

Beyond the Library Collections

Proceedings of the 2022 Erasmus Staff Training Week at ULiège Library

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ULIÈGE LIBRARY
LIÈGE





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Contents

Preface	xi
<i>Tina Baich</i>	
Introduction	1
<i>François Renaville and Fabienne Prosmans</i>	
<u>Part I. Collaboration for shared collections and preservation</u>	
Collection management collaborations in Sweden	7
<i>Karin Byström</i>	
Access to academic heritage: ENC theses available online	19
<i>Camille Carette</i>	
When David and Goliath work together: The impact of a cooperation agreement on library strategy	27
<i>Susanne Kirchmair</i>	
How the interlibrary loan service can collaborate with other libraries and university services	39
<i>Isàvena Opisso</i>	
<u>Part II. DDA and EBA as opportunities</u>	
Purchase on demand via interlibrary loan: Analysis of the first four years at University of Antwerp Library	49
<i>Jennifer Van den Avijle and Luca Maggiore</i>	
Patron-Driven Acquisition et Evidence-Based Acquisition : Comment implémenter ces modèles afin d'étendre l'offre documentaire dans une bibliothèque ?	63
<i>Marion Favre and Manon Velasco</i>	

Part III. Interlibrary loan workflows and experiences

- How library systems influence the interlibrary loan workflow: A comparison between Alma and Koha 91
Martina Kassler and Veronica Fors
- International loans in the Main Library of AGH UST: The technical library as a witness of change 109
Karolina Forma
- The gentle art of giving and receiving: Resource sharing services in a museum library 119
Florian Preiß
- Four years of ILL service at the Faculty Library of Arts and Philosophy (Ghent University): Findings and challenges 129
Joris Baeyens
- Changing tools, changing habits, changing workflows: Recent evolutions of the interlibrary loan service at ULiège Library 139
Fabienne Prosmans and François Renaville

Part IV. Enhanced ILL services through collaborations and networks

- From fee to free: How to reduce expenses by eliminating revenue 163
Léa Bouillet
- HERMES, an international project on free digital resource sharing 173
Carmen Lomba; Stefania Marzocchi; and Debora Mazza
- The NILDE network and document delivery in Verona University Libraries 187
Elisabetta Guerra

Part V. Impact of Covid-19 on library accessibility and services

- COVID-19. New challenges and new solutions at the University of Warsaw Library 201
Franciszek Skalski

How COVID has changed our world. New opportunities for the future? A case study for UPM Libraries <i>Reyes Albo</i>	217
Book Contributors	227
Acknowledgements	235

COVID-19. New challenges and new solutions at the University of Warsaw Library

Franciszek Skalski

Abstract

This article aims to address how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the University of Warsaw Library's work from 2020 to 2021. Analyses of BUW's situation in 2020 and 2021 based on published reports by the heads of the library's organisational units as well as the author's own observations and experiences reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic forced the BUW to organise its work and services in unusual ways. The results are evident in the use of new technologies and electronic resources. Furthermore, the experience gained during the pandemic helped BUW introduce new solutions, processes, and workflows which could be valuable for future use in similar situations and for the patrons' benefit.

Keywords

COVID-19; Academic library; Work organization; Health restrictions; Pandemic; University of Warsaw Library

Article

Introduction

No one suspected that 2020 would be a year of great change and disaster. The global COVID-19 pandemic affected various spheres of society. Universities and academic libraries also had to find solutions to new problems, continue their work, and adjust to the new reality imposed by the pandemic.

