

Academic Libraries in Support of Teaching during the COVID-19: The Example of Belgrade University

Dragana Grujic¹

¹ University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, LIS department, Serbia

Abstract: The paper aims to provide an overview of how academic libraries helped conduct teaching at the university level during the first wave of the COVID-19 virus epidemic, in the period from mid-March (when a state of emergency was declared in Serbia) to mid-July 2020 (exam deadlines at most faculties). The research included the network of Belgrade University libraries (academic libraries, Central University Library “Svetozar Markovic“ and the Library of Students’ City Cultural Center) and has been conducted through online questionnaires. The results of the research indicate librarianship as a flexible profession adapting to new challenges. The pandemic has confirmed that libraries are an indispensable carrier of cultural development and distance learning. On the other hand, the study reveals certain shortcomings concerning academic library management and indicate issues that have to be improved in the future. In this way, the work can be a signpost on how academic libraries can further develop their services to more effectively support the teaching process.

Keywords: academic libraries, LIS professionals, COVID-19, library services, Belgrade University

1. New Reality

Due to the COVID-19 outburst, almost all segments of life have been transported into a new kind of reality. These changes have also affected cultural and educational institutions. The said institutions have been accommodating towards these new conditions fighting numerous challenges ahead. According to IFLA, libraries all over the world have been confronted with “very different situations, from broadly maintaining a full service to complete closure“ (www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries). The IFLA.org data reveal that most libraries were completely closed at the beginning of the outburst; reconstructing and making arrangements to provide services for the users. After the accommodations had been made libraries, at first partially, started to provide



services. At the moment, most libraries are providing the usual services except for certain limitations to apply the right protection measures against the spread of the pandemic.

Academic libraries function according to the faculty schedule. After the outburst, the teaching process has been, almost totally, transported into a virtual world. Under these circumstances, there have been significant changes regarding the schedule of academic libraries. We all agree that “the new reality of the lockdown worldwide has made the necessity of digital knowledge, skills, and competencies for librarians more obvious than ever” (Alekseeva, Kosachkova, 2020: 53). This new reality is not a big unknown for librarians, “LIS professionals were using all sorts of Internet based communication tools even before the onset of COVID-19 pandemic” (Sonawane, 2020: 9). Emphasising online services, most academic libraries have been accommodating to meet the requirements of the users, “with most colleges and universities moving coursework online for the remainder of this semester due to the coronavirus pandemic, campus libraries are adapting to an increased demand for online services and support. Virtual reference, electronic access to textbooks, assistance for faculty, streaming content – as we make our way in this new reality of social distancing, these online resources feel more vital than ever” (Bowen, 2020). Simultaneously, these institutions have endeavoured to decrease the need of physical presence within the library, “for example, Macao (China) has sought to do this by continuing to extend loan periods and encouraging people to use online services as far as possible (also at the University Library). Hong Kong (China) has also allowed for unlimited renewals and waived fines at its academic libraries” (www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries). For some time now academic libraries have been going through a phase „from merely providing access to scholarly literature and toward assisting in its creation“ (Kingsley, 2017). Academic librarians have been obliged to change priorities finding ways of supporting teaching process during the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore “renewed mission is emerging, addressing access and connectivity to resources, designing for online education and fostering the development of digital literacy of students“ (Martzoukou, 2020).

Christopher Cox (2020) justly emphasized changes regarding library collections, services, space and management due to COVID-19. From this point, a year after the outburst, we can go further than making predictions; we can analyse and evaluate what has been done and define shortcomings to fulfil the optimal conditions. Critical assessment of the situation is a necessity because, despite all hopes and expectations, the spread of the virus has not been decreased. The amount of work confirms the importance of the subject. Regarding works that consider the changing role of the academic libraries in these new conditions, there has been an amount of electronic texts rather than printed. Within the European network of libraries (LIBER), a survey was conducted in order to examine the situation in research libraries during the COVID-19. “The survey received 298 responses from libraries across Europe“, including Serbia.

(libereurope.eu/article/covid19-survey-research-libraries-europe/). Also, useful information has been available at the IFLA document *COVID-19 and the Global Library Field* (www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries) providing the overview of activities: „... the Association of Research Libraries has analysis of what academic and research libraries in the US and Canada are doing. The African Library and Information Association (AfLIA) is collecting examples of what libraries are doing in Africa and has a page on how libraries can respond plus a resource page...“

2. The Research

The research aims to provide an overview of how academic libraries at Belgrade University helped conduct teaching at the university level during the first wave of the COVID-19 virus epidemic. The research lasted from mid-March (when a state of emergency was declared in Serbia) to mid-July 2020 (exam deadlines at most faculties). During this period teaching at Belgrade University had been done online to a large extent.

