Benchmarking the Corona crisis management in two European academic libraries

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Abstract: Since March 2020, the Corona virus has transformed the way that academic libraries have carried out their functions. The European situation deteriorated especially throughout the Mediterranean region. In contrast, in the initial wave of the virus in spring 2020, some Nordic countries like Finland, seemed to manage the situation in a more structured manner. The second wave, during the fall and winter 2020, was managed with the knowledge gathered during the first wave. We will be describing both the Corona situation and actions at the national levels in Finland and Spain as well as between the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Library (Spain) and the University of Eastern Finland Library (Finland). The aims of our paper and presentation will be: 1. to give an overview of the Corona situation and policy measures at the national level in both countries and 2. to identify the best practices in both academic libraries. The results also reveal how the crisis management protocols initiated in these institutions coped with the pandemic. Finally, recommendations are made with respect to the further development for crisis management in academic libraries in a rapidly changing operational environment.

Keywords: academic libraries, crisis management, benchmarking, Corona virus, best practices

1. Introduction

The Corona virus changed the way academic libraries performed their functions from March 2020 onwards (Craft 2020, IFLA 2020, Kosciejew 2020, Tammaro 2020, Rafiq & Batool 2021). The European situation deteriorated especially throughout the Mediterranean area in the spring of 2020; in contrast, several Nordic countries including Finland, seemed to manage the situation in a more structured manner. When the second wave appeared during the fall and winter of 2020, it could be confronted with the knowledge gathered during the first wave.

The presence of Covid-19 was detected in Spain at the end of January 2020, and community transmission was evident by mid-February. When it was confirmed that the virus was already present in all regions of the country, the Government issued a state of emergency to try to stop the spread of Covid-19 and a lockdown was imposed on 14 March 2020. Under the state of alarm, the central

government retained all powers, and all police were placed under the control of Ministry for Home Affairs (España 2020a and 2020b).

By the end of April, the Spanish government issued a *Plan for transition to a new normality* (España. Ministerio de Sanidad 2020; PROCICAT (2020), which established four phases for easing lockdown restrictions. It envisioned an asymmetric process, not a uniform one, i.e. moving with different speeds. A large part of the management of this plan was devolved to regional autonomic authorities but governed by the same rules and coordinated by the Spanish Government. The plan was estimated to have a duration of eight weeks if there were no setbacks, and the state of alarm ended on 21 June, this date marked the beginning of *new normal* times.

However, the result of easing restrictions during summer produced an increase of Covid-19 cases and on 25th October 2020, the Spanish government declared the second countrywide state of emergency of the coronavirus pandemic. It implemented new measures throughout the whole country such as a national night-time curfew, but not a national lockdown. Regional authorities were also given powers to ban travel between different regions.

On 15 March 2021, 8.42% of the population (46.7 million) had received at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccine; only 3.61% had been fully vaccinated. From the beginning of the pandemic, Covis-19 has been responsible for 74,000 deaths in Spain.

In Finland, although the first cases were detected at the beginning of the year 2020, by March 2020 it was estimated that without restrictions, the Finnish healthcare system would collapse under the strain of the situation and so emergency powers legislation was introduced for the period from 17th March to 15th June 2020.

For the Universities and public services, that meant a closure of the campuses including libraries and strict restrictions for travelling also inside the country (Virrankoski, Antti et al. 2020). During the summer, the situation seemed to calm down, and a partial opening of the services and society was possible during the fall of 2020.

In Finland, this also meant the adoption of a strategy based on testing and rapid local restrictions as the best way to try to prevent the situation from deteriorating. Nonetheless, the country experienced a second wave during September – October 2020 and a third wave in February – April 2021.

In Finland, most of the cases have occurred in the most populated parts of the country, i.e. Southern Finland. So far, the number of cases totals about 75,000 (population of 5.6 million) with Covid being responsible for the deaths of 822 citizens.

