RLUK Research Libraries UK

The initial responses of RLUK member
libraries to the Covid-19 crisis

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March 2020

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Overview

During the Covid-19 crisis, RLUK member libraries worked tirelessly to ensure the continuity of library services whilst protecting the health of their staff and users. The immediate reaction of member libraries to the crisis, and those of their parent institutions, provided valuable information regarding the role of the library and how it was perceived within its parent organisation. During the escalation of coronavirus within the UK, and during February and March in particular, RLUK member libraries prepared for a variety of scenarios, represented the concerns of their staff and users within their organisations, and adapted to a rapidly changing situation. This period highlighted the importance of making the library's voice heard within its institution, the value of internal advocacy, and the important role that knowledge sharing between libraries can play in decision making.

This report offers a short summary of the immediate responses of member libraries to the Covid-19 crisis. It has been informed by:

- Correspondence from RLUK's member networks which detailed the experiences of individual libraries.
- Shared resources including a Google spreadsheet detailing library closures.
- Online posts, social media, and individual library websites.

The purpose of this report is to provide a short overview of some of the key strands of discussion, to collate these into a single space, and to surface lessons learnt. This briefing will be supplemented with additional intelligence over the coming weeks. Although the Covid-19 crisis affected all of RLUK's members, this report largely relates to the experiences of its university members within the UK and their experiences leading up to library closure.[1] It is worth noting that the experience of these university members was not uniform. What this report seeks to do is draw out some of the key experiences of members in the weeks leading up to library closure, giving an illustrative picture of events and discussions, and noting when these only applied to a selection of members.

Emerging context: RLUK member libraries reaction to Covid-19

From early February 2020 it became apparent that Covid-19 had the potential to have a significant impact on the work of UK universities and their libraries. Following the first confirmed case in the UK on 31st January (in York), universities began a campaign to encourage enhanced personal hygiene and cleanliness in line with emerging government advice.

The high-usage and prominent position of RLUK member libraries on campus, within their institution, and on the national information and cultural landscapes, meant that the library provided multiple points of transmission should the spread of the virus become significant. Across February and March, concerns grew that the high-transaction rate of physical collections, and reserve collections in particular, could represent a point of transmission for the virus within the student population. The large number of high-density study spaces contained within member libraries, with sizeable surface areas, could also provide points of transmission. The high-volume

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[1] On 12.03.20 the Irish government announced the closure of schools and universities. This direct intervention meant that Trinity College Dublin Library closed on 12.03.20, although the university had announced that teaching would move online from 11.03.20. The discussion and decision-making process around closure appeared swifter than that witnessed within many UK universities due to this early government intervention.

of face-to-face services provided by member libraries to their users meant that front of house staff were potentially exposed to a higher risk of infection than colleagues elsewhere within their institution. This last point produced increasing levels of anxiety amongst colleagues.

Place of the library on campus

The growing need to control and cleanse library spaces, and introduce a degree of social distancing amongst users and staff, all had a significant impact upon library operations. This was especially the case as the library, particularly amongst some of RLUK's university members, remained functional and open, whilst other areas of the campus were increasingly closed.

Several members reflected on the strategic and symbolic importance attached to maintaining library services within their institution during this period, that the library was seen as essential to 'keeping the show on the road' by university leaders, and that with centrally located and sometimes iconic buildings, the library represented a sort of campus citadel. This was particularly the case amongst those institutions for which the library building provided one of the main areas of communal space on campus. The valuable social role played by library spaces, particularly for international students whose departure from campus was delayed, was noted by a number of members. The library's continued provision of learning materials during the transition to online teaching and learning was seen as essential, with academics on social media coining the phrase of 'panic borrowing' in preparation for remote working.

The library remaining open whilst other parts of the campus closed caused heightened anxiety amongst some library staff. This in turn, *for some members*, led to the library seeing high-usage levels by students, particularly during the week 16-20 March as options for communal gatherings diminished elsewhere on campus. This occurred despite students being encouraged to leave campus. The upswing in usage *amongst some members* during the middle of the week 16-20 March reduced the library's ability to enforce social distancing measures during such high-use periods. This situation eased towards the end of the week, following further instruction by universities that students leave campus', and, at this point, usage numbers fell far below the normal seasonal levels.

