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Summer 12-6-2021

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Shukla, Udya Chandra and Deo, Sandhya, "Strategies Used by Academic Libraries to Manage Information Crisis in the Pandemic: The Study of the Fiji National University Library" (2021). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 6712.

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**STRATEGIES USED BY ACADEMIC LIBRARIES TO MANAGE INFORMATION CRISIS IN THE  
PANDEMIC: THE STUDY OF THE FIJI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY LIBRARY**

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**1.0 Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the entire world, affecting the economy, businesses, jobs, education, health, and many other things among it. Many businesses and organizations went virtual to survive the disease and reduce the losses. The crisis encountered during the pandemic enabled people to reinvent plans and convert threats into opportunity to overcome the challenges. The study aims to analyze Fiji National University Library's response during the COVID-19 pandemic and measures enforced to tackle the pandemic and lockdown situation for smooth operation of the online services provided to the undergraduate and postgraduate students, teaching-learning faculties, higher degree researcher's (HDRs) and how active online workshops and programs support the dissemination of information to the users.

**Keywords:** National University, COVID-19, Pandemic, Information Crisis, Academic Library, Misinformation, Fiji, Digital library, Virtual.

**2.0 Aim of the study**

The main aim of this study was to resolve problems of accessing, analyzing, retrieving, and delivering the right information to users in more efficient ways. The paper aims to:

- a) analyze how learning resource center's (LRC's) are assisting their members in disseminating information during the pandemic.
- b) suggest the actual approaches to manage this situation.
- c) investigate the accessibility to technological services in college libraries as well as the ability of professionals to make use of them.

- d) determine the level of training for professional librarians to deliver quality information service.

### **3.0 Significance of the study**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has swept over the worldwide globe, it has created some difficulties for university libraries in providing information. The academic libraries have remained true with their goal as community institutions, continuing to work and respond to this new scenario by finding imaginative techniques to offer services to its members and communities. The findings would help librarians in future to tackle similar situation through the experience and skills acquired in this pandemic and the libraries will be able to formulate proper policy and effective strategies to deliver library services more effectively.

### **4.0 Introduction**

The Coronavirus was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei, China and on 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 the World Health Organizations (WHO) declared this coronavirus a pandemic. The infection is highly contagious and has a rate of destruction that is several times higher than that of the occasional flu or fever. Coronavirus disease also known as COVID-19 has been widespread across the continents since 2020. The outbreak worldwide made this pandemic tragic affecting the health care system, societies, businesses, education, and economies in large. This is a global pandemic that spread over a short period and has affected many countries around the world, including Fiji Island. COVID-19 distresses different people in different ways and people can be affected with mild illness and recover without being hospitalized while for some it can cause moderate illness resulting in death which is the current situation of some countries (*Coronavirus, 2021*).

When Fiji reported its second wave of first case this year, all the academic institution closed for the safety of everyone. In response to this outbreak, it has been proposed to socially split and isolate and due course to this sudden catastrophe, society has also changed, at least for a while. Currently, educational organizations around the world are adapting to the distance learning strategy and switching to online and blended mode. Fiji, a developing country also followed

government policies and health protocols to use safe distance learning strategies to provide useful and informative resources within an online context.

The libraries of the Fiji National University following government regulations chose to offer the best support to their library users to access online digital services of reliable databases for undergraduate-doctoral, postgraduate studies, as well as for teaching and learning activities during this crisis. The learning activities of educational organizations have been moved to an online forum as the information needs and information-seeking standard has progressed from a physical to a cybernetic format. The role of the digital library and online resources needs further development as Libraries and ICT's experts are usually interested in the latest innovations but lack their appeal to the advancement of ICT skills.

FNU Libraries are succeeding the international academic standards, as well as promoting universal and educational values, which are included in the updates of its services, skills, and resources, based on the latest web technologies allowing users to have access to library resources from home during physical shutdown of library doors due to the deadly virus. The library supports its members by providing access to a variety of reliable and up-to-date materials online and offline, such as e-books, e-journal, videos, and lecture notes ranging from numerous subjects offered by the Fiji National University. Things were made possible with the cooperation of skilled, professional, and qualified staff.

