N.I.W.A.N

National Information Workers Association of Namibia

IMPACT OF COVID -19 ON LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES AND RECORDS CENTRES IN NAMIBIA: A REVIEW BY THE NATIONAL INFORMATION WORKERS ASSOCIATION OF NAMIBIA (NIWAN).

Abstract

This article outlines the impact of COVID-19 on Libraries, Archives and Records Centres in Namibia. It highlighted the challenges, plans and strategies implemented in ensuring the continuity of services at both National Library, National Archives, public, academic, schools and special libraries.

Introduction

Established in the year 1990, the National Information Workers Association of Namibia (NIWAN), formerly known as Namibia Information Workers Association is striving to promote the development of the information professions and information services in Namibia by coordinating the efforts of information workers in the promotion of the information services. The Association has been supporting information professionals on various programs and projects related to access and provision of information in the country.

Namibia, like the rest of the world, has been fighting the outbreak of COVID-19 since the early months of 2020. In response to the pandemic, the President of the Republic of Namibia, in terms of Article 26 (1) of the Namibian Constitution, declared a State of Emergency on the 17th of March 2020 and the country also introduced a lockdown system from the 28th of March 2020, started with the partial lockdown of Erongo and Khomas regions. The lockdown was further extended to all regions from the 18th of April 2020.

In response to the State of Emergency, all staff members in the Public Service were directed by the Cabinet to work from home for 14 days from the 30th of March 2020 to the 16th of April 2020, which was consequently extended until the 4th of May 2020. This directive included librarians, Archivists and Records managers in the country. Given the state of affairs, there was a need for the Libraries, Archives and Records Centres to introduce various response strategies to ensure continuity of services at those institutions.

As a result, NIWAN reviewed how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the provision of services at both Government, Academic, Special, National Archives and Records Centre in Namibia.

Government libraries and Archives

The Government libraries, includes a network of 66 public, special, school libraries, National Library and the National Archives of Namibia. All these are falling under the Directorate of Namibia Library and Archives Service (NLAS), a directorate in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture entrusted to oversee the functions of those libraries and the National Archives. These libraries and the National Archives were all closed down for the public during the lockdown period. As such, the Directorate drew up a responsive plan to redefine their service and ensure that public members are provided with access to quality information even during the closure of libraries.

The responsive plan has adopted individual local and international guidelines both from the Ministry of Health and Social Services in Namibia, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and International Council of Archives (ICA).

Analyzing the operationalization of public libraries in Namibia, it was found out that 62 out of 66 public libraries are providing access to computers and 59 are providing access to internet connectivity and WIFI. The same service is made available at both the National Library and National Archives of Namibia. Although not all libraries are providing access to Internet and Computers as yet, the presented figure is a positive indication of the commitment of the Government of the Republic of Namibia in ensuring access to information to all citizens.

During the lockdown period, the libraries under NLAS strived to support learning for both teachers and learners by promoting and providing access to reliable online resources both that are approved by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture such as NotesMaster Namibia (www.notesmaster.com) from the Namibian College of Open Learning, Kopano and the Namibia Reads App, as well as other resources that are evaluated by librarians and found relevant for public use. Such information was shared on institutional websites, library websites and social media sites. The Directorate also made a decision for the libraries that are offering WIFI connectivity not to disconnect the WIFI after operating hours for the users to have access to the internet within the proximity of the library, using their own devices. All school libraries were unfortunately closed during the lockdown period.

In regards to the Archives Services, the National Archives of Namibia provided most of its services online at: https://nan.gov.na and has been updating Archives users on the Facebook page. The list (finding Aids) of the National Archives was uploaded on the website and requests to access the records were made electronically. Digital copies of records were then provided to the users upon request.

Academic Libraries

In response to the COVID-19 lockdown, academic libraries at institutions such as the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), Namibian College of Open Learning and the International University of Management (IUM) took decisive actions with a focus on uninterrupted service delivery. This ensured that reference assistance, research services and access to e-resources continued during the lockdown period.

The NUST Library took a step further to craft and issue a COVID-19 response service charter, to ensure that users knew what to expect from the library during that time. They also utilized all communication channels at their disposal, i.e. social media platforms, website, the Student Representative Council, to communicate the information to the user base. User guides were also developed and have been circulated to the users through social media platforms and email.

Books still on loan with users were automatically renewed to prevent the generation of overdue fines and a hotline was provided to students to contact the Librarians when they needed assistance. Services were moved online, and virtual reference services, short videos on the use of e-resources were offered and placed on the website. Webinars on accessing e-resources and referencing became a regular offering. NUST specifically created a web page on Open Access and Open Educational Resources to expand the information base.

When students started with remote learning in May 2020, NUST library had a two-pronged response, to ensure that students had access to as many e-textbooks and digitised content as much as possible, while observing Copyright all times. The library realised that, there was a need to provide access to the print prescribed text collection and the library responded to this demand by starting the Click-and-Collect service, whereby students would send an email to the library through its online catalogue, indicating which titles they need. Books were then prepared and students could just pick them up from the library. Books returned by students were placed in quarantine for 72 hours before they were processed and made available for circulation again.