2. Libraries

The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (https://www.uab.cat/en/) was established in 1968. It has its main campus in Bellaterra, located 20 km outside the city of Barcelona, Spain. Teaching and research cover a wide range of disciplines related to experimental sciences, humanities, health sciences, social sciences, and technologies. The university community consists of 39,000

students, 3,700 teachers and researchers and 2,300 administrative and service staff. The UAB Library Service (https://www.uab.cat/libraries/) has seven libraries on the Bellaterra campus as well as four libraries located in the University's extension areas. Library buildings cover over 36,000 m^2 and the library's holdings include more than 1,300,000 books and over 78,000 periodical titles with ever-expanding access to a continually growing digital library. The UAB Libraries have 168 staff members.

The University of Eastern Finland (https://www.uef.fi/en) was established in 2010 as the result of the merger of the University of Joensuu and the University of Kuopio. With approximately 15,000 students and 2,800 members of staff, the University of Eastern Finland is one of the largest universities in Finland. The university's campuses are in Joensuu and Kuopio, about 100 km apart from each other. The university has two campus libraries and a joint library with the university hospital. It has 65 staff members.

3. Theoretical background and examples of crisis management

The benchmarking can be used in several ways as a tool to find out the best practices between the organisations (Anand & Kodali 2008). Here our approach is to focus on two libraries we have been conducting benchmarking for several years to find out the best practices during the Corona crisis. We are using standard based crisis management as a theoretical framework in analysing the actions (Saarti & Balagué 2020).

It seems that the Corona crisis led the libraries and information centers to new innovations and especially to the utilization of the digital tools in providing their services (Temiz & Salelkar 2020). The role of libraries as information centers providing up-to-date information about the Covid to various actors was also vital to the society (Kosciejew 2020, Yu & Mani 2020).

4. Pandemic and libraries at the national level

Finland

At the beginning of the corona pandemic, crisis management became the norm in Finland, a practice also adopted by the university and its library. This meant quick and centralized decision-making, with mandates issued in a top-to-bottom manner. On Monday, March 16, the university management announced that the university premises would be closed on the following day in accordance with the instructions issued by the Government. The library management was tasked with implementing this decision with respect to the libraries.

The initial challenge in complying with the top-level guidelines was that the government and regional government agencies regulated public libraries separately, and it was not totally clear to customers whether the regulations also applied to university libraries. The Finnish University Libraries' Network (FUN) began holding regular meetings of library directors in the spring of 2020 to compare library practices in the country's universities e.g. to agree on common guidelines and to influence their access to university libraries, even

trying to convince Finnish publishers to open more e-material during the first phase of lockdown.

The academic year 2021-2022 has seen a partial opening of the campuses, including library premises, although the distant learning and working has remained prevalent. There are major regional variations in the severity of the situation– some parts of Finland have been virtually totally shut down during the acceleration phases of the latest Covid wave.

Spain

On March 2020, more than one million university students experienced just how much their daily routine of attending their university courses was suddenly interrupted. Although some Spanish universities are fully online, most have deep offline (in-person interaction) roots and the methodology of course delivery had to be rapidly adapted to the new situation i.e. online teaching. Several problems were evident on the teaching side, not only the methodological challenges involved, but also the different levels of technological skills that hindered the sudden switch to virtual education. From the point of view of the students, there were also some problems such as poor equipment or a lack of connectivity. In addition, libraries were closed; neither professors nor students were able to visit the actual buildings. Instead the different online services and the use of digital resources and tools were promoted, and the contact with users was intensified via social networking.

The plan for transition to a new normality published on April 27th, 2020 initiated the process to adapt the restriction measures to fit each local situation, depending on the numbers of Covid-19 cases. From the very beginning, both national and regional authorities prepared recommendations to guide the activity of the libraries and other cultural institutions. Furthermore, the library association and consortia prepared more specific guidelines to help the libraries to open their doors while still being compliant with the regulations.

It must be considered that each university has prepared its own prevention plan against Covid-19 and the university library must adapt its activities accordingly. Thus, there are some differences from one library to another, as can be seen at the REBIUN webpage (Spanish University Library Association) which has a list of all the services offered by the academic libraries https://www.rebiun.org/noticias/universidades/covid-19. The main differences are related to the durations of the opening times of physical spaces of the libraries and on-site services.

