

The Irish 'Working Group on Information Literacy' – edging towards a national policy

Background

From the early to the mid part of this decade, information literacy (IL) as it has come to be known was a topic of some debate and discussion in Irish library circles. IL activity had become a central and core element particularly in many academic and health libraries, and although long established under various names and guises, the 'concept' of information literacy was gaining real currency. A number of literature reviews (Rader Library Trends, 2002; Virkus Information Research, 2003; Johnson Reference Services Review, 2003) outlined a burgeoning body of research and IL activity in North America, Australia, New Zealand, UK and Europe. The CONUL (Irish Consortium of National and University Libraries) Advisory Committee on Information Literacy (formerly the Working Group on Information Skills Training) was established in 2002 and duly produced a series on policy papers on IL in 2004 and 2005. Library Review published a special issue on 'Worldwide Perspectives on Information Literacy and IT Literacy' in 2005, with a guest editorial (Joint & Wallis, 2005) on the role of national library and information associations in promoting information literacy in their respective countries. Internationally, IFLA and UNESCO were developing policies and recommendations arising out of national fora and IL expert group meetings held in Prague (2003) Alexandria (2005) and Ljubljana (2006). One of the recommendations at the High Level Colloquium on Information Literacy (*The Alexandria Proclamation*) was to "urge governments and intergovernmental organisations to pursue policies and programmes to support information Literacy and lifelong learning" (Garner, 2005, p. 4)

SCONUL's Seven Pillars of Information Literacy Model was updated in 2004 in the position paper 'Information Skills for Higher Education'. The frequently cited and quintessential view of IL as was also published in 2006 – "the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze and use information", (ACRL, 2006). In Ireland, also in 2006, the first national seminar on IL was hosted in association with ANTL¹, the Academic and National Library Training Co-operative. This mirrored developments in the UK in 2005 when a newly dedicated Information Literacy group was formed under the Community Services Group² in CILIP, and the first of a now well established and important international conference – Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference - LILAC - was held in London. In this context of research, action and engagement nationally and internationally, it came as little surprise that at its 2005 AGM, the Executive Board of the Library Association of Ireland³ (LAI), in recognising the importance of IL in independent learning and as a series of transferable skills, proposed and subsequently passed the following motion:

¹ ANTL – The Academic and national Library Training Co-operative established in 1995 with stated aim "to identify training needs within member Irish academic and national libraries to form the basis of an ongoing co-operative training and development programme" <http://www.anltc.ie/>

² The CILIP Community Services Sub-Group on Information Literacy <http://www.cilip.org.uk/get-involved/special-interest-groups/community-services/subgroups/information-literacy/Pages/default.aspx>

³ Library Association of Ireland <http://www.libraryassociation.ie/>

“That this Annual General Meeting calls on the incoming Executive Board to work with other agencies to adopt a standard for information skills; lobby to ensure government is made aware of the need for, and value of information skills; lobby government to recognise and affirm the role of Libraries in the delivery and maintenance of information skills” (LAI, 2006)

As a direct result of this and in recognition of the mounting importance and growth of IL, the LAI Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL) was established in spring 2006 in order to review current IL activity in Ireland and to make recommendations for its further advancement. A call was sent out to all LAI distribution lists and sectoral groups seeking members with an interest in the area of IL and willing to participate in a working group. Over a period of months, the membership of the group was finalised, comprising a chair, secretary and 8 other members from the various library sectors. As one might expect there was a leaning in the membership towards academic libraries as most (but not all) IL activity centered around higher education, confirming what Jesus Lau would later say in 2008 “academic librarians have appropriated the concept of IL from the population at large and focused it on our small corner of the world” (Campbell in Lau 2008, p.18). This however, did not detract from the work of the group and, on completion, there were representatives not just from academic, but from health, special, schools and public libraries as well as a faculty member from the School of Library and Information Studies at University College Dublin.

