

## **Sri Lankan Library Step Forward Through COVID-19 Crisis; Lessons from Global Context and Practice-Based Learning**

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### **Abstract**

*The study focuses on global research on the challenges faced by libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic time and the strategies and innovations used or suggested to overcome those challenges. Most of the libraries and educational institutions switched to the virtual setting and offered online services with the help of technology. The findings of a comprehensive literature review were reported here by the authors while comparing and stating their experience at the library of the Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka. Researchers found out that during the COVID-19 crisis, Libraries make maximum use of digital technologies to provide and expand services for patrons. They have also conducted programs for patrons to develop their information literacy and especially digital literacy skills. Moreover, they impose suitable safety measures while providing physical library services. Libraries have so far succeeded in ensuring their service continuity during this unprecedented global crisis.*

**Keywords:** Academic Library, Covid-19, Library Services

### **Introduction**

Libraries around the world are challenged by the ongoing crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Library administration is forced to make hard choices when it comes to serving the user and saving them from potential risks at the same time. Governments are taking drastic measures to restrict interaction among humans to limit the spread of the virus. These restrictions are working as a positive trigger and shedding light on the innovative ways of providing library services previously unthought of. Literature for the past one and half years reported different library case studies from many geographical locations. They bring up answers since they report solving different types of issues faced by those libraries during the COVID-19 period. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) developed key resources that tackle major issues facing all libraries (remote services, hygiene, handling materials, staying at home, closing or reopening, etc.) (IFLA, 2020). At the global level, the American Library Association (ALA) has put together a comprehensive guide and best practices and protocols for librarians to refer to; the ALA Covid-19 recovery center includes guidelines for reopening the Libraries by State (ALA, 2020a). A comprehensive analysis of related research literature can formulate a proper mechanism for the functioning of the global library system in the new normal condition. The authors focus on recognizing challenges faced by the libraries and solutions derived to solve those problems.

### **Objective**

The main objective of this research is to investigate the problems faced by global libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore the solutions and suggestions proposed by those libraries, through a thorough literature review and exploring the lessons from practical experiences of Uva Wellassa University Library in Sri Lanka.

## Methodology

The researchers search for research literature from subject-related databases, namely, “Emerald insight”, “Taylor & Francis Online”. The researchers limited the search period from 2020.01.01 to 2021.08.30. The search keywords “COVID-19” or “Corona Virus” or “Pandemic” AND “Library” are used to search the databases. Evaluation of the content is conducted by thematic coding. Challenges, Solutions, Innovation, and Suggestions were derived as the main thematic categories.

The scholarly database search period was from January 01, 2020, to October 30, 2021. The databases which are searched for this purpose are Emerald insight, Taylor & Francis Online, and Oxford University Press. Since targeted subject matter was not found in Oxford University Press, the search was limited to the other two databases.

An Inclusion and exclusion criteria are followed to access the research. From the findings of research literature focusing only on the public library, settings were filtered out and academic library settings were considered. If both public and academic library settings were described then accepted for analysis. The content focuses on challenges faced by the library and innovation strategies and suggestions to progress with library services were considered.

As the second section of the research, the practical experiences of the Uva Wellassa University Library were reported according to the developed thematic format. Suggestions and sections which need further improvement and future recommendations are reported to formulate future library guidelines under the new normal situation.

## Results and discussion

### Research literature related to the global context

Database - Emerald insight, for Keywords “COVID-19” or “Corona Virus” or “Pandemic” 263 results. For Keywords “Library” more than 7000 results. For the Keywords “COVID-19” or “Corona Virus” or “Pandemic” AND “Library” 60 results were obtained.

Database - Taylor & Francis Online, for Keywords “COVID-19” or “Corona Virus” or “Pandemic” 1,461 results. For Keywords “Library” 27,549 results. For the Keywords “COVID-19” or “Corona Virus” or “Pandemic” AND “Library” 162 results were obtained.

Findings From Literature selected through the inclusion and exclusion criteria described in the methodology section by the researchers. The findings are stated below according to the thematic categorization.

- Temiz, S., & Salelkar, L. P. (2020) reported findings from 39 Swedish university libraries,) Europe.

