
The Irish Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL),

Part II: Report of cross-sector activity 2006–2008 and recommendations for action



Philip Russell
Deputy Librarian,
Institute of Technology Tallaght,
Chair to the LAI WGIL
Tel: + 353 1 4042202
E-mail: philip.russell@ittdublin.ie

Terry O'Brien
Deputy Librarian,
Waterford Institute of Technology,
Secretary to the LAI WGIL
Tel: + 353 51 302845
E-mail: tpobrien@wit.ie

BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

In 2006, the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL) was established with an agreed role to 'recommend strategies for the development of information skills education at both theoretical and practical level in the library and information services sector in Ireland'.¹

A two-year review of current information literacy activity in the Republic of Ireland by WGIL culminated in the completion of a cross-sectoral report which provides a snapshot of information literacy in a number of library and information services sectors in Ireland (academic and special libraries sector, schools, public, health, government and related libraries sector). To further IL advancement, the report also includes a set of recommendations to be considered by the executive board of the Library Association of Ireland as per the terms of reference of the group.

With some exceptions, IL activities in Ireland have been poorly documented, and there appears to be little consensus about how library and information centres across the individual LIS (Library and Information Service) sectors can best integrate IL

into their menu of user services. Russell makes the point that there is a dearth of literature about IL in an Irish context, with no definition of information literacy being produced and with many Irish institutions defining IL according to their own needs and looking to international models and guidelines.²

The language and terminology used around information literacy and information skills remain problematic, resulting in some stigma and uncertainty around use of the terms. IL has not been fully embraced by practitioners and is not understood by the public. Different sectors use and adapt the language they require for their own needs, but this does create challenges in trying to formulate national policy and understanding.

Much has been written about use of the phrase 'information literacy', as opposed to 'information skills', and it is clear that Irish LIS sectors take a pragmatic approach to using terminology that fits their needs. What is apparent is that, outside of academia, there is no consensus on which term should be used. The term 'information literacy' has not been fully embraced in Ireland, as many LIS professionals prefer alternative but equivalent terms, such as 'information skills' or 'user training'. While many institutions, particularly in the third-level education sector, have initiated and developed extensive IL programmes, their efforts remain largely unrecognised outside their immediate spheres. Sharing of resources and experience appears to take place primarily on an informal level, and collaboration with collegial (or stakeholder) groups, such as academics, remains the exception rather than the norm.

Currently, there exists no cohesive national strategy for IL. Although there are some levels of resource-sharing and co-operation among practitioners, they tend to be ad hoc.

There have been some key developments, particularly in the academic library sector, which have raised the profile of IL in Ireland, and may pave the way for the establishment of a more connected national approach. These include the 2004 report produced by the Working Group on Information Skills Training (IST), a sub-committee of CONUL (Consortium of National and University Libraries), the establishment of the CONUL Advisory Committee on Information Literacy and the organisation of the first national seminar on IL in Ireland (2006) in association with the Academic and National Library Training Co-operative (ANTLC).³ There has also been much work done

in individual sectors, such as the establishment of the public libraries 'lifesteps' framework programme (<http://www.lifesteps.ie>), as well as many examples of co-operation and collaboration *intra*-sectorally. However, despite this progress, IL 'has not been recognised as such at the highest political level [in] Ireland',⁴ and has been subsumed within an 'information society' agenda focussing primarily on the promotion and development of ICT skills and infrastructure. Politically and socially, literacy, rather than information literacy, remains a more prevalent socio-political concern.

