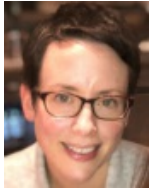# PhD theses – drawing attention to the often overlooked articles in open access repositories

*Earlier this Open Access Week, university library staff throughout the UK celebrated #ThesisThursday, a day of focused attention on the less talked-about articles in open access repositories, PhD theses. **Camilla Griffiths** and **Nancy Graham** describe the work the LSE Library has led to digitise the theses of the School's doctoral alumni, outlining the benefits of greater visibility, widespread indexing, and robust URLs, and also assuaging some of the more persistent fears around depositing theses in an open access repository, including implications for future publication and copyright concerns.*

As part of Open Access Week 2018, a group of repository staff working in UK universities agreed to focus attention on PhD theses on Thursday 25 October, using the hashtag #ThesisThursday. Behind this was the impression that our PhD theses often play second fiddle to journal articles in the world of open access repositories. Why is that? And why the focus now?

The work required to produce a doctoral thesis is huge; most take years to complete, with multiple revisions. Back in the days of print, having passed their viva students would hand-type and submit a bound copy of their final thesis to the library. At that time, whilst it was possible for interested parties to consult this copy, this was only really a feasible option for those able to travel in person to the library, and so, in the majority of cases, theses would languish in the library archive, gathering dust, neither read nor utilised.

Today, LSE theses are submitted electronically and deposited into the open access repository, LSE Theses Online (LSETO). LSETO currently contains over 3,500 theses, spanning more than a century of LSE doctoral research (1905-2018). During the last academic year (2017-18), LSE theses were downloaded on 602,748 occasions – that's over 50,000 downloads a month!

Of course, many LSE theses are still only available in print (or, in some cases, microfilm!) and one of our projects for the coming years will be to compile a coherent list of these and consider what can be done with them.

Electronic-only submission of research theses was introduced at LSE in 2011-12. At the same time it became mandatory for the final version submitted to the library to be included in LSETO. At present, 100% of records in LSETO include the full text and 98% of these are unrestricted.

Not only cheaper, quicker, and easier in terms of production and submission, having a thesis in electronic form allows it to be disseminated virtually instantaneously. This enables other researchers to benefit from the work, as well as helping to develop a positive online profile for students starting out in their academic careers. Furthermore, higher citation counts and greater visibility increase the potential for international and interdisciplinary collaboration for the author.

It's not just about having it online either – in contrast to having a thesis on a personal website or social media platform (which may cease to exist over time), theses in repositories such as LSETO are preserved, often indexed elsewhere (for example by aggregators such as CORE and EThOS), have a stable URL (which can be shared and monitored), and consistently rank highly in search results. By being able to access the number of citations and downloads their thesis receives, each student has the opportunity to measure their thesis' impact – a useful tool when it comes to job applications or promotion panels.

The road to open access has not always been easy. Whilst many of the initial concerns around making theses available were later shown not to be as problematic as initially thought, such as the worry that open access would lead to greater plagiarism, two issues continue to be of concern: copyright; and the fear that having a thesis openly online can jeopardise subsequent commercial publishing.

Regarding the latter of these issues, the current consensus suggests such fears are unfounded. In the majority of cases, the thesis is edited and reworked to such an extent that the original is not considered a threat to the commercial work, and research has shown many publishers will consider an OA thesis for submission (82%), and also for publication (54%).

Checking a thesis for copyright seems relatively straightforward but is often anything but. Not all third-party content requires permission, and some is covered by the "fair dealing" exception of copyright law. Other items such as images, maps, song lyrics, and even social media posts require permission to reproduce. What might be acceptable within a print thesis for examination purposes isn't necessarily acceptable within an electronic thesis, and all of this is dependent on the date of creation.

Aside from concerns over third-party copyright, other theses simply cannot be made available owing to sections of content being of a sensitive nature or where individuals may be identified. Most institutions allow students to request an embargo period before their thesis is made openly available (at LSE it is currently one year; other universities allow two or three years), with longer embargoes considered if legitimate reasons exist.

In 2014, an LSE project, in collaboration with ProQuest, digitised approximately 2,000 theses. The School is also working with the British Library as part of a new project to digitise 700 theses currently held on microfilm. Once this is completed, the next step will be to digitise the remaining theses on our shelves. The process of digitisation is necessarily thorough: each and every thesis is checked for copyright and redacted if necessary; and authors are contacted, wherever possible, and asked to inform us if they do not wish their thesis to be made available. Only then can the metadata record be created, the file uploaded, and the thesis be made available.

Here at LSE we have a few notable theses available electronically. Among these is Labour MP Stella Creasy's thesis on social exclusion, winner of the LSE's Richard Titmuss Award (for the most outstanding thesis in the social policy department) and digitised as part of the 2014 ProQuest collaboration.

Whilst we won't be "crashing the internet" as the University of Cambridge managed last year after making available Stephen Hawking's 1966 doctoral thesis for the first time, we do have a few theses that would be great to get out there. Of these, Ralph Milliband's 1957 thesis on economic thought in revolutionary France is definitely on our list – so Ed or David, if you're reading this, please give us permission! As we can see from usage of our other online theses, the world is waiting.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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