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# Responding to COVID-19 in an African university: the case the National University of Lesotho library

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[Digital Library Perspectives](#)

ISSN: 2059-5816

Publication date: 23 October 2020

International  
Standard

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Serial

Number.)

[PDF \(139 KB\)](#)

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## Abstract

### Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the National University of Lesotho Library's shift to supporting of contact teaching to e-learning because of COVID-19. The university library increased access to digital content and broadened digital services.

### Design/methodology/approach

This case study is based on reflective practice methodology in which practitioners learn from their practice, reflect and adapt to change as they improve on their practice. The library team members were reflective participants in the transformation of library services from on-site to digital services. The main research questions are "How did the digital libraries meet the needs of the digital community?" and "What will be the new normal after COVID-19 experience in digital libraries and their communities?" The literature review juxtaposes reports on transformation of library services to digital services.

### Findings

The library transformed from on-site to digital services library. It also reports on observed increase in databases usage during lockdown.

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## Originality/value

This paper makes a valuable contribution to lessons on how African universities' libraries respond to pandemics such as COVID-19. It speaks to the need to strengthen existing infrastructure and digital content, while ensuring the library staff and the university community adapts to the new normal.

## Keywords

Digital libraries

Libraries

Lesotho

Covid-19

Higher education libraries

National university of Lesotho library

### Citation

[Mbambo-Thata, B.](#) (2020), "Responding to COVID-19 in an African university: the case the National University of Lesotho library", [Digital Library Perspectives](#), Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DLP-07-2020-0061>

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**Publisher:** Emerald Publishing Limited

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world and precipitated lockdowns and restrictions by governments to contain its further spread. The measures included closing down economies and other activities including schools and university campuses. Higher education institutions in Africa opted to change mode of teaching despite the environmental and technological infrastructural challenges. Higher education institutions took measures to continue their academic programmes, most moving to e-learning and remote teaching as per recommendation of [UNESCO \(2020a, 2020b\)](#).

The purpose of this article is to outline how the National University of Lesotho Library supported the National University of Lesotho (NUL), as it changed its mode of teaching from contact learning to e-learning in response to COVID-19. The library responded by supporting the e-learning mode with digital content.

## Background

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university, the NUL. The NUL was established in October 1975, by an Act of Parliament, although its origin dates back to 1945 when the University College was established by Roman Catholic priests with five students. It now has a total enrolment of over 10,000 students and 370 academics (NUL Strategic Plan 2015–2020). The hub of its administration and main campus is in the town of Roma. This is where the university library, the Thomas Mofolo Library, is located.

The NUL Library is central to academic work at NUL, ensuring support of core business of the university. It does this by providing unfettered access to digital collections, a well-balanced print collection and library spaces that promote learning, research and community engagement. Although the NUL Library operates as a national research point, allowing unregistered users to use its facility for research, only the following categories have lending rights, bone fide students of the university, staff member of the University as defined in the appropriate University statutes, extra-mural member approved by the Library Board and visiting research fellows and/or professors. The NUL Library comprises the Thomas Mofolo Library as the main Library at Roma Campus and the site libraries at the Institute of Extra Mural Studies in Maseru; [www.nul.ls/library](http://www.nul.ls/library) (2020).

## State of emergency

On Thursday March 18, 2020, the then Prime Minister Dr Thomas Thabane declared a two-week state of emergency in response to a rapidly spreading COVID-19. In declaring the state of emergency, government outlined a set of restrictions that would be imposed during the state of emergency. Under the restrictions, schools and higher education institutions would be closed as from 19 March to 20 April, 2020. The ban was extended to include prohibition of public gatherings, including funerals and churches services. Furthermore, some borders were closed.

On March 24, 2020, the government further announced a four-week lockdown to commence on Sunday March 29, 2020. Only essential services were permitted to proceed. On April 24, 2020, this was extended by another two weeks.

