

# Leaders' Conversations: Academic Libraries in the Post-COVID-19 World



The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Regional Office for Asia and Oceania and the National Library Board, Singapore jointly held the third and final series of the Leaders' Conversations on 16 October 2020, which focused on academic libraries in the post-COVID-19 world.

The session received great support from IFLA and the Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania Section. Ms Tina Yang, Chair of the IFLA Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania, opened the session and Ms Christine Mackenzie, President of IFLA closed the session by summarising the common themes of all three sessions.

## **Address by Ms Tina Yang, Chair, IFLA Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania**

Ms Tina Yang welcomed participants to the Leaders' Conversations series and highlighted its timeliness to address how libraries could work together to survive the crisis. She felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused severe damage and unprecedented changes that transformed libraries around the world.

She noted that the session was well represented, as leaders from the Academic Libraries in all six sub-regions of Asia and Oceania would be sharing their reflections and insights into how academic libraries can align with new emerging priorities. She thanked the IFLA Regional Office for Asia and Oceania, IFLA Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania, and the National Library Board, Singapore for organising this. She felt that the session was well-attended

to the IFLA Global Vision and its objectives of fostering collaboration as well as working towards UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Presentation by Ms Roxanne Missingham, University Librarian (Chief Scholarly Information Officer), Australian National University (ANU), Australia**

Ms Roxanne Missingham shared how libraries had gone digital and moved online during the COVID-19 situation. The key development would be there was no going back to the pre-COVID state with the advent of the new normal. Libraries kept the spirit of the university alive and COVID had made the move to the digital mode more rapidly.

The need to learn new skills became obvious, and the role and value of libraries became evident, even as there were financial implications in supporting libraries. Besides the traditional functions, academic libraries' involvement in education-related areas became critical as well. The libraries played a pivotal role in delivering content, providing open access resources and production services for education. They intensified the collaboration with academics on how to reshape these services and redesign the digital library services. She also highlighted the need for greater digital content in library collections.

Another area flagged by Ms Missingham was the production of resources for education such as publishing e-textbooks, making resources openly accessible through the repository and increasing the capability of academics and educators in publishing. Making resources available for open access was extremely important. As an example, she mentioned an anthropology book of which only two copies were available. The library contacted the author who consented to making the copy available digitally, which then was subsequently made accessible to all universities. The future direction for the library would be to collaborate with creators of knowledge.

The library also paid attention to the capability of the library staff. The library was the gateway to global resources, and library staff were people of knowledge and needed to be involved in the development of curriculum.

At present, the ANU was slowly returning to normalcy with teaching taking on a hybrid character. The library was co-creating digital content with academics. ANU was part of the International Alliance of Research Universities facilitating students' access to resources. One of the admirable goals of IFLA was in building communities and this was one exemplification of that. She reiterated that the pandemic had transformed the libraries into the heart of the universities that co-created content with academics instead of being simply regarded as a gateway to knowledge. It had prompted a rethinking of roles and access while opening new digital spaces.

**Presentation by Mr Peter Sidorko, University Librarian, The University of Hong Kong (HKU), Hong Kong**

Mr Peter Sidorko started off by outlining the social challenges that beset Hong Kong before the COVID-19 pandemic – the political and social unrest and its consequent disruptions to

everyday life. When the pandemic broke, the library had to maintain some level of service and decided to attempt continuing to serve users, albeit with some safety measures. Even with the ongoing recovery, some curtailment of users and services remained. A great deal of internal and external communication and coordination was essential.

He also recalled the last major global medical crisis, the SARS outbreak in 2003, and mentioned that several lessons were learnt from that. He opined that people would forget and revert to old ways as the pandemic fades out. While there would be some degree of “new normal”, the operations would likely to settle back to the “old normal” with the resumption of service delivery sooner rather than later, though this forecast was made with a caveat that there could be unforeseen COVID-19 developments.

He felt that the space configuration geared towards collaborative learning and working together would be reconsidered but would not be dispensed with. Social distancing was an interim measure which “time will heal”. There was a strong demand for library seats, especially during exams, and the lack of seating capacity was the number one complaint by students. Some of the new initiatives introduced during COVID-19, such as the Zoom-a Librarian service, are likely to be continued. The library is now operating on a blended mode, fusing online and face-to-face services.