For research purposes we have created a questionnaire using *Google forms*. The questionnaire is available at the following link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfwXwTOPWBhj9rAzGqohhYKocOSDQ1cKurALbx0c49ce3ZoWQ/viewform?usp=pp_url.

The questionnaire consists of 15 closed type questions. The questions covered three important issues:

- Which of the internet tools have the librarian been using while communicating with students?
- What have been the means of providing library services?
- How well have they managed professionally in a new reality?

In order not to subject examinees with limited answers, some questions provided multiple choice answers. There were also questions with options for examinees to write or more correctly type down their answers. Using email the questionnaire was distributed to the libraries that represent the part of Belgrade University library network – academic libraries (31), Central University Library “Svetozar Marković“ and the Library of Students’ City Cultural Center. Out of 33 institutions, responses were received from 24 libraries, so the data can be considered relevant.

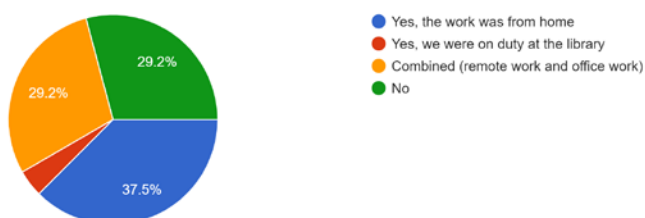
A survey (Tomovic, Aleksic, 2020) revealed that Serbian educational institutions mostly used Viber (53,8%), Skype (42,9%), Google Classroom (37,8%), Zoom (34,5%), Facebook (16%) and Moodle (3,4%) for online teaching. According to the findings, the starting hypothesis has been that librarians were obliged to finding new ways to communicate with the users using online resources in providing services.

2.1 Analysis of the results

After the first question related to the name of the institution, a question followed: *During the state of emergency declared in the Republic of Serbia due to the spread of the COVID-19 disease, did you work?* Only one academic library worked, most librarians worked from home (37.5%), while an equal number (29.2%) did not work, or they combined both works from home and being on duty at the library.

2. During the state of emergency declared in the Republic of Serbia due to the spread of the COVID-19 disease, did you work?

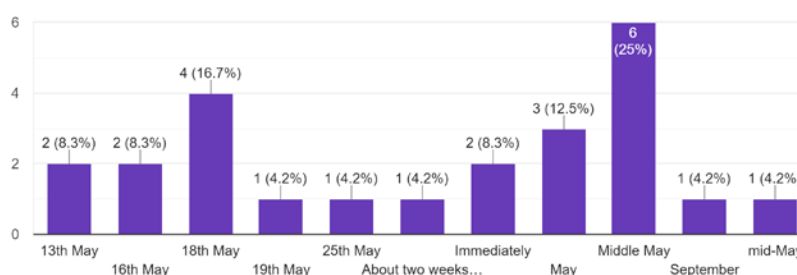
24 responses



The state of emergency was lifted on May 6, and as expected, by the end of May, all but one of the libraries resumed work with users (question no. 3). The opening of academic libraries has been somewhat delayed compared to other types of libraries. At the end of April 2020, the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia recommended that the institutions which protect cultural heritage, which included libraries, resume working, therefore public libraries in Serbia were the first to partially provide the usual library services.

3. After the end of the state of emergency, when did you reopen the door for your users?

24 responses

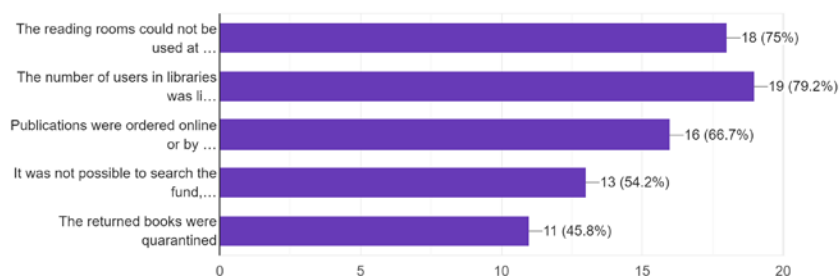


A significant fact has been that after reopening the door to the users, nothing was the same as before the outburst. This is confirmed by the answers to the 4th question – *How did the pandemic affect the work after reopening the library?* Examinees were able to choose from multiple choice answers. The most

