

# Journal of Graduate Librarianship

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Volume 1 | Issue 1

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December 2023

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More information about this article at: <https://doi.org/10.59942/2995-9063.1002>

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# More Obstacles for the Graduate Student Author: Open Access ETDs Trigger Plagiarism Detectors

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## ABSTRACT

Supporting graduate students as authors is one of the many services we provide at the University Library, University of Saskatchewan (USask). Graduate students often submit articles to journals based on content from their electronic theses or dissertations (ETDs). Recently, we have noticed an increase in the number of such article submissions being flagged for possible rejection on “plagiarism” or “prior publication” grounds. We suspect this may be because plagiarism detection software is increasingly being integrated into publishers’ article submission systems. This software is triggered by the existence of the student’s open access (OA) ETD in our institutional repository. This happens despite OA ETD inclusion in repositories being a common practice and despite journal policies often allowing submission of articles based on ETDs. We review common practices and guidelines around publishing of ETD content, two recent cases of journals initially rejecting such submissions by graduate student authors of our institution, and our reflections on this issue and how to address it.

**Keywords:** electronic theses and dissertations, ETDs, plagiarism detection software, open access repositories, publishing, prior publication

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Dawson, D., & Langrell, K. (2023). More obstacles for the graduate student author: Open access ETDs trigger plagiarism detectors. *Journal of Graduate Librarianship*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.59942/2995-9063.1002>



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## **MORE OBSTACLES FOR THE GRADUATE STUDENT AUTHOR: OPEN ACCESS ETDs TRIGGER PLAGIARISM DETECTORS**

It is now a widespread practice at many universities to require graduate students to submit their electronic theses or dissertations (ETDs) upon graduation to the institutional repository (IR) to enhance their discoverability, be preserved for the long term, and be made open access (OA). ETDs are the second most common type of document in repositories worldwide, and 64% of IRs host ETDs (OpenDOAR, n.d.). This is also the case at our institution, the University of Saskatchewan (USask) in Canada: graduate students are required to submit their thesis or dissertation to our IR to graduate, and ETDs are the dominant type of document in the IR. But this requirement can sometimes cause problems when these students want to publish the ETD, or a portion of it, as a book or in a journal article later. For example, the American Historical Association (AHA) advises history graduate students to embargo their dissertation for up to six years because they claim that university presses are reluctant to publish a book based on an ETD that is freely available online (AHA, 2013). Cirasella and Thistlethwaite (2017) thoroughly debunk this assertion as being based on rumors and distortions, not facts or evidence. The opposite of the AHA's claims appears to be true; surveys of publishers have indicated their willingness to receive submissions of monographs based on revised OA ETDs (Gilliam & Daoutis, 2018; Ramírez et al., 2013). Publishers may even consider OA ETDs a tool for finding good manuscripts for publication and believe that the attention the ETD has already received online to be a good predictor of sales in the future (Cirasella & Thistlethwaite, 2017). There are other good reasons to support non-embargoed OA ETDs, such as establishing priority. Some students (and their advisors) might fear that their findings will be "scooped" by other researchers if their ETD is openly available; however, making their ETD OA actually establishes their priority by providing a timestamp of the work that undeniably proves they are the original proponent of the ideas (Suber, 2012). Nevertheless, we continue to hear this concern from humanities graduate students and their advisors, and we devote time in attempting to assuage these concerns. Unfortunately, sometimes the only way to alleviate this anxiety is to allow an embargo period on their ETD.

