

## Exploring the development of information literacy strategies

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*Sheila examines the concept and context of information literacy and its application to the government sector.*

### **What is information literacy?**

The original definition of the concept is widely attributed to Paul Zurkowski in 1979, then President of the Information Industry Association:

*“People trained in the application of information resources to their work can be called information literates. They have learned techniques and skills for utilising the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in moulding information-solutions to their problems”<sup>1</sup>*

CILIP provide a plain English version:

*“Information literacy is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner”<sup>2</sup>*

At a time when there is easy access to vast quantities of information via tools such as search engines, internet directories and portals, many users have a false confidence in their ability to find the information they need. Their information behaviour is often characterised by shallow searches and the uncritical selection and misuse of resources. This is coupled with a poor understanding of information management as a discipline, specialism and profession.

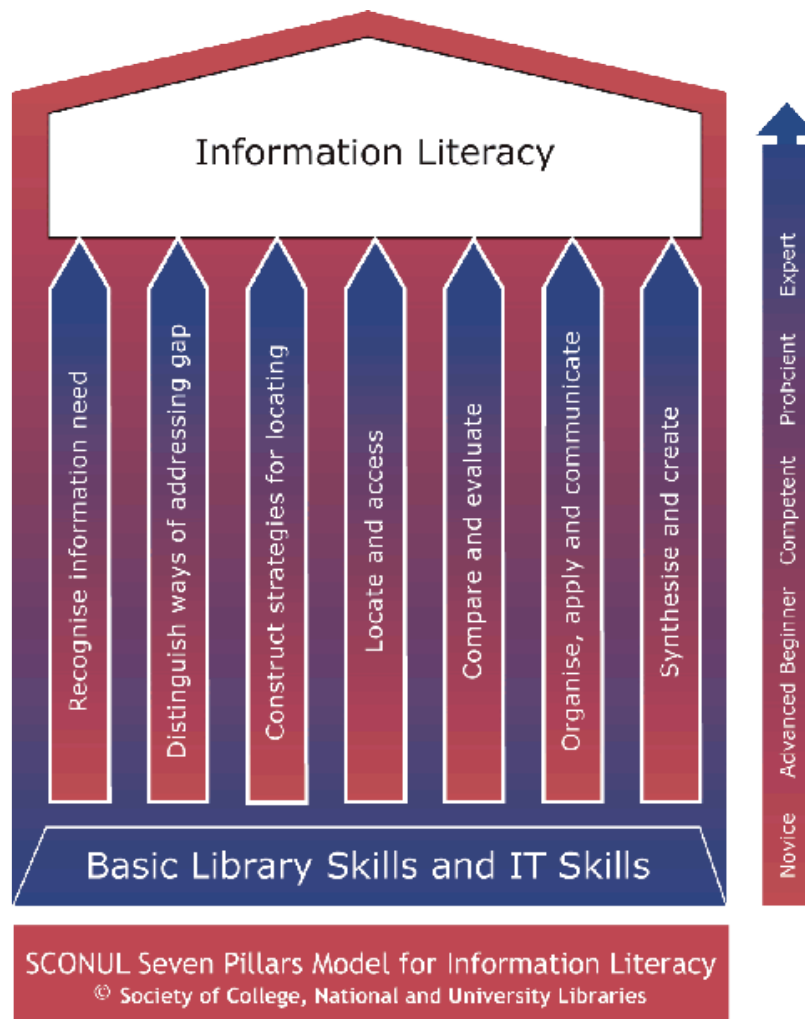
To address this, a collective effort led mainly by academic librarians, has raised awareness of the issue, produced some useful tools for information literacy practitioners/educators and moved the debate onto a strategic level. Many universities now have formal information literacy policies and strategies, and UNESCO has asserted its critical role in personal, economic, social and cultural development. There is a strong, vibrant community of practitioners willing to advise and help newcomers to the field.

Recent research<sup>3</sup> has found that university information literacy strategies have the following key features:

- They take many different forms, existing as separate documents and/or being integrated into other institutional strategy or policy statements (e.g. learning and teaching strategies, employability strategies, student skills policies).
- They provide extensive contextualisation, by making connections with current institutional concerns and documents, as well as citing external developments and reports.

- They generally include formal definitions of the concept, such as the American Library Association or CILIP definition, recognising that stakeholders may not be familiar with the concept.
- They often propose formal adoption of national information literacy standards and frameworks, such as the SCONUL seven pillars model (See illustration below) as the basis for advancing information literacy within the institution.
- Key stakeholders are involved throughout the development, implementation and delivery of the strategy
- They have a strong focus on information literacy advocacy and library staff development, as important enablers of information literacy development.

The SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) seven pillars model for information literacy is the model most widely used in the UK. It can be used as a diagnostic tool or a process model.



Visit [www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information\\_literacy/seven\\_pillars.html](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/seven_pillars.html) for more information.

