

Academic Library Online Services During Pandemic COVID-19: The Experience of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

Nurul Fariah Sarmin Panut¹, Asmahani Abdullah²

¹Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia

²Perpustakaan Cendekiawan, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia

Corresponding author email: nurul059@uitm.edu.my

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24191/aclim.v1i1.7>

Received: 19/1/2021 / Accepted: 30/6/2021 / Published Online: 15/7/2021

Abstract

Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak (PTAR) in line with Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of teaching and learning in UiTM system, has bring out these initiatives with new norms to continuously assist teaching, learning, research and innovation activities among university members. This paper highlights six online library services offered by PTAR during pandemic COVID-19 in Malaysia. Document analysis approach was used to highlight the online library services initiatives. Secondary data is used in this study through the PTAR UiTM Shah Alam official records. This paper is very useful in providing valuable insights and practical solutions in addressing pandemic issues for other academic libraries that facing similar challenges in continuing providing library services to meet the user needs.

Keywords: academic library; online library services; pandemic and library services

1. Introduction

Coronavirus (COVID-19) spreads rapidly across the world. All sectors are required to comply with government announcement to stay at home and apply new norms to slow down the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools and higher institutions are announced to shut down and make immediate conversion of moving education towards online learning. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), through its circular issued in March 2020, instructed students to leave campuses and all academic activities required to be conducted virtually via Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Staffs were also instructed to work from home and only essential parts were required to serve in rotation.

Considering this outbreak and new norms practice in UiTM, Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak (PTAR) enhances its online library services by offering off-campus virtual access towards library facilities, services, and resources. Digital library initiatives are developed and enhanced to ensure all library resources and collections are accessible online by users. This includes library online resources, past year examination paper, book loan services, inter-library loan, as well as academic consultation and guides by reference librarians. With tagline '*Stay Connected: Anywhere, Anytime, Anyone*', PTAR continues to delighted all university members with the unlimited easy access regardless of time and place to support research, reference and learning in new norms.

However, the library resources and services statistical usage trends are not as expected. In addition to the lockdown situation in the COVID-19 pandemic, all physical services are closed for a specific period to stop the spread of the pandemic. Users cannot physically access library resources and start switching to online accessibility. As a result, off campus users have limited access to library services and resources due to various reasons such as lack of facilities and poor networks connection. This has led to an imbalanced situation where library management is always committed to providing the best services through various digital library initiatives for academic excellence.

This article highlights the initiatives and best practices in online library services implemented and reported by PTAR UiTM during pandemic COVID-19 to support online distance learning in university. The initiative implemented by PTAR has successfully solved the problem of library usages during the pandemic COVID-19 outbreak. It is expected

that the best practices highlighted in this article can be a reference to other library with similar issues to optimize the library usage in term of facilities, services, and resources offered.

Discussions on initiatives and best practices regarding online library services during pandemic COVID-19 have been executed in the following arrangement. The literature review highlights detail issues related to new norms in regard to online library services in section 2 – Literature Review. Methodology section explains the method used in preparing this paper. Followed by the discussion of each initiative taken by PTAR UiTM is reported in section 4 – Discussion. This paper is closed with Conclusion in Section 5.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the issues including new norms, digital library and online library services.

New Norms.

Pandemic COVID-19 has led the world to new norms. According to Corpus (2021), the term ‘new norms’ started to use during financial crisis in 2008, referring to the dramatic economic, cultural, and social transformations that caused precariousness and social unrest, impacting collective perceptions and individual lifestyles. It somehow has been widely used during this pandemic COVID-19 to adjust the practices of essential aspects in human life. World Health Organization (2020) proposed the world to adapt new norms to cut the spread across the globe. People are suggested to avoid the three Cs; crowded places, close-contact settings and confined and enclosed spaces, continue to practice measures, ourselves and others, cover coughs and sneezes with flexed elbow, wash hands with soap, water, or alcohol-based hand rub, and many more.

