

# USE OF SCONUL'S 7 PILLARS MODEL FOR INFORMATION LITERACY: FINDINGS OF A STUDY OF SCONUL INSTITUTIONS 2008-2009

## 1. INTRODUCTION

SCONUL's Seven Pillars for Information Literacy was launched, and well received by member institutions, in 2000. In 2007, SCONUL's Information Literacy Working Group (SWGIL) revisited the 7 Pillars model, to discuss whether it needed an update and re-launch. In the course of the discussion, it was agreed that a study of the use of the 7 Pillars model would be beneficial, to ascertain whether and how it was being used. Therefore, this study was designed and carried out between October 2008 and January 2009.

The objectives of the study, as agreed by WGIL, are:

- To determine how many UK university and college libraries use the SCONUL 7 Pillars model for planning and/or delivering Information Literacy.
- To find out how college and university libraries use the 7 Pillars Model, and how (or whether) they feel it could be amended or developed to be more useful.
- To find out what else SCONUL members feel that the WGIL could provide to support the delivery of Information Literacy.

The study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, a brief email questionnaire was sent to all SCONUL member institutions, asking:

- Does your library or information service use SCONUL's 7 Pillars model of Information Literacy?
- If no: What, if anything, could SCONUL provide to better support your planning, delivery and/or evaluation of Information Literacy?
- If yes: would you be happy for a SCONUL member to contact you by telephone to ask a few brief questions about your use of, and views about, the 7 Pillars model?

The second phase of the study was originally intended to consist of telephone interviews with those people who answered yes to the third question above, to gather qualitative information on how they used the 7 Pillars, and to ascertain whether they felt the model needed amending or updating. However, the response rate to the email questionnaire was low, with only 38 of the 178 SCONUL institutions responding, with a disproportionate number of the replies from non-Russell Group universities. Therefore, the second phase of the study was extended to include telephone interviews with a selection of non-responding institutions, asking whether or not they used the 7 Pillars, and gathering additional information at the same time. Fourteen institutions were contacted in this phase, chosen at random from lists of the under-represented groups, ie, HE colleges and Russell Group universities. At each, a brief telephone interview was carried out with the person responsible for IL, asking:

- Whether their institution used the 7 pillars for planning or delivering IL.
- If so, how they used it, with prompts if necessary – eg, as part of an IL strategy or policy, for planning teaching sessions, linked with learning outcomes or to assess student skills.
- Whether they felt the model needed changing in any way.
- If they did not use it, what else could SCONUL do to assist them with the planning and delivery of IL.

Although participants were not asked why they did *not* use the 7 Pillars, most people who said no went on to explain why they did not use it.

## 2. FINDINGS

The combined results of the email questionnaire and the telephone interviews are shown in the table below.

Type of Institution	Yes	No
Russell Group Universities	7	4
Non-Russell Group Universities	22	7
HE Colleges	2	1
TOTAL	40	12

In discussions below, the participating institutions are not named for reasons of confidentiality. Rather, they are referred to by the generic terms: Russell Group University, Redbrick University (ie, a Redbrick University not in the Russell Group), Modern University, New University (ie, a post-1992 institution) and HE College.

### 2.1 Use of the 7 Pillars

Interview data, and comments included on the survey, show that the 7 Pillars model is used in a variety of ways in member institutions, with some organisations using the model in several ways. An overview is provided in the table below, followed by discussion of key themes

Uses of the 7 Pillars	No of orgs
Underpins IL programme design	10
Used in strategy and/or policy documents	6
Library or HEI IL frameworks are based on it	5
Used for learning outcomes or competencies	4
Provides framework for online/VLE IL module	4
Used for discussion and debate; was a starting point for developing IL	3
Linked to IL quiz	1

### 2.1.1 Underpins Programme Design

Ten organisations stated that the 7 Pillars underpins the design of their IL programmes. For example:

We have used the 7 Pillars model within our embedded IL programmes, ie, those in which IL is a mandatory element of an academic unit. The Pillars provide the underpinning structure for those programmes, and are linked to learning outcomes and students' assessment. (Russell Group University)

