

Libraries post Covid 19 pandemic: Considerations from Mexico

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Abstract:

The objective of this paper is to show a general description of the first actions that librarians carried out in Mexico in the face of the Covid 19 pandemic, both to respond to the user in their demands for information, and to carry out their professional and leisure activities. The actions undertaken by librarians of academic libraries in the context of the pandemic are presented. Libraries in Mexico are one of the main sources of access to documentary information. In general, all types of libraries had to suspend their services during the pandemic and initiate protocols to restart functions. In this paper we have specifically addressed the contingency measures implemented in university libraries. Academic libraries had to adapt quickly to continue offering documentary and information services and with this, continue to carry out their functions in the development of professional training activities, technological developments, research, administration, and extension of culture. Both university libraries and users (students, professors, researchers, and administrative staff) had to adapt to the contingency since in most cases protocols were established both for prevention to avoid contagion and for user care.

This document is the result of the research carried out based on the information answered by 40 libraries studied, to whom an instrument was applied. The literature on current topics was consulted in various databases and information from the websites of the libraries themselves. Information was also collected from approximately 20 academic events organized by library associations and other information professionals, such as the AMBAC (Civil Association of Librarians), the Library College of Mexico and the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions).

Keywords: *Academic libraries; Strategic lines; Post-COVID Library service.*

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Background:

Some of these concepts with which we have to familiarize ourselves during this period is the word “pandemic”, a term used in epidemiology to describe the development of an infectious disease in large geographic regions (Maguiña, 2020). In June 2020 when the WHO (World Health Organization) on its website reported 6,272,098 confirmed cases and 379,044 deaths. Mexico reported on that date 93,435 accumulated cases, and 10,167 deaths (WHO, June 3, 2020). What these data told us was that we should be prepared for a long-lasting pandemic.

With the arrival of the vaccines, the population began the immunization process, with this a new reality was visualized in which we would begin the reintegration into daily life, generating a transition period in which the vaccination process was combined on the one hand and the other a restart of activities with sanitary protocols. In Mexico, the health of teachers at all levels was considered a priority and they were vaccinated in the first stages of immunization (Trilla, 2020).

The establishment of a traffic light to know the conditions of social mobility and contagion control, as well as the report on deaths was established as a verification channel. This semaphore has been continued in use even to date.

This is how the recommendations for health care aimed at the general population were found, such as: frequent washing hand; adopt respiratory hygiene measures (what is known as etiquette sneezing), maintain social distancing of at least 1 meter between people; avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth; in the face of symptoms such as fever, cough and difficulty breathing, it was recommended to request medical attention; stay informed and follow the recommendations of health professionals. It was also encouraged to “consult the WHO research pages of the MOOCs-Massive Open Online Courses on the virus, which was prepared by the WHO. A specific IFLA action was the recommendation to subscribe to the WHO WhatsApp alert service. (IFLA; 2020).

Regarding the specific measures for libraries, they were invited to use the appropriate washing hand technique, for a minimum of 20 seconds; the use of antibacterial gel, with a minimum concentration of 70% alcohol; use of personal protection equipment such as transparent lenses that separate the work areas of the staff at the service counters. Some of the aspects that were known about the duration of the virus were those described in Table 1.

Table 1. Permanence of the virus in the materials:

<i>Material type</i>	<i>Infectivity time</i>
Paper	3 hours
Wood	4 days
Clothing/Textiles	2 days
Glass/crystal	4-5 days
Tickets	4 days

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Cardboard	24 hrs.
Steel	2-3 days
Plastic	6-9 days
Copper	4 hours
Latex gloves	8 hrs.
Masks	7 days or +

Source: Castro Moreno, M; Venteño Jaramillo, MG, et. al (2020, p. 12)

Since the beginning of the pandemic, disinfection protocols have been established for work areas, reading rooms, etc. considering the differences. The following categories were established.

- Clean. Move, remove dust, dirt and microorganisms
- Sanitize. Reduction of microorganisms and viruses to safe concentrations
- Disinfect. Inactivation of microorganisms and viruses (99.99%)
- Sterilize. Total inactivation of microorganisms and viruses

Authors such as Dr. Yerko Quitral proposed the preparation of 6 documents with recommendations for cleaning and disinfection, considering the performance of the following elements: a) the principles of action of librarians; b) user service; c) protection of personnel; d) disinfection of spaces; e) separation of material for quarantine; f) Training for the librarian; and g) Media literacy. (Quitral, 2020; Quiroz, 2020)

General situation of libraries:

As previously stated, all libraries were impacted by these events, school, public, university and specialized libraries had to modify their strategies, plans and ways of working. Some of the main situations experienced and measures taken by libraries were:

School Libraries. Libraries that belong to educational institutions have delayed their operation since schools were considered places of high contagion, for this reason it has not been indicated when they restart activities, this means that they have time to organize services and activities. At the moment it is known that these libraries have begun to open online and in some cases in a hybrid or semi-face-to-face way with prior appointment.

