EURASLIC Libraries during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other Disasters

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Abstract
Over the decades libraries have encountered challenges in the constantly changing information environment. Libraries adapted quickly, embracing

information technology as an opportunity that enables them to offer efficient and modern library services to patrons. Physical library spaces and traditional library services were complemented by digital, thus forming a hybrid library. Although libraries were on their way towards virtual libraries, no one expected that physical space would be closed one day so abruptly and unexpectedly. Libraries around the world were forced to close their doors to the public overnight due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to find out whether EURASLIC libraries were ready for this challenge and how they were coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and whether it was the only disaster they had to deal with in recent times, the EURASLIC Board decided to take a survey. The results of the survey are presented in this paper.

Keywords: Aquatic science libraries; marine science libraries; COVID-19; EURASLIC; remote access; digital collections; working from home; protective measures; lockdown; pandemic; disasters.

Short History of EURASLIC

EURASLIC is a pan-European network of aquatic sciences libraries and information centers and a regional group of the International Association of Aquatic and Marine Science Libraries and Information Centers (IAMSLIC). The main objectives of the association are:

- To provide an organisation for the exchange of ideas and views on issues of mutual concern;
- To collect and present views and proposals on behalf of the members to other organisations;
- To encourage cooperation within Europe and to build links with other national, regional, and international aquatic science libraries and information networks;
- To undertake joint projects to improve the flow, exchange, and dissemination of aquatic information.

The beginnings of the organization go back to 1988, when the idea was developed by the United Kingdom Marine and Freshwater Librarians' Group while preparing for their annual meeting. The invitation was sent to a large number of aquatic libraries and organizations. The meeting gathered 35 participants, including IAMSLIC (International Association of Marine Science Libraries and Information Centers) observers (http://www.euraslic.org/sites/euraslic.org/files/public/images/stories/EuraslicHistory.pdf) The name EURASLIC (European Association of Aquatic Sciences Libraries and Information Centres) was established at the very successful second meeting in Paris in 1990. Another outcome of this meeting was the decision to collect information about aquatic science institutions, which was a basis for publishing EURASLIC Membership Directory (Baron and Varley,1998). Several editions of the directory have been published, the last one in 2003.

EURASLIC's first website was created by David Moulder of the Marine Biological Association (MBA) / Plymouth Marine Laboratory (PML) UK in 1996. Since 1999 the website has been hosted in Greece by the Hellenic Centre for Marine Research. The domain name euraslic.org was registered in 2001 (Baron and Varley, 1998). The current website was released in 2011, developed and hosted by VLIZ Flanders Marine Institute. In the past, membership data was available as a list on the website. Now the data is gathered directly from the IAMSLIC membership database and displayed on the EURASLIC website.

For communication purposes in order to exchange ideas and information, a mailing list was created. The list is also widely used for interlibrary loan, which is still a very important service for EURASLIC libraries. For the purpose of interlibrary loan, EURASLIC members also use IAMSLIC Z39.50 Distributed Library and Union List of Marine and Aquatic Serials, which makes it difficult to gather the data about interlibrary loan activity.

A EURASLIC Newsletter has been published regurarly since 1989. In the beginning there were several issues per year. During the Lyon conference held in 2011, it was decided that Newsletter should be issued once a year.

One of the most important activities are the conferences where members have the opportunity to present their work, exchange ideas, and meet with colleagues personally. EURASLIC meetings are usually held biennally. So far 18 meetings have been held, some of them as joint EURASLIC/IAMSLIC conferences. The conference proceedings are regularly published after the meetings, and since 2010 they are available online on EURASLIC web pages.

Information about the association can be found on the website, in a leaflet that is available in five languages. Information is also shared through the Facebook page.

And Then Came 2020
Last year, 2019, was very rainy in Europe, and it was bad luck that the EURASLIC conference was accompanied by rain. The year ended with expressions of good wishes for the year to come.

And then the year 2020 came, welcomed with great expectations and grand plans for professional activities. At the beginning of the year, information about an unknown virus and contagious disease in faraway China first started to spread. The virus was coming closer and closer, infecting all European countries by March. As a safety measure, lockdown was implemented in most countries.

