Adjusting Academic Library Services to Covid 19 Prevention Protocols

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Abstract

The Covid 19 pandemic has presented challenges in the provision of library services in academic libraries. The pandemic has affected the mode of library operations and therefore librarians had to shift to virtual library services and also adopt to new ways of providing their normal physical library services while observing Covid 19 prevention protocols. Due to these unexpected challenges, this study finds out the type of library services offered, working patterns and strategies applied by academic libraries in Kenya in response to Covid 19. Google form questionnaires were administered to librarians in ten academic libraries. Semi structured interview was also conducted to five librarians in the same selected academic libraries. The study found majority of the libraries have adjusted their services and facilities to the Covid 19 prevention protocols though frequent cleaning of the main reading areas have been overlooked. Libraries have also adopted the use of virtual library services in dissemination of most of electronics resources but the main challenges hindering improved transition to virtual services are poor library infrastructure and slow internet connection, lack of adequate skilled staff, lack of support in purchasing of core e-books, e-journals and e-newspapers. During the academic institutions closure, librarians were relying on provision of online resources and this was faced with barriers of digital divide and unaffordable internet access among users. Library working schedules changed and librarians had to reduce their operating hours to adjust to the national curfew guidelines. The study recommends initiatives to be adopted by academic libraries in order to meet user information needs during and after Covid 19 pandemic period.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Virtual Library Services, E-resources, Remote Access Services, Academic Libraries.

Introduction

According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) the Covid 19 disease virus (corona virus) was first reported from Wuhan City, China, in December 2019. The sudden outbreak of the virus has brought a worldwide pandemic that has impacted the daily running of key sectors mainly the health institutions, academic institutions, businesses and social activities. The pandemic required governments worldwide to place lockdowns in order to prevent the

spread of the virus. During these lockdowns, all academic institutions were forced to close down and come up with new ways of offering their services. Academic libraries being one of the major sources of information in academic institutions had a role to play in innovating news ways of disseminating information. Academic libraries are libraries that serve the information need in institutions of higher learning example, colleges and universities (ALA, 2021). The library associations have provided guidelines on the best practices in response to the pandemic.

Globally, the American Library Association (ALA) has provided a detailed guidelines, protocols and best practices for information providers to refer to. This is the ALA Covid-19 recovery centre guidelines for reopening the libraries (ALA, 2020). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) also gathered information resources on key issues concerning working at home, remote access services, cleanliness, opening and closing of libraries (IFLA, 2020). Electronic resources publishers among them being Springer and Elsevier provided additional access to electronic information resources thereby supporting librarians in information dissemination services.

In response to Covid 19 in Kenya, colleges and schools were closed on 15th March, 2020. Face to face learning was banned in all institutions of learning. Later in September 2020, Institutions of higher learning reopened and later followed by schools reopening in January 2021(MOE guidelines Kenya, 2020). Since then, Covid 19 pandemic has not ended, most of the academic institutions in Kenya have started the online teaching methods. To support this, academic libraries require to implement virtual libraries to enable remote access and online dissemination of e-resources. However, most of the academic libraries in Kenya lack adequate resources, skilled staff and technological facilities to provide digital services.

Aim of the Study

The study aimed at determining how academic libraries have adjusted their services in response to covid 19 pandemic. The study explored the type of services being offered both physical and virtual, the library working patterns and strategies employed by the libraries in provision of information during the covid 19 period.

Literature Review

The abrupt emergence of Covid 19 pandemic was gradual closure to the use of physical libraries. Brown (2020) reported that in the USA, libraries have closed their buildings and opened their digital access. Many international and local library association among them the

American Library Association (ALA) has postponed and cancelled their annual conferences (Rafiq, 2021). Perrine (2020) stated that the closure of libraries enhanced increased usage of online resources by 75%. One of the main benefits of online services is that they are easily accessible to many users in various location. Bishop & Veil (2013) study describes how internet access within a public library played a major role in the community in requesting help to find missing friends and family members. Meeting information needs of users is key, but virtual services provide an interactive and personal platform between the user and the information provider therefore go beyond meeting emotional concern of the users (Dar, 2020).

