

# Setbacks into Comebacks: Protocols of Academic and Special Libraries during the COVID-19 Crisis in the Philippines and Some Parts of the World

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## Abstract

*Just like any other organizations and institutions across the globe, libraries have been badly hit by the Covid-19 emergency and confronted with disruptive incidents. Libraries were left unprepared for the crisis but ready to improvise. New services and strategies have been observed to counteract the impact of the pandemic. Though this is a pressing issue of concern, literature discussing the impact of covid-19 in libraries and information centers are still limited. In the Philippine set-up, there has been no attempt in the form of research to explore what has been enforced by libraries in the academic and special libraries sector. This is where this paper takes its motivation. The research agenda is to explore the new normal strategies being and have been implemented in the academic and special libraries during the Covid-19 crisis in the Philippines and some parts of the world. Specifically, the researchers intend to find answers to the following questions: 1) What are the setbacks encountered by the librarians in the academic and special libraries during the pandemic? and 2) What existing and new library protocols have been implemented during the covid-19 pandemic in terms of the following: collection, programs and services, library space, and personnel? This study employed a qualitative exploratory research approach primarily using asynchronous remote interviews via email. Findings of the study will be beneficial to all LIS professionals, faculty, students, and researchers for they will be able to glean vital solutions instigated by libraries to counteract the setbacks brought about by the pandemic. Additionally, the findings will serve as a benchmark in crafting new library programs, services, and strategies especially when faced with a disruptive incident like the Covid-19 pandemic. The researchers also deem that it is essential to document what libraries have been doing during the pandemic for it will undoubtedly affect the present and future landscape of the field of librarianship.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, academic libraries, special libraries, librarianship, Philippine librarianship

## 1. Introduction

Just like any other organizations and institutions across the globe, libraries have been badly hit by the Covid-19 emergency and confronted with disruptive incidents. To date, libraries and library and information science (LIS) professionals globally find themselves in either of the following circumstances: business as usual, open to the clients with some or minimal restrictions, or either forced to be closed (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA], 2020). Librarians tried to restructure their traditional ways by providing highly online services and resources to their service institutions and pursued two main concerns:

1) bringing the library to the community members' home and 2) taking advantage of every available tool to reach out to the community (Tamaro, 2020).

Libraries were left unprepared for this crisis but ready to improvise. New services and strategies have been observed to counteract the impact of the pandemic. Though this is a pressing issue of concern, researches discussing the impact of covid-19 in libraries and information centers are still limited and scarce (Rafiq et al., 2020). In the Philippine set-up, there has been no attempt in the form of research to explore what has been observed by libraries in the academic and special libraries sector as of this writing in November 2020. This is where this paper takes its motivation. The research agenda is to explore the new normal strategies being and have been implemented in the academic and special libraries during the Covid-19 crisis in the Philippines and some parts of the world. Specifically, the researchers intend to find answers to the following questions: 1) What are the setbacks encountered by the librarians in the academic and special libraries during the pandemic? and 2) What existing and new library protocols have been implemented during the covid-19 pandemic in terms of the following: collection, programs and services, library space, and personnel?

This paper is beneficial for the LIS professionals, faculty, students, and researchers for they will be able to glean vital solutions instigated by libraries to counteract the setbacks brought about by the pandemic. The findings will serve as a benchmark in crafting new library programs, services, and strategies, especially when faced with a disruptive incident like Covid-19. The researchers also deem that it is essential to document what libraries have been doing during the pandemic for it will undoubtedly affect the present and future landscape of the field of librarianship.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper employed a qualitative exploratory research approach primarily using asynchronous remote interviews via email. The structured interview module is composed of three major questions grounded on the research questions presented beforehand. The researchers sent the module along with the participant information profile and consent form via email. Study participants are selected with the use of non-probability sampling, specifically the purposive sampling technique. The study covered two clusters of participants: librarians coming from the 1) academic library sector and 2) special libraries. A total of 48 email participation invites, 32 emails for academic libraries, and 16 emails for special libraries, are sent between the period of October to November 2020. A final total of 33 librarians responded and emailed back their answers. Gathered responses are compiled, organized, line-by-line coded, and analyzed thematically in reference to Nowell, et al. (2017) phases of thematic analysis: 1) data familiarization, 2) initial coding, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) theme naming, and 6) report generation.

