

# Alleviating Library Anxiety in Law Undergraduates

**Abstract:** This article, written by **Catherine Parkin**, Academic Librarian for Law, Leeds Beckett University, provides an overview of library anxiety, with specific reference to how this might manifest itself amongst law students in UK higher education. The article is a preliminary exploration intended to stimulate dialogue. It discusses several measures in place at Leeds Beckett University which could potentially alleviate library anxiety amongst students and suggests other possible solutions and areas for further research.

**Keywords:** academic libraries; academic law libraries; law students; information literacy; library induction; diversity; equity and inclusion

## WHAT IS LIBRARY ANXIETY?

I first became aware of the concept of library anxiety back in 2006. It resonated with me a great deal, as someone who had similar difficulties as an undergraduate in the 1990s. I decided to make this the focus of my MSc Dissertation, later published as a journal article.<sup>1</sup> Mellon proposed the first widely accepted theory of library anxiety, which describes students who felt lost and confused. She describes how when asked to find information for an assignment, some students become very anxious and therefore unable to tackle their problem in a logical way.<sup>2</sup> Library anxiety can manifest itself as a fear or reluctance to ask for help, a feeling of being overwhelmed by the library environment, and confusion about which resources to use.

It is worth noting that this is not something that only affects shy, non-confident students. Library anxiety is a timely and relevant issue to address for several reasons. There is an increasing focus on student wellbeing in UK universities<sup>3</sup> and academic librarians play a crucial role in supporting this. University students are increasingly reporting stress and anxiety, especially post-pandemic. Library anxiety adds to this burden and can affect academic performance.<sup>4</sup> Students who avoid the library due to anxiety may miss out on valuable resources and support, meaning they could struggle more with coursework. This could lead to lower grades or even cause students to drop out.

Academic librarians at Leeds Beckett University teach information skills to students from several subject areas, including those in the School of Law. I have reflected on how library anxiety can have a particularly pronounced impact on law students due to the structure of legal education, the nature of legal research, and the academic environment. Law students inevitably must use the library and its resources, as

they rely heavily on being able to find and understand case law, legislation and legal journal articles. They encounter unfamiliar terminology (legal jargon and many abbreviations), must quickly get to grips with navigating large legal databases like Westlaw or Lexis+ and face high academic pressure. In Bowers' study, law students exhibited moderate levels of library anxiety, with higher levels of library anxiety in the areas of general library and research anxiety, their comfort with technology, and their perceived value of using the physical library.<sup>5</sup> Leeds Beckett has adopted various initiatives and support to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. I considered what our library already did to alleviate library anxiety in a more general way, and if there were any areas we could improve upon.

## THE LIBRARY'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS' WELLBEING

Academic libraries are a vital part of the educational experience, whose main role has traditionally been to provide staff and students with access to information and resources. However, the role has increasingly become extended to include supporting student wellness in a holistic way. "Libraries, with their resources such as study spaces, technological tools, academic guidance, and other facilities, potentially play a unique role in enhancing physical and mental health."<sup>6</sup>

Libraries contribute to student wellbeing through hosting events like study cafes that help students feel more connected to their academic community. Librarians provide tailored support with research, referencing and navigating information. This support reduces academic pressure and builds confidence. Anecdotally, libraries are seen by some

students as safe spaces and librarians often provide a non-judgemental attitude to those students who come seeking help. This support contributes to student success, including improved retention.<sup>7</sup> Librarians at Leeds Beckett work closely with the student wellbeing service, who offer advice and support on lots of issues, as well as signposting to other helpful services and resources. They have a web page, use fliers and place adverts in the student newsletter. They offer support for students struggling with low mood and anxiety, academic stress, adjusting to university and other personal problems. Law follows pretty much the same pattern as other schools in terms of reasons for referring, the most common being anxiety, followed by stress. Students who have attended wellbeing appointments state that they find it useful to be reminded of the importance of wellbeing and being provided with methods to help alleviate anxiety.

