OPEN ACCESS TO MASTER'S THESES: A FIVE-YEAR FOLLOW-UP OF NINE SEA-EU ALLIANCE UNIVERSITIES, 2019-2023

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AIM

To assess whether open access to master's theses in the institutional repositories of nine SEA-EU Alliance universities changed between 2019 and 2023, and to examine how national and institutional policies shape that openness.

BACKGROUND

This paper is a follow-up of our 2019 study in which we examined the availability of master's theses in the repositories of nine European universities within the SEA–EU alliance (Gudelj et al., 2022)A 2019 pilot study of six SEA-EU universities found large differences in deposit rules and openness of theses across institutions. As three new members joined the Alliance, this study extends the analysis to nine universities and re-measures openness five years later. The 2019 data for Algarve (Faro, Portimão, Portugal), Naples (Parthenope University, Italy), and NORD (Bodø, Levanger, Norway), as well as the 2023 data for all nine SEA–EU universities, were collected in 2025.

METHODOLOGY

Data on master's theses were collected from universities' websites and verified through direct contacts with librarians at each institution. The number of enrolled students in 2019 and 2023 was obtained from universities' websites or through administrative contacts.

We present descriptive analyses of the number of enrolled students and the access status of students' master's theses at individual universities and across scientific disciplines. Results are reported as frequencies and percentages for the two study years. Differences between access types were tested using the chi-square test with $\alpha = 0.05$, using MedCalc v23.3.7 (MedCalc, Ostend, Belgium).

Openness category	Description
Open access	Fully open access based on the principles of the CC license
Authorized access	Only members of the academic community have access to the content
Institutional access	Only employees and the student of the institution have access to the content
Temporary embargo	Access to the content is granted after 6, 12, or 24 months.
Closed access	Only the administrator or editor of the repository has access to the content

Table 1. Number of enrolled students and number of master theses at SEA-EU universities in 2019 and 2023

University	No. students in 2019/2020 academic year	No. of theses in a repository, 2019	No. students in 2023/2024 academic year	No. of theses in a repository, 2023
Mandatory deposit in a public repository:				
Algarve	7466	291	8863	341
Split	18947	1196	18077	1366
Mandatory deposit in a public repository for selected theses (with highest evaluation marks):				
Cadiz	20912	26	21221	31
Malta	11117	449	12418	674
Voluntary deposit in a public repository:				
Brest	17836	76	16263	37
NORD	11091	258	11141	391
Mandatory deposit in a closed repository (access only for specific purposes):				
Gdansk	27233	0	21358	0
Kiel	27200	0	25940	0
Parthenope	10075	0	13238	0

KEY POINTS

- Master's theses constitute a significant but often under recognized component of scholarly production in higher education
- We studied the types of access to master theses at nine Universities in 2019 and 2023
- There were four categories of university registries for master theses: 1) mandatory deposit, 2) mandatory deposit for selected theses, 3) voluntary, 4) no public repository
- Only about a half of the master theses in 2019, with significant decrease in 2023
- are available in open access
- Most of the master theses in open access came from medicine and health sciences
- Expanding open access to master's theses is important for enhancing research productivity and strengthening legal and ethical standards

CONCLUSIONS

Our follow up of the availability of master theses in the repositories of nine European universities from 2019 to 2023 showed that there was no major improvement in the openness of master theses. Moreover, it seems that the contribution of master theses in open access remained the same or decreased at different universities in 2023 compared to 2019. The overall decrease in the contribution of master theses in open access was mostly due to the decrease in open access theses from Engineering and technology and Medical and health sciences.

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Gudelj, D., Renić AM., Zoranić P., Marušić, A., & Marušić, M. (2026). Open access to master theses: up of nine SEA-EU Alliance universities, 2019-2023. Learned Publishing; in press.