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Library Services During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case of the University of Eswatini (UNESWA)



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Introduction

The Corona Virus/Covid-19 pandemic has changed the activities of libraries and librarians' world over. The International Federation of Libraries Association (IFLA) has noticed that this pandemic has compelled libraries to close their doors, for the good of their patrons and staff (IFLA, 2020). There have been radical changes in the way that services are offered, and in how libraries stay in touch with and support those who depend on them for access to information and culture. The emergence of the “new-normal” in the world of libraries has been evident.

University libraries faced that time of uncertainty as they prepare to meet the needs of users. The Covid-19 Pandemic has led to a huge learning curve in many areas in the libraries, and has changed the ‘settings’ of the Library field through accelerated rhythm of development. The global health crisis was witnessed following the outbreak of the COVID-19 in January 2020 (AJMC-The Center for Biosimilars, 2021). A high numbers of reported cases were on the rise till most went onto a complete lockdown around March 2020. Closure of the universities, due to lockdown and COVID19 protocols declared by the governments, became inevitable and the libraries could not be spared from closing down. Developing countries like the Kingdom of Eswatini was no exception.

It is known that the library is an “essential service” that can avail virtual programs and information services to users. The duty to provide educational and health information to all during these difficult times cannot be over emphasised. Thus, libraries had to find new ways of reaching out to patrons as online lessons became the order of the day. During the complete lockdown, the University of Eswatini had to find ways to respond to the pandemic, hence an effort on services to users were improved through different activities.

These include access to the library building, access to electronic resources and other services.

The need for libraries to provide information services to cater for online classes has risen to its highest as most classes were offered online. The library had to look into ways of investing more in digital infrastructure to enable digital distribution of content to learners. The Library also had to grasp social distancing and building restrictions as their new identity as the academic heart of the university objectives. An increase or step up or in terms of providing students with information services that will meet their needs.

The university of Eswatini found in the kingdom of Eswatini, formerly Swaziland is the only National university of the country. It is based in the Manzini region and has three campuses that are within a 40KM radius from each other, with the Kwaluseni being the main campus, Luyengo campus and Mbabane Campus. Since the start of the pandemic, the University of Eswatini libraries had to update its library website and scaled up its social media presence to provide updated COVID-19 information, including local mitigation efforts. It expanded its provision of access to e-books, databases, and e-resources for educational purposes. These resources were not accessible out the university. Users were encouraged to access these using their logins for authentication and security purposes.

Library Building Access

When lockdown started, many students left with library material. To encourage access, the University of Eswatini library ensured that access to library resources was supported, through the waiver of fines to the students and staff. They were granted amnesty in terms of returning library material since lockdown. This was done due to the fact that the library buildings in all the three campuses were closed and later opened on a limited basis. Opening hours on weekdays was 8.30am – 6.00pm and Saturday: 9.00 – 5.00, while Sundays were Closed. The library buildings were only available to Staff and Students who have been authorized by the university to return; i.e. completing undergraduate students and Post graduate students.

The number of users allowed into the building was cut off by more than half. The Kwaluseni campus library for instance has a seating capacity of +/-700 users, but was reduced to 300 users seated at the desks and 24 using carrels. Non seating areas were clearly demarcated to observe social distancing. The Luyengo Campus Library has a seating capacity of +/-300 users, and was reduced to 75 seated at desks 6 using carrels while the Mbabane campus was reduced to 34 seated at desks.

Access to Online, Physical Materials and Instructional Support

Users were notified through notices that for teaching and learning materials they should visit the Library OPAC and follow the links provided in the website. These included direct access to materials including databases, articles, books, e-books, and streaming video (University of Eswatini Libraries, 2020). They had access and instructions to remotely;

- Find books, eBooks, streaming media, and more
- Find databases and articles for research
- Find Swaziland Information Development Centre for online resources under the World bank
- Explore our EBook user guide and learn how to search for Ebooks from Ebsco

The library offered support for faculty teaching online courses through “Request online or in-person instruction for your course related to research, writing, or multimedia” option. Guidelines on how to search for eBooks use into online courses were provided to staff. For a virtual introduction to the library facilities, users were guided to follow the links where introductions were provided for navigating around the website

Health and Safety Measures in the Library

Increasing physical distancing was put into place. Signs and floor markings were made and posted to encourage social distancing of 2 meter distances. Space in between study desks to allow for physical barriers and/or physical distancing was also made to 2metres. Further, computer and space seating was adjusted to comply with the local guide. The discussion area/room was temporarily closed from large groups and the was a limit to study room use to one individual at a time, accessible only by checkout for sanitation purposes. The Booth seating was also limited. A staff member was stationed at the main library desk at all times.

Reducing Potential Spread

In terms of reducing the potential spread of the diseases, provision of additional tissues, sanitizing supplies, and hand sanitizer for staff and users was increased. The users were instructed to return all items to the circulation desk drop box where the staff would quarantine all incoming items on designated room for a minimum of 72 hours in accordance with COVID team best practices. Books and journals that have been collected from study desks are not shelved immediately but are quarantined for 24 hours before they are shelved.

Shared workspaces and study room spaces between users was regularly sanitized and patrons encouraged to continue to use remote assistance and schedule appointments for in-person assistance for more complex reference questions, through emails for a virtual session.

The library regulated entry into the library by registration at the entrance, where staff and users were allowed into the library building upon registration. The register was meant to be used for contact tracing. Appointments versus walk-in traffic was highly encouraged. The Library will be closed for sanitization if a case is traced to library contact.

Promoting Healthy Habits and Good Hygiene

Posting signs promoting physical distancing, face mask use, healthy hygiene, and traffic flow in all the library floors was made. Patrons were to review the new policies regarding social distancing and maintaining a healthy environment.

Other Services

Self-service Photocopying was suspended and the library staff were the ones who operate the photocopiers using the users photocopying cards. Photocopiers and computers were disinfected after each use.

Challenges Faced

The university of Eswatini like many others faced some challenges during this time which include the lack of finances for E-resources, especially to open up the digital access remotely. The University recently started acquiring e-books thus the collection is still limited. Further, lack of technology gadgets by users to access resources remotely was a challenge. To top it all, the expensive (Lancaster & Lange, 2020) internet access in Eswatini for many of the student users was a thorny issue that hinders their access to the library resources. †

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ntombikayise Nomsa Mathabela, is an Assistant Librarian – Readers’ Services at the University of Eswatini, in Southern Africa. She has worked as the in this position since 2010 when she came back from doing her MLIS at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa in 2009. She also takes part in teaching library skills and School librarianship to undergraduate students at the University of Eswatini. She is started her career as a Trainee Assistant Librarian in 2003 and worked in the different departments of the Library. She holds a PhD in Library and Information Science at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, a Masters in Library and Information Studies from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa – USA, a Post Graduate Diploma from the University of Cape Town and a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Swaziland. She is a 2009 Fulbright Scholar and an OCLC/IFLA 2014 Fellow. She is a believer in Christ, a member and assistant pastor in her church and local community especially for Women and Youth ministry where she is involved in counselling and motivational activities. She has lead the Women’s wing of her Church where she successfully directed the compilation of the constitution and mode of operation as well as information dissemination to congregants. She is actively involved in the Swaziland Library and Information Association (SWALA) as secretary and a member of the Christian Librarian Association (ACL). Her interest is in building strong library associations and improving the library profession. She can be e-mailed at nnmathabela@gmail.com or mathax@uniswa.sz
