

Education Research Theses : Online Communities and Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

The paper will describe the *Education Research Theses (ERT)* database, the *Australian Digital Theses Project (ADT)* and the Australian Education Index (AEI) within the current strategic environment. The ADT and the ERT databases could be more closely aligned, as universities are currently submitting data to two places.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is working collaboratively and in partnership with the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the ADT project to achieve synergies between these two important resource discovery projects. It is timely to consider their long term future within the strategic environment of new methods of access to research information and the emergence of new business models.

The paper will discuss issues and recommend strategies to support research in education collaboratively. Issues include the need for an education theses subset of the ADT or the AEI, pursuing relationships for metadata exchange, national search services, making research available internationally and cooperation in capturing data for resource discovery. The challenges faced by an independent not for profit organisation that no longer receives government funding will be explored in terms of the capacity to respond to the emergence of new business models, such as the open access initiative.

A survey of existing customers of the ERT will be held to ascertain the business need for an education theses subset of the ADT or the AEI.

1. STRATEGIC CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

The Education Research Theses Project began in 1978 and has fulfilled a vital and important role by supporting educational research with the listing and resource discovery of theses in Education. However, since that time, the strategic environment has changed. An important milestone in the changing environment includes the international open access movement. Important statements such as the IFLA Statement on Open Access to Scholarly Literature and Research Documentation and the Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom enunciate fundamental access principles in order to ensure the widest possible availability of scholarly literature and research.

These initiatives have been supported by the Department of Education, Science and Training as articulated in Backing Australia's Ability through ARIIC, the Australian Research Information Infrastructure Committee and CAUL, the Council of Australian University Librarians. The Australian Digital Theses Project is one of the ARIIC / CAUL initiatives which exposes higher degree research theses via a national distributed database of digitised theses to promote collaborative research participation and exploitation of outcomes.

These developments extend beyond academic and research libraries and include professional and research organisations. It is vital that collaborative partnerships are developed with online communities to enable benefits to all of the research community.

1.1 Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is Australia's premier educational research and development organisation. It is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established in 1930.

The ACER vision is of a vibrant research organisation deeply committed to creating and disseminating knowledge and tools to improve learning; a company that pursues the highest standards of scholarship and quality in all that it undertakes, and that is continually building its reputation as one of the world's leading education research centres with an increasingly international orientation to its work.

ACER creates and disseminates research-based knowledge, products and services that can be used to improve learning in a context of ongoing, lifelong learning both for the fulfilment of individuals and for the well-being of society. ACER is committed to the use of systematic investigation, evaluation and critical reflection in the search for ways to improve learning. As an independent, not-for-profit organisation, ACER is able to bring a high level of expertise and objectivity to its work.

There are seven research programs:

- 1 Assessment and Reporting
- 2 Early Childhood Education
- 3 Learning Processes and Contexts
- 4 National and International Surveys
- 5 Systems and Schools Testing
- 6 Teaching and Learning
- 7 Transitions and Economics of Education

1.2 The Cunningham Library

Cunningham Library at ACER is a specialist library in education and related areas. There is a strong emphasis on Australian material in the collection, which is recognised within Australia as unique because of its age and coverage.

The library aims to fulfil a national role in the provision of Australian education information and to provide information based services and materials to support ACER. Specific goals are

- To build and maintain an information resource which supports policy

- development, research, practice and debate in the field of education
- To provide information access to the education community on research and practice in the field of Australian education
- To identify, locate, acquire, record and process relevant and authoritative information
- To maintain and preserve the collection for historical research
- To maintain the library systems and collections to facilitate use.
- Compile and maintain the *Australian Education Index* database.

1.3 Education Research Theses (ERT)

With more than 12,000 entries, the *Education Research Theses* database is the only comprehensive source of the unique research found in doctoral and masters research theses accepted by all Australian Universities in the field of education. The database includes bibliographic citations and abstracts for theses ranging from 1919 to the present. The database is updated monthly, with 500 new theses added each year. Subject descriptors are assigned from ACER's *Australian Thesaurus of Education Descriptors (ATED)*. ERT appeared in print from 1978 to 2002 as the Bibliography of Education Theses in Australia. In 2000 a searchable database version was made available on the www. This was freely accessible until ACER's core grant funding was phased out in 2002 at which point it became available via subscription.

