

# The Role of Information Literacy in Higher Education: An Initiative at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco.

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**Abstract:** *This paper, part of which was presented at the 12th annual AMICAL conference at the American University in Bulgaria held in Blagoevgrad, on 29 May 2015, reports on a doctoral research project which explores the meaning and role of information literacy in higher education and lifelong learning. It also highlights an information literacy initiative at a Moroccan university, namely Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, and how its academic library strives to promote it. Living in an age of information tsunami and technological advancement, issues of information access, evaluation, retrieval and effective use, have become significantly critical in our societies. Directing the attention to the issue of information literacy and framing the best practices on how they can be best blended into the learning process of students are of paramount importance. Like other libraries across the globe, Mohammed VI Library at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco has realized the importance of information literacy and has worked in various ways to address this issue. This paper will describe the university strategy of teaching Information Literacy to graduate and undergraduate students in a number of ways. Recommendations to improve and support this initiative, including incorporating information literacy and skills across the university's curriculum, and fostering more effective partnerships between the Al Akhawayn university library and the teaching faculty, will be also discussed in this paper.*

**Keywords:** Information Literacy; Post-Secondary Education; Role of the Post-Secondary Educator; life-long learning; higher education; learning outcomes; collaboration

## **I. Introduction**

The tsunami of information in today's world has urged modern societies to explore and develop new intelligent search skills and behaviors while accessing and using information from different sources. Such skills are known as information literacy (IL) skills. Information literacy (IL) has therefore become a new paradigm and the most critical sets of skills in today's and tomorrow's advanced information and communication world. According to the UNESCO, the empowerment of people through Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is an important requirement for fostering equitable access to information and knowledge and "promoting free, independent and pluralistic media and information systems".

Information Literacy acknowledges the crucial role of information in our everyday lives. Information Literacy is of immense importance to institution of higher education. "Given that the information revolution has immensely increased the ability to access and employ information, using various sources including information published electronically, societies are required to have certain capabilities ( other than the ability to read and write) to fully utilize these resources. Scholars affirm that society requires multi-skilled learners, who are able to think critically, pose and solve problems, and become independent and lifelong learners". It is also important that learners gain an understanding of the technological environment in which information resources are incorporated and used (Brandt, 2001), as it is not just the finding of information, but the ability to use it that is important. Universities should provide opportunities for ensuring that all students acquire the necessary competence in knowing how to navigate the web and find quality resources, to formulate questions, to access potential sources of information, to critically evaluate information for accuracy and quality, to organize information, and finally, to use information to do something, the last and most valuable step in the process (Doyle, 2003).

The need for information literacy instruction is becoming continually more important due to the ubiquitous of electronic resources and the significant increase use of the internet as an information source. Information literacy is a “set of skills which includes finding information effectively; managing the abundance of information available; thinking critically about resources; synthesizing and incorporating information into one’s knowledge base; creatively expressing and effectively communicating new knowledge; using information ethically; and using knowledge to better society”. Information Literacy plays a major role in higher education. Preparing students to become information-literate and independent researchers have always been the focal goal of myriad academic institutions in the west. While many western academic institutions have successfully managed to fully incorporate information literacy within the corpuses of their educational systems, many developing countries continue to adopt traditional forms of education, utterly devoid from any reference to Information Literacy or critical thinking concepts.

## **II. The birth and evolution of the concept of Information Literacy (IL)**

In 1974, the term "information literacy" was framed outside of academia by a lawyer named Paul Zurkowski, who was a head of the Information Industry Association. Mr. Zurkowski issued a plan to the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS), in which he offered recommendations to the US government that it should create a national program, the primary goal of which is to attain universal information literacy within the next decade. According to Zurkowski, “people trained in the application of information resources to their work can be called information literates. They have learned techniques and skills for utilizing the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in modeling information-solutions to their problem” In his recommendations to the US government to help frame a new

concept of Information Literacy, Zurkowski targeted the private sector (Bowden, 2001), and his focal objective from this project was utilizing information literacy as a problem-solving tool for workplace context (Pinto et al., 2010). Paradoxically, the evolution of the concept took another stream, which is the public sector, particularly within the field of library sciences. Librarians and academics embraced the concept of information literacy and set it as their focal objectives (Pinto, Cordon & Diaz, 2010). Information literacy has thus evolved gradually from a problem-solving tool approach confined within the four walls of the private sector, into a major influence and embracement by the library sector and academia, and later on morphed into a main concept strongly linked to information technology, electronic databases, and technical expertise.

