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COVID-19 and Pakistani academic libraries: documenting the realities, challenges and state of services.

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COVID-19 and Pakistani academic libraries: documenting the realities, challenges and state of services.

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Abstract

The sudden rise of global pandemic has disrupted almost each and every segment of the society. On March, 2020, educational institutions in Pakistan including Libraries were forced to shift to online teaching, learning and provision of services. The need of the time is not only to document the systems, processes and procedures being implemented in Higher Educational Institutions including libraries, but learn from and build on these experiences. This survey is first of its kind effort to understand how Academic Libraries in Pakistan paved their way towards online transition, the challenges faced by them, the inclusion of library staff in overall decision making, the procedures and SOPs being implemented and their readiness to understand and respond to challenges. The study also provides recommendations for the Educational institutions and Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan highlighting the importance of creating systems and resources to document, implement, share and build capacities of library staff at the National Level.

Keywords: Academic Libraries and Pandemic, COVID-19, Online Library Services, Pakistan.

Introduction

Pakistan reported the first case of corona virus on February 26, 2020 and it started spreading all over the country (Dawn, 2020). Based on the decisions and directives of national health committees, the academic institutions including libraries were closed from March 14, 2020 (Dawn, 2020). In the majority of the academic institutions including university libraries, students, faculty members and staff were asked to adapt to learn and Work from Home practices. Online courses and classes gradually became a new normal for teaching and learning. Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan also instructed all the affiliated educational institutions to switch to online teaching and learning and formulated guidelines for online readiness, infrastructure, learning management system, accessing and facilitating student readiness, assessment practices and ways to utilize laboratories (Higher Education Commission, 2020). The transition was very quick and unexpected for the entire learning community associated with higher education. Based on available financial resources and technologies, institutions adopted free open source and off the shelf software systems for facilitating the learning process. The impact of this transition on learning and support services

are yet to be researched. Academic libraries being central to the institution were also pushed to come up with adaptations and ways to support services. This also had an impact of visualizing libraries as learning spaces, development of SOPs and processes for staff working either from home or providing services from the library, capacities and availability of technological access to staff members including the development of SOPs for quarantining the furniture especially checked out books etc. Above all, libraries being the heart of an academic institution, it was important to know how key library staff was engaged in formulating policies and SOPs vis-a-vis overall institutional SOPs.

In March 11, 2020, Ithaka S+R launched an online survey of how academic libraries in US have responded to covid-19 as-it-happens and shared a summary of responses from 213 libraries that responded in 24 hours. Inspired by this idea, the authors decided to come up with a quantitative survey of how Pakistani Academic Libraries responded to challenges posed by COVID-19 lockdown, extending library services, building access to staff, students and faculty during the lockdown, online readiness and staff engagement in not only provision of services, but the development and implementation of SOPs.

Objectives of the study

This quantitative survey study is the first of its kind as there is no prior survey available covering the academic libraries within Pakistan. The objectives of the study were:

1. Document status of institutional and library access during the lockdown.
2. Explore whether librarians or key library staff were engaged in day to day decision making and SOP development.
3. Explore status of services provided during the lockdown and the challenges
4. Gather details of the communication channels being used between the library and its patrons.
5. Document concerns related to provision of learning resources
6. Share the status of library websites updated with SOPs, Policies and Resources

Methodology

The survey method was used as a tool for the study. Permission from original authors was also taken for using few of the questions from the existing survey. Data was gathered through an online survey tool developed in Google Forms using purposive sampling technique. Link of the online survey were distributed through personal emails, WhatsApp messages, a promotional video, social media pages and individual calls. The survey included the institution's demographic and respondent's information, status of Library Readiness, Services and Challenges, Services offered during first 10 days of closure, challenges, concerns and questions once the campus and the library spaces reopens. Approximately 60 responses were received from various public and private sector university libraries in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The sudden rise of pandemic has forced each and every segment of the society to quickly shift to the new normal. Several studies were conducted to better understand the dynamics of this new normal in the libraries specifically. National & international library associations also presented the best practices during the lockdown. (IFLA, 2020) compiled a list of initiatives, information and resources regarding the situation of libraries globally. The association shared

