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**CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES DURING COVID-19 CRISIS AMONG NOCEI MEMBER SCHOOLS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

**Objective.** As the world continuously grapples with the massive impact of COVID-19 pandemic on all domains of life, higher education institutions (HEIs) are at the forefront of reshaping and redefining their operations, mostly transitioning into online delivery of services where libraries are not exempted. The way libraries around the globe continue to face their mandate of providing knowledge resources merits research attention, especially in the context of the present health crisis. This study aimed at identifying the challenges and strategies of academic libraries during COVID-19 crisis among member schools of NOCEI, a consortium of higher educational institutions in Region IV-A (CALABARZON), Philippines. **Methods.** Descriptive in nature, the study utilized online survey which was accomplished by 31 head librarians from the said organization. **Results.** Findings revealed that barriers on transformation from physical collections to digital format, reduced budget cuts and decrease in purchasing and usage of print and physical materials are the top challenges encountered while there was a strong agreement on strategies utilized primarily on the availability of various online library services for clients and assistance through the Ask a Librarian chat service where students have access to librarian's help in real-time through virtual chat. **Conclusions.** As a whole, results implicate the need for HEIs to ensure sustainability of library services during and beyond the pandemic, highlighting various measures that would respond to the ever changing landscape of education and knowledge sharing.

*Keywords:* academic libraries of higher education institutions; descriptive research; Philippines

**Introduction**

Since the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic across the world, governments have taken tough measures to curb its spread, including banning all public gatherings, closing public facilities such as schools and universities indefinitely, suspending all air travel, and closing cities and towns. This has restricted people's mobility in order to identify, isolate and treat infected people.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are not spared from the ongoing impact of the health crisis. However, delivery of educational services must not come to a halt, prompting them to reshape and redefine their operations. Academic libraries, as repositories of various information which support the curriculum and research functions of HEIs, are not exempted from facing the challenges brought by the pandemic. Thus, the way academic libraries around the globe continue to face their mandate of providing knowledge resources merits research attention, especially in the context of the present health crisis.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Libraries, in general, are knowledge organizations as they hold information as much as they are centres of learning and cultural activities (Greenhalgh & Worpole, 2013), serving students

and readers from all walks of life and offer services such as lending of books and reading materials. Academic libraries on the other hand are a designated place, physical or digital, set aside to house scholarly research materials and materials supporting the academic, university, or college community and curriculum (IGI Global, 2021).

As brought about by the health crisis, libraries and librarians face enormous challenges in terms of implementing social-distancing norms in a setting that is accessible to everybody and used to attempt to bring people through the doors rather than keeping them at a distance. As many libraries close their doors to users, the challenge grew as to how to maintain various programs and services as possible while in quarantine (Henrietta, 2020). Consequently, librarians need to be more dynamic, creative, and responsive than ever before in order to provide the most excellent service possible. Ali & Gatiti (2020) noted that during pandemic the library must continue to support its regular users.

As the pandemic wreaks havoc in face-to-face human interactions, it has led to the increased utilization of e-resources and services in order to observe safety protocols, making a good case for academic libraries to get support from the university administration and acquire more digital content, particularly electronic books. Due to limited physical and social interactions, there has been an increased contact less and touchless library services (Yap & Manabat, 2020). It has also prompted to the development of infrastructures and systems to fulfil the demands of online classrooms and scale-up remote delivery of library resources and services. Additionally, it underscored the utilization of electronic resources and internet access as keys to education.

In order to respond to the challenges brought by the crisis, libraries have remodelled their service operations. Samanta (2020) explicates that as responsible learning organizations, libraries have developed planned ideas regarding access to their materials via online mode. Online access to digital contents and materials have made it possible for users to search and retrieve accessible materials like journals, periodicals, books, thesis materials, magazines and other materials for their educational needs. Meanwhile Mehta and Wang (2020) pointed out that libraries have developed digital services to meet the needs of patrons from different backgrounds, without the need for patrons to visit the library to access the services physically. Moreover, libraries have redesigned their websites, reallocated resources, and planned robust online offerings (Frederick & Wolff, 2020) by providing a variety of virtual services such as reference services, bibliographic instruction, and e-resources use such as electronic journals and electronic books, and the institutional repository to support learning, research, and teaching activities.

