Information Literacy Statement of Good Practice for Staffordshire University

1. Definition
What is Information Literacy?

In its Higher Education Competency Standards for 2000 the US based Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defined information literacy as,

“an intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information—activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most important, through critical discernment and reasoning”.

According to their definition the information literate person must be,

“…able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information”¹

Information literacy is widely regarded as the key to being a successful independent learner.

For more background on definitions of information literacy and the different sets of standards used please see Appendix 1.

2. Purpose of the statement: why is Information Literacy important at Staffordshire University?
To some extent we are all engaged in information literacy and we are all committed to the principles of student-centred and life-long learning so that our students are equipped to tackle real problems and face different challenges in the future. Certain imperatives make the development of an information literacy Statement of Good Practice really relevant.

- the external impetus
  The massive increase in information available world-wide is a huge imperative. The importance of information literacy in both global political agendas and in the UK government agenda is significant.

- the external market
  The University’s approach to and support for information literacy can become, if not a unique selling point, at least a marketable reason for coming to Staffordshire University.

¹ Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education by Association of College and Research Libraries (a division of the American Library Association), January 18, 2000. These standards were endorsed by the American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Independent Colleges in February, 2004.
• **the Staffordshire University impetus**
Initiatives in e-learning, PDP, Widening Participation and Quality can be supported by greater emphasis on information literacy. The information literacy statement can work in tandem with the e-learning policy and the employability policy to enrich and deepen the student experience of learning at Staffordshire University.

• **the need to raise the profile of work already done**
A statement of good practice on information literacy can carry on from and formalize the existing work which is being done currently within the University. Some is being done independently within Faculties and some is being developed by Information Services in partnership with academic colleagues. What is needed is a customizable prospectus of learning opportunities, offered throughout the calendar, focused on needs and subject discipline, responding to the specific requirements of different modes of delivery. Information Services is well-placed to support educational technology, flexible learning and IT training in both physical and virtual environments and to work in partnership with academic colleagues to develop this approach to learning.

3. **Scope**
This statement can be used to underpin modular undergraduate courses, postgraduate courses, distance learning courses (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and SURF courses.

4. **Principles addressed**
There are 3 aspects to the integration of information literacy at Staffordshire University. Consequently, the statement we create must address these.

   (i) It must be supported at strategic level by University Executive and senior managers.
   (ii) It must ensure that Staffordshire University Information Services and academic staff from within Faculties work in partnership in achieving their target of providing support for students’ acquisition of information literacy.
   (iii) It must ensure that we are able to encourage students’ interest in becoming information literate and embed information literacy at the appropriate points in the students’ learning experience.

5. **Outcomes**
The statement of good practice should support and allow for the development of 3 strands of activity\(^2\).

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\(^2\) The statement is influenced by the work of Sheila Webber and Bill Johnston detailed in “Working towards the Information Literate University” in *Information literacy: recognising the need*, edited by Geoff Walton and Alison Pope, Chandos 2006.
i) The information literacy statement of good practice needs to become part of the University’s strategic and management landscape

- Information literacy is featured as an element within the University’s teaching and learning strategy.
- The statement should refer to and be referred to in other University strategic and learning and teaching documents and become a seamless part of the University’s fabric. All staff, especially academics and senior managers, should have an understanding of what information literacy is.
- In strategic terms information literacy should be seen as being supportive of retention, recruitment and employability. This aspect of the University’s teaching and learning strategy needs to be seen as a unique marketing point for the University.
- Validation panels should consider how information literacy is embedded within a new programme. The University’s information Statement of Good Practice which works in tandem with the University’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy should be referred to in Student Handbooks. A summary of the statement should be included in relevant module handbooks.

ii) Support academic and information professionals and a partnership approach to information literacy

The importance of the partnership between Information Services staff and academic colleagues in taking forward the information literacy initiative is crucial.

- Information literacy is embedded within the University’s new teaching and learning strategy. In order to support and develop this further we need to begin to create an academic community of practice or forum focusing on information literacy. Interested academics and information professionals could form an SU IL Community of Practice (SUILCoP) to discuss practice3. Anyone interested could belong or contribute to this and it could exist in the electronic environment via a WIKI or a blog as well as via 2 actual meetings per academic year to exchange ideas. It would give a splendid opportunity for reflective practitioners from different Faculties and Services to share experiences and ideas as well as teaching methods and learning support materials. Attracting external interest and speakers, it could also act as a focus for the outside world to signpost Staffordshire University’s commitment to information literacy.
- Within each Faculty a senior member of staff, most logically the Faculty Director for Teaching and Learning needs to become champion for the Faculty’s approach to and interaction with information literacy. The

3 A good example of this type of arena for discussion and shared practice can be found in the University of Newcastle’s Information Literacy Forum http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/infolit.php
statement and its implications need to be taken seriously in order to be successful. It should form the basis of a dynamic collaborative relationship between academic staff and information professionals.

