

SCALEplus is rationalising: what does that mean for me?

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Practitioners who have recently used SCALEplus¹, the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department's website to conduct their legal research, may have noticed that it is shrinking. Staff at the department have been progressively removing databases from the service since April last year. Information now available on the site has been reduced to Commonwealth legislation, legislation from non self-governing territories and related materi-

al such as bills, explanatory memoranda/statements, tables, indexes, etc.

The reason for the reduction in SCALEplus content is to avoid duplication of resources on the internet and to make SCALEplus the definitive Commonwealth legislation site. In a statement on the first page of the site, SCALEplus administrators note that they have been aware of the duplication of legal information on the internet for some time. In fact, in many cases, SCALEplus has been the duplicator with

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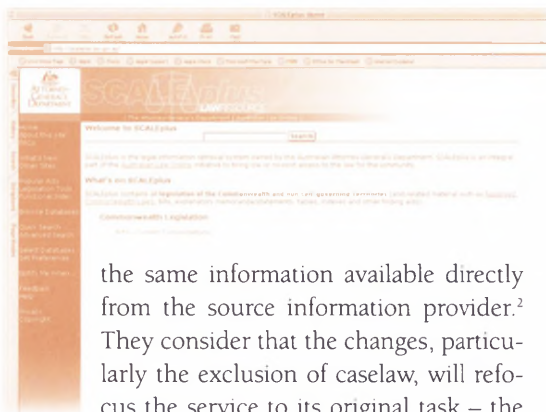
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the same information available directly from the source information provider.² They consider that the changes, particularly the exclusion of caselaw, will refocus the service to its original task – the provision of up-to-date Commonwealth legislation.

SO, WHAT WILL I FIND IF I VISIT SCALEPLUS NOW?

If you visit SCALEplus now you will find that on the surface very little has changed about the site. It retains its format and structure, including the various search options, browse function, indexes, etc. However, the note on the home page advises users of the reduction in content and a table listing dates from April to July stipulates the timing of the removal of the various databases. If you try to enter most of these databases you will find that whilst the formatting remains, all legal materials have been removed. In rare cases, however, you will find that some of the information scheduled to be removed has not yet gone. For example, at the time of writing, the SA Supreme Decisions were still available on the site.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR INTERNET LEGAL RESEARCH?

Basically, the news is good and bad. On the positive side, for those used to using SCALEplus, it has become a gateway to sites that contain the removed information as well as other similar and potentially helpful resources. For example, the table on the first page of the site not only provides details of when the various databases will be removed from SCALEplus, it also lists the URLs of alternative sites holding the information.

Updates to the 'browse all data' option on the home page is also good news for users. It can be quite helpful as a means of directing you to a site that

contains the information you are looking for. If you select this option, you will be taken to a list of all of the databases that were on the site, and in some cases, to links to sites where that information can now be found. If, for example, you are looking for NSW Supreme Court decisions, you simply scroll down the list of databases until you find the 'NSW Supreme Court Decisions' listing and click on the external link provided. You will be taken to the NSW Attorney-General's site 'Lawlink NSW'. Once there, not only are NSW Supreme Court decisions accessible, but a whole gamut of other information is also available. Material available on the site includes: departmental reports and papers; links to NSW court and tribunal sites; and law library sites, lawyer directories, etc.

It is likely that the alternative sites listed on SCALEplus now will provide at least the information that was available previously. SCALEplus has offered the administrators of the alternative sites copies of the data that was removed from SCALEplus to supplement their own holdings. The problem with this, however, is that unless the alternative site posts some kind of notification, users will not know whether the new site accepted the offer and incorporated any extra data into their databases. This should not cause users undue concern, however, as most sites will provide information about the breadth and currency of the material that they hold somewhere on their site. 'About this site' and 'help' links can often be good places to look for this information.

On the negative side, the SCALEplus rationalisation means that those conducting electronic legal research for materials other than Commonwealth legislative materials have lost access to a reliable, generally current, almost one-stop information site. Given the alternatives provided, this should at worst amount to a minor inconvenience to users until they get used to using the alternative sites. However, the onus will be on users to educate themselves about the formats, search logic and the currency of the

alternative sites. Paying particular attention to these aspects of the alternative sites will minimise any chance of ineffective or misleading research.

WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW WHEN RESEARCHING?

Given that SCALEplus provides alternative sites to users, my advice would be to go with the sites suggested. If these sites are new to you, it may take a while to get used to them. If you feel that you have given them a good try but do not feel comfortable using them, you should consider having a look for other sites containing the information you are after. You can do this by searching for the information you want on some general Australian legal research sites like Lex Scripta³ and Find Law Australia⁴. The results returned to you will come from a variety of databases that you can then have a look at.

My suggestion is to try and only rely on information you obtain from a source information provider. This may mean that you use a database you feel comfortable with first, and then check that the information it provides is complete and up-to-date using the source information provider. As the original provider of the information, the source information provider should contain the most up-to-date and complete information available.

Happy searching! ☐

Endnotes:

- ¹ SCALEplus is a part of the Australian Attorney-General's Department's 'Window on the Law' initiative which aims to provide free legal access to Australian law. The URL for SCALEplus is <http://scaleplus.law.gov.au>.
- ² Source information providers are the original providers of the particular information that they provide. For example, the source information provider of Queensland case law is the Queensland Courts, you can find their site at <http://www.courts.qld.gov.au>.
- ³ The URL for Lex Scripta is <http://www.lexscripta.com/>.
- ⁴ The URL for Find Law Australia is <http://www.findlaw.com.au/>.