

**BEST PRACTICES IN LIBRARY MANAGEMENT DURING COVID-19
PANDEMIC: CASE OF THE LIBRARY, THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA
(OUSL)**

K. H. T. Abeysekera
Library,
Open University of Sri Lanka
[*khabe@ou.ac.lk*](mailto:khabe@ou.ac.lk)

A. H. K. Balasooriya
Library,
Open University of Sri Lanka

M. M. I. K. Marasinghe
Library,
Open University of Sri Lanka

Abstract

Libraries all over the world has been compelled to impose certain restrictions limiting their services to the users and introducing alternative approaches for the delivery of library services and resources as a response to the situation created by pandemic. This paper explains how the library of the Open University has dealt with the situation and continued to provide services to its stakeholders. The case study method was used in the study, and data collection was done through observations, from the library website and various other documents available at the library. The study identified the ways that could transmit the virus in the library namely; books with the virus, infected patrons and staff, accordingly the Virus transmission triangle was introduced, with a view of taking measures to control the virus transmission Major measures taken by the OUSL library were reducing the number of users visiting the library, enhancing online inquiry service to provides a better service, introducing strict sanitary measures, keeping records of library users, changing book circulation process, a self-check-in kiosk, rearranging furniture to ensure social distancing, developing e-library editions etc. In addition, the staff of the library has been encouraged to work from home, enabling them to provide their respective services even at a time when the university is closed. The library was able to develop an Open Education Resources (OER) collection because of the adoption of the Work from home concept. This pandemic situation emphasized the importance of identifying and implementing new approaches by all institutions of the world to make sure continuous service for their stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of the institution.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, Library management, Covid, book quarantine

Introduction

Library is a common place in any academic institute where all the staff and students visit to gather information to pursue their education at various levels. However, Covid pandemic, emerged in the mid-March of 2020 in Sri Lanka made striking changes to all the facets of the life of every person and place. Closing down or partial functioning of institutions, social distancing, restrictions on free movement and social gatherings in order to control the spreading the Covid 19 heavily burdened the economy of the country. This pandemic has taken its toll on the Libraries around the world as well (Dhiman, 2020).

According to World Health Organization (WHO), Corona virus disease (Covid-19) is an infection, which causes respiratory illness. Under normal circumstances, it does not need special treatment but, older people and those having other health complications such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease etc. are more likely to develop serious health conditions. Being well aware of how the disease is transmitted is the best way to prevent the disease from spreading. The virus spreads through droplets of saliva and discharge of nose from those who cough and sneeze. Frequent hand washing with soap, using an alcohol-based sanitizer and not touching the face, keeping prescribed distance among two persons help a person from not contracting the disease (WHO, 2020).

The libraries all over the world have been compelled to impose certain restrictions limiting their services to the users and the conditions created by the pandemic have made them look for alternative approaches for the delivery of library services and resources. Considering the above, this paper aims at addressing the research questions: Why is it necessary to change the previous library practices and how the Library of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) has faced Covid situation and what are the best practices introduced and their impact on the functions of the library?

Literature Review

There were several issues the librarians worldwide have had to deal with during the pandemic situation and some of these have been how to face the pandemic situation, how to give information on pandemic, how to disseminate non-pandemic related information requested by the patrons and how to stay safe (Oyelude, 2020). Further, with the changing teaching methods due to the Covid-19 pandemic, best practices have to be introduced to secure the place of the library in education (Ifijeh and Yusuf, 2020).

Other than from human-to-human virus transfer (WHO, 2020), reading materials such as books could act as the virus transmission media for a short period. According to Van-Doremalen et al., (2020), Corona virus could survive up to 3 days on plastic materials and 24 hours on cardboard surfaces. As the surface of the most of covers in the library books PVC laminated, it is possible for the virus to remain active on these surfaces for at least three days.

According to WHO (2020) regular hand sanitization, wearing face masks, physical distancing etc. help in preventing the disease from spreading.

Methodology

The best practices in library management during Covid-19 period, a contemporary phenomenon, must be examined in the real-life context. Thus, the case study method is suitable for the broad understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2009). The Open University of Sri Lanka being the only institution that provides education entirely utilizing open and distance mode, the library of the OUSL plays a pivotal role. Thus, this can be considered as a single case study. Further, the units of analysis are the library services given by the OUSL. Data collection was done through observation, from Library website and various related documents available at the library.

