

Research paper

University Libraries Reaction to Covid-19 Pandemic: The Foremost Central Libraries in Iran

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the university libraries' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and determine their services patterns. **Method:** This study is a qualitative exploration by collecting data through phone and online interviews of selected heads or assistants of thirteen university libraries. The interview recordings were transcribed with the help of callX software. The content of the interviews was analyzed and coded using MaxQDA software and led to the extraction of 220 initial codes. **Findings:** Almost all the central libraries of the studied universities limited their in-person services during Covid 19 pandemic but engaged with the users and tried to increase digital and remote services. Revamping their web pages, Flexibility in presenting services, development of information dissemination to users were the most important services and activities that central libraries presented in the pandemic era. Two of the most significant services which they have started during this period, are librarian booking and online videoconference interview with the users. **Conclusion:** although Covid 19 quickly invaded libraries and reduced the opportunity for a quick response, some of the studied central libraries took advantage of the crisis and provided suitable services to students such as setting up digital reference desks, purchase of software to organize electronic resources in the library, online reference interview with users etc.

Keywords: COVID-19, Corona, Digital services, library services, online services, University libraries.

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Introduction

Universities and organizations can no longer think of a crisis as an isolated and contained event. Crisis events unfold along unpredictable paths, often leading to disruption of university activities and goals. Depending on the magnitude, the crisis can pose a continuous threat to the physical and/or psychological well-being of students, faculty, and staff (Moerschelland Novak, 2020). University libraries play an important role in the intellectual development of students and faculties as well as the total development of a society. It serves the information needs of the university community through provision of information resources that supports learning, teaching and research and is charged with the provision of relevant and current information resources in various accessible formats required to support the mandates of the university (Chukwuji and Umeji, 2020). Library has always been an institution that reflects societal trends. During times of crisis, the collections, services, and activities facilitated by libraries and librarians often take on new meanings as people re-negotiate national, cultural, and personal identity amidst disruptive forces that range from war, revolution, displacement, natural disaster, and economic turmoil (Witt and Smith, 2019). Due to the pandemic of new corona virus, COVID 19-, libraries around the world of all sorts especially university libraries have been working hard to provide access to collections and services remotely, often investing time and effort in updating websites and services in order to deal with demand. While many libraries already had a strong digital presence, many others have now moved to create one in order to continue serving members as far as possible (IFLA). As university libraries play an important role to meet students and faculties' information needs they have made some important changes in presenting their services to users in response to new Covid-19 restrictions. In this paper we are going to understand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed to university libraries and users and how they are responding to this crisis. So the present study aims to answer the following basic research questions:

RQ1. How does the pandemic affect services presented by university libraries?

RQ2. What are the new digital and remote services and activities that librarians are conducting from both library and their home offices to keep their libraries alive and meet their users' information needs?

Moreover, the study not only presents the current state of affairs but also makes recommendations on the basis of the findings.

Literature Review

Numerous studies on the response of academic libraries to Covid 19 have been published in recent months, some of which are mentioned below.

Rafiq, Batool, Ali and Ullah (2021) did a research entitled University libraries response to COVID-19 pandemic: A developing country perspective. They explored seven university libraries' response during the COVID-19 pandemic and determined their working practices, services patterns, strategies applied, and role played. The majority of the university libraries were physically closed for patrons in this pandemic but engaged with the users. Libraries revamped their web pages, reassigned resources, and planned robust online offerings. The university portal and other social media tools were less used communication tools during the pandemic. Library staff worked from home and there was a sense of over burden because of 24/7 connectivity and without any formal working policy addressing the new working routines. University librarians felt that digital rift, lack of digital literacy skills, and slow internet speed were the major barriers in their transition from physical to online mode and less use of library's online resources and web portals.

Temiz and Salelkar (2020) did a research on exploring reaction of Swedish university libraries to COVID-19. They explored digital services of academic libraries and their response to COVID-19 in 39 universities in Sweden. In response to the ongoing COVID-19 spread, a general trend seen among all is limited working hours and shutting down physical libraries for general public. Also the researchers evaluated the university libraries in terms of availability of Information, accessibility of resources, collaboration with other actors, increased use of existing services, motivation and support to practice social distancing. All of the studied universities have moved their offerings toward using online tools. The findings present that libraries can go beyond their responsibilities and provide emotional and psychological support the community towards social distancing such

as videos, social online meetings and live video workshops. Also there is a need for a review of digital services of academic libraries.

