The training needs of PhD students: A case study from the University of Surrey

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Abstract
We present a case study examining training needs for doctoral students related to electronic thesis submission at the University of Surrey. We consulted research students, supervisors, administrators and senior managers to gauge awareness of issues related to e-theses and identify areas that should be addressed in our training programme. We highlighted four main areas where greater awareness and training are needed: (1) preparation of an electronic thesis, and awareness of how this format creates new opportunities for presenting the research; (2) awareness of open access to theses and related benefits; (3) adopting practices that address copyright; (4) training on using our electronic submission platform. We discuss organisational/workflow and educational issues related to the design and delivery of this training and propose themes and a training outline that will help students develop research skills for life.

Keywords: electronic theses, training needs, PhD students.

Introduction
Background. The importance of open access to digital theses is now widely recognised. A growing number of institutions in the UK and abroad implement policies that require or encourage the deposit of electronic copies of doctoral theses in an open access online archive, from where theses can be downloaded immediately and free of charge. According to the Registry of Open Access Repositories Archiving Policies Mandates (ROARMAP), there are 119 registered policies worldwide requiring the submission of electronic theses in repositories, 11 of which are in the UK\(^1\); more Universities are currently supporting the submission of e-theses even if the process is not yet mandatory.

Transition to e-theses in the UK. In the UK particularly, it is expected most institutions will have moved to deposit of electronic theses by 2015\(^2\). The main driver in this transition is

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\(^1\) Aberystwyth University, Brunel University, Cranfield University Loughborough University, Royal Holloway, University of London, University of Birmingham, University of Bradford, University of East London, University of Oxford, University of St Andrews and University of Westminster. Data extracted from the Registry of Open Access Repositories Mandatory Archiving Policies accessed http://roarmap.eprints.org/view/type/thesis=5Fmandate.html on 23\(^{rd}\) May 2014.

EThO$^2$ through its digitisation service and associated support toolkit. The Finch report$^4$, instrumental in shaping open access in the UK in the last couple of years, also advocates for institutional repositories to enhance access to theses and dissertations.

**E-theses: what do researchers need to learn?** The procedures through which archiving and disseminating electronic theses is achieved may vary across institutions and are usually tailored to already established practices for thesis submission and online research dissemination. However, there are overarching themes - creativity in thesis preparation, copyright, open access to text, multimedia and data - that all training programmes in all institutions must address, despite differences in workflows, platforms or procedures. Similarly, the knowledge and skills acquired in an e-theses training programme should be expected to persist beyond thesis completion: for example, knowledge of copyright, understanding and adoption of open access practices, authority control, and preparation of electronic copy for long-term public access, will be at the heart of a researcher’s work in years to come.

The present paper describes a first step towards identifying the themes that are most relevant to doctoral students, with a view to building a training programme that will support our new procedures. Our longer term aim is, not merely to design a toolkit and set of workshops for our own students at Surrey, but hopefully to develop training resources that others can share and build upon.

**The context at Surrey.** The findings reported here are a small part of a feasibility study carried out in the academic year 2013-2014, to make recommendations on archiving, preservation and dissemination procedures that would work best for the University of Surrey.

The current theses regulations at Surrey require the deposit of a hard-bound print copy of the version of record to the University Library. Deposit of an electronic copy is also required, but implementation of this latter requirement is still not consistent. The electronic version accompanying the hard copy generally is not made available online automatically. Nevertheless, there are 975 theses in the Surrey Research Insight Open Access repository, most of which were digitised via Ethos; relatively few were born digital.

In terms of training, a short module on third party copyright is currently delivered as part of the compulsory ‘Confirmation process workshop’$^5$ that every student attends usually at the end of their second year. Although there is also a stand-alone workshop on open access,

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$^3$ British Library EThOS. Available at: [http://ethos.bl.uk/](http://ethos.bl.uk/)


$^5$ The ‘confirmation’ refers to an interim evaluation, usually at the end of year 2, of the student’s work to date. If the confirmation process is successful, the student can proceed to the final phase of the PhD.
training with electronic thesis submission in mind is not yet a formal component of the researcher training programme at Surrey.

From September 2014, Surrey will be joining other Universities in requiring the deposit of an electronic copy for every type of doctoral degree in the University's open access repository. A print copy will no longer be required. New training in several areas should be designed to support these changes.

Method and procedure

Focus group: PhD students. A focus group was held with 16 PGR students who attended the Confirmation Process in September 2013. The aim of the focus group was to: (a) find out attitudes and opinions concerning the submission and open dissemination of e-theses and (b) evaluate the usability of two different submission platforms. Only results from (a) are reported here.

