The use and usefulness of UPeTD: the University of Pretoria's electronic theses and dissertations repository

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Background

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the leading and largest research universities in South Africa and offers academic programmes for the culturally diverse students in our country. The University has nine faculties (spread over six campuses) and a Business School (University of Pretoria, 2011, p.1). According to the latest *UP at a glance* (University of Pretoria, 2011, p.1), the University of Pretoria offers 230 qualifications which include more than 1669 study programmes and in 2011 UP had 1343 postgraduate programmes.

In 2011 the total student population was 62 500 of which 45 000 were contact students (45,9% were black) and 18 000 were distance education students (University of Pretoria, 2011, p.1). Of these students, 67% are from Southern African Development Community countries, namely Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Swaziland, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. More than R400 million of financial aid was made available to these students. Our student body is a diverse group and our lectures are presented in both English and Afrikaans whilst Sepedi is also used as a language of communication on campus (University of Pretoria, 2011, p.1).

UPeTD

The University of Pretoria supports open access to research literature for all researchers worldwide. We also take active responsibility for the dissemination of our research outputs such as theses and dissertations. The University of Pretoria's electronic theses and dissertations repository is called UPeTD and has already been in operation for 12 years. According to the July 2012 Ranking Web of World Repositories (http://repositories.webometrics.info/about.html), UPeTD is number 71

of the institutional repositories in terms of content, size and visibility and is the most used repository in the African continent.

The University of Pretoria's Senate accepted a mandatory policy for the submission of theses and dissertations in 2003. According to this policy each student is required to submit both a paper and an electronic copy (the one in MS Word and the other in PDF format) of a thesis/dissertation to the Postgraduate Office of the relevant faculty. Students are also encouraged to self-submit their theses and dissertations to the UPeTD repository and assistance is provided on the website. Due to new training facilities which were completed towards the end of 2011, group training sessions have also been provided to students who are nearing graduation in 2012. The graduation ceremonies annually take place in April and September.

The Department of Library Services: Open Scholarship Office manages the implementation of the mandatory policy with two staff members. During the last 12 years the process has not really changed, but the Open Scholarship Office has undergone staff and management changes. Seeing that the University of Pretoria campus is in constant flux with new supervisors arriving and older ones retiring, a re-evaluation of UPeTD and its use and usefulness on the University of Pretoria campus seemed very relevant.

Methodology

It was decided to utilize a questionnaire as data collection instrument with the purpose to:

- evaluate the adoption of the electronic submission of theses and dissertations to the UPeTD database;
- investigate and analyse the current processes; and
- gain insight into supervisors of postgraduate students' attitudes to the UPeTD repository.

The specific objectives of the questionnaire were to:
- determine the usefulness of UPeTD as a repository;
- establish the benefits for UPeTD users;

- measure policy knowledge and compliance;
- determine the most popular communication channel with our clients; and
- establish the current knowledge and awareness level of the supervisors.

Only supervisors were targeted to complete the questionnaire which was administered via Qualtrics survey software (https://www.qualtrics.com/). Personal e-mails to participate in the survey were sent to all University of Pretoria supervisors whose e-mail addresses were collected from the repository. The survey was advertised on the library website, the library's Facebook page and forwarded for distribution to the information specialists of the library who liaise with the supervisors in the different departments. After a week the supervisors were reminded to participate and after three weeks the survey was closed. The questionnaire was answered anonymously and approval was obtained from the University's ethics committee.

