

# **The Conceptualisation of Information Literacy and its Relevance to Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

*Information Literacy is a broad term that incorporates all forms of information related learning. This paper will discuss the conceptualization of information literacy and its relevance to higher education. Information Literacy is a set of competencies to locate, analyse and evaluate information critically for decision making. These competencies supports the learning process in higher education. The learner is able to locate information amidst information overload and is able to conduct research by employing information literacy skills. In higher education, information literacy promotes originality and innovativeness through critical thinking .At national level, information literacy is a social empowerment that equips the learner with skills they will use for life time. Therefore, Information literacy education in higher education is essential to produce a work force of flexible lifelong learners which is a primary vision for higher education.*

**Key words:** Information Literacy, Higher Education, research, Innovation

## **Introduction**

Information Literacy is a broader term that embraces the many aspects of learning related to information. The literal understanding of information processes and its attributes is the

foundation for understanding the basics of information literacy. However, Information literacy goes beyond its explicit meaning as it extends to addressing the issues of motivation and quality of life of the information literate individual. There are several competing debates surrounding the meaning and composition of information literacy which explains the varied approaches taken by many scholars to conceptualize information literacy. This paper will limit itself to the conceptualization of information literacy and highlight its relevance in higher education.

### **Conceptualisation of Information Literacy**

Information literacy as a concept is derived from two terms ‘Information’ and ‘Literacy’. The term information refers to data that has been processed and has meaning (Madden, 2000) Literacy is defined as ‘the ability to read and write’ by several scholars including Mwanza (2012), Mkandawire (2017), Wilkinson and Bruch (2012), and Chileshe, Mkandawire and Tambulukani (2018). UNESCO (2005) cited in Henemann (2015) provided a comprehensive definition of literacy by referring to it as a set of skills and practices comprising reading and writing and using numbers as mediated by written materials. Thus, literacy skills are basic fundamentals to education as they complement the learning and teaching processes (Mkandawire, 2018).

The meaning of literacy has its historical background where it embraced information literacy. It began to expand in the 1990s when it evolved as it became a catch all metaphor for the skills that lead to success. Among these was computer literacy, media literacy and information literacy. Since then, information literacy has been treated as a universal and relatively unproblematic. This is because of its ability to help people in imparting a better life and in the process make them productive citizens. Information literacy has been used widely to refer to the ability of an individual to apply relevant skills in information access and applicability.

Grassian & Kaplowitz (2000) defined Information Literacy as the ability to use a variety of information sources in everyday problem solving. This definition is restrictive to the library environment where the term has since been used interchangeably in a variety of library instruction settings such as user education and library skills instruction. The term has also been used to represent use of information to access information. It is from this perspective that many librarians continue to debate the appropriate definition of information literacy. Some like Foster (1993) equate information literacy with knowing how to use libraries and conclude that terms such as library instruction and bibliographic instruction are more appropriate than information literacy.

However, Zurkowski (1974:6) tried to define the term without limiting it to the library set up by describing the information literate individuals as “people trained in the application of information resources to their work”. This definition has transformed information literacy into a staple of the educational enterprise where all the academic and civic people realised the need to embrace information literacy.

As a solution to the information age challenges, Information literacy gained momentum and the American Library Association (ALA) Presidential committee on information Literacy (1989) came up with a standardised definition that was all inclusive. Information literacy was defined as a set of abilities: recognizing an information need and locating, evaluating and using the needed information effectively (Mulauzi and Daka, 2018). The definition justifies the need for information literacy as a tool for academic excellence as well as social empowerment. It linked the need for information literacy to an information overload precipitated and sustained by a rapid growth in quantity and complexity of the information /knowledge required for academic work, civic participation, work efficiency and individual success (Edward &

Owusu- Ansah, 2005).

Information literacy extends from just acquiring the skills. According to Shapiro & Hughes (1996), Information literacy is a new liberal art that extends from knowing how to use computers and access information to critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure, and its social cultural and even philosophical context and impact. It is from this perspective that information literacy is taken to be long life learning as the skills acquired will enable the beneficiary to apply them in life even after they have completed their academic pursuance. This is the more reason information literacy can as well be regarded as a social empowerment and lifelong learning (Mulauzi, 2017).

Considering all these debates surrounding the conceptualization of information literacy, an acceptable standard definition by the American library association was adopted as the appropriate definition. The definition embraces the learners' outcome after being exposed to the information literacy training. The skills obtained lay the foundation for successful academic pursuance in higher education. Hence, it is imperative to explore the relevance of information literacy to higher education.