As stated by the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation (EBLIDA): "Libraries were locked down practically in all European countries although in different ways and with different means of implementation. Library services are being continuously re-designed during the COVID-19 phase and they may continue to be re-oriented in the next three-four months with new ways of working being experimented

with. To mention a few: homeworking was heavily practiced during the crisis; to what extent will it become a new normal? Access to digital resources rose spectacularly; will this trend consolidate? And will new services set up in response to short-term requirements continue after the crisis?" (http://www.eblida.org/news/press-release-covid-19-report.html).

"COVID-19 pandemic and measures applied had significant and ongoing impact on services, spaces, and many other aspects of the profession, with many libraries providing services entirely online and many personnel working remotely" (Craft, 2020).

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, many conferences were cancelled or turned into online events. The librarians made a huge effort to offer as many services as possible to their patrons. In May many countries began to ease restrictions, and libraries started to re-open their doors, applying safety measures prescribed by the governing bodies.

With respect to that it was assumed that the pandemic affected also the EURASLIC libraries. EURASLIC members are coming from different institutions and different countries. Usual communication is by email, information is shared on the website or via Facebook page. EURASLIC members gather once every two years at EURASLIC biennial conferences. Interlibrary loan, one of the services available to members, is done by email or by online services. At the same time, besides being a member of the association, each library provides services to its patrons, acting within the library community of their country. Among EURASLIC libraries there are a few that are already working mostly virtually, while the majority are hybrid libraries. The COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the transition to virtual environment, and even those that hesitated were forced to transform.

During closure there were not many activities within the association, except for interlibrary loan. Therefore, there was no information about how individual libraries were coping with pandemic, except for personal contacts between members. To determine the actual situation and response of EURASLIC libraries to the COVID-19 threat, the EURASLIC Board decided to perform this survey. The aim was to identify the business patterns and measures taken to provide proper library services within the EURASLIC libraries, paying special attention to the most challenging issues during the stay at home period from the end of March to the end of May (in some areas the beginning of June).

The data were collected via a Google Form survey that was run from September 15 to September 29, 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic is not over and the situation changes every day, as well as the prescribed safety measures. Libraries have to adapt quickly, develop new services and follow new practices in order to meet their patrons' requirements. Taking all that into consideration, as well as the limited time of the survey, the questions were simple.

The survey consisted of 16 questions plus one descriptive and one generic question. The first question was aimed at collecting basic information: Institution, country, and number of staff members. A few questions were simple YES/NO options, while the

majority of the questions offered multiple responses to choose one or more. Not all questions were offered to all respondents, as some depended on answers to previous questions. The last question was descriptive, allowing respondents to describe their own experience in several sentences.

The Results of the Survey

Although the number of EURASLIC members has always varied, a decline in numbers was noticed in recent years. In September 2020, the number of current members was 48, of which five are honorary members. There are also several members not working in libraries, and there are four libraries with more than one librarian who is a EURASLIC member. So the number of libraries is even lower: 35.