Further to this, Information and communication (ICT) tools were beneficial for managing collections and education, online services, training, collecting, analyzing, storing, and sharing knowledge. To cope with a rapidly growing outbreak from becoming a disaster for information centers, the librarians swiftly changed information processing, interpretation, packaging, and distribution of current and user-relevant information from the traditional way to virtual methods during this pandemic crisis. The librarians supported their users providing diverse, up-to-date, and relevant information resources.

This paper discovers the pandemic and lockdown situation of Fiji and how FNU libraries managed to fulfil user's requirements and demand for information while working virtually from home. The paper also provides SWOT analysis highlighting the challenges FNU library encountered during

pandemic and how they converted these into opportunities. The study provides some recommendations for further improvement and finally concludes from the findings.

## **5.0 Literature review**

The world presently going through a COVID-19 pandemic catastrophe has fastened all organizations and shut-down activities of life to manipulate the unfold of Covid-19. Despite such devastation, the college library continued to provide quality supply of data for sharing expertise, coaching, and scientific studies. A library acts as an actual platform in which communication, interplay, and connectivity are convenient due to the fact of generation. Balachander and Ramesh (2019) discovered that users can access library's resources in every practicable form and configuration as the ICT have modified the library deliberating the storehouse to information scattering. Mandal and Dasgupta (2019) examined that nowadays youthful era has modified their insolence towards library, they solely visited the library for the facts they did not find on the internet. Furthermore, Bansode and Shinde (2019) study showed that information technological know-how has reshaped all activities of lifestyles together with abilities of communicate, operating, interaction, and dwelling fashion. Digital libraries supply useful information resources to students during this pandemic.

The library needs professionals, notably technical, and be better ready to provide high-tech offerings. Wang and Lund (2020) found that university libraries can play an important feature in distance training via the formation of virtual libraries, inquiry-primarily based learning, correspondent, trans-formative learning, head-to-head instructor and learner, mastering platform and so on. They suggested that university libraries must serve as a reading tool for change. Samantha (2020) pointed out that the library is liable for offering its services online in epidemic lockdown. During the lock down pandemic situation individuals are concerned about how technology can facilitate information seeking. According to Ashrafi-Rizvi and Kazempour (2020), the challenges encountered by COVID-19 could be solved or reduced by providing the right information as these problems are caused by individuals and organizations disseminating incorrect information. This shows the vitality of being the right source of information providers as an academic library.

## **6.0 Research Methodology**

To successfully complete this paper, the researchers cited from reports and journal articles. Information for this research is gathered from already present data, such as internet, peer record that is evaluated case scientific studies from e-data to analyze the information for Covid-19 pandemic influencing the scholastic libraries throughout the world. Unstructured discussion was used with different library users from students to academic staff and support staff for their views on the online services rendered by FNU library. The paper also uses researcher's personal experience as a professional librarian with expertise in a number of academic libraries and most of all secondary source, i.e., internet was used for data collection.

## **7.0 Limitation of the study**

Due to current situation of lockdown and closure of libraries, observation and face to face interviews could not be conducted.

## **8.0 Findings and Discussion**

### **8.1 Pandemic and lockdown in Fiji**

On 19 March 2020, the COVID-19 case was reported in Lautoka and was well contained. The second wave of COVID-19 identified in April 2021, has now become a catastrophe for Fiji being a developing nation. At the time of July 15, 2021, the nation had an overall total of more than 12,000 positive cases of which 10, 000 were active and have had 60 deaths. To deal with the situation, Fiji imposed bans on highly impacted nations in the early stages of the pandemic and as the situation worsened, all the borders along with ports to non-residents were also sealed. The Fijian government reacted by imposing restrictions such as implementing curfew, limiting large gatherings, and closing educational institutions along with other organizations and non-essential businesses. The government implemented lockdown in the two biggest locations of Lautoka and Suva-Nausori corridor and made contact tracing app 'careFIJI' compulsory for all individuals to access work, shopping malls, pharmacies, and all other amenities. The government further imposed strict health protocols as per WHO to protect spread of the deadly virus to the greater area of Fiji by maintaining a two-meter distance, wearing a mask that properly covers both mouth