## **Case study – the University of Sheffield**

The University of Sheffield is committed to research-led teaching, reflecting its position among the leading research universities in the UK. The library had developed an information skills tutorial and there was some coverage of information skills in the university information strategy. Although there was a low level of awareness of the concept of information literacy among staff and students, there was a high level of expertise within the Department of Information Studies. The opportunity to bid for national funding as a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) provided the impetus to build on this base.

Out of this background, the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS) was established in 2005 to promote and support the development of inquiry-based learning within and beyond the institution. Inquiry-based learning is a pedagogical approach that aims to encourage learning through activities which require students to carry out research tasks, with the support of their teachers, who facilitate the process of knowledge acquisition, rather than transmitting knowledge via lectures. Sheffield's conception of inquiry-based learning has four key dimensions:

- a *collaborative* approach to inquiry, encouraging peer support, in addition to seeing learners and teachers as partners in the research process;
- engagement with *networked* resources and technologies, exemplified by the information resources and collaborative tools available via the institutional portal and virtual learning environment;
- creation of purpose-designed *collaboratories*, high-tech group learning spaces, such as the rooms and facilities in the state-of-the art Information Commons;
- the development of *information literacy*, as an essential competence for independent resource-based learning and research.

The CILASS Information Literacy Network was formed to advance the development of information literacy through a programme of curriculum innovation, which would highlight the central role of information literacy in enhancing student learning (for example, by devising new learning activities involving evaluation of different sources of information and assigning marks for the quality of students' bibliographies in assessed work). The Network was led by the Department of Information Studies, as a cross-functional, inter-disciplinary partnership involving library professionals, information science academics, academics in other areas and educational developers. A key aspect of the strategy adopted was the 'discipline-sensitive' approach, which acknowledged that conceptions and pedagogies of information literacy should reflect the different practices, methodologies and resources of the different academic and professional disciplines; for example, the information needs and behaviours of modern linguists are different to those of architects or town planners.

Information literacy is now prominent in university strategy and policy statements: it is specified as a formal objective of the University Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) Strategy, and has been incorporated in departmental LTA strategies; some departments have their own information literacy strategies; information literacy is listed in the *Characteristics of the Sheffield graduate*; it is included in the student induction

checklist; and information literacy is identified as a key theme of the *Library Strategic Plan*.

Several tactics were adopted to deploy information literacy:

- Workshops offering academic departments help with meeting university information literacy objectives in their LTA strategies were used to raise awareness and share strategies,
- Project funding was used to stimulate information literacy initiatives in departments and deliver a Library staff development programme, helping librarians to use inquiry-based approaches in teaching information literacy.
- Presentations reporting progress on information literacy initiatives were given at internal and external conferences.
- A series of events and blog postings were organised as an Information Literacy Week, to reach more people.
- The Information Literacy Network was extended to bring in more players.

As a result of these efforts, there is now widespread use of customised online information literacy tutorials. There are many examples of academic and library staff working together on the development of new learning resources, inquiry-based workshops and information literacy assessments. Academic and library staff have also given joint presentations at internal and external conferences. Academics use the SCONUL seven pillars model in their teaching. Library staff are now more involved in information literacy teaching within the Department of Information Studies, delivering traditional classroom sessions to librarianship and information management students, and also participating in the Department's innovative use of Second Life as a virtual research and learning environment. Information literacy is now part of the everyday vocabulary of the University of Sheffield.

Several factors have been critical to achieving these successes. Information literacy is explicitly linked to current institutional concerns, and has been formally incorporated in a core business strategy of the institution (the Learning and Teaching Strategy). There were financial incentives for staff to launch information literacy projects. The Information Literacy Network has had a vital role in focusing and coordinating effort, within a stakeholder-based, multi-professional partnership, and has benefited from dedicated specialist support to take the work forward. (CILASS funding supported the appointment of an Information Literacy Learning Development and Research Associate on a five-year contract.) Senior people at the university acted as institutional champions for information literacy, with departmental contacts acting as local advocates.

### ***Information literacy in government***

Research suggests that the government sector is a “relatively introverted information environment”<sup>4</sup>. Searching for information is a major activity, but there is poor awareness of advanced search techniques. Existing policy is used as a starting point for information searches, with a heavy reliance on people and standard sources for information. There are problems with information overload and the quality of information retrieved, and staff

need help with updating their knowledge, carrying out horizon scanning and accessing a broader range of sources<sup>5</sup>.

In *Corporate literacy: discovering the senses of the organisation*<sup>6</sup>, Anne Kauhanen-Simanainen identifies several information skills needed by government workers:

- The ability to outline and recognise the information environment and its information sources.
- Skills to use both the information sources and systems common to the organisation and related to their own work, and the sources of the open net and information media.
- Skills relating to information production, including creation of both core content and associated meta-information.
- Skills of cooperation, as well as communication and networking skills.
- Knowledge of the most important principles of the legislation and concomitant ethical procedures connected with the use of information.

