Libraries in Digital Skills Policies

Policy areas, mechanisms, practices (9 December 2020)

The benefits of being able to go online and make use of the opportunities the internet and ICTs offer today are immense, and growing exponentially. Meaningful digital inclusion comprises several dimensions – from access to connectivity infrastructure to having a suitable device, affordability, reliability and quality of the connection, access to relevant content, and, importantly, the skills to be able to make use of connectivity.

The importance of digital skills has been emphasised, among others, in the ITU and UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development 2025 Targets:

"By 2025, 60 per cent of youth and adults should have achieved at least a minimum level of proficiency in sustainable digital skills"[1]

However, ensuring the necessary digital skills levels for all remains a significant challenge. According to a 2020 World Economic Forum report, only 32% of the population in lower-income countries have basic digital skills (for example, sending e-mails or copying a digital file). The report points out that, even though in higher-income economies this can reach around 62% of the population, only around 44% of people in these countries have standard digital skills (for example, creating electronic presentations).[2]

For many libraries, providing digital skills learning opportunities has become an important part of their offering. A 2017 IFLA Statement[3] points to the experiences of libraries offering such programming, taking a broader view of digital literacy – as the ability to use digital tools to fulfil their information needs, ethically, effectively and efficiently. It calls on libraries to offer opportunities for such skills-building, and on relevant stakeholders – governments, educational institutions, economic sectors – to support libraries and draw on their expertise to help promote digital literacy.

This goes hand in hand with libraries' role in offering **access to technology**. As institutions which help provide public access to ICT, they are also logical places to help people learn how to use it (and the internet) effectively. In practice, many libraries already offer access to ICT, support, and informal and lifelong learning opportunities for building digital skills and competencies.

For example, an ITU publication *Digital Skills Insights 2019* showcased the results of a survey examining population's ICT skills levels and participation in ICT capacity-building in five small island developing states. **In Fiji**, 15.3% of respondents indicated that they participated in ICT skills-building activities in libraries in particular.[4] **In Lithuania**, a recent survey suggested that for a half of older public library visitors –

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[1] Broadband Commission (2015), *2025 Targets,* https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/2018-PR01.aspx
[2] World Economic Forum (2020), *Accelerating Digital Inclusion in the New Normal*, https://www.weforum.org/reports/accelerating-digital-inclusion-in-the-new-normal
[3] IFLA (2018), *IFLA Statement on Digital Literacy*, https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11586
[4] ITU (2019), *Digital Skills Insights* 2019, https://academy.itu.int/main-activities/research-publications/digital-skills-insights/digital-skills-insights-2019

especially in libraries serving more rural areas – help and support from library staff is a key reason to make use of the library internet.[5]

A global perspective

Several **international reports and frameworks** further suggest what roles libraries can play in ICT capacity-building approaches and environments.

- A 2017 report by the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development Working Group on Education sets out several recommendations, including: **"Encourage non-formal digital skills providers to deliver programmes for out-of-school children, youth and adults, especially illiterate or unemployed adults through flexible face-to-face programmes in well-established community spaces (e.g. community centres, libraries) and through affordable digital technology, including mobile phones"**.[6]

- A 2018 UNESCO publication "Guidelines for Designing Inclusive Digital Solutions and Developing Digital Skills" discusses ways to broaden digital inclusion opportunities for people who had less chances to develop literacy and other crucial skills. One of the sections highlights the importance of maximising human elements in technology support and skills-building; and suggests several recommendations, including: **"Build local support capacity. Infomediaries already known and active in the community, including librarians and community centre staff, can be trained to provide tech support as well as on-the-spot training."**[7]

- Similarly, "The E-skills Manifesto", produced by the European Schoolnet and DIGITALEUROPE as part of the 2016 'eSkills for Jobs' campaign, points out the importance of lifelong and non-formal training opportunities to power digital inclusion. The Manifesto's recommendations in this area include: **"Encourage collaboration between formal and non-formal educational institutions by providing incentives for schools and universities to collaborate with telecentres, NGOs and libraries in teaching digital skills." "Encourage collaboration between businesses, employers and telecentres, NGOs and libraries in teaching digital skills by providing incentives for the employers."**[8]

In short, some existing practices and global-level frameworks set out examples of the roles libraries can play in digital skills-building – training and on-the-spot support, especially for more vulnerable social groups. Considering these practices and insights, it is worth examining how these roles are reflected in national-level policies that seek to foster digital skills and competencies for the population.

