

Feature Article

Serving library users during a pandemic: the case of Karlstad University Library, Sweden

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Abstract

During March 2020, all Swedish universities moved their teaching to an online environment due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Karlstad University Library in Sweden made a number of changes in order to reduce the spread of infection while at the same time maintaining a high level of library services to its users. Opening hours were drastically reduced. All study spaces were closed. Most of the staff were working from home. A new virtual reference desk via Zoom was launched to increase the library office hours. Since things happened fast, the internal staff training was done while at the same time providing the new reference service to the users. Some initial mistakes were made but in general, this 'learn-as-you-go method' worked surprisingly well.

Key words: library services; library administration; COVID-19.

Introduction

Karlstad University is a mid-sized university located approx. 300 km west of Stockholm with the main campus in Karlstad and a small campus at the Ingesund School of Music. The university library serves around 16,000 students and close to 1,300 staff. During the first months of 2020, there was growing awareness at Karlstad University that the COVID-19 pandemic would affect not only Sweden as a country but also higher education institutions, including their libraries. The university's local crisis organization was activated, and plans were made for a large-scale move of all teaching from campus-based to online. At the library, a 4-level plan for a gradual closedown of the library was produced and communicated.

When the Minister for Higher Education and Research, Matilda Ernkrans, on the 18th of March announced that Swedish universities should move all campus-based courses and programs to an online environment, things happened quickly. The message from the Minister was very clear, and there was no doubt that the situation was serious. In this article, we will focus on the actions taken by the library to protect staff and users from the spread of infection, while at the same time maintaining a high level of library services to its users.

Moving to level 3

Already the day after the Minister's announcement, the library went straight into level 3 of the closing down plan. The reason for skipping the "softer" levels 1 and 2 was the sharp message from the Minister and the general uncertainty at that time about how contagious the virus was. The practical meaning of level 3 was:

- drastically reduced opening hours. Instead of 08.00-20.00, the library was now only open 2 hours per day (12.00-14.00), and it was completely closed Saturday and Sunday;
- the physical library was only open for basic services such as borrowing and returning books, picking up interlibrary loans, reservations etc.;
- all study spaces – the library holds more than 1,300 seats, out of which many are set up for students working in groups – were closed. Our 30+ rooms reserved for group work were all closed;
- most of the library staff started working from home. Only a minimum of staff was physically present at the library. Luckily, almost everyone had a laptop computer, which made this shift rather uncomplicated;
- all library teaching moved online, i.e. teaching academic information literacy to undergraduate students as well as the library course in Information seeking and publishing strategy for Ph. D students;

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- all academic writing support also moved online.

As our physical availability decreased, the need to increase our digital services and availability arose. Just like many university libraries, we have been providing remote access to our digital resources for a long time, so in this stage of the change process our major focus was instead on setting up a new digital reference service and providing user training and academic writing support online. The former will be described more in detail below.

Since the situation in mid-March was quite shaky, with new dramatic information communicated daily, we decided to have general staff meetings via Zoom every morning where every one of the library's staff attended. In the old pre-pandemic times, we had general staff meetings once a month, but there were several reasons for holding them daily:

- communication is essential during a crisis. There was a lot of new information that needed to be communicated frequently, from the government, from different authorities, and from the top management of the university. Since most of the staff were working from home, there was not much room for the informal communication and transfer of information that takes place during a normal workday;
- everyone in the staff had the availability to ask questions and verbalize their concerns and worries;
- a dramatic reduction of the library's physical services created numerous practical questions that needed to be dealt with "on the fly";
- similarly, the increase of our digital availability also created numerous questions, since we were launching the services while at the same time developing them.

When all university teaching moved online, the number of students visiting the campus and the university library dropped sharply. The library normally has approx. 2,500, some days even 3,000, daily visitors. Now we dropped to 100+ visitors/day. However, the situation was far from perfect when it came to the main purpose of the actions taken, namely, to reduce the risk for spread of infection. The largest problem was staff facing numerous students, and students not keeping the physical distance to other students. Since we were only open 2 hours/day, the users who needed help had to wait in line but we saw many examples when the distance in queues was not properly adhered to.

Moving to level 3.5 - remote becomes the new normal

On the 2nd of April, the Public Health Agency of Sweden launched legally binding recommendations for the country. Some of these recommendations were quite strict, and when also taking into account the problems mentioned above, we decided to move to level 3.5 in our 4-level closing down plan. Level 4 meant a total lock-down, but there was no level 3.5 in the original plan. It was simply invented along the way.

Level 3.5 meant that we turned the physical library into a self-service library, accessible only for students and staff with a valid access card. All books already had RFID tags and self-issue machines were in place, so in practical terms we were already set up for self-service. Members of the public and students from other universities were no longer admitted into the library. If our users needed help from the library staff, they were encouraged to contact us via telephone or chat. Even though some staff were physically present at the library, working from their office desk, they only went out into the open library area in order to help a patron as an exception. The default way of serving our users was to do it remotely.

