

The Medical Library at Umeå University during the coronavirus pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic changed the days rather dramatically for the universities in March this year and still does. In the Medical Library at Umeå University we had to change the library service in many ways from one week to another. This article shows how we managed to have the library open for our customers; while keeping students, faculty and hospital staff safe. We did not close down as libraries in many countries did and also many university libraries in Sweden.

Key words: libraries, medical; disaster planning; pandemics; COVID-19; education; support.

Introduction

The Swedish Government closed all campus education at Swedish universities from March 18th and forced the universities to deliver all education online for all students. At Umeå University we have 34,000 students, in the medical programs they are approximately 5,000 students both in undergraduate and master programs. Universities all over the world and their libraries have been struggling how to manage the coronavirus crisis and so did we at the Medical Library at Umeå University (1, 2).

When the classroom education had to stop, the university also closed all open areas except the libraries, but with restricted opening hours. Our normal opening hours were 8 am – 10 pm on weekdays, 11 am – 4 pm Saturdays and noon – 6 pm Sundays. So, from March 19th our new opening hours were just 8 am – 5 pm on weekdays, both for the medical and the main library. The library at the arts campus closed. All heads of all departments at Umeå University Library made a crisis plan for their department in case we should have to implement a total lockdown for the libraries across the whole university.

At the same time, we removed the possibility to make book requests, and cancelled all previously made requests. This was done to avoid too many people coming to the library, and to make the virus spreading even worse. Still all visitors could sit and study and check out and return books. Both students,

researchers, medical staff and the general public did still have access to the medical library, and still have. Many other university libraries closed or only gave access to their students and staff, but not to the general public.

As all staff with symptoms or staff with children with symptoms had to be home on sick leave or distance working, we did not have staff for all scheduled hours on the reference desk. So, at March 25th we had to limit our opening hours even more. Our new opening hours then was 10 am – 2 pm, which we will have until the new semester starts, on August 31st. In the summertime we will have shorter opening hours: noon – 2 pm.

Library services with restrictions

From March 30th there was a new decision from the government to the effect, that we couldn't have lots of people sitting in the library. We were to introduce more socially distanced spaces and avoid crowding. So now we had to close all rooms for group work. At the medical library we could close the upper floor and the basement floor. So now we had only the entrance floor opened, for checking out and returning books, scanning, printing, and reading newspapers. Our visitors could not sit in the library anymore. That was of course a very large impairment for the students. After a while we also installed plexiglass in front of the counters with a hole for the visa card reader, and signage to remind all visitors to keep distance.

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In the meantime, from March 18th we cancelled our short drop-in-courses and the last PhD-course. The teaching librarians prepared for and held all our teaching in medical information searching and reference work for all students in the booked classes, in videoconferencing programs such as Zoom. More programs than usual booked our courses this spring. Some of their own courses had to be cancelled. Better to have information retrieval courses than no courses. We set up a studio to make better zoom-teaching and films in the ordinary classroom.

All support in the Book a librarian-service switched into Zoom or Skype, or telephone if there were technical problems. From February we had already a new booking system for the support which made it easy to continue with the online support and close the support in the library. The library chat service was started again after the renewal of our website, after the chat had been down for a short period.

The interlibrary loans for the researchers were made much more with "Reprints desk", a vendor that sends the articles directly to the researcher's email. For the material and articles that we couldn't get from that service, we still ordered from Subito or Libris (the Swedish libraries interlibrary loans service).

When all university education changed to online teaching, and so many students went home to their hometowns and their practice in hospitals and healthcare, it became very urgent to offer most literature in electronic form. In discussion with the medical school we decided to buy ClinicalKey Student, which would support teaching with many e-books for the students' curriculum and other useful resources. JoVE Scientific Education was available for free until mid-June. After the free period we also bought both JoVE Scientific Education and JoVE Video Journals which has been very popular and much used in the free period. We also bought more e-books than usual.

In the medical library we also have two 3D-printers. It is very popular to learn how to print in 3D. In March we had to stop all face to face 3D-workshops at the library. Instead we started to print frames for visors. So, we made those frames in the 3D-printers and then put overhead-plastics on them. We sent all the visors to the nursing homes for the aged in Umeå. All nursing care for elderly was in huge need of visors and

masks in the beginning of the pandemic and for quite some time.

In February we had started serial seminars in cooperation with the medical humanities network at our university. We had two seminars until we also had to stop having open seminars. We hope to continue next February.

Discussion

So, what have we learned from this period? (3). We have learned so much about how to teach and support online. We have tried all kind of Zoom, Skype and Teams for our library meetings instead of having our meetings round our meeting table. Now we are setting up socially distanced workplaces in the library to get ready to open for study in the library from August 10th. We have also implemented social distancing measures in our classroom for those courses we can have when the semester starts again on August 31st. We will have introductions in the library, but without the usual walking tour in the library, because it is impossible to keep distance within a group of 15 students in the library when it is also crowded with other customers. We will show photographs or films of all the places in the library, in the introduction.

Luckily Västerbotten county, where Umeå is the biggest town, had one of the lowest numbers of COVID-19 cases per capita in Sweden this spring (4). How will it be when the semester starts again? We can't know for sure. The spread of the virus could increase when all the students come together at the university, and visit the library. We hope that no students with symptoms will come. But people have spread the virus, without knowing that they had it. A huge problem will be that library staff are required to stay at home if they have symptoms, and with opening hours from 8 am to 10 pm the staffing might not be sufficient. We hope that in this autumn we can have immunity tests for our staff. It is very worrying to have a library without enough staff. It would be very stressful if we were forced to reduce opening hours again when all the students will be here if members of staff show symptoms.

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