



Libraries in a Time of Covid

REVIEW PAPER

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ABSTRACT

The impact of Covid on providing access to library resources has raised interesting questions in regard to supporting students at a distance. Aside from enabling access to resources through online channels there is also the need to ensure that support for academic skills is available.

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The impact of Covid on providing access to library resources has raised interesting questions in regard to supporting students at a distance. Aside from enabling access to resources through online channels there is also the need to ensure that support for academic skills is available.

To be successful, (to get the best degree possible), our students require access to both resources (books, journals, video etc.) and academic skills support to equip them for study at degree level. During a period when students are coming to university for the first time, and also having to work remotely, methods of academic delivery have changed and access to resources is equally paramount to facilitate and reinforce their learning. Limited access to buildings means that print items are restricted at best and largely unavailable. Although efforts to provide access through access such as “Click and collect”, though helpful, will, due to the size of student cohorts, not achieve access on its own.

As a library and learning service moving to online is not the problem. Much of the resource available to students is available online as a matter of course, in fact it’s worth noting that over 75% of the library resources budget is spent on access to online content. In itself this sounds impressive but it means that the support and training required to search and find the right content and use it appropriately (plagiarism, referencing etc.) is of equal importance, to get students to quality content for their work. Library teams operated, pre-covid, to a degree anyway through a JustAsk service which was already available and would be performed remotely to a greater degree. Much as teaching also went online so did workshops and training sessions for our students and, interestingly, attendance at workshops and sessions have increased considerably while delivered at a distance.

Moving online was not, and is not, an obstacle for delivering library and learning services but what has become more acute is access to texts electronically. Where some subjects have less available electronic content and where academic staff are working with texts that are either unavailable online, or have during the course of 2020, become prohibitively expensive beyond what the budget can reasonably withstand. Despite the release of free content for the first lockdown which allowed access to new content for a period, the purchasing of electronic content has now become increasingly complex and less affordable. Publishing has models for academic content provision, but the switch to online in such a short space of time has resulted in a rush to content without the usual mechanisms to support it impacting on both cost and access, consequently making procurement more difficult and complex. It will be interesting to see how the academic publishing market moves forward as the existing situation is unsustainable. This relies as much on institutional changes and planning at a strategic level as with the publishing world.

Will this lead to a rise in open access publishing? That’s a longer question but if the current costs associated with existing publishing models are not addressed then we may well see changes occur at a faster pace than hitherto with open access.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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