**Challenges** - They reported the COVID-19 situation-related challenges such as limited working hours, shutting down physical libraries for the general public, and unmanning operations.

**Solutions** - They reported closing of library spaces and only offering to borrow or return books at a counter, Pre-booking the library space by the users, implementing quarantine policies for returned books as solutions

for physical library service maintenance.

They also reported implementing plans to offer remote services, make arrangements for all staff to work remotely, allow access to books without human contact to restrict physical contact.

**Innovation** - Using online tools and promote library services online to limit the number of visiting the libraries

**Suggestions** - Suggest the Government in providing financial support to the libraries to overcome the COVID-19 crisis

- In his research Mbambo-Thata, B. (2020) reported the COVID-19 pandemic practices from the National University of Lesotho Library from Africa.

**Challenges** - Full Closure of University Library and COVID-19 related restrictions imposed by their government were reported as challenges. Physical library access was restricted.

**Solutions** - The university library increased access to digital content and broadened digital services.

**Innovation** - The library subscribed to several platforms and databases of e-books and e-journals and has created its institutional digital library. Acquire resources via a country license through Lesotho Library and Information Consortium. Free Scholarly materials were also incorporated. to the collection. Off-campus access to digital resources was provided

Conducted digital literacy programs for the users.

**Suggestions** - Implementations should incorporate considering both providing access to resources and providing knowledge to information access through digital literacy.

- Louderback, P. (2021) in his research reported about the Library, Northeastern State University, Broken Arrow, USA

**Challenges** - Library staffing, workflow, and budgets were reported as challenging. Reduced hours of operation, full and partial closure of the libraries were reported.

**Solutions** - Online-based activities and providing access to digital resources in the place of physical resources. Follow strict safety guidelines when physical access is provided. Sanitization of library spaces and all other safety guidelines were followed. Borrowed physical item quarantine process was conducted when received back.

**Innovation** - Conducted online orientations for teaching, Creation of more digital content for users, All instructional sessions made online, Online reference service conducted via IvyBot chat. The online presence of librarians for the patrons increased

**Suggestions** - Conversion of library services to online mode, creation of digital content, and online availability of staff for the users.

- The research findings from the University of Southern Queensland, Australia, was reported by Thorpe, C., & Howlett, A. (2021)

**Challenges** - Remote working arrangements and providing services to off-campus users.

**Solutions** - Documentation of COVID-19 based practices throughout the time as a roadmap to plan. Conversion of physical services to online-based services and introducing new performance measures to monitor the service quality of newly introduced services.

**Innovation** - A timeline visualization for USQ Library COVID-19 response. Document and position the Access information resources and library services via digital channels and expansion of e-resources. Conduct Online Study Support sessions. Introducing new performance measures to evaluate the impact of transformed services.

**Suggestions** - Documentation of practical experiences libraries in this new normal situation to forecast and plan. Introduction of e-based services and expansion of e-resources. Introducing new performance measures concerning changes.

- Ma, L. F. (2020) in his research state the experiences of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library, Asia.

**Challenges** - Work from home measures and restrictions which were imposed on Public gatherings were stated as challenges.

**Solutions** - Providing waivers for available physical resource use guidelines, support the users online.

**Innovation** - Flexibility in extending the borrowing privilege of physical items, an automatic extension of the loan period, automatic renewal, waivers for overdue fines. Zoom-with-a-Librarian to provide remote support from Library staff when users are off-campus. Temporary Student Notebook Loan Scheme Digital exhibitions for collection promotion on the website.

**Suggestions** - Expand online services and support students to access them by loaning them the devices. Provide remote access to users to reach librarians for support. Imposed relaxation to available physical material use guidelines.

- Rafiq, M., Batool, S. H., Ali, A. F., & Ullah, M. (2021) reported findings from 07 University Libraries of Pakistan, Asia

**Challenges** - The study reports that the majority of the university libraries were physically closed. Library staff worked from home. Overburden of work due to 24/7 connectivity. A formal working policy addressing the new working routines was not available. The digital divide, lack of digital literacy skills, and slow internet speed were the major challenges to access digital information

**Solutions** - Conversion from physical to online mode

**Innovation** - Libraries revamped their web pages, reassigned resources, and planned robust online offerings.

**Suggestions** - Suggested governments increasing the investment and prioritize the digital transformation in their societies and improve internet penetration to the digital divide.