Online access to the ERT database via subscription is provided from the ACER website. University libraries submitting their IP address to ACER can provide online searching to staff and students. Password access is also available. Subscriptions for Australian universities vary according to university size. ACER worked with the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) in developing subscription access for Faculties of Education. Overseas subscriptions are available. <http://www.acer.edu.au/library/catalogues/theses.html>

Since inception in 1978, the ERT project has also contributed its data to the Australian Education Index (AEI).

1.4 Australian Education Index (AEI)

The AEI database <http://www.acer.edu.au/library/catalogues/aei> consists of over 133,000 bibliographic and some full text entries relating to educational research, policy and practice. It is Australia's largest source of education information with approximately 800 new entries added each month. The content is relevant to a wide range of people interested in education from schools and universities as well as the researcher. It covers the period 1979 to the present; the AEI is available in print for 1954 to 1978.

The *Australian Education Index* identifies, acquires, catalogues and retains documents and serials published in Australia, about Australia or by Australian authors of relevance to Australian education. These documents may be in print or available as web documents.

Authors and institutions are encouraged to submit items to the Cunningham Library at any time for inclusion in the AEI database and many documents are received as published without ordering. In addition to theses, the scope of the database includes

- Research and government reports from all state education departments and authorities, research organisations and professional associations; draft and consultancy reports are not selected or collected.
- Monographs, journals, serials and web documents
- School syllabi, course frameworks, curriculum documents; commercial teaching guides are not selected unless there is a significant research component in the work.
- Educational and psychological tests
- AEI is produced by the Cunningham Library at ACER. The AEI is available online through a number of commercial vendors such as Informit Online and Dialog (as International ERIC) and as one of the Australian social science databases on the CD-ROM called AUSTROM produced by RMIT Publishing

1.5 The Australian Digital Theses (ADT) Program

The aim of the ADT program is to create a national collaborative distributed database of theses in digital format. The ADT database provides access to PhD and Masters by Research theses only. The program is dedicated to the provision of a central metadata repository which aims to provide free, open access to research. The metadata repository software is currently (early 2005) being enhanced as a result of a DEST infrastructure grant.

Eleven universities now have mandated the submission of all theses in electronic form.

In partnership with the National Library of Australia (NLA), 130,000 records from the Kinetica database will soon be added to the ADT metadata repository. There will then be an overlap between the ERT database and the ADT database. This brings the possibility of closer alignment as universities are currently submitting data into two areas. It is timely to consider the long term future of the ERT database.

2. METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

2.1 Existing arrangements

The aim of the ERT project is to provide complete coverage of Australian education theses, both as a stand alone resource (the ERT web database), and through making them accessible through the AEI. The ERT database uses Inmagic DB Textworks and the Web Publisher Pro system for bibliographic description and resource discovery through the provision of searchable metadata, abstracts and links to full text where available. University libraries are contacted once a year with a request for details of theses, including title pages and copy of the abstract. Abstracts are scanned and the thesis indexed into the DB Textworks system. In late 2004 the ERT moved from an annual update to a monthly update. Theses are indexed as they are noted or become available.

Since the advent of the ADT, ERT has included hyperlinks from the thesis bibliographic record to the full-text of the thesis available on the ADT. As of May 2005 ERT (and the AEI) links to 422 online theses – in other words over 11% of the 3,500 digitised theses in ADT at this time have links direct from ERT and the AEI.

In trawling ADT for these links, the ERT project also identifies further theses for inclusion in ERT, typically theses from outside Education Faculties but with relevance to education, or theses for which details have not yet been supplied. Since moving to monthly updates, the ADT has been used as well as Kinetica's *Recent Australian Publications* to identify new theses for indexing in a more timely fashion. Some Faculties and Libraries have moved to supplying thesis data as they are received rather than as an annual batch.

In a 14 month period up until recently, the ERT database on the web had over 27,000 individual searches conducted, around 1,900 per month. This indication of interest in education theses does not include those thesis specific and general searches that may be happening in the AEI.

2.2 Survey existing customers

A survey of the existing customers of the ERT will be undertaken and the survey results and conclusions will be included in the EDT conference presentation. The survey will investigate the proposition that a subset of the education theses data can be generated from the AEI or ADT if there is a demand for it.

