2020-10

Going Digital: Academic Libraries' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article outlines the response by Irish academic libraries to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting closure of higher education institutions and their libraries for an extended period beginning in March 2020. Academic libraries have responded by accelerating their shift to digital collections and services, by supporting and participating in remote teaching and by offering new services. The article discusses the potential longer term consequences of the pandemic for academic libraries, including budgetary constraints, an impact on the shift to Open Access, changes in library design, and new work practices. Examples of initiatives by Technological University Dublin and other academic library members of the Consortium of National and University Libraries are included.

Keywords: *COVID-19; coronavirus; pandemic; academic libraries; higher education; digital services; digital collections; open access; library design; work practices*

Introduction

On the morning of 12th March 2020, following the World Health Organisation's formally describing COVID-19 as a pandemic, the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar announced that schools, colleges and childcare facilities would close from 6pm that day. The closure was initially to remain in place until 29th March 2020. Teaching was to be done remotely, where possible.

Academic libraries, along with their parent institutions, then embarked on what evolved to be a closure of unprecedented duration, with many library buildings only reopening to the wider student population in September 2020, some five months later. Higher education institutions' research and teaching continued throughout the closure, and summer examinations proceeded as originally scheduled, albeit remotely. This required academic libraries to proactively support and enable these activities without access to two of their key assets and services: the physical libraries and their print collections. It necessitated a focus on providing digital solutions to support universities' and colleges' teaching and learning and research activities, some of which were already in place, others which required rapid development.

Following the WHO's formal description of COVID-19 as a pandemic, this article outlines the response by Technological University Dublin's (TU Dublin) Library Services and other academic library members of the Consortium of National and University Libraries (CONUL).

TU Dublin is Ireland's first technological university, with campuses in Dublin City, Tallaght and Blanchardstown. Building on the rich heritage of its founding organisations, Dublin Institute of Technology, IT Blanchardstown and IT Tallaght, TU Dublin offers students pathways to graduation ranging from apprenticeship to PhD.

CONUL is the representative body of research libraries on the island of Ireland. Its members are Dublin City University (DCU); Maynooth University (MU); National Library of Ireland (NLI); National University of Ireland, Galway, (NUIG); Queens University Belfast, (QUB); the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI); the Royal Irish Academy (RIA); Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin); Trinity College Dublin (TCD); University College Cork (UCC); University College Dublin (UCD); University of Limerick (UL); and Ulster University (UU).

Immediate Response

In the days and weeks preceding the Taoiseach's announcement, higher education institutions had already begun planning for the possibility of the closure of their physical campuses in order to support the containment of COVID-19.

Academic libraries had similarly begun reviewing and developing business continuity plans in light of the pandemic. These plans included anticipating the possibility of a phased shutdown, planning for the delivery of library services online, allocating libraries' stock of student loan laptops to university and library staff to support remote working, and minimising attendance at external meetings. Reciprocal library access schemes such as CONUL's Academic Libraries Cooperating in Ireland (ALCID) scheme and the Society of College, National and University Libraries' (SCONUL) Access scheme, in which most Irish university libraries participate, were suspended until further notice.

Following the closure announcement on 12th March 2020, academic libraries' immediate steps included increasing loan allowances and extending loan periods. Libraries swiftly moved to providing their services entirely online: library websites replaced physical libraries as the embodiment of 'the library'. Academic libraries updated their websites with guides to services available during the closure, highlighting the breadth of electronic databases, journals and e-books available to students, academic staff and researchers studying and working remotely.

In parallel, academic library staff were themselves learning to work remotely with all the hardware and software challenges that shift entailed. Higher education institutions quickly turned to previously little used, but now ubiquitous, resources such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Library staff mastered these tools to enable them to meet and communicate to advance the work of their libraries, and to provide support to students, staff and researchers. The closure also provided an opportunity for library staff to avail of online training opportunities. At TU Dublin, academic liaison librarians offered live, online training in specialist, subject resources to each other and to other library staff, many of whom, due to the frontline nature of their usual role, would normally find attending training courses logistically difficult. This cross training by liaison librarians aligned to preparations for the partial consolidation of five of TU Dublin's seven City Centre library units into an interim library at the university's Grangegorman campus, scheduled for later in 2020, and also reduced the risk of single points of knowledge with regard to specialist subject knowledge.