In addition, Mr Sidorko emphasised the need to ensure quality control on any form of e-learning. The library had done a five-year review of various e-content across the campus and went on to constitute an e-learning resource hub that would facilitate creation of electronic content with technologies such as 3D and VR. The government had also done a similar review of e-learning and arising from this review, the library was coordinating contributions to an e-learning resource hub. The usage statistics of the hub had been noteworthy.

In conclusion, Mr Sidorko identified several qualities library staff needed to face the post-COVID-19 world. He zeroed in on two key attributes, agility (e.g. to adapt to new digital modes) and resilience (i.e. ability to bounce back and bounce forward).

### **Presentation by Dr Ida Fajar Priyanto, Senior Lecturer, Department of Library and Information and Management, Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia**

Dr Ida Fajar Priyanto commented that the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak were characterised by confusion in libraries. He recounted the sequence of library closures and partial reopening, and the control measures put in place. To put in context the scale of the challenge, Indonesia had almost 4,000 universities spread across the vast archipelago. He envisaged libraries becoming more creative in the delivery of services and gave the example of delivering books to students using mobile services.



He felt that there would be more online services and more contactless technology. However, he identified a serious concern whereby not all libraries could afford the hardware costs. Some libraries faced the prospect of budget cuts and a smaller role. More materials would probably be made available for open access, while the demand for physical space remained strong with many students still keen to visit the libraries. Disadvantaged users and communities at risk would still be catered for but with some adjustments. Dr Ida recalled and agreed

with Mr Sidorko's earlier point that operations would generally revert to *status quo ante*.

### **Presentation by Mr Piotr Lapo, General Expert, Nazarbayev University (NU), Kazakhstan**

Mr Piotr Lapo talked about how NU, from inception, had paid great attention to and provided for financial resources for the procurement of e-books, subscription to international databases and the development of virtual services. Therefore, the transition to online education due to COVID-19 was not problematic. However, they were keenly aware that the library's physical space was a valuable and important resource for students, and even the most advanced online services and resources could not replace it.

As for the post-COVID-19 challenges, Mr Lapo spoke of the need to "first, promote the development of a person's spiritualised intelligence; and second, to contribute to the sustainable development of humankind". In a global society, librarians must contribute to the development of emotional and cultural intelligence of people in the country and on the international level. Librarians should actively participate in the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda in their countries and in the development of media and information literacy. Librarians should also strive to implement open information sources for education and science. To this end, they should create corporate information resources and services and integrate them into the universal international information space.

Professional development of librarians was also important. The coordination of librarians, libraries, and library associations was essential. He voiced the necessity to create a unified online resource that would contain information including the systems and trends of library education and certification of librarians in different countries.

### **Presentation by Ms Randa Chidiac, Executive Director, Grants and Projects Unit, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), Lebanon**

Ms Randa Chidiac remarked that COVID-19 had witnessed the diminishing value of print resources and the rocketing use of e-resources. However, the shift to open access was hindered by copyright issues. It was important to work with the government to review copyright laws in this regard. To circumvent legal issues, USEK contacted the authors and obtained the necessary permission to digitise materials. The library webpage was expanded immediately, and online services were offered in all three national languages, English, French

and Arabic. Some of the positive developments included the participation in the teaching process and curriculum design.

She also highlighted the importance of staff support measures as without staff commitment, nothing could materialise. They need to be equipped with skills and hardware and be adequately protected from the virus risk.

On future trends, Ms Chidiac assessed that about 80 percent of work would revert to pre-COVID-19 days. The rest would evolve. Creativity and out-of-the-box thinking would be vital to meet challenges. There should also be more collaboration between libraries, not only nationally but regionally and internationally. Libraries should think of enhancing their services and of sharing resources and experiences. Libraries should consider supporting the UN 2030 Agenda in light of the other more pressing issues. Given prevalent uncertainty, they should confront the challenges one day at a time.

### **Presentation by Dr Nayana Wijayasundara, Librarian, University of Sri Jayewardenepura (USJ), Sri Lanka**

Dr Nayana Wijayasundara opened her presentation by discussing how academic libraries managed to continue some of their library services, despite being caught off guard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples of these undisrupted services included the offering of e-resources and remote assistance.

