



# Does the Internet Work for Everyone?

IFLA Briefing on UNESCO's New Internet Universality Indicators

- UNESCO has produced a set of 'Internet Universality Indicators' as a means of supporting national and global debate about how to ensure that everyone can benefit from the internet
- The indicators cover a wide range of issues, many of which are familiar to libraries through their existing work to provide universal and equitable access to information
- The indicators are a potential tool for libraries, both in thinking about how equitably the internet is working, but also in building partnerships and advocacy for change

The internet plays an ever growing part in economic, social and cultural life. With this, the importance of ensuring that it is working for everyone grows. Inequalities in access to the internet, and the possibilities and skills to use it, can all too often lead to a development divide.

IFLA and libraries have long focused on the importance of universal access to information, including in the digital age. With its Internet Universality initiative, UNESCO has enhanced its focus on the importance of meaningful internet access for all.

The recent publication of a set of [Internet Universality Indicators](#) takes this effort to a new stage by offering a practical tool for assessing the situation in individual countries. IFLA has been involved in the drafting process as a member of the international advisory group.

This brief introduces what UNESCO understands as 'Internet Universality', the contents of the indicators, how they are intended to be used, and how they can help libraries.

## A Definition of Internet Universality

*"'Internet Universality' as a concept captures what is important in the light of the growing pervasiveness of the Internet in human affairs. It highlights the behavioural norms and values underpinning this trend, and points to the need to strengthen these so as to have an Internet that helps realise the highest aspirations of humanity which is ubiquitous and serve everyone, and which reflects general participation in its development and governance'.*

UNESCO, 2015

## Internet Universality

UNESCO developed the idea of Internet Universality in the early 2010s, with its Member States [endorsing](#) it formally in 2015. The aim was to give a name to the concept that the Internet should function for all people.

In line with UNESCO's broader mandate, work under this title does not just look at the internet as a physical network of cables, transmitters and receivers. Rather, it thinks about the internet as a set of connections between people, and a driver of economic, social and cultural change.

Within this main concept, UNESCO set out four pillars of internet universality. In order to work for everyone, UNESCO argued, the internet needed to be based on human rights, on openness (technology, standards, access), and on access itself. The governance of the internet should be multi-stakeholder – i.e. everyone should have a possibility to influence how it is run.

The timing of the agreement on internet universality was not accidental. 2015 was also the year that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals were agreed. These include a number of targets directly linked to the internet – for example around connectivity. Yet it is clear that achieving many others will depend on the internet working for all.

## The Indicators

Having established the concept of Internet universality, and its four pillars, the next stage was to look at means of applying them.

The approach chosen by UNESCO, working with the [Association for Progressive Communications](#) (APC) was to establish a set of indicators. With these, it would be possible to move from general statements to more specific recommendations.

The indicators framework is split into four parts, for each of the pillars set out above, plus a fifth which looks at cross-cutting issues. Each part has a number of sub-themes, dealing with specific questions, and in turn there are questions and indicators under each sub-theme.

For example, under the 'Access' pillar, one of the themes is the 'policy and regulatory framework'. Under this, one of the questions is 'are public access facilities available that provide access to the Internet for those who cannot afford or obtain personal access to the Internet?'

The evidence required to answer this, the indicators suggest, is the inclusion of public access in universal access strategies, and the numbers of libraries and other public access points offering internet access, in relation to the number of people with no home access.

There are also a number of cross-cutting indicators (on issues around gender for example), and contextual indicators (on economics, development and demography...)

## The R.O.A.M. Framework

The four pillars of UNESCO's model of Internet Universality are:

**Rights-Based:** the internet should protect and enable all human rights, taking account of the interactions between different rights.

**Open:** as well as open technologies and standards, there should be open access to knowledge, and new players should be able to emerge and develop.

**Accessible to all:** in addition to giving everyone the possibility to connect physically, this also covers the social, cultural and skills issues that can hold people back.

**Multi-stakeholder:** there should be shared governance of the internet, with all able to participate in relevant decision-making.

The questions are varied, as is the evidence sought. Sometimes the focus is on laws, sometimes on practices, sometimes on evidence of outcomes. Some ask for numerical answers, others need more subjective judgements.

### Examples of Library-Related Indicators

Is the right of access to information guaranteed in law and respected in practice? (Rights, C1)

Are all citizens and other individuals equally able to take advantage of the Internet to participate in cultural activity? (Rights, F2)

Does the government actively promote access to knowledge and open content through its policies for education, culture and science? (Open, D1)

Are public access facilities available that provide access to the Internet for those who cannot afford or obtain personal access to the Internet? (Access, A5)

Does the government actively involve other stakeholder groups in developing national Internet policies and legislation (Multi-stakeholder, B2)

Do government and educational institutions support digital dimensions of media and information literacy with respect to children's effective and safe use of the Internet? (Cross-cutting, B6)

### Applying the Indicators

UNESCO is clear that the goal of the indicators is not to allow for a ranking of countries. Rather, they are a tool – a structure – for thinking about national internet environments, and how to make these more inclusive. They offer an idea of the right questions to ask, and then point to potential solutions or areas for action.

There also are a lot them – over 300. The team behind this work has therefore defined fewer than 100 indicators as 'core' ones. Nonetheless, the internet as a whole is complicated, and so there is merit in gathering a lot of information.

UNESCO has already tested the indicators in Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria and Thailand. To do this, they have formed country teams, with a mixture of government, experts and civil society, in order to gain maximum input and encourage discussion.

However, the indicators are also available for other stakeholders as a means of assessing challenges and identifying priorities for building a more inclusive internet.

### Relevance for Libraries

As highlighted in the introduction, libraries have a strong record of working for internet universality. This is a logical part of their mission to promote access to information for all.

The idea of Internet Universality is of course close to library missions and values. The focus on the right of the individual to access and use information, and the need to ensure the conditions are in place for everyone to exercise this, are familiar. In advocacy work at the national and global levels, libraries have long been active around these themes.



A number of the indicators chosen are directly relevant to libraries and their work – these are featured in the box above on the right. Yet many other indicators relate to issues which are close to library values and areas of advocacy. Either alone, or as part of a wider group, libraries and library associations could use the indicators as a means of understanding the current situation, and promoting positive change.

Specific actions could include:

- Read the [indicators](#), and become familiar with the idea of 'internet universality'
- Write a blog or article for your library magazine or a newspaper about how libraries promote internet universality.
- Hold a discussion at your library, or library association conference, about the Indicators, and how your country might score.
- In areas most relevant to libraries, try to gather evidence around the indicators.
- Contact your UNESCO National Commission to see if they are planning to apply the Indicators in your country
- Contact other civil society organisations interested in access to information to see if they would be interested in working to assess national performance on internet universality, in line with the indicators.