Supporting the Switch to Remote Teaching

Once university buildings closed, the need for academic libraries to support the overnight switch by their parent institutions to remote teaching was of paramount importance. University and college libraries provided this support to their institutions' learning and teaching activities in several ways.

Libraries updated, developed and promoted existing online tools and guides in areas such as research skills and teaching support (Maynooth University, 2020, for example). This support was welcomed by library users: a survey of Research Libraries UK (RLUK) members reported a large increase in traffic to library webpages containing research guidance (Greenhall, 2020), and anecdotal evidence from Irish academic libraries echoes this experience.

Liaison librarians also offered their expertise and support in the area of copyright to academic colleagues migrating to remote teaching by providing advice on the use of materials within institutions' Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) against the backdrop of ongoing negotiations with the Irish Copyright Licencing Association regarding renewal of the higher education sector's licence.

Academic libraries forged and strengthened partnerships with other function areas in their institutions to further support the shift to remote teaching and learning. TU Dublin Library Services, for example, collaborated with the university's Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre to deliver a well-attended webinar to support academic colleagues engaged in remote teaching, and librarians developed suites of reusable learning objects and made them available in the VLE. In addition, a number of university libraries (NUIG, MU and UCD, for example) have collated and promoted the use of Open Educational Resources (teaching, learning and research resources that are freely available to anyone to use, adapt and redistribute without restriction (UNESCO, n.d.) to their academic communities.

And throughout higher education institutions' closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, liaison librarians offered one-to-one consultations to researchers, academic colleagues and students by phone, chat and video calls.

Library Collections – Accelerating the Digital Trend

Despite academic libraries' extensive digital collections, the loss of access to print collections was a significant loss to users. Undergraduate students and, to a lesser extent, taught postgraduate students, rely heavily on print textbooks and the loss of access to them during university closures posed challenges to their learning.

Academic libraries reallocated collections budgets to e-books to address this issue, prioritising the purchase of e-books over print. While a necessary move, this highlighted pre-existing issues in relation to e-book versions of textbooks.

First, in certain disciplines, particularly in the humanities, e-book versions of textbooks are not available. Secondly, unlike fiction, academic e-books generally cost more than the print equivalent. This is partly due to the higher rate of VAT that applies to e-books (9% rather than 0%), but a number of

publishers' prices for e-books are considerably higher than the print equivalent. For example, an exercise conducted by NUIG library found that the average price per textbook for an institutional licence was €13,000 per annum (James Hardiman Library, 2020) – clearly an unaffordable and unsustainable price. Thirdly, e-books often have limits in terms of the proportion of the text that can be downloaded or printed. Finally, while research indicates that students prefer digital texts to print, their comprehension has been shown to be better when they read printed texts (Singer & Alexander, 2017). Nevertheless, while libraries remained closed due to COVID-19, diverting budgets to the purchase of e-books offered students and staff continued access to essential texts to support the remote learning and teaching environment.

Publishers Response to COVID-19 and Open Access

Publishers developed their own response to the pandemic. In March 2020, more than 30 publishers made all of their COVID-19 related publications available in public repositories such as PubMed Central (Wellcome, 2020). Numerous publishers in other disciplines also made some or all of their collections freely available. Many academic libraries' Collections teams undertook to collate these resources, enable access to them and to promote them to library users, thereby broadening further the range of digital resources available to students, staff and researchers.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and publishers' response to it, on the transition to Open Access publishing will be interesting to observe in the coming months and years. This transition has already been accelerated by Plan S, a European initiative which requires that, from 2021, all scholarly publications arising from scientific research funded by public agencies must be published in Open Access journals, platforms or repositories (Coalition S, 2018). As researchers and funders become increasingly acclimatised during the pandemic to research outputs being freely available, their tolerance for the re-imposition of paywalls and embargos will likely decline. Not all commentators believe that the path to open research will run completely smoothly, however, with some believing that the financial impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic is likely to stall progress to widespread Open Access publishing (Crotty, 2020). Librarians, funders, researchers and publishers will watch this issue with interest as it evolves.