the live updates of the pandemic on its website. Understanding the need and importance of online resources and making it available to a larger audience across the globe, (IFLA, 2020) shared information of some volunteer institutions initiated Resource Sharing online service during Covid-19. (Brown, 2020) identified the situation of libraries in the United States of America (USA). Study indicates that libraries in the USA were closed physically but were opened through their digital doors. Moreover, the American Library Association (ALA) has cancelled their annual conference for the first time in 75 years. (Perrine, 2020) showed that the patrons of libraries were dominantly transferred to the online platform and the use of information databases increased by 75% during the closure of libraries. Author also shared that about 3000 books were issued from Middletown Township Public Library (MTPL), NJ on its last working day which was considered 'highly unusual'. (Dadhe& Dubey, 2020) documented the library services which were provided to the patrons of Premier Technological Institutions of India during this pandemic. The study was conducted through content analysis of websites of leading institutes of information & technology throughout India, The study shows that Indian institutionshave extended many services for their patrons. Almost each institutiontransformed its key services like research assistance, literature search, plagiarism check; and virtual events etc, to their virtual platform.Few institutionsalso designed a webpage which regularly shared the notifications of World Health Organization (WHO) & the news/guidelines of Indian Government regarding the current situation of pandemic. (Nasir, 2020) have studied the services provide in Malaysian Libraries.Academic libraries in Malaysia have offered their services through online chat service & to promote the engagement, electronic posters were shared which contained a QR code directly referring towards the chat service or Library's Whatsapp group. The Perlis State Library shared a series of videos on topics of interest to the public. Pustaka Negeri Sarawak Library made numerous posts on their Facebook such as historical notes on Sarawak, local recipes, book reviews, and management of files/records room, live forums and many more. A group of young librarians formed *Librarian I.D.E.A.S.* (Information, Dissemination, Expertise, Amazing, Success). The group organizes online forums with a moderator and three invited panelists. (Ali &Gatiti, 2020) conducted a study on the medical libraries describing three key roles of the librarians in the medical institutions during the pandemic. (Adil, 2020) highlighted the service models and the implications of technology for librarians during the pandemic. Author suggested that librarians should compile a list of available online resources during the pandemic and should share it with their end users through websites, social media platforms and further try to provide those resources to the end users through online institutional repositories/library guides. (Ameen, 2021) studied the role of Pakistani libraries after the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was based on the observations, readings and on discussing the situation with personal colleagues. It highlighted that pandemic has urged the stakeholders to bridge the gap of digital divide among social classes in Pakistan. Poor information communication technology (ICT) structure, access management, lack of information and digital skills, and non-availability of proper workspaces at home were some key identified barriers in provision of the better services to the end users. (Rafiq, Batool, Ali, & Ullah, 2021) also documented the response of university libraries to the pandemic. The qualitative study is conducted by gathering the data through the interviews of selected academic librarians. The study identified the working role model of university libraries during the pandemic and also provided insight on the information barriers faced by the library patrons and specifically by the librarians during the work from home policy.

Data Analysis & Findings

Demographic information about institute

Majority of participants of this survey were private institutions(59%), while (41%) participants were institutions of public sector. A huge majority of respondents (88%) were university level institutions, while (12%) were college & High school. 56% of responding institutions were represented the provinces of Sindh, 20% from Punjab, 15% from Islamabad Capital Territory & 9% participated from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).
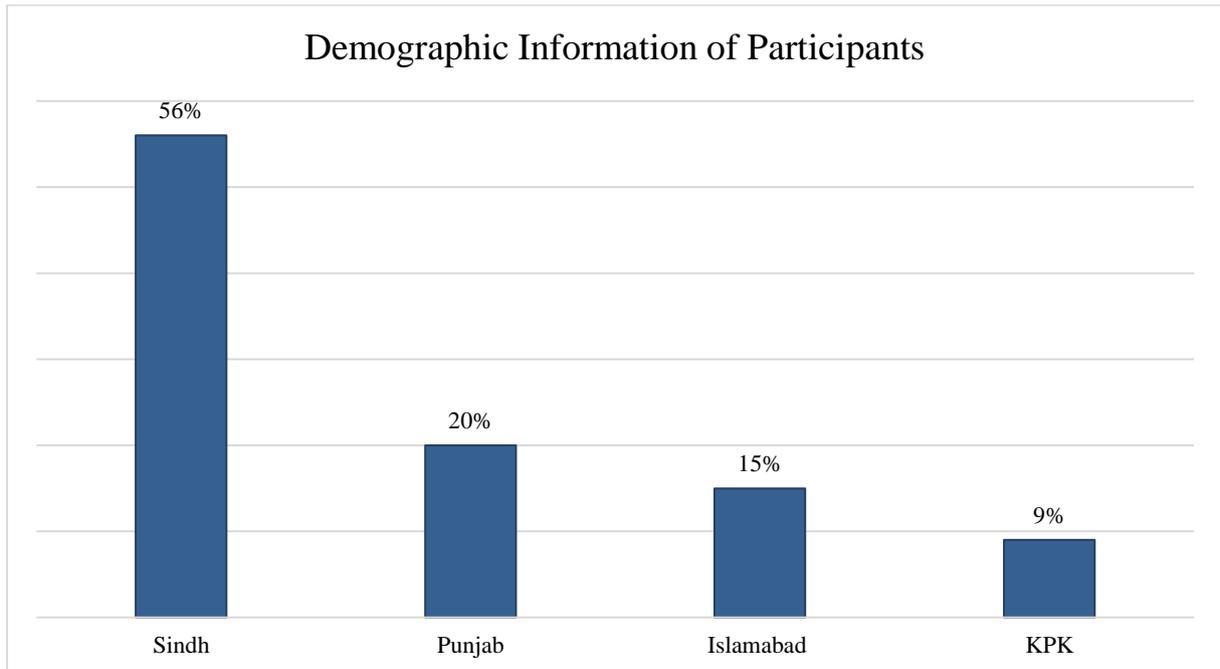
Status of Institution& Libraries.