- Information literacy needs to be seen as an integral part of the educational process rather than an incidental “training” issue. A partnership between information professionals and academic colleagues will ensure that this happens. Academics should respect information professionals’ expertise and use information professionals as consultants in areas concerning information literacy. Information professionals need to be included and involved in the development of relevant skills and information literacy sessions within courses.

- Academics and information professionals need to work together to map information literacy progression into individual courses of study, and might work together to draw up learning outcomes for each level of study. Information professionals, academics and students need to have a clear idea of their own and each others’ involvement and responsibility in the learning process.

- Information professionals need to acknowledge the need to become an integrated part of the learning and teaching community at the University. They need to ensure that they are or become reflective practitioners and that, wherever possible, they engage with opportunities to develop their teaching skills, for example, their engagement with peer observation and review or by refreshing their teaching skills on relevant courses.

- Discussion of the University statement of good practice on information literacy which supports the University’s learning, teaching and assessment strategy should be included routinely as part of a new lecturer’s induction programme. The issue should also be covered within the University’s PGCHPE and on other educational development courses taught within the University and the topic should become an expected element within an academic’s continuous professional development.

iii) The development and enhancement of students’ learning experience

Referring to the University’s information literacy statement in Student Handbooks and/or module handbooks will help to raise student awareness of what information literacy is and how it can help them both in their lives as students and afterwards in their chosen careers.

The importance of engaging student interest by doing the right thing at the appropriate time to support the acquisition of information literacy must be acknowledged. This can be achieved in several ways. Information literacy may be,

- Embedded, integrated, interstitial and subject flavoured.
- Iterative and incremental, using a “just in time” approach at properly planned points in the timetable.
- Via the Information Skills module available as a general option.
- It must cater for all learner styles including the strategic learner as well as the more earnest scholar.
• An imperative to extend teaching and learning with regard to information literacy must be created so that the process goes beyond induction. Skills touched upon in induction need to be reinforced beyond this early stage and information literacy needs to become a continuous and evolving strand in the thread of learning.

• Information literacy needs to be available in different formats; face to face, e-learning, whole group etc. with an accompanying range of deliverables.

• Students should be given the opportunity to acquire a range of information technology skills.

• Using a three year full time undergraduate course as an example, the University should make a commitment to a minimum of 9 hours contact time to support the acquisition of information literacy across a 3 year modular undergraduate course. This could be comprised as follows; Level one: induction (one hour) plus at least 2 further hours contact time over the academic year.
  Level Two: 3 hours contact time over the academic year.
  Level Three: 3 hours contact time over the academic year.

These minimums are given as a suggested guideline.

It is recognised that where information literacy support is very well embedded this may be difficult to quantify and it is not suggested that any attempt at quantification be made in such cases.

It is also recognised that for distance learners an equivalent amount of time within their study calendar will need to be set aside since contact time may not exist.

• The approach to delivery and contact time should be much more flexible. It need not be taken in one hour blocks delivered as whole group lectures. For example, one hour’s contact time could be broken down into 3 x 20 minute slots within existing lectures or workshops to ensure student awareness of databases, e-journals etc. at the most appropriate time. By doing this, the students would get more relevant information at the exact point at which it is needed and they would be better able to capitalise upon it. It should be remembered that information literacy is a process which supports learning widely and is not just centred upon the acquisition of database searching skills: this may lead to greater flexibility in integrating within the timetable and curriculum.

• Information literacy should include an awareness of the cultural, ethical, economic, legal and social issues relating to the use of information resources. In particular, it should highlight issues relating to plagiarism and its avoidance.

• It has been recognised that information literacy is an essential lifelong skill from primary to postgraduate level. As such, information literacy should be regarded as a key attribute of a Staffordshire University award holder. We should include the acquisition of information literacy within learning outcomes. The tracking of learning outcomes to match
benchmarking statements made by the QAA should have encouraged the University to focus on information literacy. Subject benchmark statements for taught undergraduate subjects outline subject specific abilities and general transferable intellectual skills which reinforce the importance of students being information literate on graduation.⁴ It is not suggested that any additional mapping work be undertaken since that already done should be sufficient.