significant changes were related to the limited number of users in the library (79.2%) and the inability to use the reading rooms (75%). It was expected (in 66.7% of surveyed institutions) that users send a request by e-mail or telephone before arrival, stating which publications they need, to reduce the retention of users in the library. In 13 institutions (54.2%) it was not possible to independently search for funds that are in free access, but electronic catalogues were available. All these libraries are part of the unique library information system of Serbia. Students have at their disposal mutual electronic catalogue (Virtual Library of Serbia – vbs.rs). In the beginning, with vague facts about the virus, in 11 libraries (45.8%) publications were separated after use and were not available to the users for one period of time. The REALM (Re-opening Archives, Libraries and Museums) project “has also published the plan for testing the survival of the virus on different materials and surfaces, as well as a systematic review of the available literature. The first results from laboratory tests have also been released, underlining that after three days of quarantine, the virus could not be detected on previously contaminated hardback and softback books, or papers inside books, plastic covers and DVD covers“ (www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries). The *quarantine* period for (non)book material ranged from 24 to 72 hours.

4. How did the pandemic affect the work after reopening the library? (you can choose multiple answers)

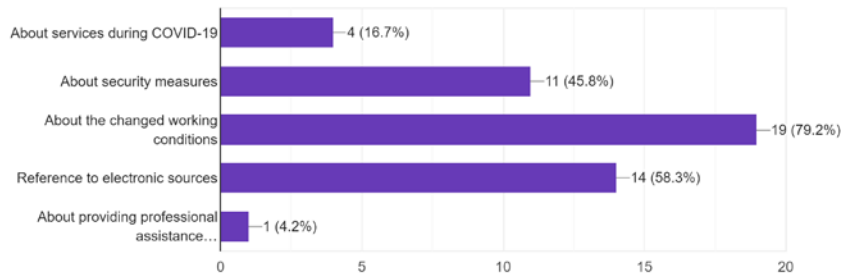
24 responses



On the fifth question (*In the period from mid-March to mid-July 2020, what types of provided information were dominant?*) examinees were able to choose from two offered answers. As expected, they paid the most attention to informing users about the changed working conditions (79.2%), then referring to electronic sources (58.3%) and security measures (45.8%). In all libraries, the use of library services has been possible with the use of a mask and respect for social distance.

5. In the period from mid-March to the mid-July 2020, what types of provided information were dominant? (you can choose two answers)

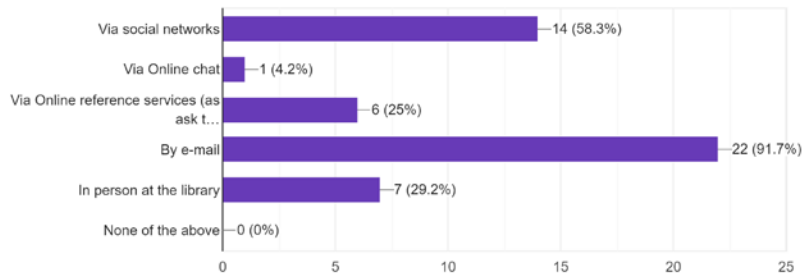
24 responses



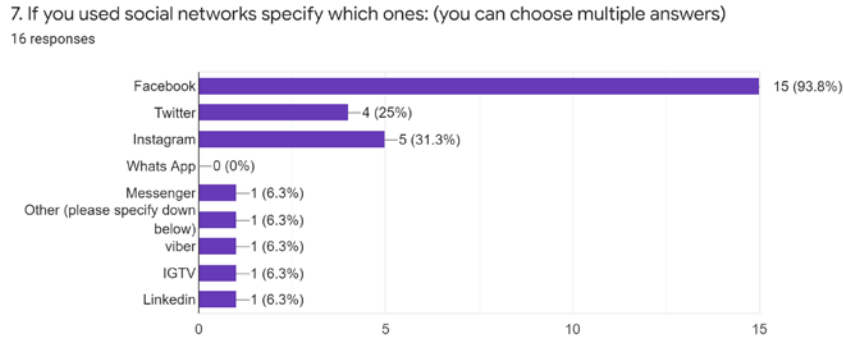
Both users and librarians, to a large extent, lacked direct communication with each other. In seven institutions (29.2%) communication took place directly in the library, while others exchanged information with the help of technology - mainly via e-mail (91.7%) and social networks (58.3%), and in some libraries (25%) the online reference service *Ask a Librarian* was used.