Methodology

The study was carried out in 10 academic libraries in Kenya. Among them are four private universities and six public universities. The study is both qualitative and quantitative and a descriptive research design was used. Data was collected through google form questionnaires which were administered to 10 librarians. One librarian in each library, either the reference or circulation librarian was emailed a link to the questionnaire with 31 questions in six broad areas. Semi structured interviews were conducted to five of the librarians whose institutions population had an approximate of 7,000 students and above. The purpose of the interview was to provide a detailed information and clarification of the questions submitted through the questionnaire. Each interview was recorded and took a duration of 20 minutes each.

Results and Discussions

The response rate for the questionnaires and interview was 100%. The results of the study were analysed according to the three major aims of the study that is the type of services offered, library working patterns and strategies applied by libraries in response to Covid 19 pandemic.

Type of Library Services

Academic Libraries are exploring potential electronic services and resources to cater for academic and research needs of academic institutions since the emergence of e-learning during the covid 19 pandemic (Dadhe, 2020). This study aimed at exploring these services in three major areas. These are the library space usage services, circulation and references services and the electronic services. These three main significant services are discussed here.

Library Space Usage

The library reading area, the library computer section and the library stack area are the main major sections accessible to users in normal working conditions. The bar graph below shows the main facilities which are open to the users during the covid 19 period as declared by the respondents.
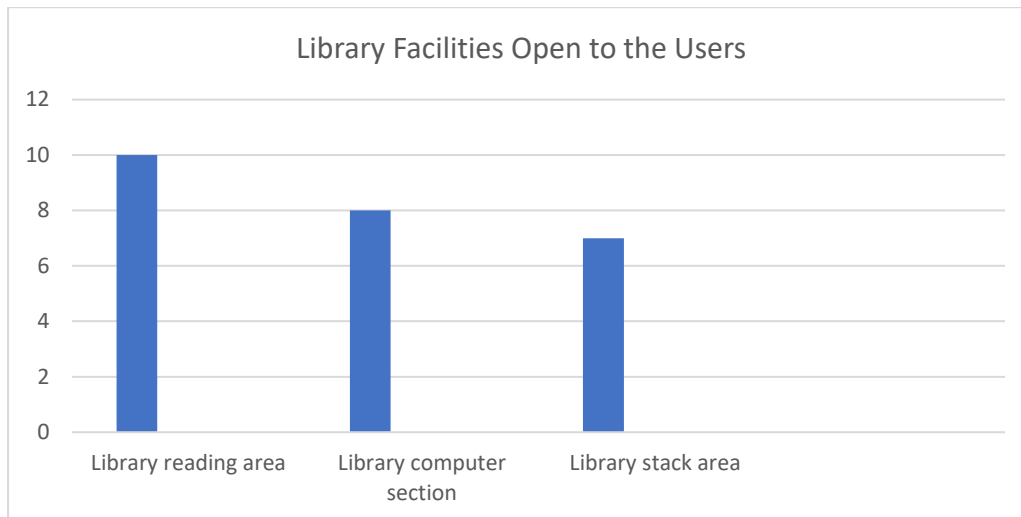

Fig. 1: Library facilities open to the users

The Figure 1, above shows that the reading area in all the 10 libraries are in use. Only two librarians have closed access to the library computer section and three have also closed access to the library stack area. These results shows that majority of the libraries have opened access to the main library facilities.

An interview with the librarians reported that the users are currently accessing the library. Eight respondents confirmed that the physical distance in metres between users in the seating areas is one and half metres apart. However, the respondents experience and perception imply that only an approximate of 70% of users are adhering to this requirement. It is mandatory for all the users in all libraries to put on face mask within the library but majority of the librarians six observed that only an approximate of 70% of the users are adhering to this requirement. In the interview all the librarians approved that the library facilities have been adjusted to outlined covid 19 prevention protocols.

90% of the respondents agreed that hand sanitizers and hand washing areas available within the library however seven of them stated that the library furniture (reading tables and chairs) are cleaned/wiped once in each day.

Circulation and Reference Services

The circulation section in academic library is mainly involved in lending of library items while the reference services provide consultation with subject specialists on research and specific information needs. According to the study, all the 10 libraries are checking out books and other physical items in the library. Seven librarians reported they are receiving returned books over the counter, only three informed that they have set up a designated dropping area within the library for returned items. 40% of the respondents asserted that their users can renew their books online.

