Digital Dissertations in the United Kingdom

by ANN MATHESON

In the United Kingdom a user wishing to consult a UK thesis has traditionally had the following choices: the thesis may be consulted in the Library of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) to which it was submitted; the thesis may be borrowed from the library of the HEI; a copy of the thesis may be purchased form the library of the HEI; the thesis may be borrowed through inter-library loan; or the thesis may be made available through the British Library's British Thesis Service, which was set up in 1971. This Service currently holds more than 150,000 UK theses, which are added to at a rate of around 7,000 a year, with the participation of about a hundred Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

With the development of new technology, however, an interest developed in examining the feasibility of making theses available online to users. In the United Kingdom, the University Theses Online Group (UTOG) was established as a consequence of a proposal to the Follett Implementation Group on Information Technology in 1994. The University Theses Online Group (UTOG) is a working group of UK university librarians: the Group's aims are to investigate the technical, cultural and administrative issues associated with the storage and delivery of theses in online form. The Group is made up of representatives of the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC), British Thesis Service, and the university libraries of Cranfield, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, Plymouth, Robert Gordon, University College London, Kent, University of London and Warwick.

When the Group was established in 1994 its main aims were defined as:

1. To investigate how theses are currently used in universities.

2. To hold an online thesis workshop for the academic community.

3. To establish a national finding aid consisting of the bibliographic description of each thesis, together with the author's abstract.

4. To establish the storage of theses in digital form either through the scanning of paper copies or by asking students to submit them in electronic form.

5. To make the theses available to users in digital form.

6. To address the problems of security, intellectual property rights, standard formats, etc.

Phase 1 of the University Theses Online Group's work was jointly funded by the British Library and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). A preliminary survey on the use of theses in the United Kingdom was undertaken in 1996, in order to gain more understanding of current attitudes to the use of theses. The survey was prepared by the University Theses Online Group and administered by the Survey Team of the University of Edinburgh. The Survey was sent to all identified authors completing doctoral theses in the year up to October 1996 across eight participating universities (Cranfield, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle, Warwick, University College London, Leeds and Sunderland). In all, the survey was sent to a total of 2,203 authors, 1,740 supervisors and 125 librarians.

The results of the survey indicated that both authors and supervisors across the subject disciplines made use of theses. Most theses consulted appeared to be identified through personal communication rather than through the use of printed or online aids. Authors appeared to be content to have their work disseminated more widely through networked services and they did not seem, on the whole, to be concerned about issues such as possible plagiarism of their work. Overall, on the basis of the survey, there did not appear to be any opposition to the idea of an electronic thesis service and, in fact, a number of respondents to the survey gave the proposal positive endorsement.

On the basis of the survey results the University Thesis Online Group decided to broaden discussion of the proposal to involve the whole of the Higher Education community in the United Kingdom. The Group realized that the experience of electronic theses projects in the United States indicated that the implementation of an e-theses service would require the involvement of a number of university departments (e.g. central administration, faculty members, the library, computing services, etc.), and it was decided to hold a seminar in June 1997, to which were invited members of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), university registrars, librarians, the major student bodies, Funding Councils and members of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC).

The seminar provided an opportunity to discuss the various issues surrounding an electronic theses service, for example, the audience for online theses; the implications for examiners; the opportunities to make research more widely available; concerns about plagiarism; and the difficulties of reading material onscreen, etc. The seminar set out a programme of work for the planning and implementation of an online theses service for the UK.

Further details can be obtained by contacting Mr Fred Friend, Chairman of the Group. Information about the Group's work is also available at <http://www.cranfield.ac.uk/cils/library/utog/>.

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