Suggested libraries to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for staff and library users and invest in getting new technologies, infrastructure, systems, and staff development to be able to serve their users in emerging online environments

Suggest offering off-campus access to all their e-resources and also to initiate digitization initiatives and provide online access to content in digital formats.

Suggest libraries reviewing their web presence.

### **Practice-Based Lessons Of Uva Wellassa University Library**

**Challenges** - The Uva Wellassa University Library faced similar challenges to most of the global academic libraries considered in this research. The library was physically closed due to restrictions imposed from time to time. Moreover, work from home and managing the library with limited staff were other challenges. Digital divide, no or limited access to the internet by staff and the patrons, unavailability of suitable devices to access online resources are some of the challenges related to the conversion of physical services to digital services. Lack of digital literacy and information literacy of newly recruited children was also a challenge when providing online services. When staff based at the home, deficiency of technical skills, lacking the suitable devices to provide services, and problems associated with internet penetration were noted.

**Solutions** - Implementation of safety guidelines for the physical library service maintenance,

**Innovation** - Implemented a COVID-19 guideline for the smooth functioning of Uva Wellassa University Library after reviewing the safety guidelines provided by IFLA, Sri Lanka Health Authorities, and University. Through the guideline, most risk zones of the library were recognized and suitable safety measures were imposed. Thorough cleaning and sanitization practices were followed while imposing safety measures for the staff. Distance demarcating labels and awareness notices were set up and seating arrangements were reduced for maximum safety.

For the continuation of the physical library services, quarantine racks were set up to hold the receiving books to the library. Time of book borrowing was extended and fines waived according to the restrictions imposed periods. Pre-booking was encouraged to limit the users at the facility. To monitor the movement of patrons to the facility Identity Card barcode reading system was set up at the entrance. The library digitized some of its collections such as past paper collection and Dissertation abstract collection to provide online access. Digital Repository and University Library Web Page were improved to provide updated information and updates related to new virtual resources and library programs. Ask a Librarian service was implemented for the library to reach out to the user through Facebook, YouTube, Messenger, and e-mail and reach out 24/7 to provide librarian guidance. The library expanded its services by providing off-campus access to the library's digital resources.

The library developed digital content and guidance videos to facilitate the user while arranging online training programs and workshops to enhance the digital literacy skills of the patrons. Moreover, training programs were conducted to support staff to work from home through cloud-based applications and social media applications.

**Solutions** - It is important to record the practice-based lessons learned from the library to forecast and plan for the new normal situation. This will provide a clear idea for the administration to work and plan on different situations caused due to the COVID-19 situation.

Digital collections, digitization, and subscription to e-resources should be further encouraged.

Low-cost copy and dissemination practices should be implemented as a solution for the digital divide. Internet facilities, technology-based infrastructure should be enhanced to support the new normal developments. Device loan-out systems should be implemented to support off-campus patrons.

## **Conclusion**

The global literature, as well as the practical experience of UWU, suggests that all the academic libraries facing similar challenges such as the digital divide associated with problems related to the internet and unavailability of devices, lack of digital literacy skills of patrons, and staff, lack of online resources and lack of staff due to restrictions. All the findings suggest the shifting of physical library services and collections to online services and e-resources. The number of innovative approaches suggests that COVID - 19 new normal situation triggered a rapid shift in the global library sector. Most libraries implemented mechanisms to provide online access to reach librarians in time of need. Documentation of the new normal practices and mapping is one innovative practice that can help the administration to plan for future emergencies.

## **Suggestions**

Academic libraries should look into digitization, digital content development, online collection development, and subscription practices, and fund allocations. Library patrons should strengthen with information literacy skills, with a special focus on digital literacy. Library staff should train to work online and with cloud-based systems and also develop their other technology-based skills. It is important to suggest improving the internet penetration at the country level.

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