5. Pandemic and UAB and UEF libraries

UEF

The merger process and the long distance between the campuses had already led to the adoption of many digital tools and knowledge of how one can both work and provide services for patrons via digital means. This meant that the UEF and its library moved surprisingly smoothly to cope with the lockdown.

For example, the university had a support platform for teleworking and teaching, which provided peer support on the use of appropriate electronic tools and programs. Thus, when teleworking started, the technology was already up and running. In addition, students, researchers, and teachers learned quite rapidly the different ways of interacting with each other.

Not only employees but also customers were accustomed to utilizing remote connections. Several years ago, the library had adopted a strategy according to which the collections would, if possible, be acquired in an electronic format. The strategy proved to be optimal to cope with the extraordinary times of 2020-2. The library's electronic collections, about 40,000 e-journal titles and 610,000 e-books in 2020, meant that faculty and students could access these materials remotely. For comparison, the corresponding figures in 2010 were 17,153 e-journals and about 310,000 e-books. At the beginning of the corona crisis, many technical problems related to the remote use of materials were solved in cooperation with the university's IT services. Over the months, the problems diminished, and users learned to find the right routes to the e-material. Communication was intensified so that even those customers who mainly used printed material could also find electronic material and suggest that it be purchased.

The situation was more challenging when it came to communicating with customers; they had to be quickly informed through as many channels as possible about return options and terms for loaned material as well as what services - teaching, guidance, procurement, etc. - could still be provided. The library's website was the library's main communication channel. A Supplementary Bulletin was prepared on that site, with a link from the university's corona information page. Rapidly changing situations and supplementary information were maintained on the library's pages as a single bulletin, so links from different communication channels always led to up-to-date information.

The work community was introduced to new ways of teleworking. Since it was not possible to meet coworkers in the coffee room, informal chat and exchange of personal issues shifted to virtual cafés. The entire library began to hold online coffee chats together in the afternoons. These online coffee meetings maintained the community spirit, and furthermore new employees who started working remotely could also become integrated into the library community in this way.

No major changes were necessary in the teaching of information retrieval organized by the library. Fortunately, prior to the covd19 crisis, it had already been decided to transfer the study materials of the library's courses on teaching and information services to an open network by 2020 at the latest. Now, only the learning tasks are in a closed learning environment. As before, some of the courses for both undergraduate and postgraduate students must be completed by a pre-defined date and some can be taken throughout the academic year.

The use of new digital tools was quickly adopted since all lectures and exercise groups were being arranged remotely. The university's distance learning support website as well links to teachers experienced with distance learning were able to provide peer support for the use of new e-learning tools and the development of

online pedagogy. Support was available through internal and external training as well as the establishment of new discussion groups and distance learning support pages.

From the beginning of August 2020, it was possible to return to the campuses if the number of employees on the premises did not exceed half the normal. Nonetheless, the recommendation to undertake telework and teleconferencing wherever possible was still valid. To ensure the smooth running of the library's services, the following policies were adopted; the majority of those working at customer service points and with collections returned to work on campus, and those whose work duties did not necessarily require working on campus continued to work remotely. Naturally, those staff who had health problems that made them high risk cases also remained teleworking. The management of the units had to have information about the people working on the campuses at any given time. For this, the library used a common electronic calendar on which all the personnel had to mark their campus days.

Since September 2020, the library premises have been mainly open. In accordance with the recommendations, all premises have adopted the safety measures and hygiene instructions issued by the university. Hand sanitizer is available at the entrances and service stations are fitted with Perspex guards to ensure staff safety. In October, the university tightened the face mask recommendation so that a mask had to be worn in all rooms with more than one person at a time. The university provided face masks free-of-charge for those studying and working on its campuses.

UAB

The state of emergency in Spain began on March 14th, 2020. A lockdown was imposed and from the first week, one priority for the Library Service was to activate communication, on the one hand between the different teams in the libraries and on the other with our users. Initially, very few people in libraries teleworked on a regular basis and even then, this was often limited to one or two days a week, with very specific tasks that could be done remotely.

