

Information literacy content for first year law students at a rural-based university in South Africa

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Information literacy (IL) has been adopted in higher education institutions in Africa. However, the lack of local IL standards led African universities to align the IL content with international standards. This study evaluated the efficacy of the IL content offered to first year law students at a rural-based university in South Africa to establish whether the IL content offered aligns with international IL standards. The study adopted a quantitative research approach using a survey design for pragmatic examination. Data were collected and analysed from the Blackboard Learning Management System. A census sampling approach was used to select a sample from 201 first year law students who attempted and completed the set IL test in the Introduction to the Theory of Law (INT 1141) module at the University of Venda (UNIVEN). Additionally, Law Student Information Literacy (LSIL) standards were adopted to assess the content of IL offered to first year law students at UNIVEN. The compliments from the academics at the School of Law were used to validate the findings of this study. The findings revealed that the IL content offered for first year-level law students efficiently provides law students with the necessary skills to search for law-related information using library resources and other Internet-based information sources. The study recommends the integration of IL into all first-year academic programmes at UNIVEN.

Keywords: information literacy, information resources, law students' information literacy standards, learning management system

1 Introduction and background

Although the exact definition of information literacy (IL) varies from source to source, what is common among most sources consulted is that students who are information literate can “recognise and articulate information needs; develop effective search strategies; select and use information retrieval tools; locate and retrieve information sources; analyse and critically evaluate information; and synthesise information; ethically use information” (Oberman, Lindauer & Wilson 2019: n.p; Hisle & Webb 2017:4). Consequently, it cannot be denied that IL enables students to be competitive in their academic tasks because it gives students generalised skills to uncover information in any field of study.

Studies reveal that universities now offer the IL for law students as standalone or integrated modules in the academic curriculum (Ndou 2022; Davids & Omar 2018; Kim-Prieto & Kahvecioğlu 2014). For instance, in Wales, at the Cardiff Law School, IL is embedded into the Legal Foundation module, which is offered to first year students, and it contributes 30 credits towards this module (Davies & Jackson 2005). At the Faculty of Law of Maltepe University in Turkey, IL is embedded in the module of Legal Research Methods, and contributes two credits, at the Cambridge Faculty of Law in the United Kingdom (UK), IL is embedded in Legal Research Skills, and in Australia, IL is embedded in Legal Research at the Faculty of Law of the University of Sydney (Cukadar & Kahvecioğlu 2012).

It has been noted that IL programmes are not new in many universities (Ndou & Zimu-Biyela 2023). Likewise, in South Africa (SA), the core teaching of IL in universities was introduced in 1994 (Moll 2009). Several studies show that IL in SA is offered in both universities and universities of technology (Zimu 2020; Davids & Omar 2018; Mnkeni-Saurombe 2015; Neerpuuth 2012). The University of South Africa (UNISA), a comprehensive open distance e-learning university in SA, is also part of the universities that offer IL to students (Mnkeni-Saurombe 2015). Assessing the efficacy of the IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN was notable due to the lack of investigations on the IL offered to law students in SA. UNIVEN is one of the historically disadvantaged universities, it was necessary to assess the effectiveness of the

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programme and understand how the currently offered IL content offered to the first-year level students is aligned to the international IL standards for the benefit of students to be able to utilise the acquired skills nationally and internationally.

UNIVEN is a university in Limpopo Province, SA with a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) and Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Criminal Justice as some of the qualifications developed for law students (UNIVEN Calendar 2022). Regarding catchment areas, “many South African students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and lack the IL skills needed for their academic” (Tiemensma 2012 cited in Ndou & Zimu-Biyela 2023: 23). Hence, there is a need to investigate the efficacy of the IL content offered for first year law students at UNIVEN.

The School of Law offers IL as embedded in the Introduction to the Theory of Law 1541 (INT 1541) as a compulsory module for all first year-level law students. The intention of embedding IL into the INT 1541 and as a compulsory module for all first year-level law students at UNIVEN is to equip the students with the skills for searching for legal information that will be useful to their future, throughout their academic progress, and in legal research entities. The skills gained from the course are useful to students not only for the duration of their law studies but also for their lifelong learning as future legal practitioners (Golenko et al. 2013; Behrens, Oln & Machet 1999).

