



# Information Literacy and Beyond: Some issues in Policy and Practice

## Background

This is an interim account of findings from a project being undertaken by the University of London's Centre for Distance Education (CDE). The project, 'Integrating Information Literacy', aims successfully to integrate Information Literacy (IL) skills into a wide range of international, including undergraduate, programmes.

The current paper uses the umbrella term 'Information Capabilities', to avoid issues in the definition of Information Literacy. 'Critical Information Fluency' is used as to describe an emergent account of necessary high-level information capabilities.

## Aims

In a little more detail, the 'Integrating Information Literacy' project aims to:

- Identify current policy and good practice in the development of information literacy across the curriculum in University of London Programmes.
- Support the integration of IL skills into curricula at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels, through working with Programme Teams and delivering writing workshop(s) for Programme Teams to facilitate the integration of IL skills.
- Establish evaluation processes and measures of the effectiveness / impact of IL skills instruction in University of London Programmes.

Accounts of good IL practice in University of London Worldwide (UoLW) programmes are being collected.

## Sponsorship and Work

Sponsors: Dr Mary Stiasny, PVC (International) and Dr Sandra Tury, AD, UoLW Library Services.  
Project staff: CDE Fellows Dr David Baume and Dr Benedetta Cappellini.

Literature on IL has been studied. Surveys and interviews have been undertaken with providers of information Services, and with UoLW Course Leaders. UoLW Course Leaders have also been supported on course design, by the project and by UoLW Library Services.

The current project concludes with reports and a CDE event to further raise awareness of IL needs.

## Interim conclusions and recommendations

### 1 Levels of Information capability

It may be useful to distinguish between two main levels of information capability:

- Basic, which involves accessing and using various reference sources, e.g. library databases, print sources and freely available internet sources; and
- Advanced, which additionally involves, as a normal part of academic and professional practice, identifying and locating appropriate information sources in the most efficient manner. This includes, but is not limited to, selecting and using keywords or search terms; critically evaluating the sources for authority, currency and relevance to the task at hand; and justifying decisions about information.

Both Basic and Advanced information capabilities also involve using and processing information in scholarly and professional ways, and communicating information to the intended audiences, including proper referencing.

## 2 Necessary information capabilities

Information Literacy, as currently often defined and practised, is arguably inadequate to meet the needs of our graduates even when they graduate, let alone for 50 or 70 or more years of work and life. In this respect we may be severely under-ambitious for our graduates. It would be difficult to overestimate the academic, professional and personal importance of high-level information capabilities. Some reasons:

- The amount of information in the world may currently be doubling every two or so years, acknowledging serious difficulties of both defining and measuring information.
- This information is of widely varying quality, which strengthens further the need to be a critical and selective user of information. We all need to be, to some extent at least, our own referees, of sources and of information.
- Growing proportions of what the student knows when they graduate become variously wrong and irrelevant each year after graduation. So students need to be critical of what they already know, as well as of new information and ideas.

This gap between students' needs for information capability and the information capabilities that we currently teach them is particularly evident at undergraduate level. This typically concentrates on what we have called Basic IL – colloquially, studying within the box, sometimes literally studying the contents of a box. Programmes may not consistently or systematically teach or assess even Basic IL, which may be contributing to student non-completion or failure.

We see more advanced work on information literacy / critical information fluency in project and dissertation modules, although these are few in University of London Worldwide programmes<sup>1</sup>. Some more advanced IL is seen in postgraduate programmes, where explicit attention to IL is leading to greater student achievement, especially in dissertations.

Students make limited use of the UoLW library. Work is underway to increase use.

## 3 Benchmarks and standards

High levels of information capability are explicit in QAA subject benchmarks, for example for Masters degrees in Business and Management: "Using information and knowledge effectively in order to abstract meaning from information and to share knowledge..." They are strongly implicit at undergraduate level: "An appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge" and "The ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline)."

## 4 A dilemma

There is a dilemma. We want to be helpful to our students. To be helpful, we typically give them ready access; including references, hyperlinks, PDFs or printed copies; to some, most or even all of the required reading, indeed also sometimes to the optional reading.

This is particularly understandable in distance education, where we cannot make the same assumptions about access to a physical library as we can with institution-based students.

