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**THE PERINE PROJECT:
COOPERATION BETWEEN
EUROPEAN EDUCATION
DATABASES**

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Introductory statement

The paper breaks into two sections. The first section will give some history and background to the PERINE project that ran from 2001 to 2004. The second section will consider the current and future status of the network. It is important to say from the outset that this paper is authored by an individual representing a network. The author of the paper is the author of the original proposal for the PERINE project and was the coordinator of the project for the funding body, the European Commission. I hope that the paper makes a clear distinction between personal statements and statements of facts about the network's collective intentions. Some statements will be self-evident to the audience for this paper: they are made in the belief that it is dangerous to make assumptions that the same things are self-evident to everyone.

1. PERINE: history and background

The genesis and purpose of PERINE

The idea for the Pedagogical and Educational Research Information Network for Europe, PERINE, initially emerged from discussions in the Information Centres and Libraries in Educational Research network of the European Educational Research Association.¹ For the rest of this paper I will refer to the Information Centres and Libraries in Educational Research network as Network 12, and to the European Educational Research Association as the EERA. Papers presented to Network 12 in 1998 and 1999 by colleagues from the Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung speculated about the possible role of networks of information workers in coordinating the better management of information about resources on the internet.² The idea of internet resource catalogues was popular at the time, the notion that specialist services could identify, evaluate and describe sources of information on the internet, distinguishing between sources that were more or less useful for particular audiences. In the United States, the Gateway for Educational Materials (GEM³) was developing, in Australia the Educational Network for Australia (EDNA⁴): the Commission would soon fund the Renardus project⁵ as part of the Information Societies Technologies programme. Some voluntary experimental work was done by Network 12 members and regular participants at Network 12 sessions began to see an internet resource catalogue as the potential focus for a collaborative project.

In early 2001, the initial PERINE group presented a successful proposal to the Commission for an infrastructure cooperation network in the research infrastructures area of Framework Programme 5. This is important. In its name and functions, PERINE was about establishing a network, not about coordinating databases. As I will explain later, the partners saw the consolidation of the network as the essential

first stage on which future cooperation could be built. The idea of cooperation on an internet resource database was more about getting partners to understand a common and shared purpose than it was about the creation of a new database.

The very first words of the proposal explained the project's purpose as follows: *"This project will ensure that originators and users of research-related information are aware of the national and international options available to them for dissemination of, and access to, information supporting their work. It will do this by connecting existing national agencies to each other and to a developing European network which they will undertake to grow."* I will return to this later but would say for now, with conviction and hope, that the invitation to participate in this conference is part of the development and growth that PERINE promised in 2001.

The PERINE partnership

The initial consortium included institutions with different capacities and experience. Institutions largely selected themselves because of their relationship with Network 12 of the EERA and the omission of other countries in the application was seen as unfortunate. Some unsuccessful attempts were made to invite others: we had to accept that the time is right for some and wrong for others.

The initial PERINE consortium comprised the following countries and agencies:

- for Austria, the Federal Ministry for Education, Research and Culture, a government ministry with long-standing national responsibility for contribution to European Commission networks, including EUDISED and Eurydice.
- for Denmark, the National Library of Education, the library of the Danish University of Education
- for Germany, the German Institute for International Educational Research, a foundation under German public law
- for Hungary, the National Educational Library and Museum, funded by the Hungarian Ministry of Education
- for Italy, the National Institute of Documentation for Innovative and Educative Research, an autonomous national institute supervised and financed by the Italian Ministry of Education, also with strong historical connections to EC networks
- for Lithuania, the Institute of Educational Studies of Kaunas University of Technology
- for Switzerland, the Swiss Coordination Centre for Research in Education, operated jointly by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education and the Confederation
- for the UK, the British Education Index, operated by a self-financing unit within Leeds University Library
- in addition, a member of the Council of the EERA acted as the evaluator for the project, monitoring progress against objectives and providing a link between PERINE and the Association.

The Austrian, Danish and Italian partners had all been involved in the construction and development of the European Education Thesaurus (EET), a tool which PERINE recognised would be important in the context of presentation of an internet resource database, one focus of the project. The Hungarian partner had independently

developed a Hungarian language version of the EET that was not integrated with the Thesaurus. The BEI was cooperating in a UK project that involved the distributed addition of information to an internet database. The Lithuanian partner wanted to see how viable it would be to establish educational research resources comparable to those of other partners.

The approach to project objectives

Our approach was not to immediately seek to make connections between the databases maintained by the partners. While we saw that as a long-term goal we recognised that it would not be possible to establish something durable within the time-frame offered by the initial project. Instead we gave our attention to work we knew we could achieve and use that as a base for future development.

