

**SETTING A STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR INFORMATION LITERACY AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

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ABSTRACT

The University of Western Australia recognises that information literacy is a key graduate attribute that has lasting value beyond university. This paper describes the steps taken by UWA Library to develop a strategic direction for information literacy so that all students have the opportunity to graduate with lifelong learning skills.

INTRODUCTION

UWA Library is comprised of eight Subject Libraries which are located on the University of Western Australia campus and are delivery points for Library Services to students and staff. Each Library has a range of information literacy programmes but there has not been a Library-wide, overarching strategy to address important issues such as the role of information literacy in new learning environments; the impact of new technologies on the delivery of information literacy; and how UWA Library can deliver sustainable, efficient and effective information literacy programmes now and into the future.

To address these issues and develop a strategic direction for information literacy at UWA, the Library chose a consultative approach and invited reference librarians and the wider library community to provide input. To begin the process reference librarians took part in a discussion forum. Following this a small working group was formed to examine the literature, facilitate the consultation process, and write a discussion paper which would inform a strategic directions statement.

The *Information Literacy Strategic Directions Statement* provides the Library with a scaffold from which to develop and deliver a range of programmes, in collaboration with academic staff, so that UWA graduates continue to develop the information literacy skills and knowledge needed to support academic excellence and lifelong learning.

This paper describes the steps taken to identify the guiding principles for information literacy at UWA, the rationale that lies behind those principles, and how the Library can adopt these strategies and move forward.

DISCUSSION

The forum

A forum for librarians who were involved in planning and delivering information literacy was held in May 2007. Focus questions stimulated discussion on topics such as current programmes and their sustainability, current barriers to the most effective delivery of information literacy, the development of generic modules to teach information literacy skills, and determining what other technologies could be used. The forum enabled librarians directly involved in preparing and delivering information literacy to contribute ideas and express their views. This consultation at the 'grass roots' level allowed us to talk about what was working and what was not, and to draw on our 'real life' experiences to contribute to the development of guidelines for the future.

Discussion at the forum revealed that individual subject libraries at UWA were developing and delivering some excellent information literacy programmes, but the absence of a Library-wide approach meant we were not able to harness and take full advantage of that knowledge and experience.

Some key points determined at the forum were:

- The Library's information literacy programme must reflect a Library-wide strategy, be responsive to student needs, and be developed in close collaboration with academics.
- Sustainable programmes are essential for efficient, effective and equitable delivery to all students. Despite our efforts in information literacy it is evident that we are not reaching some groups of students.
- Barriers to the most effective delivery of information literacy were seen as the fragmented nature of the current model; lack of staff; lack of expertise in teaching skills and using new technologies; and too busy to 'step back' and analyse what we are doing so that we can develop better strategies.

Following on from the forum, a representative working group of six reference librarians, including the author, was formed. Our brief was to examine the relevant literature, nationally and internationally; review the collated discussion from the forum; and draft a discussion paper outlining an appropriate strategic approach for information literacy at UWA. Further consultation with the wider Library community was to be sought and feedback incorporated into the paper.

How are others delivering information literacy?

At institutional level, most universities that have clearly defined strategies use national information literacy standards and stated university graduate attributes to underpin their information literacy strategies, but they vary greatly in their delivery model, programme structure, and staffing model.

In the UK, the University of Huddersfield's Teaching and Learning Committee agreed that the University develop an Information Literacy Strategy to ensure that students acquire a range of relevant information literacy skills which are vital for their University career, future working life, and lifelong learning. (University of Huddersfield, 2004) Although instigated by the Library, the strategy was developed in partnership with academic staff and academic skills tutors. University College of London (UCL) takes a more pragmatic approach by identifying information skill sets from beginning to advanced and outlining how the Library will deliver skills training to each level within each skill set. (Falconer, 2006)

In the United States, the Association of College and Research Libraries, (ACRL) have developed guidelines to define the elements of best practice in information literacy programming for the higher education community and these guidelines have been adapted worldwide as 'best practice'. (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2003)

