

Embedding information literacy through critical skills, collaboration and a new curriculum



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Introduction

Part of the National University of Ireland (NUI), Maynooth University (MU) was formally established as an autonomous university in 1997. However, MU traces its origins to the foundation of the Royal College of St Patrick in 1795. Located 25 kilometres west of Dublin, MU is Ireland's smallest, yet fastest growing university. With just over 10,000 students, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences form the academic core of the university, complemented by strong departments in teacher education, computer science, electronic engineering, business and law.

In November 2015, MU library and centre for teaching and learning (CTL) were jointly awarded a teaching and learning fellowship. This award included funding for the development of a suite of tutorials, videos and guides that support the development and assessment of key information literacy (IL) skills and the MU graduate attributes (Maynooth University, 2015a). The rationale behind the project was that IL is not developed in isolation from the other skills that students require in order to navigate their academic career and working life successfully. Because of this, the project was designed to support the development and assessment of critical skills for students in accordance with the new MU undergraduate curriculum (Maynooth University, 2015a).

This was the first time the MU library had been awarded a teaching and learning fellowship, as fellowships are still very much viewed as academic staff territory. To be considered in the same field as academic colleagues therefore represented a significant breakthrough for the library. This important success was achieved, in part, because of a strategic collaboration between the library and CTL as part of an important university initiative.

Conditions for collaboration

Collaboration between the library and the centre for teaching learning was made possible by four key factors. First, in 2012 MU launched an ambitious strategic plan for the university, which included the future growth of student numbers and fundamental changes to the undergraduate curriculum (National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2012). This seismic change was the first key element in creating an environment suitable for strategic collaboration. It was something that impacted upon all departments across the university, and the initial planning stages involved representatives from all academic and support units, including the library. In his 2002 article, Kempcke discusses the opportunities that curriculum reform can provide for academic librarians. He argues that librarians must be viewed as equals by faculty in order to take full advantage of curriculum reform and that the implementation of a 'successful... comprehensive IL program in the university curriculum relies almost entirely on the library faculty's stature on campus and their positive working relationships with academic colleagues across all disciplines' (Kempcke, 2002, p. 531). Although written fourteen years ago, the argument remains relevant and resonated strongly with us in MU library as we set about developing key relationships throughout the planning process that would enable us to take full advantage of a new undergraduate curriculum. Having a seat at the 'top table' for this process presented a real opportunity for the library to illustrate the importance of our role and the benefit it can provide to both students and faculty.

The second factor in creating the right conditions for collaboration was the strong focus placed on interdisciplinary learning by the current MU strategic plan. This multi-disciplinary approach to curriculum reform created an environment where collaboration between departments was actively encouraged and those involved in directing the new curriculum were receptive to potential new partners.

Embedding information literacy through critical skills, collaboration and a new curriculum

Thirdly, despite the undertaking of a large and wide-ranging project such as curriculum reform, as with all publicly funded third level institutions in Ireland, Maynooth University was experiencing severe resource scarcity in both financial and staffing terms. Difficult economic times often require those with responsibility for these kinds of projects to become more creative with solutions and strategies. Thus the library was a welcome part of the planning process. As argued by Kempcke, if we could prove that we are equal to faculty, this was an opportunity for us to be involved in the design, delivery and assessment of the new undergraduate curriculum, embedding IL from the outset.

Finally, and arguably most significantly, the 2012–17 strategic plan demonstrates a real commitment to information literacy. Described below, this is seen throughout the new curriculum and is included in the Maynooth University graduate attributes.

A Maynooth education

In September 2015, MU began to pilot the new undergraduate curriculum, entitled 'A Maynooth education'. Alongside this, the university also produced a new set of graduate attributes, which outline the skills, knowledge and abilities expected of MU graduates. These state that '...students are encouraged to utilise opportunities for self-development within a challenging programme of study, and graduates are expected to be... capable of gathering and critiquing information from a variety of sources' (Maynooth University, 2015a).

The central elements of 'A Maynooth education', as illustrated below, are the development of deep knowledge and critical intellectual skills; the creation of autonomous and responsible learners; the development of skills for life and work; and enabling students to have a breadth of perspective.