It was agreed from the start that WGIL would explicitly adopt a cross-sectoral approach; an approach that would ensure inclusivity of all types of libraries and ensure contributions from all sectors in the Irish library community (see diagram 1). Whilst recognising that some sectors were more evolved than others in terms of IL provision and the many diverse approaches to achieving information literacy amongst constituent users groups, the group was as one in the need for a more coherent and policy driven approach to IL at a national level. The importance of individual group members looking beyond their own sectoral (but also acknowledging any work done) interests towards a more integrated approach, grounded in the LAI was also established as key.

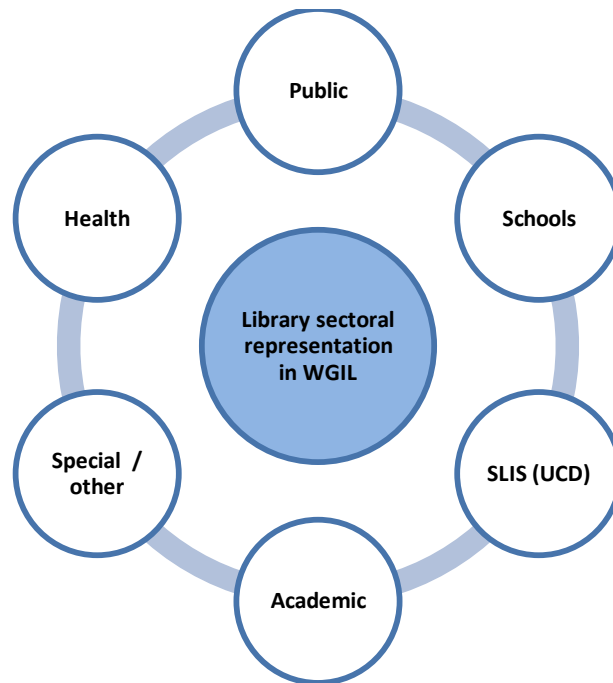


Diagram 1 – Sectoral representation

Establishing role and terms of reference

Role

- To adopt and recommend a standard for information literacy.
- Recommend strategies for the development of information skills at both a theoretical and practical level in LIS sector in Ireland.
- Encourage cross-sectoral approach and activity in developing a national cross-sectoral IL strategy.
- Lobby to ensure awareness of need for and value of information literacy and affirm the role of libraries as central to information literacy development and delivery.
- Generate recommendations to the LAI for the development of a cohesive national strategy for information literacy education and advocacy across all LIS sectors in the Republic of Ireland.
- Examine international best practice and standards and recommend the adoption of flexible IL standards and guidelines.
- Produce a sectoral-based report to provide overview of IL in a number of library and information service sectors in the Republic of Ireland.
- Advocate and heighten the profile of information literacy / information skills amongst the profession and at policy level within the LAI.
- Raise awareness nationally of the strategic value of information literacy through advocacy, dissemination, lobbying and targeted interventions.

Terms of reference

- To recommend appropriate guidelines for the practical development of information skills education across the Irish Library and Information Services sector.
- To recommend strategies for promoting and raising awareness of information skills education in the Irish Library and Information Services sector.
- To suggest further development opportunities for research and action on information skills education in Ireland.
- To recommend actions for the strategic positioning of information skills within the context of lifelong learning in a learning and knowledge society, on the national Governmental agenda.

Although it has recently argued that the wide range of definitions of IL in use renders definitions meaningless and futile (Campbell 2008), the group agreed from the outset that to help achieve consensus and also to facilitate communication, that it would be most useful to adopt a single definition of IL and therefore suggested the endorsement of an existing definition. Following an extensive review and discussion period, the group recommended the adoption of CILIP (2004) as a working definition of IL. The definition, proposed in 2004 by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), was endorsed as being most appropriate to WGIL's needs:

“information literacy is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate it, use and communicate it in an ethical manner⁴”

