A Partnership Approach to Promoting Information Literacy for Higher Education Researchers

Stéphane Goldstein

Research Information Network, London, UK,
Stephane.Goldstein@rin.ac.uk

Abstract

The promotion of information literacy in the UK higher education research sector has traditionally been the preserve of academic libraries. However, other professional groups have obvious interests in this area, and there is a strong case for providing a framework which enables different parties with a stake in information literacy to work together in order to reach practical objectives. In the UK, a coalition of partners has been set up to provide this collective framework and to provide synergy. This paper sets out the rationale for this approach, sets out the sort of activities that the coalition has fostered since its inception in late 2009 and reflects on whether it might serve as an example for other parts of Europe or for transnational collaborations.

Key Words: information literacy; higher education research; United Kingdom

Rationale and Context

Information is the lifeblood of academic research. The sheer volume of scholarly material, the ceaseless growth in its quantity, the diverse and often complex forms that it takes: these factors create challenges for academic researchers faced with the discovering, accessing, reading, reviewing, manipulating, mining, managing and creating of information (which is also taken to include research data) in all its guises.

Given these challenges, the ability of researchers to handle information is of vital importance. Many individuals have become adept at developing approaches, using innovative technologies and adapting their behaviour to make the most

of the information environment, but others rather less so. Questions about how researchers develop appropriate skills and understanding, the support they receive, the training opportunities provided for them, and the take-up of such opportunities are thus highly pertinent in the UK and beyond.

On that basis, the Research Information Network's (RIN) 2008 report *Mind the Skills Gap*[1] examined how training for researchers in information-handling management is addressed in the setting of UK higher education (HE). The report underlined that relevant training provision remains largely dependent on the initiative and efforts of individual academic libraries. Although these undertake much good work in practice to help develop appropriate skills and understanding, this is often haphazard. The report concluded that such training is uncoordinated and generally not based on any systematic assessment of needs. It called for better coordination between relevant organisations and interest groups to ensure that training and professional development programmes are provided for researchers. There is thus a strong case for greater join-up involving input from and strategic coordination between interested parties beyond the library sector.

This is the rationale for the work of an informal coalition of partners, including information professionals, graduate school personnel, data management specialists, research supervisors and researchers, which has been set up to promote the greater cohesion that *Mind the Skills Gap* called for. This coalition operates through the auspices of a multi-facetted working group on information handling[2] which was set up in November 2009 and in practice meets four or five times a year; this group is facilitated by the Research Information Network, which also provides the secretariat and meets the running costs. The partnership approach is of crucial importance: it fosters links between different players who have previously not always engaged in any dialogue; and the combination of these players' interests lends force, credibility and a certain dynamism to the avenues being explored by the coalition. The partnership plays a proactive role by:

- acting as a focal point for the discussion of issues relating to the effective development of information-handling training for researchers in HE;
- raising the profile and highlighting the importance of such training in the broader context of professional development for HE researchers at all stages in their careers;

- advocating for and promoting the need for greater coordination and a more strategic approach across the UK with regard to the provision of such training for HE researchers;
- becoming a collective interlocutor for research funders and other agencies with an interest in such training for HE researchers;
- encouraging and initiating mapping exercises, audit work, consultations and other studies that would develop the evidence base and advance the development of policy and strategy at national level for such training;
- disseminating the outcomes of such work within the relevant communities;
- preparing joint responses, where appropriate, to consultation exercises that have a bearing on the provision and development of such training.

Scope of the Coalition

The organisations represented on the working group provide an indication of the breadth of interests committed to working on a collective basis. Each of them provides a particular perspective on information literacy, or on aspects of it. Moreover, many of the individuals who sit around the table on behalf of these bodies bring their own personal interests and expertise, sometimes long-standing, to proceedings. At present, the various parties essentially emanate from the UK public sector, but that may change as the agenda develops; the coalition is dynamic and very much open to expansion.

- The British Association for Information Library Education and Research (BAILER),[3] which acts as a national forum for all teaching and research staff in the Information and Library Schools and Departments in the UK and Ireland.
- The British Library, which has developed a successful programme of postgraduate researcher training days,[4] and, along with JISC, has been the driving force behind the research project on the information behaviour of the researcher of the future.[5]
- The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), whose interest in this area is channeled through its Information Literacy Group.[6]