### **III. What is Information Literacy?**

Traditionally, literacy means the ability to read and write. However, there are various types of literacy: Such as audio visual literacy, print literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, web literacy, technical literacy, library and information literacy etc. The traditional concept of literacy was primarily concerned by making people understand how to read and how to write in their day- to-day activities. Information literacy, however, is entirely different from these classical concept. It is a combination of all the aforementioned concepts but goes far beyond them. According to the American Library Association, information literacy is the ability to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (ACRL, 2000, p. 1).

Information literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, locate, analyze, and use information. The twenty-first-century has been nominated the information era (succeeding the industrial era), due to the current tsunami of information and the abundant information sources flowing in today's world. Swimming in this giant ocean of information, it is of paramount importance for an individual to get quality information. This requires the practice and application

of special information skills in order to retrieve the accurate information needed. To put it differently, Information Literacy skills empowers individuals with set of abilities and, critical thinking skills, which will assist them in becoming independent lifelong learners. Given this information explosion, it has become increasingly obvious that students cannot learn everything they need to know in their study fields during the years at college and the university. This is why information literacy has to fill in this gap through equipping students with the necessary critical thinking for effective problem solving and becoming lifelong learners. As the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989) explains. "Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand". Many authors have reviewed the development of Information literacy as a concept (Behrens, 1994). I suggest a concise and universally accepted definition, that is, the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information effectively. This definition combines critical thinking and facility with information media technology.

#### **IV. The importance of Information Literacy ( IL)**

Information literacy stands at the core of freedom of expression and information - since it empowers citizens to understand the functions of media and other information providers, to critically evaluate their content, and to make informed decisions as users and producer of information and media content.

Information Literacy is of immense importance to institutions of higher education. One reason is that some undergraduate students acceding university have limited background of fundamental research and information competency skills. They may not have acquired the

necessary skills to effectively search for information, or evaluate, synthesize and blend ideas; or may not have learned how to use information in original work or give proper citation and reference for information used. While some students may have acquired basic computer skills to send electronic mail, navigate the web, and share files, they may not have been taught how to effectively search the Internet or effectively use library E-resources for academic research. This is where Information Literacy skills are essential and make the difference to the success of students. If these latter are given the opportunity to follow such programs, they will certainly face fewer difficulties while writing papers and doing academic research projects. Like many academic institutions across the globe, Mohammed VI Library at Al Akhawayn University is faced with the major challenge of making users information literate as opposed to library literate. In response to this, the strategic plan of the Library, which also serves the wider strategic plan of the university as a whole, has expanded over the past ten years from merely providing students with information into teaching them how to better utilize information resources and become lifelong readers.

#### **V. An Information literacy initiative at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco**

Al Akhawayn University is an independent, public, not-for-profit, coeducational university committed to educating future citizen-leaders of Morocco and the world through a globally oriented, English-language, liberal-arts curriculum based on the American style. The University enhances Morocco and engages the world through leading-edge educational and research programs, including continuing and executive education, upholds the highest academic and ethical standards, and promotes equity and social responsibility. The university serves more than 2072 students from its campus. Al Akhawayn University library, named Mohammed VI Library, is an oasis of information resources and services, whose mission is to serve the University's liberal arts educational system and provide access to information resources to the

University community and to other researchers to enhance learning, teaching and research activities. The Library provides a growing collection of print and electronic resources, and actively engages faculty and students through various outreach activities, information literacy workshops and trainings that are designed to enrich their learning, teaching and research experiences. The owned holdings of the university Library include over 97,100 print volumes, 2,223 audio/video items and over 137,000 electronic books, and the collection is growing at a rate of approximately 1,200 items a year. The Library guarantees access to 38 online databases that provide content from over 58,000 electronic journals and other research materials in all major subjects. The Library's document delivery service also provides journal articles for teaching and research, directly or through the website (<http://www.aui.ma/library>), if they are unavailable in the Library collections. A detailed list of collection development procedures is featured on the Library website. Most of the print collection growth has come from faculty requests. Roughly 84% of the Library's print holdings are in English, with materials in French and Arabic representing the bulk of the rest. The Library is open 96 hours per week when classes are in session, including 6 hours on Saturdays and 10 hours on Sundays. During exam periods, the Library is open 24/7 for three weeks.

The collaboration between the Library and the university teaching faculty at Al Akhawayn University comes through several venues. Faculty members may request library training workshops for their students; AUI students can request individualized research consultations; the University's three schools collaborate with the library in creating and uploading customized Course Guides that fits curricular needs; and Mohammed VI Librarians reach out to faculty to share ways in which they can encourage their students to participate in information and research activities and better utilize the library's varied print and electronic resources. Another proved effective approach, one which promotes faculty-librarian

collaboration, is the library's systematic creation of Course Guides to aid AUI students in various academic programs.