Reviewing the evidence, it is reasonable to state that while IL is to some extent implicitly acknowledged in Irish government policy, particularly in the context of the transferable skills, the importance of the information society and lifelong learning there needs to be much more explicitly recognised. To this end, the formulation and promotion of a national strategy for IL would ideally enable a number of positive outcomes:

- consolidation of the disparate and fragmented approaches to the development of IL education programmes across the various sectors
- opportunities to tailor IL education programmes to individual sectoral requirements
- inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaboration for IL education
- initiation of a strong and persuasive lobby to secure the inclusion of IL in national governmental policy
- international recognition of Ireland's IL activities.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE REPORT

This report and its recommendations represent the culmination of almost two years' endeavour of the working group. It aims to offer a framework for the potential development of information literacy education on a national scale, through the examination of best practice, both nationally and internationally, and through recommending the adoption of flexible IL standards and guidelines, which will enable libraries to develop suitable IL or information skills programmes that best suit the needs of their particular users.

In terms of scope, the report encompasses information literacy activities within the library and information services sector in the Republic of Ireland, and adheres to the terms of reference of WGIL through the following objectives:

- to provide an overview of information skills educational activities in the LIS sector in Ireland
- to disseminate information about information skills educational initiatives, development and practice in Ireland
- to promote the understanding and development of information skills education in Ireland and to provide advocacy for it
- to make recommendations for the practical development of information skills education in the library and information services sector in Ireland.

OVERVIEW OF APPROACH

The methodological approach to compiling the report was a hybrid or mixed model. Quantitative work was carried out in conjunction with more qualitative case studies; generic literature reviews and searching were carried out as appropriate to each sector's needs. Representatives from the individual LIS sectors assumed responsibility for collecting data and producing an analytical report for their own sector. SurveyMonkey was used to collect data for any online surveys carried out. The survey instrument consisted of eight questions, designed to elicit descriptive information about IL education activities at the respondents' institutions, as well as about the problems and barriers experienced by them in the course of their IL work. Carried out across the individual sectors between summer 2007 and spring 2008, the case studies represent a useful snapshot and overview of the work being done in the various sectors (and of perceived barriers)

SECTORAL REPORTS

The report reviewed information literacy activity and status across the range of LIS sectors in Ireland, including academic and special, schools, health, government and related and public libraries.

With limited existing cross-sectoral or multi-sectoral IL work in Irish libraries (some notable exceptions notwithstanding), one of the key challenges for the group in producing this report was ensuring that the WGIL was fully representative of all Irish library sectors. It was imperative for inclusiveness and credibility purposes that all sectors had some representation and involvement in the process.

Another challenge was the difficulty in finding consistency and consensus in a cross-sectoral

approach: IL means different things to different people and different things in different organisations. Sectoral approaches to IL tend to be dissimilar and specific to their own needs. For example, in health IL may be evidence-based whereas in special libraries a more corporate or strategic approach may apply. Academics tend to be concerned about learning outcomes and pedagogy, whilst public libraries are more concerned with social inclusion. In addition, there is a fear of the unknown – many sectors worry about what other sectors are doing. Despite this, all the sectors do share *recognition* of the need for information literacy for their users.

The review indicated the unevenness of the playing field, with some library sectors being much more evolved than others in terms of IL activity. The school libraries in particular remain chronically underdeveloped in Ireland. Qualitative responses from practitioners across all of the sectors highlighted some of the key issues for IL development. Respondents indicated common barriers to the implementation of information literacy programmes in their sector. These included:

- lack of time
- inadequate resources (funding, staff and facilities)
- lack of interest from end-users
- poor understanding/awareness of the importance of information literacy or information skills by end-users
- insufficient training to develop information literacy programmes
- poorly developed ICT infrastructure / lack of broadband.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the sectoral reports only represent a snapshot of current activity in the LIS sector, they confirm and affirm the importance of information literacy and information skills in the work of libraries and library staff. The diversity and different levels of evolution of IL across sectors is apparent in the findings. What is also perceptible is the need for continued leadership and direction sectorally and nationally. This should be provided by the Library Association of Ireland, as our professional body, and be directed not just towards its members but towards policy-makers and government. IL, in whatever guise or name it takes, is now a key requirement and core competency for what libraries do. What is equally important is that the LIS sector can make the case for IL. Most

librarians or information professionals no longer need to be convinced of the value, operationally or strategically, of IL. They 'recognise the need'. However, the case needs to be made to society at large, particularly at political and policy level, so that the value of IL is acknowledged and accordingly given due recognition through policy, first, and resources, second. This will require a sound framework and an integrated policy.