Walsh and Rana (2020) evaluated continuity of the University of Toronto Libraries' Services during the Pandemic. Elevation and expansion of existing online services and digital collections, and acquiring or building new research tools for scholars to deploy, are two approaches which the University of Toronto Libraries' staff have taken since the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper describes the continuity of library services and collections access at the University of Toronto during the period of March, April, and May of 2020. Also this paper describes how the University of Toronto Libraries adapted itself in order to continue rendering core services for research and learning in an abruptly deserted environment. Librarians supported instruction by teaching students course-required information skills through class meetings, course-tailored digital research guides, online library modules, and one-on-one consultations. The Libraries' remote-reference and information service Ask Chat with a Librarian continues to provide open access to medical research. While this service is not new, COVID-19 has led many researchers to discover it for the first time.

Guo, et al. (2020) surveyed the provision of patron services in 137 Chinese academic libraries responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that Over 94% of Chinese academic libraries released COVID-19-related information through their websites; the majority switched their service focus too partly or solely remotely online, including remote access, free electronic resources, virtual references reachable 24/7 and research support services deliverable online; services of print materials were altered to e-books for conveniences.

Mbambo-Thata (2020) investigated the various innovative support strategies rendered by academic libraries in support of e-learning in Zimbabwean universities. This was necessitated by the change in nature of learning and services provided in universities as a result of COVID-19. A quantitative study was done to unpack the role of digital library services in supporting e-learning in universities in Zimbabwe. An online questionnaire was developed using survey monkey and distributed to 50 professional librarians in both private and state universities in Zimbabwe. A total of 34 librarians responded to the questionnaire and the data was analyzed and presented thematically. The findings revealed that academic libraries play an

important role in supporting e-learning in higher education institutions by providing electronic information resources, which are key in research, learning and teaching. The libraries provide a one-stop shop for accessing electronic resources through the digital library. Patrons have benefitted by accessing and using digital library services during the COVID-19 lockdown period. It was also discovered that libraries should ensure that they are prepared to always offer their services despite the closure of physical buildings because of the pandemic.

Given that the reaction of university libraries in Iran to Covid 19 has not been studied, researchers are going to study the status of central libraries of first grade universities.

Method

Owing to the limitations of COVID-19 conditions, there was not an opportunity to visit the university libraries or time to interview with chairmen of libraries and librarians. This study is a qualitative exploration done by collecting data through phone and online interviews of selected heads or assistants of thirteen university libraries¹. The interview recordings with callX software were transcribed and then analyzed thematically. Also in some cases needed data was gathered through visiting university and their respective library websites; examination of other documents provided by the university library such as press releases, announcements and brochures.

According to the ranking of Iranian state universities by Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 13 comprehensive and specialized universities with international performance levels are among the top and first grade universities in Iran. To collect the data of this research, interviews were given by the directors or assistants of central libraries of these 13 universities. The interviews were structured and based on pre-determined questions. The content of the interviews was analyzed and coded using MaxQDA software version

1. Comprehensive universities (IsfahanUniversity, TabrizUniversity, TarbiatModaresUniversity, TehranUniversity, ShahidBeheshtiUniversity, ShirazUniversity and FerdowsiUniversity) and specialized universities (Isfahan University of Technology, Amirkabir University of Technology, K. N. Toosi University of Technology, Sharif University of Technology, AllamehTabataba'iUniversity and Iran University of Science and Technology)

20. Qualitative analysis of interview data led to the extraction of 220 initial codes. Multiple code revisions and integration based on similarity in several stages led us to achieve several themes and sub-themes.

Finding

RQ1. How did the pandemic affect the current services of university libraries?

Almost all the central libraries of the studied universities limited their in-person services during Covid 19 pandemic and tried to increase digital and remote services. The most important services and activities that central libraries presented in the pandemic era can be seen in the figure 1:

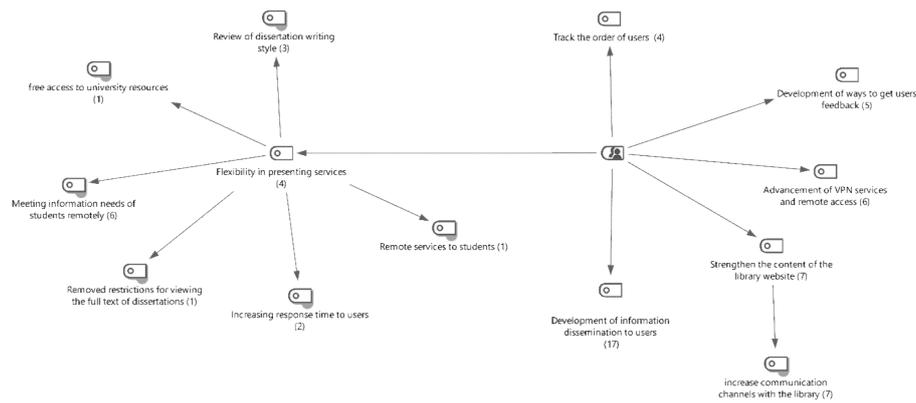


Figure 1: The most important activities that central libraries presented in the pandemic era

