
'Out of the Blue' - achievements of the Big Blue Project

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Project manager Alison Mackenzie presented an interim report on the progress of the Big Blue project in her article in the Winter 2001 edition of the SCONUL Newsletter (1). The project has now concluded and the aim of this piece is to comment on the final outputs. These include the case studies of good practice carried out in ten higher education and post-16 institutions, and the development of two information skills toolkits, one a general resource for those developing information skills (IS) programmes, and the other aimed specifically at post-16 institutions, which demonstrates how elements of IS can be found within the Key Skills curriculum.

THE CASE STUDIES

The case studies were selected from a variety of institutions to reflect differing scenarios across the post-16 and higher education sectors. For instance, Tamworth and Lichfield College is a small institution which has a modest learning resource centre with a very small staff. In contrast, University of Leeds is a large research-led university with three main library sites and nearly 200 full time library staff. By demonstrating what is possible in even the smallest institutions, the project team hoped to provide realistic examples for all members of the post-16 and higher education library and information community.

The project team were not expecting to find institutions where an entire IS programme was being delivered in an ideal way. Nor were the case studies intended to provide analysable or comparable results. Instead it was hoped to identify institutions that were simply doing something well, be it good evaluation of their programme, an innovative method of delivery or the embedding of some training into a curriculum. Whilst carrying out the case studies the team were equally keen to report

the challenges and difficulties the institutions had faced, as well as their successes and achievements. In identifying and describing such examples, the project has been able to offer tangible, practical demonstrations of what had been achieved by a variety of institutions.

The full text of the case studies can be found on the project website at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/bigblue/casestudies.htm>. They also form a significant part of the content of the information skills toolkits.

THE TOOLKITS

The major result of the project has been the development of the information skills toolkit. The content has been drawn from three main sources: the literature review; the audit of IS provision carried out in summer 2001; and the case studies, completed in March 2002. The post-16 toolkit relates information skills to the Key Skills curriculum for levels 1-3.

The information skills toolkit

The toolkit covers nine areas which the project team consider to be key in the successful delivery of information skills training.

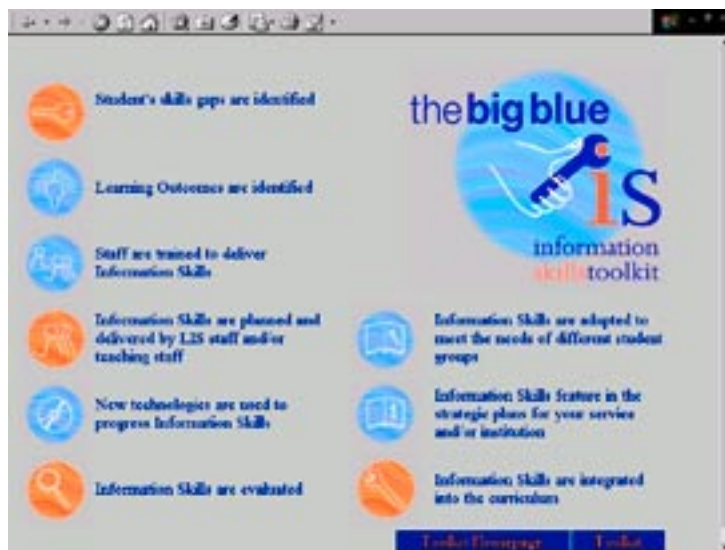


Fig 1: The toolkit

The structure and format of the toolkit is designed to enhance the idea that the toolkit is just what it says - a set of tools to help users do their job. Each toolkit page includes information on relevant findings from the audit, links to case studies, websites which relate to the issue being considered and journal articles, as well as commentary on the factors included. Many of the resources are those which the project team have found during their research. The aim has been to balance practical and theoretical approaches to issues in IS training.

The following scenarios demonstrate how the project team anticipates that the toolkit might be used.

