

## **INFORMATION CAPABILITY**

### **The Need for Professional Leadership**

Helping people to find, appraise and use information is central to our mission as library and information professionals. We have always been involved in both providing information and facilitating access for end-users, but the style of mediation has varied in different settings. Changes in the local and global environment have now put a premium on information-seeking skills and we must take responsibility for ensuring that both individuals and communities develop ‘**information capability**’.

#### ***Changes in the operating environment***

The big shift has been the fundamental change from an industrial age to an information society and ‘knowledge economy’, which immediately suggests that the ability to handle and manage information is not just important, but vital. Growth in the volume of publication and communication, advances in information-related technologies, the general tendency to replace mediation with self-service and government concerns with national skill levels have provided further impetus to the information skills agenda. The development of online and CD-ROM products, the emergence of the World Wide Web as a universal channel for communication of information and the step-change in the variety and quality of information media and sources have made information seeking a much more complex and riskier business, with serious problems surrounding the reliability and accessibility of information.

#### ***The criticality of information skills***

In the information age, knowledge economy, learning society or network community – whatever we call it – everyone needs to become a competent and confident information user. A growing proportion of information is only available in electronic form and only accessible to people with the equipment and skills to search and retrieve online. The rationale for designating information use as a core, generic, transferable skill is now overwhelming:

- to bridge the digital divide separating those who are connected from those who are not;
- to facilitate independent learning, from cradle to grave, including access to e-learning resources;
- to strengthen the employability of a workforce that is increasingly information-dependent;
- to retrieve information from the ‘invisible web’ hidden from those with limited searching skills;
- to support evidence-based policy and decisions in government and the professions, such as medicine;
- to manage the intangible assets of organisations represented by its knowledge or intellectual capital;
- to enable people to participate actively as informed citizens in their local communities;

- to improve the quality of later life by enabling older people to tap into new sources of information and inspiration.

The UK government is committed to electronic delivery of information but has not recognised the need for an ‘information literate’ population to make e-government a meaningful concept. Ironically there was greater acknowledgement of the importance of information skills in the 1970s and 1980s than in the 1990s as recent government reports have either ignored information skills or confused information skills with information *technology* skills. The National Key Skills Framework<sup>1</sup> includes elements of information literacy in its specification of different levels of *IT* skills, but the later Dearing report on higher education<sup>2</sup> did not include information skills among the four areas identified as “key to the future success of graduates whatever they intend to do in later life”. In contrast, the US SCANS report includes Information *and* Technology among five practical competencies needed by all Americans for entry-level employment<sup>3</sup> and similarly in Australia the Mayer report specifies collecting, analysing and organising information as one of seven key competency strands for effective participation in work and other social settings<sup>4</sup>.

### ***The role of information professionals***

The universal availability of information via electronic media on a self-service basis has required a migration in our role from *information provision* to *skills development*. In some sectors, information professionals have traditionally helped service users through formal training or education in information retrieval and management – *helping people to help themselves*; in others, information professionals have helped people by searching on their behalf – *supporting skills development more informally*. In practice, information skills can be developed through a wide variety of planned and *ad hoc* encounters – **a spectrum of interventions**, for example

- integrated with formal education programmes;
- organised as group training sessions or seminars;
- provided through one-to-one instruction;
- designed as self-paced learning resources;
- embedded in information resource guides;
- delivered as point-of-need assistance;
- subsumed in meeting information requests.

In the US and Australia, government recognition of information competencies has been informed by high-profile information literacy initiatives led by the profession. Examples include the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1987)<sup>5</sup>, US National Forum on Information Literacy (1989)<sup>6</sup>, Association of College and Research Libraries Institute for Information Literacy (1997) and Information Literacy Competency Standards (2000)<sup>7</sup>, Australian Library and Information Association Information Literacy Task Force (1997), Australia and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy and Australian University Librarians Information Literacy Standards (2000)<sup>8</sup>. There is also a Nordic Information Literacy Institute and a new IFLA Section for Information Literacy is now being established.

