

## **When thrown into deep water you have to learn how to swim – Impact of fires, smoke, hail and Covid at ANU**

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2020 for us started with bushfires that burned 80% of Namadgi National Park (82,700 hectares), 22% of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (1,444 hectares) and 3350 hectares of rural lands and came close to the city. The smoke that prevailed for many weeks fed by the fires in NSW now became our own. The library closed a few days because it wasn't safe for people to travel to the workplace, and it wasn't sure if air filter systems could cope with ACIs of 500-6000. As soon as there was a little relief, a hailstorm with golf-ball sized hailstones damaged 80 buildings on campus. It was raining twigs and leaves from the trees. The damage was enormous.

Then came the virus. At the beginning the general anxiety of something threatening and unknown put all of us into a state of suspense – wait (anxiously) and see what happens, constantly worrying. The ACT did go into lockdown quite early, with schools also transitioning to online only, and a few days later the university, and the libraries were closed. Library staff were told to stay home and work from home. Not knowing what to expect we found that it worked very well! IT had done a marvellous job in setting up all the connections, and we could take equipment from our workplace to home. We even had arranged for the cataloguers to get books sent to their home addresses to be catalogued from there. So technically we were in a good spot. It proved to be very helpful that we also had followed an “mostly e” policy for purchases for quite a while, so that a lot of materials were available for people off campus. We also invested a lot of time and effort in adding LibGuides, developing introductory and teaching videos for Digital Literacy and other online support. Student contacts were possible through dedicated “personal librarian” Zoom accounts, that were bookable within certain time slots. Our learning curve was steep and relentless, but also exciting!

In June we were back to the office but work from home continued within a hybrid model. Many chose to work one or two days in the week from home. That put some challenges to the rostering of information desk shifts but also led to the introduction of the Virtual Information Desk – a colleague has a Zoom session open on a dedicated computer at the info desk, and people can ask their questions as if we were there. We had some funny reactions! This has worked very well so far, but keep in mind that our branch library is a relatively quiet one. To limit customer movements, we introduced a “click and collect” service, where users can order almost any book from any of the 5 library branches to collect it from a central collection point.

Later, with the university having done the math, the economic consequences hit, as did in every other university. All in all, the university has to find 100 million to save in 2020 and another 150 million in 2021, and more until 2023. About 15% of the library acquisitions budget needs to be cut, which meant all purchases of monographs stopped from one day to the other, and we are not yet clear what this means exactly for 2021. The other, more troubling issue was the reduction of staff through Voluntary

Separation, which about 20 people from the library took. A redundancy through the VS means that this position as such is also lost. In the Asia Pacific collection team no one took the VS, so we hope to stay operable with no staff losses for that area. Yet in many other areas people left. This leaves us all with a more diverse and split work portfolio, and the library will have a new structural shape called “streams”, which is still in its first stages of implementation.

We will, of course, be a different library. Less people do more and different work, and our reliance on database providers and e-book vendors will increase. On the other hand, the requested savings may force us to look into exactly that, and big package items may not be sacrosanct anymore. There is no way back to an earlier “normal”, but what the new normal will be we are still intensely working on. We learned to dog-paddle, and now have to upgrade to swimming.