## **Relevance of Information Literacy to Higher Education**

Higher education institutions are universities and colleges that mostly offer specialised training and skills to students. Furthermore, Mkandawire and Illon (2019:1) contended that:

*Higher education refers to any structured and systematized learning that takes place in formal learning institutions that award certificates, diplomas, and degrees acquired after secondary or high school, to further one's education.*

Higher Education institutions are confronted with challenges

of adapting to the changing ways of discharging their business activities through research and teaching in an information age. The students who are at the centre of this change experience difficulties in searching, presenting and writing academic reports to the academic standards that are sustainable. The technological advancements without interventions have left many higher institutions of learning stagnant and retrogressive in providing quality research and education. Higher learning institutions that have competitively sustained this pressure are those that have embraced information literacy in their academic curricular.

Information Literacy plays a critical role to higher education. In the information age, there is increased demand in the application of electronic publications and access requires certain capabilities. Students have to be multi-skilled and must think critically to solve problems and become independent learners. The information age also demands that students gain the understanding of the technological environment in which information resources are incorporated and used. In this respect, higher learning institutions should provide opportunities for all students to acquire the necessary competencies in knowing how to explore and navigate the various information sources on the web and formulate search queries that are relevant to their search studies. In this regard, Doyle (1994) observed that after these competencies are imparted in students, they should be in a position to evaluate information and use information to make informed decisions. In fact, the need for information literacy is inevitable in higher education considering that even in early years of education including some homes, children are increasingly being exposed to technological gadgetry (Banda and Mwanza, 2017). Thus, it is imperative that institutions of higher learning embrace information literacy in their curriculum not only to impart skills in learners and maximise the information benefit but to also build on some rudimental information literacy skills they may already have.

The need for information literacy in higher education is immense. The information overload makes it complex to select appropriate information. However, students with competencies will have the ability to navigate through the information sources and capture quality information. Radia and Stapleton (2008:9) observed that, there is evidence that relying heavily on internet sources leads to poor quality of students writing skills and as such emphasis must be placed on information literacy. The heavy reliance on the use of internet affects scholarly works where students in their research work lack competencies of capturing and presenting quality research work. Some studies have indicated that among the major challenges students are facing is inability to evaluate information sources such that they opt to directly get data from google. This is evidenced from a study conducted in China by Li and Tam (2007) who established that many students and researchers go to Google for the information they need. The study established that “45% of the students surveyed used Google as their first port of call when locating information, with the university library catalogue used by only 10%. The same study established that the Chinese researchers start their searches with Google, or another internet search engine.

Further, there is little or no innovativeness by the students. This defeats the academic objective of producing graduates who can think critically and evaluate information to make better decisions at whatever level. Higher education as a centre of knowledge generation through research must promote originality in the generation of new knowledge and encourage students to apply critical thinking to promote innovativeness. This can be attained through information literacy. The emphasis for having information literacy in higher education according to the American Library Association (ALA 2000:4) is that information Literacy augments student’s competency in using information literacy skills. Hence it is considered by many accredited associations as a key outcome for university and college students.

There are a number of benefits which a student can gain from being information literate. These include the fact that students will be able to:

- (i) Select the most effective search strategies and resources in order to find manageable amounts of accurate, relevant information needed for academic and personal research.
- (ii) Analyse and critically evaluate the design, organization, information content, and credibility of information resources in all media.
- (iii) Understand and apply principles of academic integrity such as citing, avoiding plagiarism, and using proper documentation.
- (iv) Manage, use, communicate, and disseminate information effectively.

(Based on the Association of College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education 2000)

When students acquire the skills as stipulated, they become socially empowered and this complements the higher learning institutions vision of producing students who will contribute positively towards the economy of the country. Information literacy complements the education agenda of higher education. In addition, Chipeta (2010) reiterated the relevance of information literacy to higher education by stating that, information literacy is important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it offers skills to enable students succeed in the information economy which is much needed for them to be employed. This approach takes into consideration the benefits of information literacy to students when they leave the University. From this perspective, information literacy is considered as a lifelong learning process as it helps students acquire skills that will improve their opportunities in life through a self-directed learning process (ACRL, 2000:3) Information literacy skills are critical for capacity building indicating that it assists students to understand, participate actively in and benefit students

from the emerging knowledge societies. Therefore, Information literacy provides the foundation for student's stability in society after the long period of training from universities and colleges.

## **Conclusion**

It can be reiterated that Information literacy is a set of all the competencies or skills that a learner obtains for locating, analysing and evaluating information for decision making/use. Understanding the concept of information literacy is critical in determining its relevance to higher education. This calls for capacity building and information sharing among stake holders and information users in order to avoid misconceptions and misapplications of the concept of information literacy. As Mwanza (2017) suggests, misconceptions about any phenomenon may affect practice in which case people holding misconceptions may either misapply the concept/theory or even fail in their pursuit and application of the concept.

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