- The Digital Curation Centre (DCC), whose training programme[7] supports researchers and data custodians with the development of the skills they need to share and preserve data effectively.
- The Higher Education Academy (HEA), whose Subject Centre for Information and Computer Sciences[8] acts as a focal point in this area for the organisation's promotion of good learning and teaching practice.
- The Information Literacy Website,[9] which is a wide-ranging resource and source of reference managed through the University of Loughborough.
- The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), which has funded extensive programmes[10] aimed at developing good practice in research data management in UK higher education, including work aimed at fostering data management training[11] across different disciplines and institutions.
- Jorum,[12] which collects and shares learning/teaching material in further and higher education, and has the potential to become a useful resource for such material relating to information literacy.
- The Research Information Network (RIN), which, in its role as facilitator within the broad research information environment in the UK, has set up and coordinates the coalition of partners.
- Research Libraries UK (RLUK), which represents the perspective of the more research-intensive libraries.
- The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL), whose Working Group on Information Literacy[13] has been active for many years in aiding the development of theory and practice in information literacy, including notably the framework provided by the recently refined Seven Pillars of Information Literacy.
- The UK Council of Graduate Education (UKCGE),[14] whose promotion of graduate education policy and practice informs its interest in good practice in areas such as information literacy skills.
- Universities UK (UUK),[15] which has an overarching interest in ensuring that UK universities produce graduates and postgraduates with marketable skills.
- Vitae,[16] which is funded by the UK Research Councils and leads nationally on support for personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff in higher education, and has been very receptive to the incorporation of information literacy skills and competencies in its Researcher Development Framework.

The programme of work overseen by this partnership has involved engaging with and building on existing initiatives, as well as initiating new projects. Since its inception, the coalition, through the working group, has overseen several strands of activity which have built up into a small but broad programme.

Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

Following a wide-ranging consultation within the higher education community, Vitae published its new Researcher Development Framework[17] in September 2010. As described by Vitae, 'the RDF is a tool for planning, promoting and supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers in higher education. It describes the knowledge, skills, behaviours and personal qualities of researchers and encourages them to aspire to excellence through achieving higher levels of development.'[18] It details, for different stages of researchers' careers, the competencies and levels of knowledge that they might aspire to.

The Framework's extensive references to information literacy are, to a large extent, the product of the input of the coalition. From the outset of the RDF consultation process, Vitae were keen to engage with the working group and have proved receptive to suggestions about refining the Framework to ensure that it properly reflects information-handling and data management skills and competencies. The working group's joint response[19] to the RDF consultation crystallized these issues, and numerous specific elements have been introduced into the Framework following this response. Moreover, Vitae have found it useful and convenient to enter into a dialogue with an interlocutor that could speak authoritatively on behalf of a range of interest groups.

The dialogue has continued since the publication of the Framework, as Vitae develop their notion of RDF 'lenses'; these are means of focusing on a particular perspective or to emphasise a particular subset of the RDF, and to highlight how the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of researchers can be applied or developed in these various contexts or environments. The coalition has helped ensure that information handling constitutes one of the first such 'lenses'. It has undertaken mapping exercises[20] which have highlighted and drawn out the relevant parts of the RDF, and matched these against SCONUL's updated Seven Pillars of Information Literacy[21],

issued in April 2011. The Seven Pillars provide a more specialised framework of skills and attributes, and by cross-referencing these two documents, the coalition has formulated a relationship between two separate national initiatives. As part of this exercise, an information literacy taxonomy[22] has been drawn up, founded on the RDF but with reference also to the Seven Pillars.

The promotion of information literacy in the context of the RDF has also been on the coalition's agenda, and it has encouraged the organisation of workshops aimed at making participants reflect on how the Framework applies to their or their institutions' information literacy agenda. Five such events have taken place over the past year: at the Vitae Researcher Development Conference in Manchester (September 2010); at the University of Sheffield, under the auspices of the White Rose Consortium (November 2010); at the University of Newcastle (February 2011); at the University of Sheffield, as part of a workshop sponsored by UKCGE (March 2011); and at LILAC 2011, in London (April 2011). The success of these various events is prompting the working group to reflect on the development of a programme of such workshops in future.

Guidance for Researchers

Taken together, the RDF and the Seven Pillars represent important resources for helping to frame how researchers might be best supported in their information literacy needs. But however useful these two documents, they are essentially structured as relatively lengthy lists or matrices; to complement them and illustrate their content in a lively and engaging fashion, there is a case for producing a practical and guidance and user-friendly guidance booklet.

The coalition has therefore commissioned the production of such a publication, which it has been agreed should form part of the current Vitae series of guides[23] for researchers: *The Creative Researcher*, *The Balanced Researcher* and *The Engaging Researcher*; these have elicited positive feedback, as both point-of-need guides and as material to support workshops, and it makes sense for these publications to serve as a broad model for the proposed new guide.

The guide will be entitled *The Informed Researcher*. It will explain clearly and succinctly (over no more than 24 pages, in a portable, A5 format) what information literacy means in the context of higher education research; and how it can help researchers at different stages of their careers make the most out of the information that they handle both as an input to and an output from their work. The issues to be covered will reflect the content of the RDF and the Seven Pillars, but will not be bound exclusively by these two models. The style of the material will be in keeping with that of the above Vitae guides, that is to say, with a strong practical bias and written very much from the researcher's perspective.

