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**THE PLACE OF LEGAL RESEARCH IN LEGAL EDUCATION**

Legal research as an interpretable, operational form of legal  
problem solving

*Thesis of doctoral dissertation*

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**Table of contents**

- 1. Introduction ..... 3
- 2. The topic and relevance of the research ..... 3
- 3. Subject and objective of the research ..... 4
- 4. Research methodology and scientific field ..... 5
- 5. Main results of the research..... 7
  - 5.1. A functional-relevance-based reinterpretation of legal information ..... 7
  - 5.2. The decision-oriented concept of legal research ..... 7
  - 5.3. The relevance-shaping role of digital and algorithmic infrastructure ..... 8
  - 5.4. Comparative analysis of domestic law faculties ..... 8
  - 5.5. The integrated Legal Research and Legal Problem Solving course model..... 9
- 6. Further research directions ..... 9
- 7. The author's publications and conference presentations related to the topic ..... 10

## **1. Introduction**

Legal work, both in law enforcement and in legal scholarship, is based on information that has normative weight, is institutionally recognised as a source, and is suitable for use as a basis for legal decisions. Legal research can be understood as a problem-solving process involving a series of decisions, including the conscious selection, interpretation and comparison of legal information and the determination of its normative weight.

The dissertation starts from the recognition that the relevance of legal information is not "given" but develops during research, in the context of the legal problem and in line with the requirements of legal argumentation. In this context, the teachability of legal research and its inclusion in the curriculum becomes a systemic issue, because if the decision points and interpretative operations of research are not placed within an explicit educational framework, students' use of sources can easily become arbitrary.

The information environment has undergone profound changes in recent decades, as the parallel existence of printed and digitised sources, the routine use of databases and the emergence of automated search systems have created new opportunities but also new risks. This dissertation interprets these changes as a digital transformation that does not replace classical source criticism but rather supplements it with new requirements.

## **2. The topic and relevance of the research**

The central theme of the dissertation is the theoretical, historical and pedagogical reinterpretation of the concept of legal research in light of the structural transformation of the information environment. The work starts from the recognition that in legal education, the concept of legal research – if it appears at all independently – is typically reduced to the search for legal sources, the use of databases or technical search operations. Meanwhile, the recognition that legal research is a key element of legal decision-making, shaping the direction of legal argumentation through the determination of relevance, the weighting of sources and normative choices, remains in the background.

Digital information infrastructure – including online law libraries, search algorithms and artificial intelligence-based tools – has fundamentally transformed access to legal information. However, this change is not only technological in nature. Digital systems not only provide access to legal sources, but also, through their own organisation and display logic, determine which content users see and in what order. The ranking of search results, the highlighting of

related decisions and legislation, and the visual representation of connections all contribute to the assessment of relevance being not only the result of legal consideration, but also partly a consequence of the operating logic of the system used.

The starting point of the dissertation is that the significance of legal information does not exist in isolation, but is determined through legal decisions in the course of solving legal problems. Legal research is therefore not simply data collection, but a process of deliberation in which the question of relevance is re-evaluated at every step.

In Hungarian legal education, legal research does not usually appear as a separate, systematically structured subject, but is linked to other courses and occurs with varying intensity. An examination of the curricula shows that legal research rarely becomes an independently defined, competence-based and assessable element of training, even though it is one of the basic requirements for the professional competence of lawyers starting their careers.

The relevance of the research is based on three interrelated factors:

1. The theoretical ambiguity of the concept of legal information.
2. The impact of the digital and algorithmic information environment on legal problem solving.
3. The systemic lack of legal research education in Hungarian legal training.

This dissertation attempts to connect these three dimensions and examine them within a unified interpretative framework. The basic premise of the thesis is that the problems of legal research education are not solely a matter of class hours or curriculum, but stem from differing – often unconscious – perceptions of the nature and relevance of legal information in legal problem solving and educational practice.

The central question of the dissertation is therefore how legal research can be interpreted in the context of the historical transformation of legal information infrastructures and what consequences this has for legal education. The study does not focus exclusively on digital or artificial intelligence-based tools, but also on the changing modes of access, selection and interpretation of legal information, from print-based editorial systems to algorithmic environments.

### **3. Subject and objective of the research**

The subject of the research is the concept and functioning of legal research in relation to legal problem solving, with particular regard to the nature of legal information, the development of

relevance and its institutionalisation in education. The aim of the thesis is to show that legal research is a fundamental activity that can be presented as a learnable form of legal problem solving, and therefore cannot be taken for granted as a skill in legal education.

The aim of the research can be summarised on three levels:

The theoretical aim is to clarify the conceptual relationships between legal information, legal relevance and legal research, and to demonstrate that legal information only acquires normative significance in the process of legal interpretation.

The historical objective is to show that the dominant forms of legal research have always been closely linked to the information infrastructure of the given era, from printed case law collections to computer databases and artificial intelligence-supported systems.

The pedagogical and institutional goal is to explore the structural dilemmas of legal research education, particularly in relation to domestic legal training, and to propose a coherent, competence-based course package.

The basic premise of the thesis is that legal research education becomes effective when it is incorporated into the curriculum not as a technical skill, but as a conscious and normative dimension of legal problem solving.

#### **4. Research methodology and scientific field**

The dissertation is a normative-analytical work with a legal science approach, which examines legal research as an operational function of legal problem solving using interdisciplinary methodology. It is not a methodological aid or empirical educational research, but it necessarily touches on pedagogical and institutional issues because it analyses the teachability of legal research and its appearance in the curriculum.

The methodological core of the study consists of conceptual clarification and functional analysis, which examines legal information and legal research not in isolation, but within the operational logic of case law. The research therefore approaches the issues of relevance, source hierarchy, credibility and authority from the perspective of decision points.

The international overview examines the development of Anglo-Saxon courses (*Legal Research and Writing* (LRW) and *Advanced Legal Research* (ALR)) from a historical and institutional perspective, as well as professional debates on the teaching of legal research. On the other hand, it analyses, from a pedagogical and functional perspective, what problem-solving operations

and skills legal research develops, in particular strategic planning, synthesis skills, metacognitive awareness and source criticism. This is complemented by an analysis of the curricula of eight Hungarian law faculties, which examines the forms, course types and curricular visibility of legal research.

The conceptual and methodological framework of the dissertation rests on four interrelated pillars.

First, it applies a conceptual-analytical approach aimed at reinterpreting the concepts of legal information, legal relevance and legal research. The conceptual analysis is not aimed solely at clarifying terminology, but also at exploring the normative significance of these categories and how they relate to the functioning of legal decision-making.

Secondly, it conducts a historical analysis of the forms of legal research in order to periodise them. The historical study shows how the dominant forms of legal research have adapted to the information infrastructure of each era, from print-based bibliographic logic to digital databases to systems based on algorithms and artificial intelligence.

As a third pillar, it applies a comparative institutional analysis, comparing the experiences of American legal research pedagogy with the practice of domestic legal education. As part of this, it analyses the curricula of the eight domestic law faculties, focusing on exploring the form in which legal research appears, whether as a separate subject, a competence or a skill integrated into other subjects.

Finally, the dissertation uses a normative-constructive method to synthesise the conclusions pedagogically. As a result, it develops a concept for an integrated *Legal Research and Legal Problem Solving* course package, which offers a multi-semester, competency-based and assessable structure for the institutionalised teaching of legal research.

The study relies heavily on debates in American legal research education (bibliographic vs. process-oriented approach, LRW and ALR models) and the competency system of domestic training and output requirements.

## **5. Main results of the research**

### **5.1. A functional-relevance-based reinterpretation of legal information**

One of the central findings of the dissertation is that legal information cannot be understood solely in terms of source types (primary, secondary, tertiary sources), but must be interpreted along functional and decision-making dimensions.