80% institutions reported to have moved to online classes while 15% cancelled the classes. 72% Library physical spaces were closed (or moved to online services), 23% libraries continuedproviding services with reduced working hours, while only 5% libraries worked as per their routine.
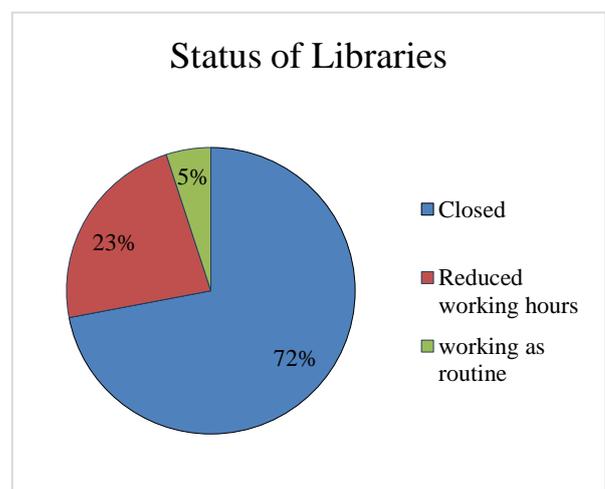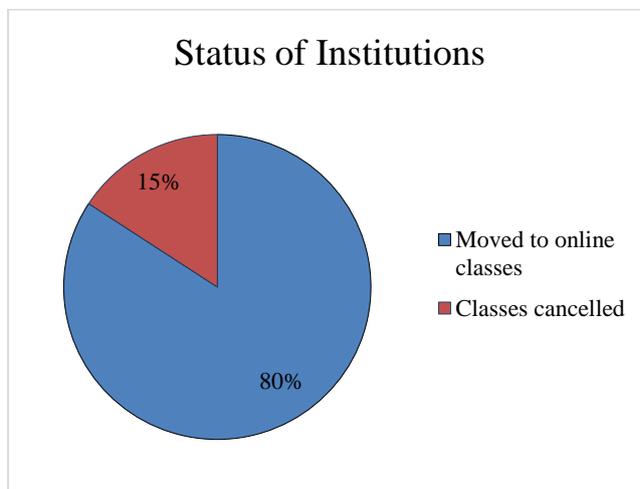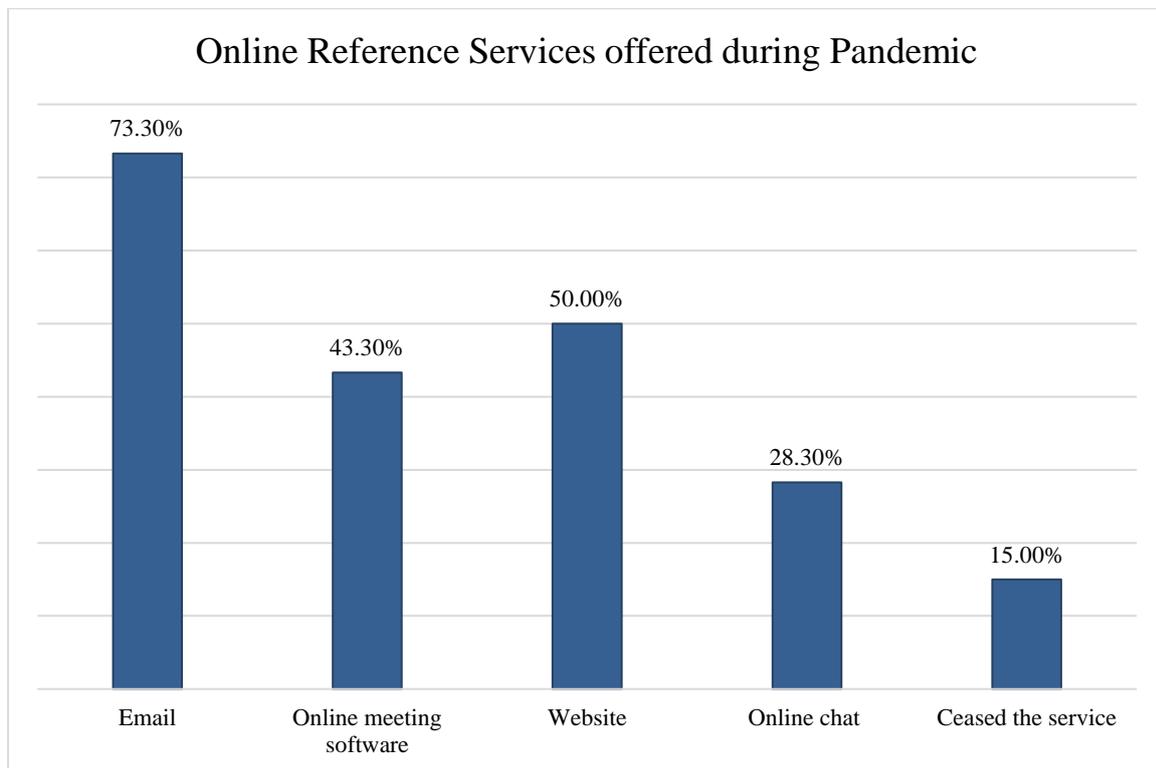
*Participation in decisions related with COVID-19*

51.7% librarians reported to have participated in the institutional decisions related with COVID-19SOPs, while 48.3% were not involved in any decision making.