According to Greig (2005, p. 326) many supervisors are less enthusiastic about the electronic archiving of theses and dissertations compared to university libraries. In his study he found that some supervisors would tend to have negative attitudes towards the process and ETD managers should be prepared to deal with them (Greig, 2005, p. 335). The supervisor's role is critical in the ETD process – an enthusiastic supervisor will encourage a student to see an ETD as a creative opportunity to have his/her research published on a global scale (Copeland & Penman, 2004, p. 24). Styles and Radloff (2001, p. 97) also reiterates the importance of the quality of the student-supervisor relationship in the positive outcome of the postgraduate research experience. Accordingly it was decided that this paper should focus on the attitudes of University of Pretoria postgraduate supervisors towards UPeTD as they play a pivotal role in influencing their students to support the UPeTD process.
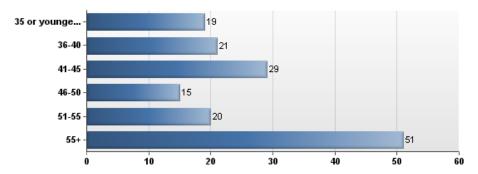
Results
The results will be discussed by firstly giving a little biographic information about the participants, followed by the use and usefulness of ETDs and particularly UPeTD and lastly awareness on different levels.
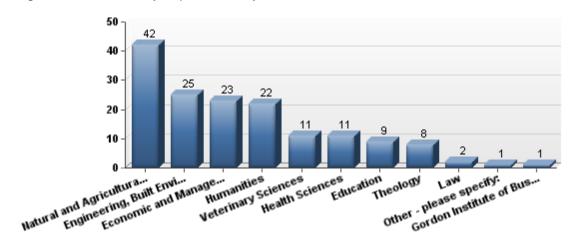
Biographical results

The questionnaire was accessed and completed by 155 supervisors but it was apparent that some respondents skipped some questions, presumably when they were unable to provide an answer. For that reason the number of responses will also be given at each result. The question on their gender was answered by 153 respondents and it indicated that 55% were male respondents. The age distribution didn't come as a surprise and it showed that almost half of the respondents (n=71) were older than 50 years (Figure 1).

Figure 1:   Age distribution

Supervisors of all nine faculties responded to the questionnaire and their response frequency corresponded with the total items in the UPeTD repository. The Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences was well represented with 42 respondents, followed by Engineering (n=25) and Economic and Management Sciences (n=23) (Figure 2).

Figure 2 :   Faculty representivity

Currently the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences has the largest number of items in UPeTD (n=1818) followed by the Humanities (n=1384) and Engineering, Built Environment & Information Technology Faculties (n=1290). The faculties of Education (n=557), Theology (n=450), Veterinary Science (n=295) and Law (n=143) have less numbers of ETDs in the UPeTD repository.

The respondents had varied experience levels – some supervisors (n=32) had not supervised doctoral students yet, but three supervisors had supervised more than 20 doctoral students. Table 1 shows their levels of experience in supervision.
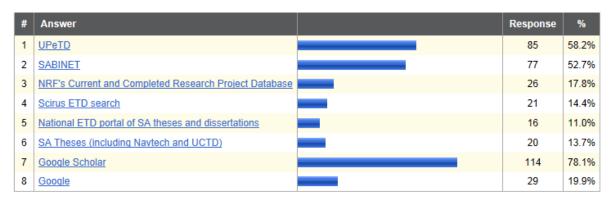
Table 1: Supervision experience

#	Question	None	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20+
1	Masters level	6	6	8	13	8	8	9	6	13	2	11	1	3	0	2	7	0	0	1	0	36
2	Doctoral level	32	19	16	10	15	7	9	5	2	1	6	2	2	0	1	4	0	1	0	1	3

The use and usefulness of ETDs

Although only 72% of the supervisors indicated that they made use of ETDs, 77% of them indicated that they encouraged their postgraduate students to use ETDs as sources of information. They were asked to indicate what they expected their students to gain from consulting specific ETDs and the majority indicated that they wanted their students to see examples on how to present research results (82%). Secondly they wanted their students to access the list of references (73%) and thirdly students would be able to get ideas on how to structure certain sections in their documents (69%). The respondents could also list "other" reasons to consult ETDs and the themes that crystallized were: to see what research had already been done in that field, to identify possible gaps in the knowledge that needed more research and to see examples of exemplary research.

The respondents were asked to indicate which other gateways to ETDs they recommended to their students. The results (n=146) are shown in Figure 3. Google Scholar is by far the preferred choice, followed by UPeTD and SABINET (South African Bibliographic and Information Network).

