Thesis and Dissertation Data: An Emerging Role for University Libraries

Thomas Joyce

University Copyright and Library Lawyer

The University of Queensland

t.joyce@library.uq.edu.au

Alicia Dodemont

Copyright Coordinator

The University of Queensland

a.dodemont@library.uq.edu.au

Introduction

In the last decade, universities have become more active and engaged in dealing with issues of the custodianship and accessibility of the research data which underpins their academics' scholarly publications. This has arisen from a combination of opportunity and necessity – opportunity, in the emergence of technologies that easily and affordably allow collection and storage of institution-wide data; necessity, in the form of increasing requirements from public funding bodies of accessibility and transparency of data underlying published research.

But these policy and practice advances are yet to fully flow into another significant area of research output generated at universities, that of research higher degree theses and dissertations. It is an area often beset by confusion around ownership and access, and frequently suffers from the absence of adequate policies and infrastructure for data storage and dissemination.

The University of Queensland has invested considerable time, effort and resources in establishing policies and facilities for the availability and sharing of research data of its academics, and is now navigating the analogous, but qualitatively different, relationship it has with students and their research data.

The objective is to provide policy clarity around ownership and custodianship and also provide the infrastructure and support to allow research higher degree (RHD) students to store and share data, alongside, and underpinning, the open access versions of their theses and dissertations.

Data ownership and sharing

Australian law, consistent with other jurisdictions, provides limited 'ownership' protection to data, and this becomes especially tenuous where data is publicly shared.

Into that environment, The University of Queensland asserts a 'custodian' role for data created under its auspices, and the relationship of the University to its employee researchers creates a clear legal connection to undertake that role. That said, the very nature of the RHD student relationship is more distant and nuanced, and can create uncertainties that inhibit sharing and collaboration.

The University of Queensland, as institutional data custodian, has an important enabling role in assisting its RHD students to understand the 'how, why and when' of data sharing.

Role of the university

This paper explores the context and rationale for this initiative. It seeks to dispel the ambiguity that often accompanied discussion of data ownership and sharing, and explores a range of trends in managing data as an institutional custodian, both domestically and internationally.

The fast-developing role of university libraries receives close attention.

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