## **3. Results and analysis**

### **3.1. Demographics**

A total of 24 academic librarians (Table 1) and nine (9) special library practitioners (Table 2) from nine (9) different countries participated in the study. Most of the respondents came from the academic library sector in the Philippines and the least number came from special libraries. More than half of the respondents are currently in the top-level management position in their respective organizations.

Table 1. Profile of Participants from Academic Libraries

<b>Academic Library (AL)</b>	<b>Geographic Location</b>	<b>Respondent's Designation</b>
AL 1	Turin, Italy	Library Director
AL 2	California, United States of America	School/Academic Librarian
AL 3	Gothenburg, Sweden	Head of the Library
AL 4	Auckland, New Zealand	Senior Client Services Assist
AL 5	Singapore, Singapore	Reference Section Head
AL 6	Dubai, United Arab Emirates	Reference Section Head
AL 7	Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan	Reference Librarian
AL 8	Melbourne, Australia	Library Director
AL 9	Davao, Philippines	Library Head
AL 10	Davao, Philippines	Library Director
AL 11	Butuan, Philippines	Library Director
AL 12	Iloilo, Philippines	Section Head
AL 13	Butuan, Philippines	Library Head
AL 14	Zamboanga, Philippines	Library Head
AL 15	Cagayan de Oro, Philippines	Library Director
AL 16	Ozamiz, Philippines	Library Director
AL 17	Cabadbaran, Philippines	Library Head
AL 18	Cebu, Philippines	Library Director
AL 19	Davao, Philippines	Library Director
AL 20	Manila, Philippines	University Librarian
AL 21	Manila, Philippines	Library Head
AL 22	Cebu, Philippines	Library Director
AL 23	Davao, Philippines	Library Director
AL 24	Cagayan de Oro, Philippines	Library Director

Table 2. Profile of Participants from Special Libraries

<b>Special Library (SL)</b>	<b>Geographic Location</b>	<b>Respondent's Designation</b>
SL 1	Manila City, Philippines	Library Head
SL 2	Quezon City, Philippines	Library Head
SL 3	Quezon City, Philippines	Section Librarian
SL 4	Quezon City, Philippines	Library Head
SL 5	Taguig City, Philippines	Library Head
SL 6	Manila City, Philippines	Library Head
SL 7	Pasig City, Philippines	Librarian
SL 8	Manila City, Philippines	Librarian
SL 9	Manila City, Philippines	Library Head

### 3.2. Setbacks: Where have we been?

Initial coding of data sets resulted in 22 specific themes relating to the setbacks and challenges experienced by the academic and special librarians during the Covid-19 crisis. The researchers further studied, sorted, and reviewed the pre-identified themes and removed any redundancies which brought out six general themes namely paradigm shift, technological barriers, human-related concerns, organizational problems, economic and access issues (Table 3). Many of the respondents (25%) find “paradigm shift” as their main mishap due to the fast-paced adjustment brought about by numerous factors such as the varying quarantine measures imposed by the government during the lockdown period. Library practitioners are also out of time to prepare and reconfigure their traditional library services into a highly digital one.

Table 3. Major Setbacks during the Pandemic (Multiple responses, n=33)

Key Themes	f	%
paradigm shift	19	25%
technological barriers	18	24%
human-related concerns	15	20%
organizational problems	11	15%
economic issues	7	9%
access issues	5	7%
<b>Total Comments around Themes</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100%</b>

The next obstacle includes technological barriers (24%). Respondents posited that there exists a form of digital inequity among library personnel. Some library team members still have insufficient knowledge to navigate the digital world and lack important digital competencies and skills which are further heightened by the unavailability of internet connectivity and/or slow connection in their residence, unavailable personal computing devices i.e. laptops, and poor information technology infrastructure of the organization and/or the library. A respondent also indicated the absence of library management software in their library, as well as the challenge of providing information literacy sessions in an online platform.