Mohammed VI Library's information literacy initiative involves teaching AUI students how to search for, find, and correctly use quality academic information made available from the library's print and electronic resources. The library has set specific objectives and actions to promote and enhance its role as a learning hub through faculty outreach initiatives and information literacy. This latter is conducted in collaboration with the coordinators and faculty of the first-year foundation programs, dubbed "FAS - Strategic Academic Skills".

Since 2007, the university library has been active in ensuring that students are provided with the necessary search skills to access and use information. Approximately, Mohammed VI Librarians facilitates more than 50 information literacy workshops for students each year in support of various classes and have served over 7279 students during the last six years. The focal objectives of the information instruction program at Mohammed VI Library is to : (a) improve the ability of university students and library users to make effective use of the library resources, services, and library staff, (b) to make library users aware of the library technological search tools and teach them how to effectively use them, and (c) to equip library users with the necessary skills that will enable them better evaluate and retrieve authoritative scholarly information for their research. Information literacy Instruction at Mohammed VI Library is not offered as a credit-bearing course for undergraduate and graduate students within the curriculum on a regular basis, but as a separate supportive library service and comprehensive training program, which enables students to develop and acquire the necessary literacy skills to deal independently and skillfully with substantial amount of information. Each semester, Mohamed VI Library provides a variety of instructional sessions and training workshops for sophomore Strategic Academic Skills students (FAS 0210 and FAS 1220), Race, Religion, and Minorities



in the United States' graduate class (SSC 3331 / SSC 5321) and Research Methods' graduate class (SSC 3303). During each Information literacy class, students generally attend and participate in a 30 minutes long training presentation as well as 15 minutes long practical application session. Usually, most of these library training sessions are held at the library multimedia learning center (MLC), which is a learning hub for both students and faculty, where they have a librarian-led information literacy instruction class. Students, also, receive library-provided handouts to reinforce the learning process and practice on their own more effectively.

Four professional librarians, all of whom are fluent in at least 3 languages, are involved in the library instruction program, working collaboratively with the faculty in supporting bibliographical instruction at the university. Having such dedicated team of librarians, who guide the students to the best available library resources, makes the Information Literacy program unique and complementary with other university-related academic programs.

The Information Literacy initiative is still in its nascent stages at Al Akhawayn University Library, albeit witnessing an impressive growth and spread during the past five years. Irrespective of what future ameliorations and direction this initiative may take, however, any plans the university makes to further embed information literacy concepts into the wider curriculum will significantly impact the academic performance of students.

Information Literacy at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco is a user-experience practice, the aim of which is to familiarize new students with the library services, collections, and facilities. Library orientations and tours, conducted at the beginning of each academic semester, enable students to learn more about the Library's collections, resources, services, and physical set up of the building. During these library orientation tours, students may ask questions. Tours at Mohamed VI Library are usually 10-20 minutes in length and may vary in content and format depending on the level of students. In addition to these comprehensive library

tours, Mohammed VI Library offers newly enrolled students the opportunity to attend and participate in a very practical face-to-face introduction Library workshop, designed to help them better use Library resources and facilities. It includes a bibliographical instruction session which comprises instruction on the use of library resources, LC classification system, Library Online Catalog and reference sources (dictionaries, encyclopedias). Following these initial library training, a subsequent Information Skills training is offered to students, which includes an introduction to Electronic resources (the library subscribes to about 38 database), how to effectively search EBSCO Discovery Service (OneSearch), how to access EBook collections, and how to cite sources correctly using a variety of different style guides. The information literacy initiative at Mohammed VI Library has grown intensely in recent years to reach 87 instruction sessions for 1,506 students in 2012-2013. Each year, close to 95% of all freshmen are introduced to Library services through the Library/FAS collaborative information literacy program in order to ensure that all AUI students become familiar with resources available to them during their first academic year.

## **VI. Constraints and challenges**

Mohammed VI Librarians at Al Akhawayn University strives to provide high quality instruction services and engage with AUI students on ethical use of information. Unfortunately, and from my experience as a librarian who has served as a Multimedia Librarian and accumulated more than 10 years of experience of teaching information literacy at this American-styled university in Morocco, not all faculty members are equally enthusiastic about this library collaborative information literacy initiative; nor they are discussing it among each other's so there is some room for expansion.

## **VII. Recommendations and conclusion**

Information literacy is an essential component of general education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I believe, Mohammed VI Library at Al Akhawayn University has succeeded into laying the foundation stone for the growth of an effective model of Information Literacy support program tailored to help AUI students build the necessary skills and know-how that carry forth into higher level of university education. However, and in order to succeed, this Library-led Information Literacy initiative should pave the way for a university-led wider initiative to incorporate and expand information literacy standards across the curriculum. Likewise, the success of this initiative depends on the willingness to devise a policy, which recognizes Information Literacy, as a key skill for the development of excellent research skills at this university.



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