The survey was completed by 21 respondents from 14 countries (Figure1): Bulgaria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Israel, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Ukraine, and the UK. There was mostly one response by each country. More than one response was received from Germany (five), Russia (three), and Croatia (two).
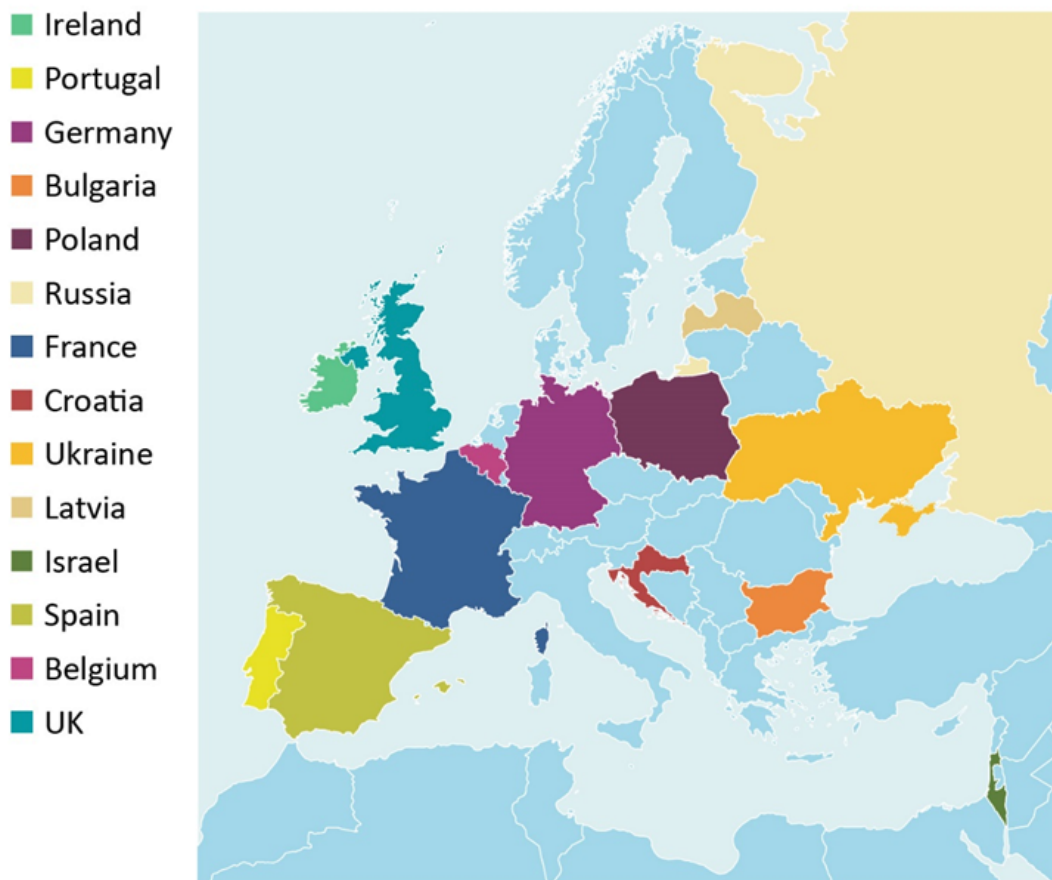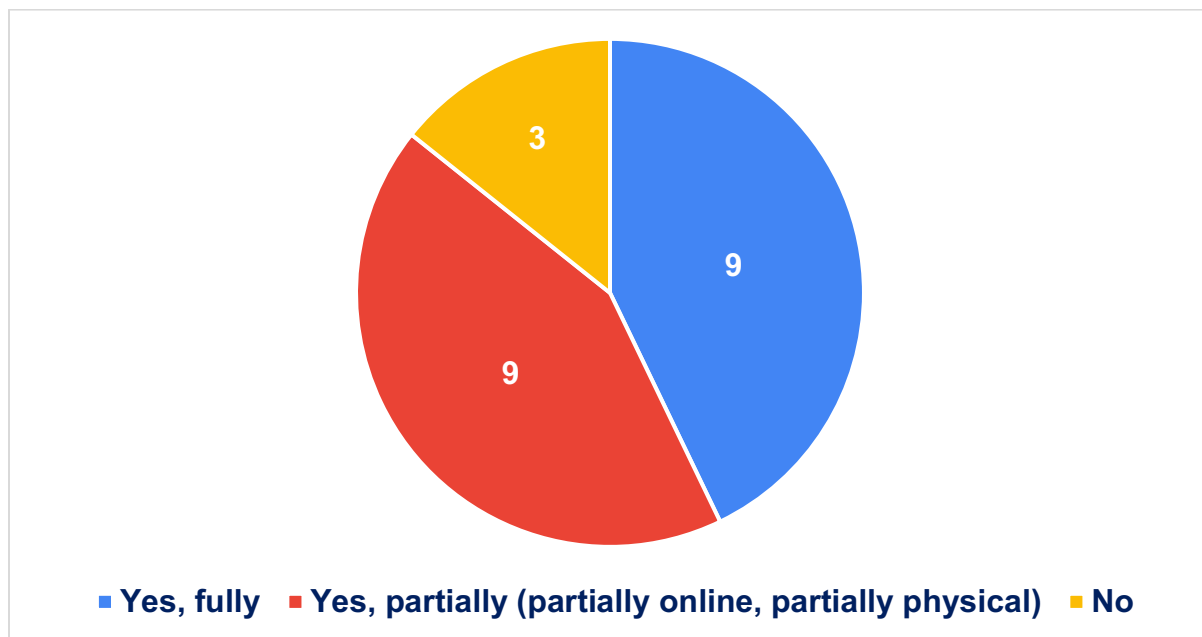

Figure 1: Map of respondents' country of origin.