Our approach had several strands:

- to research the extent to which educational researchers used different services on the internet
- to create a project website that provided information about the project and its progress, gave access to the internet resource database but, perhaps more importantly, presented information about the information services maintained by the partners, giving access to them whenever possible.
- to create an experimental multilingual internet resource database with new and existing content provided by the partners and presented through a multilingual interface, using the European Education Thesaurus to provide index terms to describe internet resources
- to use the database as a means to improve communications between the partners and educational researchers, specifically those attending the annual conferences of the EERA

The PERINE internet resource database

Each of these activities provided a focus for the partners and a way of engaging with researchers, perhaps the internet resource database most of all. In the guidelines for creating records the scope of the database was described as follows:

“The collection aims to list and describe significant information resources and services specifically relevant to the conduct, management and dissemination of educational research in Europe. In the early stages of its development the PERINE database of internet resources will focus on resources based in the countries represented by project partners. Full geographical coverage of the education field would be achieved in the longer run through association and co-operation with other national and international information providers. The primary audience comprises researchers, teachers and students in the field of education in the higher and further education sectors of the countries represented by the project partners. The audience also includes: administrators, policy makers, teachers and students in all disciplines with a particular interest in the processes and outcomes of educational research and the wider international audience of European and non-European researchers and other professionals with an interest in the processes and outcomes of educational research.”

Database records were created using forms dynamically delivered over the internet through login to a system maintained at the University of Leeds. The input system and database were written specifically for the project. Through their personal logins

partners could create and edit records for which they were responsible. The input system allowed partners to search and select subject terms from their own language version of the European Education Thesaurus and from lists of personal and organisation names that they created.

The creation of the database made the partners work collectively on a number of issues:

- it forced us to look at appropriate metadata standards: PERINE fields were compatible with the Dublin Core metadata standard
- it forced us to consider optimal means of information transfer, even if we were only able to experiment with them in a very limited way during the project. We developed an xml schema for data transfer, for example, that could be easily revised. The xml schema was devised to enable partners to submit information to the PERINE database if the partners had already created appropriate information for a local database. It also enabled partners to be supplied with data from the PERINE database so that they could incorporate PERINE records in a local database.
- it forced us to develop practical means of information transfer through input forms delivered over the internet (which were still fallible, often because of the local technical configurations of the partners' organisations, even though we adopted platform independent software solutions)
- it forced us to accommodate the EET data in a relational database structure (we hoped that work on the EET might also benefit other people)
- it forced us to associate the free-standing Hungarian version of the EET with the EET itself
- it forced us to address how a non-EET language might begin to be connected with the EET (by using Lithuanian as an example)
- it allowed us to communicate with EERA networks about their particular interests: in the third year of the project PERINE partners identified and created database records for resources that addressed topics suggested by several network convenors

Visitors to the database could choose one of thirteen languages from the EET with which to search. If the language was supported by an existing PERINE partner, instructions for use of the database were provided in that language, otherwise instructions appeared in English. Descriptions of resources appeared in the chosen language if the language was supported by a PERINE partner, otherwise descriptions appeared in English (the provision of English-language descriptions was, obviously, laborious for partners, even when descriptions were checked before records were live in the database). The database, together with other significant outputs of the project, is still accessible from the PERINE website⁶ though it is no longer consistently maintained. By the end of the project the database contained a representative sample of records from all partners.

But a resource like the experimental database created by PERINE needs to achieve "critical mass" to be really useful. That is, it needs to have sufficient content or quality to make it impossible to ignore by the people for whom it is intended. We knew that this was not achievable in the project time we had with PERINE but saw the first stage as determining whether researchers saw potential in such a database,

hoping to use that evidence to strengthen the next bid to the Commission for development and expansion of PERINE and the resources created by the partners.

The conclusion to the second PERINE survey of educational researchers' use of information services on the World Wide Web noted: *“Compared to the situation prevailing when the PERINE project was starting in 2001 there is also some support in these data for the proposition that European educational researchers are becoming more connected to information and activity beyond their national systems and that improved access to that information and activity would be valued. The suggestion that researchers might have become less confident (or perhaps more demanding) in their expectations of the internet would be one reason for asserting that the expertise and effort of information specialists – such as librarians and documentalists - will become more important in helping to make the diverse and multilingual collections of the internet more reliably accessible. PERINE clearly has a role to play in supporting this emerging European educational research space and the nascent multilingual database has been seen by those who have already tried it as potentially useful. Even without specific new resources, closer co-operation among information services across Europe will improve the breadth of knowledge and access available to the specialised information services that support research in each country.”*⁷ Of course, we could equally well say that cooperation between information services *across the globe* would provide even bigger benefits.