Access to the library digital offers more than doubled during the pandemic. In some countries, the offer increased by from 1,000% to 1,500% in relation to statistics recorded before the outbreak of Covid-19. Some libraries closed to the public also tried to perform workshops, talk shows and lectures through live streaming. In academic and research libraries, access to digital resources has increased in a more moderate way for the very reason that university members – students, researchers, professors – have been using e-resources for years (EBLIDA, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also aided in the increased usage of library sites, email, online public announcements, and social media platforms to market virtual library services. Libraries have also used self-service and touchless interactions, such as book-dropping and document delivery services, to combat illness transmission and minimize traffic in the library (Chigwada, 2021). It is worth noting that despite the impact of COVID-19 on school operations, there are concrete actions executed in order to continue the delivery of various services.

On the other hand, according to the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) (2020), libraries around the world are also facing hard choices as to which services to offer and how, ranging from minimal restrictions to full closure. As government institutions worldwide vary in their approaches to addressing the pandemic, from closure of various industries and

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establishments to continuing life as usual, academic libraries also have to overcome various issues in their continued operations as argued by M. Rafiq, S. H. Batool, A. F. Ali, and M. Ullah (2021), positing that academic libraries face particular challenges and barriers in their transition from physical to digital platform.

The study of Chakraborty and Jana (2021) identified four challenges faced by the academic libraries due to COVID-19 crisis. The first challenge the academic libraries faced is related to space. Libraries have to extend more services with less space now because everyone in the library shall have to maintain a safe distance between them. With the distance management, libraries are forced to reduce the number of seats in the reading halls. The second challenge academic libraries encountered is regarding balancing their collection vis-à-vis print and online. College students largely use print resources because of one or more reasons. Because of the impending emphasis on less person to person contact and the possibility of spreading the virus through surfaces like books, the library authorities is forced to discourage the users from coming to the library. It creates hurdles for the users to access print resources of the libraries. Moreover, because the books and other printed resources may be kept in state of unused before returning the books to the racks, it is likely to result in a delay in further issue of the books. The third challenge is for the libraries to balance the question of equity and access to the digital materials to its users because library funding in academic institutes is inadequate to acquire online resources. In terms of library services, it is challenging for academic libraries to provide accessible printed collections as there is a decreased in-person service and an increase in remote and online services. Because of increasing demand, the lack of adequate number of online or digital version of textbooks, primarily in colleges, triggers the requests for the digital copy of book chapters from their recommended textbooks. The libraries shall have to meet this demand by sending the soft copies of the respective book chapters after scanning these from the concerned books. Hence, the librarians need to develop the scanning facility in their respective libraries, if not already available. The last challenge for academic libraries identified is regarding library management. The library staff is encouraging to work from home as far as practicable and compatible with the government orders issued from time to time to contain the spread of the virus. They may be asked to attend the library physically when there are real needs to complete some essential official works. However, lack of computing facilities at home and the internet connection thereof prove a stumbling block for the library staff members to discharge their official duties from home.

The present study was motivated by the study of Chakraborty and Jana (2021) which looked at the challenges faced by academic libraries during COVID-19 pandemic. However, it also looked at the strategies used by academic libraries of the member schools of NOCEI Inc. to continue their services amid the global crisis. We argue that identifying the challenges faced and strategies utilized by academic libraries would shed light on how knowledge resources are disseminated and how users maximize available platforms available for various purposes, thereby ensuring that the primary functions of HEIs in instruction and research are not compromised amidst the exponential impact of the current health crisis. NOCEI as a consortium of educational institutions in CALABARZON was chosen as the subject of the study as represented by their head librarians because this organization is active in promoting best practices in education in Region IV-A, including librarianship. The researchers of this study are also part of the said organization, belonging to its research and library councils. The researchers argue that identifying the challenges and strategies of academic libraries in the context of pandemic will provide empirical insights to school administrators to look at their library practices, so necessary actions can be made like retrofitting of facilities, upskilling of library personnel and maximizing budget for digitalization of library materials.

## Methods

The descriptive method of research was used in the study. It aimed to determine the strategies and challenges of libraries during COVID-19 crisis. A structured online questionnaire prepared using Google Forms was used to collect the data from the 31 head librarians of the member schools of Network of CALABARZON Educational Institutions (NOCEI), Inc. Of the 31 target respondents, all answered the instrument representing 100% retrieval rate. The online survey was administered from May 12 to June 13, 2021.