Of the 21 libraries that completed the survey, most have one or two staff members, whilst seven libraries have more than one member. Out of 48 members, 43,75% completed the survey. If the honorary members are excluded, then it is 48,83% out of 43 members. If comparing the number of respondents to the number of libraries, then **60%** of EURASLIC libraries completed the survey.

EURASLIC Libraries During Lockdown
The majority of EURASLIC libraries closed their doors to the public (42) fully or partially. There were three libraries (14,28%) that remained open all the time (Figure 2). Although most libraries were closed for two months, some were closed longer, from two and a half to four months. There are also libraries that are still closed.

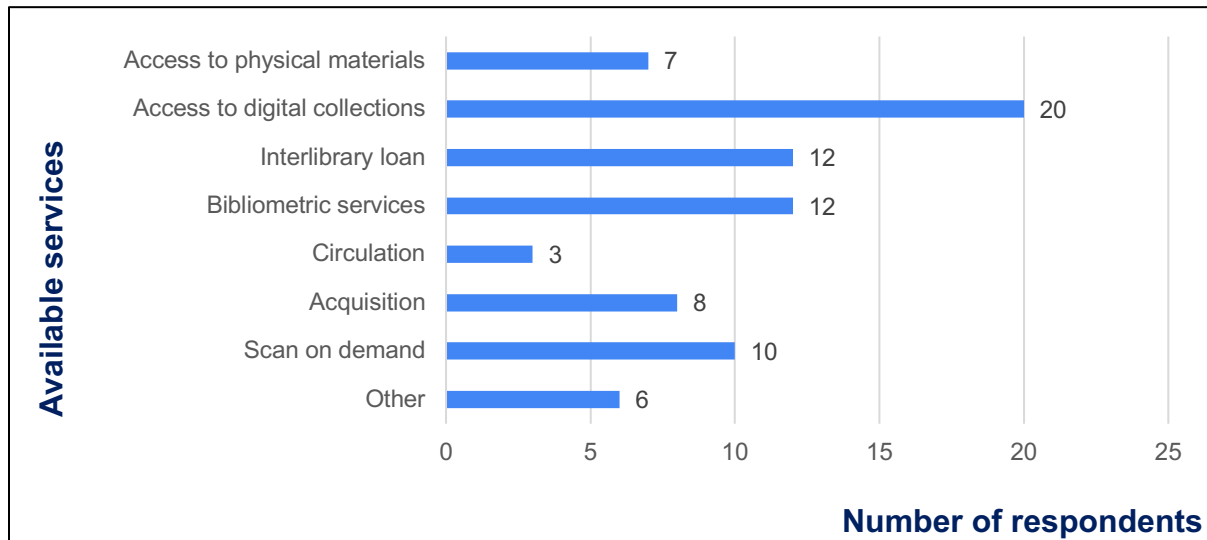*Figure 2: Was your library closed during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Digital content was available to patrons through subscription, open access and free trials. Also, as a support during lockdown, many publishers offered their e-content freely available, which increased the number of the digital collections that were available.

During lockdown almost all of the libraries provided access to digital material to their patrons. More than half of the respondents were actively handling ILL requests. The EURASLIC mailing list – that is mostly used for ILL requests – was still used very frequently, as was confirmed in this survey. Even during lockdown libraries issued bibliometric certificates, and bibliometric services were offered to library patrons. Print library collections were available directly at libraries which were opened or partially opened, but also through scan on demand service. It's no surprise that almost 48% of the respondents offered scan on demand service, provided in respect to copyright law. In this way, researchers were able to quickly obtain materials (e. g. articles, book chapters) from the print collections without physically coming to the library or waiting for

re-opening. Only a few libraries remained open all time, and a few opened the doors to their patrons by appointment mostly. Lending of books or other materials (circulation) was only provided by three libraries. What catches the eye is that of those three libraries that provided circulation services, one was closed, one was partially open, and one was fully open during lockdown.

Access to digital collections (95,24%), bibliometrics, and interlibrary loan (57,14%) were highly valued, and were among the top three services (Image 3).

Figure 3: Which services were available to the patrons during the lockdown?

Even during lockdown the library staff stayed in contact with their patrons online and continued to provide them personal assistance (e. g. answering patron inquiries, providing bibliographic searches, etc.).