The study was interested to know how libraries are conducting their orientation. The chart below shows the mode used by the libraries in conducting the orientation program.
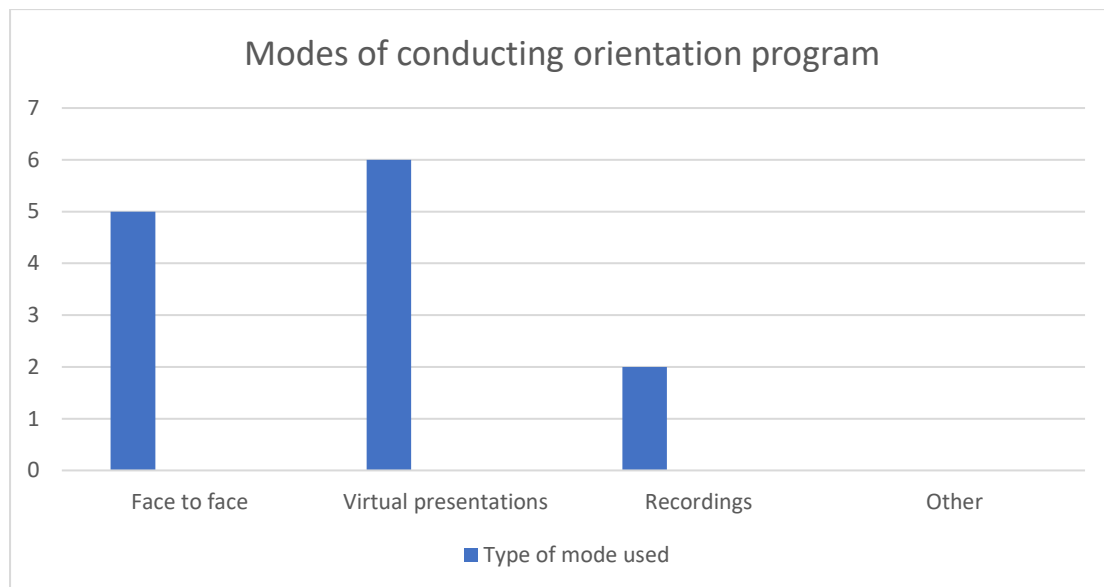

Fig 2: Mode of conducting library orientation programs

This study was being conducted during the admission of new students. This is the period when orientation of new library users happens. The study shows that majority of the librarians are using both face to face and virtual presentations in provision of orientation services. Seven of the respondents during the interview admitted that they are providing virtual reference services on daily basis. Six of them also stated that they use live chats, ask a

librarian and online presentations as the main platforms in provision of virtual reference services.