Even in its imperfect state, the database gave us the advantages that we sought. It gave us direct access to the views of researchers at the annual conferences of the EERA. We were able to present the database as one beneficial result of better and more direct relationships between researchers and the information services that represented the work of the researchers. I am not sure how usual or unusual it is for information services to have direct lines of communication open with the people who create the information that populates the services, and for whom the services are primarily intended. But all of the PERINE partners had good relations with their national research associations, where those existed. One purpose of the PERINE database was to suggest to the information producers and users that they had a very direct relationship with the providers of their information. It's a question worth asking: is there something particular about the domain of educational information that could exploit the relationships between the information services and the researchers in ways that are not so available in other disciplines? Do we, as providers of services in education, have an advantage because of those possible or actual relationships?

A lot more could be said about our experiences of the project and about the outputs but I want to move on to the more recent past and consider the network since the official end of the original project in 2004.

2. PERINE: the present and the future

PERINE after the end of project funding

While it has not yet proved possible to secure continued financial support for the development and maintenance of the PERINE database, the primary reason for the

PERINE project survives, that is the continued communication between the partners and the will to cooperate.

At the 2006 ECER we arranged a symposium in Network 12 to consider the status of PERINE. The symposium sought contributions from the PERINE partners about the status of their individual services and about more general developments with educational research information provision within their respective countries. At that event Network 12 was delighted to welcome for the first time colleagues from REDINED and from the Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique (INRP). It was clear from the discussions that there is still a place for PERINE.

Partly as a result of discussions at ECER, we made a decision to focus less on the things we are currently unable to maintain, and more on the things we can do with limited or minimal effort. We decided to contribute an article to the European Educational Research Journal, summarising the status of the national information services. More importantly, I think, we decided to transform the PERINE website to make it reflect the network, rather than the completed project. We all know how sad it is to meet the slowly decaying website of a project completed long ago. There must be thousands of sites which one finds by chance in response to a search of Google. The site looks like the perfect thing until you notice the statement giving the date of last updating and discover it is a site for a project that ceased three years' ago. I do not think that is what should happen to PERINE. Stripping the idea of PERINE back to its most basic form it is about alerting people to the existence, nature and availability of information services that might assist them in their professional practices so let's do that until we find the means of pursuing our larger ambitions for a European Education Index and other coordinated services.

We are sadly aware that our individual services are not used as much or as well as we feel they should be. Perhaps our estimations about the value of our services are too high. But even if that is true, it should be possible for our potential audiences to be the judges of the value and they cannot do that if they are unaware of the existence of the services. If we see our primary purpose as being about developing and maintaining high quality information services, it is equally an obligation to ensure that people are aware of the existence and optimal use of those services. At its heart, that is what PERINE was, and is, about. Not about the creation of a multilingual internet resource database, although I still believe that's a good idea, but about using partnerships to alert people to the existence, nature and availability of information that intermediaries identify as being of possible relevance.

Development of PERINE: an internet bureau for educational research information services?

So what is PERINE now? A database? A network? A possibility? I feel most comfortable with the network, something open to new partners who provide reference services in education. But a network with an easily accessible and informative "bureau", an address from which people can identify and find out about educational research information services, including, for example:

- information about members of the network
- descriptions of services offered by members of the network
- access to further information about the services, and to the services themselves where possible

- information about events and new initiatives in the network's field of interest.

That "bureau" might be basic at first, and might remain basic for a long time, but it is easy to see how, with necessary, and I think small, financial support, the bureau could be a website which offered members the ability to maintain their own areas of the overall site, updating their information directly whenever necessary. In the short term, organisations that maintain educational research information services could submit details for inclusion on the site according to a defined template. Among the benefits to the member is wider awareness of their work. Among the benefits to the researcher is a site that reveals a world of information. It then becomes their decision about whether they want to engage further with the services.

What we are currently doing with the PERINE website is attempting to see what such a "bureau" might look like. There is still no funding for this effort so it remains minimal, and definitely old-fashioned, in its reliance on flat html pages, for example, rather than being sensibly database-driven. But I think this position allows us to maintain the idea of a network, to introduce information about new and emerging services, and to have something to point to whenever we have an opportunity to seek funding to pursue our longer-term objectives of more sensible and closer association between information services. The ways in which those services can be individually financially supported will always be problematic. PERINE partners are well aware of the problems of funding of their own services. But if the individual services are relatively stable, then it should be very difficult to ignore the desirability of their connection with comparable and complementary services. I wonder if we could make a case for small sums of money within our own institutions to support such a resource?

Institutionalisation, growth and support of networks and some lessons from PERINE

I said earlier that it is dangerous to make assumptions about what is apparently self-evident: now I will make some observations that will be self-evident to some but it might be dangerous to ignore them in determining what our shared future might be.