Participation in online meetings and conferences was the most frequent library activity with 66,66% of libraries taking part. More than half of the respondents were still active in professional associations (e. g. EURASLIC and IAMSLIC). Also a great number of respondents worked on different projects. Many were not only cataloguing library materials but were also engaged in inputting or editing data into different databases. Quite a large number of the librarians (42,85%) were writing papers or guidelines. Some librarians with technical skills seized the opportunity and were working on the development of home made applications. Among other activities libraries were involved in the process of publishing scientific journals, or were handling some administrative tasks (Figure 4).
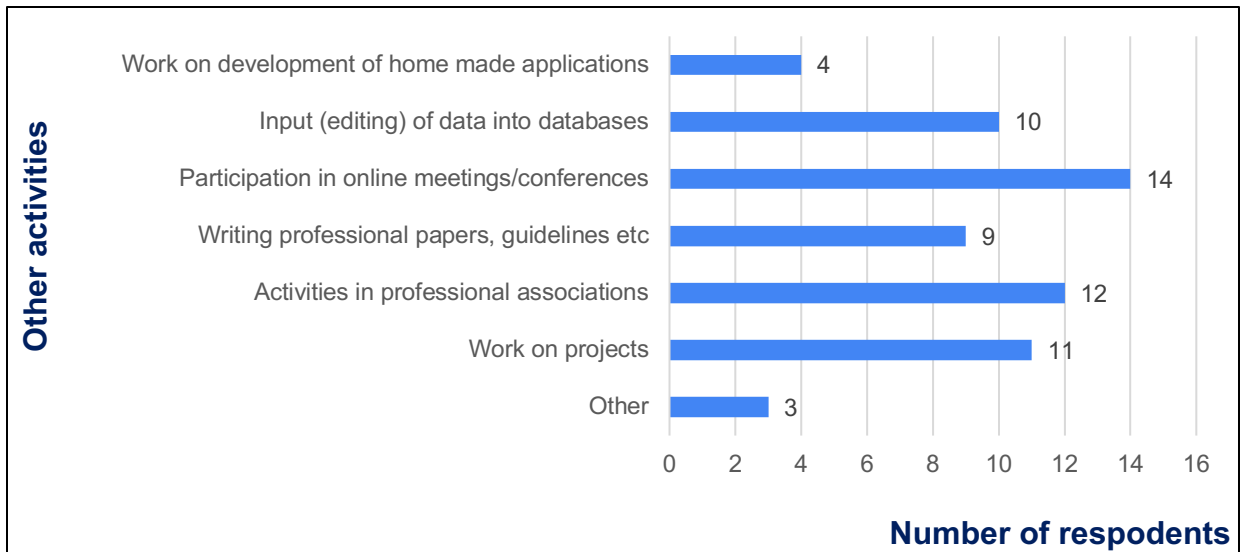
Figure 4: Besides providing services to the patrons, was the staff involved in other activities?