During the remaining days of the spring semester, we continued to have a minimum number of staff present at the library, and the rest were working from home. An evaluation made in June showed that working from home worked surprisingly well from a technical and practical perspective, but there was room for improvement when it came to ergonomics and social interactions with colleagues and users. In terms of using the technical tools required, the staff took a giant leap in their skills in using different digital tools, such as Zoom for online meetings, but quite soon, there was also a feeling of "Zoom Fatigue".

As for the libraries' reference work, we decided to set up a staffed library room in Zoom, not only to provide users with the possibility to interact with the library in form of a virtual reference desk but also as a way of increase the library office hours.

Virtual reference desk

"In today's evolving information landscape as information increasingly moves online, academic librarians must reconsider the role of the reference desk". This statement made by Gratz and Gilbert (1) is highly valid when

reflecting on how we early on in the pandemic decided to shift from a physical to a virtual reference desk.

Under normal pre-pandemic circumstances, Karlstad university library operates two reference desks, mainly staffed by librarians. Students are welcome to ask any question they might have, including questions on circulation issues at both desks. Since the reference desk as a focal point for library services has been discussed and criticized as ineffective (2), it can seem as somewhat contradictory that early on in the outbreak of COVID-19 we decided to set up a reference desk in Zoom, the video conference platform used by the university. However, after some discussion we decided to move forward with the idea. We did not have to make any financial investment since the technology was already in place, so if it did not work out well we could simply close it down.

As with the physical reference desks, the library personnel were scheduled to staff the virtual reference desk. The librarians in the library teaching team had some experience using Zoom from different teaching settings, but the majority of the library staff had never used the tool. However, since things happened fast, we had to do the staff training, and produce internal manuals while at the same time providing the new service to our users. Some initial mistakes were made of course, but in general, this "learn-as-you-go method" worked surprisingly well.

The issue of user information and data privacy was important from the start of the virtual reference desk in Zoom. In a study by Mawhinne (3) one of the findings was that feelings of security and safety had influence on which reference method the participants used.

"Privacy and security concerns were important to participants and were a factor that influenced their preference for chat and email over texting. These concerns should be carefully considered in designing any type of virtual reference service and adequately addressed through the provision of service policy information regarding privacy and confidentiality on the library's website" (3, p. 6).

The consideration of privacy and safety when using Zoom may explain why the use of our virtual desk was fairly low.

Marketing the service

In a more normal setting, the new virtual reference desk would have been introduced in a face-to-face context to create a more trustworthy relation between

library staff and users. However, in this situation, there was no time for that. The new service was marketed via digital channels, such as the library website and social media. It was also quite common that a reference question that started in one channel, e.g. chat, was moved to Zoom when the librarian felt that would be a more efficient tool.

When interacting directly with students and other users, it became clear that many of them were not aware of our new reference desk in Zoom. This is not unique for our library, studies show that many patrons still do not know that virtual reference services are available at their libraries (3, 4).

As mentioned, the use of the virtual reference desk was relatively low. Only a few students per day were using the service. There are probably several reasons for this, such as lack of knowledge and users feeling uncomfortable with direct video chats with librarians. In a study made by Chow & Croxton (4) one of the respondents stated *"Also, being able to see and hear the person made me feel a little weird because I don't usually communicate with people via video chat"*. Although this study is old in terms of how young people interact digitally today, we still think that some library users feel a bit uncomfortable about meeting a librarian face to face in an online meeting environment. When it came to the library's chat service, where the user is anonymous, we experienced a significant increase of incoming questions.

Conclusion

To summarize, it was possible to completely change the way we were working and the way we were providing services to our users in a very short period of time. One could argue that we went too far in our precautions, or that we didn't go far enough, but library staff have expressed contentment and satisfaction with the chosen route. As for the views of the users, we have not yet had time for a proper evaluation.

The changes in how Karlstad University Library reaches out to and serves its users during the odd times of a pandemic have initially been focused on students and their needs. Now, when we know that the pandemic is still ongoing and that we probably will not go back to a normal way of working until 2021 at the earliest, we need to focus on how researchers, teachers and other library user groups have been affected by this shift in service level and service approach. Do we need to serve them in new ways, and if so, how?

It remains to be decided if the new digital reference service will be permanently added to the plethora of virtual library services, or if it will be deconstructed when COVID-19 is no longer dictating the way we offer library service.

From a leadership perspective, it is quite clear that communication is a key factor when trying "to keep up the good work" during a crisis. Furthermore, leadership and decision-making must be agile, since the situation might change from one day to another.

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