Another critical issue mentioned is human-related concerns (20%). This setback is immensely associated with mental health issues. Study participants explained that the lack of direct contact to the patrons and colleagues, coupled with the long period of quarantine, isolation, and the unhealthy adoption of work from home (WFH) set-up brought extreme anxiety, depression, and paranoia which resulted in procrastination, less enthusiasm, and productivity loss. Adding up to this concern is the failure of library patrons to strictly follow quarantine protocols while inside the library premises, handling requests from demanding clients, and the lack of interest of patrons in the library’s online presence.

The fourth area of concern relates to organizational problems. Most of the respondents (15%) emphasized the demanding nature of a WFH set-up which somehow implicitly requires personnel to double or triple their work outputs. Aside from the WFH set-up, various institutions have also adopted the alternative work arrangement (AWA) which poses numerous pros and cons, the cons including the lack of transportation means to go to work and the possible exposure to the virus, thereby compromising the health and safety of the personnel. Alongside, the lack of coordination, cooperation, and communication both at the national and institutional level posed a very challenging dilemma:

*“I think the main setback was the lack of coordination and communication at [the] national level and at [the] institutional level, we had to face all difficulties by our own, we had very poor support from the university leadership; communication among universities was (and is) scarce: we had to tackle all the same problems in the same moments not having any possibility to do benchmarking...” - AL 1, personal response, November 2020*

A respondent also stated that the bureaucratic procedures in some way slowed down their library processes:

*“We need to purchase/subscribe to ebooks ASAP [as soon as possible] but bureaucratic procedures slowed us down. Sometimes, the requests received [are] needed to [be] consult[ed] [using] the materials in the library to be answered.” - SL 2, personal response, November 2020*

Another study participant added:

*“Aside from [the] lack of budget for expensive databases, [the] procurement bottleneck is also one of the major setbacks for government libraries... There are also internal political issues, silos and power struggle within [the organization] making it more difficult to lobby whatever innovations we plan to propose.” - SL 7, personal response, November 2020*

Library practitioners also reported the lack of support from their mother institutions particularly in terms of budget provision i.e. lack of professional development fund and lack of budget for database acquisition, amplified with staff displacement and retrenchment, and the prejudice in the library and library services of the institution’s higher-ups i.e. library services applies only in the face to face transactions.

Additionally, economic issues covered 9% of the total responses. This comprises the inability to travel and the observance of cost-cutting and budget freeze due to enrollment drop. Requisitions for the printed library resources were also deferred for the year. Lastly, 7% of the respondents indicated that they had encountered access issues when it comes to going in and out of their offices and the physical library spaces. 5% of the respondents have also pointed out the difficulty of accessing the physical collections and important office files due to various circumstances such as the varying levels of quarantine protocols and travel restrictions.

### **3.3. Comebacks: New Normal Library Protocols**

Given the many challenges laid out earlier, library practitioners from the academic and special libraries sector have formulated various stopgap measures to continue serving the community they belong with. This portion of the research set one’s sight on the ways they acted in response to the disruptions brought by the pandemic.

#### **3.3.1. Collection**

The pre-identified subthemes consisting of 11 categories under the main theme “collection” were initially coded and scaled down into nine major elements (Table 4) wherein access provision to digital resources is the common denominator among the 33% of the respondents. While there are libraries that have a strong foundation in both their physical and digital collections, there are still libraries that are in the nascent phase of developing their digital resources. Study participants indicated their extreme reliance on open access and open educational resources. What libraries are prioritizing now, as far as the collection is concerned, is access to digital resources:

*“Starting this October [2020], the library has subscribed to new databases to supplement the learning of the clients. Since we only had a handful of electronic resources available at the onset of the pandemic, we see to it that new electronic resources will be procured.” - AL 14, personal response, November 2020*

*“We did not implement new protocols, but we enriched our digital collections...” - AL 1, personal response, November 2020*

*“[We] renewed all [our] online subscriptions to e-journals, e-books, e-tools, etc. to support the conduct of online education...” - AL 23, personal response, November 2020*

Table 4. New Normal Responses to Library Collection (Multiple responses, n=33)

