

BLENDING SKILLS AND THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS IN THE POST-COVID-19 SCENARIO: A STUDY IN UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyse the blended skills requirement in this pandemic situation and the role of library professionals of the University of Calicut, in the post-COVID-19 Scenario. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data among 42 library professionals from Calicut University. Excel and SPSS were used for tabulation and statistical analysis. The results revealed that the COVID-19 outbreak had forced the libraries and library professionals to seek new ways for providing information to the needed users when physical access to the library resources was restricted during the lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Librarians' traditional and modern skills together resulted in blended librarians and helped the libraries to stand upright in the adverse conditions. Even in post-COVID time, it is predicted that these skills will help the librarians to provide more effective services as learning through the online platforms. To be a proper librarian, it is not just enough to have knowledge and skills but also requires the passion to apply those in their professional life.

Keywords : *Blended Skills, Personal Skills, Library Professionals, Librarians, Corona Virus, COVID-19, COVID-19 Pandemic, PostCOVID-19 Scenario, Library Services, Coronavirus Precautions, University of Calicut, Kerala.*

1. Introduction

Libraries, like any other institutions, are facing a necessity for transformation. Demanded by the situations, they can't survive by providing traditional services only. The requirements for providing various remote services became more necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of coronavirus had shaken the entire world, and affected all information centres including libraries. The closure of libraries and denial of physical access to library resources as a part of lockdown had created a serious impact on the library services and librarians. All libraries got isolated, and on the other side

users including research scholars, college students, faculties etc. had difficulties in accessing required information. According to UNESCO, 84 countries closed their public libraries and 98 countries closed their national libraries. Schools, Colleges and Universities in all countries were also compelled to shut down their libraries. The upcoming decade will face challenges in consolidating education rather than in its growth. Hence the courses will be accepted and approved based on this fact. Almost all the professionals changed their way of providing services due to the development in the field of information technology (Thanuskodi, 2015).

The speed of change in technology has created more skilled librarians in providing services and activities. This change affected the knowledge, abilities, roles and competencies of professionals (Nonthacumjane, 2011). Even though traditional skills are relevant in the present age, library professionals must acquire additional skills to deal with electronic sources of information. Hence to remain updated in this digital era, libraries started to transform from their traditional form to the latest methods providing traditional and modern services simultaneously. Majority of the users are digitally independent and are capable of accessing the library resources remotely. Despite the prevalence of digital platforms, there are still some users whose priorities are printed materials rather than digital resources. As all users must get their desired information, academic librarians play an important role as intermediaries, not only providing information, but also supporting their users. (Nakitare et al., 2020).

The library professionals should be identified insightfully the future roles and skills required to meet the changing users' needs in the modern library landscape. To withstand present circumstances, competing with all other forms of online resources, libraries and librarians face a variety of challenges. The lack of user acceptance for librarians, the lack of diversity among library personnel, the decrease in the number of readers, and the shortened attention span are regarded as the major threats to the long-term health and liveliness of the public library (Smith, 2019). The lack of usage of traditional library services had already become a major concern for libraries, and while librarians were trying their best to deal with changing scenarios, the COVID-19 pandemic breaks out. Librarians, particularly at higher education institutions, should focus on the need to be more intentional and active in providing library services. This is to ensure that they

remain relevant post COVID-19 (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020). As the usage of online sources and services increased rapidly, the spreading of fake news increased proportionally. As there is no strict peer-reviewing process in many online information sources, it is much easier to mislead people by uploading fake information. In this current global pandemic, there are new approaches to present both real and fake news. Librarians have the responsibility to classify these information so that their users have access to reliable materials to avoid misinformation. (Okike, 2020).