Work is now well advanced in the drafting of this document, which is expected to be published in the autumn of 2011 in the name of Vitae, the RIN and SCONUL, but under the general auspices of the coalition.

Setting out Good Practice

Information-handling training takes place across many institutions, and in many guises. However, as highlighted in *Mind the Skills Gap*, such training is often *ad hoc* and frequently suffers from low visibility in the broad context of researcher development. There is value therefore in identifying instances of good practice. Setting out such examples in a clear and accessible way helps to raise the profile of this agenda, particularly with researchers; and could serve as a basis of subsequent advocacy work. Not surprisingly, the coalition has made the highlighting of good practice one of its key tasks.

A preliminary list of 13 examples[24] from several institutions in the UK was drawn up during 2010. This is a first step: the intention is to see the list grow and diversify, not least so that it also includes areas such as training in data management and curation. Crucially, ways have to be found of disseminating such examples, so that they can be better exploited. At present, they are incorporated and appropriately flagged in Vitae's database of practice[25] (whose template has been used for structuring the examples). There are certainly more learning and teaching resources, such as Jorum,[26] where such information can usefully be posted. The working group is reflecting on what these resources might be, how to make use of them, and how they might be more effectively linked. As part of this, a set of quality assurance criteria is being devised, to help trainers frame and describe

their training courses and materials, thereby allowing for an element of self-review. The coalition is now considering how such criteria, once they are finalised, might be disseminated, and their take-up encouraged. In the longer term, it may be appropriate to consider using criteria of this nature to review training activities and highlight the very best examples — although, arguably, this may be premature at this stage, and, in the first instance, the criteria might be more effectively deployed for the simpler purpose suggested above.

Research Data Management Training

The coalition takes the view that researchers' knowledge and skills with regards to how they handle, manage and look after their data are an integral part of information literacy — thus 'information', in this sense, is taken to include data. This is now properly recognised in the RDF and the Seven Pillars.

Organisations such as the Digital Curation Centre (DCC), the UK Data Archive and JISC have, in the UK, taken a leading role in promoting skills in data management. The RIN's involvement in this area has focused in the charting of behaviour and the setting out of policy, for instance through empirical work on data sharing. More recent developments have brought the issue of data management competencies to the fore, particularly JISC's five coordinated projects on research data management training materials,[27] which are running until July 2011, as part of the JISC Managing Research Data Programme.

In this context, the coalition has engaged with DCC and JISC to oversee the Research Data Management Skills Support Initiative (DaMSSI)[28], co-funded by the RIN and JISC, which aims to facilitate the use of tools like the RDF and the Seven Pillars in order to help researchers and their institutions to effectively plan data management skills development and training. Working with JISC's five above projects, DaMSSI is undertaking analysis and providing guidance and support that will draw from the experiences of these projects. The various outputs from this initiative, including some flyers describing the relevance of data management for a selection of research careers will, be produced around October 2011.

Research Supervisors and Information Literacy

Research supervisors can play a crucial role in the effective imparting of relevant skills, knowledge and understanding. But in reality, they often are not able, well-equipped or even predisposed to play such a role. *Mind the Skills Gap* pointed to the 'the widespread perception that some research supervisors do not recognise the need for the types of training on offer to 'their' postgraduate students. Some supervisors are viewed by library and information specialists as a 'lost generation', overtaken by advances in research information, and not fully aware of the implications of some of these changes'. In the context of the necessary development of enabling improved information literacy, the place of research supervisors is one that is thus worthy of investigation.

The coalition has identified this as another key issue worthy of investigation, and, in December 2010, charged the RIN with commissioning a study[29] to investigate the place and role of PhD supervisors in the drive to ensure that research students possess the necessary level of information literacy to pursue their careers successfully in academia and beyond. The broad objectives for this work include:

- an investigation and analysis of current practices in this area among PhD supervisors, including their relationship and interface with other players such as graduate schools and university libraries;
- an analysis of variations in practice across institutions and disciplines;
- an analysis and judgment of the ability of PhD supervisors to impart relevant skills and provide appropriate advice;
- an identification of the areas where improvement in practice would be beneficial;
- the production of recommendations on the development of best practice and the provision of support mechanisms, that can serve as a basis for a plan of action.

The data upon which the analysis is based is drawn from surveys of both supervisors and students, case studies from selected universities and interviews with representatives from key strategic bodies. Work is now nearing completion and a report from the study should be published in October 2011. The coalition is expected to play a leading role in disseminating the results and acting as advocate for the findings.