The researchers used a self-made questionnaire which was based on review of literature and studies, observation and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first set included statements about the strategies of libraries during COVID-19 crisis, while the second set of the survey questionnaire comprised of the challenges encountered by libraries during COVID-19 pandemic. The questions in the instrument were crafted based on the input collected from academic librarians of NOCEI and were verified in recent literature and studies.

To further ensure validity of the questionnaire, it was validated by experts in library management, research and statistics. It was also subjected to reliability testing by asking head librarians from other parts of the Philippines who were not part of NOCEI. Cronbach's alpha measure showed .756 (acceptable internal consistency) for strategies items and .827 (good internal consistency) for challenges items. The questionnaire used a four-point Likert scale with 4 (3.25-4.00) as strongly agree, 3 (2.50-3.24) for agree, 2 (1.75-2.49) for disagree and 1 (1.00-1.74) for strongly disagree.

Notably, the researcher personally sent a letter through email, addressed to the Chief/Head Librarian of each NOCEI member school. Informed consent was also solicited in order to ensure compliance to the ethical standards of conducting research. The consent form included information about the purposes of the study, the rights of the respondents as well as statements on confidentiality and conflict of interest. After gaining all the necessary permission, the researchers sent the survey questionnaire link to the respondent's email. The use of Messenger account was also utilized in order to maximize platforms for distributing questionnaire and in case of problem with the respondents' email addresses. For the statistical description of data, weighted mean was used to describe the challenges encountered and the strategies utilized by libraries during COVID-19 pandemic.

## Results and Discussion

Analysis and discussion of the challenges encountered by academic libraries and the strategies they utilized during COVID-19 crisis are presented in the succeeding tables and textual presentations. The rank of indicators was determined based on the computed weighted mean, from highest to lowest. In case of similar mean values, averaging the rank numbers and dividing by the number of cases were done.

Table 1

**Challenges of Libraries During COVID-19 Crisis**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Weighted Mean</b>	<b>Verbal Interpretation</b>	<b>Rank</b>
1. A limited number of users utilize our online library resources.	3.03	Agree	8
2. There is a slow acquisition of requested library materials.	3.13	Agree	4
3. Slow internet connectivity disrupts efficient delivery of online library services.	3.06	Agree	5.5
4. There is a reduced number of library personnel.	3.03	Agree	8
5. The library has operated with reduced budget cuts in the current academic year.	3.19	Agree	2.5
6. The library experienced barriers on the transformation from physical collection to digital formats.	3.23	Agree	1
7. Access to library resources and services has been relatively low.	3.06	Agree	5.5
8. Library clients are not aware of the various resources and services offered by the library during pandemic.	2.61	Agree	10
9. There is a decrease in purchasing and usage of print and physical materials.	3.19	Agree	2.5
10. There is restricted on-site staffing which has resulted in backlogs in processing of library materials.	3.03	Agree	8
<b>Overall Weighted Mean</b>	<b>3.06</b>	<b>Agree</b>	

Legend: 1.00-1.74 (Strongly Disagree) 1.75-2.49 (Disagree) 2.50-3.24 (Agree) 3.25-4.00 (Strongly Agree)

Table 1 shows the challenges of libraries during COVID-19 crisis. Findings revealed that libraries experienced barriers on the transformation from physical collection to digital formats as evidenced by the weighted mean of 3.23. It is also evident that libraries of NOCEI member schools have operated with reduced budget cuts in the current academic year and there is a decrease in purchasing and usage of print and physical materials, as demonstrated by a mean of 3.19 and rank as 2.5. Moreover, the respondents also agreed that because of reduced budget there is a slow acquisition of requested library materials, this is shown on the result having a mean of 3.13 and ranked as 4. The result implies that most libraries experienced widespread budget cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic and as a result the purchase of library resources has been diminished and some library plans are not materialized.

Results also revealed that slow internet connectivity disrupts efficient delivery of online library services and access to library resources and services has been relatively low during COVID-19 crisis, having a mean of 3.06 or agree and ranked as 5.5. This indicates that slow internet connection disrupts various online services offered by the library which leads to low utilization of library online resources and services.

Respondents also agreed that a limited number of users utilize the online library resources as well as there is a reduced number of library personnel and restricted on-site staffing which has

resulted in backlogs in processing of library materials having a mean of 3.03 or ranked 8. Furthermore, the least mean of 2.61 or agree and ranked as 10 indicates that library clients are not aware on the various resources and services offered by the library during pandemic.