There is not an option but mandatory for all to follow. Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Prime Minister Malaysia, has declared the entire country to be on a movement control order for the first wave of the rise of COVID-19 on 18 March 2020 (Tang, 2020). The decision was made based on Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967. The prohibition of movements required all government and private premises to be shut down, except those businesses that classify under “essential services”. Malaysian government proposed changes in employment law to enable working from home to prevent the spreading of the virus COVID-19 while sustaining economy. Malaysia’s Department of Statistics (DOS) stated that 44% of employers had worked from home on early implementation of MCO 2020 (Siti Aiyisyah, 2020).

Complying with the order, Minister of Higher Education has promptly come out with circulars, standard of procedures (SOPs), and guidelines to ensure all management and academic operations in colleges and universities adapting to the new norms and reduce physical contact. Online classes and distance learning has been taken placed in continuing the process of teaching and learning. Considering the recent changes, digital library offers contactless academic supports with online resources, facilities, and services, which would be explained more in the next section.

Digital Library

Digital library is the most appropriate library service practice that fits new norms best. Most of colleges and universities libraries already have their own digital libraries. A digital library generally provides digital access to documents and objects related to knowledge and learning. The terms “library without walls”, “virtual library” and “electronic library” are often used in defining digital library. Xiangxing, Zhong, Shuguang and Chong (2008) defined collection of digital objects (text, video, and audio) along with method for access and retrieval, [as far as users are concerned] and for selection, organization, and maintenance. Digital objects resources however referred as a dynamic, growing organism that increase and expand with the line of the current technology development (Singh, 2018).

Agree with Jie and Bhao-Zhong (2012), digital library not merely offers digital collection but also involve a series of activities that bring together the collections, services, and people in supporting the full life cycle of creation, dissemination, use and presentation of date, information, and knowledge. Numerous types of information resources and services offer by digital library include information literacy online classes, webinars, live chat, online public access catalogue, library mobile application services, subscribed online databases (e-books, e-journals, and e-theses) access, and many more.

Digital library in new norms increases access to library resources, facilities, and services without physical contact while online library services with new technology adoption bring huge benefits to users, as well as the librarians as the main controller. Next section will give details about online library services.

Online Library Services

The Covid-19 pandemic is a new challenge to library services. Academic libraries need to shift roles that previously focused on physical services to online services in order to meet the needs of library users during the pandemic. Academic libraries need to be creative to create services that can meet the needs of library users (Demir & Parachi, 2018). According to Shen and Chen (2014) online library services is define as a library services within a university online system which provides resources and databases to support distance learners to conduct research or to consult information. It is supported by Kasa and Abdulsalam (2020) opined that the situation of pandemic COVID-19 requires academic libraries to be more creative and even building synergy to learn more, become more equipped, and fast track using technologies. According to Dadhe and Dubey (2020), many libraries have significant online library services; expanding access towards e-resources and make use of open access resources, and there are some of them provide multi-mode access towards resources they have based on user's request. Therefore, academic libraries have sought and created creative changes on some services by transforming them to online services to make it easier for users to access library facilities and services.

The implementation of online services in academic libraries has made the library a one-stop center for teaching, learning and research activities in the university. It is in line with the requirements of the university that all teaching, learning and research processes to be implemented through online distance learning (ODL) and applied to the library services as well (Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak, 2020). Hence, several services such as consultation services, information literacy skills classes, book loans, fine payments and loan renewals have been transformed to meet these needs. This is in line with Leo (2020) reported that Chinese University of Hong Kong Library, in creative ways, conducting online teaching using Zoom Conference Meeting, and expanding library services; waived overdue fines, auto loan period, and auto-renewal items loan. Although, this has become a new norm, but it is not an obstacle to library services and even makes the academic library staff more motivated to perform such tasks.

The most physical library services affected during the pandemic include library reference and consultation services as well customer services. Social distancing gives a personal and professional challenges to library users and staffs (Walsh & Rana, 2020). Although, social distancing was a major obstacle during a pandemic, face-to-face services continued with the use of online medium such as online meetings and webinar sessions. For example, face-to-face consultation services. These services are continued online using live instant messaging using applications and social medias such as *WhatsApp Business*, *Telegram*, *Facebook Chat*. Most of academic libraries even set up their own real-time chat with various brands such *Ask Chat with Librarian*, *Chat with Librarian*, *Ask a Librarian Live* and many more (Diaz, 2020; Nor Edzan, 2020; Haerkoenen, Blackmore & Beadle, 2020; Radford, Costello & Montague, 2020; Walsh & Rana, 2020). Although this consultation services cannot be physically carried out and implemented online, it is beginning to gain attention and provide many advantages to library users.