In compliance with the government's declaration of a lockdown, on March 26, 2020, the NUL ceased operations. Staff members vacated the University except for essential services. Students were on short term break at the time government declared a state of emergency. They could not return to campus. The Library closed down together with the rest of the University in compliance with the

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create a new situation. [Nuttall \(2020\)](#), emphasizes that reflective practice results in reflective practitioners. Macleod *et al.* (2020) posit further that reflective practice skills, resulting in a reflective practitioner, can be learnt. Furthermore, they add, that training in reflective practice should be mandatory in professions that interact with clients so that practitioners can be reflective and adaptable (Macleod *et al.*, 2020).

In the field of librarianship, [Sen and Greenhall \(2014\)](#) state that reflective practice assists library professionals deliver efficient and accountable service. Further, [Sen and Greenhall \(2014\)](#) emphasize that reflection has a potential to improve on the future of practice and delivery of service. The study concurred with those of [Chapman \*et al.\* \(2009\)](#) who posited that reflective practice assisted professionals adapt to changing technology and improvement in service. Richards, Mascearenhas and Collins (2009) further concurred that reflective practice could improve individual and group performance. In the conclusion of their 2014 study, [Sen and Greenhall \(2014\)](#) state that reflective practice is used widely in libraries. While it is noted by [De Salvo \(2014\)](#) that reflective practice takes time and requires patience, [Corrall \(2017\)](#) highlights that continuing professional education of librarians in the UK includes reflective practice as a critical and defining professional practice.

In line with the conceptual framework of reflective practice, librarians at NUL reflected on their practice before COVID-19 pandemic and altered their practice to support e-learning.

The case study responds to two research questions. The first one is:

RQ1. How did the digital libraries meet the needs of the digital community?

And the second one is:

RQ2. What will be the normal after COVID-19 experience in digital libraries and their communities?

## Review of the literature on COVID-19 and higher education libraries

According to the World Economic Forum, the closure of schools and universities in response to COVID-19 has affected 70% of the world population ([Adoteyi, 2020](#)). Furthermore, [Adoteyi \(2020\)](#) expands that despite the infrastructure un-readiness of higher education in Africa, the sector was compelled to move online and prepare for a world where COVID-19 or other similar disasters may occur. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on May 14, 2020, the

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education. The other recommendations call for training and capacity building in online and distance education, strengthening of knowledge structures and learning and research networks.

In South Africa, [Universities South Africa \(2020\)](#) indicates that all public universities responded to the national lockdown by closing down and teaching remotely. While some universities were ready to do so, it was acknowledged that some were not ready in terms of resources and staff ability. However, all universities were committed to salvage the remainder of the year by continuing to teach students online. Among other universities, the University of Cape Town issued a “The framework and calendar for completing the academic year” on April 16, 2020. The document served as a guide to the university community indicating modes of work during the COVID-19 period. Like other universities, all contact classes were suspended.

While universities deliberated and issued frameworks for online learning, one could not locate a specific reference to how libraries were to respond in this move to online learning. What has been located is literature on how libraries responded.

In its report on COVID 19 responses, The Committee for Higher Education Libraries in South Africa ([CHELSA, 2020](#)) indicated that 60% of its members had business continuity plans that informed their response to the COVID-19 emergency. Furthermore, the report indicates that 62% of its members moved to virtual services provision. Print collections were closed while digital collections remained available. Communication with clients was via social media, e-mail and LibChat services. According to the report, the majority of CHELSA members (60%) had plan of response. On the other hand, Cox (2020) states that Covid-19 surprised and “blind-sided” many university libraries in USA, leading to libraries closing stacks and preventing access to print collections and eventually closing libraries. Cox (2020) further notes that digital collections became the only content that libraries permitted users to access. Similarly, Falt and Das (2020) posit that digital collections became the vital resources for libraries. Noting further that publishers and e-resources publishers also offered more digital content, some of it gratis, during the COVID-19 period. The authors celebrate that, during the COVID –19, only digital libraries ensured safe public access to information without causing ailment and disease, in the way that print collection would be viewed as carriers of the corona virus.

