

Current Usage of Dissertations: A Global Perspective

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THE CHANGING NATURE OF SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION

Technological disruption has impacted higher education profoundly in the last 15 years. No aspect of higher education has been untouched by the move from analog to digital technology. One of the most profound areas of impact has occurred in the master's theses and PhD dissertation arena. As the publisher of record for graduate research for nearly 80 years, ProQuest has an unparalleled view of this change both from a national and international perspective. The purpose of this paper is to share our observations regarding usage and formats of dissertations around the world. These observations are based upon our experiences as a disseminator of over 4 million dissertation and theses, reaching back to dissertations from as early as 1637.

THE RISE OF THE ETD

In 1997, Virginia Tech became the first university in the world to mandate ETDs (Electronic Theses and Dissertations). Also in 1997, ProQuest began to digitize all paper dissertations and theses and provide them in an online database called "ProQuest Dissertations & Theses" (PQDT). There were many advantages to ETDs for both authors and universities. Authors benefited from lower or completely eliminated printing costs as well as wider distribution due to their work being easier to transmit in electronic format. Author creativity was also expanded due to the more flexible standards that many universities offered for ETDs as compared to printed formats. Universities benefitted from shelf space savings and the ability to take advantage of digital storage and electronic dissemination.

At ProQuest, we have seen a substantial rise in the number of ETDs, beginning in 2001 when we received 3% of all dissertations and theses in electronic format. As ProQuest introduced the ETD submission and management tool, "ETD Administrator", this easy and accessible tool assisted many universities with the transition from paper submission to ETDs. The year 2009 was a tipping point in that it was the first year ETD submissions outpaced paper submission rates. The rapid decline of paper submissions began in 2010 as a tipping point was reached with most universities and authors comfortable with submitting using new electronic methods. In 2014, ETD submissions were up to 93% (figure 1).

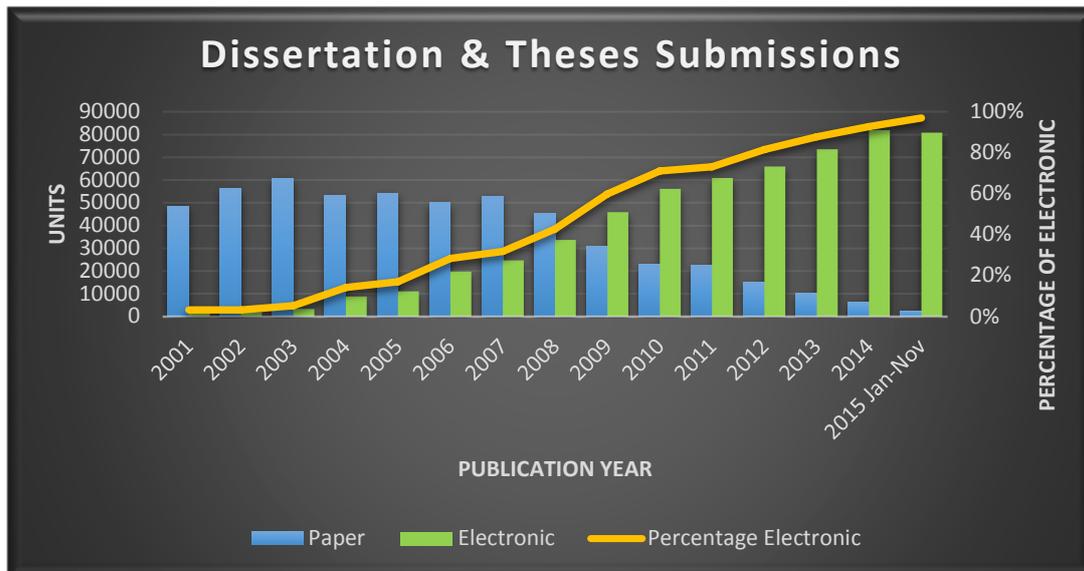


Figure 1: ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Submissions since 2001

USAGE OF ETDs

Because most North American-based universities contribute to the ProQuest program, the subject areas that comprise the nearly 2 million dissertations and theses available from ProQuest in full-text format map fairly closely with historical annual reporting of dissertations and their corresponding subject areas, including the Survey of Earned Doctorates (Figure 2).