- Scenario 1: *A member of library and information service staff who delivers IS training wants to start evaluating the programme, or encouraging students to evaluate their skills.*

This user would turn to the section of the toolkit entitled 'Information skills are evaluated'. This section includes an explanation of the value and importance of evaluation and some of the issues to consider when undertaking evaluation, such as deciding what type of data is wanted and how it will be collected and processed. This section also lists less obvious benefits of doing evaluation, such as using positive evaluation to support funding bids or to get IS embedded into the curriculum. Finally there is a link to a case study from the University of Aberdeen where pre- and post- self-assessment testing has been carried out to encourage students to track their progress and see the value of attending IS training.

- Scenario 2: *A head of a library and information service wants IS to be recognised outside the service, e.g.: by college managers and academic staff.*

This can be a key challenge for many institutions, and an important first step in providing effective training that students will be motivated to attend, and that can be embedded into the curriculum. The section of the toolkit entitled 'Information skills feature in the strategic plans for your service and/or institution' provides statistical information from the project's audit on the percentage of institutions which currently have IS in their service or college plans. There is a list of

reasons for including IS in such plans, suggesting that inclusion in library service plans can act as a springboard to inclusion in institutional plans. The toolkit page also links to some examples of IS policies from some Australian universities, as well as to a list of the characteristics of an IS policy. This has been developed by the American Association of College and Research Libraries and illustrates best practice in IS programmes. These links are intended to be useful sources of information and inspiration when trying to demonstrate the value of IS within strategic plans.

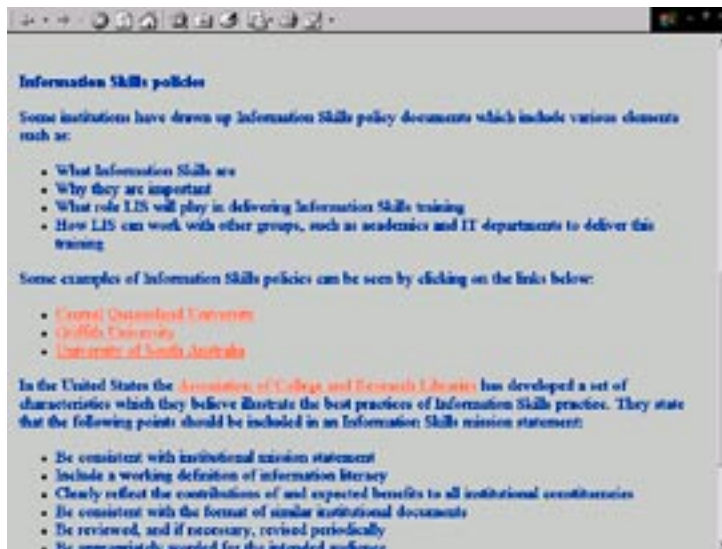
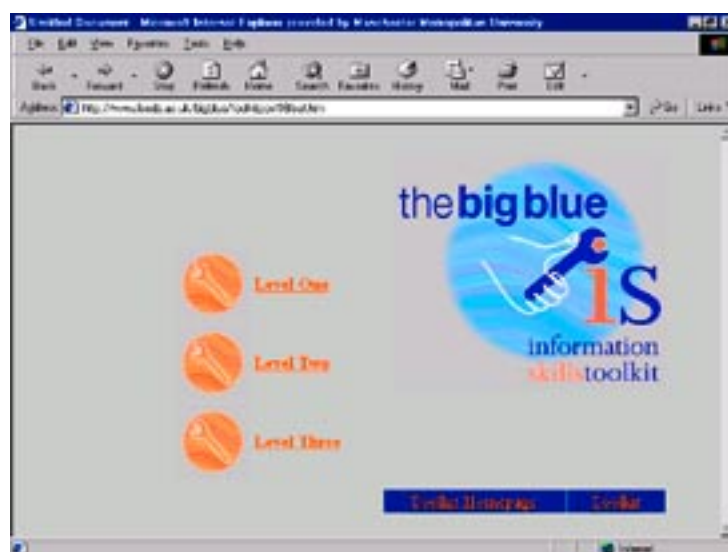


Fig 2: A toolkit section

As the above examples show, the toolkit is intended to give those involved in IS training a starting point in planning a new service or programme, and will be a resource they will return to again and again for support, ideas or motivation.