and nose, regular use of hand sanitizer and washing of hands every twenty minutes. As the local transmission soared by the Delta variant, the Government sealed off Viti Levu making Suva, Lautoka, Nadi, Nausori and Lami as containment zones and activated Fiji Emergency Medical Assistance Team (FEMAT). The number of cases reported from Western and Central units was remarkably high, however the greatest number of positive cases was from Suva, Nausori, and Lami containment. The Government stated the possibility of nationwide lockdown, and it could apply on specific locations depending on the severity of the situation (*COVID-19 UPDATES – MINISTRY OF HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICES*, 2021). The pandemic involuntary has resulted Fiji to reduce its interest rate. After decades of economic development, the Fiji's economy is expected to contract because of pandemic's effect on tourism, trade, retail, and manufacturing. The International Labor Organization and the Asian Development Bank issues reports about employees being affected as well as warned about the child labor. Some have also left the country for temporary work overseas due to the impact of the pandemic (*New ILO-ADB report addresses the impact of COVID-19 on youth employment in Asia and the Pacific*, 2021). There were even incidents reported on racism and xenophobia against Chinese folks. Even the misinformation and conspiracy ideas appeared regarding the vaccines. Domestic violence and crimes additionally increased because of lockdown restrictions as people faces financial problems and it also affected people's mental health as well (*Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide*, 2020).

## **8.2 Situation in the Wider Library Community**

Learning resource centres and libraries around the country are fronting tough choices around which services to offer and how, ranging from negligible boundaries to full closure as government are taking approaches of closing the institution premises. All school and university libraries have been affected by the closure of all educational institution and all libraries around the world faced challenges in providing services to their users. University libraries faced the same situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, but they continued to provide their services to the users despite facing a number of challenges. Most libraries opted to deliver services online that included e-resources such as e-books and e-journals to provide information to students and lecturers for reading, assignments, research and as well as for teaching. Other libraries opted for social media, for example, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and mobile for communication and distribution of

information. Unfortunately, those public libraries have budget constraints and are still following the traditional method of providing services to their community members and thus are closed since the spread of Covid-19 from 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021 (*IFLA -- COVID-19 and the Global Library Field, 2021*).

### **8.3 Introduction of the FNU library**

Fiji National University library has fifteen campus libraries reflecting the multi-campus system of the Fiji National University and each library have a valuable collection of academic resources including databases, e-journals, e-books sufficiently covering resources for all academic programmes offered by the FNU. As an academic library, it seeks quality in their services, collections, and cooperation between libraries to serve diverse users, provide user-focused services and ensure timely delivery of resources and right information to the students, academicians, researchers, alumni and all its users in an innovative learning environment. The staff have created the library into a rich information environment that functions as a hub of FNU scholarly activity allowing the students, academic staff, and researchers to collaborate and interact. The collection is indispensable to the Fiji National University (FNU) providing top-class information to the academicians, students, researchers, and all other users that assist with college teaching, discovery, and study. In addition, the library emphasizes on meeting University's mission by teaching the core competencies of information literacy that involves University wide training sessions for the staff and students on e-databases such as how to search and access information, ways to do referencing, avoid plagiarism and how to manage the information. FNU library offers extensive access to information together with approaches to administer the right information.

### **8.4 Services provided by the FNU Library during Pandemic**

Since the Fiji National University Library premises were closed for physical access during the pandemic for the safety of the users, it created a challenge as well as an opportunity to reconnect with patrons in thoughtful and innovative ways, reflecting a fluidity of infrastructure and information and resource sharing during such crisis. To continue operating during the pandemic, the fifteen FNU libraries are actively engaging online with patrons as a source of hope, comfort, and information during the lockdown. (“Full article: Information in Crisis: Analysing the Future ...”)