In contrast, neither the LA nor the IIS were involved in this area, leaving a policy gap in the UK. Three years ago SCONUL filled it with a Task Force on Information Skills (now an Advisory Committee on Information Literacy) which has initiated work on a conceptual model (the Seven Pillars), performance indicators, subject-based research and a generic module in collaboration with the Open University (Safari/Mosaic)<sup>9,10</sup>. Other UK bodies have also recently begun to take an interest: JISC has funded a survey of information skills provision in further and higher education (the Big Blue)<sup>11</sup> and a scoping study of the transferability of electronic information systems knowledge and use between secondary education and further and higher education (CrossEd)<sup>12</sup>. AHRB is funding research on school students' information-seeking skills and on academics' conceptions of information literacy; and the UK Research Councils have issued a joint statement of research students' skills training requirements which includes elements of information literacy (though not explicitly identified as such)<sup>13</sup>.

Despite evidence of community and workplace needs, national initiatives on information skills in the UK have so far been concentrated in the education sector. TFPL flagged information literacy as a key issue in its reports on skills for the knowledge economy for the former Library and Information Commission<sup>14</sup> and the Information Services National Training Organisation<sup>15</sup> and now offers TFPL FOCUS© (Find, Organise, Create, Use, Share), a skills development programme for organisations wanting to upskill their workforce to handle information effectively<sup>16</sup>. Others have confirmed the need for skills development in business, government and industry<sup>17,18,19</sup>. At last, the new DCMS ten-year strategic vision for public libraries service has identified a critical role for public library staff "in helping promote greater equality of access and capability in using information" and suggests that they "could become local mediators, helping people develop their information literacy skills"<sup>20</sup>.

### ***The need for leadership***

Further impetus for a cross-sectoral strategic initiative led by CILIP has come from a series of reports considered by our new professional body in its first year of operation, which all identified the need for concerted action on information literacy/skills:

- ★ The report of the (LA) Policy Advisory Group on National Information Policy identified the need to define and scope information literacy as a life skill supporting social, economic and cultural participation and to argue for information skills to be an integral part of curriculum skills packages.
- ★ *CILIP in the Knowledge Economy*, the report of the Knowledge-Based Economy Executive Advisory Group similarly agreed that information literacy skills need to be recognised as a core competence of society and included in academic programmes in all subjects, with advanced modules for people moving into information-intensive roles.
- ★ *Start with the Child*, the report of the CILIP Working Group on Library Provision for Children and Young People, identified the need to improve the teaching of information literacy/skills in schools and to initiate cross-sectoral working between public, school, FE and HE libraries to share models and synthesise development.

- ★ *Making a Difference*, the report of the Social Inclusion Executive Advisory Group, identified information literacy as a social inclusion issue and emphasised the need for library and information studies programmes to cover the competencies required for information skills development.
- ★ Several of the reports also suggested the need for an information equivalent of the European Computer Driving Licence (which might build on the work of SCOUNL and the OU) and all stressed the importance of collaboration and partnerships with other players and agencies interested in literacy and learning.

The cross-cutting nature of the information literacy agenda requires a unified approach with a dedicated group to take things forward, rather than including this work in the remit of one or more of the Policy Implementation Groups or assigning it to any existing CILIP panels. The next step for CILIP is to form a working group with representation from the different constituencies identified, including the SCOUNL Advisory Committee and others currently active in the field to ensure that we build on and do not duplicate work already done or in progress. In addition to taking forward the recommendations of CILIP reports, we need to consider the findings and recommendations of other recent reports (such as the Big Blue project) in the interests of national co-ordination. The working group will also need to interact with and feed into other CILIP work (for example, the new qualifications framework and the development of an Investors in Information standard).

