

# LAW AND COMPUTING AT DURHAM

by

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Durham University set up its Centre for Law and Computing in 1988. Such a centre was seen as the most effective way of concentrating academic knowledge, practitioners' know-how and computing skills on major research projects in the sphere of law and computing. Today we are very active in both research and teaching.

## **Research**

On the research front, the Durham Centre is involved in developing software for use in legal practice and law teaching, and in writing up this work for journals and conferences. We are also concerned to provide appropriate facilities for postgraduates undertaking research at the Centre.

Legal expert systems are computer programs that mimic the knowledge and the know-how of a human legal expert. We have built a number of prototype systems of this type, some of which have been used in law teaching. Systems have been developed in such domains as theft, exclusion clauses, county court procedure, legal aid eligibility and contractual duress.

In 1990, on the strength of this investigative work, we were commissioned by a large City law firm to build an expert system covering aspects of European competition law. Following the successful completion of this project, we obtained special research funding from Durham University itself and went on to develop a combined expert system and hypertext database of materials on the Brussels Convention 1968.

With a substantial expansion in numbers now under way in higher education, considerable interest is being shown in the possible benefits that the development of computer-assisted learning (CAL) software might bring. We built a CAL package called Contract Tutor in 1989. This package comprises a suite of twelve tutorial-style contract law problems and has proved very popular with our own law students. It has now been fully integrated into the contract law course here. Copies have also been sold to sixteen other law schools in the UK and abroad. We are currently working on further CAL packages covering equity & trusts, tort and European law. Furthermore, we are exploring ways in which to enhance the basic Contract Tutor style of approach to such software by, for example, integrating hypertext database components into our home-made CAL software.

Software, of course, is not our only form of output. In addition, we seek to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the sphere of law and computing. We do this, primarily, by writing and submitting papers for learned journals and conferences where we feel that we have something

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useful to contribute. One member of the Centre's staff has recently been appointed academic editor of the journal *Computers and Law*.

Last but not least, a central function of the Centre is to encourage postgraduate research into all aspects of law and computing. In furtherance of this goal, supervision, support and resources are made available to graduates wishing to undertake research into such areas as computer law, the computerisation of the law office and the role of computers in legal education.

## **Teaching**

On the teaching front, the Centre runs as part of the undergraduate law degree course a popular option in law and computing for Durham students. We also provide training in computer skills to both staff and students. Lastly, the Centre makes available teaching and conference resources to the wider community of legal practitioners and law academics.

For the last three years, we have offered a law and computing course to second and third year law undergraduates at Durham. This course comprises two elements, the first involving a study of computer law. Students explore such areas as patent law, copyright, trade secrets, computer contracts, computer torts, computer crime, and data protection. The second element involves an examination of the computerisation of the law office. Students look at the relevance to lawyers of such software applications as word processing, desk-top publishing, in-house and on-line database systems, expert systems and electronic communications.

An increasingly important function of the Centre is to provide training, support and computer resources to both law academics and law students in order to help them acquire necessary computing skills. As part of this function, and in conjunction with the University's own Computer Literacy Project, we now offer all first year law undergraduates word processing training as a matter of course.

It is often hard for legal practitioners and law academics to keep up to date with developments in the fast moving world of law and computing. We hope to contribute to the alleviation of this problem by organising appropriate courses, conferences and other such events. With this goal in mind, we have, in the past, organised a number of workshops for legal academics and a successful, well-attended course on computing issues for legal practitioners. In 1991 the Centre hosted the Sixth Annual Conference of the British and Irish Legal Education Technology Association (BILETA) which was held at Durham. At this two-day event some eighty practitioners, academics and others attended and discussed a wide range of law and computing issues.