

Rejuvenating Kenyan Academic Library Services in the post-COVID-19 era

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries in Kenya have invested heavily in subscribing to electronic resources through the Kenya Library Information Services Consortium (KLISC), an attempt has been made to install relevant technological infrastructure and to some extent ensured the utilisation of digital services and resources to meet the needs of their clientele. However, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a special challenge to physical library services. Academic institutions were forced to close down to reduce the spread of the virus and fully provide their services online. This paper explores the interventions academic libraries applied to provide their services during COVID-19 era with a view of rejuvenating library services in the post-COVID-19 era in Kenya. A systematic literature review was used a methodology for the study. The review of online published articles on academic libraries operations and services provision amidst COVID-19 pandemic was conducted with a view to identifying global interventions to help rejuvenate academic library services in Kenya in post COVID-19 era. Findings of this study shows that globally, academic libraries adopted varied online strategies to provide services. Some of these include, document delivery via email, use of VPN to access online resources, mobile apps, web-based live chat, interactive social media platforms and online meeting applications such as google class, google meet, zoom, webinars. The finding provides key insights to varied media utilized in library operations and services. Challenge that hindered optimum utilisation of the service include lack of adequate information technology infrastructure and devices, limited budgets, insufficient digital competences, and inadequate digital policies. This paper recommends development of library digital policies on use of digital resources, re-prioritize enhanced library budgets to increase e-services provision, build capacity of library staff and users and invest in appropriate IT infrastructure in order to reposition library services appropriately in the post COVID-19 era and beyond

(Keywords: Academic libraries; COVID-19 pandemic; Digital literacy; Digital library; ICT in Libraries)

I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, a coronavirus strain, differs from other viruses circulating among humans and causes mild illness (such as the common cold) (Casella et al., 2023). COVID-19 is a highly contagious novel virus that originated from Hubei City of China, Wuhan on 31st December 2019. The symptoms of this virus include dry cough, fever, difficulty in breathing, and extreme tiredness. COVID-19 infection results in a death rate severally higher than normal flu. COVID-19 spread rapidly and affected many people worldwide within a very short period of time (Yuki et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (2020) recommended the wearing of masks, social distancing, washing of hands, and isolation to fight the spread of the virus. These protocols helped to reduce COVID-19 deaths worldwide.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, all educational institutions including schools and universities were closed. Academic libraries were not left behind and their doors were equally closed. The mandate of academic libraries is to support their parent organizations in teaching, learning, consultancy, and research services. The delivery of this mandate was affected by breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted into people staying at home (Kasa & Yusuf, 2020). Employees had to work from home. During the lockdown, educational institutions worldwide were adapting to e-learning approaches as a means of ensuring that learners are taught and assessed by utilising e-learning platforms. To provide the requisite support in universities, libraries had to provide e-services to their patrons during the pandemic. Owusu-

Ansah *et al.* (2019) advocate for the creation of digital libraries as platforms for online learning where academic libraries fully engage with patrons by providing teaching resources (e-resources) and learning platforms with digital information. Furthermore, libraries had to explore and develop initiatives of equipping their users with the relevant digital information skills to adequately utilise online resources. Importantly, a few libraries had progressively improved their services and resources to remote access by their users before the pandemic. Libraries had trained their patrons on the use of electronic resources for their research, study or assignment. Hence, library users had basic skills on information retrieval in electronic environment. The librarians' knowledge, skills, and expertise in the latest technologies have now become handy in providing online services and resources to their patrons, especially in the COVID-19 era. Wang & Lund (2020) asserts that a change of the role of librarians during crises and pandemics like COVID-19 is now paramount and essential than ever before. Libraries are also getting to the community by utilising available technological tools to engage users. Recent studies indicate that more training is required on the use of digital resources. For instance, Ishtiaq *et al.* (2020) report of moderate digital literacy skills level among university librarians in Pakistan, Sindh Province. In a paper by Rafiq *et al.*, (2021) on university libraries' response to COVID-19 pandemic, it emerged that the most useful resources to users are Higher Education Commission (HEC) digital library, off-campus access, electronic document delivery services, theses and books repositories and open access resources.

Libraries also utilised Internet technologies in collection management, online services, access to space and equipment, gathering, analysing, storing, and sharing information (Mohammadi&Yegane, 2018). Mahadevan and Kumar (2020) in their investigation on the utilisation of ICTs on various sources of information asserts that libraries need to update their policies on the use of ICTs in the process of information identification, collection, processing, dissemination, and storage of information digitally. Hence, libraries are expected to continue providing their services by utilizing library integrated systems through Local Area Networks (LANs) and the World-Wide Networks (WWN) and prioritise continuous training of staff and users regarding ICT-based resources and services.