While digital collections seemed to be the only safe access to collections for libraries, [Banes and Pisacreta \(2020\)](#) caution that the new normal of digital access mainly ignores issues of equity and

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[UNESCO \(2020a, 2020b\)](#) has cautioned that while e-learning and digital content has become the solution to learning during COVID-19, institutions should consider online safety for new users and ensure safety of learners online. Thus, the UNESCO created guidelines and recommendations to ensure that online learning environments were safe for learners ([UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b](#)).

## How did National University of Lesotho respond?

For NUL, the closure was in two steps: Step 1 was March 18, 2020, which ended all academic activities. Students vacated the University. Step 2 was March 26, 2020, which saw the closure of all administrative and academic services, except for essential services in response to the government announcement of a national lockdown as from March 29, 2020. However, while the physical university closed campuses in response to lockdown, the “digital university” remained open. The University’s learning management system (LMS) *Thuto* was available online. The online admissions of students remained online and open. The University’s website was online. The Library’s website and digital content remained online. In short, the online university was not closed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The existing e-infrastructure at NUL created an opportunity for NUL to change mode of teaching and learning. Migrating from contact teaching to mainly e-learning was feasible, enabling students to continue learning in their homes while sheltering safely from COVID-19.

## E-learning at National University of Lesotho

The University uses *Thuto*, as its LMS. The adoption and usage of LMS among lecturing staff was voluntary and optional at the time of closure. The LMS, *Thuto*, had been created to support 200 logins at a time and allowed for growth with more and better uptake among teaching staff. However, the advent of COVID-19 and prolonged closure, led to a decision by Senate to move to e-learning so that students could finish the academic year.

During lockdown, the government announced that it was working in partnerships with two leading mobile operators to reduce the cost of data to students. Through a series of negotiations, the government, NUL management and mobile operators agreed to zero-rate student access to learning platforms. By this process, the mobile data providers would not charge students who accessed the

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have had learning content, were not included in the zero-rating plan. The University committed to continue zero rating beyond COVID-19 regulations. The University would meet the data cost for students in a process called “reverse billing” to enable students to continue to e-learning.

## Library response

The COVID-19 crisis removed students from campus. They could not physically walk into the library to be taught information literacy or fetch a book. Therefore, the mode of provision of library services had to change, from one where students “walked-into-the-library” to “students-were-off-campus.” That placed digital content at the center of reaching students and necessitated change of mode of delivery of services to students.

NUL Library subscribes to a number of platforms and databases of e-books and e-journals and has created its own institutional digital library, the NULIR, which includes the locally produced articles and theses. Through its consortium, the Lesotho Library and Information Consortium, Lesotho-based institutions acquire resources via a country license. They also receive digital resources that publishers avail free to Lesotho to support teaching, learning and research. Through a combination of these means, the multi and interdisciplinary NUL digital collections are 12 in total.

These collections were available via the library website before COVID-19. Furthermore, the Library had subscribed to Remotex, a tool to facilitate off-campus access to digital resources. The library had a digital library ready and a tool for making the digital library accessible off-campus.

In response to the research question “How did the digital libraries meet the needs of the digital community?,” the NUL library considered its own readiness on one hand, and the students’ willingness and adaptability to using online platforms on the other. These two considerations were central to how the library pushed service on one hand while considering recipients of service, students on the other.

In terms of students, the NUL’s undergraduate profile fits into the category of “digital natives,” people born after 1984 who use technologies and digital content often. However, [Blackwood \(2020\)](#) refutes the notion of digital native and dismisses it as a myth. [Blackwood \(2020\)](#) cites that their use of technology is superficial. Therefore, teaching them information technology literacy is critical. For NUL, the advent of COVID-19 did not give students, whether



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In terms of library readiness, the library fitted the description of the interface between the library and digital scholarship by [Li et al. \(2020\)](#), which states that in the 21st century, libraries have become spaces for knowledge creation, retention and sharing. [Li et al. \(2020\)](#) assert further that in the era of digital scholarship, libraries have become leading institutions to pilot digital tools. The NUL library had been subscribing to online journals while the University was using the contact-teaching mode. When the NUL closed because of COVID-19, the library team focused on increasing access to its digital libraries provision to support the new mode of teaching.