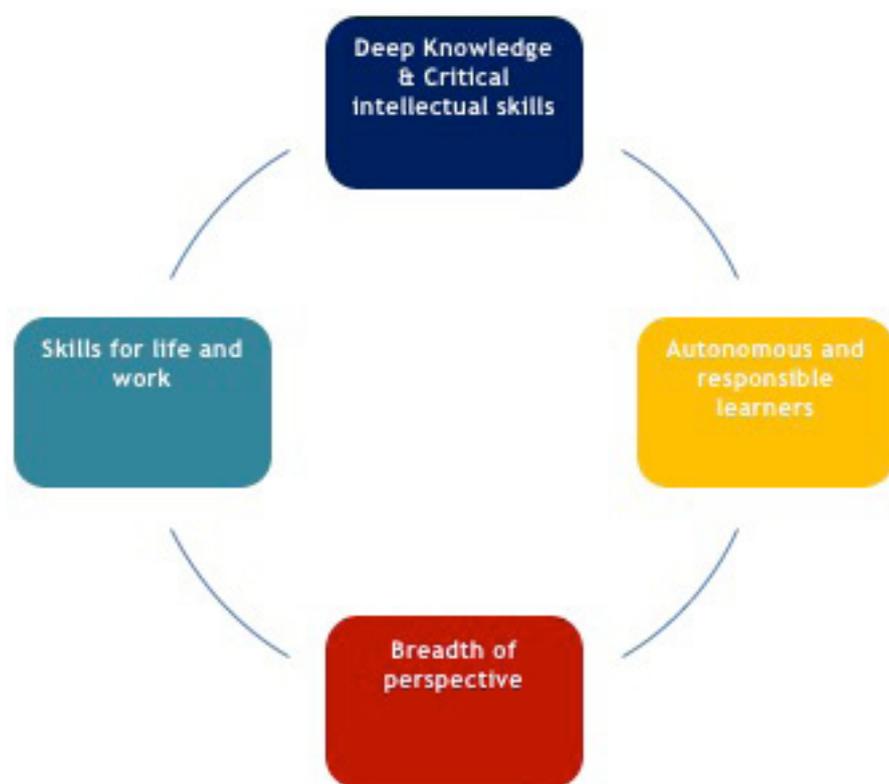


Fig. 1 A Maynooth education

Through these elements, the new undergraduate curriculum places a fundamental emphasis on the development of critical skills such as

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Embedding information literacy through critical skills, collaboration and a new curriculum

problem solving, critical thinking, analysis, reflection, communication skills, understanding academic standards and ethical responsibility (Maynooth University, 2015a).

In the academic year 2015–16, the university chose to pilot three new first-year modules to facilitate the critical skills element of the new curriculum. These modules used content as a vehicle for the delivery of critical skills, but students were assessed on skills rather than knowledge of content.

When we in the library reviewed the list of critical skills, it became immediately apparent that there was a clear connection with information literacy and that in order to develop the critical skills described above, students would need to become information literate. For example, searching for information effectively requires problem-solving skills; critical thinking and analytical skills are needed to evaluate information and its sources; and students need to have a clear understanding of plagiarism in order to understand academic standards fully and be ethically responsible.

We seized this opportunity and argued that the library should play a key role in the critical skills initiative, designing the curriculum, supporting its delivery and contributing to its assessment. For the reasons described above, our proposed collaboration was welcomed.

Prior to proposing this collaboration, we conducted our own preparations to ensure that we had structures in place to support and inform our work in the critical skills initiative. Thus we developed a new information literacy framework for Maynooth University (Maynooth University Library, 2016). The new framework is based on elements from 'A new curriculum for information literacy' (ANCIL) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) new Framework for Information Literacy in higher education (Secker & Coonan, 2011; Association of College and Research Libraries, 2014).

The new framework identifies five key competencies for students:

- managing the transition and becoming an independent learner
- mapping and evaluating the information landscape
- researching within the disciplines
- managing and presenting information
- understanding the ethical and social dimensions of information.

The framework does not suggest that these should be taught or developed in a linear way, rather that they are the identifiable competencies of an information-literate student. Their development in each student will depend on a broad range of factors including discipline, current skills level and educational and professional experience. We linked these competencies to the central elements of 'A Maynooth education' (Fig. 2). In this way, key senior university personnel responsible for the delivery of the critical skills modules were immediately able to understand the role the library could play in the delivery of critical skills, and the importance of having the delivery of information literacy integrated with other critical skills and in the context of academic subjects.