The library switched their services online to meet the expectations and best needs of undergraduate, postgraduate, early career researcher (ECR), higher degree research (HDR) scholar's, academic and professional staff in aspect to learning, teaching, and research activities. All FNU library in-person services were made available remotely. Users could even request for physical books from general collection for their academic requirement and the requested items was issued under containment zone within 36 working hours. In addition, in accordance with the University's copyright guidelines, users could also request 10% of a book or a chapter or one article from a journal issue and any other collection to be scanned and forwarded to them. Online Document Deliveries Services (DSS) for research paper, eBooks, videos, and lecture notes was also accommodated. FNU Library continues to offer all database and bibliographical training session and workshops online via Zoom/Video Conferencing and social media (Covid-19 - Library Services during COVID-19, 2021). Users were provided with options to visit and make appointments as per the events calendar for upcoming events/sessions on research tools like SciVal, Scopus and statistical tools such as Eview, NVivo, SPSS and Sage research method datasets etc. The library advertises the training sessions through Fiji National University Public Relations (FNUPR) notifications as well as through social networking sites for users to attend Zoom sessions for information literacy, subscribed database training and Bibliographical management tools such as EndNote, RefWorks webinars for precise use of techniques from Boolean logic to truncation proximity searching. Further to this, users faced the nagging problem of information anxiety when accessing information from unreliable sources in the pandemic. The volume production of information resulted library users encounter imbalanced information, hence digesting wrong information and to prevent information anxiety caused by the pandemic, the library staff engaged with users sharing drama, stories, and joyful reading materials. It can be evident that the FNU library is succeeding in trying to be the best mode of right source of information providers while working from home during the lockdown.

## **8.5 SWOT analysis**

The businesses had to reassess their situations, functions, and priorities by revisiting their strategic plans and reorganizing priorities due to the severe Covid pandemic. In the same pipeline, the Fiji National University also prioritized its goals towards reaching out to their students to ensure

smooth flow of the education without disruptions and thus, the library services along with the vision, strategized on their strengths and weaknesses to harness the crisis.

### **8.5.1 Strengths**

Building on user collection and making resources accessible to the users is one of the main priorities of an academic library whereby FNU library have established itself into digital library achieving one of its key objectives. The lockdown left users to access their favourite magazine, watch documentaries and read books online which led to increase in use of e-resources and thus the situation required libraries to reassess their plans and modes of service delivery, hence FNU library revisited their strategic plans and prioritized goals suiting the needs of the users in the pandemic. Source of contact for right information was quickly sorted and placed on the website as well as advertised through FNUPR and social media, making it easier for users to interact with librarians during the pandemic. Remote access of subscribed e-database and e-books such as Clinical Key, Access medicine EBSCO, ProQuest, PubMed etc., was made possible through EZproxy, an external access software. The library took lockdown as an advantage to negotiate with the vendors and add more collection to the e-resources. In addition, effective communication via zoom meetings within the management and staff during the lockdown assured prompt response to users' queries. With robust infrastructure, qualified staff and information technology, electronic resources were available to the users 24/7. The staff and the students did not have to return to the campus as online teaching was activated and the conferences went to virtual meeting spaces adopting the technological solutions to maintain social distancing. Hence, the FNU Library exercised flexibility in extending the borrowing privilege of physical materials allowing user community to request physical books from general collection for academic purpose. The library has been working strategically to restructure the learning experience technologically to adapt new means of outreaching to the users during this time and now can serve the users either in physical library space or during the case as in the pandemic. The interpersonal contact, connections, need for information, repertoire, literature, a gathering place, and a forum for ideas, all continue and aim to transcend physical distance while keeping the conversation going.

### **8.5.2 Weaknesses**

In a short-time frame, the FNU library faced some difficulties in operating virtually and juggling between different platforms (e-resources, zoom facilities etc.) to make quick decisions on the virtual programs. The pandemic imposed a lack of physical interaction with the users and led many to access information from misleading sources resulting in wrong information whereby the librarians felt it is their responsibility to combat misinformation. The staff living in remote areas faced some hurdle to reach out to users due to network connectivity issues resulting in slow service delivery at certain times. The internet speed and bandwidth are not fast while working from home where librarians face problems with the video conferencing via zoom, skype etc., and thus Information and Communication Technology is seen as a major barrier as internet connection and bandwidth speed are the main tools. In addition, Staff also had to arrange and take office desktop computers home since they did not have laptop. The circulation staff in fifteen centers were allocated with only one or two desktop PCs and thus were allocated in their own bubbles to visit campus to facilitate physical collection and lending of resources and of course taking heed of all Covid-19 measures. Users faced difficulties not able to access the services physically affecting those especially who depended on using the library's facilities like computers, printers, print books and for most who preferred group discussion. Finance and budget are often issues that tend to be challenging whereby addition to digital resources that is databases and e-journals needs more library budget. High-quality information is an item that really must be purchased, and librarians might end up spending more on building the e-resource collection.

### **8.5.3 Opportunities**

The FNU library moved to virtual services utilizing zoom, email, website, and social media to outreach the user's and hence increased public engagement via social media promoting its programmes and resources. Library continues to offer all database and bibliographical training session and workshops in Online formats such as Zoom, Video conferencing and social media. Students need to access FNUPR notification, FNU library webpage or FNU library Facebook to attend zoom session for information literacy, subscribed database training, bibliographical management tools such as EndNote, RefWorks, Webinars for precise use of techniques from Boolean logic to truncation proximity searching etc. All the consultation on research tools such as SciVal, Scopus and statistical tools such as Eview, Nvno, SPSS and sage research method datasets

etc. continues to be offered online. Even libraries have prioritized on open access especially in this pandemic since scholarly communication have been monopolized by the proprietary database providers with huge subscriptions fees causing libraries to reduce their subscriptions. Furthermore, staff were more efficient in respect to time and delivering information via virtual services. The library even implemented weekly zoom meetings among different functions proving effectiveness of remote work that helped keep track of performance, monitor tasks and achievements as well as discuss progress report of library's strategic plan. Working remotely has become very popular and may have a positive impact on the way librarians perform even after the pandemic.

#### **8.5.4 Threats**

The FNU library had revisited their strategic plans whereby they had to reassess their budget suiting the priorities. The users who depended on libraries for access to computers, printers, print books, conference/discussion rooms, had to shift from this comfort due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Online services were being activated to meet user's informational needs and demands and if the dependences on online services and e-collection continues there are chances it may replace the library as a physical place.

#### **8.6 Recommendation**

The following recommendations are to be considered.

The library should be provided with better technologies to achieve the goals for providing better and quality services to its users during the pandemic:

- a) Prioritize its budget for more e-resources, e-services and developing Big-Data.
- b) Energize consciousness of new arising innovation and changing ideas in the field of library and data science.
- c) Start preparing for new development advancements and facilitate training programs for staff development.
- d) Prepare assessing framework to monitor staff, performance and effectiveness of library service delivery while working from home.

- e) Re-consider providing better ICT resources and facilities for the staff to efficiently deliver quality services to the users and communicate more effectively.
- f) Focus on establishing Artificial Intelligence (AI) i.e., developing chat facilities for the users to prevent misinformation or infodemic and provide accurate information etc.
- g) Need to build institutional research repositories to enhance research for ECR's and HDR's.

## 8.7 Conclusion

Librarians play a pivotal role in providing the right information from correct sources in a timely and efficient manner whether it be even during the crises. The Fiji National University libraries have been expanding their online services disseminating information during the pandemic COVID-19 lockdown. University libraries continue to support the researchers, staff, students, and the general public, keeping them updated with informative information. From the study, it shows how librarians are playing vital and varied roles by adapting and upgrading new skills and technological techniques to serve users at the right time with the right information even while working remotely with limited access to ICT resources and facilities. Librarians are well prepared to respond to any kind of situation. This pandemic has certainly tested the abilities and patience of everyone working away from office. The current scenario demands librarians to contact information sources to access right information and produce corrective solutions during the crisis using cutting-edge technical tools. Every crisis brings the opportunity to shape organizations. The library has allowed users to meet and express themselves through library's collection and services and thus is seen as a living room with a safe and friendly environment (*Equity, Diversity, Inclusion: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, 2021). The results of the present study show that pandemic novel virus Covid-19 reshapes all activities of life for instance working style from traditional system of education to online mode. From the study, it is evident that the FNU library have developed a digital portal to support and assist users remotely by offering access to numerous e-resources however, FNU library needs to improve and redesign their skills and become expertise in electronic resources to deliver and provide direction for searching relevant information and resources. Further, this study highlights the necessity to initiate collaboration between faculty and

librarians to develop learning programs, workshops, webinars to gage to with the students. The study demarcates that even working from home, librarians still play a vital role in the society facilitating access to right information from right sources developing user's potentials and credibility in their studies and research.

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