

**Accessing Indian University Research Literature:
Importance of ETDs in the verge of UGC-InfoNet**

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Introduction

The work of scholarship is inseparable from the practice of writing. For hundreds of years, scholars labored to produce written scholarly work by hand. With the coming of print culture, not only were they able to produce knowledge more efficiently, but the nature and process of scholarship itself was in many ways transformed by the new medium. Today, information technology promises a new wave of change for the practice of knowledge production. Powerful search engines speed the process of data collection in every discipline; synchronous and asynchronous online communication facilitate the rapid dissemination of conversation within scholarly communities; electronic publication promises an unprecedented proliferation of new scholarship at the same time it threatens the conventions of “gate-keeping” and “peer review”. And, resistance to this rapid and revolutionary transformation of professional scholarship resounds in every corner of the university.

Despite the demanding potential that electronic forms of writing and publication offer new scholarship, the theses and dissertations are still written and published in linear print and subsequently shelved away in university libraries where the vast majority simply gather dust, read by perhaps one or two interested researchers who access them in print, often for a fee and most are never consulted at all. Digital libraries of electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) offer an alternative to this waste of valuable scholarship and offer researchers and University Libraries in India opportunities to explore the possibilities electronic publishing trend in academic sector. The emergence of UGC Infonet, the aspiring and dream project of University Grants Commission, which also aims at Content Creation by Indian Academic Sector will definitely catalyze this idea.

Theses and Dissertations in India

Indian universities play a major role in generation and dissemination of knowledge by conducting research works and producing Ph D theses as a unique genre of information sources. Every year, nearly 8000-10000 Ph Ds are awarded in India. The purpose of the thesis is to provide an experience in scholarship, which will be of enduring value to the student in understanding how new knowledge is acquired and communicated within the chosen field. These works contain valuable content, including focused literature reviews and details on research, which are not generally made available elsewhere. At present there are some lacunas in publication, control and access theses information in India, and some attempts have been made to address them. At the moment, most unpublished theses are hard to get hold of, as they are filed only in the university library where the student has worked. The Indian thesis literature is beset with many problems like Lack of Systematic acquisition, Lack of Access, Uncertain publication practice, Enormous Growth in the number of theses etc [Urs, 1999]. In western countries, these

problems were addressed already and serious attempts have been made to solve them. In North America, less than 5% of all accepted dissertations and masters' theses are initially conceived of and executed as electronic documents.

Value Vs Access of Print TDs

Dissertations have traditionally been quite limited as to what they can say and do, and even more limited with regard to when, where, how and to whom they are accessible. These limitations are established and maintained in part through policies set by committees, departments, universities and libraries. These policies reflect these regulatory bodies limited conceptualization of what the dissertation is and should be. This conceptualization, it can be presumed, is based on what faculty perceive the primary purpose of the dissertation to be, a demonstration of and training in research skills that is only vaguely perceived as a contribution to knowledge. [Issac, Quinlan and Walker]. As a result, accessibility by the scholarly community has not historically been a priority anywhere. Typically, only two copies of a print dissertation exist and are available without a fee, the archival copy, which remains a permanent part of the university library's collection, and the circulating copy, which may be available through inter-library loan, if the libraries wish to do so. Although the dissertation is intended to be a vehicle for the publication of new research, its traditional five or six chapter format renders it unsuitable for publication without substantial revision to make it conform to the genre of the journal article. Because of the extensive revision necessary, 1/3-1/2 of all dissertations remain unpublished. Yet, dissertations that do undergo revision and subsequent publication are cited more frequently than other work published by their authors. An unpublished thesis/dissertation remains information that is the exclusive domain of a few individuals [Thomas, Nelson and Magil]. Clearly this represents a substantial loss of opportunity to communicate new ideas.

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

The widespread use of the Web technologies and the availability of the thesis in an electronic form made by researchers themselves, raise opportunities for the wider dissemination of a thesis electronically in a network/digital library. If researchers submit dissertations in digital form, then create a database on the World-Wide Web, then you will be in the verge of free and instantaneous access to them, traditionally been difficult to get. If enough institutions adopt this idea, the improved access should lead to greater use of the hundreds of thousands of theses and dissertations completed each year, establishing them as a "new genre" of widely distributed research. An increasing number of colleges and universities throughout the world are adopting electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) as either an option or a requirement for graduate degrees or research degrees. We can interrogate the reduction of researchers findings to alphabetic text; expand the presentation of a thesis/dissertation research with the use of hypertext, sound, animation and streaming video. It allows dissertations to be continuously appended by critical commentary, to allow researchers to become expanding networks of information that concretely reveal the multiple connections between facts, theories and disciplines. Many hope that the exponentially increased access online publication affords will allow them to be read by a larger audience, and perhaps, if their research is especially significant, allow them to achieve early recognition and notoriety in their fields.

What is an ETD?

An ETD is a document that explains the research or scholarship of a researcher/student. It is expressed in a form simultaneously suitable for machine archives and worldwide retrieval. The

ETD is similar to its paper predecessor. It has figures, tables, footnotes, and references. It has a title page with the authors' name, the official name of the university, the degree sought, and the names of the committee members. It documents the author's years of academic commitment. It describes why the work was done, how the research relates to previous work as recorded in the literature, the research methods used, the results, and the interpretation and discussion of the results, and a summary with conclusions. The ETD is different, however. It provides a technologically advanced medium for expressing your ideas. ETDs evolved with Digital Libraries and many academic institutions in the world treat it as an important component of their Digital Libraries.

