



## Response from EBLIDA, the European Bureau of Library Information and Documentation to the

### EU High Level Group on Literacy

#### ANNEX – informal input-gathering by the High Level Group on Literacy (HLG).

##### A) Questions

###### *Question 1:*

**From the perspective of your organisation and/or society as a whole, which do you see as the most important issues that are relevant in the area of literacy?**

Lack of literacy (in its many varieties) excludes people from participating in labour, in society, from developing themselves and from taking responsibilities for their own life decisions. Hence, lack of literacy relates to poverty, instead of literacy pointing to empowerment.

From the economic point of view: we cannot afford to waste human potential; from the legal point of view: we cannot exclude people from basic human rights. From an 'individual' issue (- if ever correct at all), literacy is now a societal issue. Stakeholders (government, business, and social-cultural services, such as libraries) are not meeting on a regular basis, as a coalition.

Literacy should be pursued focusing the attention on children and families.

Synergy between public libraries and school is fundamental. The joint work should be translated into strategies to raise awareness of families about the importance of reading, not only as a tool for knowledge and growth, but also as a source of pleasure and fun. Families must be aware that knowing how to read easily helps children in their academic performances and also to achieve a better quality of life. Teachers should be trained to work closely with librarians, to create continuity between school programs and the possibility of reaching further information and / or ramblings, as the library offers.

Even the publishing industry is an important link in this synergy. Publishers should use the expertise of librarians and educators to provide appropriate advice to its publications. The families need ongoing support that is gained by the coordination of all forces.

The Discussion document alludes to “21st –century literacy skills” (p2) described as the ability not just to read and write text but to use higher order problem-solving skills and an illustration is given of searching for information online. Librarians describe a set of these higher order skills as “information Literacy” and one definition of this is: “Information literacy is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner”. We believe that these higher order skills are essential for individuals and communities to participate and thrive in today’s information society. The Alexandria Proclamation sets out more fully the library community’s aspirations and goals in this respect. It was sponsored by UNESCO and the International Federation of Library Associations and more details can be found at:

[http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=20891&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=20891&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

###### *Question 2:*

### **How can current policies, programmes and practices in the area of literacy be improved?**

**The role libraries have played in the past to get a working population also enjoying the benefits of literacy should be re-invented for the 21<sup>st</sup> century;**

The library network all over Europe is ready; there are ample examples of successful projects and practices; libraries have developed professional standards, and a world wide monitoring of literacy (see <http://www.ifla.org/en/literacy-and-reading>) and related sites (UNESCO/IFLA website on literacy including materials, training etc.. <http://www.ifla.org/en/about-information-literacy>).

A network approach is necessary, no authority or institution can achieve sustainable results on its own. Figures in various countries show that libraries are good networkers, both with formal and non-formal education, with the business community, the local community and the wider cultural field.

Knowledge and practices are available; professional training can be shared with other institutions and organisations. However, current policies can be improved with investment in the spread of libraries in such areas that need special attention such as the south of Europe. We should encourage and facilitate the membership of libraries of small municipalities in consortia or inter-library system to overcome spatial isolation and economic hardship.

There is also a need for more 'third places': where people can:

- come and go, find professional encouragement and guidance on basis literacy and the steps ahead.
- face new trends in social and cultural field (art, music, movies, working world, etc..)
- challenge themselves.

Libraries should become community centers where people of all ages, especially young people, willingly go and can find information, read, study, cultivate interests but also relate to others. Libraries have been such third places from the beginning, and are providing facilities to work in groups and individually, to be involved in job-seeking or computer skills, in basic reading and writing. More learning materials, e-books, adapted reading materials are high on the list of libraries to work inclusively; for which library exceptions in copyright need to be guaranteed.

Investment should focus on building sites with adequate space, which the society feel as places accessible to everyone and not as a simulacrum of culture. State and local governments should also invest in training of librarians who, as well as having specific technical skills of their profession, are able to adequately communicate a new concept of library. The training of the librarian of the future should be aimed at creating special figures, sensitive and intuitive about the new tendency in all area of society. This image of libraries and librarians should be communicated through the media also to the people who do not attend those places.

Libraries should inspire the imagination of people, telling them that reading is an enjoyable activity, at the beginning tiring, but very rewarding and, as a result of that, learning to read is a way to improve your life in every sense.