However, library anxiety has been found to be quite different to general anxiety, as it is a situational-based anxiety that occurs only in circumstances when users either use the library or think about using the library.<sup>8</sup> Students suffering from general anxiety may seek help from wellbeing services, but they may not necessarily do so for library anxiety, as it manifests itself in a different way. In fact, students suffering from library anxiety often feel that lacking competence is somehow shameful and must be kept hidden.<sup>9</sup> The question for academic libraries is how can we support students if they are unaware of their own library anxiety, unsure of how library staff can support them, or afraid of entering the library or asking for help? This article discusses different components of library anxiety and later explains the measures in place at Leeds Beckett that have the potential to help with these. It is not

based on new research, rather, it is a preliminary exploration intended to stimulate dialogue and bring attention to library anxiety as it affects law students.

## POTENTIAL CAUSES OF LIBRARY ANXIETY IN LAW STUDENTS

### Complexity of Legal Research

Many students enter UK law schools directly from A-levels or equivalent qualifications, which often require minimal independent research. This makes the leap to law school libraries, with large catalogues and specialised resources, intimidating for many. Even students with experience in studying at HE level do not always arrive with good information literacy skills or appreciate the process required to find appropriate legal resources. Students' success in studying the law is dependent upon them being able to identify evidence and to use this to construct clear, coherent arguments. Law students must learn to use tools such as legal encyclopaedias and databases, which they are unlikely to have encountered before university. They are usually more familiar with using search engines such as Google to obtain information. The OSCOLA citation style, widely used in UK law schools, requires precision and familiarity with legal documentation. Legal language can be dense or unfamiliar, and often uses abbreviations, making it difficult for students to locate and understand the necessary materials without guidance. Library anxiety might develop further when students' efforts at finding information fall short or they receive feedback from lecturers about improvements needed to referencing or the sources they use.

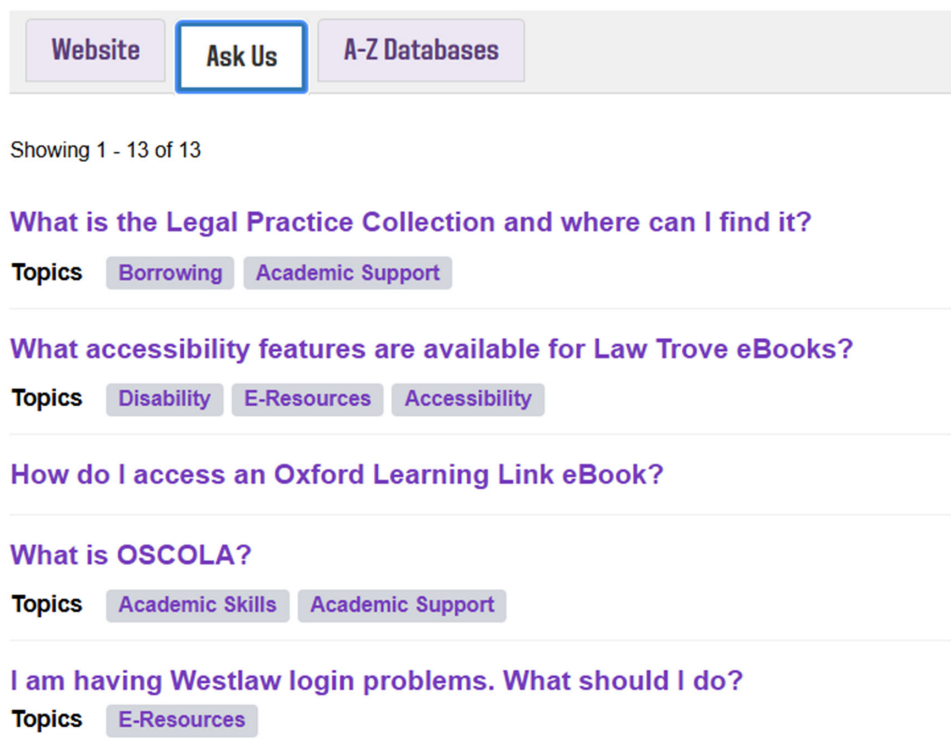


Figure 1: Excerpt from the Leeds Beckett Library FAQs

## Diversity and Inclusion Challenges

Ferrara states that “while there is no research focusing on library anxiety in individuals with disabilities, research does show that library anxiety is especially prevalent in marginalized populations”.<sup>10</sup> While at university, first in family (FiF) students (students whose parents or carers did not go to university), are more likely to select and be accepted on law, economics and management courses than non-FiF students. They also face higher dropout rates.<sup>11</sup> Currently, around 7.5% of law students at Leeds Beckett are international students studying in the UK. Around 45% of Leeds Beckett students are FiF, with the university working hard to attract students from traditionally under-represented backgrounds.<sup>12</sup> Students from international backgrounds or FiF students may feel especially out of place in a law library, where implicit expectations about research skills and library use may not be explicitly taught. Asking for help in a library might conflict with cultural values around independence or fear of ‘losing face’, further isolating students.

