

Embargos

In June 2010 UCL Library Services conducted a sector-wide survey into thesis deposit and open access in UK universities and HEIs. A rich body of qualitative data was provided by respondents describing in their own words how they approach the issues surrounding open access deposit of electronic theses. The data was analysed and evidence is presented here of consensus and best practice. A survey summary report and full text responses are available on the project website¹.

89 of the 144 respondents indicated that they use some form of embargo or access restriction. A further 3 note that they would consider restrictions but are in early stages of implementation. Many respondents did not describe their embargo procedures explicitly, but specific details where provided are compared below.

Types of embargo

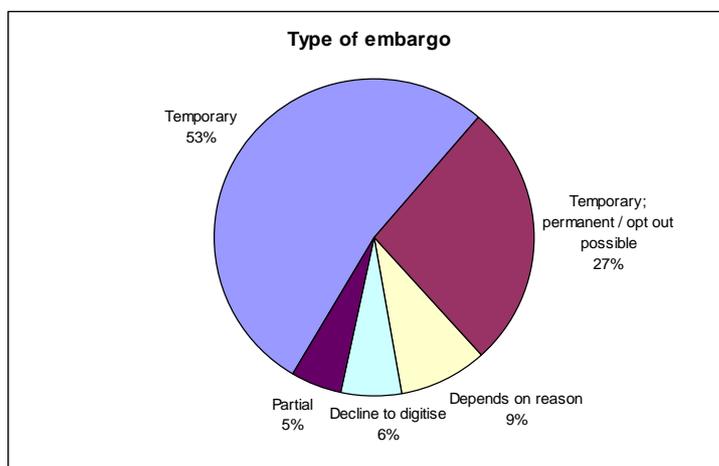


Figure 1: Types of embargo at UK HEIs

80% of respondents offer temporary embargo periods, and none uses a permanent embargo as a default measure. Some universities make use of partial embargos, whereby the majority of full text is available and sections are embargoed where necessary:

- "...removing sensitive material to an appendix and embargoing that separately so that the main body of research is still available publicly"

¹ Project website <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lis/etheses>

Embargo procedure

The vast majority (88%) of embargos are requested by the author. In other universities the embargo is initiated by the supervisor, or department, or the author and supervisor apply together for an embargo.

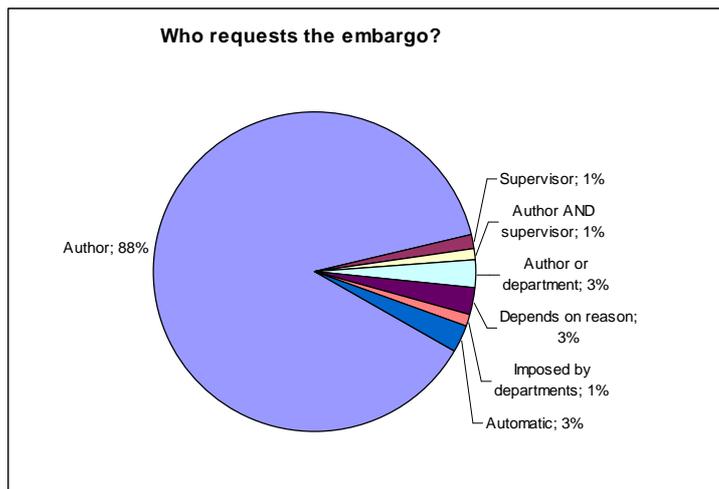


Figure 2: Requestors for embargo

- "Authors can request that theses be embargoed"
- "A student's principal supervisor can request for a thesis to be embargoed"
- "Departments can impose embargo"
- "On request a one year, repeatable restriction can be applied. No authorisation from supervisor/head of department required"

A few respondents have or are considering an automatic embargo, which does not need to be requested at all, to allow for publication.

- "Automatic year-long embargo on PhD theses to allow students time to publish"

The majority of embargos however are discretionary. Approval may come from a variety of levels. Most commonly, the embargo is ratified by a senior committee in the University; other universities require approval at departmental level, or by the supervisor.

