

# INFORMATION LITERACY FOR EDUCATION

## A call for expressions of interest

**This statement seeks to encourage the emergence of an informal alliance of stakeholders - individuals, initiatives, organisations - interested in working to make information literacy one of the key pillars of the education systems across the four nations of the UK, in particular through seeking to influence public policy.**

Information literacy (IL) is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society<sup>1</sup>. Although this document refers to IL, we recognise that what we describe is termed differently by other organisations and individuals; we therefore use IL merely as shorthand to describe similar and overlapping concepts, such as media literacy, digital literacy, news literacy and critical literacy.

As online practices and behaviours become increasingly integral to economic, political and social life, the need to promote and support IL in schools is becoming increasingly urgent and profound. **In an “always on”, interconnected and information-rich world, economic competitiveness, social cohesion and democratic legitimacy are increasingly bound up with our individual and collective capacity,**

- 🌀 **to access, make sense, use and create information from multiple sources;**
- 🌀 **to evaluate and analyse numerous media texts from a range of sources;**
- 🌀 **to operate effectively, ethically and safely in complex, dynamic and frequently ambiguous digital environments.**

Societies, communities and individual citizens that can master such skills are the most likely to thrive; those that do not are likely to find themselves increasingly isolated, marginalised and left behind.

While the need for IL has been widely recognised by stakeholders across the UK education sectors, as well as by employers and representatives of civil society, such recognition has not yet led to anything approaching a coherent strategy or programme of IL education<sup>2</sup>.

Our proposed entry point to the policy debate is the recent declaration made by the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, that “Digital literacy should be the fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths”<sup>3</sup>. When the Committee talks about ‘digital literacy’, it is referring in large part to the ability to make sense of and evaluate *information*, particularly when it comes to digital media. The report refers to the importance of “all users of digital media” being able “to understand content on the Internet,

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<sup>1</sup> CILIP Definition of Information Literacy 2018, <https://infolit.org.uk/ILdefinitionCILIP2018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Gianfranco Polizzi, ‘Digital literacy and the national curriculum for England: Learning from how the experts engage with and evaluate online content’, *Computers & Education*, February 2020, 103859 (in press, journal pre-proof), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.103859>

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Disinformation and ‘fake news’: interim report*, July 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmds/363/363.pdf>

and to work out what is accurate or trustworthy, and what is not,” and to protecting the “faculty for critical thinking”. Such concepts and language are at the heart of IL.

In its initial response to the report, the Government rejected the recommendation, on the grounds that, in its words, “digital literacy is already taught across the ... curriculum”. This was despite evidence from teachers and students that schools are not adequately equipping students with the skills they need<sup>4 5</sup>. In part this may be due to the interpretation of digital literacy as online safeguarding and hence its inclusion as such in the new 2020 PHSE Curriculum<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, since then, the Government has announced its intention to set out an online media literacy strategy before the end of 2020<sup>7</sup>. It is vital that this strategy and related policy recognise IL y as integral to educational philosophy and provision.

There is now clear scope to influence changes to education policies across the four nations of the UK. In the short term, opportunities to engage with policymakers will occur most obviously in the context of the sudden widespread shift to remote teaching and online learning stemming from the closure of schools, imposed in mid-March. In the medium-to-long term, the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis along with the online media literacy strategy and other policy reviews already in the pipeline will enable interested parties to engage with broader agendas: not just potential future changes in the school curriculum, but also the cultivation of a school system that moves away from what the RSA terms ‘education by numbers’<sup>8</sup> towards fostering inquisitiveness, informed, inquiry-led learning and critical thinking.

Making the most of such opportunities to influence thinking and practice on IL will require an alliance of interested parties representing a range of perspectives. Specifically, this means not just those who have until now been most closely associated with IL, but also those who will not necessarily have thought extensively about how this contributes to young people’s education, but who will nonetheless be critical to the formulation of any new policy and practice. These include representatives of teaching bodies (National Education Union, PSHE, Association for Citizenship Teaching among others), academics and other experts in education research; and organisations in the public, commercial and not-for-profit sectors, including employers and Higher Education. The greater the diversity of perspectives, the more influence such an alliance can exert.

As a necessary first step, we are keen to obtain expressions of interest from parties wanting to influence educational thinking and practice on IL, in order to open up a critical conversation representing as many perspectives as possible. This conversation would, we envisage, lead to a focused workshop or conference, ideally before the end of 2020, bringing key players around the table to formulate a clear statement of intent and plan of action.

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<sup>4</sup> National Literacy Trust, 2018 *Fake news and critical literacy: The final report of the commission on fake news and the teaching of critical literacy in schools*, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/fake-news-and-critical-literacy-final-report/>

<sup>5</sup> Ofcom, 2019, *Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report*, [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/134907/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-2018.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/134907/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-2018.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> DfE (2019) *Teaching online safety in schools*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-online-safety-in-schools>

<sup>7</sup> Online Harms White Paper, April 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harms-white-paper>

<sup>8</sup> *Education for Enlightenment*, RSA website, <https://www.thersa.org/discover/education-for-enlightenment>

The following factors are possible starting points for thinking and dialogue about IL:

- ☞ The potential for building on the somewhat *ad hoc* ways in which IL, often in the guise of "critical thinking", is addressed across UK secondary schools, in particular within the A Level curriculum
- ☞ How to build on the learning and teaching processes at the heart of the elective Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), the compulsory Extended Essay element of the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBDP) and compulsory research project for Scottish Advanced Highers, all characterised by the deployment of research skills, enquiry-based learning and *ipso facto*, elements of IL deemed by university admissions officers to be important<sup>9</sup>.
- ☞ What might stem from the eve of the Ofsted inspection framework.
- ☞ What inferences for the curriculum might be drawn from the informational requirements of destinations for school leavers, i.e. FE, HE and/or the workplace.
- ☞ Developments in the UK policy landscapes that have a bearing on IL, for instance the proposal for a national online media literacy strategy, as referred to above.
- ☞ Lessons from localised or focused, civil society initiatives aimed at fostering relevant literacies, such as NewsWise and Sense about Science
- ☞ Lessons from overseas, in countries where IL is better recognised and embedded in education policy and the school curriculum.

These, however, are initial, outline ideas; critique and suggestions are very much welcome.

**If you would like to register an expression of interest and add your name to the list of signatories to this statement, please complete the short form at <https://forms.gle/g4tMijh6bjmXkTgk9> . This will also allow you to set out briefly the nature of your concern with IL education in UK schools.**

With best wishes,

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<sup>9</sup> IB Schools and Colleges Association, *The University Admissions Officers Report 2017*, <https://www.ibsca.org.uk/university-admissions-officers-report-2017/>