Using the internet for administrative law research

By Rob Davis

INTERNET RESEARCH GENERALLY, ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

The internet has revolutionised how many lawyers do legal research. There is nothing more convenient for a lawyer than to locate key resources on the internet and be able to cut and paste from them directly into opinions.

But, for all its advantages, the internet also has its drawbacks. This is particularly evident in sites that provide collections of links to other internet-based resources. It's worth remembering with this type of resource that they are rarely comprehensive or current. At best, they provide an approximation of the main sources of law. So although they can often be a good starting point, they are rarely (if ever) a substitute for a good law library (or even a good text on the subject at hand).

Many key resources, particularly those of commercial providers (such as legal publishers, specialist membership organisations, etc) are not available on the internet. Others, while available, often limit access to subscribers and members.

The other problem with internet collections is that there is always a delay between the initial publication of research materials and when they're published on the internet and indexed up by the major search engines. This delay may be variable, depending on the output of the sources and the motivation of those responsible for updating the relevant sites. Some sites are updated daily, but others are updated infrequently.

The Australian Legal Information Institute (www.austlii.edu.au/) remains one of the best sites for primary sources of Australian law on the internet. Its strength lies in the fact that most of its source materials are provided and maintained by governments and courts, and are therefore reasonably current. If you are looking for cases or legislation,

then this is certainly a place to visit. But if you are seeking a more general overview of a research area, then subject-based collections are often more useful – to begin with, at least.

The difficulty with subject collections is that they depend on the particular interests, skill, resources and commitment of the party responsible for gathering the information that is linked. Further, each site is designed for a particular audience. For example, universities target students, and usually confine their collections to relevant syllabus topics. Similarly, professional organisations focus on the major needs of their members. So the researcher must visit a number of different sources to gain a good overview of the issues.

The following are three (of many) websites that provide collections of material on Australian administrative law. There is some overlap of the material covered, but each has its own peculiar focus.

If you are seeking a good introduction to this area of law, then the material on these sites should meet most of your needs (at least, to the limited extent that they can be met via the internet).

SOME USEFUL ADMINISTRATIVE LAW SITES

www.ntu.edu.au/faculties/lba/schools/Law/apl/

This link – to the Northern Territory University Australian Public Law resources – provides a basic introduction to administrative law and a useful collection of links to legislation, articles and organisations that are relevant to this area of law.

The site is a good introductory resource for law students and lawyers who are inexperienced in the subject but wish to know more about this growing area of law.

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www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/law/adminlaw.htm#legislation
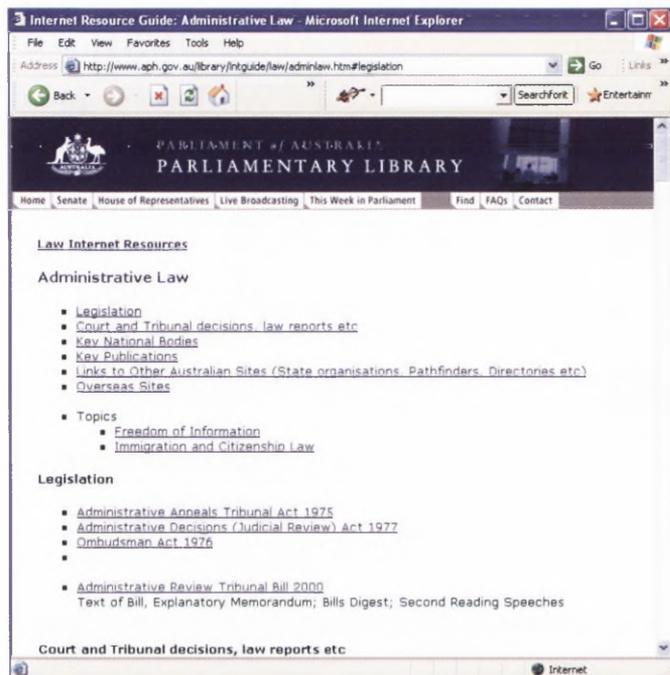
This link provides access to the Administrative Law Internet Resources of the Australian Parliamentary Library.

The page provides links to many federal resources, key national and international bodies, relevant federal legislation, conference papers, Law Reform Commission reports and administrative law articles.

In particular, it provides a useful collection of migration, immigration and citizenship links. That said, it also contains some dead links and links to some commercial resources that cannot be accessed without subscription.

The site's primary audiences are federal parliamentarians and their advisers. It therefore provides links to some policy materials that do not appear on other sites.

www.weblaw.edu.au/weblaw/
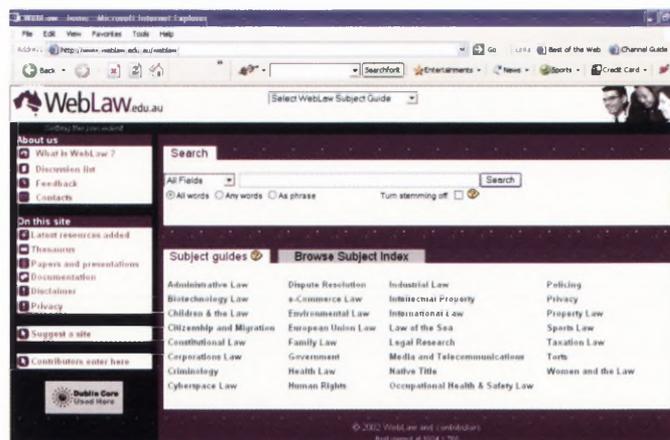
Web Law is a collaborative internet project of several Australian law faculties and gathers together a large collection of legal resources according to subject categories.

In the process it provides a good collection of links to administrative law resources. These links are jointly managed by the QUT and Griffith University.

The site boasts: 'Weblaw is a legal researcher's first choice for accessing online Australian legal Information.'

Rhetoric aside, it is a pretty good site. If you lack easy access to a comprehensive law library, then this site is a must.

Be wary however as, like all collections, legislation linked through this site may not always be up to date or as comprehensive as the blurb implies. ∎

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