2.3 Building Research Content

The partnership will identify and provide access to unique content which is not in the ADT or Kinetica but is in the ERT database, and which would be freely available for scholarship and research. Given the loading of the 130,000 records to ADT from the Kinetica database, the unique additions could be few, however there are 1000s of abstracts and ATED subject headings in ERT that could be used to enhance and upgrade ADT and Kinetica records.

2.4 Adding value to the Australian Education Index (AEI)

The proposal is to add the pre-1978 theses that are in the Education Research Theses database to the AEI. This strategy would add value to the coverage and age depth of the AEI by adding theses data going back to 1919.

At this stage only post 1978 theses are in AEI. The 1919-1972 theses were digitised from an existing print bibliography compiled by in the 1970s. These incomplete records are included in the online theses databases (ERT) only. There are 900 pre-1978 theses records and almost all lack abstracts. The records could be put in the AEI with some work required to upgrade record quality, such as record identifiers, missing fields, additional subject headings, and possibly adding abstracts.

2.5 Exploration of new business models

Working collaboratively with UNSW, a number of alternative business models will be explored :

1. Increase coverage of the AEI with theses data added and improved record coverage and quality.

2. Provide existing unique content to the ADT (records, abstracts, subject headings) as an initial contribution to strengthen the ADT.
3. Provide subject heading metadata to the ADT on an ongoing basis. This would ensure that all the education theses in the ADT have consistent subject metadata provided from a taxonomy widely used by the Australian education community, *Australian Thesaurus of Educational Descriptors (ATED)*.
4. Obtain data for educational theses from the ADT data to populate the AEI on a regular basis (monthly)
5. Create a subset of the AEI from the new improved AEI for theses which is updated on a regular basis (ADT – AEI – ERT) thus strengthening the ERT as a most reliable up to date resource of education research theses information. This could be an open access database housed on the ACER library website providing a one stop shop for education theses content.
6. Provide EdNA with the facility to do federated searches on the theses database, as per existing arrangements with other ACER databases.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONSIDERED OUTCOMES

3.1 Benefits to ACER from collaborative partnership

1. Value added to the Australian Education Index (AEI) by the addition of the 900 records for theses and the updating of the record quality therefore increasing the coverage and quality of the database. Value adding would present an opportunity for reviewing the AEI product and its byproducts, International Eric and the Database of International Education.
2. Regular updates from the National Bibliographic Database (NBD) to the Australian Education Index (AEI) directly for new theses including the New Zealand theses. Exploration of other avenues for transfer of data to the AEI.
3. Sharing of expertise with collaborative partners for ACER staff.
4. Removal of double handling and manual handling associated with the creation of the Education Research Theses (ERT) product and duplication of effort with ADT project.
5. Improved resource discovery of education theses using sophisticated search and retrieval tools in place of current systems

3.2 Benefits to ADT and the Australian education research community

1. ADT obtains a comprehensive set of records for education theses and all have consistent subject metadata from ATED, a taxonomy widely used and known in the Australian education community, enhancing the utility of ADT for people interested in education.
2. Enhanced accessibility to and use of current and future digital theses in ADT through subject (as opposed to document type/repository) gateways – ERT, AEI, and potentially, EdNA - allowing the resources to be discovered in a broader context.
3. ERT and AEI become more comprehensive and timely through data sharing strengthening the value of these to the Australian education community, and also highlighting/disseminating Australian education research internationally.

3.3 Challenges for ACER

1. Loss of revenue stream
2. Resolution of technical issues related to data exchange between ERT, ADT and AEI and Kinetica.
3. Investigation of the proposal that a useful subset of the education theses data be generated.
4. A marketing campaign would need to be put in place to ensure that the new expanded AEI was promoted.

4. CONCLUSION

ACER is strategically placed to work with the educational research community and other collaborative partners to explore new business models and develop synergies between developing metadata and document repositories and established information services, to avoid duplication of effort and fragmented collections of resources, whilst providing multiple pathways to shared resources for different user groups.

5. REFERENCES

IFLA Open Access Statement IFLA Statement on Open Access to Scholarly Literature and Research Documentation

<http://www.ifla.org/faife/policy/iflastat/gldeclar-e.html>

The Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom

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