We restructured our user education programme a couple of years ago and developed four levels, each with learning outcomes mapped to the SCONUL skills. (New University)

[We are] currently developing support for information literacy and [are] using the Seven Pillars model to inform the process in line with the University's Institutional Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy. [We aim] to enhance student learning and encourage a critical, analytical and evaluative approach to information literacy. (New University)

In some institutions, the 7 Pillars model is used alongside other models:

We use the 7 Pillars as a starting point when putting together IL courses for our students. We do not show the model to the students. We also use the ACRL IL Competency Standards for HE. (HE College)

This model of information literacy, along with other statements of IL from bodies such as CILIP and the framework that has been developed at Glasgow Caledonian University, underpins a great deal of the IL programme that I deliver... I try to build skills in the work that I do with new entrants through to honours undergraduate students; with postgraduate research students I aim to further develop higher order skills... (New University)

### 2.1.2 Used in policy and/or strategy documents

Six respondents stated that they used the 7 Pillars in their strategy or policy documents, either in the library's own IL strategy, and/or as part of a wider University strategy for learning and teaching.

We quote the 7 Pillars in our IL Strategy, as it offers a clear and helpful definition of what IL is all about. (Russell Group University)

[Our new] PVC for Teaching and Learning... is encouraging us to subsume our policy/strategy within the new Teaching and Learning strategy... After all, academics do suffer from policy fatigue. . . [W]e have a working document which references the 7 Pillars model and a CILIP definition. (Modern University)

The 7 Pillars are included in our information literacy strategy alongside the CILIP definition. (New University)

We have used the 7 Pillars in forming our strategy. (New University)

We have also put forward an IL strategy to the university based on the 7 pillars. (New University)

### 2.1.3 Library or HEI IL frameworks are based on it

Five institutions (all non-Russell Group) stated that they had frameworks for the delivery of IL across their organisations which were based on the 7 Pillars.

Our information literacy framework, developed in 2004, was based on it. (New University)

We are currently using it as the basis of an undergraduate skills framework which all programmes will be expected to show evidence of. It hopes to deliver evenly across all the pillars using input from ICT skills, the effective learning service, subject librarians and academics. (New University)

It was incorporated into the University's Information Literacy Framework, which was endorsed by our Academic Board about 5 years ago, and sent out in a glossy brochure to every member of academic staff. Since then, interest has waned, so this year we are planning to re-launch [the framework]. We are taking a two-pronged approach to the re-launch: firstly working with academic staff to re-word the document, and secondly to incorporate examples of good practice for each pillar, and how IL is being delivered for each at a variety of different levels so that staff can better understand what we can offer and how it will improve our students' work. (New University)

A few years ago, when we were in the process of becoming embedded in the first year undergraduate subject curriculum across all faculties in College, we referred to the "Seven Pillars" model in our supporting documentation. We specified our intention that the librarian and the academic would collaborate together on adapting the model to the specific needs of their students. (Russell Group University)

### 2.1.4 Learning Outcomes

Four institutions also linked the 7 Pillars to learning outcomes. For example:

We have a learning outcomes grid that outlines the various learning outcomes an individual should be able to meet at different stages of a course. These are grouped around a derivative of the seven pillars. (New University)

We have identified specific learning outcomes within each pillar. [Each of these has] suggested activities attached (Russell Group University)

### 2.1.5 Provides framework for online/VLE module or learning objects

Four respondents also stated that the 7 Pillars model provides a framework specifically for their online delivery of IL:

As part of a... project which created Learning Objects in collaboration with the School of Law, the 7 Pillars, in combination with the ALA IL Competency Standards, were used to create a grid of IL competencies at various levels, from 'Novice' to 'Expert' user for use with staff. The grid helped to clarify which skills each LO aimed to introduce/build up when at the planning stage. (Redbrick University)

It has been used as a framework for a suite of online information literacy modules. (Redbrick University)

We have a set of online Information Skills tutorials in the VLE, each with learning outcomes mapped to the SCONUL skills. (New University)

We're developing VLE modules for all/most faculties and we took the 7 Pillars as a starting-point for the structure and content of these. The 7 became 6, in a [university]-specific context, but it would be wrong to suggest that we sought to depart seriously from the essentials of the SCONUL model, which informs our VLE i-skills work as much if not more than it does our 'traditional' teaching. (Russell Group University)

#### 2.1.6 Used for discussion and debate, or as a starting point for developing IL

Three respondents said they do not use the 7 Pillars directly in any of the contexts described above, but that it was used as a starting point for developing IL, and/or for discussion and debate with the academic community.

