

## **Lawbore.net review**

Lawbore operates out of City Law School, and although it is geared towards the needs of students at that institution it also professes a public service function, both in terms of reaching users from outside City who may be interested in its contents, and also in making content available for free (see <http://lawbore.net/about/> (last accessed 1 April 2011)).

The Lawbore homepage (<http://lawbore.net/> last accessed 1 April 2011)) is broken down into a number of features.

'Topic Guides' are aligned with modules, and each Guide links to a further set of links to external sites with content specifically relevant to the module, for example, government departments, organisations, and journal articles. The Topic Guides are compiled by the law librarian, and the aim is to facilitate efficient access to relevant content. There is an associated 'New This Month' section in which recent content from a range of modules is presented in a visible list.

'Learnmore' is a set of materials related to legal study skills and careers. There are text, slideshow (some with audio) and video resources supporting a variety of aspects of legal study and personal / professional development – including legal research; mooting; and study skills for new law students. There is also an audio slideshow tour of Lawbore itself.

The Lawbore homepage also links to City Law School News and to a Calendar of law school events. 'City Hub' links to what appears to be one-stop update shop for City students, which aggregates some of the content from the broader Lawbore site and features access to various internal City administrative resources. The Lawbore

banner also links to a Forum (Discussion Board) and to a Blog ('Lawbore Future Lawyer'), which reports on the career pathways of City alumni.

Lawbore contains a range of content which should engage a variety of constituencies and learning styles. The gateway page has a modern look and feel, although there may be scope for pruning the volume of visible items (although that is admittedly a matter of taste as well as usability). A nice user-friendly element of functionality is the one-click previewing of external materials to which links are provided. This preview is provided within Lawbore and means that users can have a quick glance at an item, with some explanatory text in Lawbore itself, before committing to fully opening the item. The presentation of some aspects of the site does not have the same sharpness as the gateway page; some of the text resources in Learnmore are both very long and quite densely formatted. There might be some questions about the utility of the Forum, although one suspects no more so than is the case with a great many institutional discussion boards. There is relatively little recent usage on the publicly boards which I was able to access, and the number of replies to posts is minimal. However, conversations initiated on the Forum might be continuing in a variety of other face to face or online social networking environments, so one should be cautious about using the visible metrics as the indicator of 'success'. Students and alumni feature heavily in the content, for example as authors of FAQs, as participants in mooted videos, or as the subject of blog posts. This has to be good for the credibility of the resources for student users, and for student ownership of the learning which Lawbore is intended to support.

Lawbore has the advantage of a relatively clearly articulated rationale (see <http://lawbore.net/about/> (last accessed 1 April 2011) and the 'list of academic references' link at that page), which insulates it from the accretion of 'stuff' which can beset learning resources. The focus on quality over quantity is one to hang on to. Notwithstanding the high visibility of students in the learning resources, the orientation of Lawbore appears to be largely transmissive – users are generally recipients rather than generators of content, although there are clear opportunities for users to act on the knowledge they acquire from Lawbore to further their own

learning – not least in relation to some of the Study Skills and associated material in Learnmore. Perhaps future challenges for Lawbore might include the possibility of fostering opportunities for students to interact more directly with content items to further their learning. However, whether this is necessary or appropriate does of course depend on what learning opportunities exist elsewhere for users – after all, Lawbore sits in the wider context of the learning of City students – and on broader institutional questions around learning cultures and assessment frameworks, which impact on student motivations to learn in particular ways.

The holistic concept of Lawbore makes it a sophisticated resource, and I can imagine it benefiting City students greatly. It was harder to determine with certainty where the added value for non-City users lay – this has particular pertinence given the commendable Lawbore commitment to public availability - (a quick win on that issue might be to provide some kind of Lawbore tour for non-City users from the homepage – I rather stumbled across the tour located in Learnmore). The (properly) City-centric nature of the Topic Guides means that the learning of other users through the Guides may be largely serendipitous and hence possibly somewhat hit and miss. However, I could imagine students from other institutions making effective use of the range of study skills and associated materials situated in Learnmore. User comments cited in Allbon, E, 'Innovative involvement not embarrassing imitation: using technology to connect with students without treading on virtual toes' <http://www.slideshare.net/lawbore/innovative-involvement-not-embarrassing-imitation-using-technology-to-connect-with-students-without-treading-on-virtual-toes> (slide 36) (last accessed 1 April 2011) suggest benefits are being experienced by users both from within and beyond City.

Two further features of Lawbore are worthy of mention and commendation. First, the 'gateway' approach goes some way to making visible a full picture of the student experience, which links the formal curriculum, and 'extra-curricular' provision. Second, the site appears to represent part of a significant project, and possibly also a philosophy, of mainstreaming information skills provision in law. Both of these seem to be highly desirable directions for development.

On the first point, helping students to understand the broader context in which their studies are situated - whether that be the relationships between different modules, or the links between curriculum content and professional life – is conducive to ‘big picture’, deep learning in which thematic links can be drawn between a range of items of content. The issue faced by Lawbore, and by more orthodox institutional VLEs, and, to be frank, by curricula in general, is to strike the balance between the need to conform to modular structures and the usefulness, for authentic, messy, deep learning, of transcending modular boundaries.

On the second point, notwithstanding the proliferation of sources of information about law available to students in the wider world, the days are gone when ‘the library’ could be somehow treated as ‘other’. Quite the opposite; information skills are now a core literacy for making sense of the array of sources out there. Facilitating an integrated experience for students which bridges the gap between academic departments and information skills provision should be central to the mission of modern Universities and Lawbore is clearly going in a good direction on this issue. This mission is no less pressing for law than for other disciplines, and getting it right is not just about equipping law students to be efficient legal professionals, who can ‘find stuff’. It is about fostering and normalising a spirit of critical enquiry through which it is understood that the provenance and purpose of sources affect that which is known about the world; this is as valuable for active citizenship as it is for chancery practice.

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