6. During the first wave of the pandemic, communication with users took place: (you can choose multiple answers)

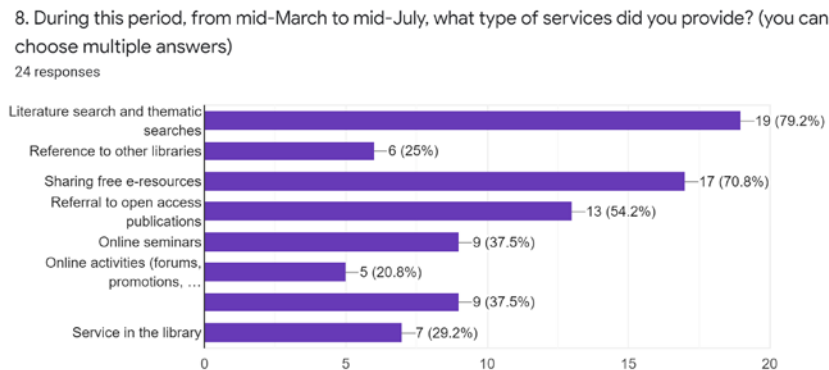
24 responses



Most librarians used several applications - the dominant one was the use of Facebook (93.7%), followed by Instagram (31.3%) and Twitter (25%). Only one library used Messenger, and one institution also used Viber, IGTV and LinkedIn.



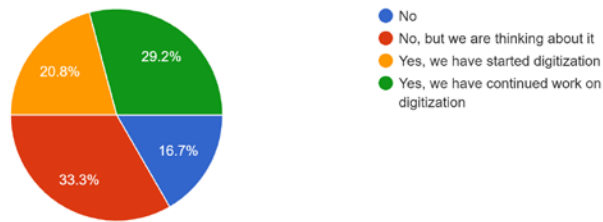
The types of services provided in the analyzed period are revealed by the answers to the eighth question (and here the possibility of multiple choice has been given). The majority of surveyed librarians worked on literature search and thematic searches (79.2%), sharing free e-resources (70.8%) and referring to publications in free access (54.2%). One of the important tasks in higher education institutions represents the production of bibliographies of professors and associates. Nine libraries (37.5%) paid attention to these tasks, while in five libraries (20.8%) the emphasis was on online activities (forums, promotions, literary evenings...). Seven libraries (29.2%) provided professional assistance in the institution, which corresponds to the number of libraries that had direct communication with users.



Especially during the pandemic “digitized collections became crucial for scholars, educators, and students to be able to continue their work“ (Moustafa). Therefore, 29.2% continued work on digitalization, and 20.8% started work on the formation of digital collections. Unfortunately, half of the analyzed institutions do not deal with the digitization of materials (33% are still considering dealing with these jobs). Moustafa justifiably points out that “many fields in the humanities and area studies still depend on printed books“, but due

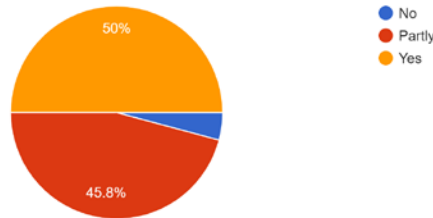
to insufficiently digitized publications there can be “a severe crisis for learning and the production of knowledge, and some opportunities as well“ (https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/blogpost_laila_moustafa.pdf).

9. Are you working on digitizing the library material
24 responses

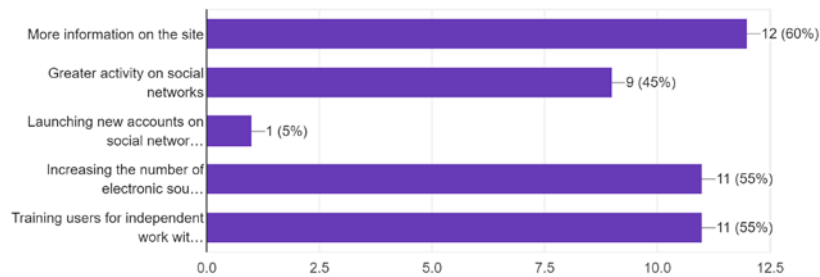


In response to the increased demand for reliable and timely information, libraries have fully (50%) or at least partially (45.8%) increased their online activities (question 10). This primarily meant more information on the site (60%), increasing electronic sources (55%) and training users to work independently with databases and other electronic sources of information (55%).

