

# **INFORMATION COMPETENCIES AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS OF POLISH UNIVERSITIES EXPLORATORY STUDIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The authors present the development and perspectives of improving the quality of Information Literacy programmes in Polish technical universities, considering the Bologna Process and the general conditions of the Polish higher education system. The survey conducted in selected technical and medical universities provided an overview of changes introduced recently in Polish higher education (assumptions of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and Polish Qualifications Framework). These changes are directly related to the implementation of Information Literacy into the curriculum using different forms of teaching, including e-learning. The study comprises analysis of different teaching methods (traditional, e-learning, blended learning) in developing information competencies.

## **KEYWORDS**

National Qualifications Framework, Information Literacy, e-learning

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Signing the Bologna Declaration by the Polish government introduced revolutionary changes into the Polish academic institutions. The main objective of the Bologna Process was ensuring more comparable and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. In order to achieve the goal, a plan was prepared for implementing the changes in the national educational system as well as at the European level. The project of The Polish National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is an ongoing process which started in 2006. In 2010, the efforts for preparing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) by experts resulted in preparing document "Establishing a balance sheet of qualifications and competencies available in the labour market and developing a model of the National Qualifications Framework". According to this document, "(...) the Polish Qualification Framework shows interactions between qualifications and integrate the different national qualifications subsystems. It also describes the hierarchy of the qualification levels (...) In the Framework, each of the levels is defined by descriptors which define, in general terms, the learning outcomes required at a given level" (Chłoń-Domińczak, Dębowski, Sławiński, 2013). The Act of 18 March 2011, introduced NQF to the Polish higher educational system. New regulations were applied from 1 October 2012. Students who began their studies in the academic year 2012/2013 follow the programmes developed by taking into account the learning outcomes.

Information competencies belong to the generic skills described in the NQF and universities should give their students the possibility of gaining knowledge and developing skills of information literacy. Information competencies are described in the National Qualifications Framework as learning outcomes in terms of knowledge and skills in the area of technical, medical sciences and other sciences. The skills are divided into competencies for the university beginners and for graduate students. The basic skills include the ability of searching information through different types of resources (including printed and electronic publications). The advanced competencies additionally contain evaluation and interpretation of information.

Information Literacy competencies have also been described similarly in scientific literature. These specific skills are as a key factor in lifelong learning. They are vital in achieving educational goals (Lau, 2016). A detailed description of information competencies can be used for creating the Information Literacy programmes at universities. Libraries are natural partners for universities in building information competencies. Library's participation in teaching process can take different forms depending on the university. According to the NQF, Information Literacy programme should be implemented in two stages, the first being training for the beginners (issues related to using the library and searching resources) and the second - for more advanced issues, including search strategy and sources evaluation.

## **2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Universities in Poland use different ways and tools for implementing information competencies. The term "Information Literacy" is used by the authors of the survey as all forms of library courses and other activities, prepared and/or supported by librarians and addressed to students, both within the curriculum and outside of it. At present, in Poland there are no standard regulations for including Information Literacy (IL) courses into the curricula. Introduction and implementation of these activities depend on each university's regulations and faculty's or library's initiatives. That is why the courses on Information Literacy can have various forms and hold various assumptions.

For this study, the authors distinguish four types of activities related to IL at universities. Firstly, the subject can take the form of a course on Information Literacy as part of the curriculum, conducted only by librarians. Secondly, the subject can be conducted by the faculty lecturer with the librarian's support. The next one is a course on Information Literacy as part of the curriculum and provided without any library support. Another type is library training courses for university beginners. Each of those courses can be implemented at different stages of university education: courses for undergraduate, graduate and PhD students.

The aim of this survey was to determine the libraries' participation in implementing information literacy courses in the curricula and to what extent is e-learning used in these courses. The other purpose of the study was to investigate the library preferences in using e-learning tools for building users' competencies in information management.

## **3. RESULTS**

The authors prepared a questionnaire comprising 15 questions and sent it to 30 university libraries (19 technical and 11 medical). The online method was used. The universities' websites were used for collecting the libraries' emails. 83% (25 out of 30) libraries responded and filled in the questionnaire. The study conclusions are presented below.

The survey found that only 6 surveyed libraries do not conduct any type of regular courses that are part of the curricula. It means that vast majority of libraries (19 out of 25) participates in helping develop information competencies.

Most libraries provide only one type of courses. Only few of them conduct courses themselves and also give support to subjects conducted by faculty lectures. More than a half of the libraries conduct the courses on Information Literacy as part of the curriculum at each of educational stages.

The results also indicate that only few libraries conduct courses on Information Literacy in cooperation with the faculty lecturer. 36% of respondents provide this type of courses for undergraduate students, 28% for graduate students and 12% for PhD students.

The library training for beginners is the most common at the universities. All respondents indicated that their library provides such training for undergraduate students. 32% of libraries provide it for graduate students and almost 28% for PhDs. The detailed information on the course type and the university stage is shown in the table below.