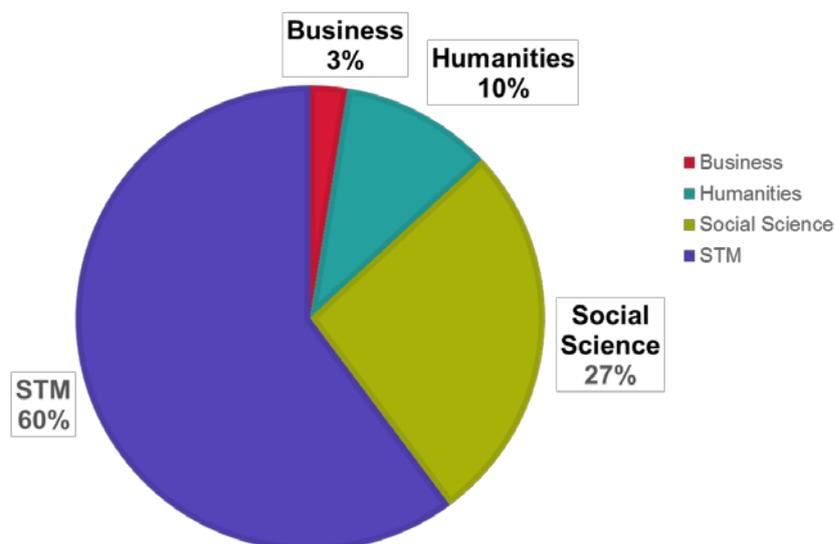


Figure 2: Distribution of full text ETDs in ProQuest databases by subject

When usage of dissertations is viewed by subject area, a different picture emerges (figure 3). For example, usage of STM dissertations, which consists of 60% of all graduate works received, are accessed less often via ProQuest, at only 40% of all full text accesses. Conversely, graduate works in the subject area of business comprise only 3% of all graduate works received, yet account for 11% of all graduate works accessed on the ProQuest platform. Both social sciences and humanities graduate works are used on a percentage basis

more than their percentage of content received, with humanities being used 11% as a total of full text retrievals compared to 10% as a percentage of deposits. Social science ETDs comprise 38% of all downloads while only making up 27% of the total of graduate works received.

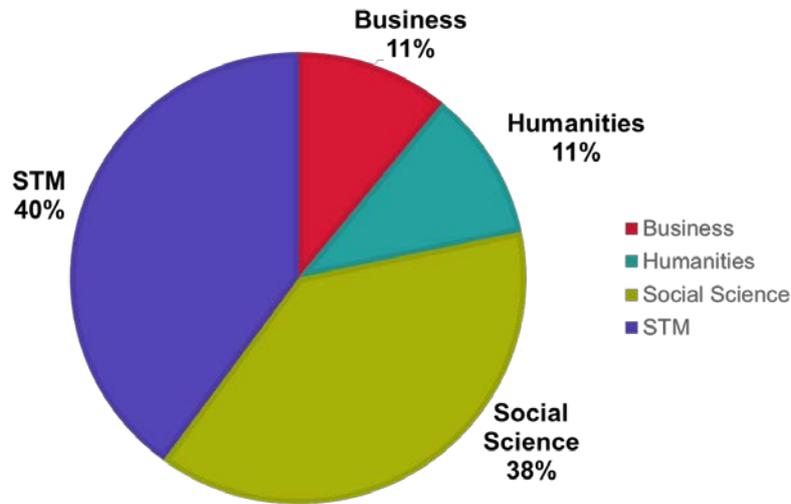


Figure 3: Usage of ETDs via the ProQuest platform (2013 – 2014) as a percentage of all ETDs downloaded. (Accesses include all full text downloads via ProQuest, including access via the ProQuest Dissertation & Theses database (PQDT), other ProQuest databases which contain graduate works and full text downloads from subject indexes (such as MLA, SciFinder, Compendex, etc.) where ProQuest facilitates full text links)

ETDs allow for insight and research into usage not previously available with paper dissemination. Of the corpus of approximately 2 million graduate works that are available for download, business ETDs comprise the highest level of repeat downloads (figure 4). In the period 2013 – 2014, the average download of each business ETD was 15.6 times, making this segment the highest average of any subject’s ETD downloaded via ProQuest. (We surmise that ProQuest’s established position related to our ABI database impacts the usage of business-related dissertations.) Conversely, if an STM ETD was downloaded, it was downloaded an average of 2.4 times during the same period.

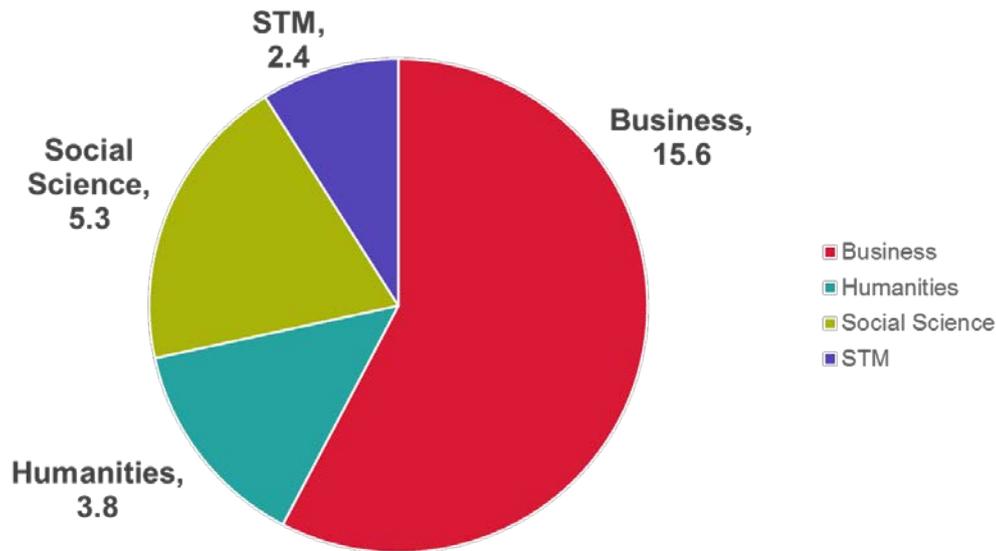


Figure 4: Average ETD downloads by subject via the ProQuest platform (2013 – 2014).

