
Perspectives on the information literate university

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Why stop at information literate students and academics? Why not transform the whole university? In this article we will explain our concept of an Information Literate University (ILU), and then go on to talk about how others have reacted to it. We started developing our idea of the ILU several years ago. We had been using our diagram of the 'information literate person in the changing world', signifying factors in the internal and external world that may require a person to develop his/her information literacy through the course of his/her life. Examples of these factors are: changing personal goals and priorities; the changing legal and ethical framework; and the information culture of the organisation that person works in.

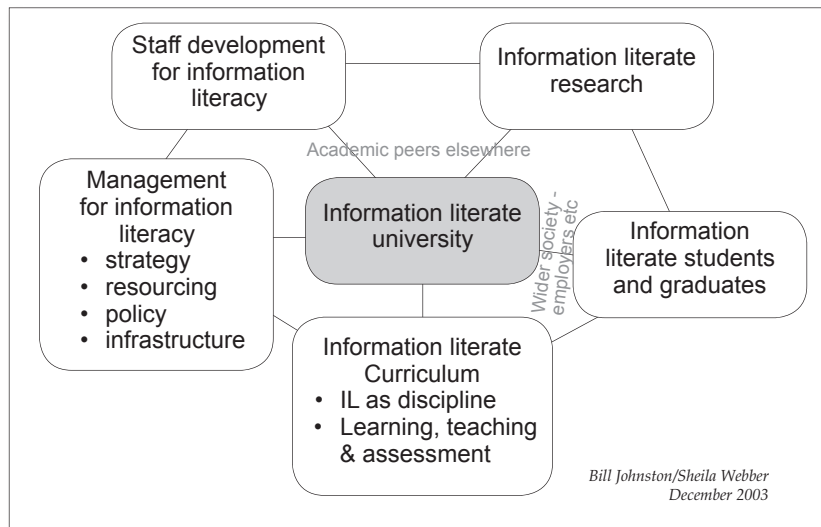
A large proportion of the UK population now pass through university, and large numbers of people work for and with universities. Although people still talk about the 'real world' as though universities are not part of it, university students' attitudes are changing. For them, university is part of a real world in which they juggle a part time job, money worries, a social life, studies, a family... As employees, we also feel that our work is part of reality (sometimes grim reality). This all led us to think what we would like from an ILU, that would support us and our students' learning.

Our vision of the ILU requires everyone in the university become information literate, whether administrators, students, researchers, librarians or academics. Management for information literacy implies rethinking internal communication and structures. It could also mean greater ability to

function as a knowledge-creating organisation and more a creative response to an increasingly complex external environment. An ILU seems a sensible response to a fast changing Information Society.

tions of information literacy (see <http://dis.shef.ac.uk/literacy/project/>). The last question which Stuart Boon, our research associate, asked in the interviews was 'What is your conception of the Information Literate University?'. Of the 80

academics he interviewed (in marketing, English, civil engineering and chemistry) only a couple blanked on the question. It gave the interviewees the opportunity to think beyond their current constraints, to sketch out a utopia (or occasionally, a dystopia) and think about what was needed to achieve change ('a bomb' was what one academic thought it would take).



Information is not quite as restricted to elite cliques as it used to be in universities, but when more and more information is piled onto a (not always well organised) web site, then it is still as easy to feel out of touch with what is going on. In an ILU, staff are aware of the importance of information management, both at a personal and an organisational level. Information is handled ethically and with cultural sensitivity. Entering into the differing worlds of the various groups within the ILU, 'information' is not just defined as formally published material. It obviously includes internally generated records, but also information gained through a wide variety of channels, including other people. In an ILU, different groups would take the trouble to understand and value different perspectives on information literacy, appropriate to different roles and priorities. It does not mean that everyone becomes a librarian.

Having talked a lot about this idea between ourselves, we started to bounce the idea off other people. We have put forward the idea of the ILU at two Society for Research in Higher Education conferences, first via a poster and then via a presentation which drew on the research mentioned below. The idea definitely captured some people's imaginations, including some senior managers. In this article, though, we will concentrate on academics' views and give a flavour of some Australian views at the end.