The students were asked to discuss in groups what they felt the pros and cons of having their thesis available online would be. They were then asked to write down their responses. Facilitators also kept notes of the discussions. Responses were gathered and grouped in larger themes.

Consultation groups. We consulted 5 postgraduate research directors representing the wide diversity of research carried out at Surrey (Arts; Sociology, Engineering, Physics, English and Languages). We also consulted senior administrators from Registry, the Technology Transfer Office and the Faculties, as well as librarians, on a number of key points, namely: intellectual property and copyright issues related to e-thesis deposit; policies related to restricted access and commercial issues; training needs; platform suitability; open access.

The consultations were more structured than the focus group, revolving around a set of set questions based on a background document. Responses were gathered from notes taken during the meeting.

Results from the focus group and contributions from different institutional stakeholders

Focus group. Research students overall felt very positive towards submission, archiving and dissemination of electronic theses.

In particular, they thought that:

- submitting electronic theses will be cheaper and environmentally friendly
- library space will not be longer required
- electronic archiving offers a better way for preservation
- openly available theses will increase their chances of citations
- links to their theses in CV will improve job opportunities
- facilitates sharing of information

Concerns raised included:

- plagiarism
• intellectual property issues
• use of third party material, especially when a thesis includes whole journal articles, music or performances
• protection of commercial interests
• confidential information provided, for instance, by patients
• questions related to presentation of the thesis, i.e. it was felt that online exposure would raise presentation expectations, raise new questions regarding the use of multimedia, etc.

**Consultation groups.** The parties who were further consulted, particularly the postgraduate research directors, mirrored the student’s opinions and concerns. Consultation groups however were encouraged to go one step further and offer possible solutions to these concerns: for instance, restriction and embargo policies were discussed with respect to different disciplines.

All participants agreed on main themes that should be the focus of the new training programme, in particular copyright. In view of the recent changes in copyright law⁶, it was felt that students would need much more than a simple checklist of third party copyright rules: they would need to be trained to understand IP and copyright at a level that would allow them to make (often complex) decisions. Participants with expertise in a particular area also made suggestions for key themes that should be included, in view of the rapid developments in open access: authority control via ORCID, research data management, and the use of social media to further promote the online thesis are a few of the topics that an informed training programme should include.

We are currently working further on these suggestions to create workshops and resources that support the new developments in e-theses at Surrey.

**Outlining our new training**

To identify areas where our training should focus, individual responses from all discussion groups were grouped into 4 main themes:

1. Issues related to the preparation of an electronic copy
2. Issues related to copyright and intellectual property
3. Awareness and adoption of open access
4. Use of the submission platform, and related topics (entering accurate metadata, understanding deposit agreements, etc.).

As mentioned earlier, practical knowledge and skills supporting these main themes, for example basic understanding of metadata, preservation of links and media, referencing in electronic documents, use of researcher IDs, etc., should be part of the training.

One of our key recommendations was that appropriate training should be given as part of the core researcher development skills, at appropriate timing over the course of the PhD.

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⁶ See [http://www.ipo.gov.uk/hargreaves-copyright-techreview](http://www.ipo.gov.uk/hargreaves-copyright-techreview) to find out more on changes to copyright law and guidance.
We are now in the process of updating our existing workshops, focusing on a narrative based on the idea that a thesis, and the practical skills acquired with it, has a life well beyond the deposit of the final version.

In our current workshops, which we seek to make them highly practical and interactive, we often start by asking the attendees the ‘why’. For the new training workshop on electronic-born theses, we aim to ask PhD students the ‘why’ of a thesis: why do we decide to do a PhD? The answer to this, which is naturally linked to dissemination and openness, will pave the way to cover the four themes above mentioned. Thus, by the end of the workshop PhD students will have developed the knowledge and skills to prepare their work for the world rather than the shelf, and more importantly knowledge and skills that are essential even after completion of their doctoral research.

Conclusions
Following our final recommendations, Surrey is now ready to make the transition to mandatory deposit of the electronic version only. As mentioned earlier, this will be effective from the new academic year 2014-2015. With new policies and procedures in place, and with workflows being tested and refined, training is bound to take a central place in our work to support this transition. Furthermore, we see this as an excellent opportunity to develop new researchers' awareness of various issues related to open access, copyright, and knowledge sharing in general. We plan further consultations and studies to refine and further improve our training. Our aim is not just to develop relevant ‘how to’ guidelines, but also prepare training that develops researchers who can make independent decisions on publishing and open access and who can adapt to changes in scholarly communication in years to come.

Finally, we would strongly welcome the opportunity to build a training community that views thesis education as the starting point towards key researcher skills.

References

British Library EThOS. Available at: http://ethos.bl.uk/