Contingencies and incremental closure

Member libraries were ultimately well placed to respond to the ongoing spread of the virus and the potential impact that this could have on their buildings and operations. Many libraries had tested a variety of contingency scenarios in the days leading up to closure, including the remote working of key staff and establishing the hardware and software requirements to enable this. With the ongoing spread of the virus, many member libraries instituted a series of incremental steps across early-mid March to reduce the exposure of library staff whilst maintaining operations. These steps included:

1. **Reduction in opening hours:** of main library and secondary library sites, including departmental and subject-specialist libraries.

2. **Partial closure:** of secondary locations such as departmental libraries, to enable the focusing of staff and resources on main library sites.

3. **Vulnerable staff:** or those with caring responsibilities were able to work from home.
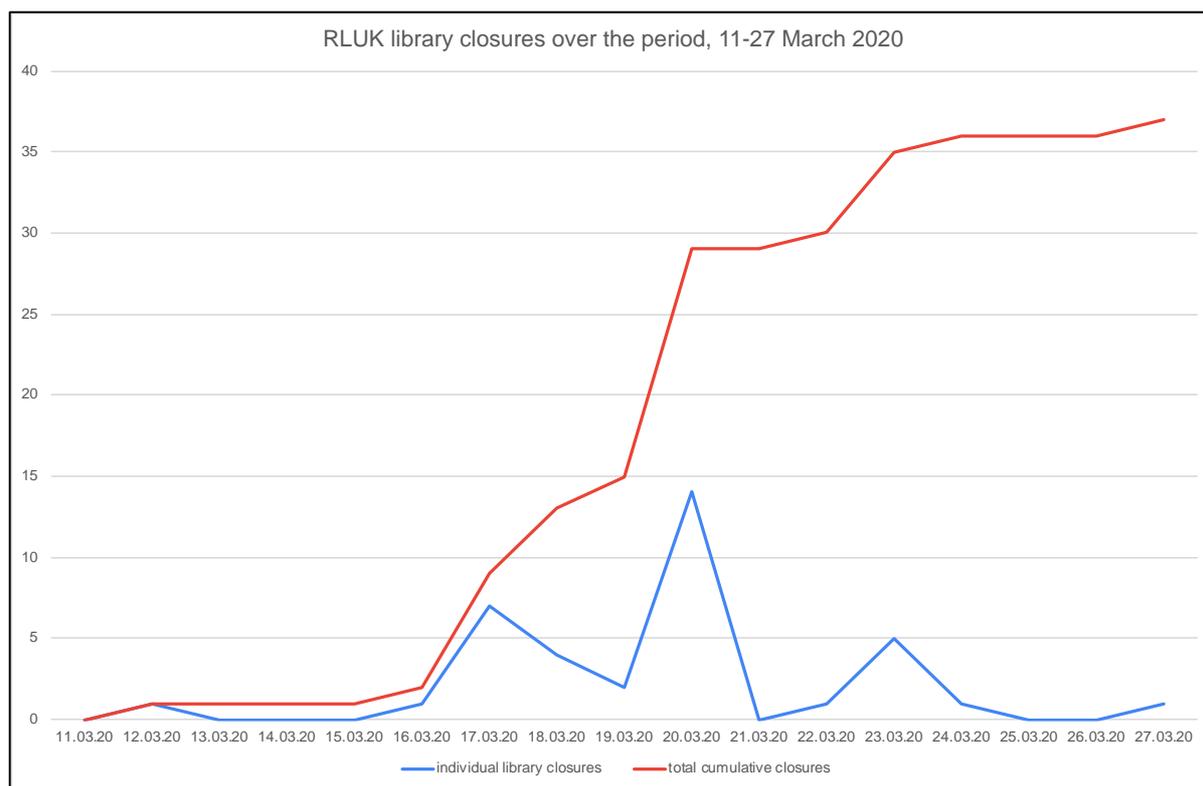
4. **Realignment of service:** including the removal of face-to-face services and movement of staff to 'back office functions'. Movement of some face-to-face services online, such as via LiveChat, email, and phone.

5. **Alternative staffing:** of library sites by non-library staff, such as security personnel. This enabled the library building to remain open without the presence of library staff.

6. **Full closure:** of all library sites and the movement to an online service only, particularly after the issuing of guidance from the Office For Students that universities should act as they saw fit to protect students and staff (17.03.20).

