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Academic Library in Times of COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID19 has gripped the whole world. After the Second World War, this pandemic has perhaps had the largest impact on humanity. Though we expect the COVID 19 crisis to come to an end in the near future, the undeniable fact is that we may have to live with restrictions for a while. The management and use of institutions like libraries have also been severely affected by this pandemic and thus forced management and staff to introduce protocols such as social distancing and other measures to prevent the spread of this contagion. This article discusses how academic libraries in Goa, India, have responded to the health crisis.

1. Introduction

Ever since the spread of COVID SARS Virus infection at the fag end of 2019, humanity has been facing a crisis that no one in present times has ever witnessed or experienced. The pandemic has already claimed the lives of 3723603 across the world. A whopping 173,080,143 have got infected as on June 5, 2021³. The COVID 19 pandemic have forced countries worldwide to either fully or partially close many organisations. It has put forth new challenges for stakeholders in different sectors.

The education sector is the one of the areas that has been severely affected due to the pandemic. Regular class room sessions have had to be shut down to avoid risks. Institutions involved in teaching and

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³As per Johns Hopkins University and Medicine, Corona Virus Resource Centre <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/> accessed on 5th June 2021.

learning have had to think of new ways to conduct classes and conduct examinations. Just like in many other cases, information and communication technology (ICT) has emerged as a major savior to tide over the situation. Technology played a big role in facilitating the continuation of teaching and other learning processes via online interactions. Libraries and other such academic institutions have been severely affected as clientele; teachers and students were prohibited to come to campuses. As a result, library professionals have had to cope with some major challenges, some of which they had not foreseen or anticipated. However, they have been able to use technology to reach out beyond the four walls of the library. Many libraries immediately switched to novel ways and started serving their clientele. The peculiar structure of libraries and their functions put forth multiple challenges.

It is a hard task to maintain social distancing, which is the first protocol to be followed to limit the pandemic from spreading. Being a social institution, it is a rather difficult task for libraries to maintain social distancing. Sharing of resources in libraries like furniture, books and journals stack areas and reading spaces can compound the risk further. Libraries also have enclosed facilities like reading lounges, discussion rooms and newspaper reading areas which totally became redundant. The air conditioned ambience also is a factor that helps in spreading the infection. Most libraries maintain a single entry and exit point. This gives scope for people to gather around this area.

However, libraries cannot remain closed for long. "It remains to be seen whether this catastrophic disruption and terrible loss of life will be something we recover from anytime soon, but it is clear that we have to build a new normal for our learning communities."(Ahlfeld, 2020).

Sooner or later, they will have to be opened, though in a phased manner. Whether to open the library fully or partially, will be a call that needs to be taken locally by the administration of every institute. Researchers, faculty and students need access to information to support their activities. It is difficult to recreate the physical space of the library and use it virtually.

But librarians in academic institutions, especially in the state of Goa, in India, have stood up to the challenge and found out measures to serve both their faculty and students.

“For decades, librarians have adapted quickly to crises: budget cuts, loss of staff, natural disasters in facilities, changing systems, both offline and online, new formats for reading, diverse technology and machinery and the internet.” (Ahlfeld, 2020).

Yes, we did it. In order to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic and yet we have fulfilled the demands of users. The libraries invented innovative ways to function and help their clientele. The most important consideration was to ensure the safety of users and the staff. So, libraries have followed the guidelines issued by the WHO and the government. They have developed their own Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). But unfortunately, the guidelines from the international and national authorities have changed frequently because of the new findings about the pandemic and the genomic mutations of the virus. Libraries have had to be ready and flexible enough to incorporate these changes from time to time. They have needed to be quick enough to respond to the changing situation.

Here is a description of the norms and procedures adopted by academic libraries of the region, while serving their clientele.

2. Access to Information Resources

The complete lockdown from March 2020 was the first stage of total disruption of the normal functioning of library. Immediately, libraries of the university and other academic institutions resorted to providing remote access to databases and e-books to the faculty and research scholars and students. The Shibboleth supported InFED software was used to give remote access. This was appreciated and extensively used by the clientele. As Carberyetal pointed out “Library staff immediately dedicated considerable time and energy to supporting and facilitating remote access to digital texts in support of the teaching and learning of our institutions.”(Carbery et al., 2020).

When it comes to journals, the demand is already there for electronic version. Many academic libraries are already subscribing to a number of e-journal packages, but limited to the campus networks. So remote access to the same was immediately worked out and provided.

Every academic library subscribes to a number of local and national newspapers and popular magazines in different languages. Many have newspaper reading areas. Such areas were closed as maintaining social distancing was difficult. Some libraries even stopped subscribing to daily newspapers as there were doubts that the virus could even spread through a newspaper’s dry surface. However, online versions of most newspapers were available and they were linked with the library portal.

3. Access to Library

Standard operating protocols were developed by most libraries after discussions in library committee meetings. Though these are difficult times, they have given much freedom for librarians to find out

innovative ways to reach out to their clientele. In most libraries, entry was restricted to a limited number of students. For example, in the case of the Goa University Library, only 15 students were allowed at a time as per the SOP and they were not allowed to remain inside the library for more than 30 minutes. Transport facilities were curtailed by the government and hence the number of people visiting the library was also proportionately low even when the lockdown was lifted.