- Information literacy should be assessed and assessed work should be credit bearing. Existing award outcomes under the heading of “enquiry” can be used to address information literacy issues. Information literacy may be assessed through the existing module assessment process. Consideration should be given to how information literacy is embedded and assessed within new modules/awards.

6. Conclusion

It is recognised that learning and teaching is a constantly developing environment. This information literacy statement of good practice will need regular review and development to ensure that it continues to be responsive to the needs of students, as well as academics and information professionals.

Alison Pope
1 December 2006

Appendix 1

1. The context
The Government White Paper, January 2003, states that:

“As well as improving vocational skills, we need to ensure that all graduates, including those who study traditional academic disciplines, have the right skills to equip them for a lifetime in a fast changing work environment.”

So it follows that, in addition to offering excellent academic courses, Staffordshire University should aim to give students the chance to gain grounding in the skills which will support them in the future, both as citizens and employees. Of all these skills, the need to be information literate is essential.

Indeed, information literacy lies at the heart of the QAA’s definition of “graduateness”. The QAA’s “Understanding qualifications: the frameworks for higher education qualifications” web page describes honours level degrees in the following way,

“Honours level

Graduates with a bachelor’s degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the graduate will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The graduate will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate effectively.

An honours graduate should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.”

Many of these requirements are closely mirrored in the development of information literacy skills and, indeed, information literacy is widely regarded as the key to being a successful independent learner.

2. Definition
What is Information Literacy?

The term information literacy has been around for some time and there are many definitions. Australia and the United States have led the way in embracing this concept. In its Higher Education Competency Standards for 2000 the US based Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defined information literacy as,

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5 The Future of Higher Education, DfES 2003
6 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Understanding qualifications: the frameworks for higher education qualifications: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/students/guides/UnderstandQuals.asp
“an intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information—activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most important, through critical discernment and reasoning”.

According to their definition the information literate person must be,

“…able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information”7

Across the world recent research across the sector has established new models which characterise the skills and attributes an information literate person should have. In America there is the ACRL model, in Australia and New Zealand the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIIL) model and, closer to home in the United Kingdom, the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) 7 pillars model and the Big Blue model created by the Joint information Systems Committee (JISC) funded “Big Blue” project8 managed jointly by Manchester Metropolitan University Library and Leeds University Library.

3. Standards and Staffordshire University’s Information Services approach

The Information Services Learning Support team at Staffordshire University has adopted the standards of the ANZIIL model and the iterative process of the Big Blue model as a means of defining and reinforcing its approach to information literacy.

In relative terms the JISC Big Blue model is a newcomer. In this model the process of becoming information literate is seen as an iterative cycle where individuals reflect, review and revise as they progress; exploiting information gathering tools to find and engage with the information they need, whether for personal or professional use, in an independent fashion.

According to Big Blue, information literate individuals engage in:

- Recognising their information need, which involves:
  - determining the nature and extent of their need
  - conferring with peers, tutors and others
  - becoming aware of the range of information resources available
  - re-evaluating the extent of information need

- Addressing their information need by:
  - determining how to address the information need
  - formulating keywords and search strategies

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7 *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* by Association of College and Research Libraries (a division of the American Library Association), January 18, 2000. These standards were endorsed by the American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Independent Colleges in February, 2004.

8 The Big Blue project: http://www.library.mmu.ac.uk/bigblue/bigblue.html
• Selecting and evaluating information sources
- retrieving the information they require, which involves:
  - interrogating a range of resources
  - selecting, retaining, reviewing and discarding information as required

- Evaluating the information critically through:
  - assessing the quality, quantity and relevance of retrieved information
  - revising search strategies and repeating as necessary
  - assessing quality of information retrieved for bias, currency, accuracy and authority

- Adapting the information required, which involves
  - interpreting information found to match information need
  - creating new knowledge for self and others
  - recognizing accumulation of new knowledge

- Organising the information to be used through
  - keeping accurate records of sources and references
  - citing references using appropriate methods
  - an awareness of the issues of copyright and plagiarism

- Communicating the information by
  - disseminating information effectively to others
  - using appropriate methods

- Reviewing the process, which involves
  - reflecting on whether the information need has been met
  - repeating the process if necessary
  - understanding the process and using it in other contexts, e.g. life-long learning

Clearly there is overlap between the two models but each has elements which are of value to the learning experience at Staffordshire. The Big Blue’s iterative process neatly reflects Kolb’s experiential adult learning cycle and for this reason should work well in a higher education environment. The ANZIIL standards provide a strong framework for academics and Information Services staff to use as the basis of developing learning support sessions integrated within the students’ curriculum.

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