As COVID-19 hit the world and lockdown was initiated, there is a gap generated between information resources available and its retrieval by the users. Hence to remove this gap, librarians had to adopt various additional skills such as adapting to the online environment, learn new ways to provide information for the users etc. along with their traditional competencies. These combined skills are the necessity of the current pandemic situation, where physical access to resources is not possible like before and it will help in the improvement of librarians and library services. Librarians should develop new skills specialised to offer and redirect delivery of library services for supporting virtual learning (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020). As the world transforms into digital form, library professionals are supposed to learn all those new digital technologies, so that the users can trust them while retrieving information. The internet had transformed the world into a global village and almost everything is handled digitally. Hence the librarians are expected to be experts in maintaining tasks in digital platforms like managing digital libraries, organizing digital knowledge, disseminating digital information etc. (Okike, 2020). Even though the pandemic had unexpectedly attacked the world, the librarians and library professionals worldwide had considered and adopted many user services as a response to the pandemic. In India, each State and Union

Territory has a different COVID-19 scenario, and hence separate strategies were planned in each State and Union Territory according to the intensity of the pandemic there. Libraries were closed during lockdown and were re-opened with many restrictions to avoid the spread of the virus. Also, the online mode of communication was highly encouraged. Supporting researchers and faculty members, maintaining public health awareness and providing regular library users with usual basic services are accepted as their main goals by the Pakistani librarians during this pandemic. They believe that information access to users is the responsibility of all library professionals at any situation and should be carried out by following all precautionary measures (Ali & Gatiti, 2020).

Hence it is proved that library professionals have a great role in forming a well-informed society. They need to acquire supportive skills to perform their duty uninterruptedly. The present study was conducted to understand the blended skills and the role of library professionals post COVID-19 scenario.

2. Review of Literature

Several studies related to the cause, effect and resistance to COVID-19 has been conducted so far, including the challenges faced by libraries during COVID-19 and in post COVID scenario. These studies confirmed that all information centres, mainly libraries, had faced severe hurdles due to COVID-19, especially during the lockdown period, where physical access to the libraries became restricted.

Fasae et al. (2020) investigated the academic libraries' response to the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Nigeria. The findings reveal some safety measures like the closure of the library, providing hand sanitiser, protective face mask, maintaining social distancing etc. adopted by the libraries.

Martzoukou (2020) explores the renewed mission for digital literacy in academic libraries during COVID-19. The study suggests the implementation of remote tools and practices in online teaching and learning in a way that ensures accessibility and equity for all. Learning platforms and libraries during COVID-19 and in the post-COVID-19 pandemic were examined by Oyelude (2020). It concludes that the future of remote learning and library services will only expand due to new online learning platforms, increased learning via mobile devices and the emergence of high speed 5G.

Tsekea and Chigwada (2020) explored the strategies for positioning the university library in support of e-learning in Zimbabwean universities. It suggests that libraries should have disaster preparedness plans to ensure that they are well prepared for any library closures, so that service provision using digital platforms is not disrupted. Koscieljew (2020) presents the international library and information community's initial responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. It chronicles official statements from various libraries and information associations as they were released in real-time, thereby providing a contemporary and historical snapshot of the early stages of this global health crisis. Bhati and Kumar (2020) emphasize the various roles of library professionals during the pandemic situation like COVID-19. The results conclude that library professionals must provide digital platforms for education and easy access to information and can also act as stress busters.

Burns (2020) explores pre-service school librarians' ability to develop and deliver integrated library lessons under remote teaching and learning conditions. The findings identified trends in developed online inquiry lessons and suggest considerations for school library educators. Temiz and Salelkar (2020) investigated the digital services of academic

libraries in Sweden and maps their response to COVID-19. The main area in which libraries are focusing their efforts during the pandemic situation is the shift towards the digital library. Chisita (2020) highlights the situation of libraries amid COVID-19 and how it manages to deal with vexatious infodemic. The study found that librarians from all fields should mobilise their knowledge, skills and material resources to provide practical solutions to overcome this crisis.

Cherinet (2018) identifies the future roles and skills required by librarians to meet the ever-changing users' needs in the modern library landscape. It revealed that the ultimate role of librarians in future is to change the knowledge revolution in society through re-socializing and shaping the young generations. Reddy and Jyothy (2014) discuss the management skills for library professionals in the digital era and the functions of library management and how it is beneficial to library professionals. The study suggests that a training program regarding management skill is required regularly, as a lot of libraries in India does not have trained and skilled library professionals.