NEXT GENERATION ETDs

Most ETDs written in the Twentieth Century were simply PDF versions of dissertations that would have been created in paper format. However, some scholars in the Twentieth Century did create fully digital dissertations. The first such dissertation that ProQuest received was the 2000 dissertation titled “The Australian Theatre of the Deaf: Essence, Sensibility, Style,” by Shannon Leigh Bradford from the University of Texas at Austin.

Today it is common to obtain dissertations with multimedia components. As seen in the chart below (figure 5), over the past 14 years, ProQuest has received nearly 4,500 ETDs with PDFs included as supplemental files. These PDF files are in addition to the primary ETD, which is most commonly also in PDF format. The supplementary PDF includes material such as a non-English abstracts, presentations, journal articles or other material. The second most prevalent file type, not including the “Other” category (which includes hundreds of various file types) is “Excel spreadsheets”. Often these “Excel spreadsheets” include datasets which further expand upon the research contained in the ETD. Also prevalent as supplemental files are “Text,” “Audio” and “Image” files.

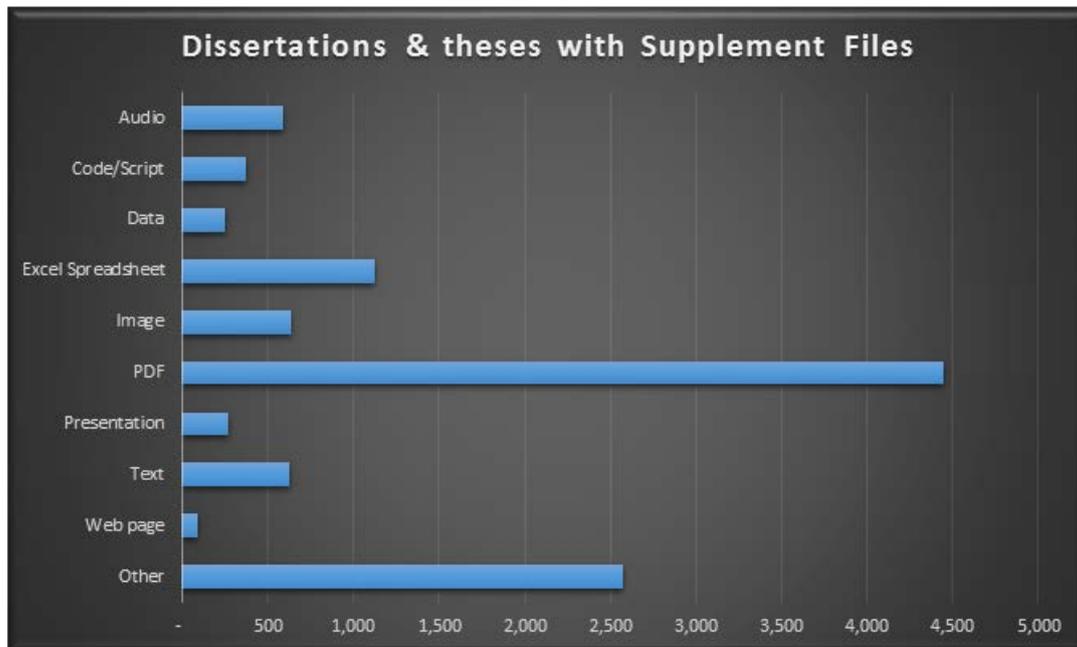


Figure 5: ETD Supplemental file types received by ProQuest since 1997

FULL TEXT EMBARGOS

One of the most hotly debated and contentious areas of ETDs relates to embargos. Embargos are defined as the length of time associated with withholding the viewing of full text. The growth of embargoes has occurred alongside the increase in number of open access university institutional repositories. Embargoes are often driven by an author or an advisor, with the length of the embargo typically agreed upon by working in consultation with the department or graduate school. The most common process is for a dialog to occur between the author and the graduate school prior to finalizing an embargo length.

Embargos are put in place by a variety of factors, most common being the desire for an author to derive additional value from the ETD prior to making it publically available. Reasons for embargos include patents, journal article publication, monograph publication or conference submissions. Most universities grant embargos for periods of 6 months – 2 years, while it is common for longer embargo requests to require permission from department chairs or graduate school deans. Many universities are willing to provide authors with extended embargoes past the initial agreed-upon term should the author be able to prove a need for the extension.

CONCLUSION

Scholarly publishing has undergone a vast change from analog to digital technology over the past 15 years. The evolution from paper to ETDs has helped graduate research output gain a much wider audience. By providing a national repository of dissertations and theses along with a free ETD submission and management system, ProQuest has been able to assist with the adoption of this new form of scholarly communication. Because of increased acceptance of ETDs on the campuses of universities throughout North American, authors now have the ability to take advantage of virtually unlimited creative expressions facilitated by ETDs.

