

## **Literature review of research into attitudes towards electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs).**

Josh Brown, SHERPA-LEAP Project Officer  
University College London.

This document summarises existing research into the attitudes of graduate students and their supervisors towards electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs). Research was identified from Germany, India, Italy, South Africa, the UK and the US. The authors of two published papers from the UK were contacted via email and asked to expand upon their published work.

In order to extend the picture of current attitudes of UK research students and supervisors to ETDs, repository managers from UCL Eprints and White Rose Research Online (Based at the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York) who have relatively advanced collections of ETDs, were asked to provide a list of the concerns that were most often brought to their attention during their advocacy work.

### **Research synopses:**

#### ***International research findings:***

Bettina Berendt *et al* (2002) surveyed users of the Humboldt University edoc dissertation publication service. They found that at least 50% of their respondents had not made any decision about placing their work online, and that 44% had not been aware of the possibility. Very few heard about the service from their supervisor or from the examination office, and 28% wished they had known about the service earlier. Of those who did not wish to place their work online, most cited the perceived 'informality' of such dissemination as a reason, although print publishing ambitions and copyright worries (both third party and their own IP) were the other main concerns. Twice as many wished to publish online as were opposed, citing increased breadth and speed of dissemination and reduced costs as the main reasons. The conclusion was that "The expressed attitudes indicate that digital publication is broadly accepted. We expect that adequate promotion of the service will have a good chance of success, since every sixth respondent is already strongly in favour of digital publishing, and half are still in the decision process." (Berendt, p160) The recommendations based on the survey were:

- 1) Inform students at the earliest opportunity about the service
- 2) Keep in regular contact with students and with supervisors wherever possible and
- 3) Lower barriers to uptake by offering assistance in preparing/converting files for upload.

Ursula Goldsmith (2002) conducted a survey of graduate supervisors at Louisiana State University which found that most faculty supervisors had a positive view of electronic theses, with a majority agreeing that the advantages

of ETDs outweigh their disadvantages and that ETDs will increase the access of faculty and graduate research students to important research literature. A majority felt that access to ETDs should be unrestricted (legal issues, presumably, notwithstanding), but most did not want to be involved in advocating deposit, feeling that workshops and web pages were the best forum for spreading the word. Faculty perceived the benefits of web delivery as speed and breadth of dissemination and the richer possibilities of digital formats as compared to traditional print. They were concerned about IPR, publication possibilities and preservation.

David Evans (2006) conducted a survey of South African graduate students and identified perceived benefits and drawbacks to ETDs. He listed the benefits as minimized duplication of research effort, improved access and visibility, speedier dissemination and reduced costs to universities. He lists the concerns as preservation, plagiarism, impact on potential publication or patents and the need for technological expertise and funding to implement ETD projects. In his survey, 85% of respondents felt that electronic dissemination had the potential to improve the 'expression of graduate education', via the potential for improved graphics, multimedia and integration with external resources. 65% reported having no reservations about putting their research online, with 13% having concerns, and 19% reporting that they would have reservations 'in some cases' (Evans, p.57).

Vijayakumar, Murthy and Khan (2007) surveyed academic librarians, Ph.D. supervisors and graduate students at a number of Indian universities to assess their attitudes to ETD services. The academic librarians identified copyright, lack of funding/infrastructure, plagiarism and lack of administrative support as the main concerns with ETDs. They cited improved research visibility, reduced duplication, enhancement of expertise in digital archiving, the promotion of electronic publishing and an increased role for libraries as the benefits of ETD developments (Vijayakumar *et al*, p418-9).

85% of supervisors surveyed supported the concept of electronic submission and 89% supported online access to ETDs, with 64% of the latter supporting global access (Vijayakumar *et al*, p419). Of those who expressed concerns, plagiarism and copyright were the most significant. The attitudes amongst students were similar, with 86% in favour of electronic submission, 83% in favour of online access, 66% of whom favoured global access. Adding the remaining 34% to the 28% of total respondents who opposed electronic access, however, indicates that 44% of the students surveyed were opposed to global online access to their theses. Prior publication, copyright and plagiarism were the main concerns for this group, with a majority wishing to publish journal articles based on their research.

