

## LOCKDOWN & CHALLENGES FOR THE LEGAL INFORMATION WORLD (CONT.)

# Surviving the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown: a Case Study

**Abstract:** In this article Peter Kargbo describes the impact of the first national lockdown, due to Covid-19, on students using the Hartley Library at the University of Southampton. He describes some of the ways that library services responded and looks at some aspects concerning collection development. He begins his article by taking a brief look at life in the library for students prior to the arrival of the pandemic before describing the period that followed up to the end of the academic year in summer 2020.

**Keywords:** university libraries; national lockdown; Covid-19

### INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 lockdown began on 23 March 2020 and even though this had been anticipated, it still came as a shock to many students and staff at the University of Southampton, especially as nothing like this had happened since the end of the Spanish flu in 1920. Rumours about closing the library had been floating around during the week prior to the announcement leading to some anxiety among students for whom the library was the most precious building on campus, especially for the period leading to, and during, the examinations.

This article will discuss the impact of the lockdown on students, library services and on collection development during this time. But first, a brief look at life in the library for students pre-Covid-19.

### BEFORE COVID-19

The Hartley Library was usually open 24 hours a day from the first week of January to the end of the summer exams and for many students the library was their life at this time of the year. It was of course where they studied, but it was also sometimes where they would eat, sleep and socialise with their friends. You only had to read some of the blog posts to realise that the library building was a lot more important to them than just a place to work. It was very much part of their student life and student experience. Prior to the pandemic the Hartley Library would be a place where students would spend their time learning and studying, sometimes for very long stints at a time – even up to 24 hours judging from one particular blog post! Social media posts sometimes provided insights giving a view of what the library meant to students at a time of the year that was crucial to their studies; how Covid-19 changed all of that.

If a long stay at the library was needed, students could bring blankets, snacks, even their VapoRub - for those

with freshers' flu! It was a place of work as well as being a part of a student's social life in more general terms. The sofas and booths were comfortable, the group study rooms had IT facilities available and wall monitors that could double as televisions. The warmth of the library was an advantage over draughty student rooms. What was there not to like! If an essay deadline needed to be met, the Hartley Library was an excellent place to be.

Judging from the experiences of its students, clearly, this was a thumbs up for the Hartley Library, in all respects, for its student population.

But that was all before Covid-19. The pandemic changed everything. The library closed and services had to adapt to the new challenges.

### IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STUDENTS

In 2019, the Commercial Court of the Queen's Bench Division ordered the mortgagee of a ship destroyed by fire to pay the costs of a firm of underwriters after its insurance claim was dismissed.<sup>1</sup> The ship in question was the *Brillante Virtuoso* which was allegedly attacked by Somali pirates some 10–12 miles off the coast of Aden on the night of 5–6 July 2011.

It's a fascinating story involving the British Secret Service, a Greek shipping magnate, and the mysterious death of a Marine Surveyor from Plymouth who had been hired by Lloyds Insurers to survey the wreckage of the oil tanker to establish the facts of the incident, as is the practice with marine insurers before payment or denial of a claim.<sup>2</sup>

The issues in the *Brillante Virtuoso* case was the subject of a dissertation by a student at the University of Southampton who was studying for the LLM during the 2019/2020 academic year. A week after the closure of the Hartley Library as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown, I received an email from the student about borrowing

some books which she needed for her dissertation. Unfortunately, the library was closed and at the time of writing there was, as yet, no arrangement in place to enable students to access print books while the library was shut. Most of the cohort on the LLM programme at the University of Southampton are international students who seemed to prefer print books and my own anecdotal evidence, from my email communication with these students, suggested that the reason for this could have been the predominance of print books in schools and university libraries in their countries of origin. However, a number of recent studies have pointed to other reasons for this preference. A joint study conducted by three universities in the United States in 2015 found a strong preference for print over ebooks among students in all three universities participating in the survey.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, a recent survey by Blackwell's in 2019/2020 found that three-quarters of students preferred to use physical books over ebooks for their studies. The survey of 741 students across UK universities asked respondents: 'If each of the following resources – printed textbooks, ebooks or digital courseware – is made available to you free of charge, which would you prefer to use in your studies?' 76 per cent of respondents said they preferred printed textbooks, compared with 18.5 per cent who chose ebooks and 5.5 per cent who said digital courseware.<sup>4</sup>

The same survey also found that lecturers rated physical textbooks the highest for concentration, educational outcomes, and ease of annotation and note-taking; and that ebooks and digital courseware received higher ratings only where 'accessibility' was concerned.

So, on this basis it was perhaps not surprising that the LLM student, mentioned previously, still preferred the print book despite the fact that the equivalent ebook was available on the Westlaw platform and assessable from anywhere in the world with an internet connection.