In Australia, universities use the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIL) *Framework* and Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) *Standards* to develop information literacy programmes. (Bundy, 2004) Their information literacy strategies range from broad statements to detailed documents that outline specific behaviours and learning outcomes. A search of the web sites of Queensland University of Technology (QUT), University of Southern Queensland (USQ), La Trobe University, Griffith University and University of Wollongong revealed strong, well developed policies and strategies. (1994, p54; La Trobe

University, 2006; Queensland University of Technology, 2004; University of Southern Queensland, 2006; University of Wollongong, 2005)

In their detailed document, *Information Literacy Strategy*, USQ maps information literacy behaviours and learning outcomes to the CAUL Standards to enable the information literacy, understandings and skills of graduates to be measured. (University of Southern Queensland, 2006, p7) At QUT their Information Literacy Framework & Syllabus closely correlates to the *Australian Information Literacy Standards* and was developed as part of a University-wide information literacy initiative to facilitate the true embedding of information literacy throughout the curriculum. (Peacock, 2002, p2-3) Like other Australian universities, UWA has adopted the CAUL Standards to develop both embedded and stand-alone information literacy programmes, but had not developed a structured Library-wide approach.

Sections of the literature discuss the effectiveness and value of information literacy and question some current practices. Fletcher (2007, p5) highlights the inequitable situation whereby large numbers of students pass through the university system with little exposure to information literacy programmes. To counter this, she suggests that services be structured and delivered in such a way that users can access them without asking, and that we concentrate our efforts on postgraduate researchers and academic staff. (Fletcher, 2007, pp6-7)

Fletcher's article certainly highlights the inequitable aspect of some of our current practices such as the face-to-face teaching of large groups of undergraduates enrolled in specific courses. We need to find ways of delivering information literacy skills to all UWA students regardless of their mode of study, their location, or their discipline. But as a research intensive university with a vision of achieving international excellence in teaching and research (University of Western Australia, 2007), we must also support the individual needs of our postgraduate researchers and academic staff.

From our review of the international and national literature it is evident that developing a strategic direction is a positive step forward. Those institutions that have articulated their information literacy goals and have strategies in place to achieve them have something tangible to build upon. At UWA we were already incorporating many of the elements of what is considered 'best practice' in information literacy, but lacked formal guidelines and a structure that could provide a coordinated path forward in an environment where it is increasingly challenging to provide equitably for all our students.

Looking at what others are doing proved very helpful but to move on we needed to assess our current roles and practices. Are we teachers, trainers or facilitators? Does it matter? What are we doing that is successful and sustainable? What are we doing that is unsustainable? How should we change our approach to provide more equitably for all our students? Our paper needed to address these key issues to frame our approach for the future.

The role of librarians in information literacy

The role of librarians in the development and delivery of information literacy programmes in universities has changed greatly in recent years. Some information literacy programmes already in place at UWA, and those described in the literature, require skills, or skill levels that many librarians do not possess, for example, a sound understanding of pedagogy. To fulfill our role in creating opportunities for lifelong learning through our information literacy initiatives, librarians need both an understanding of the underlying concepts and contexts as well as practical skills in teaching and using new and emerging technologies.

A search of the literature provided a variety of views on the role of librarians as teachers. A New Zealand study by Ivey (2003) identifies the need for librarians with teaching qualifications and experience as a resource issue. Librarians in the study, especially those employed for their skills in other areas such as subject expertise, expressed a need for more support from the library in terms of their changing role. (Ivey, 2003)

Lupton (2002) urges librarians to “...develop their self-image as one of a teacher rather than a trainer or service provider” and argues that “...the only way to facilitate information literacy as a wide educational concept rather than library centred bibliographic instruction is to embed it in the curriculum of individual subjects and entire programmes of study.” In response to Lupton, Asher (2003, p52) opposes any “merging” of the professions and argues that erasing the boundaries that keep academics and librarians separate weakens their strengths. Asher (2003) does not differentiate between bibliographic instruction and information literacy, but most of the literature describes information literacy in broader terms.

There is much to support Bridgland and Whitehead’s (2004, p54) view that adopting a strategy that requires working closely with academics, and developing programmes that can be delivered in a flexible way within an e-environment will require librarians to have a strong grounding in pedagogy, and expertise with information and communications technologies (ICT).