Library Readiness, Services & Challenges.

Reference services werecontinued in mostly institutes with new procedures. 73.3% provided reference services through email, 43.3% of the participating institutionsused an online meeting software for the reference services, 50% institutionsused their website to provide reference service, and 28.3% initiated the online chat service. Only 15% of participating institutions ceased the reference service.

Online Reference Services offered during Pandemic

| Email	Online meeting software	Website	Online chat	Ceased the service
73.30%	43.30%	50.00%	28.30%	15.00%

Since majority of institutions moved to online classes, libraries also moved to online services information material provision. 64% of the participating libraries provided the VPN access of subscribed database to their students, faculty and staff for accessing all the online materials from their residence or off campus. 11.7% of the libraries continued to provide on-campus access to their online resources, while only 16.7% libraries were unable to provide any access to their online reference materials mainly due to infrastructure challenges.

Access to Online Resources

64.00%

16.70%

11.70%

VPN Access from home   On-campus Access   Not Access
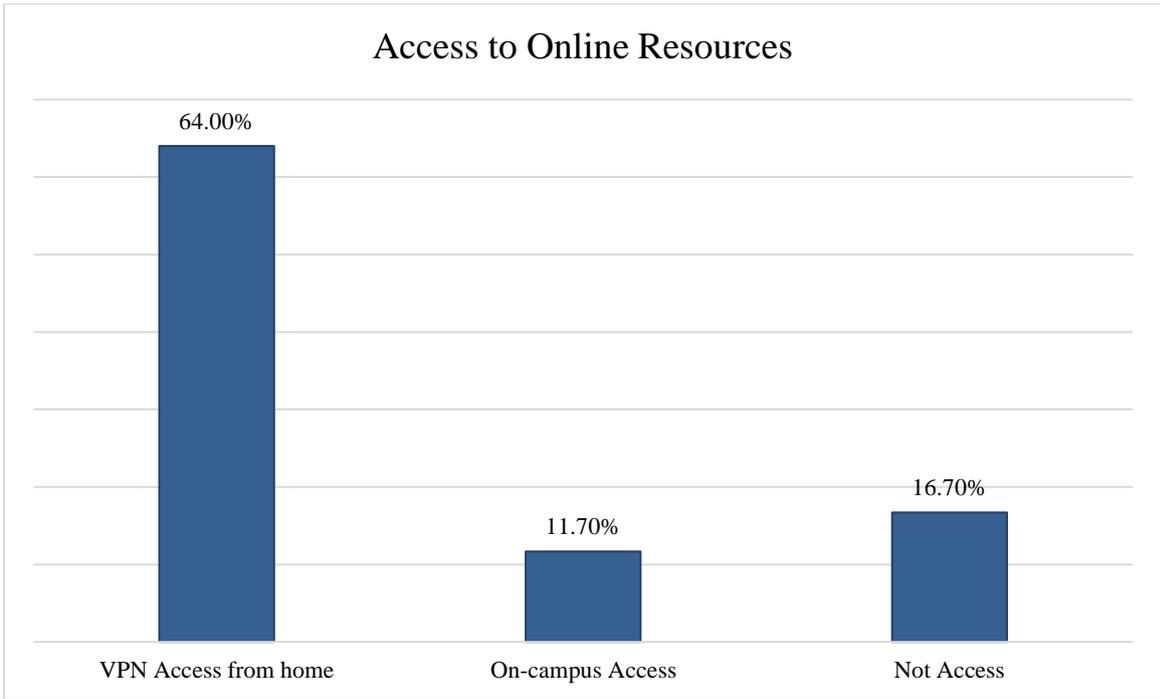
Circulation Service is reported to be the most affected library service throughout participating institutions. 71.7% libraries suspended all the circulation services. 11.7% were providing the on-campus circulation services with limited hours and strict SOPs. 6.7% libraries continued to providecirculation services through courier.