Apart from all the above-mentioned studies, this study focuses mainly on the blended skills required by library professionals in post COVID scenarios along with analysing the skills they already possess. The study evaluates the futuristic needs of library professionals to provide uninterrupted service to their users regardless of the situation.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the skills to be acquired by librarians in the University of Calicut in post COVID scenario
2. To understand the measures taken to reduce the gap between physical and remote access to information
3. To understand various challenges and how library professionals faced it.
4. To find out the precautions initiated by the libraries to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

4. Methodology

The present study is based on a structured questionnaire created with google forms and it was distributed to sixty library professionals in the University of Calicut, out of which 42 questionnaires received back (the response rate is 70%). The collected responses were tabulated and analysed using MS Excel and SPSS.

5. Analysis of Data

5.1. Gender-wise Distribution

Two third of library professionals are female (66.67%) and 33.33% of them are male.

Table 1

Gender-wise Distribution of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	14	33.33
Female	28	66.67
Total	42	100.00

5.2. Qualification-wise Distribution

A total of 42 Library Professionals took part in this study. Among them, 69.05% hold

a degree in Master of Library and Information Science, while 11.9% had completed MPhil and 19.05% have PhD in the subject.

Table 2
Qualification-wise Distribution of the Respondents

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
B.Lib.I.Sc	0	0.00
M.Lib.I.Sc	29	69.05
MPhil	5	11.90
PhD	8	19.05
Total	42	100.00

5.3. Acquired Skills by the Library Professionals

There is a great requirement of skills necessary to fulfil the role of a professional librarian. Lion's share of the respondents (97.62%) possess ICT skills, while analytics and research skills (45.24%) seem to be poor

among them. Communication skills (85.71%) and management skills (83.33%) are the next most possessed skills among the professionals. Those having decision making skills are 80.95% while 78.57% possess creativity and innovation skills.

Table 3
Acquired Skills by the Library Professionals

Skills	No. of Responses	Percentage
Communication/Presentation Skills	36	85.71
Leadership Skills	25	59.52
Management Skills	35	83.33
Decision Making Skills	34	80.95
Information and Communication Technology Skills	41	97.62
Teaching/Learning skills	23	54.76
Research skills	19	45.24
Database management	29	69.05
Analytics skills	19	45.24
Creativity and innovation	33	78.57

5.4. Services Initiated During COVID-19 Pandemic

The global pandemic had forced all institutions including libraries to initiate new services as the physical access of the documents were restricted. It is seen from table 4 that remote access to the library resources (73.81%) was the major service

initiated by most of the library professionals. One third (33.33%) of librarians conducted webinars during this pandemic as a part of providing information to the required users. Half of the respondents had started the Ask the Librarian service. Those concentrated on developing digital library and institutional repositories are 45.24%.

Table 4

Services Initiated by the Library Professionals During COVID-19 Pandemic

Services	No. of Responses	Percentage
Conducting webinars	14	33.33
Remote access to the library resources	31	73.81
The "Ask the Librarian" service	21	50.00
Library services through social media	24	57.14
Developing Digital library/Institutional repositories	19	45.24
Promotion of library products and services	24	57.14

5.5. Additional Skills Required to Cope Up With Post COVID Scenario

"To be relevant to the merging social environment the librarian of today is called upon to offer traditional services with a blend of new sources and services available in cyberspace. Librarianship of today thus is multidisciplinary and encompasses the various fields of human endeavour" (Thanuskodi, 2015). It is observed from

table 5 that lion's share (90.48%) provide resources according to the situation as it is the most important skill required by the library professionals to deal with the COVID and post COVID scenario. A great majority (83.33%) had flexibility with the virtual environment and 78.57% can teach electronic information literacy. Only less than half of the respondents are familiar with Transliteracy (40.48%) and Civic literacy (35.71).

