

HE. Ms. Michelle Bachelet,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 GENEVA 10,
Switzerland

Dear High Commissioner,

Please find below a submission from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 5, 2595 BE, The Hague, The Netherlands, www.ifla.org) and the Library Association of Ireland (LAI, 138, 144 Pearse St, Dublin, D02 DE68, Ireland, www.libraryassociation.ie) for the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in Ireland.

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations, founded in 1927, at present with over 1500 members in more than 150 countries. IFLA works to represent the interests of library and information services and their users, and is committed to promoting the principles of universal and equitable access to information and freedom of expression as drivers of development and well-being.

LAI the professional body representing libraries and librarianship in Ireland. The objectives of the association are to promote and develop high standards of librarianship and of library and information services in Ireland, and to secure greater cooperation between libraries.

Overview

1. Library users and communities across Ireland have access to 330 public library branches, 31 mobile libraries, and approx. 30 academic libraries, as well as National, school and special libraries.[1] With an overarching commitment to providing equitable access to information and knowledge, they carry out dedicated and sustained work in support of learning and education, literacy, digital skills, community cohesion and cultural rights.[2]
2. As such, their work is fundamentally linked to the rights codified in Articles 26 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (right to education and cultural participation), freedom of thought, and access to information and ideas (Article 19), and other fundamental rights facilitated by (or contingent on) access to relevant information (e.g. right to health). This submission draws on the experiences of the library sector in the country over the past 5 years to highlight important developments, good practices and recommendations in related human rights fields.

Right to education

“135.142 Step up efforts towards a more inclusive education system, especially by focusing on special education needs”

3. *Trends and developments.* Already by 2018, Ireland's notable progress towards reducing inequality in education has been marked, according to a UNICEF report.[3] However, it was noted that children from some of the most vulnerable groups – e.g. Traveller children, those with migrant backgrounds or experiencing homelessness – face a greater risk of falling behind. Recommendations regarding educational support for specific groups of children – especially children with disabilities, Roma and Traveller children, and those in the asylum process – were voiced as recently as 2020 by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.[4]

4. *Good practices.* This is clearly a challenge that requires comprehensive and multilevel solutions, and measures to address this are being taken by a range of stakeholders. There are various examples from within the library field and formal educational sector of further steps that can facilitate and support the education of students from specific groups.

5. For example, there are sensory pods installed in the Cregan Library & O'Reilly Library in the Dublin City University, as part of its mission to be an Autism-Friendly University.[5] These allow students to have control over their immediate sensory environment. Dublin City University and its Libraries have also recently incorporated the JAM (“Just a Minute”) Card into the campus. Developed by a social enterprise dedicated to supporting people with autism and learning difficulties, this non-verbal cue allows people to more easily communicate about their needs in a campus setting.

6. Also worth noting are the growing movements of Universities,[6] Cities and Libraries[7] of Sanctuary in Ireland. These are spaces tailored and adjusted to best serve and meet the needs of diverse and multicultural communities, particularly people in the asylum system and other new arrivals to the community. These spaces and services provide opportunities to learn and develop new skills, as well as help deliver on the social and cultural rights of these community members.

7. There are also examples of university library staff training on cultural competencies and creating a rich intercultural learning environment – for example in Maynooth University Library. These help address the role of staff and institutional processes in creating an inclusive learning and library environment.[8]

8. The National Library of Ireland provides a clear example of how action-oriented policy development in this area can function to support lifelong learning, with the development of their Diversity and Inclusion Policy in 2018, leading to a Diversity & Inclusion Forum in 2019, anchored in the adoption of a ‘nothing about us without us’ approach. Lifelong learning initiatives developed from this forum include the creation of family history resources by members of Ireland's Travelling community, working with National Library staff, and subsequently accessioned into the national collections. [9]

9. In public libraries, the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) has supported an extensive installation of sensory equipment in libraries which benefits students with learning difficulties, as well as other library users. In 2019 €800,000 was allocated to the sector to purchase equipment such as totovertael (‘Magic Tables’) for users with dementia and autism, licenses for software to help with dyslexia, or Touch, Type, Read and Spell (TTRS) software to help children and adults improve their reading and spelling skills [10]. Sensory collections are present across all public library authorities and include games, learning and sensory resources designed to offer support to children with learning

difficulties or more significant needs. Items have been chosen to assist and aid different skills such as fine motor skills or sensory processing development.

