

THE CHANGING PERSPECTIVES OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN THE NEW NORMAL

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Abstract

This study aims to know the kinds of services provided by the academic libraries during the pandemic and the challenges faced by them. The measures taken to overcome the problems are examined and also the changes adapted by the libraries to manage the situation. Their ideas for a better future in the new normal period are asked. The data was collected from the library staffs of University and College libraries of north Kerala using Google form. The study shows that most of the libraries have started new online services and have been using social media to communicate with their users during this pandemic period. Though they faced challenges during the pandemic, they tried to give services to their patrons using online technologies.

Key words: Covid-19; Pandemic; Academic libraries; Kerala; Library services

Introduction

For the last two years we have been going through a different life fighting with Covid-19. It has changed our way of living drastically. It is a period of realization that a virus is enough to threaten the whole world. It has affected all walks of life like education, profession, economy, business, culture, etc. Though Corona has not completely disappeared and there exists a threat of a fourth wave in the coming month, we are returning to our normal life gradually.

The impact of Corona in the field of academic institutions and libraries are not different. During lockdown days, the libraries could not provide their normal services to the users as they were forced to close their physical services. At the same time, the courses offered in universities and colleges were not suspended. The main aim of any academic library is to support the teaching, learning and research process in their institution. So the libraries have to provide services to the students, research scholars, teachers and other users. For that libraries have started transition from print

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to digital version of information sources and also educate the students and research scholars in using new technologies (Jeyaraj, 2021). According to Hasan (2022), we must “never waste a crisis”. We should see this pandemic period as an opportunity to develop our abilities and adapting to these changes so that it results in improving the future of libraries and so, can expect a better new normal.

Review of literature

Sawant’s (2021) study was about the services provided and the problems faced by the libraries in schools, colleges and universities during the Covid-19 lockdown. It shows that libraries tried to provide remote services to users and for that they developed digital content and they remained connected to the users through online reference queries. Chakraborty and Jana (2021) made a study on the impact of Covid-19 on the space, collection development, services and overall management of academic libraries in India. In majority of the libraries, space is a problem and this covid-19 made this problem more severe in order to practice social distancing and there is an increasing demand for developing online resources and library digitisation. The study says that in future, there may be a decrease in in-person service and an increase in remote and online services.

The operational procedures, delivery models, implemented tactics and overall functioning of university libraries in Sri Lanka during Covid-19 outbreak was studied by Jeyaraj (2021). It presents a set of recommendations for the shift of library from physical to digital paradigm. Libraries introduced new technologies and tools for users since it was physically inaccessible to them during the pandemic and these services kept the library functioning alive. The article by Medawar and Tabet (2021) describes how Qatar National Library managed the Covid-19 situation and also the services, collections and support offered to the users. The library extended online support to the users and the services provided before lockdown were changed to virtual during lockdown. They considered it as an opportunity than a challenge as the different sections of the library played an important role when no one was expecting it.

Mehta and Wang (2020) describe the position and the challenges faced by a University library during the pandemic based on their personal experiences. The library has changed some of their services into digital format and started new initiatives to support the university’s online teaching since March 2020. A survey was undertaken in December 2021 and January 2022 by Robinson, et al. (2022) regarding the experiences of Covid-19, lockdowns and subsequent re-openings, mental health and views about the future of services among the public library staffs

of United Kingdom. The responses indicate the importance of library as a community resource. The staffs face stress and mental health issues when dealing with users while the virus remained highly prevalent and they have a fear that new technologies like e-books may replace the traditional library services.

Dadhe and Dubey (2020) made a content analysis of websites of IITs of India in order to find out the services by their libraries during Covid-19 pandemic. The libraries provided remote access to e-resources and some of the libraries started a new service by putting all required resources under one heading namely library services during Covid-19. Many libraries have started new information page giving health tips, updates and guidelines of government and WHO and ideas on how to deal the fake news regarding pandemic.

Objectives of the study

- To know the types of services and facilities provided to the users during the pandemic
- To identify the mode of dissemination of services in the new normal
- To know the way of communication since lockdown
- To analyses the challenges faced by the library staffs during this period

Methodology

The study was conducted among the library staffs of University and College libraries in north Kerala. Random sampling was used and the sample selected was 80. The data was collected using Google form circulated via e-mail and WhatsApp. A total number of 73 responses were received. The analysis was done using the simple percentage method.