Old Habits, New Services

Despite the increased focus on the growing electronic resources available to researchers, students and staff, demand remained strong amongst academic libraries' users for access to print collections. Students and academics alike missed access to the general collections, while researchers particularly missed access to Archives and Special Collections. Once the easing by the Irish Government of COVID-19 restrictions and institutional policy permitted library staff to return to working on-campus, a number of academic libraries began offering a 'Scan and Deliver' service (University College Cork Library, 2020, for example) providing fully copyright compliant scanning and electronic delivery of book chapters and journal articles to library users on request. Prior to campuses reopening fully, some academic libraries (for example, NUIG and UCD) offered access by appointment to Archives and Special Collections Reading Rooms.

Perhaps the most wide-spread new service offered by academic libraries during the summer was a Click-and-Collect service. This service was similar to that offered by public libraries following their reopening. It provided library users the opportunity to request books via the library catalogue from academic libraries' general collections and collect them by appointment. This initiative allowed academic library users continued access to the general collections throughout a time when the wider campuses, and often even the physical libraries, remained closed.

Reopening for the 2020/21 Academic Year

Once it became apparent that universities and colleges would remain closed for longer than the initial two week period referenced in the Taoiseach's announcement on 12th March 2020, academic libraries began planning for a phased reopening of their services. While each academic library operates within its own institution's parameters, the exchange of ideas, updates and

best practice between academic libraries proved invaluable to all concerned. Collaborative organisations such as CONUL facilitated the sharing of plans in a collegiate manner.

Third level academic programmes for the 2020/21 academic year began over a two week period from 21st September 2020. For Dublin institutions, this coincided with the escalation of restrictive measures for Dublin city and county on 18th September 2020 to Risk Level 3 on the National Framework for Living with COVID-19 (Government of Ireland, 2020). While the recommencement of teaching activities proceeded as planned, returning students found their experience of academic libraries much changed. Library websites played a more significant role. Study space capacity was reduced, accessible by appointment only, and time limited. Digital literacy classes were primarily online, as was most interaction with library staff, using chat and video conferencing tools. Academic librarians rose to the challenge, however, to engage with students as creatively as possible in the digital environment.

Impact on Library Buildings

The COVID-19 pandemic will also have an impact on the design and use of library buildings. In recent years, the design of academic library buildings has

prioritised the allocation of space to library users rather than collections (White, 2016). This trend has been reflected in capital projects in Irish university libraries, including RCSI and UL, where the use of the Automated Reserve Collection (ARC), an automated storage and retrieval system, has released floor space to enable a greater footprint allocation to library users.

Much of this additional user space has enabled libraries to provide access to highly popular (in pre-COVID times) collaborative study spaces, maker spaces and wellness areas. As libraries reopened for the 2020/21 academic year, this trend towards collaborative spaces was – hopefully temporarily – reversed, with such spaces being decommissioned or repurposed as individual study spaces. Soft furnishings were removed and group study rooms were repurposed for physically distant individual study.

The acceleration due to the COVID-19 pandemic of the shift to electronic resources in preference to print further calls into question whether the reverence with which academic libraries' print collections are regarded, and the floor space which they therefore occupy, will continue. As we are being told we must learn to 'live with the virus' – and the question remains for how long that might be – we must consider the potential impact on future library building projects, such as NUIG's €39 million regeneration of the James Hardiman library (Andrews, 2020) and TU Dublin's Academic Hub library complex, which is scheduled for delivery in 2023.

