THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE LIBRARIES DURING COVID-19

SURVEY REPORT

2020-2021

By Mahlaga Molepo and Mashia Shokane

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Report prepared on behalf of the Marketing, Community Engagement & Communication Division Team:

Annah Mophosho

Annamarie Du Preez

Elma Van der Merwe

Kenosi Maholela

Marcus Maphile

Mashia Shokane

Mahlaga Molepo

Nambitha Manqola

Ohentse Diseko

Zukiswa Ketiwe

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	iii
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Aim.....	2
1.2 Background	2
1.3 Limitations of the study.....	3
2. Literature review	3
3. Methodology.....	5
3.1 Ethical considerations.....	6
4. Research findings and discussion	6
4.1 Quantitative data	6
5. Recommendations and conclusion.....	23
6. References	25

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Category of users	7
Figure 2: Recommendation of UFS libraries.....	8
Figure 3: Overall level of satisfaction with UFS LIS resources	9
Figure 4: Level of satisfaction with services.....	10
Figure 5: Rate the following UFS LIS activities	11
Figure 6: Ordering of books.....	12
Figure 7: Renewal of books.....	13
Figure 8: Web presence.....	14
Figure 9: Community engagement	15
Figure 10: Libguides	16
Figure 11: Training sessions	17
Figure 12: Copyright process	18
Figure 13: Response time.....	19
Figure 14: Self service.....	20
Figure 15: Not applicable/happy	21
Figure 16: Off campus access.....	22
Figure 17: Journals and online dissertations/thesis.....	23

1. Introduction

Academic libraries are under tremendous pressure to move their services online as countries across the globe struggle to keep up with a new strain of COVID-19. Following the announcement of a national lockdown on Monday March 23 by President Cyril Ramaphosa (South African Government News Agency, 2021); academic libraries closed their doors to physical walk-ins as universities closed their campuses. Virtual library services and off side book collection measures were put in place (University of Cape Town Libraries, 2021). South Africa went through 5 levels of the national lockdown between March 2020 and September 2020. Due to strict COVID-19 lockdown restrictions enforced during levels 5 and 4, academic libraries sought new ways (i.e. online) of providing services to users.

Emergency plans to provide services during the pandemic were rolled out by academic libraries during the final quarter of 2020. For instance, there were plans that encouraged partnerships between publishers and universities (Publishing Association of South Africa, 2021). Towards the end of 2020, there was renewed hope as national lockdown rules were eased and the country was moved to level 3. However, a high rise in the number cases, deaths caused by the COVID-19 virus forced government to review level 3 towards December 2020. This meant that the situation in university libraries remained unchanged in the New Year. In January 2021, a new variant of the COVID-19 virus was announced by health minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize (South African Government News Agency, 2021). As South Africa remains under national lockdown, and academic libraries continue to operate with limited staff, there is a need to understand the effectiveness of academic library and information services in universities. This report focuses on the University of the Free State (UFS) Library and Information Services (LIS), and covers the period between March 2020 and February 2021, with a focus on information provision and customer satisfaction. The following sections will address the aim of the survey, background, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion, as well as recommendations and conclusion.

1.1 Aim

The aim of the survey was to determine the effectiveness of University of the Free State (UFS) Library and Information Services (LIS) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following objectives were developed:

- To measure the satisfaction level of library users towards UFS library information resources during COVID-19
- To identify challenges faced by library users when accessing UFS LIS resources during COVID-19
- To understand the experiences of UFS LIS users

In pursuance of the above objectives, the researchers asked the question: how effective was UFS LIS during COVID-19?

1.2 Background

In 2019, the government of China and researchers began investigating the admission of patients with severe pneumonia in hospitals. Initial reports indicated that there was an outbreak of a virus connected to the Wuhan market which sells seafood, meat, and live animals. On 31 December the Chinese government informed the World Health Organization (WHO) about the confirmed cases of corona virus. By 11 January 2020, several cases of patients with corona virus had been reported in China and the disease begun spreading all over the world. On 30 January 2020, the WHO declared corona virus a public health emergency of great concern. The virus that causes the disease was later referred to as COVID-19 by WHO. As a result, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic of great concern since there was no vaccine for the disease at the time. Countries across the world started to enforce lockdown restrictions (Sheposh, 2021), and information provision in academic libraries was severely affected by lockdown restrictions.