EURASLIC Libraries after Lockdown

After being closed for several months, libraries started the re-opening process. Only three libraries are not yet open to the public; one of them is planning re-opening within a few weeks, and two probably next year, while 61,9% of libraries are fully opened, and 23,81% partially (Figure 5).
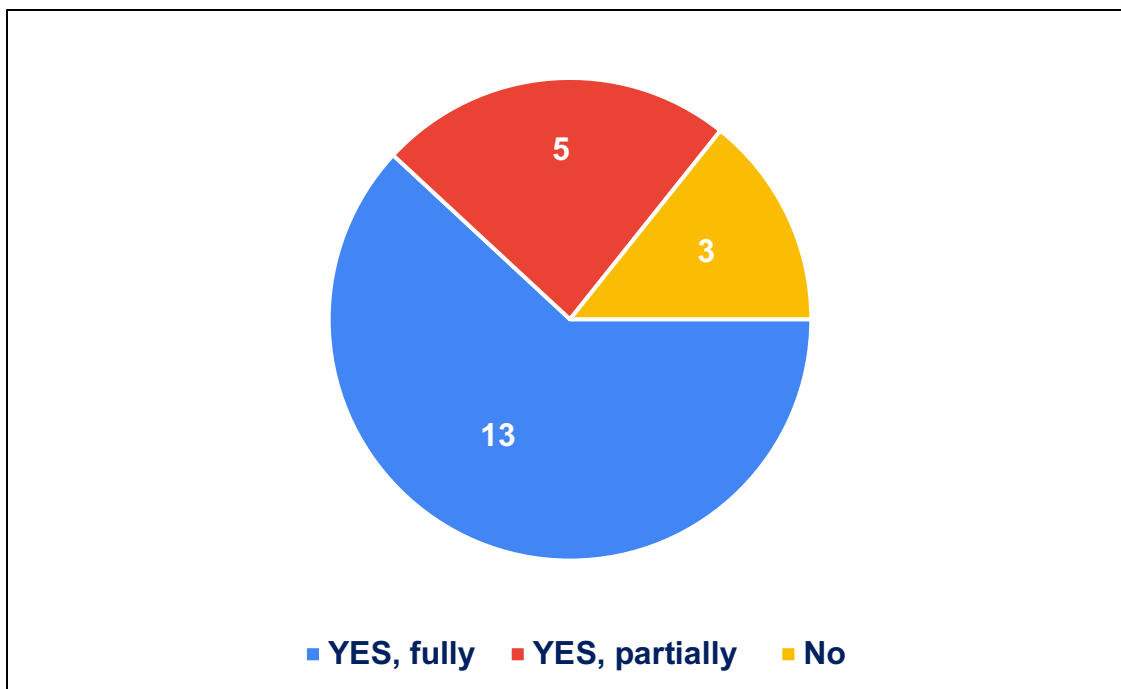

Figure 5: Is your library currently open to patrons?

Re-opening of libraries can bring some issues and obstacles, as there are measures that have to be taken into consideration which did not exist before. Libraries will have to face many challenges in post-COVID-19 times, like personnel security, space redistribution, sanitation of collections, financial hardship, new models of governance. In the already mentioned *European library agenda in the post-COVID-19 age,* EBLIDA identified and suggests five "new normals":

1. *Exponential social distancing: a well-connected two-meter library*.
   As the measure of two-meters is implemented in the libraries it can impede libraries in their performances, limit their functions, and unstaffed libraries will be obliged to offer "self-service" without surveillance of library staff.
2. *Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways.*
   The number of available online resources has increased, libraries provide access and promote online resources via their web pages, which is a positive outcome. However, the possibility of a price increase is a little concerning, as well as the quality of the relationship between publishers and libraries and probability that libraries won't have the possibility to exert control. A challenge in the library agenda is integration of traditional "core" library activities with sustainable development and investment in digital resources and high tech.
3. *Uncharted economic territory: review the library budget composition.*
   There is risk that administrators and politicians will take advantage of the situation in the post-COVID-19 age with excuses of restructuring, core investments, financial cuts and cutting-off non-essential library branches. Librarians have to take action by promoting current activities within a different framework and to look for financial support from other funders. As a framework for reviewing the composition of library budgets can be the European 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
4. *Library governance at central and local levels.*
   The consequence of the COVID-19 crisis is the centralisation of library activities because of health policies, the security of library personnel and other policies of general interest.
   If the libraries are eager to continue their effort in a well-connected two-meter society, in shaping technologies in new ways, and in re-adjusting the library budget composition, they may also need to review existing models of library governance.
5. *Do not forget the climate change opportunity and threat.*
   As many factories and service companies stopped production and delivery, car usage was reduced and carbon emission was reduced almost everywhere, so it seems that year 2020 was a good year for the climate.
   In regard to the climate libraries have two options: either restoring the past state of affairs in libraries, or evolving into the future by following environmental objective.

Effects of the COVID-19 crisis on libraries will be perceptible in the years to come. For the purpose of the EURASLIC survey we underlined current safety and health measures that are required. The usage of measures was covered by three questions in

