

Legal Education Research Network

“What’s the point if no-one knows about your research? Embedding effective dissemination into research design.

5th November 2014

A REPORT ON THE WORKSHOP: SUBMITTED BY PROFESSOR JANE CHING, LERN STEERING GROUP MEMBER

The Workshop had its origins in a number of concerns. First, that researchers in legal education tend not to integrate a dissemination/communication strategy from the outset and; second, they tend to use traditional methods of dissemination, such as conference papers and journal articles. The Workshop brought together contributors who have reflected and developed best practice as regards how to make people aware of their work, and do this as widely as possible and by using the most up to date and effective methods. But also to seek advice from those whose *raison d’être* is to influence policy-makers and other groups, along with a contributor who is the ‘consumer’ of legal education research findings and who was asked to reflect on how best to ensure ‘consumers’ *do*, indeed, become aware of the research.

Introduction by Professor Pat Leighton, co-director of LERN

LERN, whose membership is free, is intended to allow researchers to give each other mutual support. This might include looking at a draft questionnaire, or minor peer review. This session was about the recipients of research - students? Other law schools? Policy makers? – and thinking about the “consumer” perspective. What do consumers want from research? What catches their eye? How best to catch their interest?

There are traditional means of disseminating research through articles and conference papers, but have we thought about links with campaigns, blogs and social media, launches and press releases? We should think about building in dissemination/transparency/impact from the outset. There is a black hole about research into the effectiveness of research and whether or not it has brought about change. (You can download the pp on the Introduction)

Graeme Broadbent (Kingston University): Maximising the effectiveness of “traditional methods”. A researcher’s view

Think about:

- Audience:
 - Law outlets (but if international, think about jurisdictional scope and interests)
 - Allied journals (eg management education) where you might be able to influence other disciplines
 - Education journals. The most prestigious is probably *Studies in Higher Education*, but there are many specialist education journals. But do your homework – don’t assume that what is innovative in law is innovative for others; explain to a non law audience and be prepared for expectations that your work will discuss its theoretical background and its methodology (to be contrasted with method)
- Abstract:
 - These are of increasing importance. Conferences put them out to peer review and there are examples of prizes being given for abstracts. They make you focus.
 - A conference abstract sets out what you think you are likely to cover. An article abstract is after the event and summarises what you did cover.
 - A conference abstract is selling your paper to the conference organisers in the first instance, then to participants. There is a risk to your popularity with both if you

then change your actual presentation too much. A conference abstract should be a simple indicative summary:

- Identifying the issue addressed
 - Stating the material to be drawn on
 - Getting across your distinctiveness/originality
 - Showing the main thrust of your argument and your (current) interim conclusions.
 - Tailor your paper to the length of time you have.
- Articles:
 - Converting your conference paper into an article is more than simply transcribing the script of your presentation.
 - Book reviews can be a useful way for early career researchers to get used to preparing something for publication and allow you the opportunity to get noticed.
 - Attend to your referencing from the outset. If your paper is rejected by one journal, you may have to reformat for resubmission to another. Education journals tend to use Harvard.
 - Also think about keywords early. They drive the search functions and get you noticed. Think about keywords meaningful to the audience you are aiming at.
 - Which journal? Open access if you are interested in breadth of dissemination. Unlike some other disciplines, we don’t have the citation statistics and hierarchies to assist us.

Professor Avrom Sherr (Patron of LERN): an editor’s view

With most grant bidding systems, you will now be asked about your publication plans right from the outset.

The editorial team of a journal will have a distinct footprint for the kind of work they are looking for. There will be a team of peer reviewers and an editorial board which may rotate. If you have been asked to peer review 3 or 4 times by the same journal, there is nothing to be lost by asking if you could be considered for the editorial board. Volunteer to review, or guest edit a special edition as a way of gaining experience.

Always, always read the guidance to authors and comply with it. Be aware that many journals now require online submission (which promotes speed, accuracy, consistency and organisation) but loses something of the personal touch and requires a degree of IT literacy to manage.

If you are considering setting up a journal, look for a gap in the market; approach publishers; set up a working group and think hard about what other journals you will be competing with.

Referee processes are usually double blind. If a reviewer gives you advice, don’t ignore it. You may follow it or justify why you aren’t following it. Don’t attempt to “appeal” the editorial decision (or use reviewers’ feedback as an argument to lengthen the piece or give the editor choices “I could do X or Y, what do you want me to do?”) A constructive review:

- Provides a clear critique
- Avoids conflicts of interest
- Is a collegiate exercise
- Is specific
- Reviews the student that has been done, not the study the reviewer wants the author to have done

When submitting a paper:

- Select an audience

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- Know your findings or the importance of your argument
- Select the right journal (impact factor? Relevance to your area? Speed of publication? National or international reach?) If the journal is international, then you will need to have explored the international literature in your paper. It is possible to contact the editor to ask if the journal would be interested in a piece on a topic before you submit it.