Electronic Services

The future of education is now shifting to online learning and therefore the role of traditional libraries needs to transform to virtual libraries (Zhou, 2021). Virtual libraries provide storage, access and dissemination of information resources in digital form. The study explored the types of electronic resources are available in the 10 academic libraries as shown below.
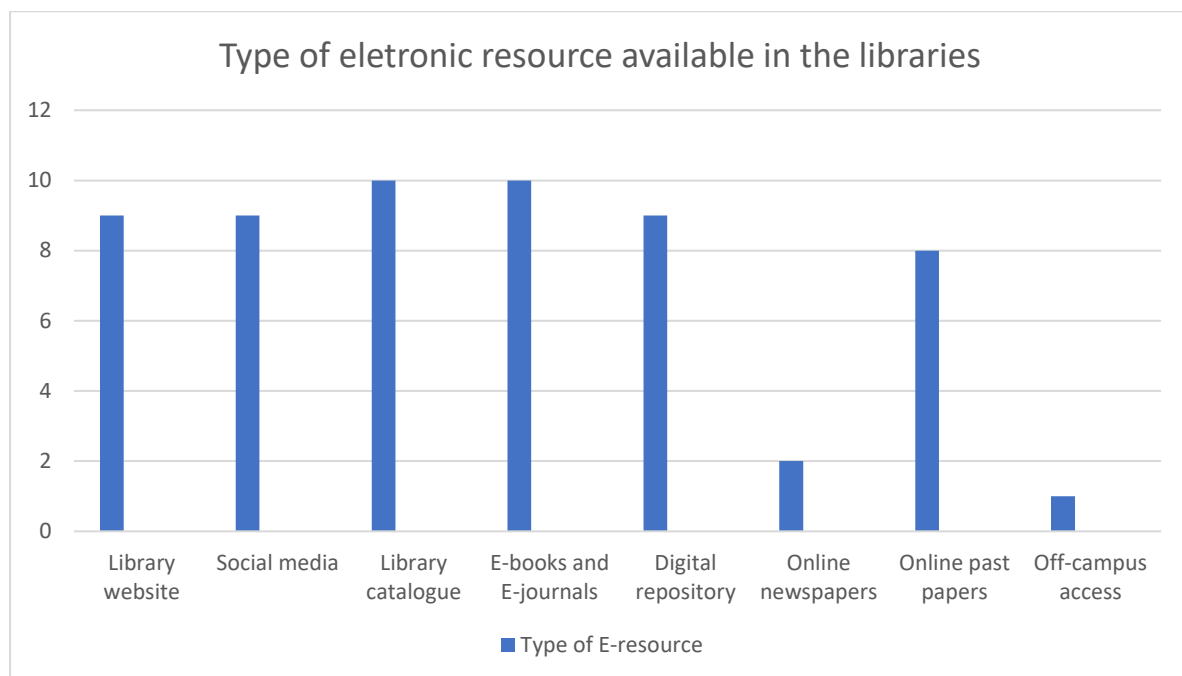

Fig 3: Types of Electronic Resources Available in the Library

From the figure three above, all the 10 libraries have developed an online library catalogue and have also subscribed to electronic books and journals. Only one library does not have access to library website, social media and digital repository. Majority with 80% provide access to online past papers. Online newspapers and Off campus/remote access are not available in most libraries. This shows that libraries have tried to transform to online services. However, during an interview with the librarians only two respondents strongly agreed that the library has subscribed to electronic resources in all specific subject areas, that the users are aware of all the e-resources and services offered by the library and that the users have acquired digital literacy skills in accessing of electronic resources.

Library technological infrastructure seems to be a challenge in most libraries as only one respondent strongly supported this. Only three librarians also strongly admitted that the library Wi-Fi is strong enough to be used by all users within the library when it's full to capacity. These results implies that libraries are not able to provide quality electronic services due to poor infrastructure.

In order to provide specialized services to all user groups within the pandemic period, the study investigated the whether the libraries were able to provide special virtual services outlined below.
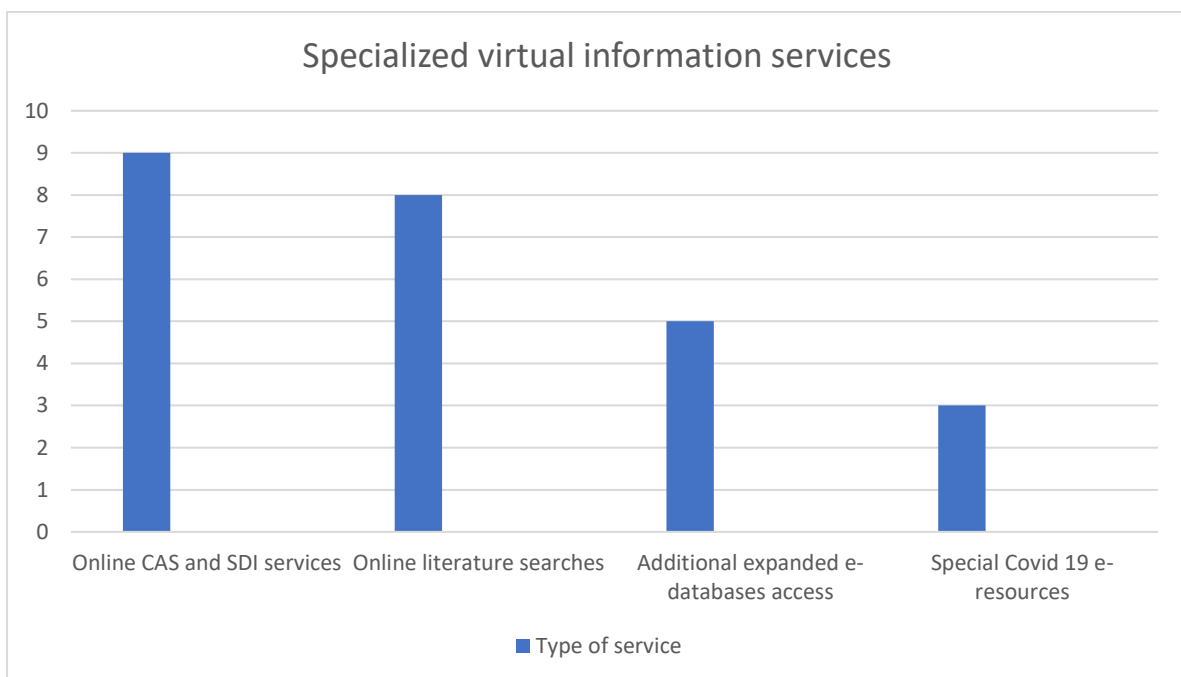