## Academic Pressure

Law students are studying in a prestigious and demanding field, with students often competing for top marks to secure training contracts, pupillages or further study opportunities. This pressure can amplify feelings of anxiety when accessing library resources. Law students must balance the demand for independent legal research with coursework, exams and employability opportunities. The additional time needed to learn how to use library systems can feel overwhelming. As students come to understand that locating legal information requires more skill than they initially anticipated, many may begin to feel uncertain or reluctant to seek support. This hesitation is often rooted in fear of appearing inexperienced or unprepared within such a competitive culture.

## Library Spaces and Layout

The design of academic library spaces is closely linked to students’ level of library anxiety.<sup>13</sup> An academic library can seem unapproachable due to an outdated view of how they operate (e.g. a perceived need to be silent) or being unfamiliar with the physical layout of the building. Something as seemingly simple as finding materials using a library catalogue can invoke feelings of anxiety. Bostick created a scale to measure library anxiety, one sub-scale being ‘mechanical barriers’, which includes ineffective library signage and illogical use of space.<sup>14</sup> Simplifying library layouts and signage helps all students, not just those who are library anxious.

## Perceived Judgement

Law students may worry that their questions will seem trivial or betray a lack of knowledge, especially in front of their peers or lecturers.<sup>15</sup> Sanders, Moore and Looby talk

about “perceived interpersonal threat”, the phenomenon of library anxious students worrying that asking questions would reveal personal inadequacy.<sup>16</sup> Library anxious students fear being judged for this, leading to them being unwilling to seek interpersonal help.

## HOW LEEDS BECKETT LIBRARY HELPS TO ALLEVIATE LIBRARY ANXIETY

### Embedded support and normalising help-seeking behaviours

Wellbeing support such as self-referral appointments are useful if a student identifies that they are struggling with anxiety and feels able to take the first step in getting support. When talking about library anxiety specifically, students will often not see themselves as being anxious or might be reluctant to seek help. By delivering whole school sessions on topics such as stress management and exam anxiety, Leeds Beckett wellbeing staff ensure all students are reached. Their largest group session in 2024/25 was for 340 students. They have also delivered small group sessions for five to six students, with groups this small mainly being online distance learners. By openly discussing stress and anxiety, it is hoped students see this as something affecting others, and wellbeing staff can start to normalise the act of seeking help. This could help those students who might previously have been reluctant to seek help in the library.

### Online chat and one-on-one support

Systems such as the Leeds Beckett 24/7 online chat service are an ideal way to encourage more students to seek help. They are not anonymous, as students must enter their name and email address, but they do allow for immediate responses and allow those students who are working off campus, or dislike speaking on the phone, to get help. This service is prominently displayed on the ‘contact us’ part of the library website, and the wording is clear about the kind of help and support available via this route (research and referencing skills, borrowing, passwords etc.) The website also signposts students to FAQs, which are especially useful for demonstrating to students that they are not the only ones who need help, normalising the concept of help-seeking.

The library recently moved to placing one-to-one appointments into a shared platform called MyHub, which means students have one place to go to book appointments with various support services. Flexible, bookable sessions are available for students to discuss research strategies or get help with complex legal resources. There are various dates and times to choose from, with a choice of in person or online slots. Students can cancel online without having to speak to anyone. The advantage of one-to-one appointments is that advice can be tailored to the students’ exact needs, and for face-to-face appointments, librarians and skill tutors can use visual cues and careful questioning to assess students’ understanding. Library staff

are empathetic in all communications, to ensure students feel welcomed and supported, we are clear about how to find the room, how long the session will last and what kinds of things to expect in the session, to alleviate any worries.