2 Problem statement

Despite how IL is offered in different countries and universities, most of the offered IL programmes are 'passive in nature and students are unengaged recipients of the IL they receive' instead of offering IL that engages students as full participants of the (Detlor et al. 2011: 4). Therefore, universities must develop real and noticeable IL content that incorporates other evolving literacies such as media literacy, academic literacy, and digital literacy. Furthermore, studies advocate that there are changes brought about by information and communication technologies (ICTs) in instructions conducted in higher learning institutions (Ndou & Mojapelo 2019; Golenko et al. 2013; Kauffman 2010). This implies that universities should not rule out the inclusion of the use of computers as part of the IL. Universities in developing countries such as SA are concerned with admitted first year level students who were not adequately prepared for university academic by the basic education system (Tiemensma, 2012).

Likewise, IL in legal studies is becoming increasingly important as law schools and firms globally focus on graduate students with IL skills because they are ready for practice (Kim-Prieto & Kahvecioglu 2014; Kauffman 2010). However, law students are found to lack IL skills (Olurunfemi, Mostert & Ocholla 2015; Toteng, Hoskins & Bell 2011). This could be evidence that most university students lack information searching skills, and they end up relying on Google to find information which may be of poor quality. If universities do not offer the right IL content to law students, they could struggle to locate relevant information sources to resolve legal matters.

Generally, law graduates and professionals are supposed to have spent a considerable amount of time doing legal research. Meyer (2009:11) states that “on average, 45% of the first year of practice of newly admitted attorneys and 30% of years 2 and 3 will be spent conducting legal research”. These statistics show the importance of IL skills in legal education and that law students who acquired IL skills are more in demand by the legal market. The UNIVEN law students are expected to be competitive nationally and internationally. Hence, a need to examine the IL content offered for first year level law students at the UNIVEN.

Consequently, this study followed the LSIL standards in assessing the efficacy of IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN considering that the acquired IL skills for law graduate students should be useful in legal entities or for legal research. The LSIL standards are adopted in developed countries such as the UK and the US. The LSIL states that a successful legal researcher “understands the legal system and legal information sources; gathers information using effective and efficient research strategies; critically evaluates information and effectively applies information to resolve a specific issue or need, and understands the legal issues associated with the discovery, use or application of information, and distinguishes between ethical and unethical uses of information” (Kim-Prieto & Kahvecioglu 2019:109).

3 Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the efficacy of the IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN, guided by the following research objectives:

- To find out if the IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN is aligned with the LSIL standards.
- Assess the understanding of the IL content by first year law students at UNIVEN.

4 Literature review

In this study, the literature review was formulated according to what has been studied with respect to the objectives of the study. Therefore, this study literature review focuses on:

- IL standards for law students.
- Understanding of law students about the content of the IL.

4.1 IL standards for law students

It has been noted that offering IL to university law students increases the usage of legal databases and reduces the plagiarism level among students and reduces queries at the reference desk (Toteng, Hoskins & Bell 2011; Davies & Jackson 2005). Therefore, universities should consider aligning the IL content offered to students with the national or international IL standards. Ineffective IL programmes result from developing the IL programmes without aligning the content with IL standards. Several studies show that different IL standards and models are being used to assess the IL content offered to university students. Kim-Prieto and Kahvecioglu (2019) advocate that Legal Information Literacy (LIL), Law Student Research Competency and IL (LSRCIL), and Law Student IL (LSIL) standards which were developed in the US, UK, and Turkey, respectively, are currently used for assessing the IL content offered to law students in most of the developed and developing countries.

The reason is that IL skills can only evolve in an intellectual vacuum, with content that allows such skills to emerge from practice (Association of College and Research Libraries 2018; Kim-Prieto & Kahvecioglu 2014). The Big 6 model was used to “assess the level of IL skills of undergraduate law students at the University of Botswana and found that most of the students lacked the necessary legal research skills in relation to the use of electronic resources” (Toteng, Hoskins & Bell 2010: 69).