To sum up, there was an agreement among the respondents that their libraries faced various challenges during COVID-19 crisis with the overall weighted mean of 3.06. This means that the libraries experienced difficulties during the pandemic. This is congruent to the study of Chakraborty and Jana (2021), which explored the impact of the current pandemic caused by COVID-19 on the academic libraries in India. The study identified four areas of challenges faced by the academic libraries due to COVID-19 namely, space, collection development, library services, and the overall management. Furthermore, the study shows how COVID-19 posed several challenges to run the academic libraries in comparison to pre-COVID-19 period regarding these areas.

Table 2

### Strategies of Libraries During COVID-19 Crisis

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. We have the partial opening of our library facilities at present.	3.13	Agree	9.5
2. We have maximized online learning resources for our clients.	3.55	Strongly Agree	3
3. We allow personal visit to our library subject to compliance with IATF, DOH health protocols.	3.13	Agree	9.5
4. There are available online library services for our clients (faculty, students, staff and guests).	3.65	Strongly Agree	1.5
5. We offer various remote services such as e-Lending, e-Learning and Document Delivery Services for our patrons.	3.35	Strongly Agree	4
6. The library has provided assistance through the Ask a Librarian chat service, where students have access to librarians' assistance in real-time through a virtual chat.	3.65	Strongly Agree	1.5
7. We have provided 24/7 access to library digital content.	3.19	Agree	7
8. We have developed an online portal for our information literacy and online resources.	3.32	Strongly Agree	5.5
9. The library provide exceptional user centred-services.	3.32	Strongly Agree	5.5
10. We have develop and implement comprehensive plan for discoverable and accessible print collections.	3.16	Agree	8
<b>Overall Weighted Mean</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	

Legend: 1.00-1.74 (Strongly Disagree) 1.75-2.49 (Disagree) 2.50-3.24 (Agree) 3.25-4.00 (Strongly Agree)

Table 2 depicts the strategies of libraries during COVID-19 crisis. Among the strategies listed, the respondents had a strong agreement that during COVID-19 crisis their libraries offered various online library services for their clients as well as provided an assistance through the Ask a

Librarian chat service, where students have access to librarians' assistance in real-time through a virtual chat. It obtained a weighted mean of 3.65 and was ranked the highest. The results imply that despite the COVID-19 pandemic the libraries never stop providing resources and services to its clientele.

It is also evident that NOCEI member's libraries have maximized online learning resources for their clients during the crisis as evidenced by a mean of 3.55 or strongly agree and ranked as 3. This denotes that libraries have maximized the use of online learning resources in support to the new learning set-up of their patrons.

Respondents also strongly agreed that their libraries offer various remote services such as e-Lending, e-Learning and Document Delivery Services for their respective patrons with a mean of 3.35 and ranked as 4. Moreover, having a weighted mean of 3.32 and ranked as 5.5, respondents also strongly agreed that their respective libraries provide an exceptional user centred-services and they developed an online portal for their information literacy and online resources.

On the other hand, respondents also agreed that they provided 24/7 access to their library digital content, having a mean of 3.19 and ranked as 7, this was followed by ranked 8 having a mean of 3.16 stating that they have develop and implement comprehensive plan for discoverable and accessible print collections. Moreover, the least mean of 3.13 or agree and ranked as 9.5 indicates that their libraries have the partial opening of their library facilities at the present and they allow personal visit to their library subject to compliance with IATF, DOH health protocols.

In general, results revealed that respondents are in strong agreement on the various strategies implemented in consonance to COVID-19 crisis as evidenced by obtained overall weighted mean of 3.35. This suggests that NOCEI member's libraries utilized various strategies in enhancing and promoting the services and resources during COVID-19 crisis. The findings corroborate to the study of Ali and Gatiti (2020) noting that during COVI-19 pandemic the library provide various strategies to continue to support the informational needs of its regular users. Librarians adopted virtual library services to meet the information needs of users during the pandemic while the use of social media pages and websites as a medium of information dissemination to users were fully equipped. Mathabela (2021) posited that libraries find ways to respond to the pandemic, hence an effort on services to users were improved through various activities and strategies. These include access to the library building, access to electronic resources and other services. Libraries also provide information services to cater for online classes, which have risen to its highest as most classes were offered online. Similarly, the libraries look into ways of investing more in digital infrastructure to enable digital distribution of content to learners and also grasp social distancing and building restrictions as their new identity as the academic heart of the university objectives.