## CLICK & COLLECT

The 'Click and Collect' service (henceforth C&C) at the University of Southampton was therefore created to enable students to borrow print books. C&C was a concept invented by Argos and its parent company the Home Retail Group and introduced in 2000. The service has allowed customers to order products online and pick them up from their local store or from designated pick-up points, such as a newsagent, when it is convenient for them. According to a recent article in *The Guardian*, the turnaround in online orders has seen a jump from just 28% of total sales in 2009 to 43% in 2013, with nearly one in three online purchasers using click and collect.<sup>5</sup> And a recent survey by the BBC found that 75% of Boots online customers had opted to pick up parcels in-store. Marks & Spencer saw 71% collected in shops and 60% of all sales for Argos started online and 80% of all sales fulfilled were from their stores or in Sainsbury's.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear from these numbers that the service has grown considerably since 2000 with many businesses adopting this service model.

Given the evident of the success and popularity of C&C with consumers, it is no surprise that a number of libraries have adopted this model as part of their service delivery during the Covid-19-related lockdown.

A number of public libraries in the Inspire network have set up a C&C as well as a 'Deliveroo' home delivery service.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, a number of UK university libraries have established a C&C service enabling students to borrow print books during the pandemic. These include, Aberdeen, Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Exeter, Liverpool, Oxford and Warwick amongst others.

At the University of Southampton, the Library had to consider a number of Covid-19-related issues to ensure that the service complied with social distancing and other health and safety protocols. These included the procedure for requesting and collecting books via C&C, what to do with returned books (with reference to quarantining them for a period of time), how to ensure social distancing when students visit to collect books, the number of staff required to ensure a smooth and Covid-19 compliant service, and how to handle requests for books from students who were overseas.

## REQUESTING AND COLLECTING BOOKS

Anyone who wanted to borrow a book first had to make a reservation via the Library's online catalogue. The person collected the item after they had received an email from the library confirming that the book was ready for collection. Although reserving a book is a fairly a simple process, it was not as straightforward for books that were designated as reference only. These required intervention from the relevant subject librarian for the book to be de-referenced to enable the student to reserve the book. Given that some of the law practitioner texts were fairly expensive, the library could only afford to purchase a few copies, so some of these texts had been designated for reference only. As the online catalogue did not allow students to reserve a reference book, this meant that colleagues in the library needed to authorise de-referencing of the books that students wanted to borrow for their dissertations.

As with every new system and service, there is always the possibility that things might not go as smoothly as planned, at least at the beginning. I was therefore keen to 'test' the system to see how it worked and to note any difficulties students might encounter trying to use C&C. I, therefore, played the role of a mystery shopper and followed the procedure from placing a reservation for a book to collecting it from the library. This first-hand experience of C&C was useful for problem-solving in relation to this.

Although students could, in theory, click & collect books, in practice, it only worked for students living in Southampton and elsewhere in the UK. The library was

not able to not offer a C&C postal service. That meant, therefore, that international students who returned home soon after the lockdown began could not use the service. This was clearly an issue for LLM students who were still working on their dissertations. Where there was an equivalent ebook available to use, that was clearly the answer. However, accessing the ebook option was sometimes problematic for students in countries where internet access was not always a simple and straightforward matter. In addition to that problem, access, there was the issue of navigating and using the library's plethora of commercial ebook platforms, some of which were not as user-friendly as one would wish. This partly explained why some of the students in the surveys, mentioned above, expressed a preference for print over ebooks. The Covid-19 lockdown was therefore problematic for students who were not particularly fond of ebooks but who couldn't borrow print books because of the distance from the library.

## SOCIAL DISTANCING

In practical terms, the Library created a one-way system to facilitate click & collect. This required modification of the entrance and exit to the library and appropriated signage and floor way finders alerting users to the need to social distance while in the library. Hand sanitisers were provided at the entrance and exit for both staff and users.

I had the opportunity to see first-hand what the 'new normal' looked like when I went to collect the book I had reserved. Pre-Covid-19, users could enter and exit the Hartley Library using either of the automatic entrances and, on arrival at the library, I tried to enter through the same door I have used in the last four years only to realise it was the wrong entrance since this entrance was now the exit! As Mark Twain once said, 'A habit cannot be tossed out the window; it must be coaxed down the stairs a step at a time.' Fortunately for me, it took only a couple of steps to find the new entrance and break the habit!

The visit to the library was my first in almost six months since lockdown had begun and it was interesting to see how things have changed. It was clear from the new Covid-secure arrangements that things would not be quite the same again, at least not for a while.

I also took the opportunity to walk around the Highfield Campus to see what had changed. Apart from the new way finder signage reminding people to stay two metres apart, little had altered, which was reassuring. Most of the buildings were closed but this was expected for this time of the year, as it was by now vacation.

Graduation ceremonies were cancelled this year as a result of the pandemic but this did not deter some of the final year international students who dressed up in their gowns and mortar boards and could be seen posing for 'graduation' photos in front of the Library and around campus.

Covid-19 may have interfered with their plans for graduation but in their joyful celebration they were expressing an optimism and hope for a brighter future that will survive the transience of the pandemic.

## RETURNING BOOKS

A dedicated Covid-safe 'books return' box was provided for users to return their books which were then quarantined for 48 hours. Inevitably, this meant that these books were out of circulation during the time they were in quarantine and any request to borrow these books would remain unfulfilled for at least 48 to 72 hours.

## COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

With over 3 million print books and more added every year, it was becoming increasingly challenging to adequately house the library's growing print collection. However, there has been a gradual shift in the library's collection development policy in favour of ebook acquisition. This shift was accelerated by the pandemic as it became evident that many of the books on reading lists, and that were needed for exams as well as for dissertations were needed electronically so as to be accessible.

Many academic publishers temporarily provided free access to their electronic content during the pandemic but this was only a short term solution as many of these resources were only free to libraries until the end of July 2020. Students and academics often tell library staff that an e-textbook is available on Amazon or directly from the publisher. However, this does not mean that the library can license a title for institutional access as many of the textbooks on course reading lists are still only available for purchase on individual license. The major academic publishers often appear to be reluctant to license them to libraries. The issue was exacerbated by the fact that 85% of existing course textbooks were only available to libraries as print books.<sup>8</sup> Where publishers are willing to license textbooks to libraries, the cost can also be high compared to print copies. For example, to provide access to an e-textbook costing £40 per student to a cohort of 240 students could cost £10,400.

It is clear that textbook publishers have built their profit models around selling e-textbooks directly to students or via platforms and access models. Some libraries are working on piloting e-textbook platforms such as BibliU and Kortext to source titles that are unavailable directly from the publisher, but these models are expensive too.

Sourcing ebooks can be a complex and fast changing landscape, where the library's expertise is required to navigate the best possible option, which may include advising students and academics on alternative titles where no e-textbook is available.

Promoting the use of Internet Archive, repositories such as Europeana and open access books that are available free is one option that some university libraries are

exploring to minimise costs. Another is directing students to Open Educational Resources (OERs) which are freely available educational materials that are openly licensed to allow for re-use and modification by academics and to an alternative title from the library's ebook collection.

## LOOKING AHEAD TO THE AUTUMN SEMESTER 2020

It was evident from the contingency plans for the autumn semester that Covid-19 would continue to have a significant impact on the way library services are delivered.

### Temporary closure of some campus libraries

At the time of writing, one of the campus libraries which serves students and academic staff in the Faculty of Humanities would remain closed until January 2021. The space will be repurposed to create additional short-term space for teaching and learning, and to ensure the library would be Covid secure for staff and students.

### Reduced study space in libraries

Study spaces will be two metres apart and cleaning materials will be provided. The computer workstation rooms within the libraries will remain closed, but some bookable PCs will be available along with self-service laptop loans in the Hartley Library.

### Pre-booking

Users will need to pre-book a time slot to select books from the shelves and use the self-issue machines to borrow the books needed. Books that are taken from the shelves but not borrowed may need to be placed on empty desks for library staff to collect and quarantine.

### Click & Collect - continuing

The C&C service will continue for users to reserve and collect books during opening hours. Books will be returned to the book returns boxes at the entrance to the campus libraries. It may take a short while for the returned books to be deleted from users' accounts. All books will be quarantined to ensure they are safe to borrow.

Other changes will include hand sanitisers at library entrances and increased cleaning, a test & trace system, perspex screens at service desks, staff wearing protective visors when interacting with users, and a one-way route around the library to avoid congestion.

The Hartley Library will continue to provide excellent support its students. However, the immediate future and for 2020/2021, is likely to continue to be different given the continuing circumstances of Covid-19. The days of students spending 24 hours 'in-person' in their library may take some time to return. In the meantime, services like C&C, greater ebook provision and socially distanced study spaces will be reassuring to students and staff alike as we move through these challenging times.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Suez Fortune Investments Ltd & Piraeus Bank AE v. Talbot Underwriting Ltd & others [2019] EWHC 2599 (Comm)

<sup>2</sup> Kit Chellel and Matthew Campbell, 'The Hijacking of the Brillante' (31 July 2017) *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

<sup>3</sup> Cummings, Lee; Larrivee, Anne; and Vega, Leslie, 'Comparing Electronic vs. Print Book Preferences Between Students in the Social Sciences, the Arts and STEM' (2015) *Library Scholarship*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Majority of students still prefer physical books, survey finds' (5 March 2020) *Time Higher Education*. Available at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/majority-students-still-prefer-physical-books-survey-finds>. Accessed 21 August 2020

<sup>5</sup> Simon Neville and Juliette Garside, 'Online purchases boost Argos profits' (2013) *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/mar/14/argos-click-collect-profits>. Accessed 21 August 2020

<sup>6</sup> 'High Street crisis: Can 'click and collect' save shops?' (2019) BBC Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-46960792>. Accessed 21 August 2020

<sup>7</sup> 'Inspire, Click and Collect and Home Delivery – New!' Available at <https://www.inspireculture.org.uk/reading-information/libraries/click-and-collect-new/>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> University of Guelph, 'Commercial Textbooks Present Challenges in a Virtual Environment' Available at <https://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/news/commercial-textbooks-present-challenges-virtual-environment>. Accessed 21 August 2020

## Biography

**Peter Kargbo** was the Academic Engagement Librarian (Law, Politics, Sociology, Social Policy, Criminology & Anthropology) at the Hartley Library on the Highfield Campus at the University of Southampton.