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Information literacy skills in Year 14 pupils - are they ready for third level study?

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1. Background

The researcher conducted this study for her MSc in Library and Information Management. The researcher is a school librarian employed by a local Education and Library Board in Northern Ireland, in a large all-girls grammar school. The school library is busy and well used by both pupils and staff. The library is particularly well used as a study facility by the Sixth Form pupils. There is concern however, that Year 14 school-leaving pupils are not adequately prepared for entering further and higher education, that their information literacy (IL) skills are not as developed as they could be.

Shortly after taking up the post, the researcher noticed through her work in the library that these pupils lack IL skills and awareness of the importance of these skills. As mentioned, the library is well used by these pupils as a place to study but they do not make use of all the resources on offer. The computer facilities are heavily used by these pupils but physical resources are not. Statistics from the library management system show that issues of books steadily decline as the pupils get older. When observing these pupils, they seem unsure of how to find resources and seem to prefer searching on the internet. They seem reluctant to ask for help, preferring to search for what they need on their own. Library feedback forms indicate that they think the physical resources in the library are of little use when they have internet access, and they prefer the internet as they consider it to be a quicker and easier way to access information. The concern is that when these pupils progress to third level education, they will not be adequately prepared for more independent study at this level as they will not be able to research effectively.

IL is an issue especially relevant to school libraries. It is often associated with teaching, learning and the curriculum. Herring (2011, p.2) noted: 'Information literacy skills should be part of each student's learning and the focus in schools should be on how students can use information literacy skills to enhance their learning.' Pupils need developed IL skills to find and effectively use all the information that is now available to them in a variety of different formats. Younger generations are becoming more dependent on the internet as their main source of information. Miller and Bartlett (2012) found that 95% of teachers surveyed reported that their pupils brought information that they had found online into class and 75% reported that internet-based content was important in the formation and validation of the beliefs of their pupils. Technology is constantly advancing – new ways of accessing information are coming into existence all the time and now more than ever, promoting IL and ensuring pupils have the skills to access, interpret and communicate information in a variety of formats is crucial. This is especially relevant to school-leaving pupils who will frequently use these skills in further and higher education, as well as for lifelong learning: 'At no other time in history have students needed such pronounced information literacy to effectively navigate and use vast amounts of information.' (Perez 2011, p.15)

2. Aims and objectives

The purpose of this study was to research IL in Year 14 school-leaving pupils. The aim was to determine the level of IL skills they have, their views on IL, the skills required in higher education, and how the school librarian can help them develop their skills in preparation for third level study.

3. Literature

As one would expect of such a prominent issue in the library and information world, there has been a lot of research into IL. However, during her literature search in early 2012, the researcher noticed that there seemed to be little focusing on IL skills in school-leaving pupils and she was unable to find any published research on IL skills in school-leaving pupils in Northern Ireland. This, along with the fact that it is such an important issue in the school library sector, made it a very attractive research topic. Literature from North America and Australia dominates, and the focus is now very much on what can be done to improve students' skills in further and higher education institutions, rather than what can be done when they are still at school. Literature from the United Kingdom and Ireland is lacking in comparison, but similarly the focus is now on IL in third level education. For the past two decades, literature on IL in schools has focused on IL skills models (Herring et al 2002), surveys of pupils' skills and how IL is being taught. Streatfield et al (2011) reviewed the evolution of IL work in UK schools and surveyed primary and secondary schools. They concluded that 'information literacy work in UK schools cannot be said to be in a good state' (2011, p.21). Although there is a lack of literature focusing on IL skills in school-leaving pupils, it does seem to be an issue that is gaining more attention; pupils' transition from secondary school to higher education was one of the main themes at the 2012 LILAC conference, for example.

4. Research approach

A mixed method approach was undertaken to conduct this research; both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Two hundred past pupils were contacted and asked to complete the questionnaire. Sixty responded and participated in the study. Six academic librarians from university campuses across Northern Ireland and three teachers from the researcher's workplace also participated.

An information sheet and details of how to complete a questionnaire online were posted out to the past pupils. The information sheet defined IL and made reference to the fact that past pupils may not be able to remember details from when they were still at school. They were asked to try and answer questions to the best of their memory. The past pupils were asked to complete an online survey (see Appendix A) consisting of two separate questionnaires; one based on their experiences as a Year 14 pupil and one based on their time at university or college. If the respondent did not attend university or college after school they were told not to complete the second section. Interviews were conducted with the academic librarians and the teachers.