Table 5

Additional Skills Required to Cope Up with Post COVID Scenario

Skills Required	No. of Responses	Percentage
Flexibility with virtual environment	35	83.33
Virtual Communication/Presentation skills	31	73.81
Provide resources demanded by the situation	38	90.48
Electronic reference skills	32	76.19
Ability to teach electronic information literacy	33	78.57
Transliteracy	17	40.48
Civic literacy	15	35.71

5.6. Remodelling the Facts in the Changing Scenario

In order to deal with the demand, librarians around the world have been working hard to provide remote access to the collections and services of their respective libraries. All libraries promote their digital services. Based on the mean score rating from table 6, it is found that online services are

more comfortable than traditional services (2.43), COVID-19 had affected positively in the spread of useful information than before (2.14). Providing online services even after the period of COVID-19 will help the users to a great extent (1.74), Printed resources will be still valid as before (1.83) and open access is an opportunity for library professionals (1.9) are the other facts that are derived from the study.

Table 6
Remodelling the Facts in the Changing Scenario

Facts	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	S D
Printed resources will be still valid as before, in post-COVID scenario	12 (28.57%)	25 (59.52%)	5 (11.90%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.83	0.62
COVID-19 had affected positively in the spread of useful information than before	8 (19.05%)	25 (59.52%)	5 (11.90%)	3 (7.14%)	1 (2.38%)	2.14	0.90
Online services are more comfortable than traditional library services	4 (9.52%)	22 (52.38%)	10 (23.81%)	6 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	2.43	0.86
Providing online services even after the period of COVID-19 will be helpful to the users to a great extent	13 (30.95%)	27 (64.29%)	2 (4.76%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.74	0.54
Open Access is an opportunity for library professionals	9 (21.43%)	28 (66.67%)	5 (11.90%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.90	0.58

5.7. Challenges Faced While Providing Online Services

During the period of lockdown, Library professionals had confronted many challenges while providing online services like digital library, remote access, e-resources etc. The results given in table 7 showed the lack of

privacy and security (Mean 3.64), Time consuming (Mean 3.55) are the major challenges faced by professionals. Lack of confidence by the users (Mean 3.5), Lack of awareness about library services among users (Mean 3.48), Lack of technical support by authority and network and bandwidth issues (Mean 3.36) are the other common barriers faced by them.

Table 7

Challenges Faced by Library Professionals While Providing Online Services

Challenges	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	S D
Lack of technical support by authority	6 (14.29%)	24 (57.14%)	9 (21.43%)	3 (7.14%)	0 (0%)	3.36	1.06
Lack of privacy and security	1 (2.38%)	22 (52.38%)	12 (28.57%)	7 (16.67%)	0 (0%)	3.64	0.62
Lack of confidence by users	1 (2.38%)	13 (30.95%)	18 (42.86%)	10 (23.81%)	0 (0%)	3.50	0.63
Network and Bandwidth issues	7 (16.67%)	25 (59.52%)	7 (16.67%)	2 (4.76%)	1 (2.38%)	3.36	1.14
Time consuming	2 (4.76%)	16 (38.10%)	13 (30.95%)	11 (26.19%)	0 (0%)	3.55	0.74
Lack of awareness among users about library services	4 (9.52%)	24 (57.14%)	10 (23.81%)	4 (9.52%)	0 (0%)	3.48	0.92

5.8. Precautions Taken for Infection Control During COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak was declared as a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO). It urged all countries to take precautions against the virus. More than 90%

of respondents are aware of the COVID-19 precautions such as social distancing (97.62%), sanitization (92.86%) and protective mask and shielding (90.48%). Half of the respondents (52.38%) follow the ventilation process. Less number of respondents were using gloves (26.19%) and work uniform (14.29%).

Table 8

Precaution Taken for Infection Control During COVID-19 Pandemic

Precaution	No. of Responses	Percentage
Sanitization	39	92.86
Handwash	35	83.33
Social Distancing	41	97.62
Protective Mask and Shielding	38	90.48
Awareness Programs	17	40.48
Ventilation (avoidance of Air Conditioner)	22	52.38
Self-monitoring / In-house vigilance	28	66.67
Work uniform	6	14.29
Gloves	11	26.19

5.9. Precautions for Facing Any Shutdown in Future

When the number of confirmed positive COVID-19 cases were approximately 500, lockdown was placed in India, there is a possibility for future lockdown as well. Therefore, to deal with those situations 92.86%

of library professionals have decided to provide online and traditional library and information services simultaneously. Information through social media is provided by 85.71% of librarians. But only 2.38% provide chat service. It is listed in table 9 and drawn in fig.1.