Fig.4: Specialized virtual information services

The figure above shows that nine libraries have been providing online current awareness services, eight have also been conducting online literature searches to their users. This implies that librarians have been exploring ways of providing electronic resources to serve the interest of all user groups within diverse information needs during the covid 19 period. Five libraries have been providing additional expanded databases. This have been possible through the support of the publishers who have been providing additional electronic resources for free during the pandemic period. Only three libraries have been able to put together and disseminate materials relating to Covid 19.

Library Working Patterns

After the sudden closure of schools, colleges and universities on 15th March 2020 in Kenya, all academic libraries were forced to close down. This was followed by a national lockdown whereby cessation of movement was imposed in various counties which were highly infected by Corona virus. All the 10 libraries reported that they were working from home during the lock down. The main form of communication with the users was through the emails, library websites and social media sites. Librarians explained that most of their users complained poor internet connections in their locations and also the incurring costs of purchasing internet bundles. The same problems were faced by the librarians in provision of their services.

Gradual reopening of academic institutions in Kenya started in September 2020. Academic libraries had to open and adjust their working patterns in regard to their institution's requirements. Eight libraries reported that current library operating hours changed to 8am to 8pm during the weekdays unlike before where they used to extend to 10pm in the evening. The other two libraries also changed their operation hours from 8am to 5pm during the week days. The change in timings was as a result of imposed curfew guidelines that require all people to close their activities and remain indoors by 10pm except for essential services.

Librarians had to change their working schedule to meet social distance guidelines. In seven libraries, librarians had changed their working schedule and were working in shifts. They had divided themselves into two to three groups and each group had its own specific working days. Two libraries reported that they were not able to work in shifts. All their library staff had to report back to work as some of the staff in contract basis were retrenched as their institutions were facing financial constraints. One librarian reported that they had inadequate staff and those who reported were not even able to meet the demand of the users.

During the interview, half of respondents explained that online services were available but they lacked adequate skilled staff to support these services. Most of the libraries are divided into sections and each section is assigned to specific group of staff. They explained that only specific group of staff assigned to ICT library services were skilled and conversant with provision of digital services. After full reopening in January 2021, all the librarians in the ten libraries returned to work full time and all the rotational working basis were stopped, however the operating hours for most of the libraries did not change as they had to follow the curfew guidelines.

Strategies Adopted by Libraries During Covid 19 Pandemic

Libraries have introduced new information services and resources during the Covid -19 pandemic to enhance usage and service delivery. (Howes) 2021explains that numerous of the newly adopted services, technologies and electronic resources have proved to be very effective and their use will continue even after covid 19 pandemic.

In this study three libraries reported that they have introduced weekly virtual information literacy trainings to ensure that their students can easily access electronic resources. Two others stated that they are increasingly using their library websites and social media pages especially Facebook and Twitter in updating users on the new trends, events happening, and services that are available within the library. Two other libraries have adopted the librarian on call and ask a librarian service. These services enable video or phone call consultation with subject specialists or reference librarians on specific information needs. Librarians are also enhancing use of their physical resources in digital formats. One of the respondents described that they are scanning chapters of print books required by users in regard to copyright act policies. Another library has procured My Loft software to enable remote access of electronic resources. Payment of services like overdue fines, carrel usage, photocopying have also transformed from cash to electronic mode as stated by one of the respondents. Payment is done by Mpesa mobile money to stem the spread of covid 19.