Circulation Services

71.70%

11.70%

6.70%

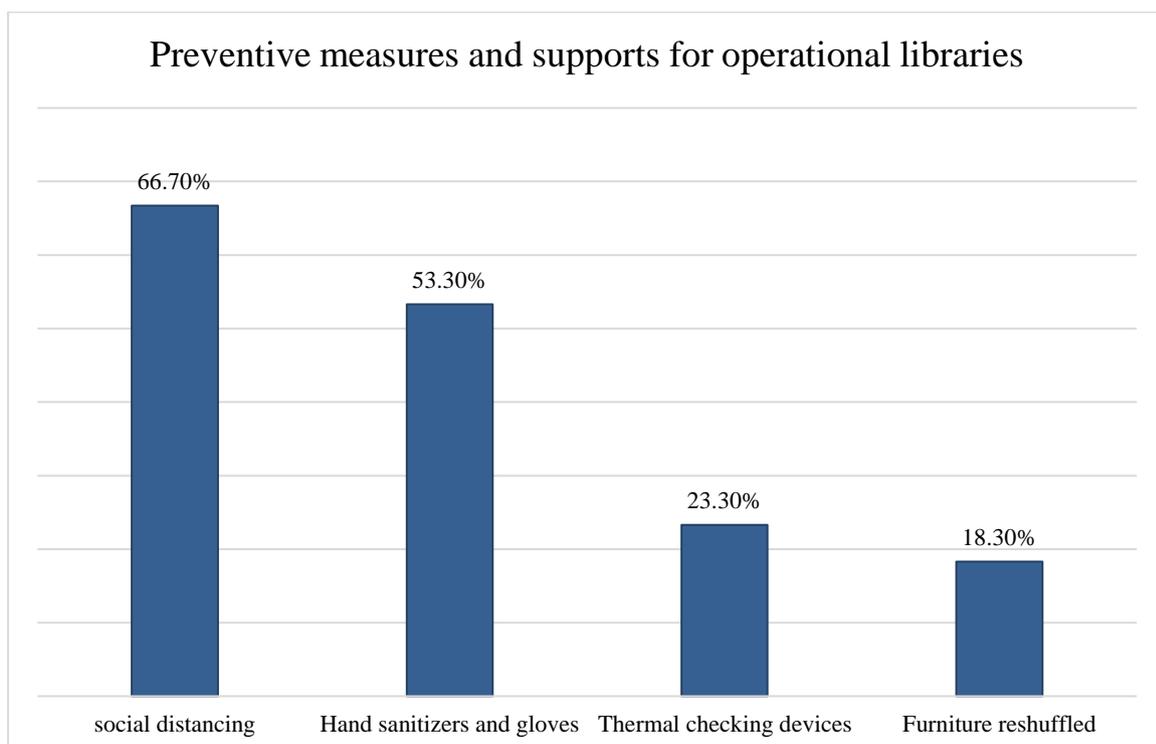Services Ceased   On-campus circulation   Through Courier
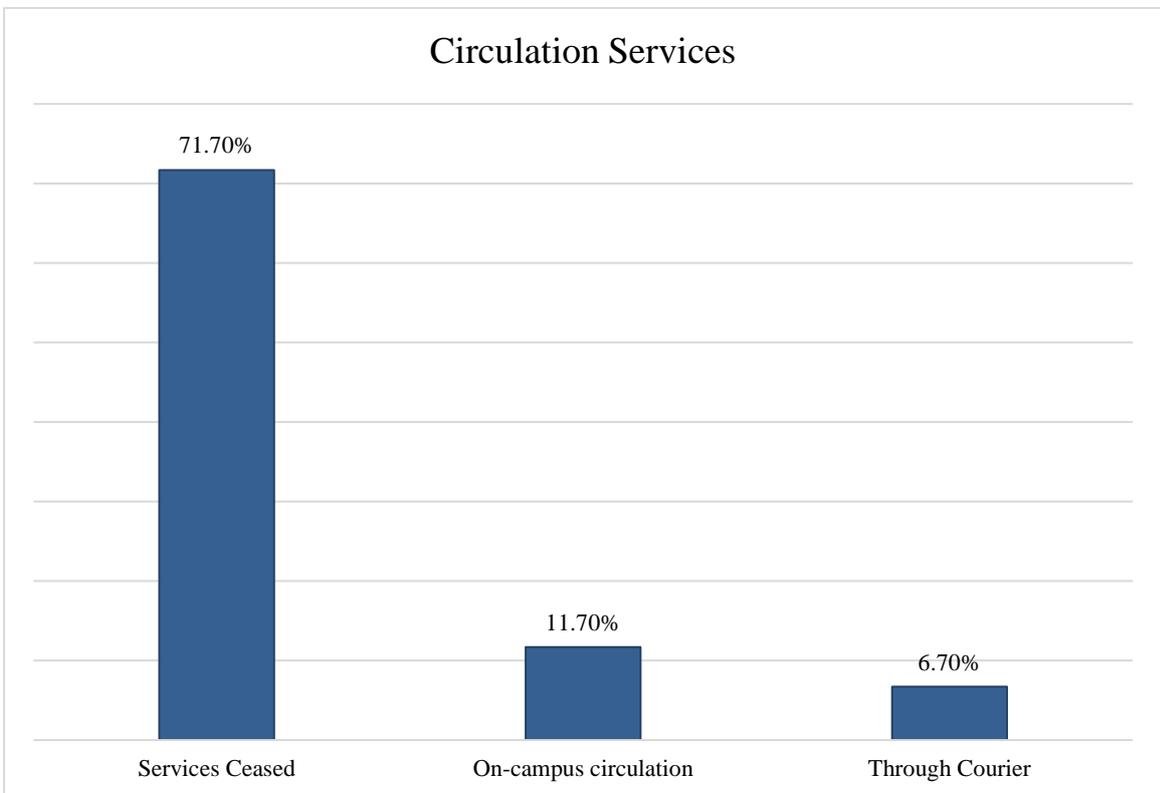
Library events have also suffered to a