She elaborated on how the academic librarians at the USJ are working on a risk reduction preparedness plan for infectious diseases and other disasters. In addition, they were looking at increasing the library's e-resources, providing the necessary infrastructure and introducing new and diverse online services. The upskilling of staff to manage the work-from-home arrangements would be another focus area.

As there was an increase in online learning and students require the access to e-materials, the discussions on issues such as copyright limitations were ongoing among the academic libraries in Sri Lanka. With the flow of funds dried up, the library was trying to centralise resources with the setting up of "e-Reservoirs". There were also plans to introduce self-checkout and drop-off facilities.

### **Presentation by Ms Bethany Wilkes, University Librarian, Singapore Management University (SMU) Libraries, Singapore**

Ms Bethany Wilkes shared that one of SMU's value propositions to students was the campus experience with its dynamic city location. The challenge was to replicate this experience in an online environment amid the pandemic.

With the bulk of its collections already in digital format (90%), SMU had minimal problems shifting services to an online mode. She mentioned that the measures in place during the COVID-19 situation and how they were being loosened up, including the bifurcation of the student cohorts for segregated physical visits. The collaboration across various stakeholders

in the university was paramount, as was consistent messaging and practices. With the digital shift, there was no interruption to the services offered.

She added that physical library spaces were a core service valued by students. They provided a conducive place for doing course work. Spaces were also necessary to host events and inspire curiosity. The post-COVID-19 narrative was not clear and required flexible reinvention of the use of space and the negotiation between the digital and physical environments. She felt that there was no need for a strict division as there was an overlap of both spaces. Students and faculty were being engaged to work out new modalities of online learning and marshalling resources for teaching. Copyright education was also being carried out.



The university was working out a new strategic plan, balancing preparations for the future while tending to the immediate. With travel disrupted, the investment in academic libraries was important for students to reach out and participate in global networks.

### **Question and Answer**

***Does your institution have a policy to attain the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN's SDG) – Ms Jayshree Mamtara, Moderator***

Ms Roxanne Missingham replied that while ANU did not have an explicit policy, ANU's work objectives were broadly aligned with the UN's SDGs, such as increasing the access to publications and digitisation.

***Hong Kong has been through quite difficult times. I'm really impressed with the way that the University of Hong Kong Library has rethought the way that it provides services to its users. What kind of strategy do you have in place to ensure that staff are able to meet the new challenges? – Ms Jayshree Mamtara, Moderator***

Mr Peter Sidorko shared that their performance evaluation had a professional development component. Additionally, one of the library's key objectives of the new strategic plan was to nurture evolving skills for academic institutions. He remarked that having the work-from-home arrangement, for example, assumed that everyone could do so seamlessly. However, this was not automatically the case for staff at the junior levels. Budgeting constraints also constricted libraries' development objectives.

***You mentioned that it's quite likely that smaller libraries are severely affected by budget cuts. How would this impact your users and is there anything that can be done to try and help those small libraries? – Ms Jayshree Mamtara, Moderator***

Dr Ida Fajar Priyanto said that smaller libraries might not be able to afford certain database subscriptions. Students at universities with limited resources could access the databases subscribed and offered by the National Library of Indonesia and the Ministry of Education.

***Do you think it's important for library staff to be involved in international events and to what extent do you think it would help them as individuals? – Ms Jayshree Mamtora, Moderator***

Mr Piotr Lapo believed that international support was extremely important to the upgrading of professional education, skills and knowledge in libraries. The Nazarbayev University Library aimed to be more active in international events including those organised by IFLA.

***Lebanese libraries have been through very tough times over many disasters in recent times. Do you think that they will bounce back this time as well? – Ms Jayshree Mamtora, Moderator***

Ms Randa Chidiac affirmed that the community and the libraries would rise again like the proverbial phoenix. The recovery might be slow but sure.

***To what extent has open access played a role in helping your library users? – Ms Jayshree Mamtora, Moderator***

Dr Nayana Wijayasundara opined that accessibility to open materials would be beneficial to library users, and it would be better to have more of these materials. She added that more work needed to be done to publish materials on open access platforms.

***To what extent are you succeeding in bringing the students back to using library services? – Ms Jayshree Mamtora, Moderator***

Ms Bethany Wilkes said that many students had returned to the libraries for their own study, and she expected to see a further uptick as the exams drew near. Given the success of the digital platforms, library services such as online workshops were likely to be continued.

