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Helping to improve the authority and integrity of Australian judicial decision making - AustLII introduces digitally signed versions of court judgments

AustLII has developed a digitally signed and watermarked ("signed by AustLII") format which can be applied to most of the judgments from the more than 120 courts and tribunals whose decisions are published on www.austlii.edu.au (about 600,000 cases). This additional format for downloading decisions is intended to further strengthen the confidence which users and Australia's courts and tribunals can have in decisions obtained from AustLII. It will be released on 2 March 2015.

The 'Signed by AustLII' format:

- is a PDF/A document which is an ISO-standardised version of the Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) specialised for the digital preservation of electronic documents;
- is available as a download option for all decisions of Courts and Tribunals available from AustLII which are based on a Word or RTF document that has been provided by the Court or Tribunal to AustLII;
- has been digitally signed by AustLII (includes a digital certificate that can be independently verified);
- has an AustLII watermark background to make it more visually obvious that it is complete and unaltered;
- is date-stamped as to when it was obtained from AustLII; and
- has a link which downloads a new copy of the decision from AustLII, to enable verification that it is the current copy of the decision.

AustLII is working with and encouraging courts and tribunals to "accept" this version as being able to be handed up in court. Where a court or tribunal has advised AustLII that the 'Signed by AustLII' format of their decisions is acceptable to be presented in their court or tribunal, the decision will also state that in its header, with a link to details such as a Practice Direction.

This digital signature has been developed by AustLII as one outcome of an Australian Research Council funded Industry Linkage grant to reconsider and reinforce the authority and integrity of primary legal materials in the light of technological changes. The previous methods of providing authority and authenticity of all categories of primary legal materials have become inadequate to the needs of the legal system over the last 20 years due to three related developments:

- i. the need for official sources to provide legal materials via the Internet;
- ii. the availability of almost all such materials for free access; and
- iii. the reliance by many users on online legal information provided by free access re-publishers such as AustLII.

AustLII is Australia's largest and most popular online legal research facility. AustLII publishes more than 630 Australasian legal databases including current and historical case law, legislation, law reform reports, law journals and the largest national treaties collection on the Internet. AustLII receives over 600,000 page accesses per day, and is regularly rated as Australia's most used legal website. Since its inception AustLII has provided free access for the Australian public to the essential legal information needed for the rule of law to function effectively. AustLII's broad public policy agenda is to improve access to justice through better access to information. For more detail on the project go to <http://www.austlii.edu.au/austlii/announce/2015/2.pdf>

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