Fabrizia Bevilacqua (2007) found, at the University of Parma, that most supervisors and students were positive about electronic theses deposit and about open access via the university's IR. Amongst the students, those whose supervisor was positive about ETDs were particularly enthusiastic. Reported concerns included prior publication and plagiarism. Students in the humanities were most likely to favour an embargo, whilst science students tended to prefer

rapid dissemination. The project concluded that the best way to ensure consistency in the handling of ETDs was mandated deposit with centrally determined policies to allay concerns and deal with exceptions.

***UK research findings:***

Morag Greig (2005) described a broadly positive response from academic faculty at the University of Glasgow to making theses available online. She identified several key concerns about ETDs on the part of those who objected. These related to the possible consequences of online availability for future publication and/or patents; the IPRs of students; the possibility of deposit requiring the agreement of the supervisor; embargo periods; sensitive research areas, such as GM or animal experiments; idea 'theft'; and the possibility of lower quality work being presented online and a perception that theses do not form a valid or useful part of the research literature.

In an email follow up, Morag indicated that the concerns expressed by students and supervisors cover the same areas as those outlined in 2005, although they are now raised by fewer individuals. The most common queries at Glasgow concern plagiarism and embargo periods. Some departments want to accept double-sided print copies, now that there is an electronic copy of each thesis, and some students have been approached by publishers, although apparently there is some question as to the bona fides of certain of these approaches. After two full academic years of mandatory deposit, most students express no concerns, and those that arise are chiefly about embargoes and third-party copyright. Supervisors seem to report concerns about plagiarism and idea theft, although embargo periods allay these fears in most cases.

Miggie Pickton and Cliff McKnight (2006)<sup>1</sup> found that access to complete theses was one of the most attractive offerings of repositories to students as researchers and authors. They found that 80% of students were in favour of making their thesis available online, with a small number 'adamantly opposed', mostly as a result of fears about plagiarism (Pickton and McKnight, p209). Interestingly, 95% desired access to full-text, open access theses for their research. One of the perceived benefits of open access ETDs for students was the opportunity for recognition and feedback within their field.

When contacted via email, Miggie named the single greatest concern over ETDs that she has encountered as prior publication. She said that other concerns are to do with plagiarism and ethics (particularly confidentiality). Copyright appears to be a source of very little concern for students, but is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant issue for repository staff.

Other repository managers were canvassed informally for the 'top three' concerns that supervisors and students bring to their attention. Responses were, for concerns from supervisors, publication status' copyright' premature exposure of data, sensitive material. Requests for more information about services also make up a large proportion of correspondence. Concerns from

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper also contains some useful recommendations for advocacy activities.

students were copyright, future publications, sensitive material, embargo periods and plagiarism.

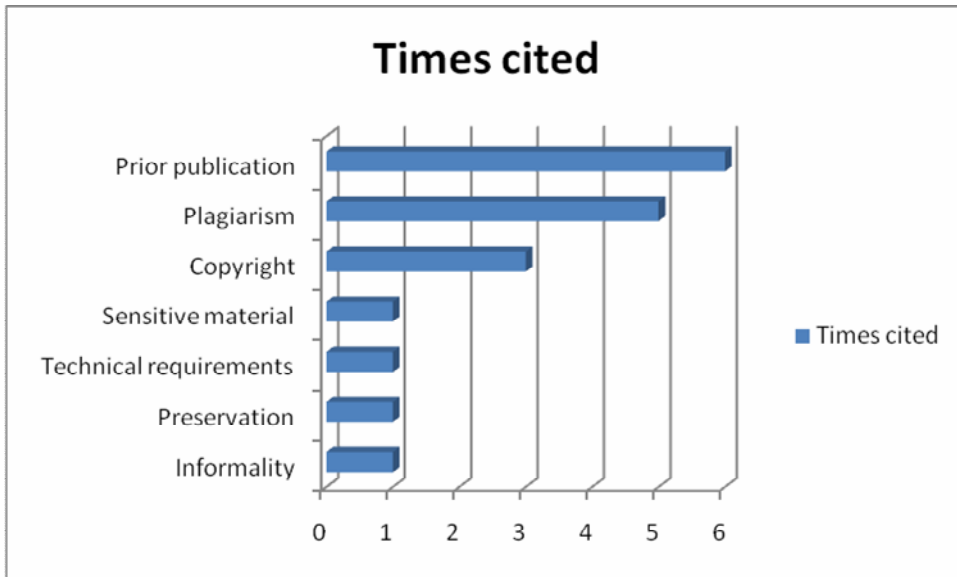
## Summary overview:

### Concerns cited:

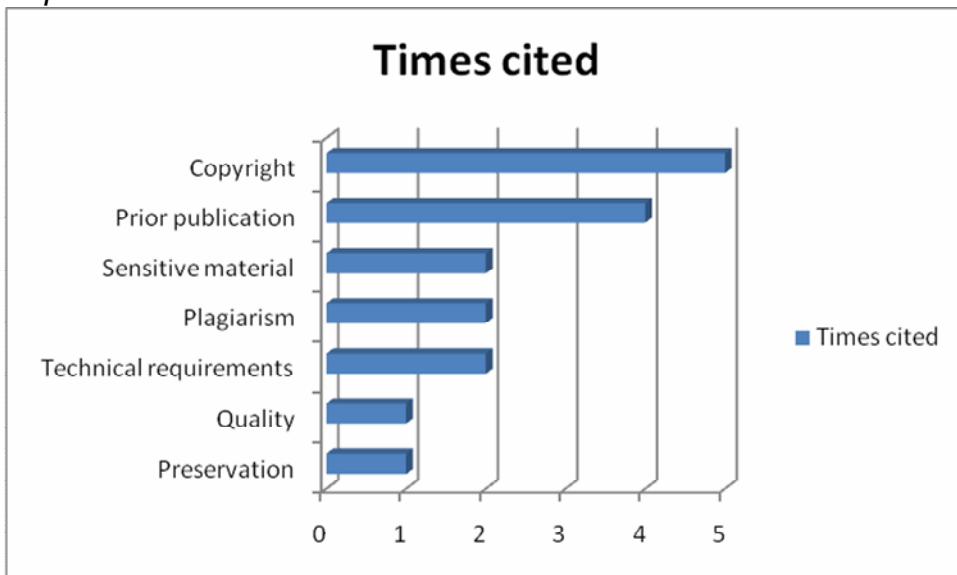
The concerns cited in the studies above are summarised below, broken down by students versus supervisors. They are ranked according to the number of studies in which they have been listed.

Concerns about the impact of ETDs being made available on future publications of journal articles, books or patents are subsumed under the category 'prior publication'.

#### Students:



#### Supervisors:

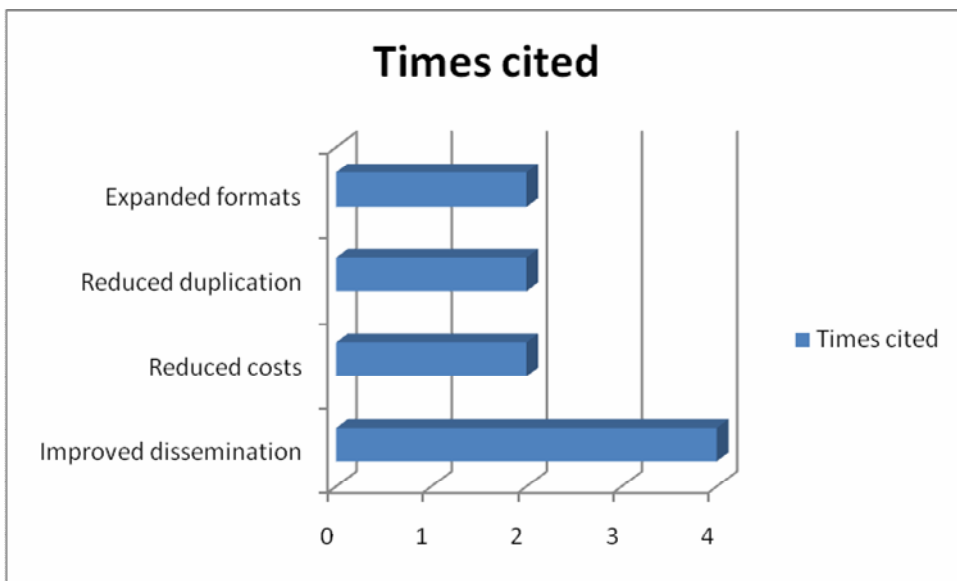


It is worthy of note that for all the same concerns made up the 'top 4', and in both groups the effect of prior publication and copyright problems were the gravest concerns.