E-mails and WhatsApp were the first channels that were utilized but very soon, we were able to move meetings to a virtual environment using the Microsoft Teams platform. In many instances, the library personnel's digital skills were rather poor, especially for the front-line staff engaged in the physical processes of library work. For some individuals, the hurdle was access to the net and/or computer equipment; in some cases, it not always available, in others, it was not sufficiently up to date.

From the first day, we updated the information on the web and disseminated the news via social networks to maintain contact with our users, who also had to adapt to teaching and online learning. Some problems in accessing the internet and/or with computer equipment became evident.

We were soon to experience very directly the gravity of the situation, one of our medical libraries, located inside a hospital, had to be dismantled quickly and a few days later the library space had been turned into a new intensive care unit

able to receive 16 critically ill Covid-19 patients. This was a tough time for all of us.

The wide range of courses provided online by the University increased the communication, management and teamwork skills and expertise of the staff to allow them to function in the virtual environment and avoid the life-threatening health issues related to Covid-19. Fortunately, most of the staff have been very active in self-learning. Virtual communication via the Teams platform has not only maintained the cohesion and work plan of the various working groups but has proven to be a flexible tool. However, we are all aware that face-to-face communication has its own unique value and we have been happy to rediscover this each time when we meet again in the work shifts that have been established since the Library started offering some on-site services when it reopened in June 2020.

The Library Service works to meet the annual objectives framed in its Strategic Plan 2019-2022. This well-established goal-setting dynamic has helped us to adapt quickly to the needed changes. There were 13 general objectives set for 2020. Although three of them had to be cancelled, at the same time, two new objectives were added to manage the new scenario. One year afterwards, the assessment is positive; in fact, the achievements have been greater than could have imagined during those first weeks of the lockdown. It has been possible to achieve some new goals related to the creation of new services as well as the expansion of existing virtual services.

From the first day, one priority was to be able to make a virtual response to our users' needs in accordance with the rapid changes in the global health situation and the recommendations of the University. Libraries were one of the first services to be reopened on campus.

The ISO 9001 quality management system has proved to be flexible enough to give us the ability to quickly adopt procedures to cope with the virtual environment.

The new situation has helped us to appreciate that there are many tasks that could be done virtually, and it also has highlighted the urgency of launching one of the objectives in our strategic plan: to review the work profiles. These had been too anchored in the on-site world; we now have strived to adapt them to the new challenges.

During the initial lockdown, the return date of all books on loan was cancelled and some additional book return mailboxes were installed outside of the libraries to facilitate the return of material. When we were able to reopen our libraries, even with some restrictions, loans were the first on-site service that we were able to provide.

Activities that previously had been held on-site, such as the yearly conferences organized during Open Education Week and the International Open Access Week, have been moved to a virtual setting and were attended by a larger number of participants than in previous times.

A definitive step has been taken to transform the user training offered by libraries. When the on-site courses had to be cancelled, these were transformed into virtual courses on the Teams platform. This has meant that the average

number of attendants is now greater than the previous on-site versions. In addition, the number of Library training courses offered on the learning platform *Moodle* has also been expanded and the existing online help desk has been complemented with a new videoconference online advice service which provides customized advice.

The collaboration with teachers and researchers in the permanent updating of the institutional repository has increased.

As teaching was becoming mainly online, our digital library became more and more crucial. It became a priority to enhance the digital collection to provide a better service for virtual teaching. A complete review of the course curricula was undertaken to link as many digital documents as possible and the web design was improved to facilitate remote access to the needed contents. The acquisition of digital monographs to complete the teaching and learning requirements of our students was also made a priority. Finally, we must mention the help provided by publishers that made available for free a substantial amount of their digital resources during the first period of the Covid-19 emergency, and we prepared a webpage to promote easy access. A comparative statistic of the number of accesses to the electronic resources from outside the Campus revealed that during 2020 these have experienced an increase of 72,4 % from the previous year.

As soon as it was possible to re-open the libraries, the first task was to implement new measures to make them a safe space. Library spaces have been modified and signposted in accordance with security and social distancing measures to deal with Covid-19 and schedules have been adapted to adhere to established mobility restrictions. While there are a total of 4,800 places available in the libraries, this has been reduced to 1,500 to ensure safe distancing. A library capacity control software has been implemented to supervise the required occupancy rate in accordance with the pandemic-related restraint measures. An explanatory video "Libraries, a safe place" has been produced to tell our users about all the actions that have been carried out to ensure their security.