While most physical library services were affected by the pandemic, online library services have provided more benefits to library users. Online library services greatly facilitate users in terms of time, place and cost. The online library service saves users time as users can get unlimited information at any time because it can be accessed 24 hours without requiring users to come to the library (Owusu-Ansah, Rodrigues & Van Der Walt, 2021). Perdana and Prasojo (2020) also mentioned that online library services provide an easy access to information as users can get the required information easily just by accessing the online library using equipment and devices. While Uzuegbu and McAlbert (2012) suggested that online library services are accessible over the Internet provide opportunities to advance knowledge and to dramatically improve the quality of life. Along with that and other benefits gained by users of online library services, online library services have become the focus of library users.

3. Methodology

This study used a document analysis to highlight the online library services initiatives. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic. Secondary data is used in this study through the PTAR UiTM Shah Alam official records. These include mission statements, monthly statistical reports, policy manuals and strategic plans. These documents are thoroughly reviewed to strategies the best practices and initiatives of online library services implemented in PTAR, UiTM Shah Alam. PTAR UiTM Shah Alam, is selected for this study as it plays an essential role in monitoring the implementation of online library services throughout all 38 branches of UiTM libraries in Malaysia during pandemic COVID-19.

4. Results and discussion

This section discusses the findings from this study by explaining the initiatives of online library services implemented by PTAR during the pandemic COVID-19.

4.1 PTAR during pandemic COVID-19

Malaysia government has taken quick responses towards this pandemic COVID-19 to protect citizens by announcing MCO at first phase, started on March 18, 2020. In response to curb the COVID-19 infection, UiTM has announced the closure of all the departments, including its 35 branches. However, Conditional MCO, which taken date on May 4, 2020, allow all sectors to resume business with restricted guidelines and regulations.

As many libraries closed, the challenges began to all library all around the world (IFLA, 2020). As one of UiTM department, Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak (PTAR) was quick to react towards this announcement by transforming its services towards digital library. Technology development in information and education industry since years ago make all initiatives ease. PTAR digital services, collections and process, which developed in-house from time to time, have been fully optimized during this pandemic COVID-19. However, PTAR librarians need to wisely restructure the strategies in term of library promotions and implementations to reach all universities members effectively. The chaos situation at first week MCO was managed promptly with the library operation guidelines and procedures that funneled to 38 UiTM libraries covering all branches through online meetings, emails and social medias. WhatsApp and emails being as the most frequent medium of communication used to deliver messages and information.

Several measures to prevent the spread of pandemics and the provision of library services were initiated by PTAR before the implementation of the MCO was enforced by the government. The preventive measures implemented by PTAR before the MCO came into force were to provide sanitation kits such as gloves and hand-sanitizer for the use of library staff and users. The process of decontamination and sanitation of counters as well as staff workspace is also done before the operation of the library service begins. Besides, PTAR also provides Standard Operating Procedure for library services in line with SOPs issued by the government, ministries and universities such as social distancing and cancellation of public assembly programs.

A few of PTAR staffs, were assigned to work from office to perform prescribed tasks during MCO and CMCO, while the rest working from home. Rotating schedule, by consent of UiTM authority, has been determined to ensure the only technical library operation teams which required physically presence were allowed to be in the library building. The PTAR head of departments, together with UiTM library branch leaders were responsible to manage library operations unceasingly reach users in order to support online teaching and learning in the university as well.

4.2 Online PTAR library services

One of the main departments that serve a core function in PTAR is a Library Services Department (*Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak*, 2020). Three main divisions under this core services at PTAR are Customer Service Division, Corporate Communications Division, and Research, Learning and Reference Division. However, other main departments in the library also playing essential roles to support the library operational services as well. Pandemic COVID-19 brings the transformation of the ways PTAR delivering these all services using online medium in order to assist university members in conducting teaching, learning, research and innovation activities. The online service initially had a great impact as users could not physically go to the library to use the facilities and access the library collections.