The CILIP definition of IL is comprehensive, and communicates the essential elements of IL in a clear and unambiguous fashion. CILIP highlights the various skills that are implied by the definition, which lends it to the abstract and practical elements of information literacy competence espoused by WGIL. The group also recommended adoption of the ANZIL⁵ (2004) IL framework – (Bundy, 2004) and recommends its endorsement by the LAI as the basis for Irish IL standards. The adoption of a set of flexible information literacy standards and guidelines will enable a number of positive outcomes by offering an excellent framework to guide information literacy practitioners in Ireland for writing programme objectives, devising learning outcomes, and integrating IL into different instructional contexts. Adopting IL standards on a cross sectoral basis will lead to a more integrated approach to IL education in Ireland. The framework will facilitate communication between different groups and organizations, enhance IL coordination and collaboration and increase the sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources. This framework was most suitable and user friendly for our purposes and the ANZIL standards are also more transferable to contexts outside academia, which was important for a group representing all library and information sectors. These standards explicitly recognise the link

⁴ From the CILIP website – information literacy: definition

<http://www.cilip.org.uk/getinvolved/advocacy/learning/information-literacy/pages/definition.aspx>

⁵ Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework principles, standards and practices 2nd ed. Alan Bundy (AZIIL, Adelaide, 2004)

between IL and lifelong learning and this in conjunction with their flexibility and practicality, meant that it met with unequivocal support amongst the WGIL group members.

Activities and advocacy of the working group

Over a period of 2½ years, the working group met 10 times and communicated on a regular basis via email and phone. The group updated the executive board of the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) under whose auspices the group was originally formed, both directly and indirectly on a number of occasions. Following a bedding in period there followed a phase in which the group clarified and fortified the objectives and terms of reference of the group and commenced work. In addition to the previously outlined work on IL definitions, frameworks and role, the group was very keen to promote and work towards raising the profile of information literacy sectorally and nationally. To this end, members of the group engaged in a series of advocacy initiatives. During the life of the group, these included - attendance at IL seminars at Dublin City University (2008), at LILAC international information literacy conferences at Manchester Metropolitan University (2007) and Limerick (2010) respectively. The group submitted a poster presentation at LILAC 2010 outlining the activity and main recommendations of the group's final report. The group also invited the Irish CONUL⁶ sub-committee on information literacy to come and speak to the group and share their experiences. Presentations included the keynote to the Academic & Special Libraries group of the LAI at the Royal Irish Academy (2007)⁷, a joint presentation to the Academic & Special Libraries group annual seminar (2008)⁸, and a further presentation at the Innovative Interfaces User Group national conference at University College Cork (2009). The group also presented to the Health Sciences Libraries Group (HSLG) and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JSCP) School Libraries group during 2007 and 2008. Two condensed articles on the work of the group were submitted and published in the UK-based Society of College, National and University Libraries publication, *SCONUL Focus* (O'Brien & Russell, 2007, Russell & O'Brien, 2009). The group also regularly contributed to the LAI website and newsletters with updates, Health Science Libraries group website, and disseminated information via many of the LIS research and listserv channels.

⁶ CONUL is the Irish Consortium of National and University Libraries. See the sub-group advisory committee on information literacy at <http://www.conul.ie/>

⁷ Presentation delivered by Terry O'Brien, available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/2439023/Information-Literacy-session-at-the-ASLS-AGM-2007>

⁸ Presentation jointly delivered by Terry O'Brien and Jamie Ward, available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/5520984/Presentation-2008>

Challenges & Issues

With no major tradition of cross-sectoral or multi-sectoral IL work in Irish libraries the need for WGIL to be fully representative of all Irish library sectors was one of the key challenges identified. It was vital for the group and for the report all sectors had some representation and involvement in the process and this that cross sectoral collaboration was attained at an early stage. This was crucial to ensuring that both the group and final report had inclusiveness and credibility. Forming a coherent consensus also proved difficult in a cross-sectoral setting as individuals were guided by their own needs in terms of their own personal approach and more specifically their own sectoral approach. In different organizations and sectors the perception and requirements of IL differed and some sectors are more evolved than others financially, technically and experientially. Green (2010) reflects that many of our assumptions around information literacy centre on people being either information literate or information illiterate, when in reality there are many levels of (ill)literacy, and that such a crude binary dichotomy is neither accurate nor helpful.

