

# The Enquiring Minds Project at Staffordshire University: Integrating Information Literacy into the Curriculum and Assessment

**Abstract:** Alison Pope, Keith Puttick and Geoff Walton have been involved in the information literacy aspects of a project to help students improve their research skills and they report on this and the wider current debates on information literacy with an emphasis throughout on legal research skills.

**Keywords:** Information literacy; academic law libraries; legal research

## Introduction

The Enquiring Minds (EMs) project at Staffordshire University has been looking at ways to give students better opportunities to deploy their research skills and raise the quality of outputs. In this article, the three members of the EMs team most closely associated with Information Literacy (IL) aspects of the EM's project, discuss ways of bringing IL into law programmes, including learning outcomes and assessment of outcomes. In more general terms, they also consider how their work chimes with current debates and the world-wide, developing IL agenda.

## Information literacy and “competency standards”

The US Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has provided this useful definition of information literacy in the context of its work on IL standards:

“Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” adding that “An information literate individual is able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base

- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally”.

ACRL's Board of Directors' IL “competency standards” were endorsed by the American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Independent Colleges. As ACRL note in their commentary, the standards provide a framework for assessment of students, helping to

“sensitise them to the need to develop a meta-cognitive approach to learning, making them conscious of the explicit actions required for gathering, analyzing, and using information”

(“Use of the Standards” in *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, 2000). Since then, the standards have been adapted and deployed in different ways in American law schools, including assessment of research and research related skills.

IL principles and standards were given fresh impetus by a Presidential Proclamation by President Barack Obama which exhorts universities and other institutions of learning to “adjust to the new realities of the Information Age”. It observes that:

“Every day we are inundated with vast amounts of information...Rather than merely possessing data we must learn the skills necessary to acquire, collate, and evaluate information... Our nation's educators and institutions of learning must be aware of – and adjust to – these new realities...”  
It went on:

“In addition to the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, it is equally important that our students are given the tools required to take advantage of the information available to them. The ability to seek, find, and decipher information can be applied to countless life decisions, whether financial, medical, educational, or technical.”

The Proclamation declared October 2009 to be National Information Literacy Awareness month in the USA.

This important development in the USA echoes the work being done by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in the area of media and literacy; and its support for two high level statements on IL, namely the *Prague Declaration: Towards an Information Literate Society* (2003); and the Alexandria Proclamation 2005. The Alexandria High Level Colloquium had invited 30 participants representing six major geographic regions to look at the opportunities to reach the goal of “empowering citizens across the globe to be information literate”.

In the light of such developments, what can and should universities and colleges here be doing to implement IL principles and produce improvements in the quality of student researchers’ outputs?

### From theory to practice: IL in UK universities

Like other UK universities and some of our UK and overseas EMs partners, Staffordshire University has started to introduce IL principles and specific standards into the curriculum. As part of the project’s remit, closer attention is also being paid to specific ways of improving the quality of outputs. It is still early days but evaluations of pilots, including the original pilot (*People, Diversity & Work*: a research project undertaken in 2007 by a team of five third year Law, Advice Studies, and Broadcast Journalism students), suggest that if standards are to be raised, IL elements need to be factored into all aspects of research task design, including assessment of learning outcomes. The authors have discussed this, the linked issues of technology literacy and what the Committee of Inquiry into the Impact on Higher Education of Students’ Widespread Use of Web 2.0 Technologies referred to as the problem of “casual and insufficiently critical attitude to information”) in their paper given at the Association of Law Teachers Annual Conference 2010.