Table 1 presents the themes and sub-themes of the interviews with quotations:

Table1: The most important activities that central libraries presented in the pandemic era

Themes	Sub-Themes	Quotations
	Remote services to students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Requests through phone and e-mail were very high. Most requests were to renew and reserve resources, check membership status, Checkout for graduation and these activities were

Themes	Sub-Themes	Quotations
Flexibility in presenting services		<p>done without previous restrictions”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Receiving CDs of dissertations and theses that were previously required for checkout was ignored”. • “Borrowed books were allowed to use by students as long as there was no applicant. Otherwise, it would be sent by mail or by the student's first trip whenever possible”. • “Books requested by students were posted in some cases”.
	Increasing response time for users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The increase of service hours was one of the important developments of this period, that is, we had a response at 12 o'clock at night”. • "We expanded the question and answer spaces”.
	Removed restrictions for viewing the full text of dissertations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Restrictions on viewing full-text dissertations removed during Covid-19 pandemic”.
	Meeting information needs of students remotely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Research one-on-one consultations were conducted to meet information needs of students in various ways”. • "We answered many students' requests by phone”. • “live video workshops on information skills were part of the library's routine program”.
	free access to university resources, business database and other systems of the university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Access to business databases got free for students.”
	Review of dissertation writing style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Review of dissertation writing style written by graduate students was one of the library's busiest tasks in the past

Themes	Sub-Themes	Quotations
		<p>which was done in-person. The dissertation was reviewed and approved by library staff before checkout. In era of Covid-19 pandemic this task was done by e-mail and social media".</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Dissertation matching is also carried out remotely".
Track the order of users who need resources	Electronic receipt of user requests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The resource request form was designed and loaded on the website".
	Provide the needed resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Submission of papers and electronic resources requested by students was done by e-mail". • "If they needed a section or chapter of the book, we would scan and send". • "University professors introduced the textbooks needed of students and the general purchase was done and sent."
Development of ways to get users feedback		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We communicated with users through various social media channels and received feedback". • "All necessary telephone numbers and e-mails were sent to students".
Advancement of VPN services and remote access		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We provide access to all subscribed databases on campus via VPN for students, staff and faculty".
Strengthen the content of the library website	increase communication channels with the library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We have designed some online web forms and loaded them on the library website so that users can register for online workshops and resource provision that did not previously exist". • "Access to the full content of all academic outputs of the university (dissertations and thesis, research projects, books, workshops, etc.) was confirmed". • "We have regularly updated the library website as a powerful and first-class library guide for the users".

Themes	Sub-Themes	Quotations
Development of information dissemination to users		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “From the very beginning of covid-19 pandemic, the librarians' contact information was loaded on the library's website”. • "The necessary contact numbers and the website address of the library were sent to the students via bulk email and messaging, in this way we communicated with the members as far as possible”. • "Not only were the office numbers provided to the students, but also the active e-mails of the departments, which had to be constantly checked at all times, and sometimes teleworker librarians were told to keep in touch with students and members beyond office hours”.

As shown in table 1, In-person services have changed to remote services and information needs of students were met remotely. Response time to users has increased and restrictions for viewing the full text of dissertations have removed and access to university resources, business database and other systems of the university in most cases was free. Communication channels with the library increased too and the content of the library website was enriched.

RQ2. What are the new digital and remote services and activities that librarians are conducting from both library and their home offices to keep their libraries alive and meet their users' information needs?