She writes:

*“The key task for information specialists working in government is to awaken awareness about the need to develop information and Media Literacy and actively assess and promote the versatility of information sources and their use. In the easily accessible surface information world, the information specialists have to signpost the versatility of the information environment, increase the visibility openness, vertical depth and lateral direction of the information channels to encompass different areas, conflicting sources and the past, present and future.”*<sup>7</sup>

Among the information literacy initiatives taking place across government, GCHQ information specialists have stepped up their training in this area, for example by developing e-learning modules with online assessment (as one-to-one sessions are not scalable across the organisation), creating an intranet training portal and setting up a blog alerting people to resources newly available. They have also brought in external speakers to raise awareness about information resources and information literacy. In the Scottish Government, information professionals provide a range of training sessions, including a Google treasure hunt and courses on essential internet skills and advanced information skills; they also offer ‘information drop-ins’ to provide help at people’s desks; and they have used various opportunities to promote information skills, including corporate induction events.

The Scottish Government provides a model for developing an information literacy strategy in the government sector. There, librarians have identified and strengthened partnerships with both internal and external stakeholders. Within the organisation they have worked with Corporate Learning Services, HR development advisers, the Skills and Learning Team, social researchers and the Policy Team. Externally, they have liaised and partnered with NHS Scotland, CILIP in Scotland and the Scottish Information Literacy Project. They have successfully raised awareness of the key role information literacy plays in the organisation, and gained recognition for it as a vital skillset for staff. As a

result, there is a substantial section on information literacy in the Scottish Government Information Strategy and a draft information literacy strategy has been submitted to senior management<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Practical questions for an IL strategy***

Changes in the information landscape have made it harder to locate, manage and use information in both educational institutions and the workplace, which has created a great opportunity for library and information professionals to show how their specialist expertise can benefit their employers. In the higher education sector, librarians are working collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders to promote information literacy at a strategic level within their institutions, tailoring their approaches to the needs of different disciplines and professions. Government library and information specialists have similar opportunities to form partnerships with key players in their organisations and work collectively to raise awareness of information literacy as an essential competence for knowledge-based organisations.

Recommended steps towards developing an effective information literacy strategy include:

- Carrying out a situation analysis: what are the big issues (strategic or operation) causing concern in your organisation, and is there an information literacy dimension that could act as a hook?
- Identifying stakeholders: who are the key players with a potential interest or involvement in the areas identified? Can you get their support as partners in information literacy initiatives?
- Portfolio development: where should you target your efforts and how should you deliver information literacy interventions?
- Professional standards: should you adopt or adapt an existing model (such as the Seven Pillars), or develop your own competency framework?

### ***Information literacy resources***

The Information Literacy Website

<http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk/>

CILIP CSG Information Literacy Group

<http://www.cilip.org.uk/specialinterestgroups/bysubject/informationliteracy/default.htm>

LIS-INFOLITERACY Email List

<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/LIS-INFOLITERACY.html>

Sheila Webber's Information Literacy Weblog

<http://information-literacy.blogspot.com/>

LILAC (Librarians' Info Lit Annual Conference)

<http://www.lilacconference.com/dw/>

University of Sheffield specialist modules and

PGCert/PGDip/MA in Information Literacy

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/prospectivepg/courses/il>

## References

1. "Information literacy strategy development in higher education: an exploratory study" by S Corral, in *International Journal of Information Management*, 28 (1), 2008, pp26-37.
2. Available at <http://www.cilip.org.uk/policyadvocacy/learning/informationliteracy/definition/default.htm>
3. *Information literacy: essential skills for the information age* by MB Eisenberg et al, published by Libraries Unlimited (2004)
4. "Information literacy in the workplace: a qualitative exploratory study" by J Crawford and C Irving, in *Journal of Library and Information Science*, vol 41, no 1, March 2009, pp29-38
5. Ibid, and "Personalised service? Changing the role of the government librarian" by K Taylor and S Corral, in *Journal of Information Science*, vol 33 no 3, 2007, pp298-314.
6. pp116-117. Published by Chandos, 2007.
7. Ibid, p143.
8. For further information, see *Progress by the Scottish Government towards improving skills*, at <http://scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/skills-strategy/progress/sg>

## Further reading

"Benchmarking strategic engagement with information literacy in higher education: towards a working model" by S Corral, in *Information Research*, 12 (4), paper 328 (2007). Available at <http://informationr.net/ir/12-4/paper328.html>

"Information literacy in the Scottish Government" by J Foreman and L Thomson, in *Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference*, 2009. Available at [www.slideshare.net/scottishlibraries/information-literacy-in-the-scottish-government](http://www.slideshare.net/scottishlibraries/information-literacy-in-the-scottish-government)