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[5] Martynas Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania (2020), A *Research Shows Significant Rise of Digital Literacy of Lithuanian Population*, https://www.lnb.lt/en/news/5089-a-research-shows-significant-rise-of-digital-literacy-of-lithuanian-population
[6] International Telecommunication Union, Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development Working Group on Education, UNESCO (2017), *Digital Skills for Life and Work*,
https://unesco.bibliomondo.com/ark:/48223/pf0000259013.locale=en
[7] Vosloo, Steve (2018), *Designing inclusive digital solutions and developing digital skills: guidelines*,
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265537
[8] European SchoolNet (2016), *The eSkills Manifesto*,
http://www.eun.org/documents/411753/817341/eSkills_Manifesto_2016.pdf/6a1ac5e4-2409-4f33-ace1-81fc689956ec

Digital skills policies at the national level: where to look?

The 2018 ITU/Decent Jobs for Youth Digital Skills Campaign "Digital Skills Toolkit" highlights that, at the national level, measures to support populations' digital skills may be featured in several different types of policies: those focusing on ICT (e.g. broadband, digital inclusion policies); sector-specific policies (e.g. education, library sector policies), and national development plans (e.g. Visions or similar).[9]

As such, to identify whether existing policy documents setting out a national-level approach to digital skills-building reference libraries, possible options can include:

- Digital, Digitisation or Digital Inclusion agendas/strategies /frameworks/ action plans
- Digital Skills or Media Literacy policies and plans
- ICT policies
- ICT in Education policies
- Library policies and legislation
- Education Strategies
- Innovation Strategies and Plans, National Development Plans
- Broadband Policies

Libraries in digital skills policies: a look at the policy landscape

Drawing on examples of various national-level policy documents that reference libraries, we can begin to chart the diversity of roles that libraries and librarians can take on to support digital skills-building at the policy level.

We can look both at the types of digital skills (from basic ICT competencies to media literacy, advanced skills and beyond), and the different ways in which libraries can support learning. Links to the strategies and documents mentioned feature in annex.

What skills can libraries help build?

Basic and general ICT skills

Some references to libraries in digital skills-related policy documents focus on key and fundamental digital skills learning opportunities. For example, the *Digital Literacy Exchange* programme described in Canada's *Innovation and Skills Plan* aims to support non-profit organisations to teach fundamental digital skills in established facilities such as libraries. Meanwhile, Norway's 2015-2018 *National Strategy for Libraries 2015–2018* noted that most public libraries that have the capacity already offer learning opportunities for basic digital skills - i.e. using computers and the internet.

The 2018 *National Broadband Strategy* of Botswana also points to the importance of ICT capacity-building and suggests various possible policy measures that could help achieve that. Among the possible shapes that concerted digital literacy action can take is basic computer training in public libraries through the existing Sesigo Project.

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[9] ITU (2018), *Digital Skills Toolkit,* https://www.decentjobsforyouth.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Digital-Skills-Toolkit.pdf

Media and information literacy

Another area where policies seek to engage libraries (or point out existing library initiatives) is media and/or information literacy. One example is the 2019 *National Media Education Policy* in Finland*,* which points out the link between library roles set out in a National Library Act and media literacy education goals. It notes, among others, an existing large-scale initiative to develop guidelines for public libraries for offering media literacy learning opportunities in the country.

Several policies also point to the role that school libraries can play in building these competencies. One example is the *Digital Education Strategy of Hungary* (Annex to the Government's Proposal), which mentions both media and information literacy learning that transformed school libraries can help deliver. Another is the *Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020*, which notes how both school libraries and mediatheques are used as spaces for learning and educational activities, to help develop students' media literacy.

Advanced ICT skills and competencies

There are also examples of policies seeking to engage libraries in more advanced and digital competencies and skills in emerging areas. For instance, South Korea's 2019 *National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence* points out how cultural sector institutions, including libraries, can offer AI education and learning opportunities for the general public. In libraries in particular, the Strategy mentions a "Read to a Robot" initiative, which allows people experience the technology firsthand and become more familiar with it.

Similarly, the UK *Digital Strategy* 2017 policy paper notes how libraries increasingly offer an opportunity for people to develop higher-level digital skills. In particular, the paper refers to library-based makerspaces and fab-labs, where people can work on projects and learn new skills and competencies.

Functional digital skills for research and academic studies

Libraries can also offer ICT skills training and technical support to facilitate research or academic studies. On example of policies reflecting that is the *Portugal INCoDe.2030* initiative, which aims to support digital literacy and inclusion, specialisation in digital skills to boost employability, and facilitate knowledge production. One of the points the initiative mentions is training higher-education library staff in areas such as data visualisation tools or digital data management, which can help facilitate research and knowledge production.