To meet the needs of digital community, the library was ready with a digital content. The students, who are “digital natives,” would be assisted to transfer from print-learning resources to digital libraries. To enhance service, the library focused on the following service changes and ways of work that would promote support of digital library service:

## Staff and consultation

During the national health emergency, uncertainty as to how to proceed prevailed. The library aligned itself to the university pronouncement in response to the national state of emergency regulations. At Step 1 closure, the library print collections and spaces were closed to students but remained open for those returning print books. In line with WHO guidelines, the library acquired gloves and soap for its staff, especially those on the front desks. The institution proceeded to order sanitizers and place them at entrances. Staff were also encouraged to use personal protection and practice safe distance, hand hygiene and to sanitize. It was critical to keep staff safe at this time while navigating service offering to learners.

## Automating remotex

Soon after the first announcement of Step 1 closure starting on March 19, 2020, which sent students home, the library began to review its services to students who would not be on campus. Library management team met with the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) section to explore ways of enhancing access to the digital library. It was noted that registration for Remotex, the system that enables library access from off-campus, was a manual process. Students traditionally visited the library to register for Remotex, followed by a manual approval process. In the light of that, students were no longer on campus, it was evident that the process had to be changed and automated.

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increased the number of administrators to approve Remotex registration. In a short time, the registration on Remotex was automated. Students could register from wherever they were.

## Instructions on how to access online resource

Realizing that the library did not have an online information literacy programme, it was agreed to place self-paced information on accessing e-journals online. This information would assist student to access the digital content available online.

The library noted increase in usage of e-resources between April and June 2020. In the month of June, there was a drop in usage as students had exams and staff were marking. There was yet another increase in July. It was evident that the university community was using the e-resources during lockdown.

## Long-term plans to improve online access

The library team agreed to continue reflecting on services offering on digital platforms. To enhance online access and presence, the team agreed on the following set of internal activities to improve remote access of library services:

- *Evaluation and improvement of the library's online presence* – The team agreed that the whole library team would workshop the library's online presence. It was critical that the whole library team was involved in the evaluation of online presence tools and service menu to ensure a uniform and coordinated assistance for the faculties and students online.
- Evaluation and revamp of the library website as the main window to many library activities.
- *Evaluation of access to open access online journals* – Noting that open access journals were not accessible through Remotex, it was critical that students were educated on how to access all online journals including open access journal. An interactive workshop would create a manual of access online journals and a tool for assessing impact.

## Reopening the library

The University reopened to staff on May 8, 2020. Students did not return to campus. The physical library was closed to students. The library continued meeting students online. Digital services remained at the core of service delivery to students. The reconvening of staff was critical for planning for the future of work in a digital environment. It had to be done safely.

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of staff facilitated development of shared understanding frameworks and procedures while practicing social distancing. It was only after reopening that a culture of working online and virtually was established and staff could connect to meetings wherever they were.

## Sustaining the “new normal” in service to the digital community

At the core of these changes is the second research question, “how will this new normal be sustained?” At NUL Library, the strategies for sustaining the new normal are premised on taking staff and students along. The following are some of the strategies for sustaining the new normal:

### Breaking the digital divide

Data cost is a major digital divide that inhibits access to learning in digital spaces. The library by itself could not break the digital divide. It could only provide digital content. However, NUL’s adoption of reverse billing broke the digital divide that often prohibits access to online content. It broke the limitation of data costs. The cost of learning was not passed to students but was absorbed by the University. The cost of accessing the digital library was not passed to students but was absorbed by the University. This left student free to learn. The digital divide of data cost was broken.

