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## INFORMATION ON EDUCATION EURYDICE. THE EXPERIENCE OF A NETWORK

By Luce Pépin

**Abstract:** Over the years, the number of information networks has multiplied. However, there is still a certain amount of frustration with the difficulties of gaining access to and achieving mastery of information. How can networks provide a solution to this problem while encouraging greater transparency and accessibility and better dissemination of information?

### Introducing the EURYDICE Network

EURYDICE is the education information network in the European Community. It is composed of 15 National Units located mainly within the education ministries of the 12 Member States and a European Unit created by the EC Commission in Brussels. The network is scheduled to be enlarged to include the member countries of EFTA (except for Switzerland) on 1 January 1994. EURYDICE's activities concern mainly systems and policies of education. Political officials in the field of education at both Community and national levels are the principal target audience which the network serves by providing a system of inquiry within the network to answer these officials' questions. The goals of the EURYDICE network are to incorporate a European dimension into education reform at the national level and to contribute to better mutual understanding among the Member States. EURYDICE is creating a bibliographic database and another on education systems (based on UNESCO's CDS-ISIS software) and is specialising increasingly in the production of comparative analyses on issues of common interest to the Member States. Its products are available to a wider audience and in particular to those involved in education.

### Issues of Concern to the Network

Networks are vital, although complex, interactive tools, the purpose of which is to make information as effective as possible through sharing and collective

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management of resources. In order to be effective, networks must operate based on objectives, a goals and resources which are clear to and well understood by each of the participants. The human dimension of networks is essential and should not be neglected, as it is the cornerstone of the interactivity of exchanges. European and international networks are characterised by additional complexity and greater challenges due to their intercultural dimension. It is essential to develop a real "network culture and spirit." The activities of the national centre or European hub are, for this reason, crucial. Dealing with diversity requires joint definition of a lowest common denominator with which each participant in the network can identify, allowing it to develop while taking the others into account. Cooperation among similar and other networks and is im important for the effectiveness of information. EURYDICE cooperates closely with the EUDISED network of the Council of Europe and the CEDEFOP network of information on vocational training.

## **Introduction**

Our society revolves first and foremost around information, and the multitude of information networks which have come into being are essential tools for exchanging and disseminating this information. We could also say that we live in an age of information networks, at both national and international level and in all fields of endeavour. However, along with this burgeoning of synergistic networks, questions and widespread frustration remain concerning the issues of access to and mastery of information. How can inform networks, in their future development, help to improve this situation? Better dissemination and greater transparency seem to be the keys to meeting current expectations.

## **The EURYDICE Network**

The EURYDICE network, the education information network in the European Community, has been evolving as the principal focus of and foundation for cooperation among the Member States of the European Community in the area of education since 1980. The advantages, difficulties and potential of such a network given the need for information as the century draws to a close and we approach the year 2000.

Cooperation in education among the EC Member States has been a source of inspiration for more than 16 years now, covering a number of areas of common interest to the Member States, including language instruction, inter-university cooperation, mobility, initial and vocational training for young people, equal

opportunity, teachers and teacher training, intercultural education, school failure and new technologies in education, to mention but a few.

With the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty on European Union, this cooperation is bound to intensify. There has always been universal agreement on one major point, namely the need for high-quality information to ensure ever-greater mutual understanding of and familiarity with the education systems and policies in place in each Member State. How can we take appropriate decisions together at Community level if we are not thoroughly familiar with each Member State's special characteristics and our cultural and educational differences, without, however, overlooking areas of existing and potential convergence? This was the concern of the ministers of education when they adopted the first Community programme in the area of education in 1976. The need for basic information on education systems had always been at the heart of dialogue and cooperative efforts. The EURYDICE network was therefore created in 1980 to meet this need and to promote cooperation in education, almost as soon as such cooperation began. The main target group consisted of education officials and decision-makers at national and Community level. The Commission established a European Unit within the network to be responsible for coordination and leadership. For their part, the Member States created, either within or working closely with their education ministries, at least one National Unit each (two in Germany, Belgium and the UK). The network thus consists of 15 National Units.

The objective behind the creation of an interactive network was to contribute to political cooperation among the EC Member States and to build bridges between Community institutions and national education ministries, as well as among the ministries themselves. By creating synergistic exchanges of information among the ministries and with Brussels, the EURYDICE network, as early as 1980, presaged the more profound meaning which would be given to the concept of subsidiary more than ten years later.

In its role of providing support for Community cooperation in education, EURYDICE makes a vital contribution through the production of descriptive and cooperative documents on issues of common interest to the Member States. EURYDICE facilitates contact and exchange among the Member States by providing policy-makers within the education ministries with an inquiry mechanism which allows them to query the Network about national education policy or planned reforms. The goal is to encourage ministries at the highest level to take into account the policies and reforms under way elsewhere and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge about "good practice". In order to strengthen this "backbone" of its services, EURYDICE is completing a relational database on the

education system of the Member States. This database will be updated annually and will be installed in all of the National Units in September. Based on UNESCO's free documentary software, CDS-ISIS, the database will allow a user to move among its various elements and from one dossier to another and to print out the results. The Units are currently preparing additional files which will be integrated directly into the database. These include a bibliographic file, legislative references, a glossary of terminology and a list of institutions. When completed, this database will provide rapid and accurate access, at both Community and national level, to basic data about education systems, thus improving both the operation of the inquiry system and the service given to policy-makers. The database will also be made available on a server and on CD-ROM in order to reach a larger audience, including those involved in education and interested libraries. This audience already has access to EURYDICE publications.

EURYDICE primarily provides a service to political officials, but is being called upon more and more to meet the growing demands of a larger community. This development, which is making itself increasingly felt over the years, raises the crucial issue of dissemination of information. The world of education is very large. How can all parts of it be reached? How can the information which EURYDICE produces be made accessible to all interested parties? This issue is on the EURYDICE agenda and will be addressed beginning with an assessment of official distributors of information about education at national level. This inventory will contribute to the development of a dissemination strategy based on the use of existing national links. In the area of education, Europe is currently seeing a strong trend towards decentralisation and regionalisation. Information services and networks in general, and the EURYDICE network in particular, will be increasingly called upon to adapt to this new situation by forging closer links to the new centres for decision-making and innovation.

In addition, 13 years after its founding, the network is on the verge of expanding to encompass the six member countries of EFTA (Sweden, Austria, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) which have signed the EEA (European Economic Area) cooperation agreement with the EC. This near-50% increase in the number of members of the network, while stimulating enthusiasm and interest, is also reason for concern and consideration. An information network is a living entity which ensures its own survival through adaptation to perceived needs and renewal. An expansion of this scope requires a re-examination of the network's operations. The establishment of an electronic mail service will be a first step towards more interactive exchanges.

Initially created mainly as a documentation service, the EURYDICE network, after more than a decade of intense cooperation among the Member States and of significant growth in their needs. As an information network, EURYDICE was not alone in being forced to determine how to go beyond the stage of collecting and exchanging purely documentary information and to participate in the creation of high-quality, "processed" information? How can EURYDICE avoid making documentary information and objective in itself and see it as a means of achieving the broader goal of producing information which meets the needs of a society suffering from an overflow of documentation and a shortage of real information?

Documentation should no doubt remain an essential element in the creation of information, but over-emphasis on documentation in the area of education, which concerns EURYDICE, could have created the illusion that the reality of education was confined to the information contained in documents. Education policies and systems are constantly changing, and information should provide as faithful a depiction of this as possible, while providing a true and reliable picture of these changes and their deeper meaning. Information should be at the service of political decision-makers.

This is the challenge which EURYDICE strives to meet. The network will, to this end, be obliged to streamline its operations. The information collected must meet strict criteria for selection in keeping with the objectives at hand. Documentation must be as current and as relevant as possible, covering not only basic documents on education systems and policies, but also major innovations and results of research in education. This approach will allow for optimum use of the documentation collected for the drafting and production of comparative information tools at various levels and in different forms. In this way, stored information is put to use and documentation is brought out of the dark corners where it is too often left.

The EURYDICE European Unit currently has a document database containing some 12,000 units of data, of which over 60% are Community documents, 40% being of national origin. The network recently decided to create a collective bibliographic database using the CDS-ISIS software.

### **Issues surrounding information networks "Developing a true Network Culture"**

Discussions of the main difficulties which networks and documentation networks in particular face often emphasise technical, data-processing or financial problems. However, an important dimension of the operation and the effectiveness of these networks, their human dimension, is often forgotten. This dimension is the

foundation for exchange and represents the driving force behind the dynamic of interactivity, which is the capstone of the network concept. A network is, **first and foremost, a living entity.**

A network's level of activity and its potential are strengthened when the education professionals who make up the network are well informed about the collective objectives and goals which are its entire justification. The concept of participation in the achievement of a common goal is a crucial element of the proactive and positive attitude which those involved must demonstrate. This concept must be thoroughly understood and internalised. A lack of clarity and consensus can be a major obstacle to performance within a network and to its vital dynamic, which depends on the interdependence of its participants. Difficulties in collective decision-making on issues which are basic to the operation of a network (such as the definition of common standards and the development of joint databases) may follow. This situation can lead to a negation of the very concept of a network, which is based on the objective of greater effectiveness through collective management and the sharing of resources.

It is thus vital for the objectives of a network and the framework of operations to be clear to all those directly involved as well as from the outside, and that mechanisms be provided for adjustment of objectives and resources in response to developments in the demand for information. A network requires that its constituent parts feel themselves to be participants in a **true network culture**. This attitude is essential to the development of mutual understanding, to the shoring up of weak points without weakening the strongest points and to the development of a **lowest common denominator** with which each participant can identify and which provides a foundation for growth.

This holds true for all networks, whether national, European or international. In the case of EURYDICE, a European network, an additional dimension adds to the complexity and to the challenges of work within a network, i.e. the intercultural dimension. Representatives from 12 countries, soon to be 18, interact and work together, bringing widely varying resources and professional backgrounds, while processing and exchanging information about very different cultures and education systems. Europe, to a greater extent than any other continent, is a complex and rich mosaic, and the network cannot help but reflect this fact.

The central element, whether national, European or international, which coordinates and leads all of the activities of a network has a crucial role to play in the development of this network culture and to the strongest possible cohesion concerning joint objectives.

It is also vital that this living entity which constitutes a network does not operate as a closed circuit. Its openness to the outside world of information and the target audiences for information is essential. Links and synergies with other information networks with similar or identical objectives are basic to the effectiveness of information. Networks must contribute to greater transparency of information, and the information processed must therefore be made accessible. EURYDICE is developing ever-greater synergies with other European and international networks for information about education, including the EUDISED network of the Council of Europe and the INED network of UNESCO/BIE. The enlargement of the European Community and the strengthening of its relations with third countries is likely to lead EURYDICE to play a role in an increasing number of countries. It is therefore important for this cooperation to serve the goal of more effective information.

Luce Pépin  
European Unit of EURYDICE  
- the education information network in the European  
Community -  
Rue d'Arlon 15  
B-1040 Bruxelles  
Belgium