### **Conclusions**

The COVID19 pandemic has exponentially changed the way we live and work, affecting academic libraries around the world. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues claiming lives and redefining the landscapes of society in all aspects, academic libraries should continue their mission that capitalizes among other things on digital literacy through maximized use of online platforms to serve students, scholars and researchers. Our findings showed that there was an agreement among head librarians of NOCEI member schools that there were challenges especially in transforming resources from physical to digital formats, reduced budget cuts in the current academic year and decrease in purchasing and usage of print and physical materials, suggesting the need to maximize online learning resources and services. This has resulted in various strategies employed like availability of online library services, assistance through real-time chat service,

maximized use of online learning resources and remote services like e-Lending, e-learning and document delivery services. As a whole, our findings suggest that academic libraries face various challenges that resulted in the utilization of different online and digital platforms, ensuring both safety of clients without compromising the quality of library services.

Though the sample size was limited as only head librarians represented the institutions, results of this study could guide school administrators to ensure sustainability of library services during and beyond the pandemic, highlighting various measures that would respond to the ever changing landscape of education and knowledge sharing. Academic libraries from anywhere in the world could use the findings of this study to look at their own experiences and narratives in library management, thereby improving the educational environment of higher education institutions through knowledge dissemination and creation towards a renewed and wiser society with or without the pandemic.

The following are the recommendations for the sustainability of libraries during and after of COVID-19 crisis. Academic libraries need to revamp their library policies and realign their practices to the new circumstances in order to serve users and comply with social distancing standards as a result of COVID-19. Moreover, libraries should develop Standard Operating Instructions (SOPs) for library staff and users to maintain social distancing standards during and after the COVID19 pandemic. An increase or re-prioritizing of library budgets to add electronic resources and services should be considered. In addition, libraries must invest in the procurement of new technologies, infrastructures, systems and human resource development in order to serve their users in new online environments. Continuous digitization initiatives should also be ensured in order to provide online access to contents in digital formats for quick and easy information retrieval. Academic libraries should also check their web presence. It is important to evaluate the use of library portals and redesign/update the library website. There is also a need to work towards providing one-spot access to all library resources and to try to purchase or create new systems for these purposes. Because library managers or head librarians are important key persons in resource management, they should coordinate with professors, academic units or social organizations to provide websites, videos, and web-based tutorials, among others while responding to the issues of false and spurious information which can be disseminated ubiquitously in online environments.

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## ВИКЛИКИ І СТРАТЕГІЇ АКАДЕМІЧНИХ БІБЛІОТЕК ПІД ЧАС КРИЗИ COVID-19 У ШКОЛАХ-ЧЛЕНАХ NOCEI НА ФІЛІППІНАХ

**Мета.** Оскільки світ безперервно бореться з величезним впливом пандемії COVID-19 у всіх сферах життя, заклади вищої освіти, в т. ч. і бібліотеки, знаходяться в авангарді перебудови та переосмислення своєї діяльності, переважно переходячи на онлайн-послуги. Те, як бібліотеки по всьому світу продовжують виконувати свої завдання з надання інформаційних ресурсів, заслуговує на увагу дослідників, особливо в контексті нинішньої кризи в галузі охорони здоров'я. Це дослідження було спрямовано на визначення проблем та стратегій академічних бібліотек під час кризи COVID-19 серед шкіл-членів NOCEI, консорціуму вищих навчальних закладів у регіоні IV-A (Calabarzon), Філіппіни. **Методика.** В описовому дослідженні використовувалось онлайн-опитування, проведене 31 головним бібліотекарем із зазначеної організації. **Результати.** Результати показали, що перешкоди на шляху переходу від фізичних колекцій до цифрового формату, скорочення бюджетних асигнувань та закупівель, використання друківаних та фізичних матеріалів є головними проблемами, з якими зіткнулися, коли було досягнуто твердої згоди щодо стратегій, які використовуються, в першу чергу, для доступності різних онлайн-послуг бібліотек для користувачів та допомоги через службу чату «Запитайте бібліотекаря», де студенти мають доступ до консультацій бібліотекаря в режимі реального часу через віртуальний чат. **Висновки.** В цілому, результати вказують на необхідність для закладів вищої освіти забезпечувати стабільність бібліотечних послуг під час і після

пандемії, включаючи різні заходи, які будуть реагувати на ландшафт освіти та обмін знаннями, що постійно змінюються.

*Ключові слова:* академічні бібліотеки; заклади вищої освіти; описові дослідження; Філіппіни

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