Upon the return of students to the campus on the 22nd of June 2020, NUST introduced a phased-in approach, allowing only certain groups of students to return at one time. The library adhered to all the safety protocols as prescribed by the government and continued to adapt as government directives changed.

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) implemented the pre-booking sessions apart from the phased in approach. The College went further to issue user cards for security control at the entrance and around the campus. The Self-study Area at the Nahas Angula Hall remained open for all drop in students and learners to prepare for the examinations. Secondary school learners continuously had access to learning resources on the NotesMasters platform during and after lockdown. All Tertiary and TVET students had access to the e-resources as the College had subscribed to Emerald until December 2020. The renewal for the subscription is a strong consideration if the current COVID-19 situation remains unchanged. To prevent the transmission of the virus among students, hard copies of learning materials were discouraged.

Additionally, students and tutors used the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) Learning Platform or course management system (CMS) - a free Open Source software package designed to help educators to create effective online content.

Therefore, NAMCOL utilised Moodle for tertiary programmes (TP), International Computer Driving License Course (ICDL), Basic Computer Literacy Course (BCLC), TVET courses and short courses in terms of teaching- learning online courses, assignments submission and grading all the assignments of all students for TP, ICDL, BCLC. This platform enabled the continuation

of online courses amidst the COVID – 19 pandemic. In order to mitigate the spread of the virus, students were encouraged to submit assignments online by making use of the Namibian Open Learning Network Trust (NOLNet) affiliated centres and libraries in Namibia.

On the other hand the International University of Management (IUM) Library was able to continue to offer online services and access to the online resources during stage 1 of the lockdown primarily because the online library was functional prior to the lockdown. Users guides (most of which were already on the library website) were shared with the users through social media platforms and email; which was made more effective by the fact that the Library Knowledge Ambassadors (i.e. a group of students who volunteer to train their peers and create awareness of the library resources and services) assisted the library staff to share the guides with their fellow students mostly through WhatsApp. As a result, the library was able to reach out to many users. In addition, users could request for assistance through the online reference service "Ask a Librarian'.

In regard to print books, borrowing was suspended, however, through the Web OPAC users were able to renew books borrowed and for those who couldn't, the accrued overdue charges were waived. Nonetheless, stage 1 of the lockdown had its share of challenges as not all library staff and users alike had the required infrastructure to work online or gain access to the online library (i.e. personal computer and/or internet connectivity).

During the stage 2 of the lockdown (i.e. From May) users were not permitted to use the physical library. However, in cognizant that not all users could access the online library, circulation of books was allowed provided the user notified the circulation staff through email or phone call of the intended book(s) in advance; which were then processed for pick up. Users were not allowed to go to the shelves.

To support online teaching and learning, the library acquired a significant number of the prescribed ebooks of all courses offered by the University. The ebooks were linked to the LMS for easier access and use, a move that was welcomed by students and staff as it made teaching and learning easier.

The academic libraries recorded low usage of print resources even after allowing users to borrow books during Stage 2.

Lessons Learnt

Digital Divide is a Real Issue

The Library and Archives Sector had realized that whilst the educational institutions were focusing more on electronic resources over the print, there was a segment of users (mostly students) who had no means of accessing the available e-resources. The same observation was true for the public libraries.

In that regard, a need was identified for libraries to acquire sufficient information technology equipment and infrastructure, reliable internet connectivity, as well as the need to develop training programs for library staff and users on information search strategies.

The biggest lesson learnt was that, libraries need to invest more in the acquisition of e-resources with an emphasis on e-textbooks and training in their usage. It is certain that COVID-19 will impact on the current models of e-resources acquisition and usage, not only for academic libraries but all libraries that have thus far been focusing on print collections.

Libraries and archives need to have disaster management plans in order to respond faster to crises and not be too tied down by procedure and tradition. A positive aspect of the pandemic at NUST for instance was that, it validated and accelerated certain projects such as an interactive website with chat functionality, which will continue to be of immense value post-COVID. It is therefore, not all doom and gloom but an incredible time of rethinking and rebirth.

Challenges

Working from home posed various challenges to most staff members as there were no measures in place to provide staff members with resources such as computers and internet connectivity devices for them to effectively execute their duties while at home. Working from home was also an unknown experience for library staff and they had to learn how to perform productively without close proximity to other colleagues. It was realised that libraries and archives did not always have the technological tools or skills to work offsite and attention should be directed to changing this. The psychological impact of the pandemic on staff is also an aspect libraries should not ignore and learn how to deal with

The biggest challenge observed by the librarians was that, some students do not have the necessary technology to access internet, e.g computers, smart phone and internet connection at home thus they have to travel to internet café, libraries or places where they can access internet in order to submit their assignments.

Conclusion

The current crisis of COVID-19 pandemic has affected the information service delivery in Namibia, as most of the libraries and archives did not have a firm plan to mitigate this level of catastrophe. Information professionals are however applauded as they were responsive and managed to establish different services to ensure that student, learners and the general public members had access to quality information.

COVID-19 has the potential to disrupt the library profession for the foreseeable future and Namibian libraries will do well to plan ahead to ensure seamless service delivery and resilience in light of the changing information landscape.