Table 1. Types of Information Literacy courses and its implementation at different educational stages

	Library conducts courses on information literacy, as part of the curriculum			The subject of Information Literacy is conducted by the faculty lecturer with the librarian' support			Library training for the university beginners		
	undergrad-uate students	graduate students	PhD students	undergrad-uate students	graduate students	PhD students	undergrad-uate students	graduate students	PhD students
Number of libraries (% of responses)									
<b>Library does not conduct any classes</b>	12 (48%)	11 (44%)	12 (48%)	15 (60%)	18 (72%)	22 (88%)	0 (0%)	8 (32%)	18 (72%)
<b>Traditional courses (lecture, workshops) etc.</b>	9 (36%)	9 (36%)	8 (32%)	8 (32%)	6 (24%)	3 (12%)	8 (33%)	8 (32%)	2 (8%)
<b>Online courses (e-learning)</b>	1 (4%)	3 (12%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (40%)	5 (20%)	1 (4%)
<b>Blended learning (traditional and online courses)</b>	3 (12%)	2 (8%)	4 (16%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	7 (28%)	4 (16%)	4 (16%)

There are various reasons for regular courses not being as popular as the library training. Firstly, library training for university beginners has a long tradition in Poland and started long before implementing National Qualification Framework. In other words, there is no need to convince faculty authorities to introduce such training at the beginning of each academic year, because it is customary at university. Usually, they are short (maximum 2 hours), so they require less effort for preparation in comparison with regular lectures or workshops that last much longer. What is more, the course content is rather general, thus easier to prepare.

Among 13 libraries that conduct courses on Information Literacy, 9 prefer traditional form of teaching for graduate and undergraduate students, 8 libraries favor it for teaching PhD students. The traditional form dominates also in courses conducted in cooperation with the faculty lecturer.

We can see that online courses are mostly used in the library training for university beginners. The vast majority of the libraries offer their users e-learning courses or blended courses. The e-learning tools are not as much popular in conducting regular subjects in the curriculum.

The libraries which offer e-learning courses usually use university e-learning platform (12 responses). 7 libraries have their own e-learning platform.

The survey also shows that librarians use various types of the materials in e-learning. There seems to be a tendency to use the text documents - 19 libraries indicated it. Such great popularity may be caused by the fact that they are easy to prepare. What is more, 12 libraries put audio and video materials on their platform. The third most frequently selected response was using interactive tools such as games, quizzes and other interactive activities. These figures can lead to the conclusion that libraries try to use as many ways and tools in e-learning as possible. They are not afraid of taking risks and are open to new teaching possibilities.

The respondents were also asked if they conduct surveys on users' preferences in teaching methods. It turned out that the majority of libraries (64%) do not conduct any surveys on this issue. The libraries that did such surveys indicate that the most preferred teaching method for users is e-learning and blended learning.

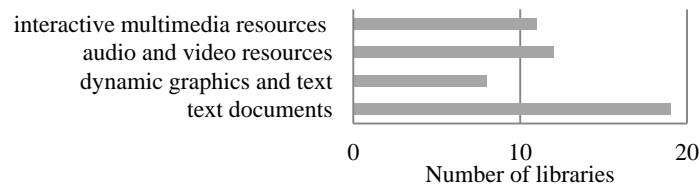


Figure 1. Types of learning materials used in e-learning

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the survey results, it may be concluded that despite the fact that National Qualification Framework has been implemented since 2010, there is still a lot to do in the area of including Information Literacy in the university curricula. The survey results also show that it is academic libraries that have taken the responsibility for including IL into curricula. Only 6 surveyed libraries do not conduct any regular courses as part of the curriculum. At 3 universities, the subject was deployed without any library support. The data analysis indicates that the medical libraries have the best achievements in this area. All of them provide courses on IL for PhDs.

The experiences of the Warsaw University of Technology Main Library show that including the courses on Information Literacy in the curriculum is a long process which encounters many considerable obstacles. The most significant one is the lack of awareness on Information Literacy importance in education. Usually, there are no general regulations at the universities that could help facilitate cooperation between faculties and the library. Faculties sometimes do not have basic knowledge on what Information Literacy really is and this is why they are reluctant to introduce it. They sometimes perceive conducting courses on Information Literacy as something which requires additional personnel and costs. This could be one of reasons why they hesitate to ask the library for help or cooperation. Another reason can be that they do not consider the library as a partner in teaching.

The vast majority of the courses were included as the result of the library and faculty initiative. The success in this process depends on the library commitment. It is also very important to keep in touch with the university authorities, participate in all possible educational meetings organized at the university and try convincing as many faculty deans as possible that developing information competencies is really important. Such proactive approach seems to be the only key to success. The worst thing that libraries can do is passive waiting for the faculty initiative.

When the library succeeds in including new courses in the curriculum it can consider using various teaching method such as e-learning, that can help them make their educational offer more attractive to users. A wide range of educational activities, flexible and tailored to the needs of specific groups, is necessary for gaining users' attention and for meeting their expectations. E-learning tools such as interactive exercises can help students get more involved in developing information competencies. We really hope that the libraries in Poland will see all possibilities in using e-learning tools in teaching and e-learning usage in regular courses will be growing.

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