larger extent in this pandemic situation. 66.7% of library events are cancelled, while 28.3% libraries shifted their events online.
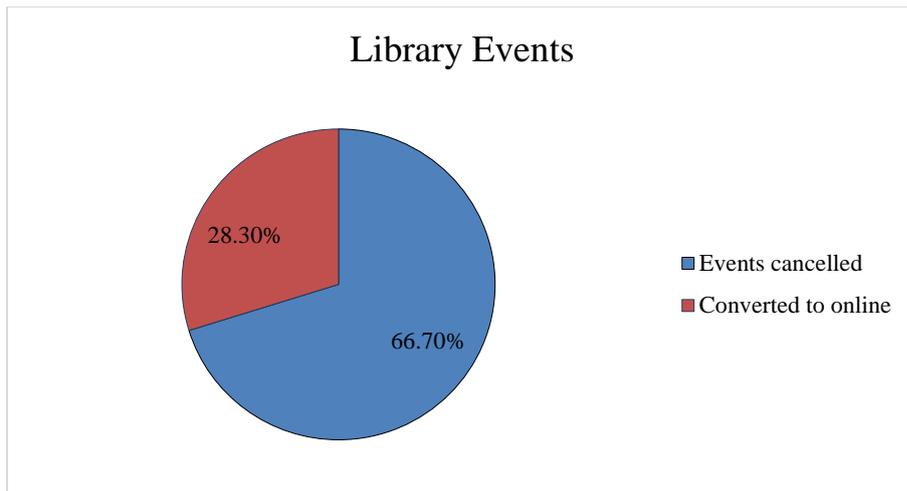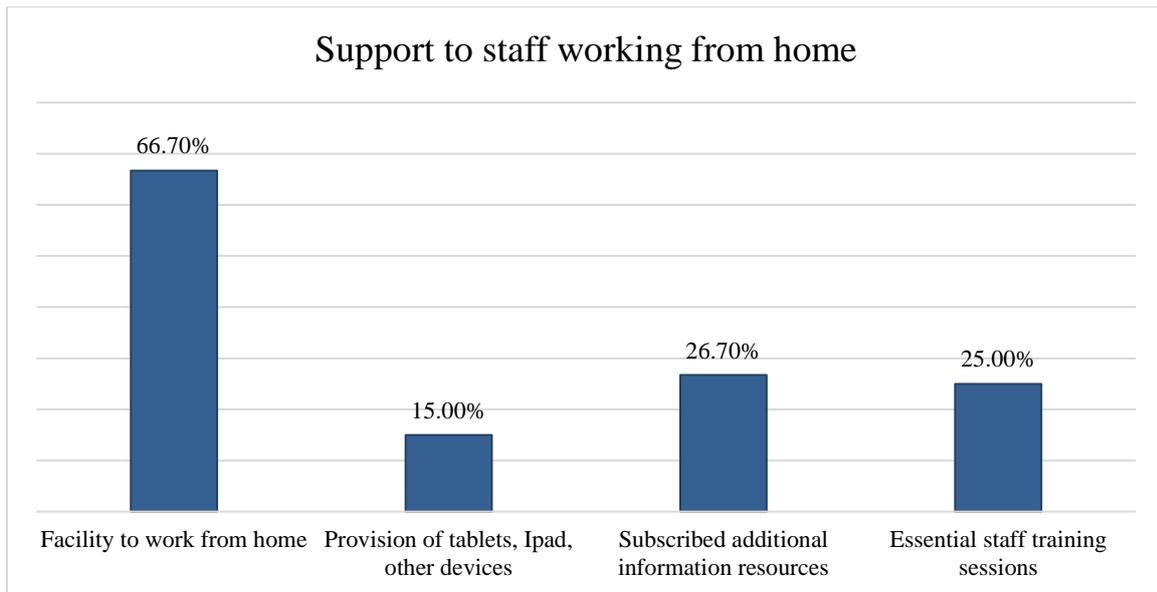
Library Events

