The British Education Index

The involvement of the British Education Index (BEI) in a recent British Educational Research Association seminar involving local authority and SSRG researchers was a welcome recognition of the often overlooked role of information services in the planning and conduct of research. It also came at a significant point in the life of the BEI.

The BEI is a long-standing example of a resource that seeks to save researchers' time. Established in the early 1960s to address the information needs of educational researchers by providing a subject index to the contents of journals, the BEI's subsequent development has mirrored that of information services in other disciplines, moving from print through online availability to fixed electronic media like CD-ROM and on to the internet. It has also been necessary to follow the significant literature as it moves from print to electronic and to adapt the service's coverage as publication patterns change and distinctions between traditional subject areas and interests blur.

In the BEI's case such developments in the educational and information environments have meant the association of the original bibliographic resource[1] with an early repository of full texts of "grey" literature (conference papers, working papers and research reports, for example)[2], a catalogue of significant texts on other organisations' internet sites[3], and searchable conference programmes[4]. While the support of professional associations like BERA has enabled the BEI to deliver a number of these services free at the point of their use, the main BEI database remains subscription-based. The new services have been developed over a period of twenty years in line with an established strategic direction for the BEI but their independent delivery required attention.

Over the last couple of years, therefore, a lot of effort has gone into reconciling the services into one relational database and developing an interface to the information that uses the information's systematic indexing to best effect (the BEI uses a thesaurus vocabulary designed for efficient information management and retrieval). This new facility, deliverable over the internet, was demonstrated to SSRG members at the BERA local authorities event and, recently in a more developed form, at an event in ESRC's Social Science Week. The extent to which benefits will be derived from the new source depends, at least in part, on the BEI's success in establishing an economic model that allows optimum exposure while continuing to meet the direct costs of the operation. The BEI is currently financed by direct subscription income to the printed BEI (declining), by small scale payments for special services, and by royalty revenue from electronic delivery of the BEI database by a commercial host. It currently operates as a self-financing operation delivered by a unit within Leeds University Library. While it is possible to maintain that financial position, the BEI is posing questions about whether it is the best model as new audiences open up for its information and as expectations grow that such information should be free at the point of its use. Traditional perceptions of the BEI as exclusively an academic tool for use in university libraries are being seriously tested.

In this context, the BEI has noted the complementarity

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of its information with that conveyed by Social Care Online and it would be interesting to see the BEI liberated to operate in a similar way. In the meantime, visiting www.bei.ac.uk will give a flavour of what the BEI has to offer.

For further information about the Index operation: Phil Sheffield, Manager: British Education Index, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, Tel: 0113 3435524; p.w.sheffield@leeds.ac.uk.

[1] British Education Index - www.bei.ac.uk/bei.htm - this version of the database presents only selected recent references

[2] Education-line - www.leeds.ac.uk/educol

[3] British Education Internet Resource Catalogue - www.beirc.ac.uk

[4] Education Conference Programmes - www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/beia.htm

Strategy for Social Work Research in Higher Education

The Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC) is currently developing a long term strategy for social work research in higher education The full text is available on the SSRG website (www.ssrg.org.uk/consultations)

JUC SWEC believes that social work research has a vital role to play in the development and delivery of high quality social services in the UK across all age groups. Social work research contributes to the production of the evidence base for effective services and social work academics who are active in research are best able to train up to date, evidence aware practitioners.

However, social work research in higher education institutions faces a number of obstacles in meeting these expectations. The need to develop social work research capacity has been formally recognised by both the ESRC and the Higher Education Funding Councils in recent years.

JUC SWEC is now working to articulate a strategy for securing a step change in the quantity and quality of social work research activity in Universities and is seeking your advice and support in doing so.

We are consulting about the draft strategy with a variety of stakeholders and would welcome your views about our approach, its principles, analysis, aims and proposed actions. We are also looking to join with others to secure the improvements we seek and would like to know whether you would wish to explore the possibilities for collaboration on aspects of the strategy. It would be helpful if you could send, by 21st April if possible, comments to:

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