Beginning of the pandemic and its initial problems

On 10 March 2020, the rector of the University of Warsaw (UW) decided to shut down the University of Warsaw Library (*Biblioteka Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* – BUW). It was the beginning of a long series of changes ([Łukaszewska, 2020](#)). We had to decide on the library's closure, the duration of this closure, how resources would be delivered to patrons during that period, and whether such deliveries would be possible at all. Furthermore, we also had to determine what to do with the due dates of the borrowed books and other materials and the penalties for overdue items. Finally, we needed to decide how to inform BUW's patrons that the library would be closed. BUW used to be very flexible. It was crucial for the library to provide its patrons with instant access to information. Thus, we immediately started an information campaign addressed to the patrons through our social media channels and website. The first piece of information concerned the increased number of books that could be borrowed at a time, up to 20. Moreover, we extended the period for returning the borrowed books to 14 April 2020 (later, this date was changed several times during the first lockdown until the final date, 30 May 2020). We also announced that overdue fines would not be charged for keeping books borrowed beyond the set deadline. Finally, BUW's authorities decided that the library would be accessible until 10 pm on 10 March 2020 and that the entire library would be operational until the last patron had left. Ultimately, this meant that the library was closed at midnight. BUW was very crowded that day; 8,137 books were borrowed (including 2,331 in self-check kiosks) and 3,255 were returned to the library (Fig. 1). In comparison, before the pandemic, about 1,450 books were borrowed in one day. These decisions did not solve all the problems that the pandemic brought about later. However, we hoped that the extended limits would help our patrons, especially UW students and employees. In BUW, we also had to cancel the scheduled staff meetings, training, and travel for the following weeks. Furthermore, we had to stop registering new patrons. Although we did not forget about the second important group of our patrons, those from outside the UW, we could not do much to help them. External users had access to BUW, but they were not allowed to borrow books; instead, they could use the library's collections onsite. However, because of the pandemic situation, they lost admission to the library building. To compensate for our inability to offer them access to traditional or electronic collections, we extended their accounts until the time they could enter the library again because of health restrictions ([Wołodko, 2020](#), p. 62).



Figure 1: Crowds of students waiting in line at the circulation desk and looking for information at the information desk on 10 March 2020

First lockdown in Poland

On 11 March 2020, a national lockdown was enforced in Poland. However, the lockdown did not mean that BUW staff automatically switched to teleworking. On the first day, we had to prepare books ordered on the previous days—they had not been borrowed because the library had to be closed. Another problem appeared here as to what should be done with those books. Previously, patrons had one week to come and collect requested books, but now adhering to this collection period had become impossible. The solution appeared simple: we extended that period to the week after the end of the first lockdown. No one could predict when we would be able to reopen the library. It turned out that we had to apply this solution several times. A parallel, more complicated problem was with the books from the interlibrary loan. First, we had to contact each library from where we had requested books and ask whether we could keep them until the sit-

uation would allow us to deliver them to our patrons or return them immediately to the libraries in Poland and abroad.

Another key challenge brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic was the reorganisation of the library departments' work, which previously focused primarily on contact with the patrons. Even though academic lectures were immediately organised online, students and employees still needed books and other library materials. During the first lockdown, these students and employees had to exclusively rely on electronic resources provided by BUW. We decreased the price for scanning documents to 1 PLN (approximately 0.21 EUR) for the A3 page format for all our patrons. Moreover, we prepared a special offer for the UW students and employees, according to which they could issue a free scanning order of up to 50 pages weekly. Although this was not a significant amount, we could not offer more services due to the large number of BUW patrons. In the beginning, we hoped that the lockdown would end shortly. The Information Services and Training Department communicated with our patrons through phone calls, emails, and social media.

A week later, from 18 March 2020 onwards, all university staff had to switch to working from home in line with the decision of the rector of the UW. This decision caused new challenges as it was a completely new situation for the library staff. We had no experience with remote work, yet we had to manage and organise the tasks to fit the situation. We could no longer scan and send documents to our patrons, nor could we deliver books and other materials. Information services could not respond to the phone calls, and the only information channels that remained operational were our social media and website. The other major problem was setting up secure remote home offices. For this purpose, our IT Department set up and provided 80 new VPN accounts, which were necessary for all staff whose work was related to the BUW intranet and Virtua/VTLS integrated library system. Furthermore, the library laptops were specially configured and lent to the staff members who needed compatible hardware ([Kamińska et al., 2020](#)).

The circulation department staff were organised into two groups, and each group was assigned a different task. Furthermore, the end date of the lockdown was postponed several times. First, the date was shifted to 14 April 2020. However, on 20 March 2020, it was extended indefinitely until further notice by the decision of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Poland ([Ministra Zdrowia, 2020](#)).

Other key tasks during this first lockdown and home office period were to analyse how to prepare the library for reopening under new conditions and determine how to minimise contact with patrons to prevent the spread of the virus. BUW's work was based on the following four different but related topics:

- the organisation of the new location of the circulation desk;
- the organisation of work at the circulation desk;
- an analysis of the devices and alternative ways that could help with circulating the materials between the patrons and the library to minimise the contact between the

- library staff and patrons; and
- a summary of the ways to protect the library staff from the virus.