The traditional classification of sources is of systematic importance, but it does not answer the question of what information becomes relevant in the context of a given legal problem, with what normative weight and with what decision-making consequences. According to the dissertation, the relevance of legal information is not an inherent characteristic of the source, but develops in the act of legal problem-solving.

Consequently, the concept of legal information can be interpreted as a functional category, i.e. content that is of normative significance in the resolution of a specific legal problem qualifies as legal information. Relevance is therefore not predetermined, but is formed in the course of problem interpretation, the selection of applicable norms and the process of legal interpretation.

At this point, the dissertation develops a two-pronged model of relevance, according to which legal relevance has, on the one hand, an institutional-authoritative dimension (normative binding force, hierarchy of sources) and, on the other hand, a contextual-problem-oriented dimension. Legal decision-making takes place in the dynamic balance between these two factors.

### **5.2. The decision-oriented concept of legal research**

The second main result of the research is the redefinition of the concept of legal research.

The dissertation argues that legal research is not the same as searching for sources of law. Searching is a technical sub-activity, while legal research is a complex process of establishing relevance, weighing norms and structuring legal problems.

Legal research is decision-oriented in nature; its purpose is not simply to gather information, but to select and weigh legally relevant norms, arguments and precedents. Legal research is therefore an integral part of legal problem-solving, rather than a preparatory, technical stage.

The dissertation shows that in Hungarian literature, the concept of legal source research is typically narrowed down to computer-assisted search techniques, while legal research as an

independent methodological category is rarely given a theoretical foundation. This thesis attempts to fill this gap.

### **5.3. The relevance-shaping role of digital and algorithmic infrastructure**

The third significant result of the dissertation is the confirmation that digital legal information systems are not neutral tools, but contribute substantially to the designation and enforcement of legal relevance criteria.

Keyword search engines, algorithm-generated priority rankings, and artificial intelligence-based tools create an information environment in which relevance appears to be objective, but is in fact the result of technological and editorial decisions.

Digital infrastructure highlights, ranks, connects, visually structures, makes certain content more visible and hides others. This structuring effect influences the starting point for legal problem solving. The dissertation shows that the recognition of relevance is increasingly taking place in an algorithmically shaped environment, which requires a new methodological awareness in legal education.

In the case of artificial intelligence-based tools, this phenomenon is further reinforced, as preliminary content filtering and synthesis takes place at the system level. However, the dissertation does not take a technologically deterministic stance, but emphasises that the normative responsibility for legal research remains with the lawyer.

### **5.4. Comparative analysis of domestic law faculties**

The empirical result of the research is a comparative analysis of the curriculum structures of Hungarian law faculties.

The analysis highlights that legal research is not typically taught as a separate, compulsory subject in the curricula, but appears as a skill to be developed within the framework of other subjects. Its credit value and assessment system vary considerably from institution to institution.

The study concludes that legal research competence does not appear in a uniform, assessable and structurally integrated form in Hungarian legal education, even though it is a basic requirement for professional practice.

This finding supports the normative proposal of the dissertation.

## **5.5. The integrated Legal Research and Legal Problem Solving course model**

The final result of the dissertation is the development of a multi-year, competency-based course package that treats legal research and legal problem solving as a unified system.

The model uses a gradually building structure that integrates conceptual, methodological and digital dimensions, is based on clearly defined competencies, and includes elements that develop a conscious, critical approach.

The course package is not simply a subject proposal, but a systematic rethinking of legal research education. The aim of the model is to present the recognition of legal relevance, the weighing of normative weight and the conscious use of digital tools in a unified competence system.

## **6. Further research directions**

The results of the dissertation also point to several further research directions that are of particular importance for the future development of legal research education.

On the one hand, it seems justified to examine in greater depth the connections between generational characteristics and legal research strategies. The information usage patterns, digital socialisation and learning preferences of different generations of students presumably result not only in technical differences, but also in differences in the recognition of relevance, the practice of source criticism and the methods of research planning. Empirical exploration of this issue could contribute to a more accurate understanding of which pedagogical forms of legal research education best support deep, reflective and autonomous research activity.