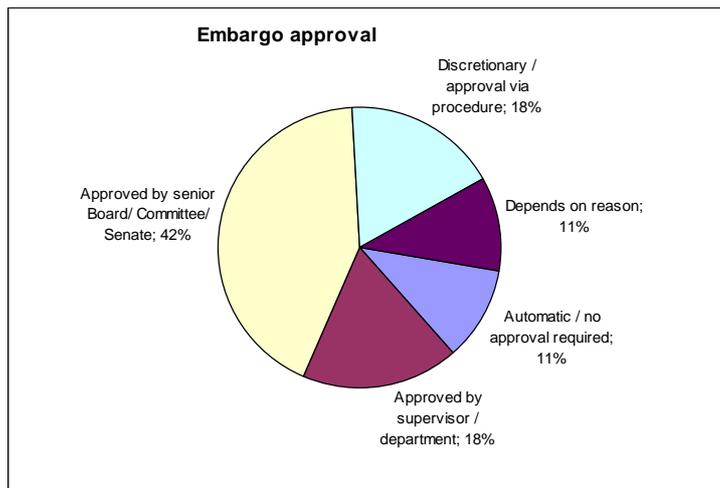


Figure 3: Embargo approval

- “We have recently re-written our submission forms and guides to include a request for the supervisors' approval for any embargo”
- “Up to 5 years restriction for hard copy. Needs authorisation from Head of Department.”
- “Our Research Degree Board will embargo the complete thesis if that has been requested by the student and their supervisor. Reasons would have to be very good for this to happen i.e. funded by an external organisation and commercial interests are linked to the work”

A number of Universities offer dual solutions depending on circumstance, where a simple embargo is available for authors seeking publication and a formal process can secure a more permanent embargo if warranted by the content of the thesis:

- “Up to 3 year [embargo] at request of submitting author...Permanent embargo (print & electronic) at request of supervisor and with approval of Institutional Senate (although in practice this can be for a period of years not forever if required). Only approved for reasons of national security, commercial sensitivity, copyright or funder restrictions.”

Length of embargo period

The most common temporary embargo is a flexible length of up to 5 years. Default periods may be two or three years but an initial one-year period is most common.

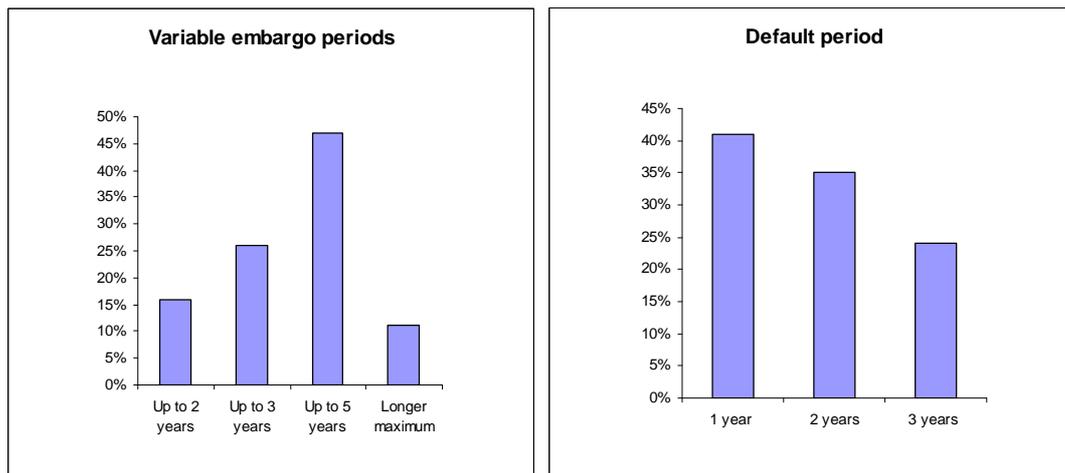


Figure 4: Variable embargo periods

Figure 5: Default embargo periods

Two HEIs noted that it is the author who chooses the length of the embargo, and another two noted that the decision lies with a Faculty Board or Committee. Elsewhere the length is negotiated between the author, university, funder, publisher or commercial partner.

- “Students can opt-out, so their thesis is not available online at all, or request an embargo period (the length of which is of their choosing.)”
- “Agree an embargo period between the student, their publisher and ourselves.”
- “Request made on case-by-case basis to Postgraduate Studies Committee which has authority to approve or not, and to specify time limit of restriction. Library is not made aware of the reason, only of the decision.”