Students can be another end-target group – for example, Croatia's 2014 *Education, Science and Technology Strategy* envisions a measure that focuses on university libraries' technical support and consultation for students - which can help them prepare final papers and dissertations.

This point is also reflected in one of the recommendations made in the 2015-2017 *Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education: A Roadmap For Enhancement In A*

Digital World, prepared by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Recommendation 3 highlights, inter alia, developing a consistent digital experience and supporting students and teachers in higher education to build their digital skills. Expected outcomes of a successful implementation towards such a seamless experience include, among others, coordinated actions from a number of relevant actors - including libraries.

Functional digital skills for other areas

Finally, different libraries can help offer learning opportunities and support for various task- and area-specific digital skills. This can include skills related to **e-health**: for example, the *National Digital Health Workforce and Education Roadmap* in Australia mentions activities to raise awareness and understanding of the My Health Record online platform, including the work of the Australian Library and Information Association.

Another area is **e-government** – for instance, in the Netherlands, a government publication *Digital inclusion: Everyone must be able to participate* also points out the roles libraries can take on to support access to public services to help more people go digital. This includes, for example, information or support with applying for allowances or benefits online, or filling out tax return forms.

Finally, there is broader **literacy** in a digital world. The *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014-2019* discusses how libraries working with digital materials can help make e-books more accessible to support literacy in this way.

How can libraries help build these skills?

Alongside different types of digital skills and literacies, some policy documents outline specific approaches through which libraries can support skills-building. Possible roles and mechanisms set out in different policies – either suggested or existing – include:

Lifelong and informal learning: The Czech *Digital Literacy Strategy* for the period 2015 - 2020 highlights that there are three pathways to digital skills-building for the population: formal education, learning through informal communities (e.g. libraries), and informal, trial—and-error learning at the individual level. Bulgaria's *National Strategy for Lifelong Learning for The Period 2014 – 2020* points out the role of public libraries in offering informal and non-formal learning opportunities, particularly for acquiring digital competences.

Such opportunities could be particularly important for, and help target, **specific social groups** – Bulgaria's strategy, for example, mentions the work of libraries to support digital skills-building for groups such as pensioners, users with special needs, or children. Similarly, Italy's 2014 *National Program for Culture, Training and Digital Competencies* points out that libraries can help reach people who dropped out of school.

Alongside dedicated programming, there can also be **on-site support** for those who need it. For example, the Isle of Man *Digital Inclusion Strategy 2016-2021* mentions ad-hoc and volunteer support, as well as training, available in several libraries.

Making use of existing infrastructure: Some policies draw attention specifically to the idea that it makes sense to set up digital skills learning opportunities in existing facilities and places that communities can access, libraries being one of them. Such references can be found, for example, in South Africa's *National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper* and Italy's *Strategy for Digital Growth* 2014-2020.

Providing access to third-party educational materials: There are also policies that refer to access to materials which can facilitate digital skills learning or formal educational processes. In libraries, available materials are also supported by access to ICT and the expertise of librarians.

For example, the 2018 Botswana *Broadband Policy* points out that libraries can help distribute (and make available for ordering or printing) offline resources for digital skills learning. This last point also highlights what digital libraries can do to power ICT skills-building.

Helping create platforms or tools for digital literacy learning: Finally, libraries can also help develop tools that allow people to build up their digital skills and competencies. One example here is the Royal Library of the Netherlands: the 2018 *Dutch Digitalisation Strategy* points out that the online *Digital Help Platform* was an initiative of several actors, including government ministries and the Royal Library.

Another is Uganda's 2014 National Information and Communications Technology Policy, which mentions the importance of human resource development, digital literacy and relevant professional skills for the ICT industry, with setting up of a national educational network to facilitate, inter alia, sharing educational materials and resources in e-libraries as one of the potential means of achieving this.

How can national policies support these measures?

While some policy documents set high-level goals and others outline more detailed plans, some do contain references to specific measures intended to further boost library-based digital literacy learning. Possible measures include:

- *Engaging libraries in planning, decision-making and/or evaluation:* Libraries and librarians can offer help to policy-makers in developing or evaluating interventions to support digital literacy, for example by offering assistance in assessing the population's digital skills levels. For instance, the 2020 ITU Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook offers insights on how to carry out such an evaluation on a national level. One of the suggested steps is bringing together a group of stakeholders who can offer insights on the kind of assessment that can be most suitable, and what the population's digital skills needs are – both currently and in the future. Considering many libraries' and civil society organisations' work with informal digital skills learning

opportunities, they could offer insights on the digital skills levels and needs of the population groups who are outside of formal education systems or work.[10]

▪ ***Fostering collaboration and joint implementation of digital literacy initiatives:*** Several policies set out a goal to engage several stakeholders to achieve a specific goal or implement a specific measure. Policy frameworks can foster and encourage cooperation between libraries and other stakeholders – e.g. formal education organisations, non-profit organisations, and others – to help deliver digital literacy interventions, as suggested in Canada and Czechia (Strategie digitální gramotnosti).