New computer equipment has been purchased to facilitate teleworking in the Covid-19 situation (webcams and laptops), and we have also been able to lend some complementary laptops our users. In addition, the Library Service has collaborated with the University authorities to organize a wide program of laptop lending for students that needed the equipment to guarantee that they would be able to follow online teaching.

Social media and the web allowed us to reconnect with our users from the very beginning of the emergency. The first messages we transmitted were to remind our users about the digital resources and online services we already offered but this soon started to spread news of important resources and new online services. Personalized attention was important, with WhatsApp messaging and a new online counselling service being some of the best-valued examples.

The digital library has seen an increase in usage unthinkable a year ago, and attendance in training courses has risen since they began being taught virtually. Teaching in the university is still mostly virtual and the presence of students on

campus is uncommon, but they regularly visit the library, which has recently added to its on-site functions, becoming a good place to attend an online class.

A confirmation that libraries have been able to find the right way to meet the needs of users in these uncertain times is provided by the comments that the students sent us during 2020: congratulations increased by 44% and complaints declined by 75% as compared to 2019. It is due to the huge effort and involvement of all library staff that these changes have been so successful.

6. Library checklist for pandemic crisis management

Based on our comparison between the two libraries, we propose the following as a checklist for the future crisis management of a pandemic in the libraries (Saarti & Balagué 2020).

<u>Planning</u>

1. Be aware of all the regulations on health protection.
2. Share ideas and problems with other libraries to find the optimal way to meet the requirements.
3. Increase the coordination with University authorities and be ready to offer and/or to ask for support.
4. Increase the ties with the university's IT services.
5. Use digital tools intensively and have an out-of-the-campus service plan ready.

<u>Staff</u>

6. Train staff
   a. 1) on digital tools, teamwork skills in the virtual environment 2) to gather knowledge on how one can both work and provide services for patrons in a digital environment
   b. on health prevention: 1) how to protect themselves (from Covid, but also to prevent mental problems like depression, 2) how to arrange an ergonomic and healthy space at home suitable for teleworking).
7. Keep staff in good spirits so that they do not feel isolated by arranging formal and informal meetings (virtual café).

<u>Collection and services</u>

8. Adopt a prioritization strategy to expand the library's collections with material available electronically, if possible.
9. Maximize the number of services that can be offered on-line and continue balancing the off-site/on-site services.

<u>Patrons</u>

10. Inform customers quickly through as many channels as possible (mainly the web and social networks).
11. Establish easy ways to stay connected with the library staff (online question point, apps, e-mails) and answer their questions immediately if possible, or within a very short time.

<u>Premises</u>

12. Communicate all the actions that have been carried out to ensure the security of all who work in or visit the library. Explain to the users that the library is a safe place.
13. Ask the users to adhere to all the rules to guaranty their security (handwashing, wearing masks, the use of sanitizers, keeping a safe distance from others).

7. Conclusions

At the present, there are ongoing preparations for the post-corona period. In fact, the experiences gained in the Covid-19 period have provided a good foundation to prepare for multi-site work practices, i.e., the transition to a practice that combines work both on and off campus. Thus, the practices established to cope with the exceptional circumstances which started during the spring 2020 and that became the new-normal in the fall of 2020, may well become the accepted way of working in the future. This includes also remote management.

The Corona shutdown has also represented an extra impetus to improve open science and digital services: it seems that in the future the open access to scientific resources will also an issue that crisis management will have to tackle if we are to cope appropriately with the next global crisis.

It is evident that the right balance needs to be found for what should be done on the campuses and what can be done remotely. In this respect, the needs of the workers, management and users must be matched evenly. The campus safety is of course priority for the management.

It also seems that the regulations for stricter health measures, e.g. handwashing, masks, use of sanitizers etc. have helped to tackle also other seasonal infectious diseases. Therefore, it may be beneficial to continue with these procedures also during the so-called normal times in the future.

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