5. Findings and conclusion

This research found that these past pupils generally did not know what IL was when they were in Year 14, that they were only vaguely aware of the importance of IL skills, that their skills were underdeveloped and that they overestimated their skills. When asked if they knew what IL was when they were in Year 14, 72% of respondents said 'No'. 52% of these past pupils said they consider themselves to be information literate now but some of the comments provided made the researcher doubtful. Some comments suggested respondents interpreted IL as simply being able to find information: '*Yes because I am able to find the information I am looking for efficiently.*' Some comments suggested respondents interpreted information literacy as being able to search for information online: '*Yes, I can find information using search engines.*' Students' over-estimation of their IL skills and misplaced confidence were recurring themes in this research.

Through the interviews with academic librarians the researcher found that there are a number of IL skills expected and required in third level education; the ability to identify a need for information, the ability to source and critically evaluate the information gathered, the ability to present information effectively, academic writing skills, an understanding of academic terminology, the ability to navigate their way around the library and locate sections, the ability to search the library catalogue, an understanding of the types of information sources available, the ability to locate physical and electronic resources on the shelf or online, the ability to choose the correct resources,

evaluate them and use them effectively, the ability to reference and an understanding of the importance of ethically using information, the ability to borrow, reserve and renew items, the ability to search databases and the ability to develop search strategies.

This research also found that the school librarian can help pupils develop their existing skills in a number of ways; through collaboration with academic librarians and teachers, repeat library inductions, and IL instruction for these pupils. An instruction programme for school librarians to deliver to Year 14 pupils could be developed based on the findings of this research and distributed to schools. The situation would undoubtedly improve if IL was embedded into both school and university curricula, as is being attempted in Scotland (Crawford and Irving 2007) and also in Wales (Welsh Information Literacy Project 2010).

This research has also highlighted areas where further research could be carried out. Other lines of enquiry arose such as how prominent IL really is in the National Curriculum, if the skills expected and required in third level study are too advanced, how aware teachers are of IL, what IL instruction school librarians are providing and if any informal instruction is taking place in schools – that which is not necessarily in the curriculum but is perhaps written into prospectuses or course content guides, for example.

Overall this study shows that there is potential to develop how IL is taught in secondary schools and that instruction is beneficial for school leaving pupils – for continuing education and for lifelong learning.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Past pupil questionnaire

Past Pupil Questionnaire Section A – When you were at school

Q1. How often did you use your School Library when you were a Year 14?

- ☐ Once that year
- ☐ Twice that year
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ Twice a week
- ☐ Three times a week
- ☐ More than three times a week
- ☐ I did not use the School Library when I was a Year 14

Q2 . What did you use your School Library for when you were a Year 14? You may select more than one answer

- ☐ Borrowing books related to school work
- ☐ Borrowing books to read for pleasure
- ☐ Reading magazines
- ☐ Reading reference books
- ☐ Studying
- ☐ Accessing the internet
- ☐ Doing homework/coursework
- ☐ I did not use the School Library when I was a Year 14

Other (please specify)

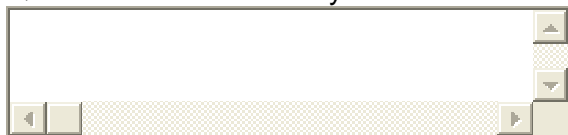
Q3. Did you receive a Library Induction when you were at school? Please answer Yes or No. If Yes, please state when you received it, whether or not you found this useful and why.

Q4. When you were a Year 14 pupil, how did you find information about a topic? You may select more than one answer

- ☐ Books
- ☐ The internet

Other (please specify)


Q5 . Which resource did you find easier to use when you were a Year 14 and why?



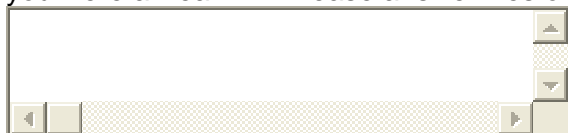
Q6 . When you were a Year 14, how did you find what you were looking for in your School Library? You may select more than one answer

- ☐ I asked the Librarian
- ☐ I searched the Library catalogue
- ☐ I looked around the Library
- ☐ I consulted the Dewey Decimal System Wall Chart
- ☐ I asked friends if they knew
- ☐ I didn't use the Library when I was a Year 14

Other (please specify)



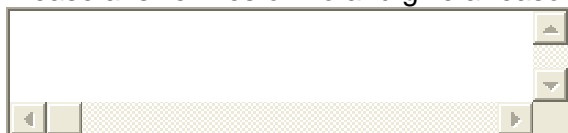
Q7. Did you ever have difficulty finding what you were looking for in your School Library when you were a Year 14? Please answer Yes or No. If Yes, please try to give an example.