Professor Paul Maharg (ANU): the view of expert in using social media

Paul’s slides are at: <http://www.slideshare.net/paulmaharg>

Paul discussed a number of digital media that can be used to disseminate, but also to track impact/interest (eg number of citations, number of views). These include a blog (<http://paulmaharg.com/>), and use of SSRN, googlescholar, researchgate (more used by scientists), academia.edu; impactstory, carbonmade, blawg and slideshare.

Duncan O’Leary (Research Director of DEMOS): impact and policy development: The view of the professional in influencing policy-makers

How do you do research that is high quality but has impact and is noticed by the media? Private sector sponsors of individual pieces of work want to gain profile as a result and are interested in media presence.

DEMOS carries out around forty projects each year. The PDF report is available free on their website and hard copies are sent out to a targeted list. They normally have a launch event with a panel including a minister and/or the sponsoring organisation. They use press releases and have a social media strategy.

There are five main points:

- 1 Answer the right questions; don’t work in a vacuum. Ask yourself why would anyone else care about this? How can I make it noticed? How does your work connect to, eg, what’s in the media at the moment. They will have an early meeting with the press team, considering why the project matters; what the end product will be; what will interest the press and what political agenda the work connects to. They consciously make projects visible during their lifetimes – setting out how they can be contacted, what the timelines are. They go out and ask policy makers what is really bothering them? What would they like to know? Talk to journalists at the beginning rather than the end. Ask them what hurdles they need to get over to get the story past their editor and into the paper?
- 2 Know your audience. In government it is the MPs and political advisors who drive change, not the civil servants. However, if a bill is in progress, the civil servants will be doing the drafting. Politicians: Why does this matter? What should I do? Civil servants: How should this be implemented? What will it cost?
- 3 Provide something new. How does your work add to the sum of human knowledge? Does it provide new figures? Evidence of the consequences of a particular policy? New concepts or new ways of thinking? New policy also has more impact if it is telling the recipient something new at the outset.
- 4 Find intermediaries for your message. Journalists? Backbenchers with a particular specialism? MPs have power to raise issues but lack the resources to commission research – a partnership with an interested MP can be fruitful. Show MPs that the topic matters in

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their constituency? Think about members of the House of Lords, and MPS who are attached to groups or committees on the topic.

- 5 Be opportunistic. Don’t forget the work once you’ve done it. There might, for instance, subsequently be a government consultation on a related topic into which you can feed results you already have. Use press releases. Think about using the human interest angle – a case study or example? Are there links to the NSS data when that is published? Or to the forthcoming general election?

Dr Vanessa Davies (Director of the Bar Standards Board (BSB)): what is attractive about legal research: the ‘consumer’s’ view

Consider what a tough audience the legal professions and their regulators are. There is evidence that 80% of potential clients need at least 5 contacts from a lawyer before they will instruct them. So one website, or seminar, or passively waiting for people to respond is not enough. You need to have multiple and sustained interactions with your audience throughout the project.

You have to be able to answer the “So what?” question, and tell the story. Even at the outset you should be able to anticipate some idea of the findings, and can prepare the ground. Repackage your information for different audiences. Keep following through.

As a commissioner of research, the key points are:

- Follow the bidding instructions. The commissioner may need to operate as a public body in its procurement processes, so failure to follow the instructions undermines the propriety of the process and leads to your bid being rejected.
- Don’t assume the commissioner is entirely ignorant about research.
- Think about the communications plan and strategy from the outset. The commissioner will need to have one running alongside and, as a regulator, may need to control the messages given out. You can piggyback on the commissioner’s dissemination plan and have your press people work them them.
- You may be asked to determine success criteria from the outset (eg response rate on the survey; number of media hits of different kinds; identifying the key audiences for the key communications).
- When disseminating to members of the legal professions and their regulators, remember:
 - Short attention span
 - They need to hear the message multiple times
 - Be very clear about the key messages
 - Intolerance of research “jargon” – work on use of plain English
 - Ensure findings and reports are digitally available and easy to access (no broken links).
 - There is limited interest in theory, methodology, data sets: but some people will be interested in them. Have multiple methods of dissemination so that those who want to can get at the theory, data sets etc.
- Use social media but be prepared for positive and negative unintended consequences.

The event closed with short though wide ranging discussion of the key messages of the day.