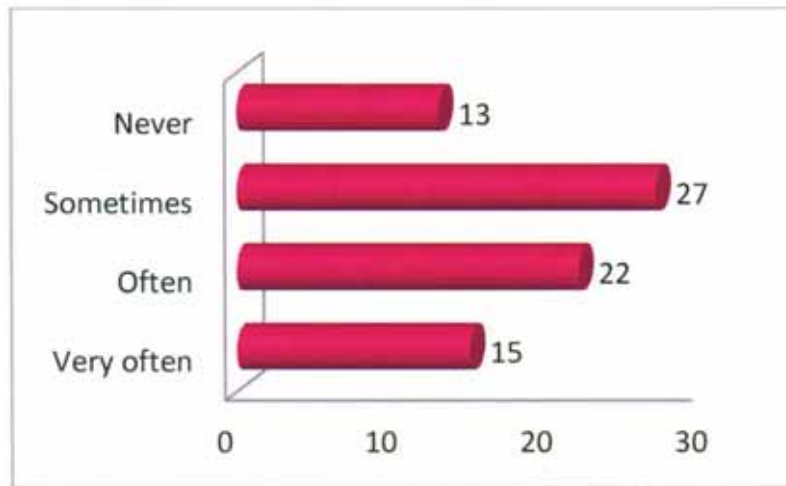
The findings of this study confirm those of earlier studies. For example, Kuhlthau and Tama (2001, 39) demonstrated that the role of librarians as mediators was very limited. Otike (1999, 37) claimed that the use of legal colleagues was the most popular way to seek information. The study by Jones (2008, 336) also revealed that people will more likely go for information that is close to hand such as their friends and colleagues. Fleming-May and Yuro (2009, 212) found that doctoral students preferred asking colleagues for research assistance rather than librarians.

### The use of other libraries

Cooperation with other libraries is an important element. Collaboration helps to develop better collections and services for customers. It is essential for libraries to co-operate over acquisitions and access to avoid unnecessary overlaps in their collections. It is an investment in the future.

One of the research questions concerned how often students used other libraries. The respondents were presented with a list of options.

Figure 7 shows the results. Apparently students use other libraries apart from their University Library to carry out their research work.



**Figure 7.** How often do you refer to other libraries for information sources? (n=77)

The results indicate that the respondents used the Supreme Court Library, the Namibia National Library, the Polytechnic of Namibia Library, the Human Resource Documentation Centre, the Law of Society of Namibia Library and the High Court of Namibia Library.

### Services and facilities provided by UNAM Library

The aim of this study is to design better library services and facilities for customers. Thus it is essential that customers have an opportunity to give feedback.

The respondents were provided with a list of library services and facilities. Most of the respondents rated the services adequate. According to this study the information literacy services are inadequate. It is also possible that the term *information literacy* was not familiar to all and this affected the results.



**Table 4.** How would you rate the services provided by the UNAM Library? (n=77, multiple responses were allowed)

Service	Very adequate	Adequate	Inadequate
Help with finding books	5	45	19
Inter-library loan	14	32	17
Literature search	4	44	15
Reference service	5	40	19
Information literacy	2	12	48
Operating hours	17	34	18

Fleming-May and Yuro (2009, 214–215) found that doctoral students did not know all the services and resources available in the library. This is quite a common problem in many libraries. Therefore libraries need new ways to co-operate with customers. In the study by Fleming-May and Yuro doctoral students recommended librarians to communicate directly with students.

The respondents also evaluated the facilities provided by the Library. It seems that students need more reading places and access to Internet is also inadequate. The same emerged in the additional comments.

Since the questions of the survey were mostly closed, the students were asked at the end of questionnaire for additional comments or suggestions on how the Library could be improved.

(i) Size of the law collection

“The library does not have a lot of law books”, another one said “the books must be easily accessible, and the library should also include new editions.”

(ii) “Law reports are essential and for UNAM Library is a must that they try and get all law reports in the library.”

(iii) Internet

“Please improve the Internet, is very slow and very few computers with Internet access.”

Twenty-five respondents requested that the university library opening hours should be extended to allow them to make maximum use of the library resources.

## 9. Conclusions and possible further directions in research

A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed and 77 were returned (response rate 77%). The survey indicated that 31 postgraduate students visit the library daily. It is important to find new ways to meet customers' needs. It is important that the libraries support undergraduate and doctoral students in their studies and research. They need different kinds of places for studying, for example, reading places and group working rooms.

In our study most respondents visited the Library to borrow books. It is noted that the legal profession relies heavily on printed sources. In our study law books were the most heavily used of all legal materials. In the future it will be essential to support students in the use of digital libraries. Research groups especially are a real challenge for the libraries. This is one area for future research. More research is also needed to find out how lawyers keep up with developments in a field. It would be interesting to know how often they use current awareness programmes, such as email alerts, blogs and RSS-feeds.

Our results confirm those of earlier studies. Law students have many ways to access new information, but they put high regard for fellow students and colleagues first. According to earlier studies lawyers prefer browsing and this was also popular in our study.

The results showed that the majority of the respondents used other law libraries. It is important to promote cooperation with other legal libraries in the future to avoid unnecessary overlap in collections.

In this study we observed that students need more information literacy courses. It is important to have different kinds of courses: online courses, classroom courses and lectures. Cooperation with the teachers is essential when planning information literacy courses. Students learn information literacy better when it is embedded in the curriculum.

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