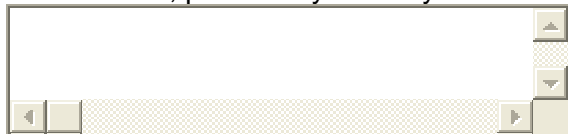
Q8. Could you use your School Library catalogue when you were a Year 14?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure, I never tried

Q9. Did you consider your School Library to be a valuable resource when you were a Year 14? Please answer Yes or No and give a reason for your answer

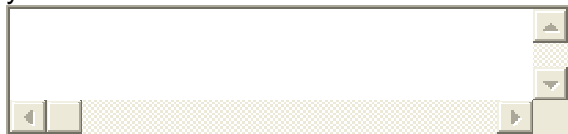


Q10. Did you know what information literacy was when you were a Year 14? Please answer Yes or No. If Yes, please say where you learned about information literacy.

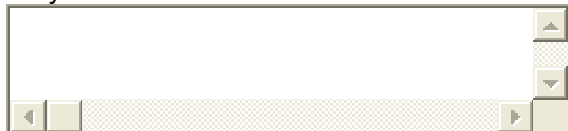


Past Pupil Questionnaire Section B – Now you are at university/college

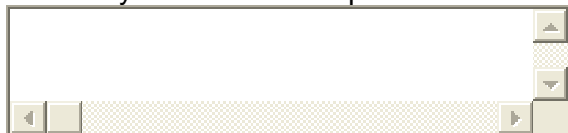
Q1 . When you went to university/college, did you feel that you were prepared for the independent study and research that is required? Please answer Yes or No and give a reason for your answer.

A rectangular text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It has a scroll bar on the right side and a small 'X' button in the bottom right corner.

Q2 . Do you feel your School Library had done enough to help you develop your information literacy skills in preparation for university/college? Please answer Yes or No and give a reason for your answer.

A rectangular text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It has a scroll bar on the right side and a small 'X' button in the bottom right corner.

Q3. Did you receive a Library Induction at university/college? Please answer Yes or No and state whether you found this helpful or not

A rectangular text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It has a scroll bar on the right side and a small 'X' button in the bottom right corner.

Q4. How often do you use your university/college Library?

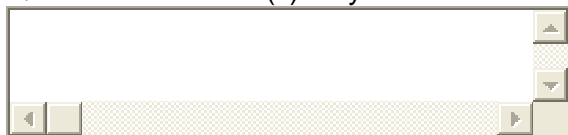
- ☐ Once every year
- ☐ Once every six months
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ Twice a week
- ☐ Three times a week
- ☐ More than three times a week
- ☐ Never

Q5. How do you find out more information about a topic now you are at university/college? You may select more than one answer

- ☐ Print books
- ☐ Print journals
- ☐ Ebooks
- ☐ Ejournals
- ☐ Searching on the internet

Other (please specify)

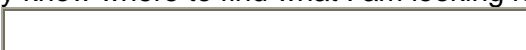
Q6. Which resource(s) do you find easier to use? Please give a reason for your answer.



Q7. Now you are at university/college, how do you find what you were looking for in the Library? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ I ask the Librarians
- ☐ I search the Library catalogue
- ☐ I look around the Library shelves
- ☐ I ask friends if they know where to find what I am looking for

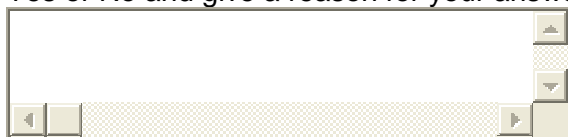
Other (please specify)



Q8. Can you use the university/college Library catalogue?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure, I have never tried

Q9. Do you consider your university/college Library to be a valuable resource? Please answer Yes or No and give a reason for your answer



Q10. Finally, do you now consider yourself to be an information literate person? Please answer Yes or No and explain why you feel this way.