The recommendations and final conclusions of the report represent the views of the WGIL group as to how best to advance IL in an Irish context. These views do not purport to be a complete solution nor do they claim unique originality. They do represent the strong and enthusiastic opinions of practitioners with a genuine and practical passion for IL and libraries.

One of the key objectives of the group was to progress a series of recommendations for submission to the LAI executive board. There was wide-ranging agreement amongst all members of the group that these recommendations should be practical, robust and meaningful and should provide real direction for the future development of an appropriate national IL policy for all library sectors. It is hoped that, following further consultation with LAI members, many of these recommendations will be taken on board and that the executive board of the LAI will use its influence to try and ensure that the best of these proposals can be delivered. The following is a list of the WGIL recommendations. Because we need to be particularly mindful of current difficult economic conditions, some of these are practical, others more aspirational:

- Formulate a national IL policy, promoted and driven by the LAI.
- Investigate the applicability to Ireland of a 'national information literacy framework' similar to that in Scotland.⁵
- Formally adopt the CILIP (2004) definition of IL ('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') as a working definition and the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIIL) information literacy framework (2004) in any IL national policy.
- Increase advocacy of IL – both within the profession and nationally – as part of a wider equality agenda.
- Raise awareness nationally of the strategic value of information literacy through advo-

cacy, dissemination, lobbying and targeted interventions.

- Promote the socio-economic capital of IL at policy level, particularly in the context of the information-society agenda, lifelong learning and employable transferable skills.
- *Lobby; get political!* Use the political influence of the LAI at local government, departmental and national government levels.
- Lobby government and departments to deliver the necessary broadband/ICT infrastructure, particularly as it relates to schools and rural public libraries.
- Promote the inclusion of IL in education at all levels.
- Recommend IL to be made a key strategic training and priority for all in the LIS sector.
- Investigate funding of dedicated IL post(s) at a national level.
- Support further research into IL activities in Ireland.
- Facilitate and host a national (or international) IL seminar/conference.
- Co-ordinate existing disparate IL activity in Ireland.
- Develop a presence or 'community of practice' on the NDLR – National Digital Learning Repository.⁶
- Establish a new standing IL group within the LAI and build relationships with other appropriate groups such as CONUL (Ireland's Consortium of National and University Libraries) and COLICO (Committee on Library Co-operation in Ireland) and international groups such as the CILIP CSG (Community Services Group) IL group (UK).
- Employ a dedicated national IL officer.
- Adopt and assimilate the new IL logo developed by the International Federation of Library Associations.

In order to achieve many of the stated recommendations of the group, WGIL suggests that a *national expert advisory group* is formed to assist and guide any future IL groupings (and indeed the LAI itself) in delivering achievable recommendations in action and implementation phases.

REFERENCES

- 1 See <http://www2.libraryassociation.ie/working-group-on-information-literacyx/working-group-on-information-literacy/>
- 2 P. Russell, 'Information literacy support for off-campus students by academic libraries in the Republic of Ireland', *Journal of information literacy*, 2 (2), 2008; available at <http://jil.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/RA-V2-I2-2008-4> [accessed December 2008]

- 3 See <http://www.conul.ie/committees/activities.shtml>
- 4 S. Webber and C. McGuinness, 'UK and Ireland', in J. Lau, ed., *Information literacy: an international state-of-the-art report*, The Hague: International Federation of Library Associations & UNESCO, 2007, pp 121–33
- 5 See <http://www.caledonian.ac.uk/ils/framework.html>
- 6 See <http://www.ndlr.ie/>