In other disciplines, graduate students tend to rework portions of their thesis or dissertation into one or more journal articles to be published after graduation. The challenge here is whether those journals or publishers consider this to be plagiarism or "prior publication." An ETD embargo may be requested by students to alleviate these concerns as well. However, many journal publishers now recognize that openly posting ETDs is a widespread practice and they have adopted policies to allow for consideration of portions of these ETDs for publication (Ramírez et al., 2014). Indeed, such policies are considered

best practice now. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) provides this advice to publishers: “Where a thesis (or a thesis chapter) contains otherwise unpublished work, such as the first description of an experiment or an original synthesis of an area of academic study it should NOT be considered prior publication” (COPE, 2017, p.1). COPE considers ETDs to be like preprints and advises that they should be treated as such. They further advise that journals have clear policies on this, and authors should inform the journals that the submitted work is based on a thesis or dissertation and properly cite the ETD. (Of course, this guidance does not apply to the “manuscript-style” thesis or dissertation, which consists of a series of journal publications; these are clearly previously published works.) Many publishers and journals, including the Journal of Graduate Librarianship, have taken this advice from COPE and developed statements or policies permitting submissions based on preprints or OA ETDs.

Despite COPE’s clear guidelines, and journals adopting policies permitting this practice, we are anecdotally seeing an increase in the number of papers by graduate student authors being rejected at the point of submission. We speculate that this recent apparent uptick in rejections may be attributed to the now widespread adoption of plagiarism detection software (also known as “originality software” or “similarity-detection software”) by publishers who have integrated them into the article submission workflow. As early as 2010 it was reported that many major publishers were trialing newly created plagiarism detection services such as CrossCheck (now known as Similarity Check, which uses Turnitin’s iThenticate software) in their article submission systems (Butler, 2010). By 2018, a majority of publishers responding to a survey reported using such software services (LaPointe, 2018). Editorials authored by editors have also openly discussed implementation of this software in their journal’s submission workflows (e.g., Carter & Blanford, 2016; Roberts, 2018). Similarity Check works by comparing the submitted article against a database of other articles as well as web sources, then produces a Similarity Score (a percentage) and Similarity Report (Crossref, 2020a). Despite the common adoption of these software tools, there is no industry consensus of best practices in interpreting the scores and reports produced by them. In a letter to the editor, Miller (2020) urges editors to go beyond decisions based on the raw numbers provided by these tools, and instead exercise judgment in interpreting the scores and reports. As he argues, there could be many legitimate reasons for high similarity scores, such as routine descriptions of common laboratory techniques in methods sections, or the existence of a preprint of the paper in an open access repository. Indeed, according to the documentation for Similarity Check, “we expect a high degree of similarity between the preprint and author’s submitted manuscript” (Crossref, 2020b).

Like preprints, the existence of an OA ETD in an IR can trigger plagiarism detectors and the submitted paper will likely receive a high similarity score prompting possible rejection. This can occur even in journals with policies in place permitting submissions based on preprints or ETDs. If editorial staff are not adhering to their own policies or using proper judgment in their assessment of the similarity reports and scores of the submitted paper, it can be flagged for potential rejection. Graduate student authors are understandably alarmed when this happens, and their advisors are also upset, sometimes misdirecting their anger at the library for hosting the OA ETDs in the repository. A recent (January 2023) conversation on the ACRL ScholComm email list indicated that this scenario is occurring at other universities too, and other academic librarians and copyright specialists are also needing to intervene with publishers on behalf of their graduate student authors.<sup>1</sup> In addition to an anecdotal uptick in cases of works based on OA ETDs being rejected by journals, there has been an increase in questions from USask graduate students and their advisors prior to submitting an article based on an OA ETD for publication. Many students and faculty have asked whether articles based on these openly posted works can be submitted for publication at all, seemingly anticipating a higher risk of rejection and perhaps confusion about what qualifies as prior publication.

## **TWO CASES AT USASK IN 2022**

In 2022, the USask University Library was contacted regarding two cases of articles based on ETDs being submitted to journals then flagged for rejection on the grounds of alleged plagiarism or a failure of the journal's originality checking. In both situations, the journals were from major commercial scholarly publishers. The biggest difference between these two cases, as described below, were the responses of the respective advisors.

### **Case 1**

In early 2022, an editorial assistant with a journal of one of the major commercial publishers repeatedly insisted that a graduate student author who had submitted an article based on their ETD revise major portions that were too similar to the original ETD. This particular ETD had been under a two-year embargo which expired before the submitted manuscript was run through the originality software.