The post-16 toolkit

As information skills are not formally recognised as key skills the post-16 toolkit has been developed as an aid to integrating them into the curriculum. The lack of recognition is compounded by elements of IS spanning two key skill components, namely information technology and communication. The toolkit aims to illustrate how IS training can be included in the post-16 curriculum, using the Key Skills framework, and providing ideas and evidence for this through links with the case studies.



The following scenario demonstrates how the post-16 toolkit might be used:

- Scenario: A large post-16 college has a strong Key Skills structure which is well attended and valued by students. LRC staff want to integrate IS into the curriculum but don't know how.

The toolkit identifies two Key Skills units, information technology and communication. The QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) framework identifies skills for these units that LRC staff would consider to

be information skills, such as 'Collate and organise information gathered to use in discussions or written material', and, 'Find different types of information from IT and non-IT sources'. Library and information Service staff can use this evidence to make a case for including such skills into Key Skills sessions, and offer to teach them. The case study at Tamworth and Lichfield College could be used as evidence that such skills can be successfully taught by library staff.

It is important to stress that the toolkits are intended to be a source of inspiration and ideas and are not intended to be a universal panacea. It has been clear from the very early stages of the project that there are almost as many approaches to IS as there are people working in this area. One size does not fit all because each institution and its circumstances are unique. It is hoped that by highlighting some key aspects of IS institutions can adopt approaches which best suit their circumstances. It is due to this lack of uniformity that the project team have not devised an 'off the shelf' IS package for institutions to adopt. It is hoped that the toolkits will provide a more useful resource for a wider-range of institutions.

FINAL REPORT

The final report is likely to be considered by JISC in September and the project team are currently finalising the content. The content is structured around the characteristics of the information literate person, an approach which aims to illustrate how IS can be applied to any situation or information need. It covers the work of the project and includes an

update of the literature review and a comprehensive bibliography of literature of material relating to IS.

A number of recommendations are to be made in the following areas amongst others:

- That JISC give consideration to the continued funding and maintenance of websites which have been produced as a part of the Big Blue and other similar projects.
- That an IS portal be developed to serve as a one-stop-shop for IS information, as well as providing a forum for sharing experiences and debate.
- That further research is carried out into how students acquire and use information skills in the course of their studies. Recent articles by Seamans (2), Dunn (3) and Manuel (4) all indicate that despite undertaking sometimes extensive IS training students are still experiencing difficulties in using these skills.
- That investigations be carried out into the development and adoption of information literacy standards such as those used by ACRL and CAUL.
- That further work be done in to the question of 'who trains the trainers' and its implications for information and library management courses and professional bodies such as CILIP.

CONCLUSION

The research carried out by the Big Blue project shows a lot of activity across the Higher and Post-16 education sectors, with many different and innovative approaches being developed. However, it is clear that there is much more to be done, particularly when compared to the experiences in the US and Australia and the recent literature on the assessment of students' information skills.

The conclusions drawn at the end of the earlier article by Alison Mackenzie (5) are still valid – there is still a long way to go if we are to equip students with the skills to identify, select, evaluate, interpret and apply information effectively, both in their studies and beyond. It is hoped that the work of the Big Blue has provided some means of working towards this goal.

FOOTNOTES

The Big Blue website can be found at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/bigblue>

- 1 A. Mackenzie, ' "Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere" (Chinese proverb)', *SCONUL newsletter*, 24, 2001, pp 36-39
- 2 N.H. Seamans, 'Student perceptions of information literacy: insights for librarians', *Reference services review*, 30(2), 2002, pp 112-123
- 3 K. Dunn, 'Assessing information literacy skills in the California State University: A progress report', *Journal of academic librarianship*, 28(1), 2002, pp 26-35
- 4 K. Manuel, 'How first-year college students read Popular Science: an experiment in teaching media literacy skills', *Studies in media and information literacy education*, 2(2),
- 5 <http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile> (17/06/2002)
- 6 Ibid.