Public Libraries. In the municipalities, it was considered to return to the new normality, public libraries will open sooner, although at present only a few have started activities, and most of them are still closed.

University Libraries. Although activities have already started, not all services are available yet. However, those in which health sciences degrees are taught, it has been reported that they have not suspended activities, have operated with remote services and have even developed new services.

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Special libraries. This type of libraries have continued to provide services and have had to innovate and make decisions in its daily work. Particularly, in the case of Libraries in the health area, they have continued to provide library services, favoring electronic services. Access to the facilities is restricted and the library staff is already working normally following the relevant protection protocol.

Inside, the healthy distance of 1.5 meters is respected. Housekeeping is done daily on the premises. Staffs wear face masks and constantly wash their hands.

Most of the health sciences libraries are located in hospital areas, medical centers and patient care areas, in which protocols and recommendations suggested by government agencies, experts or required by the Library areas will continue to be implemented permanent its services uninterrupted.

Academic libraries:

From the first days of the pandemic, Mexican librarians began to prepare to continue offering their services. In academic libraries, measures were taken days before the closure so that their communities could have access to information resources and continue with the activities of teaching, research and extension of culture.

Due to the conditions of the pandemic, the distancing measures had to be prolonged, offering information services remotely and through appointments for the loan service, actions that allowed the services to continue to be offered (Murillo, 2020). In some cases, libraries began to use technological tools and electronic resources were available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In addition to this, the actions are focused on developing informative skills and cultural and leisure activities, benefiting not only the university community but also other social groups.

Inter-institutional work and collaboration between librarians were strengthened in this period , and other actions with libraries from other institutions in order to reinforce their usefulness for the benefit of the various communities that require reliable, true, timely and reliable information more than ever. Librarians and users came together to continue fulfilling the mission of libraries: to provide library and information services that guarantee access to information in an efficient, pertinent and effective manner, in order to contribute to teaching, research and the dissemination of culture (IFLA Newsletter, 2021)

The library and the response of the associations:

In the face of the contingency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the library's social commitment became more evident. The librarians gave an early notice to their users, so they organized quickly. One of the values that were shown among the library community was

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empathy in the face of circumstances as well as their ethical and moral commitment. The members of society committed themselves individually or in groups to improve a condition, considering that their action would have an impact on their community (Nina Alonso, 2020)

Some definitions of social responsibility are found in sociology, it defines social responsibility as a mechanism for the creation and promotion of autonomous morality and civilized self-control of the members of society. In general terms, social responsibility “is the awareness of the impact that our decisions will have on society in the future”. (Offe, 1988)

This concept is closely related to ethics and morality, given that the decisions made by both individuals and societies or groups in general have consequences for the rest and a collective conscience must be developed. Regarding legal aspects, social responsibility is regulated informally by decrees, internal rules and other regulations regarding the time of action. Social responsibility exists in all social actors, companies, institutions, citizens. Within this framework, the library also has its social responsibility.

In the library field, “Libraries (from the university to the public) help create the essential element that democratization requires as a way of life, government and State: an educated and informed citizenry, that is, an enlightened community.” (White, 2020). Each library has a variety of services depending on the organization to which it belongs.

The library is attended by a great diversity of social groups, in this framework the concept of the role of the library in the community can be taken up from the concept given by Lloyd V. Ballard in which he identifies the main functions of libraries in these areas : 1) Preserves the social heritage; 2) Distributes information; 3) Selects educational material; 4) Guides the reading; 5) Develops social homogeneity; 6) Provides cultural recreation; 7) Produces intellectual tools; 8) Provides laboratories for research; and 9) Promotes social interaction. (Ballar, 1936; Gilli 2006).

On the other hand, the library is viewed in terms of its social responsibility as: a) As a social institution by its nature, servant and provider of services for a population; b) Being part of an integral system, it involves systemic processes; c) Due to the commitment and responsibility acquired by the personnel, who work in them and acquire a commitment as a service provider for people; d) For being an entity based on the service to human beings that attends people with different needs and ways of living and conceptions of the world; e) For showing sensitivity towards diverse groups such as the vulnerable, and indigenous; f) For all of the above, we can say that in these moments of contingency, the social responsibility of the library is fundamental, since it will not only have to internally regulate the way it acts, but it will also have to favor its community (students, citizens, teachers, researchers, Administrators, officials, etc.) to promote affirmative actions to help improve the current situation.