PERINE arose, in part, through the commitment of a group of individuals. Those individuals are older now than they were at the start of the project, and therefore closer to the ends of their working lives. If networks are to endure, they cannot be dependent on committed individuals. Perhaps one purpose of those committed individuals is to establish the principles of the network, but the importance of the network needs to be understood and supported at the institutional level to survive. Whatever work is necessary for institutions to do, it needs to be clearly associated with the institution's purposes, it needs to be easily assimilated within the institution, and it needs to be easy to do.

We have failed in two subsequent proposals to the Commission, proposals that developed the idea of the internet resource database, improving its material and linguistic coverage, that posited the basis of a European education index to bibliographic resources and repositories of information, and that proposed the use of new Web technologies to accumulate and manage information. Were we lucky first time? Were attitudes different when PERINE was first proposed? The trend appears to

be towards much larger-scale projects now, at least within the infrastructures area where PERINE was born, and projects addressing educational research seem rare.

PERINE was not really about innovative technological development, rather about the use of appropriate technology in an effort to connect the different elements of the network: information producers (researchers), information providers and information users (researchers). We saw the internet resource database as a demonstrator or “proof of concept” rather than a finished product, something to be developed, recognising that securing funds for continuing content building would be difficult. Ironically, subsequent PERINE proposals to the Commission involved practical and technical development, seeing a wider network encompassing all of the existing EET languages and taking account of the semantic web and education ontologies. Here I would identify another problem with this kind of willing cooperative activity. For PERINE there was an imaginable, and imagined, developmental path, with steady incorporation of new organisations and services, the better coordination of their content and coverage to reduce duplication of effort (how many times are records created for the same periodical article?), the better utilisation of technology for record creation, maintenance and delivery.

But bidding for funding inevitably introduces blocks to such developmental thinking. Although patterns of development can be identified in proposals, the development is compromised by the need to evaluate such proposals as units in isolation from one another. No doubt larger consortia can manage their relations with the Commission in order to make such points but the distributed nature of PERINE, and the organisational structures within which the services operate, perhaps even the very nature of our activity, make such nurturing relationships more difficult. So, while we saw PERINE as a progressive process, building on fairly well-defined stages, we are in some ways stuck because of the funding streams available to such initiatives. I make the point again about the need to take opportunities offered by fortunate conjunctions of willing organisations and individuals. Perhaps this conference is one such opportunity, with an audience of willing organisations and individuals. Perhaps, also, we need to consider alternative sources of financial support for services which we, or our parent institutions, recognise as worthwhile. Contributions of small sums of money from many organisations that saw benefits in cooperation might, for example, provide the support necessary to make a difference.

Concluding statement

I began this presentation with the opening words of the proposal that led to the creation of the PERINE. I want to include in my conclusion the last words from the final report to the Commission:

“In summation, by the end of the project it was very noticeable how integrated PERINE had become in the thinking of delegates at the European Conference on Educational Research.

- In September 2002, partners made a presentation about PERINE to members of EERA Council and to network convenors
- In September 2003, partners presented the database for the first time publicly to members of EERA Council, to network convenors, and to members of several networks: researchers connected with EERA welcomed the initiative and suggested research themes to foreground in the database

- In September 2004, PERINE was heard routinely mentioned in convenors' and Council meetings and at the Association's Annual General Assembly, in most contexts in terms of it being a source of infrastructural support for the Association and its affiliates: the word "PERINE" suffused the conference. Also, people from nations not represented in the initial partnership were expressing a desire to be involved in future network activity."

Sadly, we were unable to build on that progressive interest in PERINE within EERA. But it is interesting to me that more than two years after those words were written the interest in cooperation continues to increase among information service providers in PERINE's field of interest. Perhaps this is a good time to review the ambitions and problems we had, the resolutions we have made and the potential we offer. It will be good to be able to say to new partners "welcome to PERINE".

¹ <http://www.eera.ac.uk/web/eng/all/networks/network12/index.html>

² See, for example, Bartel, Heinz "Selected and structured knowledge bases on education and educational research contra disorientation in the information floods of the INTERNET. From national efforts to global actions to create the necessary international information network", paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, University of Ljubljana, 17-20 September 1998, available at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000824.htm>

³ now <http://www.thegateway.org/>

⁴ <http://www.edna.edu.au/>

⁵ <http://www.renardus.org/>

⁶ <http://www.perine.org> or <http://www.dipf.de/perine>

⁷ Saunders, Sam "Educational researchers' use of information services on the World Wide Web: a follow-up report on the PERINE survey of educational researchers in 8 European nations 2001-2004". Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, University of Crete, 22-25 September 2004, available at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003672.htm>)