On a positive note, it is heartening that planning at TU Dublin for the Academic Hub, the library for the university at Grangegorman, is continuing apace, despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, work which was ongoing at Grangegorman on a number of buildings prior to the closure of all construction sites in Ireland due to COVID-19 in March 2020, recommenced in May 2020. This included two new academic buildings and an interim library to support those buildings' occupants prior to the completion of the Academic Hub in 2023.

While delayed somewhat by the closure, relocation to the new academic buildings and the consolidation of five of TU Dublin's City Centre library units

into a temporary interim library is still planned to take place during the 2020/21 academic year. TU Dublin library staff have continued to plan for the re-sequenced moves to the interim library while working remotely throughout the university's closure due to COVID-19.

Budgetary Impact

COVID-19 is expected to have a significant financial impact on the third level sector. A Higher Education Authority report released in May 2020 anticipated a €500 million shortfall for the sector in 2020 and 2021 due to a combination of loss of revenues from international students, student accommodation and commercial sources (Irish Times, Jun 2020; RTE, May 2020). Some academic libraries have already had indications of the impact on library budgets of this change in their parent institutions' fortunes, and others are likely to do so in the coming years. This, at a time when the migration to more expensive electronic rather than print resources is accelerating, increases the pressure on academic libraries to ensure value for money in their negotiations with publishers. Consortia such as IReL can play a leading role in this regard. IReL is a nationally funded e-resource licensing consortium providing access to leading Science Technology and Medicine, and Humanities and Social Sciences resources on behalf of participating Irish publicly funded higher education institutions.

Internationally, there is speculation that growing budgetary constraints facing academic libraries could accelerate the trend, which had begun before COVID-19, of academic libraries cancelling their Big Deal subscriptions (Aiwuyor, 2020; Cox, 2020). It certainly seems to be accelerating the change in tone of libraries' and library consortia's negotiations with publishers. In the UK, RLUK, SCONUL and JISC have joined together to put pressure on publishers to reduce prices for journal subscriptions, threatening to cancel subscriptions if publishers do not respond favourably to the current financial pressures facing universities (JISC, 2020) – a strategy which Irish academic libraries will watch with interest.

Impact of Changing Work Practices

Technology posed challenges and opportunities in the overnight shift to remote working thrust upon academic libraries by the closure of Irish higher education institutions in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges included shortages of hardware for library staff, gaining Virtual Private Network access to allow access to library systems, and a digital divide which meant not all library staff had internet access at home. Once these issues were resolved, however, these same tools allowed academic libraries to respond rapidly and effectively to the crisis, developing new and innovative services in a short space of time. Web conferencing tools such as MS Teams and Zoom enabled collaborative work to continue. Due to the elimination of commuting to meetings, these tools made it easier to collaborate with colleagues normally located on other campuses, or in other institutions. Web conferencing tools also helped to mitigate the impact of isolation and lack of social interaction on academic library teams, with virtual coffee breaks becoming a regular feature for many.

Remote working saves commuting time and provides the opportunity to balance work and caring responsibilities. It therefore seems likely that the experience of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic will influence future work practices in academic libraries, even in the post-COVID world which we all hope is on the horizon.

Conclusion

The closure of third level institutions and their libraries in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to academic libraries. These included an upheaval in work practices, operational issues, and an inability to offer access to key services such as print collections and study and collaborative spaces. Academic libraries have responded by accelerating their shift to digital collections and services, by supporting and participating in remote teaching and by offering new services. As third level institutions enter the 2020/21 academic year, academic libraries can expect to need to continue to innovate and adapt to the changing environment. Longer term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic libraries may also begin to materialise in the form of budgetary constraints, changed relationships with publishers, a lasting influence on the design and use of library buildings, and changes in work practices.

We are in the foothills of a period of significant change in academic libraries and wider society. While this will be challenging, it also presents academic libraries with a unique opportunity to adapt and respond courageously and innovatively to better lead, collaborate and provide support in the delivery of their institutions' academic missions.

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