

Prior publication and theses

Research higher degree theses have traditionally been seen as part of the scholarly communications chain, and have been made available by university libraries in print and, latterly, online via institutional repositories.

The issue we seek to address is whether or not work already publicly available in a thesis (whether in print or online, although the concern is primarily around online) is seen as “prior publication” by journals and rejected for that reason. The perception drives behaviour so that, where students/supervisors have a choice, they will decline open access or seek a lengthy embargo because they fear publishers will refuse to publish work that has arisen from the thesis.

A 2013 survey¹ of STEM publishers showed that while just over 50% of respondents did not view electronic theses as prior publication, the remainder either treated submissions on a case by case basis or would not consider publication. This survey was necessitated, in part, because publisher websites^{2,3} are often unhelpful in providing usable advice on this issue. Major commercial publishers are often ambiguous/silent on the question in author rights and editorial pages.

Question

- What is the best and most responsible general advice to provide to students and faculty on this question.

References

1. Ramirez ML, et al (2014). Do open access electronic theses and dissertations diminish publishing opportunities in the sciences? *College and Research Libraries*. 75[6] 808–821. <http://doi.org/10.5860/crl.75.6.808>
2. Nature Publishing Group. Nature journals' policy on duplicate publication (<http://www.nature.com/authors/policies/duplicate.html>). "The Nature journals are happy to consider submissions containing material that has previously formed part of a PhD or other academic thesis which has been published according to the requirements of the institution awarding the qualification."
3. American Chemical Society “Publishing policies” <http://pubs.acs.org/page/policy/prior/index.html> (varies by journal on attitude to theses as prior publication).

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (Wednesday 10 June 2015) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- Theses (masters or PhDs) often contain very detailed information, and so are not in the form of a paper that would normally be considered as publishable by journals. Hence papers and theses are different entities for different purposes.
- The whole issue of PhDs theses has become much more complicated as universities may post theses on commercial websites, such as [ProQuest](#). Theses have even been known to appear on sale on Amazon. Universities often do not know what to do and there is confusion among universities. Journals need to have their own clear policies on this issue. Journals and publishers need total clarity in their guidance to authors on this issue.
- A suggestion was for COPE to develop a set of principles for journals to broadly agree upon, laying out the issues, implications, alerts and consequences. Editors could then use this guidance to develop their own policies. It is important that editors and

publishers are aware of the implications of their decisions as the issue is not straightforward. COPE could include advice for publishers and outline what is happening at the university level.

- Any guidance from COPE on this issue should include advice on similarity checks. Similarity checks on papers can highlight potential overlap with theses. If journals have a policy of automatically rejecting articles with a certain percentage of overlap, theses may be rejected. Hence editors need to look carefully at the sections where there is overlap and judge whether this really is a case of duplicate publication or plagiarism. Editors cannot rely on a percentage to determine potential plagiarism. Theses may legitimately have overlap, as for example happens with conference abstracts and full papers.
- Some journals require that authors obtain written permission if they wish to include the published paper in the bound copy of their thesis.
- If a journal does not consider theses as prior publication, they should state it clearly in their guidance to authors documentation
- While many publishers do not normally consider theses as prior publication, there may be copyright implications that need to be investigated. Models where the author retains copyright, rather than copyright being assigned to the publisher, may make prior publication issues easier to resolve.
- In fields such as the humanities, this may be a more complex issue because monographs are often based largely on theses, so any guidance should take into account issues in different disciplines. Hence overarching statements about whether theses are considered prior publication cannot be applied as decisions can be very content related.
- In addition, the awarding of PhDs can vary by country and this may need to be taken into consideration in any guidance.
- In a poll of the Forum audience, the majority said they would not consider theses as prior publication.

ACTION: COPE will convene a group from council and any interested members to draft an initial document to provide advice and guidance to editors and publishers on this issue.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

Posted by Jon Marshall, 1/6/2015

In my journal, we do not regard work in a thesis as prior publication, essentially because it is not peer-reviewed, the writing style is usually quite different to that of a journal and often it is not easily accessible.

The discussion thread needs to carefully consider what material is being examined here. The discussion mentions "higher degree theses", so that is certainly PhD, but presumably Masters theses also? I would imagine that there would be few occasions when work in a Masters thesis would be of sufficient merit for journal publication. Then what about first degree theses or even high school reports? All of these can make their way into the public domain, but I would suggest that without the peer-review stage, none should be regarded as "published" or part of the scientific record.

Posted by Michael Wise, 1/6/2015

Jon, I think for the purposes of this discussion, Masters/Honours theses, of sufficient quality and interest to justify publication, would be included.

Posted by David Smith, 1/6/2015

My journal also does not regard a thesis as prior publication. We would expect to see proper acknowledgment of the work's origin in a thesis in the referencing. In my experience a chapter from a thesis is almost never suitable for publication as a journal article without reasonably significant rewriting, which often further weakens whatever case there might be for it being a piece that has already been published.

Posted by S.Ferraz-Mello, 1/6/2015

I agree with Jon Marshal.

Posted by Josep Santaló, 2/6/2015

Although I agree with Jon Marshal's comment and the peer review criteria could be useful for distinguishing both manuscripts, the question arises when considering the job done by the Committee judging the high degree PhD theses: can the members of the committee be considered as peer reviewers ? (they are supposed to be peer and to be reviewers, of course).