Most academic libraries had a single gate for entry and exit, ensuring library security. But during the pandemic it is best to avoid any human to human contact or at least minimise the same to the extent possible. This led libraries to make a provision for separate gates or doors for entry and exit, thus reducing rush and avoiding contact between users while entering and exiting from the library. In some libraries the slogan of “Break the Chain” was printed and placed near areas where sanitizers were kept. It ensured that people entering the library, sanitised themselves before doing so. In some libraries thermal checking was also implemented, even though it was not a serious measure to detect infected person.

4. Seating Arrangement inside the library

How much place was to be allotted to a reader is a question that had to be considered while making seating arrangements in the library. There was no consensus on this among libraries. This is basically because many college libraries do not have large spaces to accommodate people inside the library while following social distancing. This depended on the size of reading areas, number of library users and the demand to sit in the library.

In academic libraries in India, the sitting arrangement is generally six readers per table or four readers per table. This was to be drastically reduced to two readers per six seater table and a single reader per four seater table. While allocating space for two readers per table, the chairs were diagonally opposite to each other. This prevented the readers from facing each other and hence found to be safe. Many libraries removed all extra chairs from the reading areas.

Many academic libraries had small cubicles for readers popularly called as research cubicles. These are enclosed spaces and were totally avoided. Common areas like Reading lounges, meeting rooms and newspaper reading areas were all kept closed.

5. Cleaning the premises

It was reported that chlorinated products are more effective against the virus than alcoholic products. However, libraries followed a cleaning plan in consultation with the local governing authority and local health authority. A step-by-step daily cleaning plan document was prepared by some libraries and handed over to the cleaning team. Special attention was given to frequently touched surfaces like door handles, lift buttons, taps, flush handles, staircase railings etc. They were cleaned frequently. Tables and chairs were cleaned every day and sanitisers were placed in different places.

6. Air Conditioning

Though there is no data to prove that air conditioning leads to the spread of the virus, to be on safer side it was decided to shut down central air conditioning of some libraries. Wherever possible it was advised to keep windows open to facilitate natural air flow and use fans.

7. Limiting Number of Users

Some areas in the library primarily used for socialising, like meeting rooms, were closed even though there was the possibility of social distancing. This was done to avoid any risk of the virus spreading. The SOPs followed by the libraries, the changes in the rules of library and limitations in seating arrangements etc. were informed to the users through online documents. Library website was another place where these updates were put up at regular intervals. “The library rules should be revised and it should be clearly communicated to all via e-mail and the notice board. If any changes takes place in the rule (revised) that should also be communicated at an earliest to the students and staff and all the library members.” (D. Mestri D, 2020)

Controlling the entry of people was done by the security staff in most cases. But adapting of smart cards and swiping was a nice option followed by libraries who could afford it. Some libraries adopted the policy of making different categories of students and allocating them specific days for visiting the library. This worked out very well. The students were also careful about t turning up at the libraries in groups.

8. Managing Circulation of Books

In some discussions of peer librarians, there were ideas to have a screen put up at the circulation desk, like the one they generally have at bank counters. If that was not possible, at least to provide the circulation staff with face shields and hand gloves, which was followed by many libraries. Another suggestion was to keep the counter open for a limited time, wherever the average transactions were less in number. If they were more, then again allocating slots for different categories of users was followed. Activities like reserving a book, extension of loan period

were strictly asked to be done through online modes. This drastically reduced the number of users visiting the library. In some libraries, online requisitions were collected from users who wanted to borrow books. Library staff kept the books ready at the counter and the user was notified about it.

For returning books, some libraries kept drop boxes as it is not required to return them personally. The returned books were kept aside for a week before shelving. They were kept in seven locations and on the eighth day, the first set was taken for shelving.

Several notices for following social distancing and the use of masks were placed at various parts of the library to make people aware of the seriousness of the situation. The Government of Goa suggested that the employees should take an oath that they will resort to the SOPs suggested by the government.

In most libraries the fine on late returns of books was abandoned after discussion in the library committee as many could not return their books in time due to the lack of transport facilities.

9. Zomato/Swiggy Model

Another idea that came up during this period was the Zomato / Swiggy model of delivery. This model would be easy in a residential campus. Users can place order for books they wish to borrow and library can have a delivery mechanism in place to reach the books in their respective hostels or residences. The same person can also collect the books to be returned. This will curtail a lot of human interaction.

However, in residential campuses, as students were sent home, this model though discussed, was not implemented.

10. Making Library a safe place

All safety measures have to be in place as per accepted norms. Libraries did not allow people without masks. Queuing with social distancing in times of rush was followed strictly. For following social distancing circles were marked on the ground for people to stand, especially at the entrance and exit of the library and at the circulation desk.

Sanitisers were kept at many places, like at the entrance and exit, circulation desk, at different areas in reading rooms and in stacks. Furniture, computers, online kiosks, printers and scanners were sanitised frequently.

Face shields were given to all library staff interacting with users. Staff was asked to wash their hands frequently or to sanitise. Library staff was asked to report any symptoms like cough, cold, fever etc. and isolate themselves immediately.

11. Library Administration

Most libraries had an organisational plan in place. They allowed many staff to work from home. Staff were called shifts in a day or on alternate days. They were advised not to share office space. The staff was closely monitored for any health-related issues. Even if symptoms of cold were seen in any staff, they were advised to isolate themselves till recovery.

12. Conclusion

The protocols as described were followed by the academic libraries in Goa. All these precautions helped in such a way that none of the libraries in Goa became centres for spreading the infection. Libraries

continued to deliver services, though in a limited manner throughout the pandemic period and the same continues even now. This seems to be a new normal for the near future too as the threat from the pandemic remains. Let us work together and see that humanity progresses even in the dreadful times like this.

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