In SA, the Committee of Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (CHELSA) is tasked as the overseeing body for the development of the IL frameworks for higher education institutions (Esterhuizen & Kuhn 2010). However, the present study notes that in SA there are no specific IL standards that universities are recommended to follow to align the IL programmes offered to law students. Hence, this study used the following five principles of the LSIL standards: identify, access, evaluate, apply, and ethical and legal issues of use to assess the IL content offered for first year law students at the UNIVEN. The LSIL standards are influential in the offering of IL instructions for law students in developed countries such as the US and the UK (Kim-Prieto, 2021). The current study opines that it is vital for the UNIVEN to access the IL content offered for law students according to international standards, especially the IL standards practised in developed countries such as the US and the UK. Kim-Prieto (2011: 610) avows that the IL content which is aligned to the LSIL standards equips law students with the skills to:

1. Identify the type and sources of information appropriate to the problem or issue at hand.
2. Access the appropriate information effectively and efficiently.
3. Critically assess the information and its sources to properly incorporate the appropriate information into reliable work products.
4. Apply the information effectively to resolve a specific problem or need.
5. Distinguishes between ethical uses and unethical uses of information and understand the legal issues that arise from the discovery, use or application of information.

4.2 Understanding of the IL content by law students

Toteng, Hoskins and Bell (2011) emphasise that law students and lawyers are more dependent on the literature of their legal profession than any other field. The law is highly dependent on case law, which the students have to read but also analyse. Generally, students are now expected not only to search for information but also to learn to find information, evaluate it, assess it, and use it efficiently while also developing critical thinking as a lifelong learning skill (Golenko et al. 2013; Margolis & Murray 2012). IL within the field of law is based on a large number of specific aspects, even unique ones different from other scientific fields. Today's law students need “more instruction in assessing and evaluating the sources they find” (Margolis & Murray 2012). Therefore, IL is significant for law students “to know legal sources of information, know different ways of citing legal acts, and know the specifics of legal databases” (Golenko et al. 2013: 416). In the US, law graduate students are admitted to law schools without adequate IL skills (Gallagher 2007). Therefore, there is a need for

a study to examine the understanding of law students about IL content in a historically disadvantaged university in developing countries.

Law is a specialised field with a specialised collection. The study and practice of law are highly dependent on case law, given the doctrine of precedent, which students must read, analyse, and apply to a specific set of facts (Toteng, Hoskins & Bell 2010). Law students deal with case law and legislation daily; students must be trained on how to search or find cases, legislation, articles, law reports, government gazettes, and any other relevant information for their studies (Toteng, Hoskins & Bell 2010). In the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) information is accessible digitally. Knowing where and how to locate the needed information is more important than searching for materials for a specific subject (Çukadar & Kahvecioglu 2012). Law students use different kinds of search engines to access information from electronic databases and get too many results that need to be managed, selected, filtered, and evaluated. To deal with this challenge, law students need to be equipped with knowledge and skills to be information literate to understand, follow, and manage the changes in the digital world (Cukadar & Kahvecioglu 2012; Toteng, Hoskins & Bell 2011). Like students in many other fields, law students need these new skills offered in the IL content. There are many changes in the legal profession, and law students need to know how to search for the current or latest legal information to compete in the 4IR workforce.

5 Methodology

The study used a quantitative research approach that involves collecting numerical data or data that can be counted (Mohajan 2020). It adopted a census sampling approach used to select first year law students who participated in and wrote the IL test in INT 1541 in the 2019 academic year. Census sampling is a method used to include the entire reference population in the study (González-Chica, Duquia, Bonamigo & Bastos 2016; Singh & Masuku 2014). The INT 1541 IL test was accessed online via the BLMS. This study applied a census sampling method to select all 201 students who managed to write and complete the online set test of 311 first year law registered students for INT 1541 at UNIVEN.

This implies that of 311 first year law registered students, 201 students were considered the population of this study because 110 students who did not complete the set test were excluded from the sample. To complement the findings, an interview was conducted with a prospective sample of two academics from the School of Law at UNIVEN. The INT 1541 IL test was completed using BLMS and the student's answers were based on 13 questions that were in line with the research objectives. The BLMS was also used to analyse the results or findings of 13 questions aligned with the research objectives. Dietz-Uhler and Hurn (2013) emphasise that one advantage of using learning management systems is the ability to collect and analyse data about students and their needs.

6 Findings and discussions

The findings and discussions of this study are based on the IL content offered and the understanding of the IL content by first year law students.

6.1 IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN

Based on the information obtained from the BLMS, Table 1 shows the IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN. The IL content offered comprises of the library catalogue, online databases, the internet as an information resource; and economic, legal, and social issues around the use of information.