Analysis and Interpretation

The sample consists of 57.5% of library staffs in University libraries and 42.5% from college libraries. Among them 58.9% are female and 41.09% are male. A good number of the respondents (68.5%) belong to the age group 40-50. Majority of them (87.7%) are having MLISc. as their qualification. The courses offered in these institutions are Degree (57.5%), Post-Graduation (84.9%) and research (52.05%).

- **Status of library during pandemic**

A good number of libraries (78.08%) were partially open during the Covid-19 period because of the lockdown. Only few libraries were fully open and some libraries opened only some sections.

- **Primary mode of working**

During the new normal situation some of the library staffs were worked in their normal place (42.46%) and some worked from home for a short period (36.98%). Whereas, very few of them were worked from home most of the time as well as deployed to other services during the pandemic.

- **Services provided during lockdown**

More than half of the libraries (57.5%) provided virtual services to the users during the lockdown and near half of them (42.5%) provided other services. The services like book groups and mobile library services were practiced by only a few of them. During this period the libraries' main focus has been the development of e-resource collection to provide remote access to the users.

- **E-resources during pandemic**

The major e-resource provided by the libraries during the pandemic was e-journals (78.9%). E-books (68.5%) and databases (63.01%) also became a main source of information at that time.

- **Communication during Covid-19**

The information related to the library services were given to the users mainly through e-mail (78.9%), social media (78.9%) and telephone (78.9%). Other methods like informing via website (42.5%), post (21.9%) and newspaper (15.06%) were also practiced by the libraries.

The most common method by which the library staffs received messages from the users were telephone (84.9%), social media (78.9%) and e-mail (73.97%).

- **Role of Social Media**

A majority of the library staffs (84.9%) are satisfied with the role of social media for facilitating library services, especially informing the users about the library services during the pandemic period.

- **New services**

A good number of library staffs (78.9%) realised the need of new services for their users and introduced some services. This includes different online services (67.1%)

and programmes like book review, quiz, elocution, essay competition, etc. on Google meet (34.2%).

- **Status of library service**

The respondents were asked about the present status of their library in comparison with the period before Covid-19. Near half of them (47.9%) felt there was no difference between the pre and post Covid-19 period, whereas 31.5% of them found it was better than the period before Covid-19. It may be because of the new services started in their library during lockdown. There are a few library staffs thinks that the library services became worse than before the pandemic.

- **Challenges faced in the new normal period**

Covid-19 has brought difficulties in all facets of life and so in libraries too. When the staffs were asked about the challenges they faced during the pandemic, there were a number of problems like decrease in the number of users coming to the library (73.97%), lack of infrastructure and e-resources (57.5%) which were the only service that could be provided to the users during lockdown. Near half of them (47.9%) were not able to provide services to users properly and were not able to communicate to the users (42.5%) effectively. Lack of adequate fund was a problem faced by some of them (36.98%) and a few (15.06%) didn't have proficiency in providing online services to the users during lockdown.

- **Improvement in library services**

There have been a lot of differences in our life style since Covid-19 outbreak. In the case of library too, there have been a change from conventional services to new technology driven services. The libraries started several new services for their users during the pandemic. Some of the services are introduction of mobile application for giving services to users. Some of them started online services and the users are provided with the user name and password in order to access the resources. During these period most of the libraries withdrew the fines for the overdue books. The university libraries promoted the usage of e-books, e-journal and databases subscribed in the university so that the users can access information from the home itself.

- **Future of Library**

When asked about the future plans for the library, the staffs mainly concerned about the introduction of new online services so that the users can access library resources in any such adverse situation. They are in the opinion that libraries need more fund in order to launch such new services and its management.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates the different services provided by the academic libraries during the pandemic and the challenges faced by them. Many libraries have started new online services for their users and conducted Programmes through virtual platforms. They widely used social media to facilitate their functions and the e-resources like e-journals, e-books and databases attain importance during this time when users couldn't visit the library. Also the respondents realized the need of new technologies and more e-resources so that they can face such new normal situations.

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