Table 9
Precautions for Facing any Shutdown in Future

Precaution	No. of Responses	Percentage
Information through social medias	36	85.71
Selective Dissemination of Information	29	69.05
Digitizing all the printed resources in library	21	50.00
Providing online library and information services along with traditional library services	39	92.86
Orientation programs about the online library services to the users	31	73.81
Chat service	1	2.38

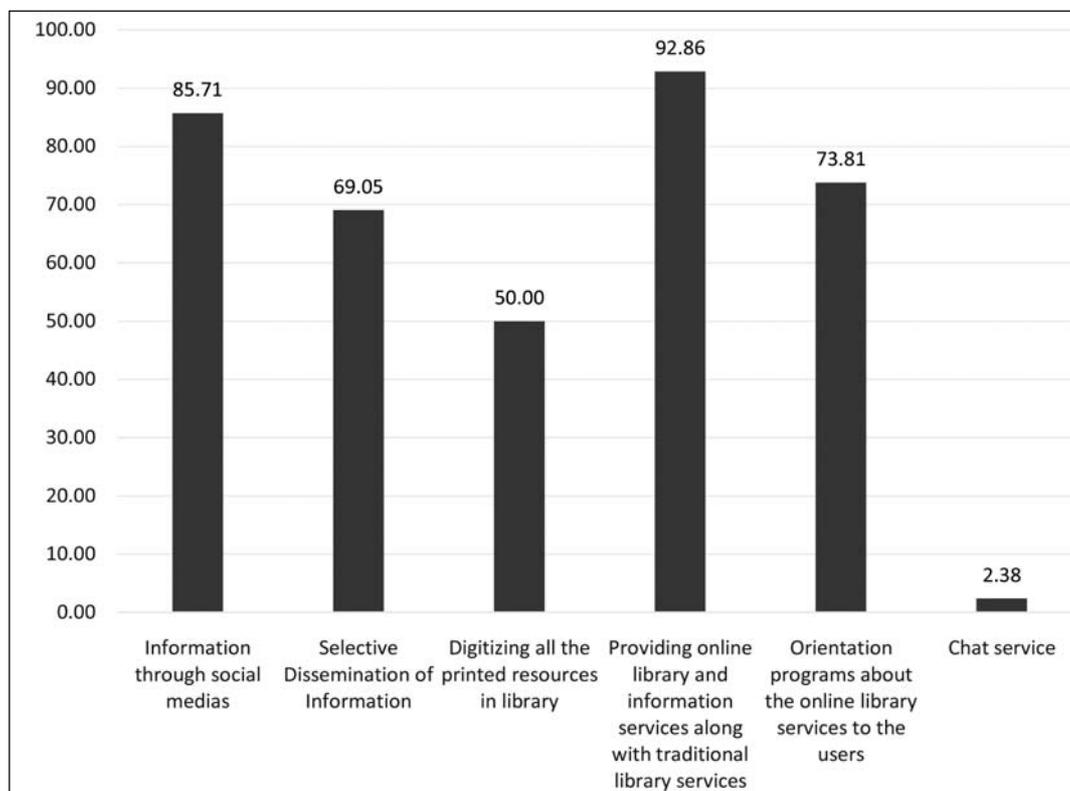


Fig. 1: Precautions for Facing any Shutdown in Future

6. Major Findings

Major findings of the study are:

1. Lion's share of library professionals possess ICT skills.
2. Communication, Management and Decision making are the next important skills acquired by most of the library professionals.
3. Only less than half of the respondents have Analytics skills and Research skills and it is reflected in developing Institutional repositories.
4. Remote access to the library resources is the main service provided during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.
5. Providing library and information resources demanded by the situation is the important skill required to deal in the post-COVID-19 scenario.
6. The main form of information demanded by the present situation is electronic and it is much easier for the librarians to provide as most of them are skilled in ICT.
7. Transliteracy and Civic literacy are possessed by few library professionals only.
8. Online services are more comfortable than traditional services.
9. Many librarians are satisfied in providing information through online platforms as it reaches more users and therefore had decided to continue the service parallel to traditional services even in the postCOVID-19 period.

