

Covid19 -lockdowns and their impact on ANU library services in 2021

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ANU had, as almost every other university, difficult years in 2020 and 2021 due to a reported loss of revenue of 17.4%¹. The combination of massive cuts and lockdowns had us thinking about services and staffing quite differently. I would like to give an overview from a personal perspective of what we had to do, what we did, and what repercussions I think this all will have for the future.

Disclaimer:

Descriptions and opinions are mine only and do not represent the opinions of any other library or university executives or staff.

Implications of financial constraints

The financial constraints meant that university staff deferred salary increase in 2020, and about 460 positions had to go university wide. A large part of those were taken from the professional portfolios, in contrast to earlier redundancy rounds in 2013 and 2016/17 where mostly academics and teaching staff were affected. The ANU Library is a part of the university's "Service Portfolio" which contributed highly to cost savings through staff separations in 2020. Of the Scholarly Information System's ca. 120 employees 30 took the voluntary separation package, 20 of those came from the library. In addition to that the University did not renew most of its casual staff contracts. For the library that meant a loss of approximately 620 work hours per week, and a loss of almost all higher-level positions and many years of corporate knowledge. Major reviews of services were undertaken, and the need of redistribution recognised. When restructuring was introduced in other portfolios and schools the Library management decided not to pursue the same direction but simply "reorganise the reporting lines". In consequence all staff members that are in cataloguing, acquisitions and licensing were streamlined into the "Tech Services Stream" whereas everyone else became a member of the newly established "Client Services Stream". With voluntary redundancies and a purchase freeze for the end of 2020, the Scholarly Information Services division reached the prescribed goal of savings in 2020 and possibly for 2021 without having to implement involuntary redundancies. In 2021 we did not experience a budget reduction for library materials.

Examples of new services

Throughout the lockdown periods the libraries were closed. In the recent 9 weeks of lockdown almost all staff worked from home and we managed to stay in contact with our users online.

No one could borrow or return books, so we increased lending periods and waived all occurring fines. For requests that were not available as e-books, we offered a click and collect service where users could order books to be collected from the shelves and placed for collection on a specific trolley in the entrance area of one specific library building. Only a small number of staff had access to the library buildings to pick up the items and process them. On request we even delivered the books to the requestors' doors – a staff member drove through town to deliver. As student accommodations were locked down this service was

¹ Marshman, I. and Larkins, F.: "How bad has COVID been for university finances and staff?" *University World News*, 15 December 2021. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20211215052334254>

highly welcome. We also invested a lot of time and effort into short introductory videos for digital literacy training, and recently implemented a live chat function, which was received particularly well. This chat, using Springshare's LibAnswer/LibChat module, is to be serviced by all library staff, with shifts rostered with multiple staff available at the same time so that questions can be answered with as little delay as possible. For all staff this is a positively challenging and exciting experience.

We have now also moved to using LibCal, a booking system for appointments with specific librarians responsible for focus areas. In a way it works similar to the medical HotDoc appointment software. At the time of writing it's still in its starting phase.

The first week after reopening 2 November the libraries had more than 8000 visitors – we saw many happy faces, yes – real and full faces, since not everyone followed mandatory mask wearing in the first weeks. We were supposed to monitor this and remind users to wear them, policing through the aisles. Not all staff felt confident doing this. Recently restrictions were eased and masks are not mandatory right now.

The position of subject specialists

For subject librarians, who at ANU already run by the generic term "information access coordinator", the main change was a move towards more desk shifts, everyday active online chat supports, loans and fines managements, user registrations, and many more generic user and client services. Information access coordinators can now be rostered up to more than half of their weekly work hours for these general client services. These services are part of the general position description and are necessarily extended, yet they constitute a major disruption in work arrangements: the liaison with academics, the follow-up of specific reference requests, and collection management tasks. The loss of staff means that these user services will be permanent additional work load for subject librarians.

The study of Asia and the Pacific is formulated as one of the "main areas of research focus" in ANU's Strategic Plan 2021-2025, and thus the existence of Asian Studies collections at ANU may not be endangered. Even though the ANU library as one of the last academic libraries in Australia that has not yet abolished subject specialists as such and has kept the Asian and Pacific Studies library, as a consequence of this re-shift towards generic client services the research support by subject specialists will be diminished simply due to a lack of allocated time. We may, however, be lucky that we are housed in a dedicated library, where the Asian Studies team already provides most of the client services, partly functions as building custodian, deals with minor IT issues, contributes to teaching information literacy, and also functions as the caretakers of the rare book collection, all in addition to the responsibilities as subject specialists/collection managers.

With the progressing perception of libraries' main functions being social space, study space, safe space, learning and teaching space, and with staff also functioning as well-being mentors particularly in competitive corporate-structured universities, the subject qualification of staff tends to step into the background. This has been elevated in Covid- and lockdown periods as reorganisation required "all hands on deck" due to staff shortages, which, in spite of having filled a few positions back, will remain.

In the long run this development, amplified by circumstance, fits into a widely seen phenomenon that downgrades academic subject librarians to be administrative generalists only, with a loss of their distinctive portfolios. The new function as a "liaison librarian" does not necessarily require that specific

expertise any more. The alarming developments at National Library, Monash and other university libraries in the last few years regarding Asian Studies staff and collections don't bode well for the future of subject specialists. In the long run they seem to be a dying species, perceived as "no longer required" by library executives and boards.

Implications for collections:

A long-time ongoing policy change towards "e-book acquisitions only" with carefully curated large scale EBA (Evidence Based Acquisition) and DDA (Demand-Driven Acquisition) models providing a "one-stop-shop" and a "just in need"² model where users have major influence on purchase and collections, has made collection curation by subject specialists for English language titles within Asian Studies largely superfluous. Large vendors' packages whose EBA structure we use contain many of those items already, ready for the user to call. Even though we place a major part of our collection development into the hands of big for-profit vendors and aggregators, in times of lockdown and library closures it proved extremely useful: clients have instant access to new material very quickly, and since a VPN system was installed that allowed users access to the ANU network these materials are available remotely irrespective of location. This and the perceived savings of time, effort, and staff will make these models attractive to become the new normal in acquisitions.

For materials in other European languages it still looks a bit different, here the input of collection experts may still be required. It is, however, a diminishing part of work since research publications in other languages than English are rarely required nor supported to be purchased. For Asian and other non-Latin script languages this, to a degree, still needs the input of some experts³.

Even though the allocated percentage of the overall library budget for all Asian Studies has been only 3% for many years, the fact that ANU put Asian Studies into a focus of research will guarantee for the further existence of the Asian Studies collection. How extensively collection building can be done we will be seen in the coming years, when budgets, acquisition models, workplace descriptions and key performance indicators for subject specialists have been abolished, reassigned or redefined. The trend, how I see it, is increasing mechanisation of an environment where mainly usage statistics and economic rationalism decide on collections, with Asian Studies in danger of becoming more and more a mere sub-group of business and politics studies – but I'd be happy to be proven wrong.

² R. Missingham: "Flipping the catalogue: taking resource discovery to the next level" in: McLeish, Simon, editor. *Resource Discovery for the Twenty-First Century Library: Case Studies and Perspectives on the Role of IT in User Engagement and Empowerment*. London: Facet Publishing, 2020. Used here is the preprint article.

³ See: "Cartoon" in this publication