EDINA and the wider world

ALISON BAYLEY and PETER BURNHILL

In the beginning there was BIDS . . . or so it seems to many. In fact, there also existed a diverse range of other data sources available to those who knew where to find them. Obvious examples included the services provided by the Data Archive, the Oxford Text Archive, MIDAS, and Edinburgh University Data Library to name a few. The JISC-funded firmament into which EDINA was created has been expanding and is constantly changing. There are, however, recent signs of order.

JISC’s mission statement is: “to stimulate and enable the cost effective exploitation of information systems and to provide a high-quality national network infrastructure for the UK higher education and research councils communities.” JISC contracts the national datacentres, such as BIDS, EDINA and MIDAS, to provide particular services directly to the higher education community. The Arts and Humanities Data Service, created according to a different pattern, co-ordinates another range of (distributed) services including the History Data Service, the Oxford Text Archive, the Performing Arts Data Service and the Visual Arts Data Service. There is a great range of other JISC-funded data services (see http://www.niss.ac.uk/education/jasper/index.html for the complete list), and new ones are emerging as a result of the JISC eLib Programme.

The services offered by each data provider differ significantly in content, structure, and software environment. And there are major differences in the form of user registration required by each. As the number of services increases, the diversity is causing bewilderment among users and information support staff alike. What is important to the user and to support staff is to be able to discover relevant data sources, to register easily to use them, and to have a level of access and service suitable for academic needs. This is a real challenge.

Fortunately there is some progress to report. The first is of co-ordinated effort triggered by a JISC-sponsored joint working party of the representatives of the three national datacentres. Their report proposed ‘A Uniform Framework for the JISC Bibliographic Services’ (see http://edina.ed.ac.uk/admin/common-int.html). It highlighted authentication and registration as two key issues requiring attention. The report contained the well-rehearsed arguments on individual versus group accounts, and on the effectiveness of username/password versus call-address validation. The report recommended that a system being developed by NISS should be investigated. Known as ATHENS, this unified system of registration and authentication is now supported by the JISC and is being adopted by EDINA, BIDS and MIDAS for use during the 1997/98 academic session. See page 2 of this Newsline for further information about ATHENS3.

A second item to report is the creation of a Monitoring and Advisory Unit (MAU), based at the University of Kent and the University of Wales, Cardiff. The MAU’s remit is to manage the JISC contracts with the national datacentres and CHEST, and to define the conditions of services offered by each.

Over the summer, EDINA and the others have been engaged with the MAU in drafting Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and Service Level Definitions (SLD). These documents, which will be published for all to see on the Web, will form the framework of defined standards for national services, and will make it possible for the JISC to monitor performance. MAU will also attempt to assess customer satisfaction through site visits, attendance at user meetings, surveys, etc, and will conduct any ‘value for money’ exercise deemed appropriate by the JISC Secretariat.

We hope that EDINA users will find the MoU and SLD informative and will assist us by sending constructive comments on the level of service experienced. While we can monitor quantitative statistics, such as number of active users, concurrent usage, training course participation etc., it is only with this user feedback that we can assess the quality of our service.
Reaching out to users

ANDREW BEVAN
EDINA Training Officer

How does an on-line database provider ensure its services are reaching the right people and that they’re being used effectively? This is just one of the challenges facing a data centre such as EDINA. To address the question, we have undertaken a number of initiatives this year.

In April at the UK Serials Group (UKSG) conference, held at Heriot-Watt University, EDINA’s exhibition stand provided a useful opportunity to demonstrate the newly-launched PCI-Web interface and other EDINA services. Reflecting the two-way nature of the process, we certainly learnt a good deal about what users expect and how they approach a service and navigate their way round databases.

The UKSG stand was a suitable prelude to a series of workshops we ran at various universities during May and June. The workshops were held jointly with representatives from Chadwyck-Healey (for PCI and Palmer’s Index) and BIOSIS, UK (for BIOSIS Previews), and attracted a mix of site representatives and subject librarians. We hope that by familiarising them fully with the relevant databases, the objective of ‘training the trainers’ was achieved.

At the beginning of October we have planned one more of each workshop at Durham University, and we remain open to invitations to visit other institutions if there is sufficient local interest and our travel costs can be covered.

Additionally in September at the Libbrech conference we are holding two seminars, one in conjunction with Chadwyck-Healey and the other alone, giving an overview of recent developments to EDINA.

As an outcome of the workshops, and in recognition that such events alone cannot reach everyone, a number of PowerPoint demonstrations have been created and made available via the EDINA web pages. The beauty of this medium is its versatility, allowing for subsequent customising by users. Furthermore slideshows can be used either as self-tuition guides or to form the basis of presentations to groups.

To raise awareness of our services we are considering targeted mailings to academics and researchers at the start of term.

Over the Summer, we piloted the direct approach of a short, email user survey for PCI and Palmer’s Index. The responses helped increase our understanding of user needs and led directly to some interface changes. We remain keen to receive feedback from users of any EDINA service, via whatever medium.

Even with these different initiatives, we don’t claim to have found the answer to the original question. However we hope that with continuing feedback from users, we can satisfy their needs and gradually incorporate more of their wishes.

EDINA goes to Athens

In the next academic year the UK higher education community will take another step towards the digital library. Soon, each user will be able to access a range of services provided by BIDS, EDINA, MIDAS and NISS with the same user ID and password. This will be made possible by ATHENS3, the new national authentication service developed by NISS.

ATHENS3 will allow users to access various services from computers anywhere; and to customise certain service aspects to suit their own needs. It will also place responsibility for the proper use of on-line services more firmly on the end-user, and will mean less ‘red tape’ for site representatives.

EDINA hopes to link its bibliographic services to ATHENS3 during the autumn term. (BIDS and MIDAS have similar timetables.) UKBORDERS will move to the new system by autumn 1998 after certain legal issues are resolved.

For details, see http://www.niss.ac.uk/authentication. The EDINA home page has a pointer to presentations given at a recent series of ATHENS3 workshops.

Staff changes at EDINA

We would like to extend a welcome to Paul Bedworth, our latest recruit. A Computer Science postgraduate at the University of Edinburgh, Paul has joined EDINA as a Software Engineer, and is working with Alan Ferguson in our Technical Infrastructure team. He has a strong programming background and brings knowledge of UNIX, C, Java, CGI and other such useful skills to contribute to EDINA's future success.

Education and life-long learning are wonderful, but they do occasionally mean that we must say goodbye to long-standing colleagues as they decide to go off and be students again. And so it is with Heather Ewington, who has left the Data Library to begin a course in Human Computer Interaction at Heriot-Watt University. Heather has contributed greatly to the success of EDINA, and from 1989, to the wider success of the Data Library. Among her many achievements in recent years, she can count SALSER, PCI-Web and a critical understanding and application of OCLC SiteSearch. Things will never be the same at EDINA without her. We all wish her well in her new career.
The BIOSIS experience at Stirling University

Two librarians share their experience of introducing their staff and students to EDINA BIOSIS.

LISA HADDOW, Science Librarian
& CLARE ALLAN, Science Information Officer

Stirling University Library

In early 1996, to support the information needs of the students and staff in Stirling’s Faculty of Natural Sciences, we subscribed to the print version of Biological Abstracts and the CDROM version of The Life Sciences Collection (LSC). At that point we had never been able to afford the CDROM version of BA, so we were pleased when BIOSIS Previews became available on-line from EDINA. After subscribing to EDINA BIOSIS, we cancelled the print version of BA. Unsurprisingly, we had no complaints, as the print version of BA is such a horrible thing to use!

In Autumn 1996, we launched BIOSIS to staff in the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and then integrated the service into our existing user education programme. We see all the taught postgraduates in the Faculty of Natural Sciences as well as all the 3rd year undergraduates intending to do honours. We also introduced BIOSIS into our workshops for Aquaculture MSc students and Biology and Biochemistry students. The Aquaculture MSc students, who are mainly from overseas, seemed to struggle with changing passwords, never mind getting into the system! We hope the new ATHENS system will improve things for the user.

We used a PowerPoint presentation with a demo of the service to highlight the main features of BIOSIS: how to search and combine searches; displaying, marking and outputting results; and advanced search techniques (Concept Codes, Biosystematic Codes, and Supertaxa). The demo was scripted in advance — i.e., we have particular searches we want to show them — and we produced a handout and a worksheet for the practical hands-on session. At the end of the session we invited staff to fill out a form on their research interests and we constructed a search strategy for them.

In December, we cancelled our subscription to Life Sciences Collection CDROM since the coverage of the database is limited. For example, physiology is not covered at all. There was a huge outcry from staff about this. Although BIOSIS gives a more comprehensive coverage of biological literature, the main criticism from former LSC users is that it does not have a GUI interface. For the people who had never used LSC, however, BIOSIS seems brilliant!

Although it took a huge amount of time to prepare our PowerPoint presentations and the handouts, it was well worth the effort. We have two presentations: one for students, and one for staff and research postgrads which goes into more detail about how to use BIOSIS for current awareness purposes. The handout and worksheet are modified for each particular audience to include relevant subject-specific examples. If you are interested in seeing our PowerPoint presentations or documentation, please feel free to contact us.

EDINA BIOSIS has developed rapidly in the last year and we have found the staff at EDINA responsive to our comments. We look forward to continuing to work with them to provide a service that our users value, and more importantly, will use!

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UKBORDERS prepares for year 2001

DAWN GRIEBSCH

UKBORDERS was set up by ESRC under the 1991 Census Initiative, to give UK academic users access to digital boundary data (DBD) representing approximately half a million different census areas. The service allows users to map 1991 census data systematically at various levels of aggregation.

UKBORDERS digital boundary data has a very high level of precision. Researchers investigating large-scale, small area social phenomena require this level of complexity. However, as Dr. Donald J. Morse, UKBORDERS National Service Coordinator, points out, “Very precise boundary data is not always needed for thematic mapping. In fact, in many cases, this high level of precision gives users far too much information, sometimes resulting in file sizes that are too large for practical use.”

What is needed is a way of reducing the detail — or generalising the boundaries — so that users can maintain control over the quality of the data, while at the same time reducing the complexity and size of the data files. This is the aim of the GENABOUNDARY project.

It is anticipated that the 2001 Census data will eventually be made available to the UK higher education community. Having a generalisation facility within UKBORDERS will be crucial for increasing the flexibility of this very important resource, and for making it more useful to the greater number of social science researchers.
EDINA services - latest news

The user interface to the Palmer’s Index to The Times service has been revised. This follows consultation with users and an extensive beta test phase. Among other things, the appearance of the interface generally has improved, and users can now browse on indexed field values. Full details of the changes can be obtained by use of the Palmer’s News and Help commands.

The user interfaces for the PCI services have also been improved. A revised version of the PCI-Web interface went into service earlier in the Summer. A revised version of the PCI Telnet interface is now available in ‘test’ mode. (Try out this version by entering ‘3test’ in the standard EDINA screen.) This version will go into full service by the end of September.

As always, we are pleased to receive comments and suggestions from our users on possible improvements to our database services.

EDINA at Libtech

Libtech International at the University of Hertfordshire has become a jour fix for many information professionals. This year’s event will take place from Sept. 10-11, and we will be demonstrating our services at stand 218. So why not come and have a look and a chat? If you missed the recent series of JISC seminars introducing ATHENS, here’s your chance to discuss what is involved in the transition process. We will also be running two free seminars.

On Wednesday, 10th September, EDINA — Networked Resources for Higher Education will give an overview of recent developments to the EDINA services, highlight new interface features, and show some useful but less well known options. There will also be an update on EDINA's move to ATHENS3.

On Thursday, a joint EDINA/Chadwyck-Healey workshop, Online resources for the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities, will focus on PCI and Palmer’s Index to the Times, along with some of Chadwyck-Healey’s own Web services: Literature Online, International Index to Music Periodicals, and Patrologia Latina Database.

Further information about both seminars is available at http://edina.ed.ac.uk/admin/road-show.html.

Edinburgh Data & INformation Access

EDINA, based at Edinburgh University Data Library, is a JISC-funded national datacentre. It offers the UK higher education and research community networked access to a library of data, information and research resources. All EDINA services are available free of charge to members of UK higher education institutions for academic use, although university subscription and end-user registration is required for some services.

EDINA services are:

• EDINA BIOSIS
• EDINA PCI (Periodicals Contents Index)
• EDINA Palmer’s Index to The Times
• SALSER (Scottish Academic Libraries SERials)
• UKBORDERS

Details of these services are available at http://edina.ed.ac.uk

EDINA contacts (front of house)

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Reference cards

Reference cards for EDINA BIOSIS, PCI and Palmer’s Index to The Times are available for purchase at £12/100. They are also available free from the EDINA Web pages in PDF and postscript formats.

EDINA subscription and registration

Some EDINA services require the completion of a licence agreement before those services can be made available to users.

For BIOSIS, the Periodicals Contents Index and Palmer’s Index to The Times, licence agreements must be obtained from CHEST (email chest@chest.ac.uk) and a subscription fee must be paid. Individual users must register locally at their library.

For UKBORDERS, there is no fee for academic institutions within the UK, but a licence agreement must be signed (email edina@ed.ac.uk) and individual users must sign an End User Licence.

SALSER is a completely free service, with no subscription fee. No licence or prior registration is required.

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