By the time the graduate student's advisor contacted the liaison librarian for their subject area about the issue, they had already been arguing with the editorial assistant over email

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<sup>1</sup> The archive of emails from this list is behind a member login, which prevents us from linking to it.

and were understandably frustrated. This journal has an explicit policy of allowing portions of ETDs to be submitted for publication—which the advisor brought directly to the attention of the editorial assistant—and yet, pushback continued. The editorial assistant had not been properly trained in the journal’s policies, and we finally had to escalate the conversation to the actual editor of the journal. The editor quickly confirmed that the editorial assistant had been incorrect in their assessment, and the submission was permitted to continue.

However, by this point the damage had been done. The graduate student’s advisor was angry not with the journal but with the library for requiring OA ETDs (despite this being a policy of the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, not the library). In the final email communication the liaison librarian received from the advisor on the matter, the advisor shared that they would recommend to all of their students going forward to embargo their ETDs in the repository, stating that “this is just too time-consuming.”

This case was resolved in the sense that the student’s submission was ultimately permitted, but to date we have not followed up further with this advisor regarding their concerning stance on OA ETDs. The advisor is highly likely to talk with other faculty and graduate students about this experience; graduate students will speak with each other about it; and this all perpetuates pervasive negative myths about OA that advocates continue to contend with. It is exhausting emotional labor to repeatedly dispel these myths and many librarians responsible for OA advocacy work risk burnout (Batte, 2020; Bradley 2021; Dawson, 2018), but pushback on anti-OA rhetoric remains essential. This case suggests that proactively raising awareness of ETD publishing obstacles among graduate advisors, and strongly framing the library as an ally, is necessary. Since not all graduate students and advisors realize that the library can support them in these issues, we suspect that we are only witnessing the tip of the iceberg; these challenges may be more widespread than we are aware of. If more graduate advisors better understand this issue, are made aware that the library can help, and are provided with the tools and support to respond effectively, then we are likely to see these scenarios unfold more positively, as the next case (Case 2) did.

## **Case 2**

Another USask graduate student’s article based on an ETD was initially rejected from a journal in late 2022 for similar reasons. The graduate student’s advisor reached out to the library’s copyright office almost immediately for help and further information. In this case, the journal did not have a policy regarding this situation and the advisor was upset not with the library but with the journal for not having up-to-date policies. The professor

subsequently expressed their gratitude to us for providing advice and support on how to address this issue with the journal. They were determined to see this journal adopt more beneficial practices for graduate students, and their persistence was ultimately successful. After the advisor provided the journal with the COPE best practices and advocated for their adoption, the editorial board officially updated the journal policies to explicitly confirm that they would consider articles based on ETDs for publication, and the submitted paper was permitted to continue.

We were so grateful for the advisor's willingness to invest their time and energy to engage with the journal on this issue, leading to real and positive change. The advisor trusted the library, saw the value of sharing ETDs openly through the IR, and understood the need for this important journal in their field to improve their policies. Although this situation had a positive outcome in the end, it still caused considerable and unnecessary anxiety for the authors involved.

## REFLECTIONS

The fact that both recent incidents occurred in journals from major commercial publishers is frustrating. We would be more understanding if smaller, scholar-led, and low-resourced journals were behind on best practices regarding policies and staff training (if they even have paid staff members). The big commercial publishers have the financial resources to ensure that they are up to date on all the COPE guidelines and to properly train their editorial staff in their journals' policies as well as provide guidance on appropriately interpreting the similarity reports and scores. Yet sometimes this work seems to be falling to graduate advisors and library employees who are already overburdened and under-resourced. We should not need to raise the awareness of journal staff concerning their own policies, and we should not have to advocate that journals belonging to major publishers adopt COPE guidelines and best practices. We encourage journals, especially those belonging to the big profit-driven publishers, to do better. Newly graduated students should feel confident and empowered in sharing their ETDs openly, and that publishing subsequent works based on these ETDs will be a positive experience—especially since this is often their first experience in scholarly publishing.