### Integrating IL into HE programmes

As a result of changes to Staffordshire University’s statement on award outcomes which, as in most universities,

are generally aligned to National Quality Framework (NQF) Level Descriptors, expectations are higher than ever. For honours/Level 3 students, the university’s expectation is that information literacy should be explicitly built into outcomes – as made clear in the university’s *Typology of Award Outcomes & Indicative Descriptions of Levels*. In the context of a Learning and Teaching Fellowship project, Staffordshire University began to explore the viability of taking a strategic approach to the integration of information literacy within the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Between 2005 and 2009 Alison Pope worked alongside academic colleagues to seek to integrate information literacy into the student curriculum. In the process of attempting to infiltrate the curriculum in this way the University’s Information Literacy Statement of Good Practice was created and formally approved in January 2007 and, supporting this document, in September 2007 the University approved a revision of the learning outcome “enquiry” so that it encompassed a statement requiring students working at undergraduate level to embrace information literacy. Whenever the enquiry learning outcome featured within a module descriptor students were now to be asked to,

“Deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry and initiate and carry out projects within (the field of study). **Evaluate use of information literacy, including the ethical use of information in (the field of study).”**

One of the first occasions on which this revised learning outcome was used was in the re-design of the Law undergraduate award’s SKILLS module and this development was discussed by Alison Pope in the Winter 2009 issue of *Legal Information Management* (q.v.). The really significant aspect of this new link to the strategic framework is that wherever the “enquiry” learning outcome is linked to a module, information literacy work must now be assessed. In their paper on the defining factors of an information literate university (ILLU) Webber and Johnston (2006) say that information literacy should be regarded by that university as a graduate attribute and assessed by credit bearing work. All too often it might be too easy to say that information literacy based work is completed in the context of a module, but this link to the outcome makes the assessment requirement unavoidable.

For related skills like Analysis and Communication the standards are equally demanding, and map on to formal Quality Assurance Agency requirements. Among other things, these stipulate that Bachelor’s degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated

“a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of

a discipline... an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline... to communicate information, ideas, problems..."

The step change that the incorporation of information literacy represents in this area of skills has been explained by Alison Pope and Geoff Walton (Walton and Pope 2006) in the following way:

'Information Literacy is part of a much bigger picture, part of a jigsaw puzzle which includes other literacies (including academic, media and digital)'.

### IL in task design and "guidance"

At around the same time that the university's strategic information literacy strategy was evolving, Geoff Walton and Keith Puttick, working in different areas of the university's programmes, began pilot studies to look at ways of integrating information literacy into the curriculum and evaluating some of the new approaches being trialled. In the Law area, for example, a number of lecturers in the EMs project team started to recognise the advantages to be gained by flagging up IL-related expectations and particularly in the task-setting stages of skills development work.

This has been relevant to the way our students are helped to prepare for dissertations, and the longer, more demanding kinds of research tasks, especially those longer types of project work that students undertake in their final year at Level 3/H Level. We have been developing approaches to preparing such students more carefully in the lead-up to starting work on such projects – a feature of our recently developed twelve week Use of Legal Sources & Research Skills module. A central feature of this module has been the collaboration between the lecturer leading the module and the Senior Subject and Learning Support Librarian in jointly running the workshops, and in preparing students to undertake project work. Before production by students of formally assessed research project proposals and the setting of research questions and hypotheses, we encourage them to become more familiar with their chosen subject area, to identify related sources and to reflect on matters such as the wider policy context in which the law in that area has and is evolving. As the guidance given to them makes clear, this may well necessitate enquiry that crosses into disciplines other than law. In developing this part of the module's assessments, a lead was provided by ACRL IL Standard One. Key performance indicators linked to the standard include the need for students to explore general information sources and increase familiarity with the topic.

### IT, dialogic approaches and skills development

In the Association of Law Teachers conference paper we referred to other approaches we have been taking in EMs project work, some of which link to discourses about dialogic approaches as a key element in enquiry-based learning. In particular, Geoff Walton has highlighted the value of dialogic approaches to teaching and research project work, including the development of online discourse, collaborative work and social network learning, all areas in which he has researched and published widely.<sup>1</sup> He has found that the higher cognitive skills as identified by Bloom et al<sup>2</sup> of analysis, synthesis and evaluation are enabled in learners when they have meaningful opportunities to discuss a topic and exchange ideas online. Using the technique of the 'pedagogy of the question',<sup>3</sup> tutors give students questions to answer, with accompanying resources, rather than simply transferring knowledge. For example, students were asked to discuss and agree upon what important features should be present in a good quality web site. Students typed out their thoughts and posted them online for all to see. Other students then commented and through this discourse a set of agreed meanings regarding evaluation of web based information emerged. The student reaction to this type of learning was very positive and they found the experience useful. A typical student reaction was as follows:

"Somebody commenting on your evaluation could possibly highlight things that you overlooked obviously you always think your own work is perfect, sometimes it's a bit of an eye opener when somebody says you should have done this, gets you thinking about everything"

Such approaches are helpful in promoting genuine autonomy. Furthermore, students are treated (and become) active participants in the learning process, shaping their own new knowledge, rather than being empty vessels to be filled.

### Conclusions

By including information literacy in the curriculum and assessment regimes and delivering it in an active, learning-by-doing way, students are more likely to change their approach to research, and research behaviour, whether they are working independently, or as part of a project group. In deploying their skills effectively, the hope is that they will also be making better, more carefully considered judgements about the information they find, and how they will use it. The introduction of IL into programmes has the potential to help students gain new knowledge and, in line with their perception of an information literate individual, will enable them to engage in "higher order thinking" which is to comprehend, analyse, apply,

synthesise and evaluate that knowledge in the ways described by Bloom et al.

The EMs project and other work being done across the University marks the beginnings of an attempt to get

lecturers and librarians to work together in preparing students for a world flooded with information. To help students become confident in navigating the information landscape must be a common goal.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>For example, Hepworth, M. and Walton, G. (2009) *Teaching Information Literacy for Inquiry-based Learning* (Oxford: Chandos); Walton, G., Barker, J., Hepworth, M., and Stephens, D. (2007) 'Facilitating Information Literacy Teaching and Learning and Exercise Module by means of Collaborative Online and Reflective Learning' in Andretta, S. (ed.) *Change and Challenge: Information Literacy for the 21st Century*. (Adelaide: Auslib Press); Walton, G., Barker, J., Hepworth, M. and Stephens, D. (2007) 'Using Online Collaborative Learning to Enhance Information Literacy Delivery in a Level 1 Module: An Evaluation', *Journal of Information Literacy*, 1 (1), pp 13–30; and Walton, G. (2010, forthcoming) 'From Online Discourse to Online Social Networking, the E-learning Holy Grail?' in Parkes, D. and Walton, G. (eds) *Web 2.0 and Libraries: Impacts, Technologies and Trends* (Oxford: Chandos).

<sup>2</sup>Bloom, B.S, Engelhart, D, Furst, E.J., Krathwohl, D.A. and Hill, W.H. (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals: handbook 1: cognitive domain* (New York: David McKay Company Inc).

<sup>3</sup>Andretta, S. (2006) 'Information Literacy: The New "Pedagogy of the Question"' in G. Walton and A. Pope (eds), *Information Literacy: Recognising the Need* (Oxford: Chandos, 2006).

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National Information Literacy Awareness Month (Presidential Proclamation, White House October 1 2009):

[http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/presidential-proclamation-national-information-literacy-awareness-month/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/presidential-proclamation-national-information-literacy-awareness-month/)

*Information & Media Literacy* (UNESCO, Dec 2009): [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=15886&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15886&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

The Prague Declaration - "Towards an Information Literate Society". Information Literacy Meeting of Experts, Prague, Czech Republic (20-23 September 2003): [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=19636&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=19636&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

The Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning, Bibliotheca Alexandrina (6-9 November 2005).

Among other things, this called for inclusion of information literacy in initial and continuing education throughout key economic sectors, government policy making and administration; and recognition of IL as a key element in accreditation of education and training programmes. <http://archive.ifla.org/III/wsis/BeaconInfSoc.html>

*Typology of Award Outcomes & Indicative Descriptions of Levels* (Staffordshire University, 2008), Table 1. Students must have the ability to "Deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry and initiate and carry out projects within Law (as their field of study) – and use and evaluate use of Information Literacy, including the ethical use of information";