Similarly, users should be prepared to enhance their capabilities by moving from traditional approaches and adapting to virtual practices (Ishtiaq *et al.*, 2020). Libraries have used ICTs in most of their services such

as library integrated management systems used to dispense varied functions in libraries. Library users are now embracing the use of electronic resources and services. With the new norm, libraries are challenged to enforce the use of digital resources to support online learning. They should also provide more services on social media platforms like Facebook and telegram, improve their websites to provide interactive feedback, and to market electronic resources by creating tutorials online. In particular, a study on the use of telegram in a library complex in Nigeria demonstrated that benefits of ICTs where the library provided both subscribed and free e-content online (Kasa& Yusuf, 2020).

In Kenya, there are limited visible studies on academic libraries during the COVID-19 era. The Ministry of Education in Kenya developed online learning content through various channels to ensure uninterrupted access to education for learners in the country while they were at home during COVID-19. However, this is riddled with a lot of challenges (Wekulloet *et al.*, 2023). Libraries with hybrid collections responded fairly well during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the users had various options to access information. The Government of Kenya also developed a three-pronged approach to aid the continuation of learning remotely, adhering to the international and national guidance for social distancing, quarantine and self-isolation (Areba, 2020).

A review of some websites revealed that some academic libraries have been equipped with modern infrastructure and have provided access to online resources through the Kenya Library and Information Services Consortium (KLISC) which was established in 2003 with the main objective of facilitating collective subscription to electronic resources to cope with the increasing costs of information resources. Notably, some libraries such as the University of Nairobi (UoN, 2022), Kenyatta University (KU, 2022), United States International University (USIU, 2022), the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA, 2022), Aga Khan University (AKU, 2022), Daystar University (Daystar, 2022), and Strathmore University (Strathmore, 2022), among others, have state-of-the-art learning resource centres. During the COVID-19 era, these libraries provided their services online. For instance, Kenyatta University ensured that academic staff and students had access to online libraries (Mugoet *et al.*, 2020). The University of Nairobi provided latest updates on COVID-19 through their website and provided guidelines on the measures students and staff needed to take to combat COVID-19 while using library services (UoN, 2022). Generally, with the continued spread of COVID-19 world-wide, Kenyan academic libraries had

to adjust and provide reliable and current digital information to their patrons for research, teaching and learning.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a systematic review methodology where review of published papers during inception of COVID-19 focusing on academic libraries world-wide and narrowing to Kenyan academic libraries. Data was searched using the search term “library services provision during COVID-19 pandemic, seventeen journals were identified and retrieved. Liberati *et al.*, (2009) defines systematic review is a research method and process where relevant research is identified, critically appraised, collected and analysed based on research findings. Eleven journals were purposely selected to draw findings that were relevant to academic libraries service provision during COVID-19 pandemic. According to Moher *et al.* (2009), a systematic review reduces biasness leading to reliable findings from which conclusions and recommendations are drawn

Data was analysed using content analysis, a qualitative research technique interpreting underlying contexts on academic libraries services provision amidst COVID-19 pandemic. Contents from relevant studies were analysed using the summative content analysis approach. A summative content analysis is a content analysis approach whereby keywords or contents are counted, compared and thereafter interpretation of the underlying context (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). The eleven papers were analysed based on the objectives of the study where major findings focused on academic

libraries provision of online operations and services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Libraries are striving to meet their user's needs through provision of digital collections and services. During COVID-19 pandemic all the physical library services were in lockdown. Furthermore, there were guidelines that aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, hence users were limited to online library operations and services. Academic libraries in Britain used Zoom platform to share reliable information on COVID-19, train on library literacy skills and sourced cost-effective e-book licenses for staff and students (Poole, 2020). The provision of electronic resources by libraries increased to meet the changing needs of patrons during COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the circumstance, Libraries had to shift many of their operations and services to an online environment to adapt to changing user needs and to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Universities in Pakistan provided document delivery services according to disciplines and patron demand. Other services were manuscripts archives, access to databases through VPNs, e-books, e-dissertation articles, and library instruction manuals (Ishtiaq *et al.*, 2020). Some of the learning institutions also commenced virtual events and programmes like book groups, chess games and “click and collect” services. The table below provides a summary of library services and resources used by libraries during COVID-19 pandemic (Armanule *et al.*, 2022).