The length may be determined by content, for example:

- “2 years if seeking publication, 10 years if commercially sensitive and indefinite if there are data protection issues”

Several respondents noted that longer or permanent embargos are only approved in extremis, for example:

- “Various embargo options up to 5 year maximum. 20 years can be requested in exceptional circumstances. There will be a small number of sensitive theses that can never be made openly available.”

Extension of the embargo period was only mentioned by 7 respondents. Extension is viewed as an occasional exception and is likely to require approval from a senior Committee or Board.

- “Only a one year restriction can be requested, longer periods need to be approved by the Board of Studies.”
- “Theses may be embargoed from any public consultation; periods of more than three years require ongoing permission from the Faculty Research Committee”

During the embargo

While full text of the thesis is restricted during the embargo, the majority (66%) of respondents indicate they make metadata or abstracts available during that period.

- “Restrict access to the online version, metadata still available online”

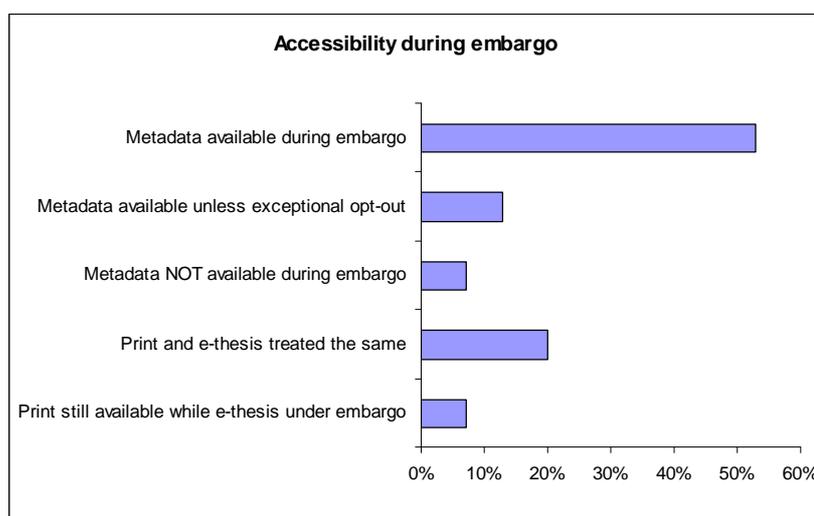


Figure 6: Accessibility during embargo

7% of respondents embargo the metadata as well as the thesis, and 13% may restrict the metadata on exceptional occasions. This may be dependent on the reason for the embargo. Two noted that the embargo system is a pre-library phase and therefore they receive neither thesis nor metadata until after the embargo.

- “Formal embargos (for commercial sensitivity, DPA [data protection] etc) can be requested through formal committee channels - formally embargoed items do not get submitted to the repository or made available in the library. Students can also request an informal embargo during submission if they are planning to publish from their thesis - in this case, the metadata is freely available and a copy of the thesis can be requested from the author via the repository's "Request a copy" functionality”

Several respondents noted that the print and electronic copies are treated the same, ie any embargo applies to both versions. Others keep the print copy available or allow arrangements to be made to view the thesis during the embargo.

- “During embargo period both print and ecopies are restricted.”
- “Only if approved by their supervisor / department. Print and electronic theses must have the same status, eg. if the electronic copy is Restricted Access for two years, then the print copy must be too.”

Finally, the role of the embargo may be regarded as an exceptional measure. Open access is encouraged as far as possible by many HEIs. Twelve respondents stressed that embargo is

occasional rather than the norm, and two noted that opting out completely or permanent embargo is discouraged. Another notes that advocacy encourages electronic deposit:

- “Explaining reduces concerns. Most students are eager to participate as they see the advantage to researchers.”

Conclusion

The typical embargo is requested by the author and of variable length up to five years. A short default embargo period on the full text makes the process easy to manage, especially where the student intends to publish; but in order to accommodate more sensitive data such as confidential or copyrighted information, if it cannot be embargoed separately in an appendix, a senior Committee may be required to make case by case judgements on longer or indefinite embargo periods.

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Further information can be found on the project website at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ls/theses>