Conclusion

Libraries in Kenya are facing a hard time as the Covid 19 pandemic has forced them to change their daily routines. It has shown the need for a virtual library with good infrastructure as a key in supporting education in academic institutions. However, provision of remote services is a challenge to users who are in geographic remote areas and who cannot afford to purchase internet bundles to access these services. Users also lack adequate skills to access online resources and to add on this some librarians have not acquired adequate digital literacy skills. Some resources that are in high demand by users like the newspapers need to be subscribed in softcopies as though has not been the case in most libraries.

During this period of pandemic, the study shows libraries have not been playing their social role in repacking and dissemination of special Covid 19 resources to the users. The information would have been very useful to the community and also researchers who are working day and night in invention of Covid 19 cure. Librarians have observed national Covid 19 guidelines,

these includes wearing of face masks, social distance and provision of handwashing areas in the library but cleanliness of reading area facilities has been overlooked.

Despite all this, the pandemic has shown the importance of e-resources especially e-books. This creates a good situation for librarians to get support from the administration managers for acquisition of core e-resources. The attempts by the librarians have also shown that they are ready to adopt to the new normal working conditions.

Recommendations

Based on this study the following recommendations has been made:

1. **Improving library infrastructure**

To enhance the use of digital resources, libraries need to ensure that there is good infrastructure within the library. The library building should have proper power and internet cabling, enough space to cater for computers, e-resources usage, trainings and other related technologies. The WiFi should be strong enough to serve all users when the library is full to capacity. The height library building should be high to allow proper ventilation, enough light and good air circulation. The serving areas should be well protected with acrylic glass shield protectors to prevent the spread of corona virus.

2. **Installation of book chute**

To curb the spread of Corona virus through handling of physical library resources, librarians should install book return chute in a designated area around the library entrance. This provides proper handling and isolation of returned books. This allows a 24-hour return service even when the library is closed. Some modern book chutes are integrated with the library system in a way that when the book is returned, its automatically cleared and a user is notified of the its receipt.

3. **Purchase of core e-books, e-journal databases and online newspaper**

Apart from the print copies of core reference books available in the library, librarians should ensure that they provide other core related online resources for their users. Librarian's perception in this study has shown that users are preferring the use of electronic resources rather than the physical resources. Subscription of online newspaper should be done since print newspapers are at a high risk of spreading the virus as they are being handled by many users.

4. Digitization of institutions resources

The library should digitize their institution's output which includes research publications, past examination papers, newsletters, pamphlets, graduation booklets and almanacs. This enhances preservation and wide access of institution resources.

5. Provision of Covid 19 resources

Academic libraries should keep their users aware of Covid 19 by repacking related information. There has been so many published myths and fake news about Covid 19 within social media, libraries should be at the forefront in controlling this by providing relevant and reliable information. They should also participate in corporate social responsibilities through dissemination of the resources to the neighboring communities.

6. Developing of Covid 19 policy guidelines

Academic libraries should develop a policy regarding the use of library resources and services, accessing the library building, and how users and librarians should conduct themselves during the Covid 19 pandemic.

7. Training of library staff in provision of online resources

All library staff within the library should acquire knowledge on the use of all electronic resources provided by the library. This enables them to disseminate the same skills to their users.

8. Information literacy trainings to library users

Librarians should continue providing numerous virtual trainings to their users. The trainings should cover the use of electronic resources, how to search information resources in the library, use of citation and referencing software and research ethics. Information literacy trainings should be converted to a common online course which is examinable for all new students who join their institutions. By this, the students acquire adequate skills to use library resources in the course of their studies and research works.

9. Developing new library systems

Libraries should purchase or build user friendly software that enable storage and access of electronic resources. These are software for remote access, digitization of resources, and also build an interactive library website that allow one spot access for all online library resources.

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