<b>Major Themes</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
access to digital resources	22	33%
health and safety protocols	12	18%
digitization	11	16%
access levels	6	9%
reassessment	6	9%
increase of borrowing privileges	4	6%
borrowing suspension for printed materials	3	4%
acquisition of printed materials	2	3%
resource-sharing	1	1%
<b>Total Comments around Themes</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100%</b>

Next response is the observance of health and safety protocols (18%) before lending the library materials and upon its return to the library. Returned books undergo quarantine measures ranging from three days to two weeks straight, and are isolated to a separate area to prevent the possible spread of the virus. Another 16% of the study participants started with their digitization projects to suffice the information deficiencies in their current library collections. Book chapters, theses, and dissertations, non-restricted public documents, identified publications deemed important for the institution are converted to digital copies subject to the provisions outlined in the copyright law and the intellectual property code. Differing access levels were also observed by 9% of the respondents. While some libraries have loose rules when it comes to using and borrowing printed library materials, several libraries and information centers have prohibited and restricted physical access to the physical library collection by applying the closed shelf system for the entire collection.

The pandemic has also allowed libraries to reassess their existing collection as emphasized by 9% of the participants. According to them, they have completed a major inventory of their library holdings, revisited their pick-up and delivery mechanism for printed materials, and started developing their collection development policy. Other things observed by the library practitioners on the onset, and even during the covid-19 crisis, is the increase of borrowing privileges of the patrons (6%), complete suspension of borrowing printed materials and

encourage high dependence on e-resources (4%), continuous acquisition of printed materials such as textbooks and monographs (3%), and resource-sharing (1%).

### 3.3.2. Programs and services

Under this category, 13 key themes were deduced out of the original 15 themes (Table 5). Many of the respondents (26%) initiated and revamped their online presence by introducing and updating their virtual reference services (VRS). The respondents termed VRS in many interesting ways: Zoom Information Desk, Virtual Learning Support, Online Research and Reference Assistant (ORRA), Library Research Assistance (LiRA), Virtual Information Direct Assistant (VIDA), Virtual Desk Service, 24/7 Reference Service, Virtual Circulation Assistance (VICA), Librarian Online Helpdesk, Virtual Information Reference Assistance (VIRA), InfoVider (IVi), and many more. They took advantage of the available technology such as social media channels and open-access systems to continuously provide support to the service community.

Table 5. New Normal Responses to Library Programs and Services  
(Multiple responses, n=33)

Major Themes	f	%
virtual reference services	27	26%
online events, trainings, and programs	17	16%
book drop and curbside services	14	13%
access to contents	13	13%
book delivery	6	6%
cutting back service hours	5	5%
waived fines and penalties	5	5%
technology support	4	4%
marketing and promotion	4	4%
program and event cancellation	3	3%
policies and planning	3	3%
extended library hours	2	2%
community outreach	1	1%
<b>Total Comments around Themes</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>100%</b>

Other than VRS, 16% of the respondents have converted their regular face-to-face library events, training, and programs into an online platform such as library orientation, information literacy sessions, library instruction, and database training. They have also successfully organized online reskilling and upskilling programs for the service community like copyright training and compliance, bite-sized workshops, online book talks, and online user education. The concept of library gamification was also utilized to provide a more meaningful and exciting learning experience. The conventional library book clubs were also reformed into what they called “virtual library guild” and “virtual reading circle.” The entire digital reformation has been useful and inclusive at some point as mentioned by a respondent:

*“No public programs, but we have done a lot [of] programs on Zoom, and our experience is very positive, we can see an increase of attendees. The programs are accessible regardless [of] space...” – AL 3, personal response, November 2020*

While this digital transformation may not be fully possible and feasible to all libraries, what other library practitioners have highly prioritized is access to content, both the physical and digital library collections. Library book drop and curbside services have been introduced by 13% of the study participants. This service allowed library patrons to request their needed library materials in advance and fetch those on a specified schedule provided by the library in a notification message. Other libraries prefer to call this type of service as click and collect, drive-thru book borrowing, click and pick-up service, virtual circulation assistance (VICA), book borrowing drive-thru via appointment system, and curbside pick-up services. To minimize physical interaction between the library personnel and patrons, a designated book drop for materials to be returned and a self-check-in machine has been put in place.