Regional Initiatives

The initiatives described above reflect a dialogue that goes on essentially at a national level, but there is also a strong case for developing such networking at a regional level, closer to the practitioners. In particular, there could be much to be gained from encouraging regional connections and dialogue — in other words, to mirror at a regional level what the coalition is seeking to achieve nationally. The coalition has therefore expressed an interest in encouraging regional initiatives[30] that might:

- connect professionals involved in researcher development relating to information handling and data management;
- provide a forum for such professionals to meet (in person or virtually) to discuss relevant issues, research, publications…;
- present examples of good practice in researcher development;
- facilitate collaboration on training for both researchers and other professionals;
- act as a conduit within regions for information from and to national bodies involved in researcher development relating to information handling and data management.

The first such initiative is emerging in the Yorkshire/North East England region; an inaugural meeting[31] took place at Newcastle University in February 2011, attended by representatives from a dozen institutions and with the collaboration of Vitae's Yorkshire/North East regional hub. The *modus operandi* of the initiative is currently being defined, and it is expected that a plan of action will be produced soon.

It is hoped that these developments will act as a precedent for other parts of the country. Preliminary discussions have been held between the RIN and the M25 Consortium[32] of libraries to set up a similar grouping in the London area, and there have also been informal expressions of interest from Scotland.

Conclusions

Although the coalition has been active for only a year and a half, it has already demonstrated its capacity to act as a catalyst for collectively agreed

activities — and it should be remembered that much of what is described above is work in progress. The resources at its disposal are limited, but it has managed to foster a small but energetic programme of projects and initiatives. By enabling organisations with different interests and outlooks to work together and reach a common understanding of important areas of researcher development, the coalition has created a synergy which has endowed the outputs of joint efforts with greater credibility. Importantly, it has enabled the agenda to move beyond the confines of the academic library world. The difficult funding context in the UK makes it difficult to predict whether the coalition will remain viable, as it is dependent on at least a minimum degree of financial and organisational support — which, to date, has been provided essentially by the RIN. It is hoped that ways will be found to sustain its work.

The coalition has operated to date in a purely national (and to an extent, a regional) setting. However, the issues and challenges that it addresses are not unique to the UK, and it is worth reflecting on whether this successful experiment might be transposed to other individual countries, in Europe and even beyond; or indeed to serve as a basis for transnational activities. There is nothing prescriptive about what has been accomplished to date. The coalition emerged in the UK because a set of circumstances favoured it: the publication of a report which incorporated a call for action; a degree of willingness and enthusiasm on the part of key organisations and individuals to develop an agenda; commitment by these same players; and the existence of a body — in this instance the RIN — to coordinate and support the collective effort. Differing circumstances are likely to prevail in other countries, and it is up to librarians and other professional groups to decide on what might be possible and appropriate according to the settings in which they operate. The RIN is happy to assist with advice should any such activity or initiatives be considered.

Notes

[1] http://www.rin.ac.uk/mind-skills-gap.

[2] Further information on the working group and terms of reference at http://www.rin.ac.uk/info-handling-group.

[3] http://www.bailer.org.uk/.

[4] Information about the British Library's training days at http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/acrossuk/highered/heresearchers/heservices.html.

[5] http://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/stories/2011/06/researchersoftomorrow.aspx.

[6] http://www.cilip.org.uk/get-involved/special-interest-groups/community-services/subgroups/information-literacy/pages/default.aspx.

[7] http://www.dcc.ac.uk/training.

[8] http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/.

[9] http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk/.

[10] http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/mrd.aspx.

[11] http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/mrd/rdmtrain.aspx.

[12] http://www.jorum.ac.uk/.

[13] http://www.sconul.ac.uk/topics_issues/info_literacy/.

[14] http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/.

[15] http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk.

[16] http://www.vitae.ac.uk.

[17] http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf.

[18] http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/234381/RDF-overview.html.

[19] http://www.rin.ac.uk/rdf.

[20] http://www.rin.ac.uk/rdf-7pillars.

[21] http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/seven_pillars.html.

[22] The taxonomy was drawn up to complement the above mapping exercises; it is also available at http://www.rin.ac.uk/rdf-7pillars.

[23] The three guides can be found at http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/169081/Researcher-booklets.html.

[24] http://www.rin.ac.uk/info-handling-good-practice.

[25] http://www.vitae.ac.uk/dop.

[26] Op. cit.

[27] http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/~/link.aspx?_id=677B9C-0D0E8F4B12A7E2ACC86FD9D736&_z=z.

[28] The project plan for DaMSSI can be found at http://www.rin.ac.uk/data-management-skills.

[29] http://www.rin.ac.uk/role-research-supervisors.

[30] http://www.rin.ac.uk/info-handling-regional.

[31] http://www.rin.ac.uk/yorks-ne-event.

[32] http://www.m25lib.ac.uk.