***You (Ms Roxanne Missingham) mentioned about being able to continue providing resources, under the provision of fair use, and at the same time, Randa spoke about copyright challenges and working with the government on reviewing the copyright policy on contacting individual Lebanese authors to get permissions to distribute their resources. Moving forward, library can consider working with the publishers to put in a favourable clause in our licence to request publishers to lift certain restrictions during these times temporarily. We can see how to scope it under certain agreeable conditions to help libraries continue assisting users in their learning. – Ms Joan Wee, University Librarian, Singapore Institute of Technology Library***

Ms Roxanne Missingham agreed that this was worth pursuing and that she would be writing an article in the IFLA journal on the elements necessary for enabling legislations in the respective jurisdictions.

***I wonder if the new emphasis on remote services makes it harder or easier for your users with disabilities. What is the value increase in accessibility by using these new services – I think accessibility is the key word here. – Mr Winston Roberts, Senior Advisor, National Library of New Zealand***

Ms Roxanne Missingham acknowledged the validity of the concerns and admitted that work had to be done in this area. The ANU website, however, had been tested for accessibility. Conversely, there were some staff and students who had a range of health issues and benefitted from the remote access. Some of them had issues such as being prone to distractions and susceptible to noise disturbance.

***The border closure has devastated the tourism-dependent economy of Fiji. Funding for educational institutions and libraries has been greatly affected. This has accelerated the shift to digital and to open educational resources. Textbooks are expensive. Are your academics producing e-textbooks locally or are you publishing textbooks that have been brought in and making some arrangements to publish them in an electronic format? – Ms Elizabeth Reade Fong, University Librarian, University of the South Pacific***

Ms Roxanne Missingham noted the extreme fragility of certain economies. As for the textbooks, ANU faculty did publish their textbooks locally with funding support from the university in areas aligned with national or niche objectives. The authors might not financially profit from that but would be recognised for their endeavour.

***When devising a strategic plan, are there any parts that are different due to the pandemic? – Ms Joan Wee, University Librarian, Singapore Institute of Technology Library***

Ms Bethany Wilkes clarified that they had not formalised the library strategic plan. Only the university plan had been finalised. The partnership and collaboration forged across the university needed to be further developed in the library plan along with the digital transformation agenda.

Mr Peter Sidorko added that the strategic plan for The University of Hong Kong encompassed four key areas – e-learning, partnership across the campus, supporting infrastructure and staff skills.

### **Closing remarks by Ms Christine Mackenzie, President, IFLA**

Ms Christine Mackenzie identified common themes that straddled the three episodes of the Leaders' Conversations series on libraries in the Post COVID-19 world. One of the common themes that struck her was how libraries were working together and sharing information. She felt this trend would continue, with IFLA's website on information sharing and the countries' respective information networks.

Other notable observations include:

- a. The changing role of libraries
- b. Demonstrating innovation and creativity through the reinvention of library services.
- c. Upskilling of librarians.
- d. New appreciation for libraries as they were now seen as valuable partners by the community and the academics.
- e. Being resilient and pivoting.

Ms Mackenzie was glad that the UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals were repeatedly brought up during the conversations and stressed that libraries should not lose focus on that. She closed the series by showing her appreciation ended by thanking the IFLA Regional Office for Asia and Oceania and the National Library Board, Singapore for organising the three sessions of Leaders' Conversations, which all have been valuable.

### **Panellists**

Ms Christine Mackenzie, President, IFLA

Ms Tina Yang, Chair, IFLA Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania

Ms Roxanne Missingham, University Librarian and Chief Scholarly Information Officer, Australian National University, Australia

Mr Peter Sidorko, University Librarian, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Dr Ida Fajar Priyanto, Senior Lecturer, Department of Library and Information Management, Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia

Mr Piotr Lapo, General Expert, Nazarbayev University Library, Kazakhstan

Ms Randa Chidiac, Executive Director, Projects and Grants, International Affairs Office, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Lebanon

Dr Nayana Wijayasundara, Librarian, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

Ms Bethany Wilkes, University Librarian, Singapore Management University Libraries, Singapore

### **Host**

Ms Soh Lin Li, Manager, IFLA Regional Office for Asia and Oceania

### **Moderator**

Ms Jayshree Mamtora, Scholarly Communications Librarian, James Cook University, Co-Chair of IFLA Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania