Post-Pandemic Library Era: Practices at Three Medical Libraries in Malaysia

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Abstract
COVID-19 has affected the way that libraries function, especially in terms of operations and services. Activities and stories shared in this paper show significant similarities amongst three medical university libraries in Malaysia, namely, the International Medical University (IMU) library in Kuala Lumpur, Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia (NUMed) library in Johor Bahru, and the Dar al-Hikmah International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) library in Kuantan, Pahang. These libraries were chosen due to several reasons ranging from mutual interest of the Library Heads where data can be easily retrieved within the capacity of the authors, similar categories of clientele served, and similar nature of courses offered. They experienced immediate changes in the way library services are provided and engagement of the users throughout this pandemic. The libraries were quick to adapt to changes and planned for activities to benefit the users with the limitations faced. As most academic libraries reopen and enter the endemic phase, a plan for more enhanced digital services is needed to ensure that the libraries are still supporting the pre- and post-pandemic teaching, learning, and research activities.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Medical libraries, COVID-19

Introduction
Over the past two years, libraries around the world have learnt to adapt their services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have been forced to accelerate change from serving their users face-to-face to emergency and creative remote services via online, in view that teaching and learning activities were done online, with some limitation to access resources. This paper discusses both the similarities and differences of practice amongst three medical libraries in Malaysia, which are the International Medical University (IMU) library in Kuala Lumpur, Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia (NUMed) library in Johor Bharu and the Dar al-Hikmah International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) library in Kuantan, Pahang during the pandemic and post-pandemic era. These medical libraries were studied due to several reasons ranging from mutual interest of the Library Heads where data can easily retrieve within the capacity of the authors, similar categories of clientele served, and similar nature of courses offered by these universities.

During the Pandemic
During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the IMU Chief Librarian and colleagues from NUMed Library and IIUM Library prepared *The Guideline on Managing Library Operations Post Movement Control Order (MCO)* and shared it with members of the Medical Library Group (MLG) team upon approval from the Persatuan Pustakawan Malaysia (Malaysia Librarian Association). This guideline serves to assist libraries in Malaysia to take precautionary measures to practice physical distancing, crowd management, and enhanced hygienic practices in

libraries during the post-Movement Control Order (MCO) to minimise risk of infection for both the library users and staff whilst they are in the library. Libraries are encouraged to adopt Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) and/or World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines in addition to this guideline.

The IMU library hours were adjusted from time to time as per the Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), and the university management requirements. Some of the services were pivoted online such as the *Information Literacy* sessions and circulation of books. Some new services were introduced to assist users remotely. This included the video production on multiple themes on the *IMU Library YouTube channel* which users could view anytime and anywhere at their own convenience.

Professional development activities of the librarians were affected similarly. The lockdown period provided opportunities for the library staff to enhance their skills. During the pandemic, online conferences and seminars attracted audience numbers exceeding expectations as online events have eliminated travel costs and travel time. Five IMU Librarians attended the *KOHA Conference* in New Zealand that was held online in 2020 for free instead of sending only one representative if it was held face-to-face. Some IIUM library staff members were able to attend online training like video-editing using smartphones for example and this effort resulted in higher productivity and effectiveness as the staff produced higher quality posters and videos.

While at NUMed, library services have immediately shifted online since all staff were instructed to work from home and students were expected to study remotely off campus. Complying with the order during the COVID-19 pandemic, NUMed library followed the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and guidelines from MOH and MOHE to ensure all operations adapted to the new norm to reduce physical contact.

NUMed Library staff continuously updated and added necessary information to the library website to ensure its currency such as the new procedures of returning and borrowing books, paying library fines online, step-by-step guides, assisting students with login issues pertaining to some of the resources etc. This helped library staff improve their own information search methods through exploration and navigation of new online platforms available, identify reliable and current information to be added to the library website, and be creative in new ways to provide information to the library users. Additionally, this effort helped the library staff to establish contact with library users by saving user's time while they searched for the appropriate material using the appropriate technique. This endeavour also helped the library staff build relationships with library users. As a result of these actions, library staff at NUMed were inspired to think of new ways to share information to library users.

During this period, MOHE announced that the international students were allowed to return to their home countries within a certain period. As the university was closed, both library book loans and returns during this period was temporarily paused as well. However, some students requested to be allowed to return the library books. Hence, NUMed library collaborated with the Security Section to enable students to return the library books at the Security Post. The students were advised to place the books into a paper bag etc. with their names and book titles pasted on the bag. Once the books were returned, Security staff placed them in a

dedicated storeroom (during COVID-19 period) at the Security Section for easy retrieval by the library staff when they were allowed to enter the campus once MCO was lifted.

During this period, suppliers of some of the online resources provided temporary access to some of their resources, NUMed library staff included the announcement and links about the new services on the library website for easy access. The *Introduction to Library and Resources* sessions were conducted online for new students and staff. NUMed library also worked with the Finance Section for students to remit their overdue fines payments directly to the university account.

When the Government announced the transition from MCO to CMCO, the NUMed management instructed all sections to develop their own SOPs. NUMed library referred to *[The Guideline on Managing Library Operations Post Movement Control Order (MCO)](#)* in preparing the [library SOP](#) in accordance with the requirements set by the MOHE for colleges and universities on opening hours, seating capacity, physical distancing, etc. One of the new procedures NUMed library introduced to comply with the requirement was procedures for an online booking system for library space and IT clusters. This system was shared with the Security Section and Student Office. This system helped library staff to monitor the number of students using the space and facilities in the library while for the Security Office, it helped them to ensure that students had registered to enter the campus. The Student Office used this system to help them trace students' statistics on campus. The *[NUMed library SOP](#)* was announced to students which they needed to comply with during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The IIUM Library also produced its own guidelines entitled *A Guide for Library Usage and Operations in the Renewed Normal*, using *[The Guideline on Managing Library Operations Post Movement Control Order (MCO)](#)* as a reference.

The IIUM library introduced a new service called *Collect 'n Go* service to cater to the needs of students who were stranded on campus whilst ensuring their information needs were fulfilled. Physical contact was minimised, and students were only required to pick up their books at designated times to reduce exposure.

In addition, the IIUM Library *Live Chat* was established on 28 March 2020 during Movement Control Order (MCO) to facilitate communication with library users virtually. The *Live Chat* service received good response from users. This effort, which combines librarians from all IIUM campuses enables support to users in real-time. The online chat services were helpful for some of the international students who were not able to return to campus. Even though some queries were unrelated to library services, the librarians managed to channel the requests to the relevant parties. The pandemic also brought a new norm of working unusual, irregular hours. Some of the queries and requests received were outside standard working hours, but the librarians were willing to respond to them considering different time zones. The *[Live Chat](#)* service was extended until 10pm daily to accommodate the International students. When support is readily available to users, it fosters trust and makes them feel cared for at any time of day.

The following were frequent enquiries by the library users:

Table 1: Frequent Enquiries via *Live Chat* by Library Users

No.	Enquiries via *Live Chat*
1.	Book-a-Seat
2.	Loans/Inter-library loans
3.	Miscellaneous (not related to library)
4.	Opening hours
5.	Membership
6.	Due dates/Fines
7.	Online database/e-books
8.	Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC)
9.	Thesis
10.	IRep (IIUM Repository)/EZProxy
11.	Clearance
12.	Renewal
13.	Visitor
14.	Facilities
15.	Exam Papers
16.	Other Branches
17.	User Education
18.	Copyright

The lockdown period gave the librarians opportunities to enhance contents of the social media platforms. The IIUM librarians were able to update the social media platforms especially *Facebook* and *Instagram* with freely available resources. The library collaborated with publishers on having on-line trials and training. Some of the publishers provided complimentary access for their databases to facilitate this new virtual learning environment.

The librarians were challenged to conduct the Information Literacy classes in the new normal. Most of the library skill classes were conducted via Google Meet. The challenge was to ensure that the users were able to participate during the sessions as most students were not accustomed to online learning, and some had difficulties getting connected.

The IIUM library contributed to the resource sharing activities with other university libraries, especially with regards to the Inter-Library Loan services. Some of the resources were scanned and made available for the students to access.

Some users, especially international students were concerned as they were isolated (or away) in their homes, being unable to renew their books and concerned about increasing amounts of fines. All three libraries; IMU, NUMed, and IIUM waived the fines, to ensure that the users' access was not blocked. Any amount accrued during the lockdown period were waived when the items were returned; some until the campus reopened.

IIUM Library introduced a service for the return of books via postage or mail. As some of the students had completed their studies during the lockdown, they requested to send the books on loan via mail so as not to deprive other users of the resources.

Post-pandemic Library Era

Two years after the pandemic, libraries have experienced changes in services and purposes. In times of uncertainty, libraries have been considering how best to serve their users once the library opens again. The *Guideline on Managing Library Operations Post Movement Control Order (MCO)* published in 2020 is still referred to from time to time. The IMU library, IIUM Library, and NUMed library shared their best practices to isolate returned books and prepared an SOP for processing of books for delivery. Computer labs, furniture, and the counter were re-organised to minimise contact. The counters were installed with Do-It-Yourself (DIY) plastic shields to ensure the safety of both staff and users when they interacted with each other.

Some users realised the importance of activating their library membership as their accounts would help them access the library and its resources off-campus. The IIUM library created a Google form as an additional service to apply for library membership, hence enabling them to access IIUM subscribed electronic resources via the EZProxy server.

While services have always been a priority, librarians acknowledged the importance of the needs of the library staff well-being and staff needed to consider the well-being of the users as well. Staff motivation and acceptance to the changes in services and library operations were issues to be considered when the library decided to open its doors.

Even though Malaysia is already in the post-pandemic and endemic era, libraries continue practicing the safety measures such as seating capacity, physical distancing, etc. There were free webinars organised by publishers or book suppliers and the library associations (Persatuan Pustakawan Malaysia (PPM), Library Association of Singapore (LAS), etc.). Continuous efforts by a group of young librarians called Librarians I.D.E.A.S. (Information, Dissemination, Expertise, Amazing, Success), which included sharing sessions organised by other ASEAN countries were done at a slower pace compared to during the pandemic. Library staff have had an opportunity to interact and build networks with others to gain new insights of performing their library duties in the new normal environment.

As far as service is concerned, it is hard to think that the library would simply return to pre-pandemic business as usual. Instead of returning to the old normal, librarians acknowledged the increasing reliance on digital technologies. The problem that a library like IMU faces is not the digitalisation or the decrease in the number of physical copies of books, but it is the lack of funding to ensure resources are sufficient to meet the needs of all the programmes taught at IMU. The use of the digital collection and relative increase of acquisition of the electronic resources meant a 35% increase in budget for the e-resources in 2021 at IMU library. While several programmes at IMU pivoted to the Online Distance Learning (ODL) mode, the need to have more online resources and online support for teaching and learning activities is crucial.

IMU Library upgraded the contents of the online *Information Literacy* session by adding media literacy content, hence the session was re-named *Information & Media Literacy* session. IMU Library continues the *Click & Collect Services* where the users can reserve a book online via the library system and pick up the physical copy at the Circulation desk. IMU library encouraged users to return books to the Book-Drop box instead of returning them to the library counter. By doing this the library maintains contact-less borrowing.

The growth of digital meetings and programmes since the pandemic shall be continued during the post-pandemic era as it would lead to more professional development opportunities, hopefully resulting in better-trained librarians who could offer more and better services to the communities.

The library opening hours have been shortened due to concerns for safety and the IMU and NUMed libraries will continue with the online booking system for library spaces and IT clusters. This practice was well-accepted by the students at both libraries and who now understand that this is now the new normal.

The NUMed library has stopped printing the due date slips to fulfil the university objective to be a sustainable campus. This has been a practice since the MCO where students were informed to take own responsibility by checking their library accounts to renew books and reminders would not be sent via email anymore. The library website usage has increased too due to active promotion during the MCO and the post pandemic period.

As for supporting the research activities, the IIUM library continues its collaboration with Research Management Centre in promoting the research projects by the academics in a series of online sharing sessions, *Fast Talk*, *Research of the week*, and *Know your researcher* posted on Facebook as a medium to share their research projects and increase research visibility.

Conclusion
Moving forward, since virtual library visits at these three libraries have increased in comparison to physical visits during the post-pandemic library era, libraries should continue to extend their online services.

An important area to consider is space planning within the library to ensure it is well-utilised due to reduced physical usage. The library instructional activities need to continue being offered online. The impact of the Online Distance Learning (ODL) at some universities such as IMU required librarians to think creatively on serving their communities despite reduced annual funding.

The impact of COVID-19 on academic libraries has been significant. Library staff leveraged the changes by creating new and innovative services to support their campus communities due to emergency remote learning during COVID-19. Most students from IMU, NUMed, and IIUM faced no technical issues, predominantly stating that they also had good internet connectivity. They were able to self-regulate their learning using online resources instead of physical resources with minimal support received remotely from the librarians.
Students have been able to adapt to the change during the post-pandemic era, where blended learning which involve face-to-face education and online learning are well accepted as the new norm of teaching and learning activities. The new pattern of learning gives freedom for the students to access their study materials anytime and anywhere.

All libraries are facing a paradigm shift in moving into the endemic phase. There might be a need for more rapid progress to have accessible resources online to accommodate the future

of education. The new hybrid model of education has emerged, and libraries will continue to be the venue for students to find and use the information they need whether face-to-face or virtually. Librarians must be upskilled with capabilities such as video-editing, using a range of collaboration tools and apps to help provide effective learning online in many ways.

Libraries have become interested in making their buildings more environmentally friendly too. Libraries can be a place to teach campus communities about sustainability for example by organising exhibitions, programmes, or displays which can be applied at work, at home, and in the community.

The librarians also need to work with other organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to be agents of change. Librarians, as part of society, need to continue to champion managing and being digitally inclusive for the vulnerable and underprivileged members of the community in order to ensure everyone has access to the information they need.

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