

E-Theses Developments in the UK

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Abstract

Several projects are underway currently in the UK to promote the production, management and use of theses in electronic format. Funding from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) is enabling three project teams to address key issues which to date have held back e-theses development in this country, including the lack of models suitable for use at national level. In order to appreciate the context within which the (Glasgow, Edinburgh and RGU led) projects are operating, this paper includes a brief history of the development of e-theses in the UK.

It has taken a considerable length of time for the present, positive, situation to materialise in the UK. However, it is hoped that by highlighting the stages of development, the paper will serve to encourage others to persevere with attempts to obtain funding, and change attitudes, in order to achieve acceptance of electronic theses in their own institutions.

The formation of the 'University Theses Online Group' (UTOG), in the mid 1990s, may be considered the first milestone in the UK. Over the years, members of UTOG have worked hard to ascertain the views of students and researchers and to raise awareness of the advantages of having theses available in electronic format. At times the slow rate of progress has been dispiriting, but individual achievements have been significant. The paper explores the difficulties associated with maintaining interest in the subject of e-theses over a lengthy period during which there were few major breakthroughs - and it explains how this has been achieved in the UK.

Finally, the paper examines the value of having easy access, via Web pages, to information about international e-theses projects and developments. Persuasive arguments can be made 'at home' when details about progress, achievements and increased usage statistics elsewhere can be cited.

Introduction

Within the library community in the UK, there has been interest in the development of electronic theses and dissertations since the mid 1990s. However, it is only recently that a substantial amount of funding has been made available to allow the theories and plans to be turned into practice. A number of speakers at this year's 'International Symposium On Electronic Theses and Dissertations' will be describing the key UK projects in more detail in later sessions. My aim in this paper, therefore, is to provide an overview of developments leading up to the present situation in order to allow the recent work to be considered in context.

My intention is not to dwell on why it has taken so long for the UK to reach its current position. Rather, it is to demonstrate that it is worth persevering with efforts to achieve acceptance of electronic submission. I would also like to use this opportunity to encourage delegates to continue publicising details of progress with their own projects on the Web. As the number of international ETD projects increase, developments within individual institutions may not seem newsworthy if they are not original. However, where cultural change is needed within an institution, it may be the reassurance that numerous universities have adopted a similar practice that persuades those responsible for approving ETD proposals to follow suit.

The creation of UTOG

Achieving a 'culture change' was one of the main aims of the 'University Theses Online Group' (UTOG) which was formed in the UK in 1994 to initiate discussions about the potential difficulties and opportunities associated with the development of ETDs (PhD theses in particular). UTOG aimed to persuade students, their supervisors, researchers, librarians and university administrators to accept the submission and provision of theses in electronic format. (There are some cultural variations in the use of the terms 'theses' and 'dissertations' with regard to the output of PhD and Masters level work. UTOG has concentrated its efforts, in the main, on doctoral theses).

From the beginning, the members of UTOG appreciated the need to have the support of all of the major stakeholders in the production and management of ETDs. Although UTOG had no funding as a body, meetings were attended by representatives from a diverse range of universities including: Cranfield, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, London, Manchester Metropolitan, Newcastle, RGU, University College London (UCL), and Warwick. Representatives from the British Library also participated from the early years and, latterly, the UK Council for Graduate Education was represented. Following the retirement of the first chairperson of UTOG, Brenda Moon (then Librarian at the University of Edinburgh), the group was chaired for some time by Fred Friend (then Director Scholarly Communication at University College London).

At present, the group is undergoing a period of transition but it is hoped that, as a result of the current ETD projects, UTOG will reconvene soon with a new set of aims and objectives to ensure that a focal point exists within the UK to take forward future ETD developments.

The UTOG Survey

The key piece of work undertaken by UTOG during its 'first phase', to bring about a culture change, was the organisation of a major survey to determine current practice and levels of use of theses within the academic community in the UK. Funding was obtained from the British Library Research and Innovation Centre and from the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Higher Education Funding Councils (JISC), and a survey prepared by the members of UTOG was duly administered by a team from the University of Edinburgh. A questionnaire was sent to authors who were completing doctoral theses in the year to October 1996 in eight participating universities (2,203 people). The (1,740) supervisors of these students also received a questionnaire, as did 125 librarians (members of SCONUL, the Society of College, National and University Libraries). The response rate from authors was 44%, from supervisors 58%, and from librarians 72%.

The results of the survey, which were published as a British Library report and on University of Edinburgh Web pages, were encouraging.¹ Two-thirds of the respondents had consulted doctoral theses in the course of their research, but many had encountered problems in tracking down or accessing ETDs from outwith their own institution. Librarians reported that many of the theses in their collections were never read and that levels of use were generally not monitored accurately. Students confirmed that nearly all of the theses were produced in electronic form using standard software packages, though very few incorporated audio or video recordings (1% and 0.5% respectively). Over two-thirds (70%) of the students stated that they would be willing to publish their thesis more widely in its existing form. All of this information suggested to UTOG that it would be well worth pursuing the goal of introducing electronic 'submission' and storage of ETDs.

Publicity

Following the UTOG survey, the group attempted to publicise the findings as widely as possible. With financial support from the British Library, a workshop was held in June 1997, at University College London, to discuss the cultural issues raised by the survey and to explore the associated technical challenges. Articles by Alason Roberts were published in the *British Library Research and Innovation Centre Research Bulletin* and *Ariadne*². Articles by Susan Copeland were published in *Library and Information Research News*³, and an article by Joanne Lomax was published in *Program*⁴.

Practical Developments

Having gained a significant amount of interest in the subject of ETDs, members of UTOG planned to implement 'Phase 2' of their strategy: the design and implementation of a prototype. Using some remaining funding from the original project, the Science and Engineering Library, Learning and Information Centre at the University of Edinburgh proceeded to undertake a small scale pilot project to create example ETDs. The results of this work were demonstrated to academic and library staff at a seminar at The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. The work by the Edinburgh team again proved useful in terms of publicising ETDs and demonstrating the benefits of making theses available in electronic format. However, it became clear that a significant amount of additional work was needed to produce a model for the production, management and use of ETDs at national level, and that a substantial amount of funding would be needed to achieve this.

Until such large scale funding could be obtained, small scale progress was made wherever opportunities arose. For example, in 2000, five universities agreed to act as pilot sites to participate in a JISC funded trial of a new template designed to allow electronic submission of theses information to the 'Index to Theses'. (The latter, first published by ASLIB and now published by Expert Information Ltd.,⁵ is an abstracting and indexing service covering higher degree theses published in the UK and Ireland

1 Roberts, A. Survey on the use of doctoral theses in British Universities. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, 1997. (British Library Research and Innovation Report 57). <http://libcd2.lib.ed.ac.uk/Theses>

2 Roberts, A. Theses Unbound. *Ariadne*. Issue 11. September 1997 p.1. <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk>

3 Roberts, A. Electronic Theses a Step Nearer. *British Library Research and Innovation Centre Research Bulletin*. Summer 1997. Issue 17. p.7.

3 Copeland, S. Electronic Theses: their production, management and use. *Library and Information Research News*. Vol. 23. No. 75. Autumn 1999 pp 23-28.

Copeland, S. Electronic Theses: some recent developments. *Library and Information Research News*. Vol. 24. No. 77. Summer 2000. pp 35-39.

4 Lomax, J. The work of the University Theses Online Group: report of a survey and seminar. *Program*. Vol. 31. No. 4. October 1997. pp 377-382

which provides a link to the British Library's 'British Thesis Service').

Current Developments

Despite the best efforts of the members of UTOG, and librarians and academic staff in a number of other universities in the UK, it had become apparent by 2001/2002 that widespread adoption of ETDs was only likely to happen when developments could be seen at national level. Although there was little activity in this area in the UK, interested individuals were keeping abreast of developments internationally. News of ongoing developments, particularly in the U.S., Australia, Germany, France and Scandinavia, served as a reminder that this was an area in which the UK was going to be left behind unless some major activity took place. Web sites showed how other universities were making their PhD and Masters level research output available, and how they were gaining publicity by doing so. Evidence of increased awareness and use of theses, for example as illustrated in Virginia Tech's Web pages of usage statistics, proved useful in making the case for ETDs.⁶ Within particular universities, individuals have continued to advocate acceptance of ETDs. Already, in the first few months of 2003, library staff at several universities, including those at Cranfield, Leeds and RGU, have taken papers to their appropriate committees to gain approval for electronic submission and storage of theses. It has been the growing momentum internationally that has kept individuals in the UK motivated and keen to persevere with their efforts.

The JISC 'FAIR' Programme

Finally, in 2003, the efforts of many of the individuals were rewarded when the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) provided a substantial amount of funding to allow three major ETD project to commence. The financial support has been forthcoming as part of the 'Focus on Access to Institutional Resources' (FAIR) programme which "aims to evaluate and explore different mechanisms for disclosure and sharing of content (and

the related challenges) to fulfil the vision of a web of resources built by groups with a long term stake in the future of those resources, but made available to the whole community of learning"⁷

To focus the work being undertaken as part of the 'FAIR' programme, the projects have been arranged into a number of 'clusters'. The ETD related projects form part of the 'E-prints and e-theses cluster' which comprises:

- Daedalus (A project being undertaken by the University of Glasgow "to provide exemplars for the development of a network of different data providers for a range of institutional assets to be exploited by a local harvesting service")⁸
- e-prints UK (A project "to develop a national service through which the HE and FE communities can access the collective output of e-print papers available from compliant OAI repositories provided by UK universities and colleges")⁹
- Electronic Theses (A project involving a consortium led by The Robert Gordon University "to evaluate a wide range of existing practice and methods of e-theses production, management and use against a set of criteria in order to produce recommended models for use within the UK information environment")¹⁰
- HalRST: Harvesting Institutional Resources in Scotland Testbed. (A project at the University of Strathclyde "to support research into the design, development and implementation of a pilot service to provide stable ongoing UK-wide access to locally created learning and research resources in HE and FE institutions in Scotland")¹¹
- SHERPA: (A project that "aims to create a substantial corpus of research papers from several of the leading research institutions in the UK by establishing e-print archives which comply with the OAI PMH using eprints.org software")¹²
- TARDIS: (A project at the University of Southampton "to investigate strategies to overcome the technical, cultural and academic barriers which currently restrict the development of institutional e-print archives and will develop a working model of a multi-disciplinary institutional archive")¹³
- Theses Alive!: (A project at the University of Edinburgh which aims to "examine the use of OAI-compliant software designed to handle electronic thesis metadata" and seeks to "adapt and develop the software for use across the UK")¹⁴

5 <http://www.theses.com>

6 <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/data/somefacts.html>

7 JISC 'Focus on Access to Institutional Resources (FAIR) Programme' Web page (6 May 2003) http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme_fair

8 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project_daedalus

9 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project_eprints_uk

10 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project_rgu_etd

11 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project_hairst

12 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project_sherpa

13 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project_tardis

Representatives from the 'Daedalus' project, the 'Electronic Theses' project and 'Theses Alive!' are at this conference and will be giving presentations detailing their specific aims and findings to date. Therefore, for further

information about current ETD activities in the UK, I would strongly recommend attending one of the talks by the above speakers.