Subject or discipline-specific knowledge was seen by the UWA working group as important for both liaising with academics and developing programmes for students. From the student’s perspective, especially at postgraduate level, there is often the expectation that librarians will have some knowledge of their subject area. Remaining in one Subject Library for a reasonable period was suggested at the forum as the best way for librarians at UWA to acquire such knowledge and experience.

The role of librarians involved in information literacy is not only changing, it is becoming very complex as relationships with faculty and students become more important. While technological solutions are being sought to deliver some services, librarians still need to maintain and nurture their ability to teach small face-to-face groups and conduct one-on-one reference interviews. There is a strong argument that the skills we need are more than those of a trainer or facilitator. Considering that most librarians don’t graduate with some of the skills required to develop and teach information literacy programmes, any future strategy needs to support the professional development of librarians in these important areas.

Sustainability

Crucial to any information literacy programme is sustainability. Certainly the forum highlighted that some of the activities we are currently engaged in are unsustainable. A major point of discussion had been a proposal that information literacy for undergraduates be delivered primarily online. This would help ensure both sustainability and equity of access. With thousands of undergraduate students and only a handful of librarians we can only hope to reach a small number if we continue to use labour intensive face-to-face delivery methods. Furthermore, research shows that today’s undergraduates expect access to information 24/7, preferably presented through a single interface: “They expect convenient, one-stop shopping when it comes to research...”. (Gardner & Eng, 2005)

To increase sustainability, the Library has already created a Learning Resource System (LRS) to store reusable material and it envisaged that this will be used extensively in the development of information literacy programmes. The LRS allows for the sharing of learning objects and it is intended that academic staff will incorporate material from the LRS into their own teaching

materials. In the UK, Cardiff University has had a measure of success with a similar product, The Resource Bank and found it to be a useful resource that is flexible enough to be seamlessly integrated into a whole range of teaching materials and subjects. (Jackson & Mogg, 2007)

The working group found that the concept of creating reusable learning material as a means of achieving a level of sustainability to be convincing. However there were some reservations about the time and skills required to create material for the repository, and what percentage of material could be reusable without requiring any editing

To address the challenge of building sustainable information literacy programmes the University of Melbourne created a separate unit, Learning Resources Services. (Bridgland & Whitehead, 2005, p55) The unit is staffed by librarians with library instruction experience and expert ICT skills and is supported by a web team skilled in programming and instructional design. (Bridgland & Whitehead, 2005) A study by the team revealed that mode of delivery did not impact on student acquisition of knowledge and Bridgland and Whitehead cite various research to support this. (Bridgland & Whitehead, 2005, p57)

Despite the obvious efficiencies of web-based programmes there are drawbacks. They are time consuming to create and require specific technical skills. They must be maintained to a very high level, particularly if they are compulsory and/or assessable. All content and web links must be kept current and access problems minimised. Evaluation is also an essential element of such programmes but is very costly to undertake regularly and effectively.

While technology has been clearly identified as a method of creating sustainable initiatives in information literacy, it is closely tied to staff expertise. The successful implementation of many of the technological solutions will require staff who are trained appropriately. There is also the issue of who should be trained: should there be a core group, or should a separate section be established with responsibility for developing and managing web-based services?

Careful evaluation of programmes, especially those delivered online, is also essential so that we can assess in an ongoing way whether they are effective. We need to know that what we are doing contributes to students graduating with the skills necessary for participation in the workforce and wider society.

Reflecting on success: what are we doing that is working well?

A collaborative approach between academics and librarians is already a strong feature of information literacy programs at UWA. Such initiatives are proving successful at meeting students' requirements for information literacy because they are usually delivered within a specific learning context at 'point of need'. The Law, and Medical & Dental libraries have information literacy programs embedded in the curricula and work closely with faculty. The Humanities and Social Sciences Library, the Biological Sciences Library and the Business Library have compulsory online information literacy units for first year students. These units, Introductory Research and Information Skills (IRIS) are compulsory within their Faculties, self-directed and delivered online through WebCT. They are based on a strong pedagogical framework, which maps learning outcomes against standards developed by CAUL.