What we recommend to our students is: publish first and then write your theses.

Posted by Chris Leonard, 3/6/2015

Jon Marshall and David Smith make excellent points, which I agree with. I think it is reasonably common practice to try to publish Chapter 1 of a thesis as a review article—but I imagine this only succeeds after at least one round of revisions and possibly more. As to the 'meat' of a thesis and any new results, my opinion is that this grey literature needs to be properly reviewed and rewritten to a journal style before we can consider it 'published'. Just my \$0.02 though.

Posted by Charon Pierson, 3/6/2015

I agree with David Smith's comments that journal articles are not equivalent to thesis chapters but the work should be cited appropriately. Publication of the entire thesis by a university should not, in most cases, constitute duplicate or prior publication. I don't think the committee members truly act as peer reviewers in most cases. The objective of a thesis is not the same as the objective of a scholarly article. Alternatively, many doctoral programs now require a number of publications in peer-reviewed journals that are subsequently linked through additional writing to complete the actual thesis document. In those cases, we give permission to reprint the articles in the thesis. I actually think this is a better option but it might delay conferring of the degree in some cases, although I don't know if anyone has studied that question.

Posted by Jürgen Kesselmeier, 4/6/2015

I agree with Jon Marshall not to regard work in a thesis as prior publication, essentially because it is not peer-reviewed. However, I would like to widen the view taking into account highly reputable peer-reviewed open-access journals such as published by Copernicus on behalf of the European Geosciences Union (EGU). An EGU-Journal such as "Biogeosciences" (BG) follows a two-stage process of publication and review, in order to foster and document scientific discussion. This procedure has proven to enhance transparency of the whole publication process, thus enhancing efficiency and self-regulation of scientific quality assurance. In the first stage, manuscripts pass a rapid pre-screening and are immediately made public as discussion papers in the journal's discussion forum. The next step is the peer review, which also in public. All comments and decisions are made public.

Furthermore, discussion papers and all comments are archived. This will protect authors' ideas also in case of peer review rejection. These discussion papers are proceedings-type publications, comparable to traditional conference proceedings, working papers, or PhD theses. It is clear that contents and formulation of final papers such as finally published as a peer reviewed paper in the main journal are likely to differ from those of the corresponding discussion papers. Thus, a discussion paper should not be regarded as formally reviewed and published and is not disqualified from appearing in other publications.

Posted by Julia Hargreaves, 8/6/2015

Journals are there to serve science, not the other way around. The way science works at present is that people write theses in the form of a single document readable by examiners, and the papers from the thesis may be submitted/published before or after the thesis is completed/examined. In general, the better the thesis, the more publishable work comes from it. Presumably, we wish this model to continue and it is therefore surely correct to not worry about prior or post publication in theses. Or are you suggesting that it is better for PhD's to contain a folio of journal reprints plus introduction, discussion and conclusion?

The idea that you plagiarise yourself, or break journal copyright by publishing things twice with thesis + journal papers is novel to me. Surely we don't want to be penalising those who do more publishable work!? In the field I did my PhD in (astrophysics) it was normal to publish or at least have submitted all the papers before the thesis is published. I suppose all those students are breaking journal copyright. In the field I am in now (climate) the normal mode seems to be to publish some papers before and some after the thesis is examined. So those students get to both self-plagiarise and break copyright! Cool...

BTW - I do not understand the comments above that theses are not peer reviewed - theses are surely thoroughly examined!?

Posted by Nickola Nelson, 8/6/2015

Wearing my hat as journal editor, our journal would consider publishing work based on research that previously had been part of a doctoral or master's thesis after blind peer review, with revision to respond to external blind peer reviewers' comments, and with proper acknowledgment added after acceptance. This raises the question of whether authors and editors should reveal such acknowledgments during the review process, which could reduce the blinding of reviewers (in our journal, we try not to do this). I would expect any publications related to graduate thesis work to be substantially different from student research products that are in the public domain. Wearing my hat as director of a PhD program in Interdisciplinary Health Sciences, however, our philosophy is that our students should be learning to write scientific reports in a scholarly format that they will need to use throughout their careers, rather than using an archaic format they might never use again. Thus, most of them elect (and are advised) to use the "three paper method." This entails introductory and concluding chapters encompassing three stand-alone papers, which are expected to be much closer to journal article format, and to be submitted to scholarly journals for review when approved by the committee, perhaps prior to the dissertation defense. Prior publication reduces the problem, but is not all that common. We generally recommend to our students that they embargo their dissertations so they do not run into difficulty later when submitting their papers to peer reviewed journals after the dissertation defense and archiving of their dissertations.

Posted by Antony Ley, 9/6/2015

The PhD theses at our University are increasingly made up of journal articles. I recently assisted a candidate who had eight articles in her thesis. Not infrequently a thesis is submitted for marking when one of the articles included is still in the process of being submitted to a journal for publication. The way we get around the prior publication issue (and the embargo period for including post-prints of most articles) is to publish the thesis online 12 months after the marking is completed.

I had to investigate the issue of what exactly constituted prior publication for a University department a few months back. I looked at the Publishers' publishing guidelines and took the trouble to write to Publishers for clarity. I was then told to contact the individual journals for clarity. At this stage my investigation ceased. To provide clarity for the department would have meant writing to many journals. The other issue is how long the advice would retain currency, as the opinions of the individual editorial board could change. I hope this is of assistance.