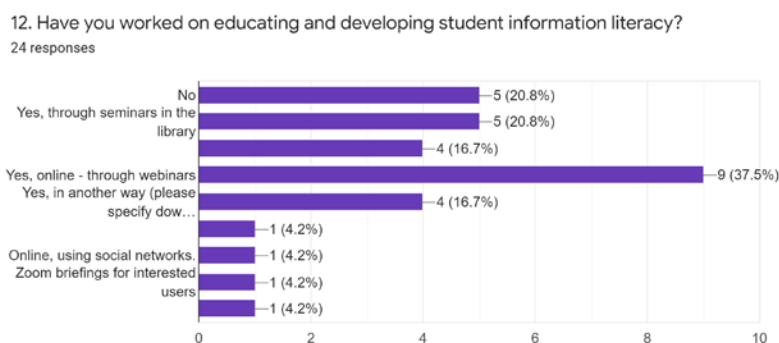
10. Did you increase online activity during the pandemic?
24 responses



11. If your answer is yes please specify in what way (you can choose multiple answers)
20 responses



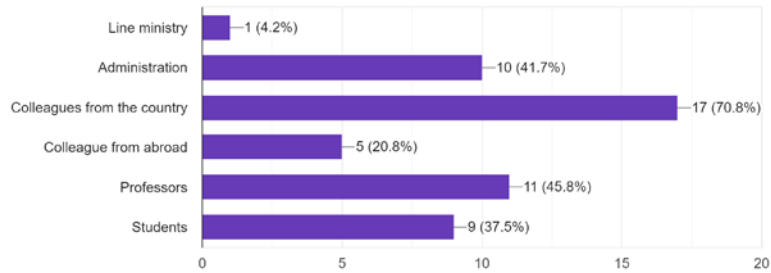
The increase in online resources also required additional engagement in the development of information skills (questions 11 and 12). However, five libraries (20,8%) did not pay attention to these activities. On the other hand, it is encouraging that in 19 libraries training on information education and development of information literacy of students were conducted through webinars (37.5%), by organizing training in libraries (20.8%), by posting video materials (16.7%), but they were held and training to interested users via zoom. The Library of Students' City Cultural Center also published the manual *Introduction to Information Literacy* (Papic, Vuckovac, Deljanin, 2020). This publication is intended for students and librarians of higher education institutions and represents a kind of guide through the knowledge and skills that are necessary for the academic environment, in professional engagement and the process of lifelong learning (Grujic, 2020).



Confronting challenging circumstances, various experiences, advice and support have been valuable. The Serbian Library Association provided great assistance, giving, even before the official guidelines of the relevant Ministry, a proposal of recommendations and measures for the work of libraries during the state of emergency caused by the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, it is not surprising that, to the 13th question (*During this period you had the cooperation and support from...*), 70.8% of examinees answered that they mostly cooperated with colleagues from the country and received their support, but also from the administration (41.7%), professors (45.8%) and students (37.5%).

13. During this period you had the cooperation and support from... (you can choose multiple answers)

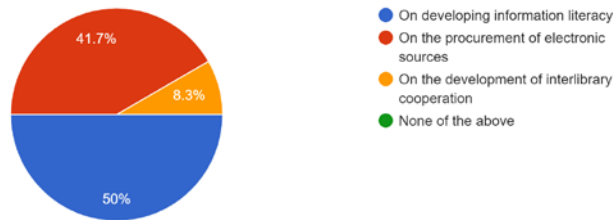
24 responses



Based on the experience of library management conditions during the pandemic, in the future librarians are going to focus on providing access to electronic resources (41,7%), and thus on developing information literacy (50%).

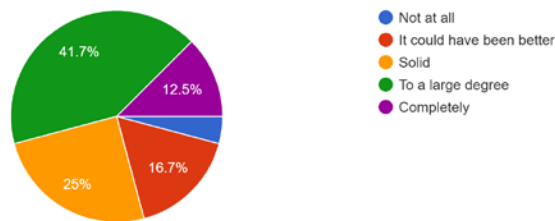
14. With this (pandemic) experience, in the future, will you focus more...