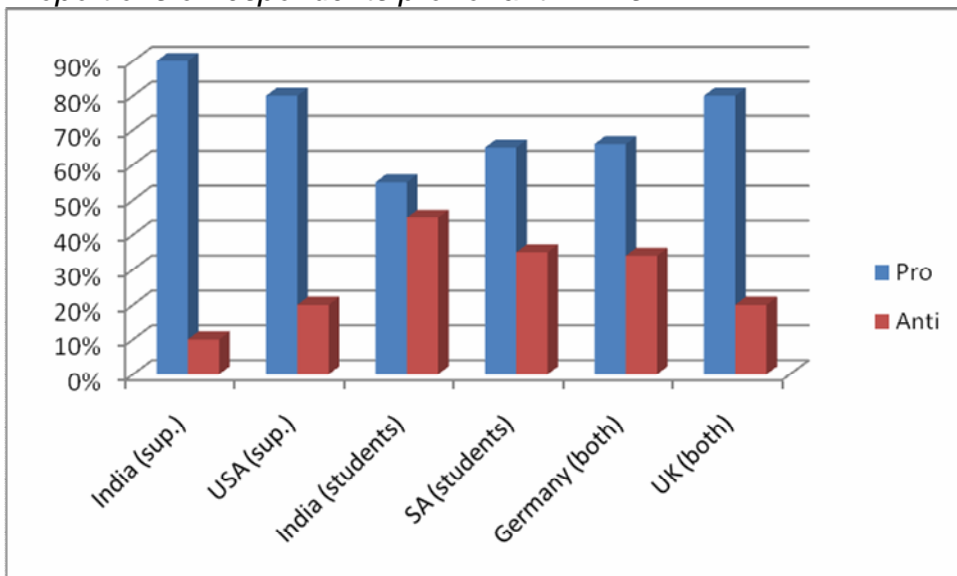
*Perceived benefits:*

Of those studies which cited benefits as identified by respondents, the most important was improved dissemination, via increased access and more rapid distribution.

Reduced costs and reduced duplication of research effort, it could be argued, are consequences of improved dissemination.



*Proportions of respondents pro- or anti-ETDs:*



It is interesting that supervisors appear to be markedly more in favour of ETDs than their students. However, a clear majority identified themselves as being in favour of ETDs in all the studies.

## **Conclusions:**

While a clear majority of graduate students and supervisors are in favour of ETDs, there are number of significant concerns, predominantly impact on future publication, copyright, plagiarism and sensitive material. Many of these concerns can be allayed by sensitive and responsive handling of ETDs. Advocacy and processes should be developed in a way that addresses concerns 'up front'. Most of these concerns can be managed practically for a majority of students by a properly designed deposit process, and advocacy that explains how these concerns are taken seriously and demonstrates the benefits of ETDs has the potential to resolve the worries of most of the concerned minority.

In order to develop targeted advocacy, the strategies used and arguments presented by authors cited here will be of some benefit, and could form a supplementary briefing document.

## ***Bibliography:***

Berendt, B; Brenstein, E; Li, Y. and Wendland, B. (2002) Marketing for participation: how can electronic dissertation services win authors? In Proceedings of ETD 2003, pp156-161. Available at: <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/etd2003/berendt-bettina> [last accessed 2/12/09]

Bevilacqua, F. (2007) Polimnia project: issues and problems about realising a deposit of theses at the University of Parma. Paper presented at the 10th International Symposium on Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Uppsala, Sweden, June 13-16.

Evans, D. (2006) Perceptions and attributes of electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs): a South African Study. MA dissertation, University of Zululand.

Greig, M. (2005) Implementing electronic theses at the University of Glasgow: cultural challenges. Library Collections, Acquisitions and Technical Services, 29. pp326-335.

Goldsmith, U. (2002) Perceptions of active graduate faculty at a research extensive university regarding electronic submission of theses and dissertations. Ph.D. Thesis. Louisiana State University.

Pickton, M. & McKnight, C. (2006) Research Students and the Loughborough institutional repository. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 38(4), pp206-223.

Vijayakumar, J.K.; Murthy, T.A.V. & Khan, M.T.M. (2007) Electronic theses and dissertations and academia: a preliminary study. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 33(3), pp417-22.