Prevention supports and mitigation measures by the Institutions/Parent Organization

The library staff working on-campus have shared satisfactory information over the preventive and safety measures. 66.7% of the workinglibraries were strictly following the social distancing protocols. 53.3 libraries extended support with the provision of hand sanitizers and gloves. 23.3% libraries used thermal checking devices for library users. While 18.3% reshuffled their furniture settings to promote social distancing protocols.

The libraries which were closed have also shown positive results towards these challenging times. 66.7% of the staff from the closed libraries were working from home & providing essential services to their end users. 15% libraries were supported by their institutions with the provision of tablet, IPAD, or Laptop devices. 26.7% libraries subscribed additional databases to satisfy the online information needs. 25% librarians reported that essential training to use the relevant software was provided while working from home.
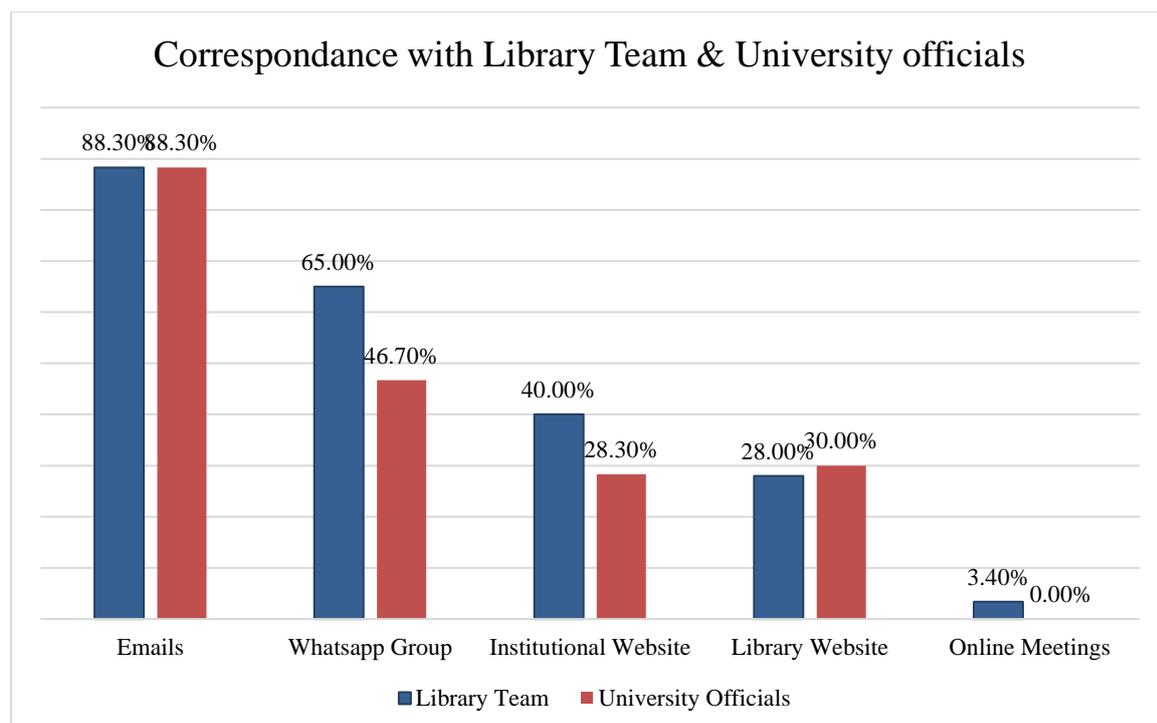
Support to staff working from home

- Facility to work from home: 66.70%
- Provision of tablets, Ipad, other devices: 15.00%
- Subscribed additional information resources: 26.70%
- Essential staff training sessions: 25.00%

Communication of policies, guidelines & Information received from partner vendors.

Emails (88.3%) remained the most common and effective medium of communication while working from home. 65% Libraries used Whatsapp groups for communication. 40% institutionsused their website, while 28% library websites are also used for disseminating the guidelines &information received from partner vendors. 3.4% librarians have conducted regular online meetings with their staff using various tools such as Zoom Online meeting, MS Teams & Google Hangout.

Majority of Libraries opted for Email (88.3%) to correspond and share the important updates with faculty and staff. 46.7% used Whatsapp group, 28.3% used institutional website, and 30% used the library website for sharing the COVID-19 information resources as well.

Correspondance with Library Team & University officials

	Library Team	University Officials
Emails	88.30%	88.30%
Whatsapp Group	65.00%	46.70%
Institutional Website	40.00%	28.30%
Library Website	28.00%	30.00%
Online Meetings	3.40%	0.00%

Libraries adopted extreme cleaning, disinfection & safety measures during the first 10 days of lockdown when libraries were operational. 71.7% libraries made sure that the regular cleaning of all hard surfaces is undertaken frequently. 61.7 % cleaned the supplies which were provided to librarians. 15% provided paper towel as well. 21.7% libraries also quarantined the books which were returned during that period.

66.7% libraries strictly followed the protocol of physical distancing. 46.7% libraries converted their meeting to virtual/online platform. 30% libraries also changed their furniture setting to maintain the required distance.

During the first 10 days, 75% libraries were mostly concerned that how will they provide the textbooks, reference books, & coursepacks to students for their assignments & examinations. 83.3% libraries showed concern related with the checked out materials and how the fines would be settled. 31.7% were also concerned for the copyright issues incase the learning and course materials have to be scanned.

88.3% of the total libraries extended the due date of checked out material & informed their patrons. 3.3% libraries asked the patron to urgently return the material.