These two incidents were also highly emotionally charged, and the advisors involved reacted in completely opposite ways to similar situations. It is stressful for library employees not only to have to manage the anxiety and anger of student authors and their advisors, but also to not be able to predict their responses. This is heavy emotional labor. Relatedly, we feel internal conflict in having to advise student authors to adopt practices that are contrary

to our professional values but might ultimately alleviate some of this anxiety for them in publishing. Even before these recent cases occurred, we regularly offered workshop sessions in our library for graduate students, which often focused on copyright issues related to theses and dissertations. Information on the topic of prior publication and publishing articles based on OA ETDs was always provided in these sessions, so that students would be somewhat prepared to navigate the possibility of their submission being flagged by a plagiarism detector.

Our recommendations to students about this have generally included:

- Journals usually do not want to publish something that has been previously published elsewhere, but theses and dissertations (like preprints) should not be considered as previously published.
- Check in advance of submitting to a journal what their policies say about submission or publication of articles based on theses and dissertations. This information could be included in a section or policy about “Prior Publication” on the journal’s or publisher’s website.
- If the journal policies are silent on prior publication and/or publication of content based on ETDs, contact the journal to ask.
- Inform the journal prior to submitting your manuscript that it is a version of (or a copy of) your thesis or dissertation, which will be openly available online in your institution’s repository. Letting the journal know about this early in the publication process may help avoid any potential issues later.
- Consider rewording or rewriting the content from your ETD when submitting to a journal to mitigate the risk of the submission being flagged by originality software. Rewriting portions of your thesis or dissertation could be needed anyway if the journal has specific requirements around word count, section headings, formatting, etc.
- If you are still concerned, you can place an embargo on your thesis or dissertation in the IR so that it will not be open online while you submit an article based on it for publication.

It would be an easy solution to embargo all theses and dissertations in the IR for a time, or to recommend embargoes to all graduate students interested in publishing their work. However, this approach does not reflect our professional values or the strategic priorities of our library in championing open scholarship. Keeping scholarly work closed and accessible



to only a privileged few does not ultimately advance research and scholarship, which is what universities strive to do, and train graduate students to do.

Although we already provide sessions to graduate students with the advice listed above, we are now considering developing more explicit resources such as templates or talking points for graduate students to use when communicating with journal staff if these issues arise. These two recent cases have also prompted us to consider ways to better communicate with graduate advisors. To date, we have focused our educational outreach on this topic directly to graduate students. But considering the wide disparity of knowledge and reactions displayed by the advisors in these two cases, we cannot assume that all advisors are similarly informed or have the same opinions. As such, we now recognize the need to proactively reach out to graduate advisors to ensure that they understand the benefits of unembargoed OA ETDs, and that this practice should not hinder subsequent publications based on these ETDs. If problems do arise with articles based on these ETDs during the journal submission process, they can get support from the library to advocate with the journal's staff on their behalf, the primary underlying message being that the library is their ally. Workshop-style sessions on this topic have been effective with graduate students who are used to learning in this manner, but communicating with faculty on these issues may require a more varied approach. The methods we are considering include: messages in faculty newsletters or sent out through liaison librarians; brief presentations at faculty meetings and other events; social media campaigns; and print handouts or posters. There is potentially an opportunity for us to better partner with the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies on some of these initiatives too.

Although we hesitate to make broad assumptions based on only two cases, we do suspect there are many more that we do not hear about simply because it does not occur to graduate students and advisors that the library can help. Anecdotal reports of similar situations from other institutions have made us wonder how widespread this problem is, and if it is growing. We encourage publishers and journal staff to update and improve their processes as inclusion of plagiarism detection software in article submission systems becomes more universal, and we hope that COPE might consider addressing this issue more substantively with their members. More research and analysis of these issues is needed, and this paper is a contribution to initiating these conversations.

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