The potential agenda for the working group is already quite extensive and includes the following broad areas of activity or **strategic thrusts**:

- ★ Raising awareness of the significance of information literacy/skills and the importance of the library and information profession's contribution among policy makers, educators, employers and community leaders (and within the profession).
- ★ Building relationships with key players/potential allies and creating the infrastructure to support co-operation and partnership among different agencies, professions and sectors, beyond and within the library and information community.
- ★ Gaining recognition of information literacy as a key skill/core competence for learning, employment and citizenship and improving the coverage of information skills in education, training and development programmes at all levels.
- ★ Strengthening capacity within the profession to support the development of information skills and promoting excellence in the design and delivery of information literacy programmes, especially in the community and the workplace.

The working group will need to decide the specific tasks and **priority actions** required to pursue the issues identified. The following list is a starting point for discussion.

1. Develop a clear and concise **definition** of information literacy/skills to support advocacy and other work. This would include reviewing published statements and deciding whether to adopt/adapt an existing definition or to create a new one. Among other things the definition should clearly differentiate information literacy/skills from computer literacy and IT skills.

2. Provide guidance on the **terminology** of this field to facilitate communication within and beyond the profession. Information literacy and information skills are often (but not always) used interchangeably and both terms convey messages that are unhelpful in some contexts. Other terms found include information capability, information competence, information fluency and personal knowledge management. We should aim at least to standardise usage within CILIP and provide a glossary to differentiate related terms.
3. Record and publish examples of **good practice** in information skills development. These could include mini case studies/sketches from different sectors to support advocacy work and more detailed documentation for exchange of information within the library and information profession.
4. Establish a new CILIP **award** to celebrate excellence in information skills development and promote good practice. This would ideally include sector-specific awards to encourage information skills development beyond the education sector and could be supported and promoted by external sponsors.
5. Encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas through a **special interest group** on information literacy/skills. This would bring together individuals from all sectors via a newsletter and/or journal, meetings and events, web resources, etc to exchange information, share good practice and advance the state of the art. (Under present arrangements, this would have to be initiated by members.)
6. Produce a formal CILIP policy or **position statement** on information literacy/skills. This would give a CILIP view on the place, scope and value of information literacy/skills in different settings and explain how library and information professionals can work in partnership with colleagues (such as subject specialists and functional experts) to the benefit of their communities.
7. Stimulate collaboration by convening a **national forum** for information literacy/skills. This would bring together representatives of interested organisations to exchange news and views, consider policy and strategy and discuss collaborative action and joint ventures (such as lobbying and projects).
8. Specify a basic syllabus as the minimum requirement for coverage of information literacy/skills in initial **professional education** for library and information professionals. This could include reviewing existing provision and determining whether any current modules/units could serve as exemplars. A key issue here is the extent to which information studies programmes should cover models and methods of developing information literacy/skills as well as roles and responsibilities. (This task would feed into the planned review of the body of knowledge and the process of accreditation for information studies programmes. It should also inform regulations for admission to Chartership.)

9. Appraise options and make recommendations for library and information professionals to develop competence in **teaching methods**, learning support and curriculum/course design. This relates to the task above in that initial professional education could provide an introduction to this area, but we also need to provide for people who want more advanced education and training. This would involve reviewing courses and qualifications currently offered by CILIP and others (eg PGCE, Open University, City and Guilds). Possible options include strengthening CILIP training and development offerings and/or extending information and advice provided for members on courses and qualifications offered by others.
10. Assess needs and make recommendations on training and development in information literacy/skills delivery to provide **professional updating** for mid-career staff. The intention here would be to plug any identified gaps in relevant knowledge, skills and understanding arising from deficiencies in previous education, training and development. Possible options include an 'immersion' programme modelled on US ACRL practice.

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Information literacy (IL) was adopted as the theme for her Presidential year by Sheila Corrall, the first President of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), in April 2002. This briefing paper was produced to support her presidential mission to advance information literacy in the UK. Toward the end of her term of office, she called a meeting of experts and practitioners at CILIP, which concluded that the term was not understood or used consistently across all sectors in the UK. A working party was formed under her leadership, charged with producing a definition, as well as supporting material such as case studies demonstrating how IL can make a difference to individuals. Outcomes of the initiative include the CILIP definition of information literacy and the CILIP Information Literacy Group, which organizes the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) and manages the annual Information Literacy Award.