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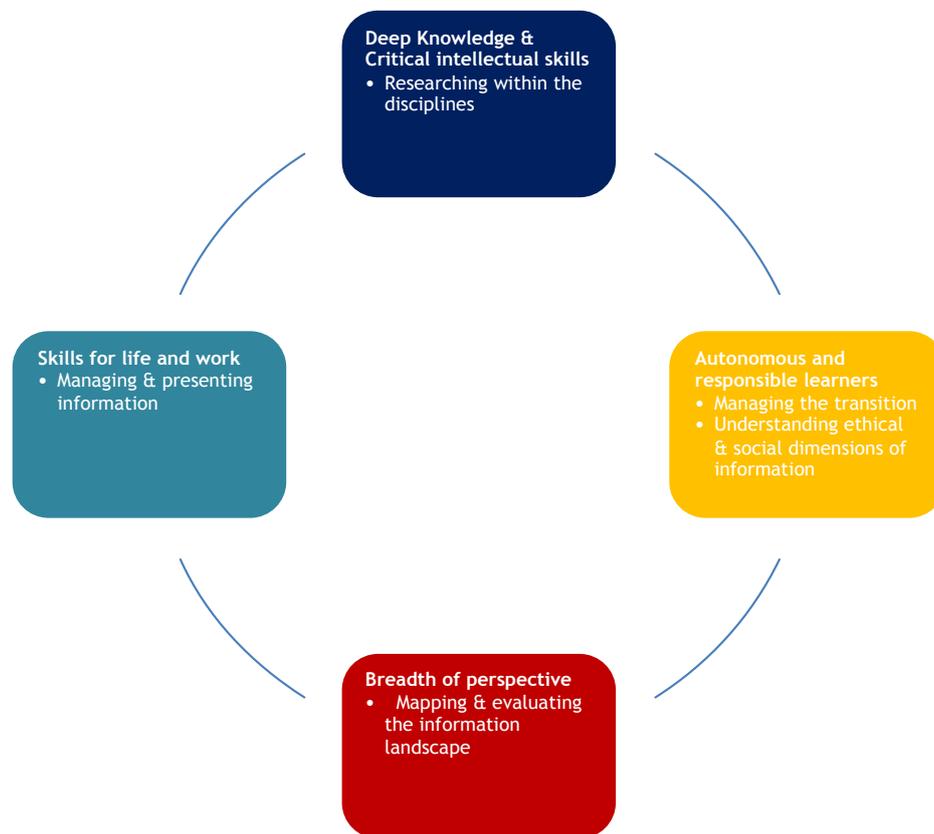


Fig. 2 A Maynooth education & the Five IL competencies

The library now collaborates closely with the centre for teaching and learning in the design, delivery and assessment of the critical skills modules. These modules were piloted in the 2015–16 academic year and will be mainstreamed to all incoming first years in 2016–17. Information literacy is a key component of the critical skills modules, and its development is scaffolded onto other key skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, giving students the opportunity to become information literate in a real-world context. Although we are heavily involved in the curriculum design, we are not involved in content delivery. Critical skills tutors are trained by library staff and given ongoing support and guidance from relevant librarians. The ongoing growth of student numbers at MU means that it would not be possible for us to deliver IL classes to all students. Our role in the critical skills modules enables us to ensure that all first years are given the opportunity to develop IL in the context of their curriculum, rather than in a stand-alone, one-shot session, and in a way that is sustainable for the library. Rather than support staff, librarians are now viewed as the ‘experts’ in the area of information literacy, acting in an advisory and consultative role.

Reflections <subhdg A>

One of the most tangible benefits of our new role in the critical skills modules is that we have found a sustainable approach to the delivery of IL across the curriculum. It has never been possible for us to reach all students in a classroom setting and, now that the university population is growing at a rapid rate, it became imperative that a solution for this be found. Our collaboration with CTL also means that we are reaching a much broader range of students, beyond those who happen to have a lecturer who is engaged with the library and invites the librarian to participate in a class.

Shortly after the first critical skills pilot modules began in 2015, there was a call for applications for a university teaching and learning fellowship. Through our close working relationship with CTL we identified the potential to develop a

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Embedding information literacy through critical skills, collaboration and a new curriculum

range of resources that support the development and assessment of IL skills and the MU graduate attributes (as described above). Our success in securing this award illustrates the benefits of developing strategic partnerships across campus and in June 2016 we collaborated further with CTL to present a conference paper on our work together.

While our experience working at a strategic level in the university and collaborating on the critical skills initiative has been a positive one in the main, we are aware of potential challenges ahead. As critical skills become more mainstreamed throughout the curriculum, individual academic departments will assume greater responsibility for the delivery of critical skills. In order for us to maintain our role in the design and delivery of IL across the curriculum, we will need to continue to develop our role as campus 'experts' in IL and demonstrate our professional and educational expertise. As Kempcke notes, 'we must make IL skills unquestionably as important as writing, speaking, math and science skills. To do less would be a disservice to students and the institution we serve' (2002, p. 547).

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