University of the Free State Libraries have been providing information resources in both print and electronic form before the Global Pandemic. During COVID-19, UFS LIS have adhered to the national regulations of social distancing by emphasizing remote access to their electronic resource collection to library users. Users employ their UFS login credentials to be authenticated by the UFS LIS website. Academic libraries strengthened their relationship with the publishers and vendors as some publishers were able to provide

free access to their content for few months. Academic Libraries are under tremendous pressure to move their services from print collection to electronic collection as there is a high demand for electronic books and journals now more than ever (University of the Free State Libraries, 2020).

1.3 Limitations of the study

The limitations of this survey are twofold: social and technical. A lower-than-expected response rate was received from the university community, especially students. The low response rate could be caused by the email communication method used to distribute the survey. Students often use personal email addresses instead of the email address allocated by the university (i.e. studentnr@ufs.ac.za) when they register for the academic year. For this reason, many students are unable to receive messages send through official email addresses. The survey relied heavily on electronic announcements through official university platforms such as the UFS Libraries organization on Blackboard, as well as Digest by Department of Communication and Marketing. Additionally, UFS library users have gotten used to researcher administered “evaluation forms” that are used to collect data in face-to-face interactions between faculty librarians and students. The “evaluation forms” approach has been the preferred method for collecting data from library users by UFS Libraries. Furthermore, the survey does not cover information services provided to a cohort of students (i.e. final year medical students doing laboratory experiments) that were allowed to be on campus during lockdown. As the reader will notice in the next section, literature on COVID-19 and academic libraries is scarce.

2. Literature review

Literature on the effectiveness of information provision by South African university libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic is scarce. One reason for the dearth of literature could be the speed at which the pandemic struck in March 2020. Most of the literature addressed in this report is current and covers an international and regional scope. The literature mainly focuses on emergency plans universities and libraries had to come up with in response to the pandemic.

There is evidence of activities aimed at the provision of library and information services during the COVID-19 pandemic. These activities are evident in different types of libraries. Talamo (2020) indicates that by the end of 2020, public libraries in the United States were already introducing book pickup services. Mitchell and Yu (2008) highlight that some academic libraries began offering book deliveries directly to academic staff at their offices. Omane and Nmecha (2020) assert that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will greatly influence the future of information provision in libraries. The authors mention automated systems such as chat bots and shelf reading agents as examples of AI introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is against the backdrop of concerns by librarians who worry that AI might impact their jobs. Guo *et al.* (2020) identified the measures employed in the provision of patron services during COVID-19 in Chinese academic libraries. The authors found that 92% of Chinese academic libraries disseminated COVID-19 related information through their websites while services were moved from physical to remote access. Ifije and Yusuf (2020) studied the role of academic libraries in the evolving paradigm shift in teaching methodologies in Nigerian university as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors recommend “dynamism in library service provision and the acquisition of new skills by librarians” (Ifijeh and Yusuf, 2020: 5-6). Landoy and Faerevaag (2020) investigated how the academic library at University of Bergen in Norway responded to the challenges posed by COVID-19. The findings reveal the library employed automated access to electronic resources. The number of usages of electronic resources used remotely is also reported. The authors state that email and chat-bot’s were used as most librarians worked from home.

The scarcity of scholarly research on the response of academic libraries to the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa may be due to the manner in which the pandemic struck. Perhaps there are other reasons as well. Nicholson (2020) asserts that “on level 5, libraries and archives, museums, educational institutions and businesses were closed at very short notice”. That said, librarians in academic libraries across the world (i.e. Nigeria, United States of America and Norway) have already published research related to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is clearly a need for research on academic libraries and the COVID-19 pandemic in South African university

libraries. This research report employed a methodology that allows for a one-time study that will lay the groundwork for further research.

3. Methodology

The study employed the survey method to collect data from a probability simple random sample of 100 participants using an electronic questionnaire. Graziano and Raulin (2000: 140) posit that “surveys can be carried out by anyone who wants to find out what people are thinking or feeling about specific issues or events”. Probability sampling gives researchers confidence that sample adequately represents the population. According to Graziano and Raulin (2000: 144), “every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected” in simple random sample. Probability simple random sampling was chosen because the researchers had access to a list of staff, and students via the Department of Communication and Marketing, Blackboard and cross-sectional mailing lists. Every effort was made to ensure the protection of participant’s personal information. The electronic questionnaire was distributed to the university community consisting of academic staff (i.e. lecturers), support staff (i.e., administrators) as well as students (i.e. undergraduate and postgraduate). The electronic questionnaire consisted of ordinal, nominal, scale levels of measurements as well as closed and open-ended questions. Out of 100, an initial 50 responses were received between October and December 2020. Towards the end of December 2020, the researchers decided to extend the data collection process to end of January 2021. An additional 30 responses were collected between January 2021 and February 2021. Quantitative data was analysed using a combination of Springshare LibWizard software (Springshare, 2020) and Statistical Software for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Responses were visualized into column, pie and bar charts. The methodology employed in this report symbolises a shift from the practice of collecting data from users through what is referred to as “evaluation forms” in UFS LIS. Oftentimes, the data collected is not systematically analysed and presented in technical reports. The researchers hope that the findings will lay the platform for further research.