## Self-help resources and tutorials

Self-guided tools allow students to work at their own pace, providing them with a sense of control over their learning. For students who feel anxious about asking for help or navigating library systems, these tools offer a private, independent way to explore resources without the fear of judgment or making mistakes in front of others. International students often face challenges adjusting to the academic expectations and practices within UK universities. When students from international backgrounds first enrol at the university, they are encouraged to complete an 'International Students' Academic Introduction' module, which introduces them to studying at Leeds Beckett and, more broadly, what is expected of them as a student in a UK HE institution. It covers finding and using reading lists, how to use the library to find further resources for assignments and how to use the library subject guides.

Leeds Beckett law students are introduced to the library systems and sources of assistance using the 'Study Smart' online induction. Students are encouraged to develop their academic skills independently, through self-help resources. The law subject guide includes links to guides and tutorials, legal databases and online journals, as well as links to practitioner resources and current awareness tools. Each tab contains our contact details, a 'Get Help' link that students can follow to make an online appointment, and it directs students to our 24/7 online chat and phone service. This early exposure to library resources reduces the anxiety they might feel when having to use library systems during high-pressure times, such as exams or assignments.

Librarians at Leeds Beckett have noticed that one of the things students often worry about is using the OSCOLA referencing system. Materials have been placed on their VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) which students can work through independently and refer to throughout their studies. The advantage of placing these here is it reduces the need for students to approach us to ask for help. Knowing how to cite using OSCOLA lowers the risk of students accidentally plagiarising or submitting poorly cited pieces of work, potentially helping them feel more in control and reducing anxiety.

## Library signage and spaces

Both library sites at Leeds Beckett use a chalkboard, with brightly coloured messages advertising upcoming skills sessions, explaining how our classification system works or advertising the 'word of the day'. They also often display calming phrases or motivational quotes. These chalkboards provide information in a very informal eye-catching way and can be a real talking point at open days. They lend a human touch to the library message and suggest to students that there are real people behind the

communication. They have an approachable, informal tone that has the potential to reduce the sense of anxiety students might feel. When the environment feels less rigid, students may feel less judged.

Both library sites provide a self-guided tour which introduces students to key services and helps them to familiarise themselves with the building. Self-guided tours help students feel at ease by allowing them to explore the space at their own pace, without fear of embarrassment or judgement. At Leeds Beckett we have a designated area for legal materials on the third floor of the library, and this helps law students easily locate their resources and feel that it is 'their space'. Having a specific area for law students gives them a clear sense of where they should go. This removes the fear of not knowing where to start and helps foster a feeling of belonging, because students know the space is meant for them. When students regularly use the same designated space, it becomes familiar over time. Familiarity with a part of the library reduces uncertainty and fear, helping students to feel more confident and comfortable accessing more parts of the library later. Also, when law students gather in a shared area, they are more likely to see peers working on similar subjects. This can reduce isolation and create informal opportunities to ask each other questions, reducing the need to approach library staff. Staff at Leeds Beckett Library have already started to look again at space for all students, adding soft furnishings, looking to display student artwork and potentially adding plants to create calming areas.