Findings

In the libraries there could be three possible virus carriers namely; books containing virus, infected patrons and staff. Books carrying the virus can infect staff and patrons and while infected patrons and staff too could make each other infected.

OUSL is the premier open and distant learning institution in the country and its library facilities support its users by providing library resources both in printed and electronic formats and other library services that meet the stakeholder requirements in learning, teaching and research conducted in distant mode. On average 150 students visit the library and 80 books are circulated within a day. Average visits to the library website are 600 visits per day, the library has a seating capacity of 140 and this tends to be fully occupied.

Effect of Covid-19 on the Library:

During pre-Covid days the library was a place where significant number of students and staff often visited and engaged in different activities. Soon after the contagious Covid outbreak, the library was identified as a leading place that could spread Covid to a large number of students and staff members that visit the library from various areas of the country. Through the contaminated materials and persons in the library, it is possible for the disease to spread widely. Accordingly, the main change implemented during the Covid first wave was the reduction of number of users visiting the library. Mostly the academic staff members visit the library to return and borrow books. Reduction in the number of students visiting the library has been significant. However, there has not been any drop in incoming academic and general inquiries, accordingly online inquiry service was further promoted among library users to provide a better service.

Protection of the library staff members, especially those who operate the main circulation counter, from the disease was given the utmost importance during the post first wave period. Management of the library identified the possible 'virus transmission triangle' and the places where the contamination or transmission of the virus should be stopped. Considering the wellbeing of the staff and patrons, many safety measures were taken.

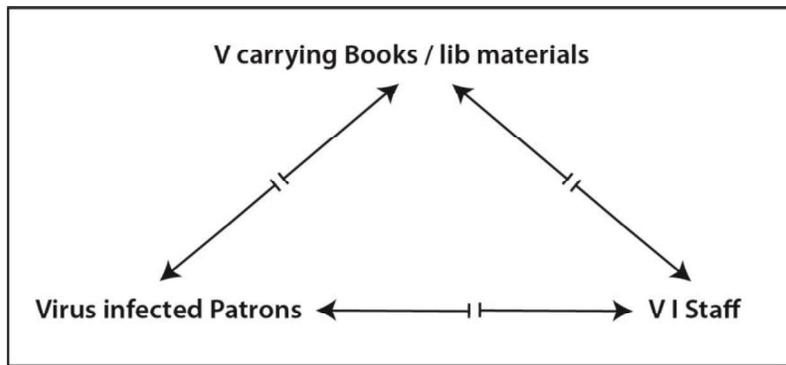


Figure 1: Virus transmission triangle (VTT) for the libraries

Safety Measures Taken

Management decisions – Soon after the island wide quarantine curfew was lifted, the management group of the Library comprising Acting Librarian, Senior Assistant Librarians, Assistant Librarian and the Senior Assistant Registrar met on Zoom and took decisions to ensure safety. Subsequently, these measures were taken up for discussion at the Library and Information Committee, headed by the Vice Chancellor of the OUSL. The Library management requested the Public Health Inspector (PHI) of the University to visit the Library to ensure the steps taken were correct and also to seek further advices.

Entrance - First and foremost the University made arrangements to fix water supply and hand wash dispenser in front of the library and requested all the users and the staff members of the library to wash hands before entering. This was based on the health guidelines given by the Government of Sri Lanka.

On entrance, the security personnel were instructed to check the body temperature and also to record the name, address and the national identity or student registration number along with the time of arrival of all those who enter the library building. This was done with the view to tracing back the source of infection if needed.

Main Circulation counter –Library circulation process is the lifeline of the library. In conventional set up this process increases the possibility of exposure of the staff and the patrons to the Covid virus. Immediately a barrier was erected in front of the counter to ensure 1 m distance between the counter officer and the visitor.

Handling of the returned books by the staff members needed to be prevented. Towards this, a self-check-in kiosk was established so that the user can return the books by him/herself. The kiosk is comprised of a barcode reader, digital display and a key board. The instructions to use the kiosk were displayed digitally and in print formats near the kiosk. After self-check-in the books, the users have to place the books in a rack, where the returned books remained there for three days for quarantine. A notice was displayed for the patrons not to take out the books from

the given shelf. A sanitizer bottle was also kept in the kiosk for the users to sanitize their hands after the process.

In addition, the staff member/s in the main counter were advised and given the facilities to frequently wash hands.