In addition to the provision of online databases and e-resources access, 13% of the library institutions have rendered online document delivery, scan-on demand, production of pathfinders, and selective dissemination of information. Other services and programs initiated encompassed the utilization of couriers to deliver book requests to the patron's residence (6%), waived fines and penalties of the library clients (5%), technology support for faculty, staff, and students by providing connectivity and hardware support i.e. laptop loan service (4%), intensify online marketing and promotional programs (4%), and cancellation of physical programs and events (3%). The pandemic has also stirred up library institutions to devise an effective business continuity plan, emergency response plan, specific guidelines for virtual programs, and social media policy (3%). While 5% of the study participants observed cutting back of service hours, 2% of the total respondents opted to extend their service hours to better serve their patrons. Interestingly, 1 out of the 33 respondents tried to extend their service beyond merely providing information and resources, that is using their library 3D printers to produce face shields and other personal protective equipment for the community.

### 3.3.3. Library space

In the matter of protocols relating to library space, eight key themes were derived (Table 6). When asked what protocols have they carried out during the pandemic, most of the respondents (30%) fixated on the observance and compliance to the necessary health and safety protocols outlined by the national and local government health department. Among the most cited protocols is temperature checking before entering the institution/library premises, wearing of face mask and face shield, social distancing, mounted plastic, acrylic barriers, and plexiglass shields to service counters i.e. circulation desk, installation of hand sanitizers and alcohols, use of both manual printed form and quick response (QR) code for contact tracing, and disinfecting of spaces and high touch surfaces every hour, and installation of thermal scanners and occupancy counters to monitor the number of people within the premises.

Table 6. New Normal Responses to Library Spaces (Multiple responses, n=33)

Major Themes	f	%
health and safety protocols	22	30%
total closure of physical space	13	18%
partial closure of physical space	10	14%
emerging themes	9	12%
reduced seating capacity	7	10%
signages and marketing	5	7%
space improvement	4	5%
digital space management	3	4%

<b>Total Comments around Themes</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>100%</b>
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18% of the study participants opted to close the entire library space while 14% have chosen to stay partially open where service counters are accessible but reading areas are totally closed for public use. Moreover, 12% of the respondents have mentioned unique emerging themes that they have implemented:

bring your own device (BYOD)	virtual library office
library as a temporary office	library Facebook page as a digital space
library as a classroom	library space as a studio
library as a record room	library as a video recording studio
one-way traffic policy	per appointment basis of library visit

Also, a portion of respondents consisting of 10%, shared that they have limited the entry of clients and reduced the library seating capacity. Signages and floor markings are also posted in strategic locations to remind and inform the public on the observance of health and safety protocols. The quarantine period was also used by 5% of the respondents as an opportune time for library housekeeping, repainting, and rearrangement of the space. Another 4% of the study participants modified and updated their digital spaces. They have included covid 19-related information and resources in their digital spaces, and prepared subject guides and infographics. Libraries which had no social media accounts and websites before have now launched their own.

### 3.3.4. Personnel

Aside from customer-driven programs, study participants have also noted critical initiatives and programs tailored to fit the needs of the library personnel. The researchers drew-out 8 key themes out of the initially 13 themes concerning library staff (Table 7). Most of the participants (28%) responded to the pandemic by observing different work arrangements i.e. flexible working hours, WFH, AWA, and/or skeletal workforce with designated staff groupings.