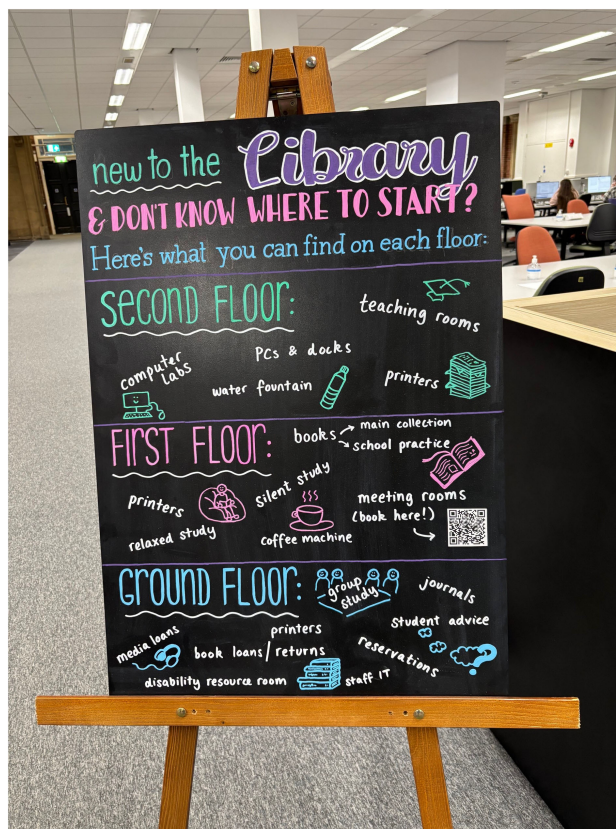


Figure 2: Chalkboard within Leeds Beckett Library



## Peer-led support

Peer support has a great potential to reduce library anxiety. Peer-led library greeting and information services have been shown to increase student library engagement and reduce library anxiety.<sup>17</sup> Students can fear being judged for their lack of knowledge, so peers can feel more approachable than librarians or tutors. Hearing more experienced students openly discussing their own challenges could help reduce any sense of shame. Peers can provide practical demonstrations of search techniques and help demystify some of the library jargon. At Leeds Beckett, Law School colleagues have recently been given the go-ahead to launch a new peer-assisted learning scheme in September. Pairs of level 5 and 6 students will act as student leaders. They will work with groups of around 25 level 4 student learners to provide support with a broad range of things, including career development, wellbeing and library skills. Academic librarians and skills tutors have been asked to help with this scheme and will provide training in early September to the student leaders. The student leaders will be able to provide support such as library tours which frees up staff time and gives a more student-centred focus. They can also promote things like the library group study rooms, which can be invaluable in allowing students to meet with peers and discuss any issues they are having.

## CONCLUSIONS

Library anxiety remains an under-recognised barrier to student success, particularly within the context of legal education where information literacy is crucial. This article has sought to raise awareness of how the structure of legal studies, academic pressures, and cultural and institutional factors can heighten library anxiety among law students. Academic librarians should assume many of their students will suffer from library anxiety and not confuse outward confidence with an ease with using library services. Libraries should ideally create library systems and spaces that are so simple and intuitive to use that the number of situations where students need to ask for help is reduced.

Libraries should also provide clear, easily accessible, self-guided help, which can help students feel at ease and in control. Another important way of alleviating library anxiety is to normalise help-seeking behaviours. This is a message that librarians and skills tutors will pass on to student leaders as part of the upcoming peer-assisted learning scheme, and we will ask them to instil this message to new law undergraduates.

Academic libraries should reassess their spaces and signage with a view to making their libraries appear more welcoming and non-threatening. Perhaps libraries should display promotional materials that emphasise the value of seeking assistance, portraying it as a strength, rather than a weakness. Academic librarians cannot underestimate the importance of being visible within a law school, whether that be through regular appearances at lectures, or being promoted via plasma screens. “When people have an information need, they’ll always ask people they know before they’ll ask a librarian. The trick is making sure that librarians are some of the people they know.”<sup>18</sup> Students who feel anxious in the library environment are often more comfortable approaching someone they recognise, as the familiarity can reduce the ‘perceived threat’ of asking for help.

Library anxiety disproportionately affects FiF students, international students, and those unfamiliar with academic environments. Addressing it helps promote educational equality. Moving forward, there is a need for further research, perhaps qualitative work that explores law students’ personal experiences with library anxiety. Law schools and academic libraries can work together to build more inclusive environments by embedding support early in the curriculum, training peer leaders and normalising help-seeking behaviours. By addressing library anxiety proactively, we can enhance student confidence and empower students to obtain the skills and confidence they need to navigate legal resources effectively. Law students who overcome library anxiety early are more likely to engage meaningfully with legal research and develop skills that will benefit them when they move into the workplace.

## Endnotes

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## Biography

**Catherine Parkin** has 25 years' experience of working in academic libraries. She is Academic Librarian for Law at Leeds Beckett University. She's looked after the Law subject area for 15 years and enjoys helping library users feel confident in finding their own information. She has previously presented at BIALL in 2016, when she delivered the lightning talk "The Leeds Beckett Library Libguide on Employability and Skills Development: Moving into New Territories of Support" and in 2024, with a presentation on database engagement activities, co-delivered with Aarti Sehgal. She has written several journal articles, including one published in *Reference Services Review*, based on her MSc dissertation which examined library anxiety, and has had a previous article published in *Legal Information Management* based on her 2024 BIALL presentation.