In conjunction with implementation of ODL in UiTM academic system, the force of performing online services in the PTAR became compulsory. This situation has posed a challenge for libraries and users including teaching faculty and students (Mehta & Wang, 2020). PTAR librarians were required to equip themselves with skills in interacting with users through online information literacy classes, being available at live chat, and doing frequent promotional awareness about online digital services, facilities and collection. Online library services development at PTAR is quite impressive since almost all online systems and digital resources have been developed in-house by PTAR technical team.

Since this health crisis occurred, PTAR has made the best effort in providing online library services. According to Nazri (2020), it was reported that PTAR's online library services nationwide has recorded an increase of 81 percent since the enforcement of the Movement Control Order. This positive usage increment motivates PTAR to perform better.

4.2.1 Online Information Literacy Class

Online Information Literacy Class (afterward called e-ILC) is one of the PTAR user education programs. The programs used to enhance library skills to the new students (Suleiman, 2012). It helps students to know various types of library facilities as well as library resources and services offered to user. Generally, eILC was conducted by librarian in physical classroom, face-to-face, and hands-on guide. However, during pandemic period and ODL mode of learning in UiTM, this class are organized and conducted via online to university members using online platform such as Google Classroom, Google Meet and Webex Meeting. In e-ILC, participants will learn on how to find research materials effectively from library resources.

For more effective and organized management of e-ILC, PTAR provides an online application and class management platform called *Sistem Kelas Kemahiran Maklumat* (eKKM) or Information Literacy Skill Class System. This system was developed to facilitate users to register for e-ILC. There are 11 modules are developed and offered to all users, including:

- 1) LSC100: Introduction to Library System
- 2) LSC101: Introduction to PTAR Electronic Resources
- 3) LSC102: Online Databases for Literature
- 4) LSC200: Advanced Literature Search I (Scopus: World's largest scientific database)
- 5) LSC201: Advanced Literature Search II (Identify Collaborators Using Web of Science)
- 6) LMS300: Library Management Software – Endnote
- 7) LMS301: Library Management Software – Mendeley
- 8) LMS302: Easy Write with Microsoft Word
- 9) LSA400: Writing and Publishing
- 10) LSA401: Open Access for Scholarly Publication
- 11) LSA402: Google Scholar & Google Drive

4.2.2 Online Reference and Consultation Service

One of the crucial works for librarian is reference (Murray, 2016; O'Gorman & Trott, 2009). Yet much of the literature on face-to-face reference services in academic libraries describes moving away from a traditional sit-and-wait model (Riehman-Murphy & Hunter, 2019). There is no doubt that students need assistance using the library – from selecting sources to evaluating sources to using and producing information ethically – yet one of the primary modes of aiding students, the reference desk.

To answer queries from users, PTAR has provide a real-time, chat-based online reference service that allows users to ask questions directly to the librarian on duty. This live chat service application is called *Chat with Librarian* service. Live chat reference service allows users to ask questions in real-time. While the campus remains closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, reference librarians entertain this service remotely from 9:00am – 5:00pm every day. Offline chat would be answered by emails for the next day.

4.2.3 Library Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

According to Rinne (2014) MOOCs comes from the fact that they allow students who are not enrolled to fully participate in the class for free – hence the “Open” aspect. In line to support online learning in the university, PTAR has developed Massive Open Online Courses or PTAR Online Learning known as MOOCs @ PTAR for users. PTAR Online Learning is one of UiTM library new services to support the Education 5.0 Initiative. MOOCs facilitate users in flexible online training and enable them to self-study for the Information Skills Class modules offered by PTAR. In an event of MCO, users who are not able to come to the library can enroll to MOOCs @PTAR for free. This is another alternative provided by PTAR for users who are unable to attend e-ILC. There are 8 modules offered in MOOCs @ PTAR which include:

1. UiTM Institutional Repository
2. Exam Paper System
3. Online Database Subscribed by UiTM
4. eBook Subscribed by UiTM
5. MyLibrary Account
6. Web of Science
7. Reference Management Software - Endnote
8. Reference Management Software – Mendeley