Full title: 'Enquiring Minds: Strategies for the Design and Use of Enquiry Tasks that Promote the Law Teaching-Research Nexus, Cross-Disciplinary and Comparative Law Studies, and Effective Deployment and Assessment of Students' Enquiry Skills at Level 3/H Level. The project was preceded by a pilot called *People, Diversity & Work* - a research project undertaken in 2007 by a team of five 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Law, Advice Studies, and Broadcast Journalism students commissioned by the organisers of the *Empowerment, Work & Welfare* conference in November 2007 (and assisted by the TUC, Department of Business and Enterprise, Institute of Employment Rights, Disability Alliance, and East London Mosque). The project provided a 'youth perspective' on the empowerment, employment, and retention policies being developed by the government at the time, and debated by the conference

Chris Harrison, Alison Pope, Keith Puttick & Geoff Walton *Enquiring Minds & Information Literacy: Infiltrating the Curriculum and Challenging the Assessment Agenda*: Association of Law Teachers' 2010 Annual Conference *Legal Education: Making the Difference* (29-31 March 2010, Clare College Cambridge accessible at: [http://www.staffs.ac.uk/research/research\\_informed\\_teaching/current\\_projects/#keith](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/research/research_informed_teaching/current_projects/#keith)

Committee of Inquiry into the Impact on Higher Education of Students' Widespread Use of Web 2.0 Technologies: Final Report & Conclusions <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/generalpublications/2009/heweb2.aspx>

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## Biographies

**Alison Pope** is Library and Information Services Manager and supports the Schools of Law and Business at Staffordshire University Law School. As a Learning and Teaching Fellow at the University 2005-2009, Alison was involved in integrating information literacy into the University's Learning and Teaching strategy. She has since been working on initiatives to integrate information literacy elements into law and other university programmes and projects such as Enquiring Minds (EMs). She was co-editor (with Geoff Walton) of *Information Literacy: Recognising the Need* (Oxford: Chandos, 2006) and other IL work. With Geoff Walton she is co-editing *Information Literacy: Infiltrating the Curriculum, Challenging Minds* (Oxford: Chandos, forthcoming later in 2010).

**Keith Puttick** lectures in employment, social welfare law and family welfare aspects of migration at SULLS. He is a co-author of *Employment Rights; Civil Appeals* (ed. Sir Michael Burton: Foreword Lord Woolf); *Butterworths Family Law/SFLS* (ed. John Fotheringham); and *The Challenge of Asylum to Legal Systems* (ed. Prakash Shah).

**Geoff Walton** is Academic Skills Tutor Librarian and Research Informed Teaching (RiT) Project Co-ordinator at Staffordshire University. His specific subject responsibilities are for Psychology and Sport & Exercise Science. He recently completed a PhD which analysed the development of a blended approach (a mix of face-to-face and online pedagogical methods) for delivering information literacy to first year undergraduates. Geoff is co-author (with Mark Hepworth) of *Teaching Information Literacy for Inquiry-based Learning*. He is also winner of the award - SLA Europe information Professional 2010.

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# Law Firm Legal Research – What Trainees Need to Know

**Abstract:** At large City firm Herbert Smith, the legal research training programme for trainee solicitors is taken very seriously and includes a compulsory training course in their first two weeks, followed by research exercises and further courses which have been carefully designed in association with the partners to ensure that trainees qualify with excellent legal research skills.

**Keywords:** law firms; legal research; trainee solicitors

## Introduction

Herbert Smith, in common with most law firms, has a rigorous selection procedure for its trainees. All are graduates who have performed to a high standard throughout their degree course. At the selection stage they are tested both in writing and verbally at interview on their ability to solve problems, express themselves clearly and commercial awareness. Why then, do we consider it necessary to give these individuals further training on research skills?



Caroline Tuckwell

The answer is simple. The background of the students, both at university and subsequently at law school, does not adequately equip the majority of them to tackle a piece of research in the commercial context. Whilst it is dangerous to over-generalise, at the degree stage the students are working at a more theoretical and academic level, where the main purpose of the assignment is to test their ability to assimilate information from a variety of sources and to produce a well-argued and structured answer to the