10. COVID-19 has affected positively in the spread of information to more users.
11. Lack of privacy and security is the major obstacle faced by library professionals while providing online services
12. Social distancing, Sanitization and Protective masks were the major precautions taken by professionals to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
13. Providing online library and information services along with traditional library services is an important measure taken to face future lockdown if any.

7. Suggestions

- 1) Special programmes for increasing the research and analytic skills of the library professionals should be conducted.
- 2) More webinars should be organized considering the time and availability of the targeted participants and resource persons.
- 3) Initiatives should be taken for developing digital libraries
- 4) Transliteracy and Civic literacy are relatively new terms and hence it should be more popularized among the library professionals
- 5) Online and traditional services should be considered equal. One should not overpower the other.
- 6) Give importance to digitizing the library resources
- 7) Orientation programs should be conducted by library professionals to the users explaining all the services provided by the library.

- 8) Social medias are the main platform where more people are active. So, providing information through social medias should be considered seriously.
- 9) Precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 should be adopted seriously. The users and faculties must have a feeling that the place doesn't give much threat.
- 10) Chat services should be given more popularity as only very few library professionals are aware of it.

8. Conclusion

As COVID-19 breaks out and the lockdown has been initiated in order to prevent the spread of the virus, almost all the institutions including libraries were shut down. But as a responsible information professionals, librarians can't watch their libraries being closed and doing nothing in the time of this urgent situation. Along with the fear of spreading the virus, another great challenge faced by the World was infodemic, the spread of misinformation. The librarians have the responsibility of providing faithful information and pointing out the fake news. They had decided to act wisely and to provide information to the needed ones while considering the pandemic. The result was providing information remotely, mainly through online sources. The migration to the world of online resources and services to meet the needs of users had put additional pressure on library professionals and the study discussed how the library professionals adapted various skills to deal with the pressure.

This study examines the skills that should be acquired by the library professionals

to fulfil their duties in any adverse conditions. It reveals that the important skill required for a library professional in any situation is the ability to provide the resources in the form that is demanded by the situation. Also, they should be capable of adapting to any worse scenarios, so that their duties remain uninterrupted. Almost all the librarians had acquired ICT skills even before the global pandemic, and that helped them a lot in dealing with current issues. It can also be found that many additional services such as remote access to the library resources, the "Ask the Librarian" service etc. are initiated by many librarians to fight against all the physical limitations created by the pandemic. Another issue was the unawareness among users regarding the special services provided by the institution in this very special condition and thus many services remain unused. Thus, librarians should conduct orientation classes for their users to inform them about the services and teaching them the methods to access the library resources. Many library professionals possess communication, management and decision-making skills and hence interacting with users through an online platform will not be a challenge for them. Many professionals agreed to the fact that open access is an opportunity for them to develop as professional librarian, to learn more. Most of them have decided to provide online services along with traditional services in the post-COVID 19 scenarios, as they believe it will help the users to attain more information. The ever-changing information requirements of users began expanded and new roles for librarians to implement with various emerging skills to stay consistent in the emerging knowledge and digital environment. Even after the reopening of libraries with many restrictions, precautionary measures such as Protective masks, Social distancing, Sanitization etc. are followed by them to prevent the spread of the virus.

This pandemic and the lockdown have been a lesson for all the professionals about how unpredictable the future can be. It taught us that libraries can no longer sustain themselves by providing services that are only based on physical resources. So, all the library professionals have started preparing themselves by adopting various techniques such as providing online and traditional services simultaneously, digitizing the library resources etc. to face any challenges that are awaited in the future. Hence the library professionals have been trying restlessly to acquire various blended skills to deal with the post-COVID-19 scenario.

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