There are many reasons for having ETDs.

- Almost all TDs are produced as electronic documents, and if researchers know in advance about how to prepare ETDs, then creating their own ETD usually is a very simple process.
- Minimize duplication of effort
- Improve visibility
- Accelerate workflow: graduate more quickly, make ETDs available faster to outside audience
- Costs and benefits
- Enhancing access to university research
- Helping universities develop digital library services & infrastructure
- Increasing sharing and collaboration among universities and students. [UNESCO ETD Guide]

More than that, ETDs enhance the availability of research and creative work done by researchers and increase the visibility of research and creative activities undertaken at our universities. Electronic archiving would likely make access to dissertations and theses easier, more rapid, and more economical, that digital dissertations require less space to store than paper documents, and that digital dissertations have portability advantages and may be more environmentally friendly than paper documents.

Social Implications

This movement has resulted in questions about the role of these electronic documents in the world of scholarly communications and publishing. One specific question raised by students and their faculty advisors has been whether or not ETDs would be viewed as prior publications and would, as such, be ineligible for consideration for publication in traditional journals. This article presents survey findings that indicate that, while more study is needed, this concern appears to be largely unwarranted. By placing an emphasis on the published article there is every chance that mediocre research material of no consequences does not get through [Mulimani, 2001].

Indian Initiatives

As a bibliographical tool to know about theses of awarded Ph Ds, Association of Indian Universities started publishing of Doctoral Bibliographies in all subjects and Theses of the Month column through its weekly publication *University News*. In 1994, INFLIBNET hosted a regularly updated free online union database of Ph D theses submitted to Indian universities. At present it is freely available for searching at INFLIBNET website and contains around 1,40,000 of unique bibliographical records covering all subjects and all universities. Being the data supplied by the Universities themselves, it is considered as the only authoritative online-tool available to find-out the research output of Indian Universities. [Vijayakumar, Hosamani and Murthy, 2003]. Recently

University of Mysore, in collaboration with NISSAT and Ford Foundation initiated a project called Vidyanidhi to host individual full-text thesis from various universities who are willing to become a member of this project [<http://www.vidyanidhi.org.in>]. Even though, this project tries to evolve as a national depository for Indian theses, but it is not compulsory for Universities to become a part of this project. All these efforts are, off course, helpful for researchers in locating theses, but in the case of access, still we need remedies.

UGC Infonet

As technology is becoming a driving force in the contemporary education systems, University Grant Commission has launched an ambitious programme to bring about a qualitative change in the academic infrastructure, especially for higher education. Under this initiative UGC is modernizing the University Campuses with State-of-the-art campus wide networks and setting up its own nationwide communication network named UGC-Infonet. UGC-Infonet will be a boon to the higher education systems in several ways to facilitate spread of quality education all over the country. This will function as a tool to distribute education material and journals to the remotest of areas and a resource centre for researchers and scholars for tapping the most up-to-date information. [UGC Infonet Site].

As a main feature of UGC Infonet, a data center with large server capacity is being set up, where content of common interest can be maintained. Each University will have the option of hosting their website, digital content like ETDs and the E-journals subscribed through INFLIBNET Consortia.

Role of University Libraries and Librarians

Popularization of ETDs and its full advantages for faculty, students, and researchers are the foremost attempt to be start of. Brochures, communications, websites etc conveying this information need to be written, designed, published and disseminated to all affected by this far-reaching change. Workshops and training programmes for both students and faculty need to be developed that cover issues of copyright and choice of access, and that encourage research scholars to carefully consider the ethics of restricting their research from access by the national and international scholarly community. Well-equipped computer labs must be put in place to provide workstations, software, and technical support staff for students writing ETDs. And standards need to be developed for the presentation of dissertation research—standards which facilitate the development of a useful and easily navigable digital collection of works, but which do not unnecessarily constrain the use of software and design considerations graduate students deem essential to their research. Careful consideration of these requirements and their full support will contribute substantially to making this transition smoothly. The potential ETDs have to transform graduate education in ways that benefit both students and the scholarly community depends upon it.

Conclusion

Electronic theses and dissertations must be a technological and organizational innovation. As a technological innovation, they should redefine the content, structure or audience of the traditional print dissertation; as an organizational innovation, they should redefine faculty, student, teaching departments, and library perceptions of research and the purposes it serves within the university. The inclusion of content in visual and/or audio form, the use of hyperlinks to provide alternative reading structures, and the potential broad accessibility of ETDs via the

WWW are all “new” features typically not associated with the writing of dissertations, which have for many years been almost exclusively text-based. As universities accept the challenge of accommodating students who choose to write ETDs that reflect new content, structure, and audience choices previously unavailable to seasoned faculty, change will inevitably occur:

- traditional faculty/student mentoring relationships may transform;
- students themselves may realize the opportunity to achieve earlier notoriety within their fields;
- teaching schools will be faced with creating new standards for the presentation of research documents that bring new visibility to their programs;
- libraries will be charged with creating prominent new digital collections that showcase their universities’ production of new research.

Our universities and librarians must take up the challenge to preserve and make available the key intellectual product of their institutions to the world, and the Internet presents a wonderful opportunity for us to do so. It is a fact that many all of our Universities do not have full Internet access, but it should not deter us from collecting electronic files along with print copies of theses and dissertations produced in their institutions. It will give an opportunity for popularizing the idea of Digital Library and E-Publishing in particular. Organisations like INFLIBNET can assist them in formulating the policies, training and necessary fundings.

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