On the other hand, the impact of artificial intelligence on legal research requires further investigation, both theoretically and methodologically. Generative systems not only represent new tools, but also transform the process of establishing relevance, the relationship to sources, and the structure of legal argumentation. Future research should therefore extend beyond the question of technological efficiency to include the dimensions of normativity, authority and professional responsibility.

Thirdly, it would be worthwhile to examine the education policy and skills development directions of professional self-regulatory organisations, particularly the Bar Association. Mandatory continuing education systems, the definition of professional competencies, and the proportion of practice-oriented training elements directly influence the role that legal research

plays in the professional development of early-career and practising lawyers. Exploring the harmony or possible discrepancies between university education and the Bar Association's skills policy can contribute to the development of a more coherent competency model that covers the entire professional career.

Furthermore, it is also justified to examine the role of legal knowledge managers more consciously and to strengthen it institutionally. The dissertation argues that legal librarians – and, in a broader sense, legal knowledge managers – are not only service providers in the background, but also pedagogical and methodological mediators of legal research. One direction for future research could be to explore what competence profile, organisational position and cooperation model are necessary for this role to appear not as informal support but as a structural element of legal education. This may include the systematic recognition of the educational activities of legal knowledge managers, the formalisation of curriculum cooperation, and an examination of how legal information specialists can be involved in chamber training and the skills development of practising lawyers. From the perspective of the quality of legal research and the responsible use of legal information, it is not irrelevant whether there are professionals who are capable of raising awareness of the use of sources, the assessment of relevance and changes in the information environment. Raising awareness of the role of legal knowledge managers is therefore not simply an institutional issue, but can also be a guarantee of the quality of the legal profession. The theoretical foundation and practical positioning of this field requires further targeted research, especially in the information space shaped by digital transformation and artificial intelligence.

Taken together, these research directions indicate that legal research is not a closed field, but a dynamically evolving discourse that raises new questions and analytical perspectives in parallel with technological, pedagogical and professional policy changes.

## **7. The author's publications and conference presentations related to the topic**

### **Publications in Hungarian**

Aczél-Partos, Adrienn: Legal libraries and legal databases. In: Jakab, András; Menyhárd, Attila (eds.): *The science of law: Writings on the history and theory of science, with practical advice*. Budapest, HVG-Orac, 2015, 423-466.

Aczél-Partos, Adrienn: The problem of the legal assessment of a thesis as a work of authorship. *Industrial Property and Copyright Review*, 2024/1, 67—89.

### **Related publications in Hungarian**

Aczél-Partos Adrienn: The digital transformation of plagiarism. In: Tick, József; Kokas, Károly; Holl, András (eds.): *Educational, research and public collection infrastructures and content: digital transformation at the highest level: NETWORKSHOP 2025: 34th National IT Conference: 13–15 May 2025*. Széchenyi István University, Győr. Budapest, Hungarnet Association, 2025, 149—163.

### **Hungarian-language publications awaiting publication**

Aczél-Partos Adrienn: Thesis 2.0, or the role of artificial intelligence in the renewal of research methodology. *Philology*, 2026/1.

Adrienn Aczél-Partos: Teaching artificial intelligence at Hungarian law schools. *Iustum Aequum Salutare*, 2026

### **Foreign language publications**

Adrienn, Aczél-Partos: Plagiarism in Higher Education: The Impact of EU-funded Research, Law, and AI on Evolving Academic Norms. *Hungarian Yearbook of International Law and European Law*, Vol. 13, 2025/1, 123–140.

### **Foreign language publications forthcoming**

Adrienn Aczél-Partos: Teaching Legal Technology in Law School: Forming Competence and Character in the Age of AI. *Master and Disciple Special Issue (Gravissimum Educationis 60 – Perspectives on Church Education)*, 2026