Table 1: IL content offered to first-year law students at UNIVEN

Offered IL content	Content briefing	LSIL standards
Access and use of library catalogue.	Students are introduced to the university and taught how to search for books, memorandums, course outlines, class notes, and past examination papers.	Standard II: Access the appropriate information effectively and efficiently.
Presentation of information and basic computing (MS Word).	Students are introduced to computer troubleshooting and also how to do PowerPoint presentations	Standard IV: Apply information effectively to resolve a specific issue or need.
Local and international online legal databases.	Students are introduced to some relevant legal databases and are taught how to search for journal articles, caselaw, and legislation.	Standard I: Identify types and sources of information appropriate to the problem or issue at hand.
Reference and referencing techniques.	Students are taught how to reference properly using the referencing styles available in the School of Law.	Standard V: Distinguish between ethical uses and unethical uses of information and understand the legal issues arising from information discovery, use, or application.
Plagiarism	Students are taught about plagiarism and how to avoid it	Standard V: Distinguish between ethical uses and unethical uses of information and understand the legal issues arising from information discovery, use, or application.

(Source: Developed by the author)

As reflected in Table 1, this study finds that the IL content offered for first year level students is in line with the standard I, II, IV, and V of the LSIL standards. The portrayed IL content implies that first year law students at UNIVEN are equipped with the skills to access and use legal information sources; apply information effectively and distinguish between ethical and unethical use of information. This finding implies that the IL content offered to first year law students at the UNIVEN does not comply with standard III of the LSIL standards. Standard III of the LSIL standards stipulates that law students must be able to 'critically evaluate information and its sources, to properly incorporate the appropriate information into a reliable work product' (Kim-Prieto, 2011; Sibanda, 2004). Students have been noted to have difficulties evaluating information (Yebowaah & Owusu-Ansah 2020; Woitte & Mccay 2019).

Hence, Table 1 does not show coverage of the evaluation of information and information sources as part of the IL content covered for first year law students at UNIVEN. Studies show that effective and efficient strategies in searching for information and evaluating information sources should form part of the IL content offered to law students (Bawack & Kala-Kamdjoug 2020; Coklar Yaman & Yurdakul 2017; Golenko et al. 2013). Likewise, Keboh and Baro (2020) allude that universities should offer IL content that is relevant in equipping students with the skills to evaluate information and information sources. As it has been noted that most university students use Google as a first-stop platform when searching for academic information (Salehi & Ashman 2018), it is significant for IL programmes to cover search strategies and evaluation of information sources.

6.2 Understanding IL content by first year students

The student's understanding of the IL content was based on using library catalogues and online databases, the knowledge of the Internet as an information resource and the awareness of academic integrity. The average score of the INT 1541 IL test was used to assess the understanding of the IL content by the students. The compliments from the academics at the School of Law were also used to validate the findings of this study.

6.2.1 Library and online information resources

The student's understanding of the IL content was based on using library catalogues and online databases, the knowledge of the Internet as an information resource and the awareness of academic integrity. The average score of the INT 1541 IL test was used to assess the understanding of the IL content by the students. The compliments from the academics at the School of Law were also used to validate the findings of this study.

It has been noted that the UNIVEN Library offers a compulsory library orientation to all first year entering students. During library orientation, students are introduced to the library catalogue and how to find library resources using the library catalogue. This study expected that 100% of the first-year law students at UNIVEN will be familiar with the university library as they were expected to have attended a library orientation before the start of UNIVEN IL instructions. However, the finding of this study shows that less than 90% of first year law students fully understand UNIVEN's library catalogue. Table 2 shows that 135 (67%) of the respondents are aware of the location option in a library catalogue, while 161 (80%) of the respondents are aware of the status option in a library catalogue. This implies that the UNIVEN students' understanding of the catalogue differs. Studies show that a library catalogue is one of the most useful search tools for university students (Toteng, Hoskins & Bell 2010).

Although not revealing the number of databases that first year law students at the UNIVEN are introduced to, Table 2 further reveals that the majority 143 (71%) of first year law students understand that subscribed online legal databases such as Sabinet are useful databases for law students. However, approximately 50% of first year law students do not know the correct way of searching for information in Sabinet. As shown in Table 2, slightly 109 (54%) of the students know how to refine a search and 50% of the students could use search filters. Considering this average percentage, it is not debatable that first year law students at UNIVEN need to be fully engaged in how to refine searches using e-databases. This finding is consistent with the study by Toteng, Hoskins, and Bell (2010) which shows that law students at the University of Botswana do not know how to refine searches using subscribed databases. Therefore, law students need to follow the appropriate access and retrieval mechanism to locate the information.