▪ ***Offering digital competencies learning and upskilling opportunities for librarians:*** Ensuring that librarians have the opportunity to acquire and maintain the skills required to offer on-the-spot support and organise training for their communities is another measure that several policies set out, as suggested in Czechia (Strategie digitální gramotnosti), New Zealand and Norway.

▪ ***Building up and supporting the library sector*** can help ensure that libraries have the resources needed to effectively deliver digital literacy interventions. This can, of course, include material, financial and technical resources (e.g. ICT equipment, library connectivity) and personnel – making sure that libraries have sufficient staff to meet the demand for digital skills learning. This can also entail awareness-raising among the communities libraires serve about the available library offerings, and facilitating coordination within the library sector. Such suggestions appear in the plans for Bulgaria (Digital Transformation of Bulgaria), Czechia (Strategie digitální gramotnosti) and Latvia.

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[10] ITU (2020), *Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook,* https://academy.itu.int/main-activities/research-publications/digital-skills-insights/digital-skills-assessment-guidebook

In short, a brief look at various national-level policies that aim to engage libraries in digital skills-building offers several insights:

- **Policy measures to support digital skills-building, including through libraries, can be found in a variety of types of policy document: from ICT and broadband plans and policies, digital skills strategies or digital inclusion agendas, education and development strategies and visions, and beyond**

- **All types of libraries – from public and community to school and academic, digital and National, and beyond – can support various forms of digital skills and competencies, from basic and advanced digital skills to more task- and area-specific digital skills (e.g. e-health or e-government)**

- **Libraries can support digital literacy in different ways: for example, offering support and digital skills learning opportunities themselves, serving as a space for informal learning, providing educational and learning materials and resources, supporting and collaborating with formal educational institutions and other stakeholders, and helping develop tools or platforms that offer digital skills learning opportunities.**

- **Different policy measures can support libraries' work in the field of digital literacy. For example, policies can engage libraries in intervention planning, evaluation or assessment; foster collaboration between libraries and other stakeholders, and build up and support the library sector – from staff upskilling to connectivity, equipment, or other resources.**

Annex 1: Examples of national-level policies that reference libraries

Australia	National Digital Health Workforce and Education Roadmap (2020)
Botswana	National Broadband Strategy (2018)
Bulgaria	Digital Transformation Of Bulgaria For The Period 2020-2030
Bulgaria	National Strategy for Lifelong Learning For The Period 2014 – 2020
Canada	Canada's Innovation and Skills Plan
Czechia	Strategie digitální gramotnosti ČR naobdobí 2015 až 2020
Czechia	The Strategy for the Development of Libraries in the Czech Republic for 2017–2020
Finland	Media Literacy in Finland. National media education policy (2019)
Hungary	Digital Education Strategy of Hungary - Annex to The Government's Proposal (2016)
Hungary	National Infocommunication Strategy 2014-2020
Italy	Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale
Italy	Programma nazionale per la cultura, la formazione e le competenze digitali – LINEE GUIDA; indicazioni strategiche e operative (2014)
Italy	Strategia per la crescita digitale 2014-2020
Ireland	Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education: A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017
Isle of Man	Digital Inclusion Strategy 2016-2021
Korea	National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (2019)
Latvia	Informācijas sabiedrības attīstības pamatnostādnes 2014.–2020.Gadam (informatīvā daļa) (2013)
Malta	A National Literacy Strategy For All In Malta And Gozo 2014-2019
Nepal	2019 Digital Nepal Framework
Netherlands	Digital Government Agenda (2019)
Netherlands	Dutch Digitalisation Strategy (2018)
Netherlands	Nederlandse Digitaliseringsstrategie 2.0 (2019)

Netherlands	Digitale inclusive - edereen moet kunnen meedoen (2019)
New Zealand	Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2020–2021
Norway	National strategy for libraries 2015–2018
Portugal	Portugal INCoDe.2030. Initiativa Nacional Competências Digitais .2030
Romania	Digital Agenda Strategy for Romania (2014)
Serbia	Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020
South Africa	National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper (2016)
Sweden	För ett hållbart digitaliserat Sverige – en digitaliseringsstrategi (2017)
Sweden	The Swedish Library Act
Uganda	National Information and Communications Technology Policy for Uganda (2014)
UK	UK Digital Strategy 2017 - Policy paper