3.1 Ethical considerations

Ethics are important to ensure the protection of participants in research. According to Cilliers (2020), “South African are finally getting some much needed protection when it comes to selling and unauthorised use of their personal information”. The protection of personal information of our students and staff is an important ethical consideration in this survey report. The electronic questionnaire did not request for personal information such as names and identification numbers.

4. Research findings and discussion

This section reports on the findings of the survey. The discussion is aimed at highlighting areas which require further research.

4.1 Quantitative data

Since the study was purely quantitative, data was analysed using Springhare's Libwizard software and SPSS. “Quantitative methods are used when data have been collected in or are soon converted into numbers for analysis” (Blaikie, 2003:47). LibWizard is one of the products Springshare offer to UFS LIS on a subscription basis. As already indicated, a major technical limitation of LibWizard is its inability to display responses of gathered through open ended questions. Out of the 10 questions distributed to participants, 5 use the ordinal, nominal, and scale levels of measurement, and use the ordinal, nominal an scale levels of measurement, and 5 were open ended. The idea was to allow participants to make suggestions on library and information services which require improvement. The inability of LibWizard to display open ended fields prompted the researchers to use SPSS for additional analysis and visualization of data.

4.1.1 Category of library users

Figure 1: Category of users

Out of 80, 13 (16.3%) indicated they were support staff, 16 (20 %) were undergraduate students, 13 (16.3%) were postgraduate students, and 38 (47.5%) were academic staff (Refer to Figure 1). These numbers indicate that academic staff responded positively to the survey as compared to support staff and students. Another indication is that the survey generated interest among academic staff, hence the positive response.

4.1.2 Recommendation of UFS libraries to students and staff at other institutions

Figure 2: Recommendation of UFS libraries

Participants responded positively to the question how likely are you to recommend UFS LIS to students and staff at other institutions of higher learning? More than 28 participants were promoters of UFS LIS while 5 were passives and detractors of the UFS LIS (Refer to Figure 2).

The findings above give UFS LIS a gradual promotion score between 5 and 10. The score means that UFS is doing fairly well but there is room for improvement. As the reader will discover in later sections, participants highlighted several areas which need improvement.

4.1.3. Overall satisfaction with UFS LIS resources

Figure 3: Overall level of satisfaction with UFS LIS resources

More than 30 participants indicated they were satisfied with Kovsiecat, 22 were highly satisfied, and 14 neutral. A very small number (1) indicated they were unsatisfied. At least 32 participants said they were highly satisfied with electronic resources, 28 were satisfied, 5 neutral, 6 unsatisfied and 4 highly unsatisfied (Refer to Figure 3). These findings reveal the UFS LIS situation regarding the provision of remote information resources. For instance, electronic resources include eBooks and journals. UFS libraries have invested a considerable number of financial resources into the acquisition of eBooks. Participants who indicated not satisfied and highly satisfied highlighted challenges with off campus access of eBooks. The researchers can only speculate there are challenges with the process of finding and retrieving eBooks from databases. Although the findings indicate library users are fairly satisfied with UFS LIS resources, challenges with the finding and retrieval of eBooks from databases by some library users may indicate otherwise.

Furthermore, a high number of participants indicated they were neutral about exam papers (42), lib guides (41), and new acquisitions (35). As the reader will notice in sub-section 4.1.9, the neutral findings on lib guides are influenced by several factors.

4.1.4 Level of satisfaction with services

Figure 4: Level of satisfaction with services

Participants were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with UFS LIS services. Ask a librarian, inter-library loans, copyright licensing, the arrival information resources, renewal of information resources, Nevada online book ordering, photocopying and scanning, training sessions, evening services and operating hours attracted higher numbers of neutral responses from participants (Refer to Figure 4). The high number of neutral responses point to indecisiveness among participants. Out of all the services listed, 26 participants indicated that they were satisfied with new arrivals of information resources. New arrivals of information resources attracted a higher number of participants at 26, followed by operating library hours (21), renewal of information resources (19), photocopying and scanning (16), training sessions (13), and evening services (8).