### Teamwork and reflection is key to online service support

E-learning at scale was new to the whole NUL community. Supporting e-learning was also new to the library team. The library team worked together to reflect on its existing practice and developed ways of assisting the e-learning community. Therefore, the library’s own online presence had to be critiqued and enhanced.

The library team worked together on evaluating the website. The team developed a website complete with a chat facility. It edited the features that consumed bandwidth. The team worked together in developing lib-guides. The team worked together on a framework of constantly enhancing its online presence. Working together, the team enhanced its online presence, making it easy for the university community to find information and help on the library website.

### Sustaining human contact in a digital

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could contact a human being to help them navigate the digital library.

## Shifting mode to online support

While the library was enhancing its online presence, the familiar and known mode of delivery was serving students who were on campus and walked into the library. For the Library community, servicing students not on campus, not before us, not in a print environment but a digital environment, was new. Working in teams made it less threatening to change and adopt a new way of work. Working in teams enabled common reflection and shared a change of mind-set. While building a digital community of users, the library team was also building in internal digital support team.

## Cost of digital infrastructure

The effect of COVID-19 on higher education libraries is yet to be ascertained. The sustainability of the existing digital content will be a challenge should e-book and e-journal prices escalate. NUL Library is working with partners to ensure that the current digital content is sustained, while also strengthening the open access infrastructure, so that open science is mainstreamed. This will enhance not only access to digital content but also provide NUL with a platform to add African content to digital spaces by publishing its own research output.

## Discussion

The response of NUL Library, to change mode to deliver digital services, was not unique. It was similar to those of institutions surveyed by [Banes and Pisacreta \(2020\)](#) for ITHAKA and the [CHELSA \(2020\)](#). Library services moved from print and site services to online and digital services. The services were not limited to digital content provision only, but included support for the off-campus community and continued online contact. The academic libraries shifted to digital services and online to support institutions of higher learning as they heeded the [UNESCO \(2020a, 2020b\)](#) recommendations to change teaching mode from contact to remotely teaching. Reflective practice assisted the team at NUL Library to assess which of their practices needed to change to remain supportive for students, in an e-learning environment.

As indicated in the [CHELSA \(2020\)](#), libraries with business continuity plans had formulated guidelines for responding to interruptions to onsite business. Those without such plans had to scramble for options. While NUL Library did not have a business continuity plan,

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may hinder access to vulnerable groups in the move to digital services. NUL Library will have to pay special attention to this, especially regarding students living with disabilities who had used resources on site to convert from print to other.

The NUL opted to absorb the cost of access to learning by continuing reverse billing beyond COVID 19 national arrangement. This will ensure that students continue to access the digital services and the university generally and the library in particular. This is a critical development that ensures that no student is left behind.

## Conclusion

It is evident that COVID-19 has challenged higher education world over, including in Lesotho. However, higher education has also responded boldly by seeking alternative ways of continuing to educate. Most, as demonstrated, went online, including NUL. The shift to e-learning mode created a new method of work for the NUL community and its Library services. Library services shifted from delivering service on-site to delivering digital services online.

The NUL library team noted that it was not adequate to merely avail the NUL Library digital collections on its website. It rather needed to shift its role to providing digital content services to support the e-learning community. Active support of e-learning and digital services was strengthened by the library's own online presence improvement. The Library website was improved by addition of lib-guides, chat service and e-mail contact of subject librarians' website. By so doing, the library demonstrated not only how it would support the digital learning community but also its adaptability and willingness to change and support the digital community.

The library team remained committed to exploring new mechanisms of making digital content discoverable to the university community. To sustain digital service, the team will be exploring ways of strengthening the user experience of the Library's digital services.

While COVID-19 was an unforeseen health emergency, the NUL community has provided a framework for continuing with its business online. The NUL Library remains committed to shifting its focus to strengthening the e-learning support and strengthening its digital learning support. Finally, NUL Library will continuously develop innovative ways of sustaining and scaling digital library provisions.

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