24 responses



In regular circumstances, “library users hold expectations for concrete indicators such as the rapid delivery of interlibrary loan materials or the consistently good working order of online equipment” (Cooper, Dempsey, 1998). Extraordinary working conditions do not lower the expectations of the users. How much did the librarians listen to the needs of the users and to what extent did they respond to them successfully? The research reveals that 41.7% of examinees managed to meet expectations to a great extent, 25% think that they did very well, 12.5% that they were completely successful, 16.7% that they could have been better, and 4.2% (one library) felt that they had no success at all during this period.

15. During this period, to what extent you have met the requirements and expectations of users?
24 responses



There may be those who think that libraries could have done better, that they could have done more, but they, in accordance with their abilities, responded to the challenges of the pandemic and showed that this is a great chance for a book.

3. Conclusion

In the first half of 2020, when the most severe measures were taken to prevent the spread of the virus, libraries moved most of their services into virtual space. Together with the professors, librarians had to face the changes, support the teaching process in the new reality and innovate their work in accordance with it. The research confirmed the initial hypotheses and showed that librarians had communication with students all the time, that they provided library and information services with the use of the Internet, free or inexpensive platforms, social networks and the support of colleagues. Librarianship is a profession that is flexible, ready to adapt to new requirements, and this time confirms that libraries are a key support for both cultural development and distance learning. The crisis has also revealed the shortcomings of the work, but it can serve as a signpost, and even an incentive for the improvement of activities, especially in the areas of digitalization, interlibrary cooperation and the development of information literacy. All these activities will, not only during the pandemic but also in the future, contribute to better results and successful teaching.

References

- Alekseeva, M., Kosachkova, K. (2020). Russian Libraries for Young Adults: Proper Response to the Challenges of the COVID-19 Crisis. *The Librarian: journal for theory and practice of librarianship (Bibliotekar)*, 62(2): 45-55. <http://doi.fil.bg.ac.rs/pdf/journals/bibliotekar/2020-12/bibliotekar-2020-62-2-4>
- Bowen, K. (2020). Taking Academic Library Programs Online: COVID-19 & Beyond. Access date 25.02.2021. Available at: <https://programminglibrarian.org/articles/taking-academic-library-programs-online-covid-19-beyond>
- Cooper, R., Dempsey P. R. (1998). Remote Library Users – Needs and Expectations. *Library Trends*, Vol. 47, Issue 1. Access date 30.03.2021. Available at: <http://www.lib.pu.edu.tw/~jiang/articals/Remote%20Library%20Users--Needs%20and%20Expectations.htm>
- COVID-19 and the Global Library Field (2020). Access date 25.02.2021. Available at: <https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries>
- Cox, C. (2020). Changed, Changed Utterly. Access date 25.02.2021. Available at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/06/05/academic-libraries-will-change-significant-ways-result-pandemic-opinion>
- Grujic, D. (2020). Handbook for Acquiring Information Literacy Skills. *Citaliste: the scientific journal on theory and practice of librarianship*, 37: 106. (in Serbian)
- The Impact of Covid-19 on Research Libraries Across Europe (2020). Access date 12.01.2021. Available at: <https://libereurope.eu/article/covid19-survey-research-libraries-europe/>
- Martzoukou, K. (2020). Academic libraries in COVID-19: a renewed mission for digital literacy. *Library Management*. Access date 25.02.2021. Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/LM-09-2020-0131/full/html?skipTracking=true>
- Moustafa, L. H.. Digital Expansion and Leadership in Pandemic Times. Access date 30.03.2021. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/blogpost_laila_moustafa.pdf
- Sewell, C., Kingsley, D. (2017). Developing the 21st Century Academic Librarian: The Research Support Ambassador Programme. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2017.1323766>. Access date 25.02.2021. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13614533.2017.1323766>
- Sonawane, C. S. (2020). The Use of Internet Tools by Indianlis Professionals for Providing Support Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *The*

Librarian: journal for theory and practice of librarianship (Bibliotekar),
62(2): 9-20. <http://doi.fil.bg.ac.rs/pdf/journals/bibliotekar/2020-12/bibliotekar-2020-62-2-1>

Papic, N., Vuckovac, O., Deljanin, S. (2020). *Introduction to Information Literacy* Belgrade: Students' City Cultural Center. ISBN 978-86-7933-146-5 (in Serbian)

Tomovic, N., Aleksic, M. (2020). Teaching English Online in Serbia During the COVID-19 Epidemic. *Communication and Culture Online*, 11: 241-250. <http://doi.fil.bg.ac.rs/pdf/journals/kkonline/2020-1/kkonline-2020-11-11-13> (in Serbian).