[It was] a model for debate in our Learning and Teaching Committee. (New University)

Although not used in an institution-wide context, library staff have found the 7 Pillars model useful to refer to when talking to academics to help to explain exactly what is meant by the term 'Information Literacy' – which anecdotal evidence suggests is still not widely understood outside of the library community. (Redbrick University)

We have used it before as an informal reference point for subject librarians and discussions with academics on information literacy. (New University)

#### 2.1.7 Quiz questions

Finally, one Russell Group University said that the 7 Pillars were 'allocated as metadata to the quiz questions we have created.'

## 2.2 Why Some Organisations Do Not Use the 7 Pillars

Whilst 40 institutions (77% of the sample group) said they did use the 7 Pillars in some way, ten respondents said they did not use it. Some people did not say why they did not use the model. For example, one HE College respondent who answered 'no' to the first questionnaire question went on to say, 'I am aware of the Seven Pillars and am probably unconsciously affected by, it although I have not referred to it recently.' Others, however, gave reasons why they did not use it. These are shown in the following table, and discussed below.

<b>Do Not Use 7 Pillars Because...</b>	<b>No of orgs</b>
IL is increasingly delivered electronically, and model is not suitable	3
Use other models instead	3
The university is not ready for the 7 Pillars	2
Our main thrust is academic competencies, linked to the curriculum	2
Our decentralised institution would not welcome a 'top-down' model	1
We developed our own model	1

### 2.2.1 Not suitable for online delivery of IL

Three universities felt that the 7 Pillars was not suitable for the e-learning environment, which was their preferred method of delivering IL.

We looked a few years ago at what we needed to tell students [using the VLE]. We considered 7 Pillars, but didn't use it. It is nice as a theory, but not suitable for what we wanted to do. Instead, we have documents and help sheets on study skills, including library skills. (New University)

It is increasingly provided electronically. The synergies are with study support or support for academics. There is an IL community with the VLE materials, as part of the broader academic community. (New University)

We use a VLE now, rather than [face-to-face] teaching. (Russell Group University)

### 2.2.2 Use other models instead

Three universities stated that they use other models instead of the 7 Pillars. A Scottish university said they used the Big Six model. Others said:

[A] after much thought we opted for an amalgam of Big Blue, ANZILL and AACRL. We do however see existing models as essential heuristics – at present they don't necessarily reflect the iterative, circular, dynamic, and even serendipitous way in which people gather and assimilate information or on how they learn. (New University)

We use several models and standards to inform our practice in learning and teaching and in curriculum and content development. This may include subject benchmarks and programme or module learning outcomes. (Modern University)

### 2.2.3 The University is not ready for the 7 Pillars

Two universities stated that their organisations were not ready to use the 7 Pillars, one suggesting that the model wasn't practical enough, and the other because they felt the university was not yet ready to engage with any model of IL:

We have an Information Literacy Roadmap which was . . . approved as university policy in 2006 . . . It was felt that the university wasn't ready for the Seven Pillars at the time and so [we] avoided the SCONUL model and made the roadmap as practical as possible. (Russell Group University)

Here at the [New University] we are at the beginning of a process to embed Information Literacy into the curriculum and we have looked at a number of different models including the SCONUL Seven Pillars model. The issue we face [here] is the variance of what is currently undertaken across the University, which ranges from a high level of engagement with academic staff and students in some areas to pretty much no engagement with others. At present we are looking first of all to improve our liaison with the schools/facilities where we have little input to bring them up to a level of engagement where we are in a position to consider which model of Information Literacy would best suit [the University]. (New University)