4.1.5 Rate the following UFS LIS activities

Figure 5: Rate the following UFS LIS activities

UFS libraries undertake several activities aimed at supporting the teaching, learning and research activities of the university. Out of 80 responses, 59 indicated they was no change in photocopying and scanning, 54 in copyright licensing, 48 in lib guides and renewal of books respectively. Also, 46 participants indicated there was no change in training sessions and community engagement respectively. Furthermore, 40 participants indicated there was no change in web, social media and ordering of books respectively (Refer to Figure 5). Interestingly, 32 indicated UFS LIS web presence and social media were much stronger, and 27 said the ordering of books was much stronger. These findings are contradictory since the researchers could not find, as an example, regular and updated social media pages of UFS LIS.

Based on participant's experience of the above, the researchers also asked participants to indicate which activities and services need to be improved. As already highlighted in section 3, the researchers employed SPSS to analyse and visualize the data for the following sections.

4.1.6 Ordering of books

Figure 6: Ordering of books

A total number of 6 participants indicated that the ordering of books should be improved (Refer to Figure 6). These findings highlight the need to improve on the process of ordering from the day a book is requested and the day the book is finally made available in the catalog.

4.1.7 Renewal of books

Figure 7: Renewal of books

Since UFS Libraries closed doors in March 2020, many users were not able to physically return books they borrowed before the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 5 participants indicated that the renewal of books should be improved (Refer to Figure 7). These findings reveal some users might not be aware that they can renew books by logging into their library accounts through the UFS LIS website page.

4.1.8 Web presence

Figure 8: Web presence

A total of 3 participants indicated that UFS LIS web presence needs improvement (Refer to Figure 8). Web presence in this case refers to UFS LIS website pages as well social media pages. The improvement of website pages may include the regular updating of content, and the consistent use of social media pages for regular communication to library users.

4.1.9 Community engagement

Figure 9: Community engagement

Again, 3 participants indicated that UFS LIS should improve its community engagement initiatives (Refer to Figure 9). Given the COVID-19 pandemic, community engagement may be strengthened by improving on UFS LIS web presence as already mentioned in sub section 4.1. 8.

4.1.10 Lib guides

Figure 10: Lib guides

More than 30% of participants indicated that UFS LIS lib guides were not updated regularly (Refer to Figure 10). This finding comes at a time when UFS LIS has decided to “standardize” lib guides. What the participants are saying is that there is a need to regularly update the content in lib guides, especially during a time when services have been moved to the online environment.

While the standardization of lib guides might seem a workable solution for UFS LIS, it does not guarantee the regular updating of lib guide content. The findings highlight that the regular updating of UFS LIS lib guide is important for customer satisfaction. Additionally, changing the design of lib guides haphazardly without research may negatively affect user experience. Literature shows that conducting research among users before any changes to lib guides may improve user satisfaction. For instance, Thorngate and Hoden (2017) explored usability testing of user interface options in lib guides. Markman (2016) presented a study on Reimagining

Harvard's Lib guides. Kirsh (2004) studied the relationship between metacognition, distributed cognition and visual design. Research is crucial for the design of effective lib guides that speak directly to the needs of library users.

4.1.11 Training sessions

Figure 11: Training sessions

Participants indicated that UFS LIS training sessions need improvement. Among the 33% of participants, none of them specified exactly which aspect of training sessions should be improved (Refer to Figure 11). These findings present an opportunity for further research to be conducted on teaching and learning services, especially the philosophy, approaches, methods, strategies used by librarians in information literacy classes.

4.1.12 Copyright process

Figure 12: Copyright process

Approximately 5.7% of participants indicated that the copyright process during COVID-19 could be improved (Refer to Figure 12). Most of the participants highlighted not being able to access hard copies. The majority suggest that librarians made an effort to scan, copy and deliver copies on time whenever needed.

The copyright process could also be improved through regular communication with library users. Communication could be sent through lib guides, university newsletters under notices and/or through email. Further research is needed to understand library user's communication platform preferences as well as the models used by UFS LIS when communicating with users.

4.1.13 Response time

Figure 13: Response time

Out of 80 participants, only 1% indicated response time for the request of library materials could be improved (Refer to Figure 13). Most of the participants were happy with the response time. These findings indicate that most of the participants were happy with the response time between a request and the delivery of a service.

4.1.14 Self service

Figure 14: Self service

At least 1% of participants suggested self-service machines as a solution during a time of crisis such as COVID-19 (Refer to Figure 14). Although there were very few participants who suggested self-service machines as a solution during COVID-19, further research could be conducted into the possibility of introducing RFID machines to UFS LIS.