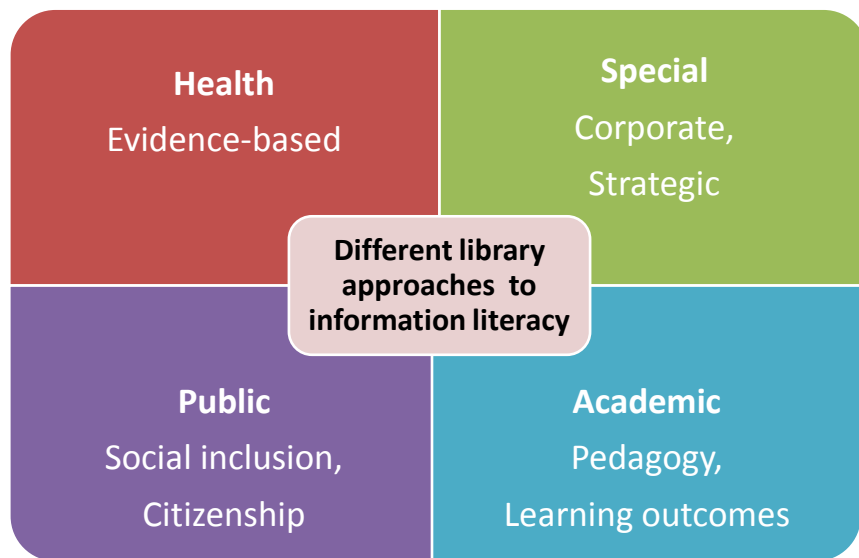


Diagram 2 – Approaches to IL

There is currently no national cohesive strategy for IL and this one of the key challenges for IL development in Ireland. IL activities to date have been fragmented and ad hoc, although many libraries

and IL practitioners have well-developed programmes and services, development of policy have been hindered by a lack of collaborative thinking and multiple stakeholders. Further, despite some successful *intra-sectoral* projects, IL continues to lack an overarching approach and “has not been recognized at the highest political level [in] Ireland” (Webber & McGuinness, 2007, p. 121) but has instead been subsumed into a general information society agenda with an overt focus on ICT. A more integrated approach amongst all stakeholders is imperative in terms of ensuring the development of a national policy for IL, and the Library Association of Ireland, as the national representative body is ideally placed to foster and facilitate this. At a political and social level, literacy is much more of a priority in Ireland with IL lacking any real explicit understanding or standing outside of the library arena. The Library Association of Ireland is well positioned to play a key role to in this, and to effect policy development by making the case for the strategic value of IL at the highest political level. The national association should be at the forefront promoting the prominent role of libraries and IL in formal education and wider society generally. As Joint & Wallis advance in their guest editorial in *Library Review* (2005, p. 215, 216) national library or professional associations can give “institutional sponsorship” and provide “enabling structures”, and “can give this wider view and facilitate a range of collaboration and cross-sectoral initiatives”.

One of the difficulties in formulating a national policy and, a difficulty shared internationally, is a lack of clarity and understanding with regard to the term information literacy and what it actually means. This uncertainty surrounding the terminology can lead to it not being fully embraced by practitioners and can contribute towards a lack of recognition of the importance of IL amongst policymakers, the public, and indeed library users and patrons. Diverse sectors adapt the language to meet their own needs but this lack of consensus around language does create difficulties in terms of achieving a framework for national policy development. Multiculturalism and the increasing internationalization of Irish society have also presented difficulties for the delivery and provision of IL in different sectors, with differing learning, language and communication needs providing real challenges. The necessity to actively meet these challenges and ensure that appropriate IL initiatives are in place should form part of any IL strategy going forward. WGIL views this as a major opportunity to engage with the public and improve and enhance our profile potentially through specific IL initiatives for new ‘audiences’. Further contextual impediments include a traditionally chronically underfunded schools’ libraries’ sector, lack of understanding and little priority given to IL outside of libraries in higher education sector and generally within the educational space. This is exacerbated with mainstream higher education adoption of semesterisation and modularisation models, which have placed increasing demands on a sector which is already struggling with time-constraints, inadequate resources and a congested curriculum. In such an environment, libraries are in danger of being further marginalized. There are also challenges and opportunities presented by Web 2.0 technologies which may enable more enhanced service delivery and meet the needs of a more diverse type of user. However, Web 2.0 promotes a more user-centric approach, which can be at odds with some strands of IL, regarded as prescriptive and instructive.