#### 2.2.4 Use university-driven academic competencies instead

Two universities stated that they were focussed on the academic competencies used in their organisations' programmes, suggesting that these were different than, or incompatible with, the 7 Pillars. For example:

The main thrust is on academic competencies so what we provide depends on the pedagogy and curriculum within the institution. (New University)

#### 2.2.5 Other reasons

There were also two other reasons given why organisations did not use the 7 Pillars. One Russell Group university stated that their university would not welcome a 'top down' model, and another stated that they had developed their own model:

The library defined 5 IL standards in a paper to Learning & Teaching Committee. These standards have been endorsed by the University and departments are required to implement them, starting in the 2007/8 academic year. (Russell Group University)

### 2.3 **What changes are needed to the Pillars, or what else can SCONUL WGIL do to help?**

There was a wide variety of things suggested by the study's participants which SCONUL WGIL could do to help their organisations develop and deliver IL, as shown in the table below.

Suggestions for SCONUL WGIL	No of orgs
Nothing	2
Work on evaluating the impact of IL	2
Support staff with ideas for planning, delivery & evaluation	2
Split each pillar into levels	1
Identify specific learning outcomes for each pillar	1
Map IL programme activities to the pillars	1
Needs another layer to express differences between information skills and information literacy	1
IL should be seen in context of the wider learning and teaching agenda. SCONUL should continue to engage with HEA (especially HEA-ICS).	1
Use the 'Big Six'. It would be good to join with CILIP and Scottish IL project.	1
Lobby LIS schools to include IL & teaching skills	1
Feedback from those who have embedded	1
Undertake or commission research to test IL models to help understanding of how people who engage with information are finding that information	1
Would be useful to have something relevant to the 'blended' world where VLEs are used increasingly.	1
Advocacy of IL	1
Examples of what other institutions have done	1
More seminars on strategies for embedding	1

Some of these suggestions are discussed further in the Conclusions and Recommendations below.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some key themes which arise from the respondents' views described above. These are discussed below, each followed by recommendations for SWIGL.

#### 3.1. Examples and Case Studies

The study shows that there is a range of good practice in IL, using the 7 Pillars model for a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts. Participants have suggested that SWIGL could usefully disseminate these examples.

More examples of what other institutions have done are always welcome to help inspire new approaches. Hearing of success (and failure) elsewhere is useful when taking new IL initiatives forward and revisiting old ones. (Modern University)

Case studies on how institutions have addressed IL would be particularly helpful (although perhaps they already exist?) (New University)

I think feedback from colleagues who are in the process or who have embedded a programme would be useful. (New University)

**Recommendation 1: Building on this study, SWIGL should identify and disseminate case study examples of successful IL programmes, especially those in which the 7 Pillars model is used.**

#### 3.2 Embedding: the 7 Pillars and academic competencies

Several participants stated that their organisations used the 7 Pillars in IL programmes which were embedded in the academic curriculum. However, two organisations said they did not use the model, suggesting that it was not compatible with embedded IL using academic competencies and learning outcomes.

Library-based teaching needs to be considered in the context of the wider teaching and learning agenda. Although it is valuable to explore conceptions of teaching as a librarian and how we may best develop information and learning skills, I also believe that we need to engage more widely with the academic community nationally and within our institutions. I think it may be useful to continue an engagement with the HEA (in particular the HEA-ICS) but I recognise the difficulties of working with subject centres and their limited remit in respect of central service staff. Standalone conferences are always popular, but they can risk just comprising librarians talking to other librarians, all of them seeking a universal key to knowledge in teaching. (New University)

What I am most concerned about is the amount of time taken up by information specialists in teaching and whether this is really appropriate. This is why it is really important to embed what they do or use appropriate technologies. (Modern University)

**Recommendation 2: Disseminated case Studies should include, or focus on, examples of embedded IL programmes, especially those in which the 7 Pillars model is used.**

**Recommendation 3: SWIGL should continue to engage with the HEA, and with the academic community generally.**



### 3.3 Levels and Learning Outcomes

One participant who used the 7 Pillars model noted that they had applied levels to each of the pillars, and two people noted that they associated learning outcomes with the pillars. Additionally, two participants suggested that the 7 Pillars should have associated levels and learning outcomes. For example, one participant said:

[T]he model does not consider the notion of levels or stages through which the learner must pass on his/her journey from novice to expert. The 7 Pillars model does in fact acknowledge this journey as it lists the stages as outlined in the Dreyfus and Dreyfus 5 stage novice to expert model of skills development. We have had to identify appropriate stages of development of IL and our framework has tried to represent these as learning outcomes/level descriptors for each of the 5 stages. Guidance/consensus across the sector would be valuable in this area. (New University)

**Recommendation 4: Disseminated case studies should provide examples of levels and of learning outcomes in IL programmes or frameworks using the 7 Pillars model.**

**Recommendation 5: In an updated 7 Pillars model, SWIGL should consider providing standard levels and learning outcomes associated with each Pillar.**

### 3.4 IL and the 7 Pillars in the e-Learning Environment

Several participants discussed using the 7 Pillars in an e-learning environment, including in VLEs, learning objects and an online quiz. Three people, however, implied that the 7 Pillars was not immediately applicable in the e-learning environment, and one of these suggested that SWIGL could provide 'something relevant to the blended world where the VLE is the tool of communication.'

**Recommendation 6: Disseminated case studies should include examples of 7 Pillars used to underpin IL delivered online, including if possible VLE modules and learning objects.**

### 3.5 Assessment

Several participants mentioned that their IL programmes were assessed, and one linked the 7 Pillars with that assessment. Two people suggested that SWIGL could look further at assessing IL, for example:

I would like to see SCONUL looking at how to assess information literacy skills either separately, which might be difficult to assess, or integrated with subject assessment. In particular, at assessing the thinking skills, not the technical search skills. (New University)

**Recommendation 7: SWIGL should consider the feasibility of gathering further information from practitioners about assessed IL, particularly that linked to the 7 Pillars, in order to provide examples and case studies.**

### 3.6 Evaluation, Impact Measurement and Advocacy

Many of the study's participants were concerned with the lack of academic uptake of and commitment to IL. Some people suggested that, in addition to maintaining its advocacy role generally, SWIGL could usefully provide a method of evaluation and impact measurement.

The problem which our information professionals face here – and which is no doubt encountered in many other institutions – is of trying to gain footholds into which information skills sessions can be taught on programmes which are owned by schools and faculties. Essentially we have to convince academics that information skills are more important than something else in the curriculum which will then of necessity have to come out. (Russell Group University)

There is still much to be done in measuring impact in an area of skills development where many colleagues still do not have an opportunity to undertake proper measurement of student achievement and learning. (New University)

We believe that SCONUL has a role to play in advocacy of IL, continuing to explain what it means, and how it makes a difference both to students who gain these skills, and to academics. (Eg, increased classroom participation due to student ability to identify and synthesise relevant materials within databases effectively.) (Modern University)

We'd like to see SCONUL undertake/commission research which tests IL models so that we can begin to understand how people engage with information and the process of finding it. (New University)

**Recommendation 8: SWIGL should continue its advocacy role, promoting the growing significance of IL to support and underpin learning and research in HE.**

**Recommendation 9: SWIGL should consider carrying out or commissioning an impact study of IL in Higher Education.**

### 3.7 The 7 Pillars and other models

Several study participants mentioned that they used other frameworks alongside the 7 Pillars, and two participants said they used other models *instead of* the 7 Pillars. Other models mentioned were Big Blue, Anziil, ACRL and the Big Six.

Obviously the model is quite old now, so it has been supplemented by models such as BRUCE 6 frames model which bring a wider perspective to IL teaching. The most helpful material is to be found on the CSG IL group website as our academic liaison librarians get most benefit from pragmatic advice and freely available toolkits. (Modern University)

**Recommendation 10: It is important that SWIGL continues to maintain close links with other bodies addressing IL in HE, in order to identify, develop and promote synergies between developing models and practice, and to reduce incompatibilities.**

Cathryn Gallacher, April 2009