Table 1: Library Online services and resources provision during COVID-19

Library	Services/Resources
The University of Malaya library, Malaysia (IFLA, 2020)	Developed tools for online discovery and evidence retrieval of information on the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing a poster on how the online discovery tools worked
The Central Library of the Al Ameed University, Iraq (IFLA,2020)	Documented reflection on COVID-19, through a seminar on the subject (now up on YouTube)
The Federal University, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (IFLA,2020)	Produced a series of tutorials on the utilization of library materials and provided consultation via WhatsApp and videoconferencing
King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia (IFLA,2020)	Produced a series of tutorials on the utilization of library materials

Helsingborg libraries, Sweden (IFLA 2020)	Established a chat function on their website
Danish libraries, Denmark (IFLA, 2020)	Used the reference service of “Ask-a-Librarian”
Libraries in Pakistan (Ishtiaq <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Using mobile apps, web-based live chat, social media platforms, and emails Google class to provide services and used VPN to access resources and document delivery Manuscripts archives Use of e-mails to send scanned book chapters, book reviews E-books, dissertation articles, and Library instruction manuals
Rhodes University, South Africa (IFLA, 2020; Ishtiaq <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Use of remote access to provide online article request service
University of Mustansiriyah, Iraq (IFLA, 2020; Ishtiaq <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Online services, webinars Electronic thesis deposit service
Morocco (IFLA, 2020; Ishtiaq <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Access to E-books supported by IFLA

Although, some of the library services and resource were used before the COVID-19 pandemic, there witnessed accelerated use of the services which would not have been actively utilized before the pandemic. In Kenya, there was limited visible research on academic library interventions during the COVID-19 era. websites.

However, libraries had to step up and provide online services resources to their patrons online. The Table 3 below shows some interventions adopted by some libraries to meet patron's needs during COVID-19 as revealed in their library

Table 3: Interventions of services and resources provided during COVID-19 Pandemic in Kenya

University	Services / Interventions for service provision amidst COVID-19
Strathmore University Library (https://library.strathmore.edu/)	Links on research support, providing library resources and accounts for library users access to library services.
University of Nairobi (https://uonlibrary.uonbi.ac.ke/)	Links on COVID-19 information and updates the use library resources during COVID-19
Kabarak University (https://kabarak.ac.ke/library/)	
Kenya University library (https://library.ku.ac.ke/)	Information literacy tab and dates organized for trainings on referencing, plagiarism, etc
Aga Khan University (https://www.aku.edu/library/Pages/home.aspx)	eCommons for digital research outputs and publications.

In Kenya, it's evident that, most of the online strategies used were not documented and were not easily identifiable. However, the limited data collected indicated basic online attempts towards addressing provision of Libraries operations, eServices and eResources during the COVID-19 pandemic.

IV. CONCLUSION

The majority of academic libraries were physically closed during COVID-19 pandemic. However, few libraries especially in Kenya utilized some online strategies to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They adopted some proactive approaches that include but not limited to: producing a series of tutorials to guide online use of library materials, provided consultation and communicated with users through WhatsApp, emails and videoconferencing. Document delivery services and scanned book chapters, and book reviews were delivered via email, use of VPN to access online resources, book reviews, electronic thesis deposit, use of manuscript archives were provided in some academic libraries. With the new normal, libraries have been leapfrogged into the online environment and are expected to be at the forefront of utilising different online interventions to provide services and resources to their users. Specifically, Librarians should be more digital literate to manoeuvre the available web tools for efficient and effective information provision. Therefore, it's inevitable that libraries have to provide their services online during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond owing to the fact the library users are now becoming more accustomed to online environment.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Owing to the continuous change of technology especially in digital environment, libraries need to constantly train staff and patrons on digital literacy and develop tutorials, guides and assistive tools for ease of retrieval of information in this post COVID-19 era. Academic libraries should now embrace current online platforms like webinars, zoom, google meet, mobile apps, web-based live chat, social media to train librarians and patron's users on new technological concepts on information collection, dissemination, sharing, and archiving. This view is further supported by Ishtiaq *et al.* (2020) whose findings argue that librarians should be trained on digital literacy to manage disasters efficiently.

Further, Libraries should develop and revise their digital and ICT policies to cater for possible strategies in disaster management similar to COVID-19. This approach will ensure Libraries are vigilant during any other potential pandemic in future by adequately planning on how to mitigate such pandemics as they arise and proactively meet the changing needs of their patrons in the digital environment.

It's critical that, academic libraries continuously update their websites by ensuring interactive communication tools like Ask a Librarian, chat, use of remote access and VPN to provide online services to adequately address their patrons needs.

It's inevitable that, Libraries should increase their budgets in support of empowering staff and patrons' needs in the electronic environment in the increase of e-resources, e-services and digital literacy. It is paramount to invest in Library Management Systems that supports dependable systems in information and knowledge management, with appropriate equipment and materials.

In Kenya, key institutions like Commission for University Education (CUE) and Kenya Library Information Services Consortium (KLISC) should develop and revise current guidelines on University Libraries collection, services and IT infrastructure in tandem with emerging issues occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. This will ensure acquisition, updating and renewal of appropriate softwares, e-Eresources and digital literacy for their sustenance and survival in the digital environment

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