To ensure we adhered to the safety protocols, we followed the decisions of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Poland. We also followed the recommendations provided by the National Library of Poland ([Biblioteka Narodowa, 2020a](#); [2020b](#)). Due to the lack of information regarding the spread of the virus, BUW decided to extend the quarantine period for returning books and other library materials. Moreover, to minimise direct contact with patrons, BUW bought and installed a book return box outside its main entrance (Fig. 2). We introduced a procedure to deal with possibly contaminated books from the return box. From 22 April 2020, two librarians from the circulation department came to the library to empty the return box every Wednesday. The procedure was simple. One librarian emptied the return box and delivered the books to a dedicated place at the circulation desk. The second librarian removed the books from the patron's account using the laser reader to minimise contact with possibly contaminated materials. Finally, the first librarian put the books away on a designated bookshelf for a five-day quarantine.



Figure 2: Book return box located outside the library

Temporary circulation desk

As mentioned before, our tasks while working from home included preparing a plan for reopening the library under the pandemic restrictions, protecting the staff, and introducing certain restrictions and procedures to guarantee safety in BUW. Based on the recommendations of the National Library of Poland ([Biblioteka Narodowa, 2020a](#)), BUW

decided that the library staff would have to work with gloves and masks when the lockdown was lifted. The other recommendations included maintaining the libraries' focus on borrowing and returning books as soon as this was possible and keeping reading rooms closed until the pandemic situation was under control. Moreover, the BN recommended organising the circulation of books outside the libraries, which created another problem, namely ensuring the safety of the place where the circulation desk was installed. We decided to organise the temporary circulation desk in one of the empty office spaces, which was a former restaurant, near the entrance of the library. According to the recommendations, the space was organised as follows:

- There were two entrances.
- Two librarians were appointed from the circulation department and seated at a distance of 1.5 metres from each other.
- One librarian was dedicated to borrowing, while the other was in charge of the returned books and other materials.
- A transparent plexiglass screen separated librarians from the patrons to avoid spreading the virus.
- Bookshelves with the ordered books were placed behind the librarians.
- Bookshelves also separated the circulation desk from the place where the returned books were quarantined.
- There was a separate exit to prevent contact between the patrons entering the room and those leaving the temporary circulation desk.

The temporary circulation desk was opened on 18 May 2020, after two days of technical preparation (Figs. 3–5). For the first time since the beginning of the lockdown, patrons could come to the library to borrow and return books and other materials. The circulation desk was open from Monday to Friday, between 9 am and 6 pm. We further introduced changes to allow borrowing and returning the books and materials under the new special restrictions. For instance, only two people other than the library staff were allowed in the room at a time. Everyone had to wear a mask and sanitise their hands before entering. There was a security desk in front of the entrance, where security staff checked each patron's body temperature. The restrictions were strictly enforced to prevent the spread of the virus, so no one with a higher temperature was allowed to enter. Two librarians issued and collected books, and two others put the returned books away on the specially designated bookshelves for a five-day quarantine. The special status 'on quarantine' was created in our integrated library system (ILS) to prevent books from being requested before the end of the quarantine period. BUW had to introduce this solution since previously there was a possibility to reserve books that had already been borrowed by someone else. When a requested book was returned to the library, the ILS automatically activated the request for that book and sent a notification to the requester.

After that, the patron had five days to come and pick up the item. Through these new conditions, the status 'on quarantine' blocked the book in the holding process.



Figure 3. Temporary circulation desk. A view from the patron's side



Figure 4. Temporary circulation desk. A view from the staff's side

While two librarians worked at the temporary circulation desk, others looked for and put on shelf the requested books located in the open stack area. When the requested books were found and prepared, the librarians delivered them to the temporary circulation desk. Due to numerous requests, BUW had to introduce a change in the delivery time. Usually, the time between the request and delivery of the book was one hour. Because

patrons could not take the books from the open stack area by themselves and had to similarly request books from the closed stacks, we extended the delivery time to one day. Practically, it meant that a requested book would be ready for pick-up the following day.



Figure 5: Temporary circulation desk (Quarantine zone)

New borrowing limits

We changed the limits on borrowed books and other materials. On 10 March 2020, we harmonized and increased the limits on 20 items to 60 days for all patron groups. However, this was a temporary solution dictated by the specific conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the temporary circulation desk was opened, BUW increased the pre-pandemic limits on borrowing books to 10 books for the UW's bachelor's and master's students and 20 books for the doctoral students, employees, and professors.