10. Public libraries have begun to offer access to the Eduroam ('education roaming') network during 2021, with a view to providing the service across the entire country [11]. This will enable students to access library WiFi in a privacy-friendly way, using their home institution's login credentials.

11. *Recommendation: We encourage further action and further adoption of good practices and measures expanding access to (and quality of) education for learners with special needs and those from underserved groups, at all levels of education and in informal and lifelong learning environments.*

Literacy as part of the right to education

12. *Trends and developments.* Broadly, literacy can be understood as a key part and an enabler of the right to education.[12] In Ireland, a PISA 2018 study rated Irish students' reading skills very highly.[13] However, there is an active commitment and ongoing efforts and initiatives from a range of stakeholders to support literacy (including early literacy), and make sure that people who are more at risk of having literacy difficulties are not left behind.[14]

13. *Good practices.* Examples of such practices include the *Right to Read* Programme. This is a national initiative, first launched in 2017, with public libraries leading the implementation. *Right to Read* is a series of resources, services and programs promoting literacy and reading through story and family times at a library, book festivals, and other reading-focused initiatives.[15] Administered by Right to Read library coordinators in all 30 local authorities, the program has been implemented across all public library branches, which enabled the Summer Stars Reading programme to reach 64,000 children in 2019 [16]. In 2020, despite the effects of COVID, 4149 online events were held with 1,428,957 views [17].

14. Most recently, a public libraries campaign to promote wellbeing and literacy, *Ireland Reads*, invited people to pledge to spend time reading on February 25th, the first national reading day in Ireland. The Ireland Reads website enabled people to sign up and also use a type of 'couch to 5k' reading recommendation engine to find the right title to get back into the habit of reading. The initiative saw more than 650,000 minutes pledged within the first few days of the initiative alone.[18]

15. Similarly, there are initiatives focused on promoting adult literacy and adult learners who returned to education. One example is the Dublin City University Library's annual Creative Writing Competition, which receives more than 100 entries every year from local literacy groups.[19]

16. *Recommendation: Drawing on the library network's experiences in delivering literacy initiatives and interventions, we encourage further adoption of these and similar initiatives supporting literacy as a key enabler of the right to education. Ireland's new 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy should place libraries at its heart, and utilise the public library network to reach its objectives.*

Right to health and health literacy

17. *Trends and developments.* Health literacy – which can broadly be understood as the capacities needed to access, understand and effectively make use of health information – is an integral part of the

fundamental right to health. While this is not unique to Ireland, there is some evidence suggesting that levels of health literacy are unevenly distributed across the population's levels of financial deprivation – and social status.[20]

18. As such, as changes to the national healthcare system are being implemented and planned,[21] it is also important to continue efforts towards promoting health literacy and equitable access to health information.

19. *Good practices.* For instance, “Healthy Ireland At Your Library” is a government-funded initiative, implemented through libraries, which aims to address these goals. The initiative encompasses a range of free services accessible in all 330 public libraries – these include print and digital materials on health and well-being available in all libraries, a program of events and activities,[22] as well as training for library staff to offer information and guidance to users.

20. An evaluation of the initial phase of the project in 2018 saw 90% of respondents say they are likely to use the service again, and that people accessed and found useful of a variety of services and informational channels made available under this programme.[23]

21. *Recommendation: We encourage further adoption, and further examination of, health literacy learning opportunities and access to health information as part of the right to health. We encourage examination of the connection between digital inclusion as a determinant of health, and steps taken to increase digital access to health information.*

Right to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits

22. *Trends and developments.* The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the remaining digital divide in Ireland – giving rise to unequal opportunity to digital information and services. Particularly during the pandemic, meaningful digital inclusion and internet access is vital to defend and deliver on human rights and increase access to information.[24]

23. In Ireland, significant progress has been made over the past few years in achieving more universal connectivity and digital inclusion. Between 2018 and 2019, the percentage of households with internet access grew from 89% to 91%.[25] However, this still indicates nearly 1 in 10 households without such connectivity. Similarly, important progress has been made in digital skills-building – in 2 years, the estimated number of people with at least basic digital skills grew from 48% to 53%.[26] In five years, Ireland has been the fastest-growing EU member state on the EU Digital Economy and Society Index, yet there are still important gains to be made to ensure more universal digital inclusion – which in turn helps deliver on people's rights to education, culture, health, access to information, and more.