Reading areas –Reading areas were arranged in a way to maintain 1 m distance between two readers, thus reducing the accommodation capacity. In the reading areas too, hand sanitizers were kept and notices were posted requesting library users to clean their hands once they handle the books.

Air conditioners were switched off and the windows kept open in the reading areas to ensure the circulation of fresh air, thus reducing the possibility of Corona spreading.

Staff and staff work stations – Though the staff areas of the back office were not congested Library management sought the advice of the PHI of the University. Even though 1 m distance was maintained between the staff work stations PHI advised to keep hand sanitizers in each area enabling the respective persons to sanitize their hands after handling the books. Further, Library Management requested the staff to wear the mask whenever they leave the respective work station. However, in the staff dining area the safe distance cannot be kept unless only 3 members remain at a time. Thus, the staff members were advised to take their lunch break in groups of three at separate time slots. The newly purchased books were also kept away from the staff for three days to avoid possible virus transmission.

“Work from home (WFH)” concept, the Library introduced without any difficulty, is another ‘novel-to-Sri Lanka’. Tasks of handling inquiries, information collection including Open Education Resources (OER) etc. were assigned to all information assistants and they were informed to report to respective supervisor of their daily work. Familiarity with the ICT of the staff members made the implementation of WFH hazard free.

Development of e-Library – OUSL as a distant education institution, the library has the tendency towards developing e-resources. The management of the Library has been working on the direction of developing an e-library. This Covid situation accelerated the process. During the first Covid wave the library developed an e resources collection comprising e-resources having free access. Further, by redesigning the library website, the visibility of e-resources was improved. Steps were taken to make textbooks and other educational resources freely available to be used in learning, teaching and research. OUSL library accelerated the process of building the Open Educational Resources (OER) collection and took steps to encourage staff and students to use OER materials. In addition, a decision was taken to purchase e books, instead of hard copies. Supportive services for accessing the e-resources have also been strengthened. Tutorials are available on the website for services such as setting up VPN connection, which allows access of journal databases from home.

As mentioned above all the precautionary steps were taken to break the possible two-way transmission of virus depicted by the sides of the VTT as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Steps taken by the OUSL Library to break the VTT

Possible virus transmission way	Precautionary steps taken
books ↔ patrons (side 1)	<p>Book quarantine (for returned and newly purchased books)</p> <p>Facilities for using hand sanitizers after handling books</p> <p>Discourage patrons to minimize the use of textbooks and utilization of eBooks are promoted.</p> <p>Increase the visibility of the e-resources by redesigning the library website with a view to promoting eBooks and e-resources</p> <p>Strengthen the supportive service for e-resource</p> <p>Promote online book reservation service of Library Management System, thus minimizing the time spent at the library by the patrons.</p> <p>Increase the collection size and accessibility of library Open Educational Materials (OER) and encourage academics to incorporate OER for learning and teaching</p>
Patrons ↔ staff (side 2)	<p>Wearing face mask in the library premises made compulsory for patrons as well as staff</p> <p>Checking body temperature of all entering the library</p> <p>Self-check-in kiosk for returning books</p> <p>Hand washing and encouragement of using hand sanitizers</p> <p>Encouragement of maintaining social distancing (1m distance among all, all the time)</p>

Staff ↔ Books (side 3)	<p>Hand sanitization before handling books</p> <p>Wearing face mask while handling books</p> <p>Encourage work-from-home for all staff members, where possible</p>
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Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

According to the WHO, the total elimination of Covid pandemic is far from over unless an effective vaccine or treatment is found and the whole world has to live under the conditions of 'new normal' people have to protect themselves by following health guidelines provided by the authorities. At present, it is necessary for people to wash hands sanitizers after handling books, equipment and also after using common services such as transport, further wearing a face mask is a must when going out. Library professionals must ensure that our patrons and staff members are protected from the pandemic and must ensure that the Library is not a place where infection propagates. In the meantime, it is essential to identify and implement new approaches to ensure continuous information service for library users, especially through digital resources and services.

The OUSL Library has taken many precautionary steps; all are aimed at limiting the contact between two persons. Self-check-in kiosk is a novel introduction to the local academic libraries, which ensures the contactless returning of books. Under the present pandemic situation introducing good library management practices as mentioned above are of utmost importance.

In conclusion, the OUSL library has taken necessary measures to protect its staff and users from Covid-19. Further Virus Transmission Triangle (VTT) is a model, which could be used by the libraries to take necessary steps to prevent virus transmission.

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