Free of charge scanning service

To provide patrons with access to the library's resources which could not be borrowed, BUW offered the BW's students and employees a new service, namely scanning up to 50 pages weekly free of charge. We understood that it could not satisfy all the needs of our patrons. People needed a wide variety of content to work and study, especially during the global pandemic ([Anderson, 2020](#)). We did the best we could, but the 50-page limit was driven by the abilities of our Imaging Services staff, the high number of patrons, and the copyright regulations.

Interlibrary Loan

Changes were introduced in the Interlibrary Loan Services. According to an internal decision taken by BUW authorities, we permitted patrons to borrow home books from the interlibrary loan, which were previously only accessible onsite. This decision was limited to the books from the libraries that allowed us to provide such a service. We also introduced another solution for the UW's students and employees who could not pick up books requested in Interlibrary Loan (ILL). They could request the partial digitisation of items received by ILL under the same conditions as BUW materials (50 pages weekly, free of charge). This solution was restricted to print books requested by BUW from the ILL services. Previously, our students and employees could only request articles within the Subito portal.

Rotational work

On 29 June 2020, the circulation department introduced work on a rotating basis to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus among the library staff. A large number of infections could lead to the library shutting down. Hence, the librarians were organised into two groups. One group worked from the library, while the second one worked from home. After one week, the groups switched their work locations. In that case, if someone was infected, only one group would go into quarantine, and the second group could still work in the library to keep BUW's services open. Dividing the staff into two groups meant that only half of the employees were in place; therefore, shift work was impossible. We had to shorten the circulation desk opening hours to seven hours per day. The temporary circulation desk operated under those conditions for three and a half months, until 14 October 2020.

Reopening of the Library

On 15 October 2020, after six months of work, the temporary circulation desk was removed and the BUW building was reopened to the public. Reopening resulted in new challenges and restrictions that had to be introduced to prevent the spread of the virus. We had to limit the number of people who could be in the library building at one time to 300. Previously, no such restrictions existed. Everyone entering the library had to check their body temperature and sanitise their hands. We also had to limit the number of people in the reopened main reading room to 10.

We relocated the registration desk outside the library to prevent new, unregistered patrons from entering the library. The presence of unregistered patrons could have

exceeded the limit of people allowed in the library simultaneously. We also included an information desk alongside the new registration desk, where the newly registered patrons could seek help from the IT Department's librarian.

The Interlibrary Loan Services returned to the pre-pandemic loan policy. Thus, the books requested from other libraries could be read onsite only.

We cancelled the 'on quarantine' status of the returned books in the ILS. This decision was made in line with the BN's new recommendations ([Biblioteka Narodowa, 2020c](#)). Moreover, it would have been redundant to keep the returned books 'on quarantine' when the open stack area had been reopened, allowing people contact with books and periodicals located there. We hoped that the sanitary restrictions and the limited number of people would prevent the spreading of the virus. Due to the increasing number of sick and hospitalised staff, BUW returned to the rotational work system on 19 October 2020. The library was open from 2 pm to 9 pm on Monday and Tuesday and between 9 am and 4 pm from Wednesday to Friday. In the following days, the pandemic situation consistently worsened.

Second lockdown in Poland

On 9 November 2020, due to a large number of COVID-19 cases and according to the decisions of the Ministry of Health ([Rady Ministrów, 2020](#)), the UW authorities announced a second lockdown and closed the library once again. However, this time, the decision to shut down the library was made rapidly and formalised in the evening, after the library's working hours. BUW could not apply solutions similar to those made for the first lockdown. We could only inform our patrons via social media channels and our website that from the following day onwards, the library would be closed until further notice. We repeated the good practices from the first lockdown, extending the validity of the library accounts and the period for returning the borrowed books. Once again, the library staff had to work remotely.