Methodology:

Libraries have been working trying to get back to normal, resuming their activities, offering library and information services. This study is the result of data collection that was voluntarily answered by 40 university academic libraries. Libraries offer services to undergraduate students and professors. The information was collected between September 2021 and February 2022.

One of the main questions for this study was to know what strategies libraries would implement to return to activities. In this framework, it was desired to know if the libraries would continue to offer the same services until the start of the pandemic or what their performance would be in this new reality and with the support of information and communication technologies (Serrano, 1999; Lehmann, 2007.)

The instrument that was applied consists of 3 sections:

- Section 1. Services offered during the contingency
- Section 2. Services offered during the pandemic, and
- Section 3. Activities to be carried out for the return to normality and new projects.

For the present study, the answers offered in Section 3 were taken i.e. activities to be carried out for the return to normality. Of the 40 participating libraries, 32 responded to this section corresponding to 80% in which they describe the main actions they have carried out for the return to face-to-face activities, for this reason we will take the responses of the 32 libraries as 100 percent, with the results that they described and that is given below:

According to these results, we can say that all academic libraries have taken adequate measures to return to face-to-face activities, this means that they have placed new signs on the access and exit areas. Antibacterial gel dispensers and thermometers have also been placed at the entrance along with sanitizing mats. The use of masks has been promoted and access to services is granted only to those who have them. Librarians wear their masks permanently. In the reception of materials, the librarians use gloves and the bibliographic materials are placed in specific areas.

Libraries have also taken care to allocate specific areas to place returned materials. Regarding communication with users, dissemination activities have been carried out in order to keep their respective communities informed. The reception of books has been done gradually through appointments by email.

Although all of Mexico is already at a green traffic light, not all libraries have been opened for different reasons: lack of staff, hygiene conditions, lack of services such as drinking water, dust accumulation, etc. Therefore, librarians have had to work on actions prior to the opening to have the optimal conditions to serve users and the collections in good condition.

Results and Discussion:

According to the results obtained, the information was organized to be able to interpret it, since the questions were open, giving the librarians the opportunity to respond without limitations, this caused a lot of information to be found, which was classified into the following sections: Digital library and repositories; Collection development; Information skills development; Dissemination of services; Reading encouragement; technical processes; biosafety protocol; Repositories and Services.

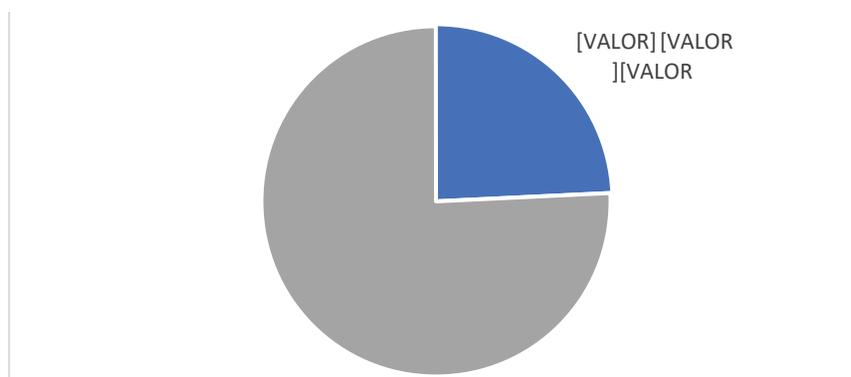
Digital Library and repositories:

Of the 32 libraries that responded, only 2 stated that they had developed activities for the creation of their own Digital Library and another responded that they had worked on the creation of digital repositories.

Technical processes and collection development:

Regarding the Development of collections, 46.87% of the libraries responded that they are working on activities such as: updating the basic bibliography of the study plans; the acquisition of digital books; digitization of collections; integration of collaboration programs in the field of electronic resources with related libraries, digitization project in general and the restoration of documentary materials. One library stated that it was prepared to carry out cataloging activities and another indicated planning to create repositories. Figure 1.

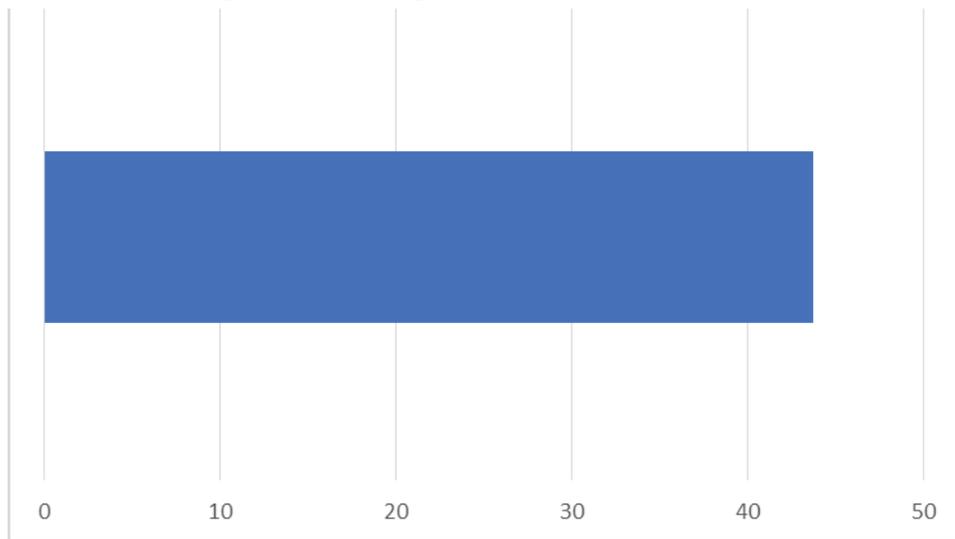
Figure 1. Technical processes and collection development:



Development of information skills:

Of the total number of libraries, 43.75% are developing activities of: user training in the use of online electronic resources; course on the use of databases on the Moodle platform; elaboration of tutorials, guides and manuals for the university community; info graphics on gender equality; promote the use of open access electronic resources; offering workshops on the use of databases and electronic resources.

Figure 2. Development of information skills



Dissemination of services:

In this topic, 9.37% of the libraries scheduled the update of the library's web page; dissemination of information through social networks; dissemination of new acquisitions; dissemination of electronic resources and design of info graphics, videos and information capsules; dissemination of resources and services through social networks.

Reading encouragement:

It was 9.37% of the libraries that carried out activities to promote reading such as: cultural activities such as film club; reading club and promotion of reading through virtual conferences.

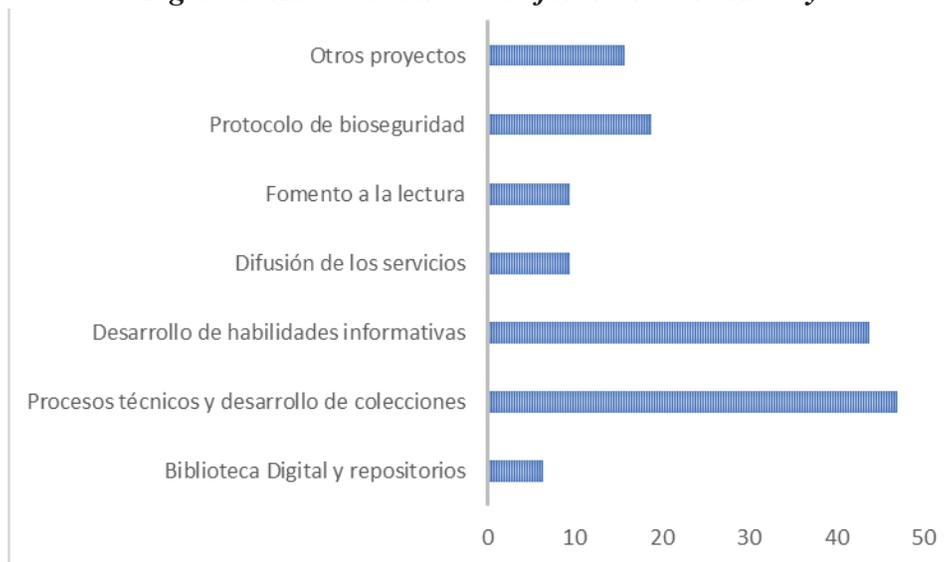
Biosafety protocol:

In total, 18.75% of the libraries stated that they were prepared to update their own Biosafety Protocol. Other actions that the libraries were prepared to carry out were: digital photographic exhibition; Digital Book Fair; Design of a virtual game with images and biofilmographies; geolocation of old maps and specific signage programs.

Conclusions:

In this study we found that the 32 libraries were concerned about the return to the new normality and were attentive to seek new possibilities to meet the demands for information. They sought to establish new projects in conditions of a return to the "new normal", which means that practically all libraries continued to work during the pandemic on some library project such as the digitization of collections and in some cases they sought to implement new projects, Figure 3.

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Figure 3. Activities scheduled for the new normality:



The main projects were Technical processes and collection development; Development of informative skills and the Biosafety Protocol.

Table 2. Results:

No. of libraries	Activities	Percentage
15	Technical process and collection development	46.87
14	Development of information skills	43.75
12	Dissemination of services	9.37
6	Biosafety protocols	18.75
5	Other projects	15.62
3	Promotion of reading	9.37
2	Digital libraries and repositories	6.25

As we can see in the table, 18.75% of the libraries were concerned about this issue, so it is considered that there is a real concern for caring for the health of the community, without neglecting the library services that, as can be seen, have been a priority aspect at all times.

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