But in doing this, we simultaneously enable them in the short term, and fail to enable them to develop the necessary more advanced information capabilities suggested earlier.

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of project and dissertation modules at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level also merits attention. Graduates surely need to be capable independent learners as well as having current disciplinary knowledge.

## 5 **Libraries and Information Literacy**

Libraries have taken an important lead on IL. However, information literacy / fluency is much bigger than just a library issue, even when we properly consider libraries as services and as curating portals rather than as collections. Information is pretty much everywhere.

## 6 **Developing and Embedding IL**

Students can be helped to develop and internalize the capability and commitment to define what information they need, identify appropriate sources, critically review what they find, and of course use and reference it appropriately. These capabilities and commitments can be taught, learned and assessed. Information literacy / critical information fluency can be embedded explicitly in curriculum, in learning outcomes, in pedagogy, and also of course in assessment.

Information literacy / critical information fluency take different forms in each discipline. They are a necessary part of disciplinary and professional practice.

There is a case for teaching information skills when they are needed, not (just) at induction.

## 7 **Course Design and information Literacy**

There is an intimate connection between the design and operation of courses and the associated requirements for student Information Literacy. (in each of these cases, indeed in all conceivable cases, critical use and proper referencing of information are also required.)

Three examples:

1. If complete PDFs or printed matter are provided, then few or no selection or search skills are needed, other of course than within the material.
2. If links are provided, then references should also be provided, in case of broken links, and students need the basic ability to locate and obtain sources from references.
3. By contrast, if no guidance to sources is provided beyond the assignment itself, then students will need advanced skills of constructing, implementing, reviewing and revising searches.

This may suggest that we should start with the course as designed, and deduce from the course the information capabilities that are required.

However, if the arguments in section 2, on necessary information capabilities, are accepted, then the picture changes. Courses and assignments also need to be designed to require and develop steadily more advanced information capabilities in students. In general, this shift will enrich the course and the learning.

## 8 **IL, policy, strategy and collaboration**

Without institutional policy and strategy that requires information literacy / critical information fluency; perhaps as a graduate attribute; then provision will remain partial, and current local initiatives by enthusiasts are unlikely to come together to achieve the necessary synergies.

Information Literacy is part of institutional policy in many Higher Education Institutions.

Collaboration between academic leaders and information specialists will increase the effectiveness of the development of Information literacy / critical information fluency.

As ever, top-down (policy), bottom-up and middle-out (both achieved through sharing of practice) are required for maximum benefit.

## 9 **What do we mean by “information” in our disciplines?**

“Information” can take any form from raw data to accounts of sophisticated, complex, high level understanding, theories and models. It can include images and artefacts, as well as text and numbers. And it can doubtless also take many other forms. Different kinds of information are likely to require different kinds of capabilities.

## 10 Grey literature

There is a lot of valuable information in the grey literature. And a lot that is less valuable. Essential real-world information capabilities therefore include the ability to judge the quality and the relevance of everything we come across that might be of use.

We each need to be our own referee.

## 11 Sipping from the waterfall



Some 97 million items are in or accessible through the University of London Worldwide Library.

The amount of knowledge / information may be doubling every two or so years.

The half-life of (true) (useful) knowledge is reducing, quickly.

A further essential information capability is sipping from the waterfall without drowning.

## 12 Critical Information Fluency – an emergent account

“I am Critically Information Fluent, in that I:

1. Identify what information I need;
2. Identify why (and when?) I need it;
3. Find it efficiently;
4. Evaluate it rigorously according to explicit and appropriate criteria;
5. Use / process it for my intended academic / professional purpose(s), and
6. Communicate it to the intended audience(s) clearly, accurately, appropriately and ethically.
7. Also, I can justify my decisions and actions about information at each stage.”

This still offers a linear account. It does not capture the dynamic and highly interactive nature of real information searches. It does not include the vast range of types of search, from “I know exactly what I’m looking for” through to, perhaps, “I have this vague memory...” and “I wonder if there’s anything out there that may help me with this?” Work on a definition continues.

### Further work

Further work is being planned on policy development and implementation in relation to information capabilities, and on relations between information literacy and other literacies.

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