ACADEMICS AND THE INFORMATION LITERATE UNIVERSITY

The main way in which we have been collecting other academics' views about the ILU is through our project on UK academics' concep-

Some thought it essential: 'It would be unacceptable not to be a university that is information literate'. A variety of possible goals for the ILU emerged, for example, focusing on students: 'Just more learning. It's as simple as better, fuller, student learning experience that goes beyond the confines of the classroom and the university, and you know, better research, more informed research.' This could extend beyond the university 'to teach students better: to give them, not just more information, but more skills and more confidence they can go out and they can have a good life with.'

For others, increased access and increased skill were prime goals: 'the aim would be to make available every bit of information that is possible to have accessible'; 'to be able to use information more efficiently and accurately, of course'. To achieve this version of the ILU you need 'big enough computer labs', 'access to a lot of quality databases' and 'the best software packages.' Some people saw their current resources as inadequate, and lack of money as a barrier. However, for others change in attitude or skill level was key to achieving an ILU: 'I think all the technological side is there. The challenge would be changing the way that academics provide teaching or learning provision, or whatever you want to call it.'

Not all academics were focused on networks and traditional information. For some, the goal would be communication rather than access: 'an university that is highly information literate would provide access to information and advice to a much larger constituency than just students... one that enables those kinds of enriching process of

where people interact in many, many unplanned and unlooked-for ways...'. This communication does not just rely on a good technological infrastructure: 'you need buildings and communication methods that break down barriers and help people to bump into one another so that ideas flow.'

Some of the visions that we found most exciting talked about development and creativity:

'I don't know that I would be doing anything differently..., it would just be that I would have so much more freedom to interact and engage with others.'

It was particularly because of these kinds of response that we added in the links to the outside world which are in the ILU diagram above. An ILU might have a more meaningful and creative relationship with the information society around it – including the local society:

'I might be expecting to work, well, be more involved in the local community, being more obviously tied to a city and a place, and, know more about what is going on, a more holistic view of the university's place, and what's happening across the university. I might be able to deploy all the resources of the library rather than just the ones I have encountered so far, and I would be able to do that in a way that is both meaningful to me, to my students, and also to those from outside who might be peers.'

We see special roles in the ILU for library and information academics, namely:

- visionaries
- strategists
- change agents
- consultants
- collaborators
- leaders of research into information literacy
- innovators in IL teaching and learning initiatives
- role models
- implementers of IL curricula¹

Of course, these are also possible roles for librarians; or, even better, librarians in collaboration with library and information academics! At the conference where we first presented these roles there was a mixed reaction – some seeing this as expressing an opportunity (e.g. some lecturers from central and eastern Europe, who have been rethinking their curricula radically), others being more 'Yes, but' (subtext perhaps: we've got to con-

centrate on writing papers, etc., to get promoted – well, that's the way of the world at present).

LIBRARIANS AND THE INFORMATION LITERATE UNIVERSITY

In summer 2004 we ran a workshop in Yeppoon, Australia at the International Lifelong Learning conference at which we presented our ideas about the ILU to about twenty Australian librarians, and they worked on different aspects of the idea in groups. There is an account of the session, and some (rather bad!) photos of the posters they produced on our weblog at <http://ciquest.shef.ac.uk/infolit/archives/000351.html> (this page also has a link to our powerpoint). They did some interesting work on key stakeholder groups in the ILU: academic-related staff, academic staff, senior officers and students. As an example, the academic staff (as stakeholders in the ILU) poster reads:

- *'Outward looking:* breaking down disciplinary boundaries; share knowledge and expertise more widely; work with community
- *'Innovation: cutting edge* practice in teaching & learning and in research; constant renewal and review of trends and issues; risk taking
- *'Communication:* collaboration, strengthened relationships; teamwork; work practice could be more open
- *'Learning:* student-centred
- *'Wisdom:* evidence-based practice; reflective practice; teachers would model learning
- *'Barriers [to all the above]* fear; time; reward/tenure structure; big picture e.g. government's perceptions of a university's role.'

THE FUTURE?

Do you find this vision – or one of these visions – of an ILU attractive? Do you think that you are already in an ILU? We don't think there are many (any?) around at the moment... We would be interested to hear others' thoughts on whether a university can really be information literate, what the goals for such a university might be, and how we could achieve them.

NOTES

1. B. Johnston and S. Webber. 'The role of LIS faculty in the information literate university: taking over the academy?' *New library world*, 105 (1/2), 2004, pp12-20.