The effectiveness of working in partnership with academics to develop and deliver information literacy programs is well documented in the literature. Examination of an information literacy collaborative project at the University of Otago found that "... embedding information literacy skills into the course assessment improved students' information literacy skill levels." (Proctor, Wartho, & Anderson, 2005 , p166) An analysis of an embedded information literacy program at

Central Queensland University revealed that costs were similar to other information literacy initiatives and over the long term cost benefits were envisaged, with responsibility for the delivery of the information literacy component transferred to the academic staff member delivering the course. (Orr & Cribb, 2003)

Whilst some of these issues were not within the scope of the paper and raised many questions that could not be answered, they needed to be discussed so that realistic opportunities and pathways for planning future directions could be identified.

The discussion paper

Through the process of review and discussion the UWA working group reached a stage where it was ready to draft a discussion paper informed by the literature and the experiences and ideas of UWA librarians. The paper and a selection of key articles was made available to the Library-wide community and the Library Executive for comment and feedback.

Some of the key points contained in the discussion paper:

- UWA Library recognises the need for a coordinated, student-centred strategy for information literacy that supports the view that competency in using information is not only essential for success in university studies, it is also of lasting value beyond university.
- The strategic direction statement will complement the objectives and educational principles in the University's Strategic Plan and align with the UWA Library Strategic Plan.
- The Library's approach to information literacy will be a collaborative effort between library and academic staff so that information competencies are regarded as an integral part of university learning.
- There will be a focus on sustainability and the use of technology to support equitable access for all students.
- Information literacy programmes will be developed according to 'best practice' within the University, Australia and internationally.
- The Library will be proactive in the development of information literacy programmes and recognises that a range of approaches is required.
- Staff will be provided with opportunities for training and professional development to support the implementation process.

Where are we going?

The discussion paper developed from the forum was the first step in what is an ongoing process. It has foreshadowed a more prescriptive document, the *Information Literacy Strategic Directions Statement*, which provides a framework of guiding principles and strategic direction.

The guiding principles of the strategic directions statement are:

- The delivery of information literacy skills is available to all UWA students regardless of their mode of study, their location, or their discipline.
- The information literacy programme will be developed, utilised and adapted according to 'best practice' within the University, Australia and internationally.
- Information literacy activities will be sustainable.

- All information literacy training will be evaluated as part of a process of continual improvement.
- The development of the information literacy programme will be guided by the ways in which students access and use information.
- A range of approaches will be used to accommodate variations in course structure and content differences across faculties and disciplines.

From the strategic directions statement we have now identified priorities and started the implementation process. To assist implementation a table has been created that lists each principle according to its priority and links it to the CAUL *Information Literacy Guidelines* that support it. Within the table the way forward for each principle is outlined.

Priorities

The first priority will be to identify and establish 'best practice' guidelines so that all newly developed information literacy materials meet these standards. Being careful not to 'reinvent the wheel', we will look for existing guidelines that meet our needs rather than develop new guidelines.

Our second priority will be the delivery of information literacy skills to all students regardless of their mode of study. Many first year undergraduates are already provided for through the compulsory IRIS units, but there is a need to make more material available in a variety of formats such as iLectures, ipod downloads, and online learning objects so that students can incrementally build their skills throughout their undergraduate years in a flexible way that allows them to navigate backward and forward at their own pace.

At postgraduate level, survey results and the 2006 Library Review also indicate there is a need to support the flexible delivery of information literacy skills training. To address this need, a Library team who recently participated in e-learning professional development is creating online learning materials specifically designed for postgraduates. The learning objects will be stored in the LRS making them available to all UWA postgraduate students and academic staff 24/7.

CONCLUSION

The Library recognised that a coordinated and systematic approach to information literacy is essential if we are to provide for all students at UWA. It chose a consultative approach to start the process. Developing a strategic direction using this approach made it both a reflective process and a way to frame the future for information literacy at UWA.

The forum gave librarians an opportunity to contribute ideas gained through their experiences with faculty and students as well as a platform to discuss issues such as how we would acquire the skills necessary to deliver information literacy into new learning environments.

What has flowed from the discussion paper has demonstrated the importance of setting a strategic direction. From the broader aims of the working group's paper we have developed a document that provides detailed principles and points outlining the way forward.

For the working group, the process of literature review, discussion and feedback deepened our understanding of information literacy and by exploring information literacy in a broader context we learned how we can play a leading role in facilitating lifelong learning for students at UWA.

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