Main issues in summary

- No one size fits all approach and even if there were the suitability of such an approach.
- The diversity of the Irish library scene.

- No cohesive national strategy, policy guidelines or approach.
- Uneven development of IL across sectors financially, technically, experientially.
- Challenges of multiculturalism and internationalization of Irish society.
- Chronic underdevelopment and funding of school libraries.
- Language and terminology seem to remain problematic albeit with a growing acceptance around usage of the phrase and international IL logo.
- Disconnect between work of the group and the national association.
- Group and organizational challenges (little tradition of cross-sectoral projects, difficulty in achieving consensus, different priorities in different sectors, voluntary, no funding, broad terms of reference, changing landscape of libraries, timescale, inclusiveness).

Approach and final report

In 2009, the WGIL presented an 85 page report – “*Library Association of Ireland: Working Group on Information Literacy: Review of Cross-Sector Activity 2006 - 2008 and Initial Recommendations for Further Action*”, to the Executive Board of the LAI. The report followed two and a half years of activity and a fulfillment of two of the key objectives of the group, namely to:

- Provide an overview of information skills educational activities in the Irish LIS field.
- To make recommendations for the practical development of information skills education in the Irish LIS field.

The report spanned a two-year period, in which best practice was examined and information literacy activities were scoped across the various sectors. Compilation of the report involved a mixed model involving surveys, case studies, literature reviews, and reviewing international practitioner best practice. Group members representing their respective sectors took responsibility for producing a sub-report for their particular areas. Five sectoral sub-reports were produced forming the basis of much of the final report. Some used *SurveyMonkey* as an online survey instrument to generate and analyze quantitative data. Others looked at case studies and reviewed the perceived barriers and problems experience qualitatively in their fields. The case studies present a useful overview of the activities across the various Irish LIS sectors. The target of having an inclusive report was achieved in having sectoral reports from academic, public, schools, special and health libraries. It became evident that IL means different things in different sectors and people apply IL specific to their own users needs. Despite this fairly obvious lack of consensus, the recognition from all of the need for information literacy was clearly evident. The final report provides a broad overview, analysis and useful snapshot of the types of IL-related activities and also a framework with which to advance IL and IL advocacy through a series of proposals. It shows considerable IL activity but an approach sectorally and *intra*-sectorally that is both ad hoc and fragmented. Despite this diversity, there were common positive goals across sectors in promoting and advocating the worth and value of IL. Many of the challenges were sketched too, and a recurring list of barriers was reflected in many of the survey responses. The most common of these included – uneven development of IL programmes, lack of time, inadequate resources (such as funding, facilities, qualified or suitable staff), indifference and lack of appreciation from end-users and the wider

community, poor understanding and awareness of the necessity and importance of IL, insufficient training and CPD initiatives to up-skill staff, ICT infrastructure, web 2.0 and technological issues.