Initial days of lockdown

Concerns and Actions Taken
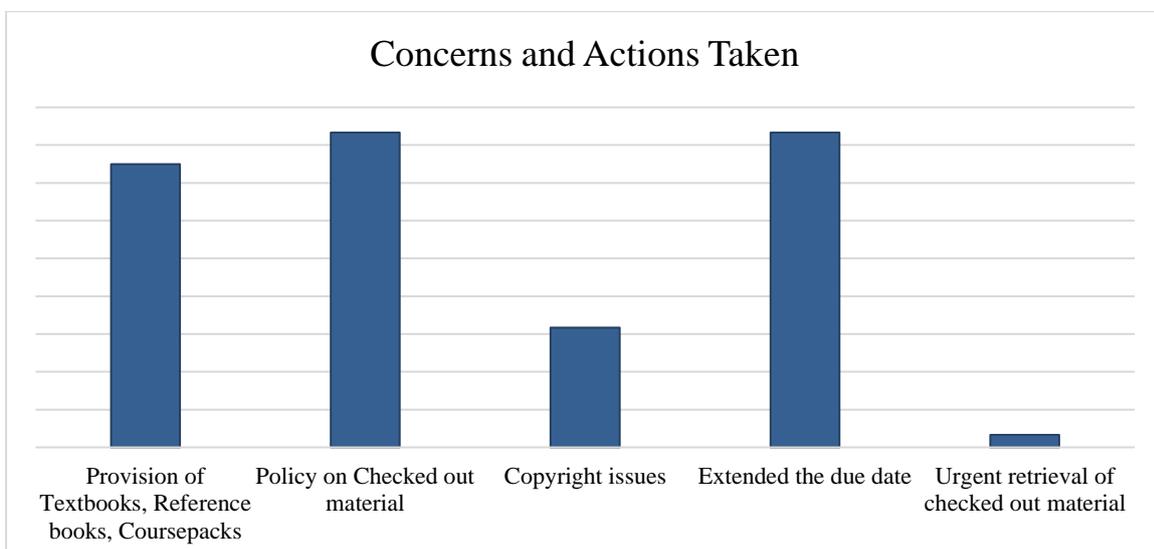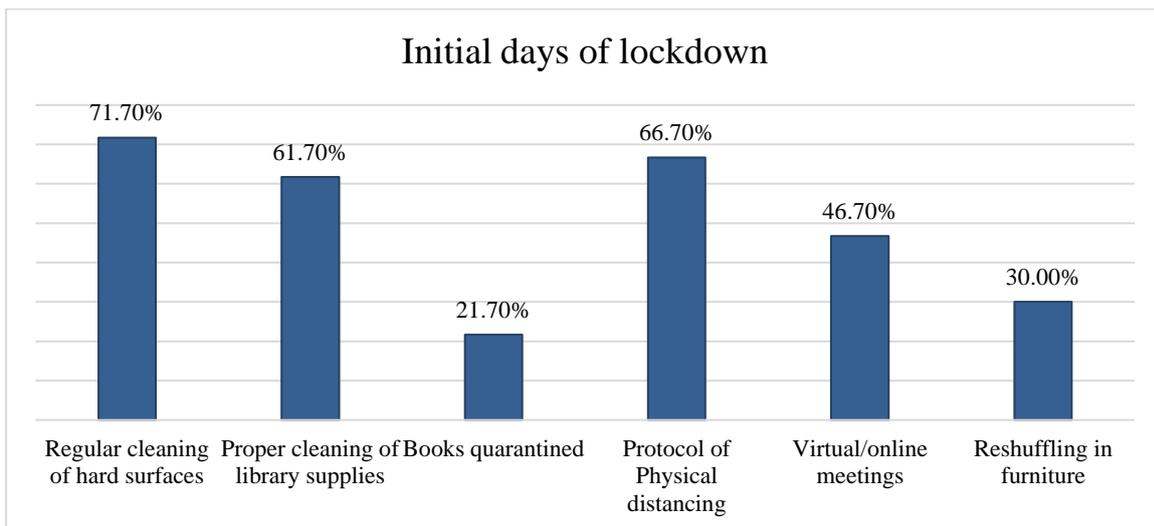
Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey catered to understand and document the major details of the processes, procedures and services undertaken during the first of its kind uncertain and prolonged disruption faced by the higher education institutions and the libraries. It is also first of its kind study which sheds light on how Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan and their libraries responded to the needs of this challenging time. It also facilitated in knowing how libraries as learning institutions continue to provide their service and the challenges faced by them. This survey indicates that majority of the participating institutions and their libraries have played a commendable role in provision of services for continuity of learning. The authors would like to share few recommendations which include development of a portal to document practices of institutions and their success stories. Higher Education Commission Pakistan has developed an online information and resources portal for faculty members to support online teaching and learning during the pandemic (Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2020). A similar kind of portal could be developed for libraries and librarians covering wide range of resources including SOP drafts developed by the institutions and libraries. A centralized online learning resource pointing out all the recorded webinars (held locally or internationally) for capacity building and awareness of libraries could also be developed and shared with the institutions. One more key area of exploration and capacity building is equipping library staff with knowledge and skills to understand fake news and how to help its patrons combat this challenge with wisdom.The survey was unable to document the effects of these transitions on change of work habits, capacity building needs and the state of mental health of the staff serving the institutions and the support services extended to them. This could be undertaken as a separate area of exploration. Above all, the institutions including libraries could also assess the effectiveness and impact of the services offered during the pandemic by taking a feedback from patrons including areas for further improvement.

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