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The Irish 'Working Group on Information Literacy' — Edging towards a national policy

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Abstract The authors of this paper provide an overview of the activities of the Irish Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL) and its role in advancing a national policy for information literacy in the Republic of Ireland.

The study focuses on the work of the group during its lifetime including the various activities, marketing and advocacy initiatives and some of the challenges and issues the group faced, in particular, the diversity of the Irish library and information sector and the lack of an integrated approach for information literacy development.

The study presents the findings of the report produced by WGIL entitled Library Association of Ireland: Working Group on Information Literacy: Review of Cross-Sector Activity 2006–2008 and Initial Recommendations for Further Action which reviewed best practices and information literacy activities in the various LIS sectors in the Republic of Ireland during a two-year period. The key recommendation of this report is for the leadership of the Library Association of Ireland to develop a national information literacy strategy that advocates for the importance of information literacy as a lifelong and transferable skill.
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Background

From the early to the mid part of this decade, information literacy (IL) has been 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 in *Library Trends*, 2002; Virkus in *Information Research*, 2003; Johnson in *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 (2005) in published a special issue on 'Worldwide Perspectives on Information Literacy and IT

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Literacy,' with a guest editorial by Joint and Wallis (2005, pp. 213–217) on the role of national library and information associations in promoting information literacy in their respective countries. Internationally, IFLA and UNESCO Horton (2008) 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 was to "urge governments and intergovernmental organisations to pursue policies and programmes to support information Literacy and lifelong learning" (Garner, 2005, p. 4).

The Society of College, National, and University Libraries (SCONUL) Seven Pillars of Information Literacy Model were originally presented in 1999 in 'Information Skills for Higher Education' (SCONUL, 1999), were re-designed in 2004 (SCONUL, 2007), and were updated most recently in 2011 (SCONUL, 2011). The frequently cited and quintessential view of IL as promulgated by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) was 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 the Academic and National Library Training Co-operative (ANTC).[3] This mirrored developments in the UK in 2005 when a newly dedicated Information Literacy group was formed under the Community Services Group[4] in Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and the first of a now well-established and important international conference, the 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 annual general meeting, the Executive Board of the Library Association of Ireland[5] (LAI), in recognising the importance of IL in independent learning and as a series of transferable skills, proposed and subsequently passed the following motion:

> '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, 2005).

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 to further its 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 eight other members from the various library sectors. As one might expect, there was an academic library bias in the membership as most IL activity centred on 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" (p.18). This however, did not detract from the work of the group and, upon completion, there were representatives not just from academic, but from health, special, school, 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 contributions from all sectors in the Irish library community (see Fig. 1). Whilst recognising that some sectors were more advanced than others in terms of IL provision and diverse approaches to achieving information literacy amongst constituent users groups, the group was in 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.

Establishing role and terms of reference

Role

- Adopt and recommend a standard for information literacy.

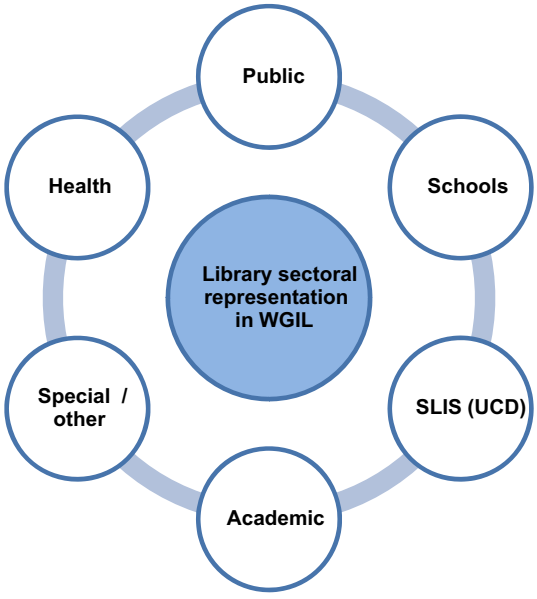

Figure 1 Sectoral representation.

[3] ANTLC — 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/.

[4] 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.

[5] Library Association of Ireland http://www.libraryassociation.ie/.

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