Some key recommendations

The report of the WGIL does not claim to be a complete solution as to how to best advance IL in an Irish library context, nor does it claim that the recommendations are uniquely distinctive. Rather, the report presents a broad snapshot and offers a series of practical and pragmatic proposals. The report confirms and acknowledges the variety and importance of information literacy and information skills work in libraries and amongst many library staff. The report also highlights the need for continued leadership and guidance at institutional and national level particularly from the LAI. The leverage of the national representative body *as* policy-makers and *with* policy-makers should be utilized. Making the case for IL as a set of key transferable and lifelong skills needs to be made clear at a policy level before we can hope for resources in these financially restrictive times. Putting in place a framework and cohesive policy can only help this process. This framework approach has proven successful in Scotland⁹ (The Scottish Information Literacy Skills Project) and is ongoing in Wales¹⁰, (Welsh Information Literacy Project). The report met one of its key objectives in compiling a series of recommendations (some more aspirational than practical) for the consideration of the Executive Board of the LAI. It is hoped that these will provide some real direction for future development and that following further consultation could form the basis for implementation, and ultimately delivery. There were some 20 broad recommendations suggested for action, with 10 identified as strategically fundamental. These are -

- Formally adopt the CILIP definition and ANZIIL framework for IL.
- Establish a new IL Group within the LAI and build relationships with other appropriate groups such as the CSG IL group (CILIP) and the Welsh and Scottish IL groups.
- Co-ordinate existing disparate IL channels, pathways and activities.
- Increase advocacy of IL – both within the profession and nationally – as part of a wider equality agenda at local, departmental and national governmental levels.
- Promote the inclusion of IL (and IL CPD) in education at all levels and in workplace staff training and development – not least amongst library staff themselves.
- Investigate funding of dedicated IL post(s) at a national level.
- Investigate the applicability to Ireland of a National IL frameworks' similar to those in Scotland and Wales.
- Support further formal research into IL activities under the auspices of the LAI and amongst individuals or dedicated sectoral groups.
- Host a major IL conference.
- Adopt and publicize the new IL logo developed by IFLA.

⁹ See more information at <http://www.gcu.ac.uk/ils/index.html>

¹⁰ See more information at <http://library.wales.org/information-literacy/national-information-literacy-framework/>

Next

In short, the advancement of a national strategy and approach for information literacy could result in a number of constructive developments. This could include a heightening of awareness around the value of IL outside of libraries. The value and potential social capital in information literacy and associated skills and competencies is underrated and as Webber & McGuinness (2007) point out, is subsumed within a broader information society agenda. A national strategy hand in hand with implementation (short-term and medium-term initially) of some of the working groups recommendations could elevate IL to a higher and more effective stage. Positive effects could result in international recognition of Irish practitioners IL activities, more collaboration and co-operation amongst Irish (and potentially) international libraries, higher quality IL and re-usable learning objects, consolidation of ad hoc and disjointed programmes and a more established and targeted lobby to ensure the inclusion of IL at appropriate governmental policy levels. The necessity for information literacy across so many facets of citizenship, education and society continues unabated. The challenge and ability to make *sense* of the vast quantities of information available to us through so many media, formats and technologies and across so many types of literacy has been captured by various Horizon Reports over the past number of years.

“skills of critical thinking, research and evaluation are increasingly required to make sense of the world”
(Horizon Report, 2007, p.4)

“sense-making and the ability to assess the credibility of information are paramount”
(Horizon Report, 2010, p.3)

“the abundance of resources and relationships made easily accessible via the Internet is increasingly challenging us to revisit our roles as educators in sense-making, coaching, and credentialing”
(Horizon Report, 2011, p.3)

This combined with ever increasing expectations, models of learning, working and doing business in the context of fiscal difficulties surely compels us to place information literacy at the centre of our sense making processes. The work of the Irish Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL) represents small but not insignificant initial steps in working towards a more formal integrated strategy for IL in Ireland. At the very least it has initiated a discussion and a conversation around IL that prior to the formation of the group was on uncertain ground. WGIL cannot stress enough the importance of the role the national library association must play in maintaining and raising the profile of IL amongst the *internal* library sectors and the *external* wider community. Further, swift action and implementation of the groups' recommendations including the formation of a national expert advisory group on IL are required to keep momentum alive. It is therefore equally heartening and important that the LAI Executive Board (2011) recently undertook to continue to edge towards a national policy in forming a new Task Force on Information Literacy (TFIL), representing a new phase in IL policy and committing to action'ing and achieving the goals and recommendations of the final report of working group on information literacy.

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