Table 2 shows that the majority 167 (83%) of the first-year law students at UNIVEN were aware that the Google search engine could be used to search for case law, though it is not recommended to rely on it (Google) as a first stop search engine platform. Furthermore, slightly half 107 (53%) of the participants showed that they are aware that websites such as www.saflii.org; www.acts.co.za; www.gov.za could be used to search for legislation and articles. The finding of this study shows that the IL content offered to the first-year law students at UNIVEN encourages the access and use of relevant legal databases, internet websites, and Open Access (OA) resources such as the SAFLII website. Dogruer, Eyyam and Menevis (2011) deem that access and use of other Internet websites by students could be a way of promoting the use of Open Access (OA) resources.

Table 2: Understanding online information resources

Content	Question and the average score
Access and use of the library catalogue	Status of items 161 (80%), location of the items 135 (67%)
Access and use of online databases	Identifying legal databases 143 (71%), limiting search (50%), Expanding search 109 (54%)
Internet as an information source	Knowledge of legal websites 107 (53%), awareness for use of Google 167 (83%)

6.2.2 Referencing and plagiarism

The IL offered shows the importance of including plagiarism, copyright, referencing, and reference techniques in the IL content offered for university law students. Table 3 indicates that referencing and plagiarism are included as part of the IL content offered for first year UNIVEN law students. Furthermore, Table 3 shows that the majority 181 (90%) of the respondents are aware that Turnitin software is an anti-plagiarism detection tool used to detect similarity index, 177 (88%) Of respondents know that correct paraphrasing is used so as to avoid plagiarism, 175 (87%) of the respondents are aware

that failure to give credit to the sources used in the assignment is plagiarism. Introducing anti-plagiarism tools to UNIVEN law students will play a vital role in their academic future. Additionally, the IL content offered to first year law students has a significant role in promoting referencing among law students and promoting awareness of plagiarism in academic projects. The compliments from the academics at the School of Law were also used to validate this finding. Some of the academics at the School of Law contacted the librarian and thanked the library for offering the IL content, which promotes referencing and discourages plagiarism among university students.

Despite the fact that the majority 177 (88%) of students know that changing the words and sentence structure without quotation marks, but giving credit to the author, is an example of correct paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism. However, slightly more than half 111 (55%) of the students know that it is a must to cite a source if:

- Someone's idea was used in the paper, and the words were changed.
- The sources were from a web page.
- The sources were quoted word for word.

Evans (2012) alludes to the fact that law students who plagiarise may face serious challenges in getting jobs or being accepted in legal practices. Hansen and Anderson (2015: 421 – 422) assert that:

The prohibition against plagiarism in law schools seeks to ensure that students do the work that learning requires, and it also serves the purpose of providing students with a conduct expectation that they are expected to fulfil in good faith, thereby developing their sense of responsibility, an attribute key to the practice of law.

Table 3: Referencing and plagiarism

Content	Question and the average score
Referencing	Paraphrasing 177 (88%), when to cite 111 (55%)
Plagiarism	Awareness of antiplagiarism detection tools 181 (90%), defining plagiarism 175 (87%)

The programme was important to UNIVEN law students and academics as they benefitted from it. The compliments from the academics at the School of Law were also used to validate the findings of this study. Some of these academics contacted the law librarian and thanked the law librarian for offering the IL programme to the students.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

This study concludes that first year law students at UNIVEN learned and mastered the IL content offered by the university. In addition, the IL content offered to the first year-level law students at UNIVEN is efficient to provide law students with the skills to access and use both print and online legal information sources. Although the offered content does not address standard principle III of the LSIL standard, this study concludes that the IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN is aligned with the other four standards essential for LSIL standards. Consequently, the offered IL content equips students with the skills to “identify the type and sources of information appropriate to the problem or issue at hand; access the appropriate information effectively and efficiently; distinguish between ethical uses and unethical uses of information and understand the legal issues arising from information discovery, use, or application.”

This implies that UNIVEN law graduate students are capable of competing with international students in the access and use of legal information resources. This study recommends that the currently offered IL content offered to first year law students at UNIVEN should be developed to incorporate other evolving literacy, such as media and visual literacies. Furthermore, the IL-related training offered to UNIVEN law students at postgraduate levels should be examined.

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