Second reopening of BUW

On 29 November 2020, BUW reopened for the second time. As the situation was unstable, the library retained the rotational work system with one significant change. Previously, the library's opening hours were from 2 pm to 9 pm on Monday and Tuesday and between 9 am and 4 pm from Wednesday to Friday. This time, BUW decided to extend the opening hours by introducing the self-service mode from 9 am to 2 pm on Monday and Tuesday and between 4 pm and 9 pm from Wednesday to Friday. During the self-service mode hours, the patrons could enter the library building, read books, and

borrow them from the open stack area in our self-check kiosks. This solution not only extended the time of access to the library collection but also minimised contact between the library staff and patrons. For example, if the patrons needed a book from the open stack area, they did not have to wait until the library staff's working hours. Instead, the patrons could independently borrow the required items from self-check kiosks without contacting anyone or waiting for the opening of the circulation desk. BUW worked under these conditions throughout the remainder of 2020 and beyond, until the third lockdown in April 2021.

In January 2021, we introduced another change, namely self-service mode hours on weekends. The patrons could access the library on Saturdays from 9 am to 4 pm and on Sundays from 3 pm to 8 pm.

Third lockdown in Poland

On 15 March 2021, the pandemic situation forced the Ministry of Health to issue another lockdown. However, this time the library remained open. According to the decision of the rector of the UW ([Rektora UW, 2021](#)), BUW had to change the previous conditions of working during self-service hours to avoid contact between patrons and library staff. The rotational work system remained but was modified to fit the new requirements. Furthermore, the registration desk, main reading room, and Interlibrary Loan Services had to be closed. We introduced new procedures to allow our patrons to borrow books not only from the open stack area but also from closed stacks. From 7 am to 12 am, the circulation department staff had to bring in the books from the return box, check the books returned in the self-check kiosks, and pick from shelf requested books. The requested books were then placed on the bookshelves in a specially designated area near the circulation desk. At noon, the library building was opened to patrons. They could find the requested books on the bookshelves and borrow them from self-check kiosks. Moreover, they could also return books if needed. This solution allowed BUW to maintain the flow of materials without contact between library staff and patrons. We did our utmost to inform our patrons about the new restrictions, and two days before the introduction of the new working conditions, we published the relevant information on the library's social media channels and website.

Third reopening of BUW

On 14 May 2021, BUW reopened for the third time under the same conditions as the second reopening. We retained the rotational work system with self-service mode hours during the week and on weekends. After 30 May 2021, BUW stopped working on a rotat-

ing basis as it was no longer necessary. However, opening and self-service mode hours remained the same until October 2021. The free scanning service changed, and only UW employees could request 50 scans free of charge (including items from the ILL service).

Comparative statistics

A comparison of the statistics presented in BUW's annual report for 2020 ([Wołodko et al., 2021](#)) and data from previous years indicates how the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted the library's work. According to this report, the use of electronic resources increased by 87%. The main impact was seen in the circulation of books, which decreased by 44%, and the number of onsite visits to the library, which decreased by 72%. In 2020, there were 8,751 new registrations, 5,486 of which were made online. In 2019, the library registered 13,046 patrons; of these, 5,275 patrons registered themselves online. The total number of registered BUW patrons dropped slightly by 10%, and the number of new registrations decreased by 33%. Moreover, the number of active borrowers decreased by 33%. BUW noted a sharp 55% increase in communication with patrons facilitated through the 'ask the librarian' chat service and a further increase of 224% through social media messages. There was also a significant increase in digitisation requests (166%) and in the general number of requested items (32%) and scans (34%). Most requests were issued by UW students and employees, of which 96% were successful. The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted the Interlibrary Loan Services. The number of requests from other libraries decreased by 43%. The rate of unsuccessful requests was 30% in 2020 compared to 25% in 2019. The number of items delivered via the Subito platform decreased by 51%, and the number of scans delivered in other ways decreased by 24% ([Wołodko et al., 2021](#)).

Those numbers show how the pandemic situation affected the library. We observed an increase in the usage of electronic resources and a significant decrease in the number of borrowed books and onsite visits. These findings are unsurprising given the pandemic conditions since, for a long time, only electronic channels were open for delivering materials and information. A comparison of the statistics from 2020 and 2021 ([Wołodko et al., 2021](#)), indicates a further increase in the usage of electronic resources (33%) and a further decrease in the number of active borrowers (9%). We can also observe an increase in onsite visits (38%), circulation of books (7%), and new registrations (22%). The total number of registered BUW patrons increased by 7% from 2020 to 2021. However, the use of the 'ask a librarian' feature and communication through social media channels dropped significantly by 40% and 46%, respectively.