4.2.4 Electronic Resources

According to Sharma and Kumar (2018) an electronic resource is defined as a resource which requires computer access or any electronic product that delivers a collection of data, be it text referring to full text databases, electronic journals, image collections, other multimedia products and numerical and graphical or time based, as a commercially available title that has been published with an aim to being marketed. As online database subscription is the most expensive library resource, academic libraries need to take actions to intensify the use of e-resources during the pandemic to ensure the usage statistics are constantly increasing. The primary e-resources are in the form of proprietary online databases, e-books, e-journals and open access publications. It has been provided by the library through various platforms. Pandemic has provided great opportunities to promote library e-resources collection to students and the university community.

EZAccess is one of the library systems which has been developed years ago to locate all subscribed online databases and PTAR e-resources. Strictly to all UiTM members, PTAR has created more awareness using all promotional mediums for all university members in optimizing the usefulness of *EZAccess* in assisting teaching, learning, research and innovation activities.

During pandemic COVID-19, many publishers offer open access towards scholars’ opinions, reviews and studies about the virus to encourage awareness, reading and research among societies as well as researchers to take part in seeking the solutions about COVID-19. PTAR effectively took this chance by listing the open access COVID-19 collection links at *EZAccess* for assisting university members to access that special collection from only one-stop-center.



(a)

(b)

Figure 1. (a) COVID-19 special collection poster; (b) PTAR online databases COVID-19 Special Collection

Other PTAR systems that facilitate users to access library electronic resources are: -

- WebOPAC (<https://library.uitm.edu.my/opac.html>) – To access book collection.
- Electronic Question Paper System - EQPS (<https://koleksi.uitm.edu.my/eqps/>) – To access past semesters examination papers.
- Institutional Repository (<http://ir.uitm.edu.my/>) – To access UiTM publications.
- MyKnowledge Management (<https://mykm.uitm.edu.my/v2/>) – To access personalized library information.
- Local Content Hub (<http://localcontent.library.uitm.edu.my/>) – To access collection by special subjects.

4.2.5 Online Book Loan Service

PTAR receives many enquiries regarding book loan during pandemic COVID-19. Due to this demand, PTAR offers the online book loan service for those who want to borrow books by requesting using online form and requested books will be delivered to their home by postage. The maximum amount of loans allowed is 10 books per user. Book loans due date period also are extended until end of the semester, and late fine would be waived. Users also can return book loan by postage; however, any risks in regard to postage issues are under users' responsibility.

4.2.6 Online Library Outreach Program

The librarian's duties are extended to promote library services and facilities through the Library Outreach Program. Although in times of pandemic, these promotional activities are intensified to library users with the aim that users are aware and alert of all services and facilities provided by the library. Liu (2013) highlights that outreach services have become an important aspect of overall library services because of their unique goal – the extension of library presence into new venues. These programs are primarily intended to convey information and raise awareness about the current and new services and facilities served by PTAR to the faculty members. Before pandemic, this program was conducted in a physical manner whereby library will go to the respective faculty and do a briefing. But now this program is conducted by using online platform like *Webex Meeting*, and *Google Meet*. However, using this online platform brought ease to all participants to join the program anywhere, everywhere.

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a growing need for libraries to serve library users creatively in these specific situations. The results of this study show that academic libraries need to take proactive steps in providing library services in order to meet the needs of users. Despite the difficulties of physically delivering services, the online library services initiative strategy needs to be implemented immediately to prevent library services from being affected.

PTAR library online services highlight its potential by providing a wide range of free online services and high-quality content to UiTM members. The use of online library services is seen to be able to continue and grow rapidly in the future. Adoption of technology in library services creates opportunity and challenge to librarians and library professional to maximize the library resources and brings value to benefit all. Despite the global pandemic COVID-19, the functions and roles of the academic library will continue to be enhanced to support learning, teaching and research in universities.

Future studies on the use of online library services could be considered. This is to evaluate the level of effectiveness of its use by library users. Thus, it can provide insights to the library management to optimize the use of online library services and improve existing services in the future so that this initiative can have a significant impact on users.

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