Each of these options and incremental changes required varying degrees of planning and their adoption often depended on a series of factors and decisions external to the library. This underlined the importance of the library being able to represent its views to university leaders.

Internal advocacy

Throughout this period, library directors and senior colleagues worked closely with university leaders to outline the ongoing role of the library, the possibility of streamlining services, and the potential need to close library buildings. Library directors conveyed the increasing anxiety of front-line staff and the importance of reassigning vulnerable colleagues from front-of-house roles. During this process, the library's ability to deliver a significant portion of its operations online, the inability of some libraries to ensure social distancing due to periodic increases in demand, and the closure of other university libraries elsewhere were all important in making these arguments.

In particular, there was value in the ability of library directors to point to the closure of university libraries, initially internationally, and increasingly across the UK. As the situation developed, particularly following the issuing of OFS guidance on 17.03.20, libraries were able to point towards a greater number of their domestic counterparts as instituting closures.

RLUK library closures over the period, 11-27 March 2020

Line chart showing individual library closures and total cumulative closures over the period 11.03.20 to 27.03.20. Legend: individual library closures (blue), total cumulative closures (red).

Sources: SCONUL library closure googlesheet and individual library Twitter accounts and websites.
Definition: 'Closure' is defined as the physical closure of all library sites.

In making its case for closure, a number of factors were highlighted as being particularly important:

- **Stakeholder engagement:** student unions, both postgraduate and undergraduate, were generally supportive of library closure, although there was some opposition reported once closures were announced within some members.

- **Engagement with core departments:** particularly Human Resources, IT, and Security were all cited as essential.

- **University leadership:** clear and unambiguous reporting lines and communication with university leaders during a fast-moving situation.

- **Importance of intelligence sharing:** throughout the ongoing spread of the virus and the impact that it was having on RLUK members, the importance of knowledge sharing between libraries was highlighted.

The impact of closure upon the collection

The closure of libraries removed the provision of physical access to the collection and curtailed the ability of libraries to add to the digital collections through the scanning of material. Initial impact on the collection have included:

- **Inter-Library Loans:** As closures were instituted, libraries ceased all print Inter-Library Loans. In anticipation of closure, and following the government advice of 16 March, a number of member libraries reported a large upswing in ILL requests from users.

- **Cessation of print ordering:** the ordering of print has been halted across the RLUK membership whilst library buildings are closed.

- **Legal Deposit:** With the physical closure of the legal deposit libraries, there is no longer access to the UK and Ireland's legal deposit collections, non-print legal deposit, or the UK web archive.

- **EHESS:** Following its closure on 17.03.20 The British Library was no longer able to provide access to its Enhanced Higher Education Supply Service.

- **Relaxation of terms of loan:** In response to the removal of physical access to collections, and to discourage users from returning to the library, members extended loan periods and cancelled forthcoming fines. They also cancelled existing loan requests where possible.

- **Contemporary collecting:** a number of members have highlighted the historical value of collecting materials for archival preservation relating to the current Covid-19 crisis.

Digital shift in action

The response of members to the Covid-19 crisis has offered the RLUK community valuable evidence in regard to the digital shift being experienced within library operations, audiences, and collections. The physical closure of libraries and the movement of their operations online provided a unique opportunity to witness 'the digital shift' in action.

Although the launch of RLUK's [digital shift manifesto](#) was delayed due to the cancellation of the RLUK conference, the period of the library closures provides an opportunity for RLUK to test the assumptions of its digital shift manifesto and to gather the real-world experiences of members.

Summary

RLUK members responded swiftly and effectively to the ongoing spread of the Covid-19 virus. In doing so, they worked tirelessly to maintain levels of service whilst protecting the wellbeing of their staff and users. The experience of implementing incremental, and then full, closure of library sites and physical services demonstrated the centrality of the library's position within universities, their institutions, and the national information and cultural landscapes. Library buildings were seen as central to the function of their institutions. This centrality, and the perceived need within some universities to maintain library operations, highlighted the importance of internal advocacy on behalf of the library, the essential role of library directors in representing the concerns of their staff, and the value of information sharing between library senior leadership via RLUK and other community lists.

RLUK will continue to work with its members during this uncertain and unprecedent period. Further work will be undertaken to chart the impact of Covid-19 on the operations of member libraries over the coming months, on which RLUK will report back to members.