4.1.15 Not applicable/happy

Figure 15: Not applicable/happy

Out of 80, 35 participants indicated they had nothing to add to the question relating to the improvement of UFS LIS activities and services (Refer to Figure 15). The percentage could be split into participants who had nothing to add and those who indicated that they were happy with the way the UFS LIS carried out its operations during COVID-19.

From these findings we can denote a positive response to the effectiveness of UFS LIS during COVID-19 albeit also taking into consideration silence might also mean concern.

4.1.16 Off campus access

Figure 16: Off campus access

Out of all the responses that were received from participants, only 1 indicated off campus access should be improved (Refer to Figure 16). Challenges with off campus access of UFS LIS services may be linked to connectivity, the type of devices used to access services as well as the credentials used during the authentication process. Again, such information needs to be communicated to library users on a regular basis in order to harness the experiences of library users. According to University of the Free State Libraries (2020), “access to UFS Library's electronic resources are restricted to currently registered students and staff members of the UFS”.

4.1.17 Journals and online dissertations/ thesis

Figure 17: Journals and online dissertations/thesis

A small number (2) of participants indicated that access to journals and online dissertation/thesis should be improved (Refer to Figure 17). It is not clear why these participants gave this response since the university's Communities in D Space (KovsieScholar Repository) is fully operational and user friendly.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

In the introduction to this report, it was mentioned that academic libraries are under tremendous pressure to move their services online as countries across the globe struggle to keep up with a new strain of COVID-19. UFS Libraries have been providing information resources in both print and electronic form before the Global Pandemic. Due to COVID-19, UFS LIS have adhered to the national COVID-19 regulation of keeping social distancing by emphasizing remote access to their electronic resource collection to library users. The researchers noted the limitations of the survey, especially the heavy reliance on electronic communication during

the data collection stage. It was also indicated that literature on the effectiveness of academic libraries in the provision of information during COVID-19 in South Africa is scarce. The study employed the survey method to collect data from a probability simple random sample of 100 participants using an electronic questionnaire. The findings of the survey have been presented and discussed in section 4. In answering the research question: *how effective was the UFS LIS during COVID19*, especially the period starting March 2020 and ending February 2021, the report presents a moderate to fair effectiveness of UFS LIS. The report also addressed the following objectives:

- To measure the satisfaction level of library users towards UFS library information resources during COVID-19

Although the majority of participants indicated they were satisfied, 6 indicated they were unsatisfied and 4 highly unsatisfied (see subsection 4.1.3). Also, a high number of participants were neutral about their satisfaction with UFS LIS services (see sub section 4.1.4). Therefore this objective has been met.

- To identify challenges faced by library users when accessing UFS LIS resources during COVID-19

While the majority of participants did not highlight challenges with UFS LIS resources during COVID-19, 6 indicated they faced challenges with the ordering of books (see subsection 4.1.6), and 5 indicated difficulties with the renewal of books (see subsection 4.1.7). Also, there challenges with off campus access (see subsection 4.1.16). This objective has also been met.

- To understand the experiences of UFS LIS users

Participants highlighted a lower than expected experience with web presence (see sub section 4.1.8), community engagement (see subsection 4.1.9), lib guides (see subsection 4.1.10), training sessions (see subsection 4.1.11). The above objectives were linked to the analysis and discussion of findings in Section 4, subsections 4.1, subsections 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.4, 4.1.5, 4.1.6, 4.1.7, 4.1.8, 4.1.9, 4.1.10, 4.1.11, 4.1.12, 4.1.13, 4.1.14, 4.1.15, 4.1.16, and 4.1.17. All the objectives have been met. Therefore:

- It is recommended that the approach to user studies in UFS LIS be systematic as opposed to the use of “evaluation forms” to collect data that is never presented in technical reports and shared with the university community (see also section 3).
- It is also recommended that UFS LIS conduct research into areas such as user interfaces, think and usability testing of lib guides (see also subsection 4.1.10).
- In addition, further research should be conducted on teaching and learning in UFS LIS, especially the philosophy, approaches, methods, strategies used by librarians in information literacy classes (see also subsection 4.1.11).
- Further research should be conducted to find out what holds in other South African university libraries.
- Research is needed to understand library user's communication platform preferences as well as models used by UFS LIS when communicating with users (see also sub-section 4.1.12).

Although the provision of services in academic libraries has been severely affected by Covid-19, the pandemic also presents an opportunity for self-reflection and improvement towards a world class UFS LIS. The findings of this survey can be generalised to the broader UFS community.

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