24. *Good practices.* It is particularly important to enable and accelerate digital inclusion for those most at risk of being left behind. The library field has been working to address this through expanding public internet access to ICT and the internet in libraries and by offering digital skills learning opportunities. Investments of €7.8 million under the current national public library strategy have seen virtually all public libraries in Ireland offer internet access, via desktop PCs and WiFi [27].

25. An example of digital skills support is the recently completed “Age Friendly Libraries Digital Ambassadors Programme” pilot, which is being expanded to all library authorities in the country. Implemented through a partnership between the Local Government Management Agency and Age Friendly Ireland, it aims to address issues around digital exclusion and isolation of older people. It focuses on helping older community members learn the skills to access digital library services – which would also be helpful in helping them navigate other online services, activities and engagement opportunities.[28]

26. Outside of digital skills and connectivity, the Creative Ireland Programme 2017-2022 is a five-year all-of-government, culture-based initiative that emphasises the importance of human creativity for individual, community and national wellbeing. Public libraries play a key role in local Culture and Creativity Teams and many County teams are led by County Librarians. The purpose and role of the local team is to enable a shift in how the creativity and culture sector can add to the sense of identity and place within Ireland, focusing on diversity and inclusivity to enable harder to reach communities to participate and in helping to address societal challenges.

27. Recommendations: The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgent need to address the remaining digital divides. We strongly support further action towards meaningful digital inclusion - spanning connectivity, affordability, access devices, digital skills and more - including through libraries; especially for vulnerable groups more at risk of being left behind.

28. *Trends and developments.* A significant challenge in delivering on people’s rights to culture and education in a digital-first environment became more pronounced during the pandemic. A rapid pivot to digital content – required for education, study, work, leisure and wellbeing - highlighted restrictive licensing terms and the increasingly high prices being charged for digital versions of published materials.

28. As highlighted in a Statement by the Irish Library Association, a lack of standardisation within the publishing sector and of transparency over pricing and licencing models, has led to an electronic content crisis.[29] Extremely high prices, coupled with a lack of availability of many titles in an electronic format, risks making eBooks and eResources vital for people’s right to culture, education and access to information, less attainable for the public.

30. Recommendation: To ensure equitable access to digital materials as part of people’s right to culture, education, leisure, and enjoyment of scientific advancements, we strongly recommend taking measures to establish an enabling policy, legislative and funding environment to address the digital content crisis.

31. *Trends and developments.* On the other hand, there are encouraging examples of Open Access models in scientific publications increasingly leveraged to help more equitably deliver on people’s right to education and to share in scientific advancement. The link between open science models and the fundamental right to access to scientific progress has been highlighted, for instance, in a recent joint call from UNESCO, WHO and OHCHR.[30] As such, Ireland’s proactive stance towards open access model of scientific publishing is a valuable force for delivering on this human right.

32. Today, all universities and several other higher education institutions in Ireland have available OA repositories; and in 2019, a National Framework on the Transition to an Open Research Environment was published. 2017 saw a new peak in the number of OA publications in Ireland in one year (over 4500).[31]

33. There are also examples of how digitisation and making materials more easily available online helps to not only deliver on cultural rights, but also raise awareness on human rights issues. A clear example here is the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive, digitised and made available online by the Maynooth University Library.[32] This helped further promote engagement with the materials (e.g. a poetry reading competition, further building an accompanying audio collection with thematic recordings expanding the Archive). Meanwhile, the Open Access version of the Archive - Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa – published in 2018 saw broad reach and interest.[33]

34. Recommendations: We encourage the review to consider the move towards Open Access as an important step towards more equitable outcomes in the right to share in, and benefit from, the scientific progress; and encourage further adoption of such practices.

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