Figure 3:   Recommended gateway to ETDs

#	Answer		Response	%
1	UPeTD		85	58.2%
2	SABINET		77	52.7%
3	NRF's Current and Completed Research Project Database		26	17.8%
4	Scirus ETD search		21	14.4%
5	National ETD portal of SA theses and dissertations		16	11.0%
6	SA Theses (including Navtech and UCTD)		20	13.7%
7	Google Scholar		114	78.1%
8	Google		29	19.9%

Although 72% (n=111) of the respondents indicated that they made use of UPeTD themselves, 36% (n=54) were uncertain whether they found the UPeTD site easy to navigate. This is an indication that many of them haven't really used the site yet.

A Likert scale was used to measure the supervisors' personal opinion of UPeTD and it ranged from strongly disagree (SD), via neither agree or disagree (N) to strongly agree (SA). The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2:   Personal opinions about UPeTD

#	Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Responses	Mean
1	The repository is very useful	1	2	25	75	38	141	4.0
2	I do not make use of it at all	44	43	24	22	14	147	2.4
3	I do not obtain much value from accessing UPeTD	35	52	34	12	3	136	2.2
4	I cannot find what I am looking for	32	54	43	8	1	138	2.2
5	I do not know how to obtain access to UPeTD	69	50	9	8	1	137	1.7

Table 2 indicates that most of the respondents know how to obtain access to the repository, they find it very useful, they make use of it and they find what they are looking for. Nevertheless, the fact that large numbers of respondents were indecisive about the statements was alarming, considering the nature of the statement. For the statement "I cannot find what I am looking for", 43 respondents chose "neither agree nor disagree". It is possible that they chose that option because they wanted to indicate that they only sometimes found what they were looking for.

Fortunately 90% of respondents knew what open access was, which indicated that the many Open Access events which had been presented on campus rendered results in creating awareness. When asked what they considered as the advantages for students in having their ETDs available in UPeTD, the following themes emerged:

- the research is more accessible 24/7 worldwide (91%);
- search engines like Google can easily access the dissertation or thesis enhancing the visibility (88%) of the research;
- students can enhance their CVs or web pages with the link (63%); and
- students can incorporate multimedia to their ETDs (43%).
- This question had an open option and the theme that crystallized was that ETDs improved the footprint of the university research in the world arena. Only 2,6% of respondents indicated that ETDs had no benefits for students

Awareness

When respondents were asked whether they were aware that it was compulsory for students to submit an electronic version of their thesis/dissertation to UPeTD, 97% (n=149) replied in the affirmative, but when they were asked whether they were familiar with the policy for mandatory submission only 85% (n=130) said "yes". It was interesting that 53 respondents took the trouble to answer the open ended question to mention what they would change in the policy if they had the opportunity to do so. Of these 28 would change nothing, yet there were explicit comments made by others. The theme that came out as most frequent was that more time should be allowed for article publication before opening access to ETDs in UPeTD. Interestingly enough UPeTD has a two-year embargo period and before an embargo is lifted, supervisors are contacted via e-mail well in advance and are given the option to extend the embargo again which shows that some supervisors are not familiar with the access options.

The issue about Intellectual Property (IP) was the second theme. Respondents claimed that work in open access gets plagiarised more by other students. However in the same questionnaire a supervisor made the following comment: "[I have] No suggestions but encouragement. I had enquiries in the past from an UK university about a student that plagiarised a thesis in UPeTD. However, Turnitin (a plagiarism

checker) was able to flag it. This is of course another advantage of electronic theses - Turnitin has access as well and assist in countering plagiarism."

The third theme was very encouraging and was about awareness of UPeTD *per se.* One respondent said: "I have not used it (UPeTD) in the past, but due to this survey I will certainly do so and recommend to my students to use. In the past I just considered the electronic depositing of theses as an extra nuisance!" Another respondent commented: "I must admit that I was not aware of where to access UPeTD before I got the link as part of your questionnaire."

Respondents were also asked whether they knew where to access the policy on mandatory submission, but only 39% (n=60) replied in the affirmative. It therefore seems as if many respondents have not really studied the policy and don't know where to find it. It also transpired that only 44% (n=68) of respondents were aware of the web support and submission guidelines that are provided on UPeTD. They were also not aware of the annual NDLTD ETD awards as 88% (n=135) answered "no" to this question which meant that they never nominated their students for this award.