Table 7. New Normal Response to Library Personnel (Multiple responses, n=33)

<b>Major Themes</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
work arrangement	22	28%
health and safety	20	25%
upskilling and retooling	13	16%
staff reassignment	6	8%
communication	6	8%
mental health wellness	5	6%
technology support	4	5%
work accomplishment	4	5%
<b>Total Comments around Themes</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100%</b>

As shown in Table 7, 25% mentioned that the health and safety of the library personnel is their topmost priority. The number of sick leaves has increased. The entire library staff is strictly required to observe precautionary measures like:

*“...1) proper wearing of face masks and face shields; 2) social distancing (no group eating and refrain talking with each other); 3) daily sanitation of work area; 4) frequent washing of hands with soap and water or with alcohol...” - AL 10, personal response, November 2020*

*“All personnel who are assigned to go to work physically should have a negative PCR [polymerase chain reaction] test result prior to going to work...”- AL 7, personal response, November 2020*

Another frequently identified theme across the participants' responses is the importance of new skills acquisition, upskilling, and retooling of the library personnel (16%). The library staff were encouraged and required to attend webinars, training sessions, and other continuing professional endeavors to widen one's knowledge in navigating the online world, as well as strategies on how to support online distance learning. To further support the mother institution and adjust to the new normal circumstances, 8% of the respondents resorted to allowing library personnel to be temporarily reassigned and reallocated to other offices within the organization. Another 8% of them said that communication among and between library personnel is of prime importance. That is why they initiated regular staff online meetings, catch-up sessions, and online games i.e. online scavenger hunt, trivia questions, and the like. Equally important is the mental wellness of each of the library staff as per the 6% of the participants. Stress-relief programs, spiritual and mental health webinars have been organized too and library personnel are encouraged to participate.

In addition to the physiological and mental health support extended by the mother institution and the library per se, technological support has been evident too as revealed by 5% of the total respondents. Technological support covers lending out of computers, laptops, and even office chairs to prepare the library staff for the WFH set-up. Software such as Zoom and MS Teams were also purchased. Those with no internet connectivity at their residence were given access and connectivity allowance. The last theme that emerged under the library personnel category is the monitoring of work accomplishments by submitting either daily, weekly, and monthly individual reports.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

This research is formulated to explore how academic and special libraries have responded to the challenges brought by the covid-19 global crisis. The researchers have investigated first what specific drawbacks did the libraries encounter in the onset and during the pandemic to further reveal and understand the current situation. Exposing the various strengths and weaknesses of libraries in this disruptive period will benefit the management and organization for long-term gains. From the salient findings, the researchers confirmed that paradigm shift was the topmost obstacle of library managers in the pandemic. Many are left unprepared and have left with no choice but to adapt the disruptions. While some library institutions are quick enough to have effectively designed solutions to the problems, some are still struggling with their band aid solutions. This is not surprising because the findings suggest that many libraries have just recently thought of formulating their business continuity and emergency preparedness plan, which should have been available in advance.

Access to digital resources before is just one of the many options but now, the situation requires libraries to completely pivot to electronic resources and incorporate technology across library processes and systems. The digital reformation also accompanied the demand to revamp one's skills and knowledge to effectively provide quality service to the community. Physical library

spaces were also challenged as many libraries opted to shut off their entire space and focus on the enhancement of the digital library spaces. Although the goal of any organization is to thrive and be productive despite many disruptive incidents, the management must not forget to check on their people as they are an important asset of the organization. From the perspective of the study participants, mental health issues have been taking toll highly during the pandemic period. While some people can easily cope up in unexpected changes, some cannot. Regular meetings, stress-relief and spiritual programs are just a few of the helpful ways to support the people.

Another important point underscored is the ongoing digital divide among individuals, communities, and nations. There remains a big gap when it comes to access to computing devices coupled with the lack of skills and knowledge in navigating the digital arena. This was further supported by the study of Tammaro (2020), wherein she explicitly pointed out that the most challenging part of digital reformation is the digital divide. From the findings, it is apparent that whatever the status of your institution, organization, or country of origin, there still exists a digital gap which should be given a solution to produce a more inclusive and digital-ready society.

As a result of conducting this study, the researchers propose further investigations on the ways how school and public libraries responded to the consequences brought by the pandemic and how effective their solutions were from the viewpoint of their community. The crisis brought realization that what has been applicable before might not be relevant to the upcoming years. Thus, there is a need for library and information professionals to continuously learn and unlearn things to persist in this fast-changing world. One must continue to innovate and tend on his creativity and resiliency or else, fall into the trap of ceasing to exist.

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