

How to get a French doctoral thesis, especially when you aren't French

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Abstract

In 1985 the French government created a unique circuit for the dissemination of doctoral theses: References went to a national database "Téléthèses" whereas the documents were distributed to the university libraries in microform. In the era of the electronic document this French thesis network of deposit of and access to doctoral theses is changing. How do you discover and locate a French thesis today, how do you get hold of a paper copy and how do you access the full electronic text? What are the catalogues and databases referencing theses since the disappearance of "Téléthèses"? Where are the archives, and are they open? What is the legal environment that rules the emerging structures and tools?

This paper presents national plans on referencing and archiving doctoral theses coordinated by the government as well as some initiatives for creating full text archives. These initiatives come from universities as well as from research institutions and learned societies. "Téléthèses" records have been integrated in a union catalogue of French university libraries SUDOC. University of Lyon-2 and INSA Lyon developed procedures and tools covering the entire production chain from writing to the final access in an archive: "Cyberthèses" and "Cither". The CNRS Centre for Direct Scientific Communication at Lyon (CCSD) maintains an archive ("TEL") with about 2000 theses in all disciplines. Another repository for theses in engineering, economics and management called "Pastel" is proposed by the Paris Institute of Technology (ParisTech), a consortium of 10 engineering and commercial schools of the Paris region.

(* See glossary at the end of the paper)

What is a French doctoral thesis?

Considered as scientific publications, French doctoral theses constitute an important part of scholarly communication. Following scientometrics, they represent 10-20% of indexed academic research in STM (OST* 2002).

Theses are often the result of 3-4 years of research. At the same time they are an administrative document necessary to obtain the doctoral degree. In some disciplines they are regarded as a result of teamwork and appear in the list of publications of the research laboratory (Mermet et al. 1998).

French universities are autonomous; each one delivers its own degrees and preserves the theses in its library. In the past, before 1985, the graduate student had to deposit a certain number of copies that varied according to local rules (30-180). There are more than 100 universities in France, each one with one or more catalogues and with a specific logic of preservation and supply. Furthermore, academic communities – sciences, humanities, medicine, law etc. – hold different views and have different practices and traditions. And last not least, local autonomy and responsibility are "counterbalanced" by a national framework structure, the French interlibrary loan network.

So, how find a French thesis? And once found, how get it? The following communication tries to give some practical hints and perspectives, imbedded in a larger description of the development of the production, processing and preservation of French doctoral theses and an overview of the principal actors, catalogues and databases.

First steps to improve access to this type of grey literature (1985-2000)

The French government published in 1985 a decree that regulated and improved the deposit and dissemination of doctoral theses. These rules have been applied until 2001. The main principles:

- Guarantee the deposit of the doctoral thesis.
- Harmonize the number of copies to submit.
- Facilitate the identification and availability of the documents.
- Move the format of preservation and dissemination from paper to microfiche (gain of shelf-space, easier access).

The result of the 1985 decree was the creation of a "four-level national network". Each university had to create a special service for doctoral theses ("service de doctorat"). Two institutions (ANRT*) in Lille and Grenoble transformed the print originals into microfiches. Three input centres (INIST* for sciences and