When respondents were asked about their interaction regarding their student's work in terms of self-submission, the responses varied. The results are displayed in Table 3.
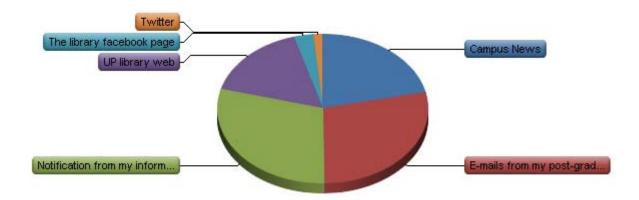
Table 3:   Student-self submission

#	Question	No, never	Occasionally	Yes, always	Responses
1	Do you inform your students about it?	30	39	84	153
2	Do you encourage your students to do it?	34	30	85	149
3	Do you assist your students to do it?	84	36	29	149

It is evident that respondents inform their students about the possibility to self-submit their theses or dissertations to UPeTD, but do not see it as their role to assist students in this process. However, the self-submission rate of students is very low, namely 19%.

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferred communication platform where ETD news could be communicated to them. Their responses are given in Figure 4 (n=152).

Figure 4:   Preferred communication platforms of supervisors

Interestingly enough it seems that participants prefer to receive ETD information from their information specialist in the library, but the importance of regular communication with the Faculty Research Coordinators should not be underestimated. The social media networks like Facebook and Twitter are not very popular yet, the official Campus news notifications only drew the support of 38% of the supervisors and the library website was preferred by 29%.

External requests for digitization of older items are received on a regular basis and the authors asked respondents whether they would support a retrospective digitization project. A retrospective project was supported by 86% (n=132), but unfortunately only 15% (n=23) was aware that a personal request to have an item digitized could be forwarded.

A serious concern is the fact that the access options to ETDs are not properly discussed with students and only 42% (n=64) admitted to discussing the different access options carefully with their students. It was also alarming that only 34% (n=53) knew that supervisors needed a letter from the Vice-Principal to place an item under total embargo. Both these two issues cause huge problems for the Open Scholarship Office in the management of ETDs. One supervisor commented that he "did not realise that we could restrict dissertations" and the survey cleared this

misconception for him. It was heartening though, that 90% (n=129) indicated that they were satisfied with the management of restricted theses and dissertations.

Final lessons learnt

The final question was an open-ended question which prompted respondents to make suggestions on how their UPeTD experience could be improved. Many lessons can be learnt from these comments and 39 responses were received. The theme that emerged strongest was that the questionnaire in itself served in raising awareness regarding different aspects of ETDs and the process followed at the University of Pretoria. More queries were received from supervisors either telephonically or via e-mail after the circulation of the questionnaire. Many commented on the excellent service already provided but also requested more training and marketing of UPeTD. It is obvious that even supervisors had a need for regular information sessions – especially new staff members on campus need to be orientated about this process. Due to misconceptions on especially the publishing of theses and dissertations it is obvious that urgent information sessions need to be planned to communicate the correct procedure to supervisors.

Supervisors also expressed a need for more assistance during the final completion process of the research theses and dissertations as they were overburdened by "what they are supposed to know and do regarding technology". Possible solutions can include annual awareness drives to promote and inform students and staff about ETDs, to communicate UPeTD news more regularly to Faculty Research Coordinators, to provide more assistance to the students during the self-submission process and finally to compile a UPeTD manual and distribute it to staff members and students alike.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that the distribution of the questionnaire was a valuable data collection instrument providing insight into the current adoption practices and attitudes of the University of Pretoria's postgraduate supervisors towards the electronic submission of theses and dissertations to the UPeTD repository.

Most supervisors who took part in the questionnaire were fairly knowledgeable about UPeTD and its process, the UPeTD repository was rated as a valuable source of information by them for their postgraduate students and it offered many benefits for students in providing global access to their research. However, many supervisors also showed a lack of knowledge about the policy, did not know where to access it, had misconceptions about access options, copyright, publishing as well as the ETD procedures. It is clear that advocacy and training should be an on-going process for the acceptance and positive adoption of an ETD programme – even for one which is considered useful and which is as well-used as UPeTD!

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