To answer this question, the directors and assistants of the central libraries were asked to describe the new services that they have started during this period. The following services were extracted from their speeches (see figure 2 and table 2):

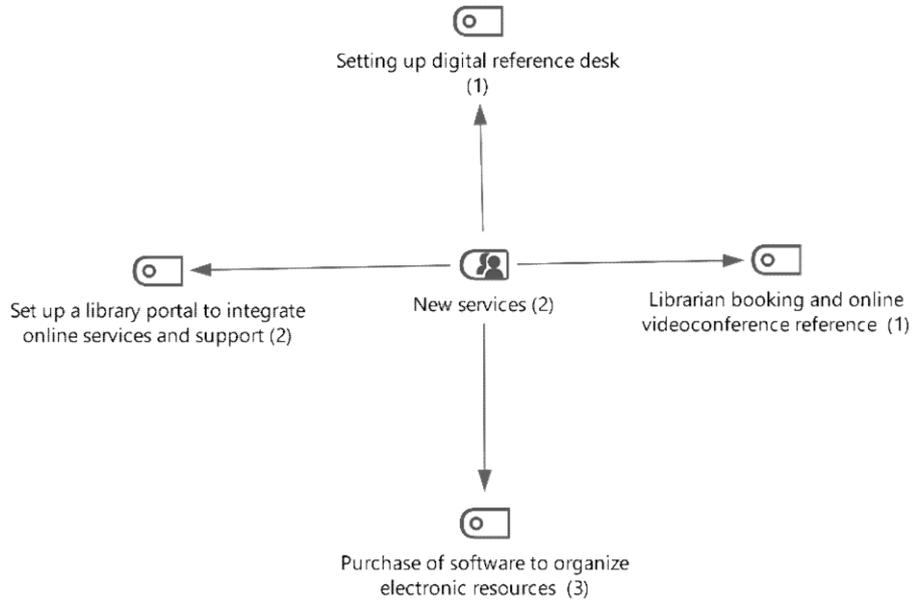


Figure2: New digital and remote services

Table 2: New digital and remote services in the central libraries

New services	Description
Purchase of software to organize electronic resources in the library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Many electronic data, including papers, standards, and books that we had already stored on the university's internal database, could not be intelligently searched” • "Software was purchased and more than 90 percent of the data was implemented and transferred; now students can more easily search and store this information".
Setting up digital reference desk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We developed online chat”. • "Online response provided to users during business hours". • “COVID-19 has led many researchers to discover it for the first time”.
Librarian booking and online videoconference interview with the user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “By making an appointment, reference interview with users was provided through Adobe Connect software”.
Set up a library portal to integrate online services and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Providing digital library services, integrated and comprehensive information to members, as well as online support for users were accessed via this portal”.

As shown in table 2, some new digital and remote services were created, from setting up digital reference desk to librarian booking and online video-conference interview with the user.

Conclusion

University libraries are important as disseminators of information in critical situations because of their unique role in supporting education and research. Librarians also play an important role as facilitators and connectors in this process. With the end of face-to-face library services, the scrutiny and paying special attention to remote services of university libraries was felt more than ever. This is also seen in most previous studies (Rafiq, Batool, Ali and Ullah, 2021; Temiz and Salelkar, 2020; Mbambo-Thata, 2020). The findings of this study showed that The COVID-19 pandemic forced university libraries to reassign resources, revamp their web presence, and adopt different strategies to meet the needs of the users. Libraries changed their working practices, reviewed and enhanced their web pages, reassigned their resources on their web portals, added new electronic resources, added necessary contacts details on websites, delivered their services through emails and social media and generally they moved towards remote and digital services. This is what we see in researches (Rafiq, Batool, Ali and Ullah, 2021; Temiz and Salelkar, 2020; Mbambo-Thata, 2020; Guo, et al., 2020; Walsh and Rana, 2020).

Findings showed the most important activities that central libraries presented in the pandemic era respectively were development of information dissemination to users (With a frequency of 17), enrichment of the content of the library website (7), advancement of VPN services and remote access (6), development of ways to get users feedback (5), flexibility in presenting services (4), and tracking the order of users who need resources (4). According to results some new digital and remote services were created in central libraries, such as purchase of software to organize electronic resources in the library and setting up digital reference desk and etc.

Although Covid 19 quickly invaded countries and reduced the opportunity for a quick response, some of the studied central libraries took advantage of the crisis and rendered suitable services to students. However, future research will indicate students' satisfaction with the services provided, in this study, the response of central libraries to Covid 19 shows flexibility in providing services, improvement of the

position of libraries in accessing and disseminating information and moving toward presenting new services. Almost all of studied libraries did their best to meet information needs of users with as much ease as possible and were flexible in information services. Some innovated new methods for meeting information needs of users. The Ferdowsi University of Mashhad launched a plan entitled “librarian booking” according to which online video -conference interview was performed by the user via Adobe connect software. It is also interesting that the use of social media such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Golestan system etc, provided convenience and opportunities for library information services from which almost all the studied libraries benefitted greatly (Rafiq, Batool, Ali and Ullah, 2021). All these mean that libraries turned the crisis into their own advantage.

Resources

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