The number of digitisation requests decreased by 22%, while the number of requested items and the general number of scans increased by 25% and 13%, respectively. ILL services statistics indicate that the number of requests from other libraries increased by 17%

compared to 2020 but the number of unsuccessful requests was higher than in previous years (34%). The number of items delivered via the Subito platform increased by 25%, and the number of scans delivered through other means increased by 20%. Moreover, the number of requests for onsite scanning per the new solution introduced in 2020 was almost at the same level in 2020 and 2021 (Wołodko et al. 2022). These numbers indicate that the pandemic situation still affected the library in 2021 but had a lesser impact compared to 2020.

	2019	2020	2021
Visits to the library	719,809	201,682 (↓ 72%)	277,573 (↑ 38%)
Borrowed books	844,105	472,749 (↓ 44%)	504,573 (↑ 7%)
New registrations	13,046	8,751 (↓ 33%)	10,700 (↑ 22%)
Total number of registered patrons	112,826	102,091 (↓ 10%)	109,515 (↑ 7%)
Number of active borrowers	25,086	16,833 (↓ 33%)	15,375 (↓ 9%)
Use of electronic resources	2,003,679	3,746,964 (↑ 87%)	4,975,796 (↑ 33%)
Communication transmitted through "Ask the librarian"	352	1,772 (↑ 403%)	1056 (↓ 40%)
Communication transmitted through social media channels	123	399 (↑ 224%)	216 (↓ 46%)

Table 1: Summary of comparative statistics

	2019	2020	2021
Total number of requests	1,167	3,104 (↑ 166%)	2,430 (↓ 22%)
Total number of requested items	3,908	5,177 (↑ 32%)	6,468 (↑ 25%)
Requests from BUW users (paid requests)	349	467	374
Requests from UW faculties and BUW staff	818	595	418
Free requests from UW staff and students	N/A	2,042	1,638
Free requests completed	N/A	1,961 (96%)	1,596 (↑ 97%)
Total number of scanned pages	175,677	235,329 (↑ 34%)	266,585 (↑ 13%)

Table 2: Digitization requests

Tables 1 and 2 present a numerical summary of the comparative statistics discussed

above. Values in brackets show the percentage decrease and increase compared to the previous year. Tables 3 and 4 present the numerical summary of comparative statistics from ILL services.

		2019	2020	2021
Requests from other libraries	General	1174	669 (↓ 43%)	780 (↑ 17%)
	Polish libraries	1080	585	712
	Foreign libraries	94	84	68
Requests not completed	General	293 (25%)	204 (30%)	268 (34%)
	Polish libraries	257	140	231
	Foreign libraries	58	64	37
Requests completed	General	881 (75%)	465 (70%)	512 (66%)
	Polish libraries	823	445	481
	Foreign libraries	36	20	31

Table 3: ILL requests

		2019	2020	2021
Requests delivered via Subito	General	57	28 (↓ 51%)	35 (↑ 25%)
	Polish libraries	0	0	0
	Foreign libraries	57	28	35
Scans sent by libraries	General	58	44 (↓ 24%)	53 (↑ 20%)
	Polish libraries	31	36	32
	Foreign libraries	27	8	21
Requests for onsite scanning	Nr of requests	N/A	35	32
	Nr of items	N/A	45	34
	Nr of scans	N/A	7,077	9,542

Table 4: Digital ILL requests

Conclusions

The COVID-19 global pandemic caused major changes in the libraries' work. Lockdowns and health restrictions forced BUW to reorganise their work in unusual ways, such as by creating a temporary circulation desk or introducing rotational work. Despite

those solutions, the statistics from 2020 showed a significant decrease in the traditional aspects of library work, such as borrowing books, registrations, and visits. It is apparent that the pandemic also disrupted the work of the ILL services, especially in the circulation of physical materials, which is unsurprising because the library was shut down for an extended period. The lockdown forced librarians to use new technologies. Moreover, VPN use became increasingly necessary to work from home during lockdowns and rotational work. The increased use of technology was particularly evident in communication. We noted a large volume of information transmitted through the 'ask the librarian' chat feature and an increase in the use of social media channels. The statistics also revealed an increase in the use of digital materials and electronic resources. A significant increase was noted in digitisation requests, which were also applied to the ILL services. Whether this trend will continue after the end of the pandemic remains to be seen.

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