#### **Question 3:**

The HLG discussed the main trends in societies across Europe and what they mean for literacy among European children, adolescents and adults. As background information, a background discussion paper is attached identifying main social economic trends in Europe with relevance for literacy. [See discussion paper attached to this mail]

#### **Question 3 a):**

**Are there any gaps in the identified main social economic trends in Europe over the next 20 to 50 years and which are the implications for literacy?**

The notion should be that literacy efforts must start from the day the baby is born (see for example the Book Start programme by libraries), include the parents, and continue into lifelong learning.

To the identified trends one may add the issue of multilingualism. Speaking only your mother tongue will not be enough in a modern multicultural and multilingual society. Reading and writing in the mother tongue might be the basis, to which speaking at least 1 other language should be encouraged. Immigrants with more language skills should be able to use this to their advantage. Modern forms of language learning and practical learning on the job could mutually reinforce the results.

The other element, partly related to this, is the emerging need for better intercultural skills and related communication. The diversity of Europe gives ample evidence of the need to improve awareness and training of cultural skills, in order to have better communication in working and leisure circumstances. (See studies by the Council of Europe)

The most important socio-economic trend is the increasingly, widespread and frequent use of new technologies. This reality has positive consequences only on the lives of those who already possess a good level of literacy, these people can use it to improve their knowledge and work performance. At the same time other people could be overcome by the IT, not having the basic tools to use them adequately for their own growth and improvement of their quality of life.

Many young people habitually use technological tools but their ability to read and write are almost childlike. The problem is that young people like technologies because they allows to get results quickly and effortlessly, while reading, writing and thinking are operations that require longer times current anymore.

**Question 3 b):**

**There is a lot of knowledge about the importance of literacy and what needs to be done on e.g. reading motivation. Why do you feel literacy has not been seen as an issue of importance for the functioning of society?**

Literacy (or its lack of it according to society) has possibly too long been considered as an individual issues (and failure). Investments in courses have not been extended to investments in facilitating learners after obligatory courses, to train and update their skills and knowledge. In spite of insufficient budget, libraries have tried to accommodate for these new groups of readers and learners, as they know: reading requires daily training. Reading needs an encouraging environment: reading adults, reading politicians; testimonies from VIPs and idols regarding the turn literacy has made in their lives.

The results of (non or insufficient) education become only visible in the next generation... losing a generation to live a meaningful life in Europe.

The functioning of our society is mainly measured by parameters based on economic profit. Often, the success of those who have important positions do not depend on the cultural level reached. Young people are inspired by models that do not contain culturally defined features. So, for example, the motivation for reading is not perceived as a focal issue. In particular, people who live a socially or economically difficult situation does not consider the improvement of their main cultural level as the fastest way to get out of trouble.

**Question 4:**

**What do you see as your role in meeting these challenges?**

As librarians, our role is to encourage the spread of reading, informing families about the importance of reading out to children starting in preschool ages. Read out to a child with a gesture of affection makes it possible to transmit him all the emotions that this practice can give. In this way the child perceives reading as something enjoyable and this link will remain in his mind forever.

Following the libraries and the schools should accompany the families and children in their journey of growth, fostering the development of reading skills and encouraging the passion for reading.

Having children involved in this kind of experiences can draw to reading also the most refractory adults. If the children became passionate about reading, this can easily infect their parents and families with enthusiasm.

As a library organisation, and at a larger scale, EBLIDA works for an EU policy in which the major roles of libraries in the field of literacy, reading, education, culture and science are acknowledged and supported. This library policy for Europe, also known as the Vienna Declaration calls on the European Commission to work on four specific areas to improve literacy and the place of public libraries in Europe.

The detailed declaration is accessible in several European languages at:

[http://www.eblida.org/uploads/ViennaDeclaration/EN\\_Vienna\\_Declaration%20%28English%29.pdf](http://www.eblida.org/uploads/ViennaDeclaration/EN_Vienna_Declaration%20%28English%29.pdf).

To be able to play this role it is necessary to tackle with all these issues and especially to solve the issue regarding copyright, digitized information and e-books.

An EU policy is necessary to strengthen the network of 90.000 libraries all over Europe, to be a strong partner in a number of EU priorities: mobility, capacity building, and innovative workforce in a diverse, creative, democratic European society.

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**EBLIDA, is the European Bureau of Library Information and Documentation Associations**, an independent umbrella association of national library, information, documentation and archive associations and institutions in Europe.

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