the survey and applied to staff, patrons, and also to the space, materials, and equipment. As is evident, all EURASLIC libraries implemented at least some safety measures (Figure 6). Three libraries are still closed, so this question didn't apply to them, therefore the total number of libraries that responded is 18.
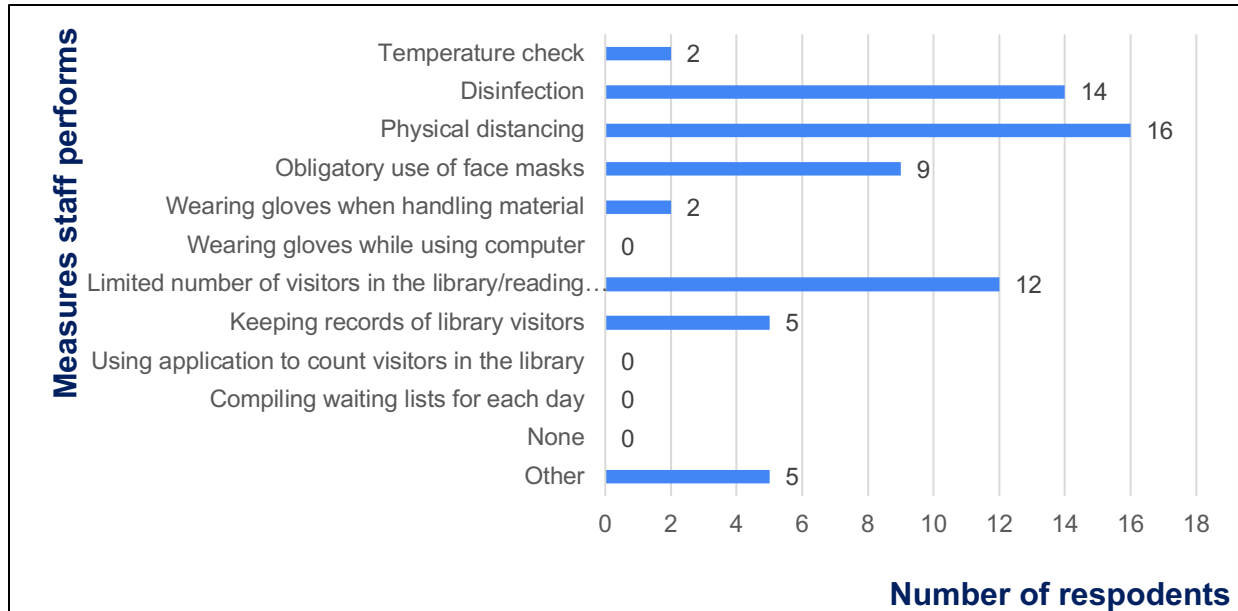

Figure 6: If your library is currently open to patrons, what health and safety measures do staff perform?

As expected, the most used health and safety measures that staff performs are physical distancing (88,88%) and disinfection (77,77%). Although the options in the survey did not specify what exactly is being disinfected, there was only one comment in this regard: disinfection (of hands) is carried out when entering the organization, and a librarian performs keyboard and mouse disinfection on their own initiative. The latter refers rather to measures for the library space which appears in the survey later. The third place is occupied by the restriction on the number of visitors in the library or reading rooms (66,66%) which is in a way related with physical distancing. It seems that usage of face masks was not that obligatory as it is applied in nine libraries (50%). In some institutions only external visitors are obliged to wear the masks.

Making lists and keeping records of library visitors is a measure that helps to track the contacts in case if a disease is detected among visitors or employees. Nevertheless it appears that it's not widely used in EURASLIC community as only five libraries (27,77%) apply that measure. According to comments made in the section *Other*, as a consequence of the limited number of visitors there are not many people in the library, so the measure is superfluous.

The temperature check is commonly used as a strategic measure to combat the COVID-19 disease, but it is obviously less used among EURASLIC libraries (11,11%),), along with wearing gloves when handling material (5,55%). Some libraries do not do temperature checks in the library as it is obligatory upon entering the institution.

The library visitor counter system is used regularly in larger libraries on a daily basis, to calculate the exact number of visitors. That helps them to evaluate their efficiency, provides statistical data and proves their performance to funders. As the pandemic imposed a limited number of visitors in the libraries, the same system is used to detect an allowable number of visitors; it seems that those are not among EURASLIC libraries, as the results show. Obviosly there is no need for waiting lists as there are not too many visitors. In a few EURASLIC libraries' visitors have to make an appointment before visiting the library, to ensure the presence of the staff.

Some of the measures mentioned above apply to both staff and the patrons, such as physical distancing and disinfection which are the most used measures in both categories (Figure 7). As many as 16 libraries (88,88%) apply physical distancing to its patrons. This measure is followed by hand disinfection (66,66%).
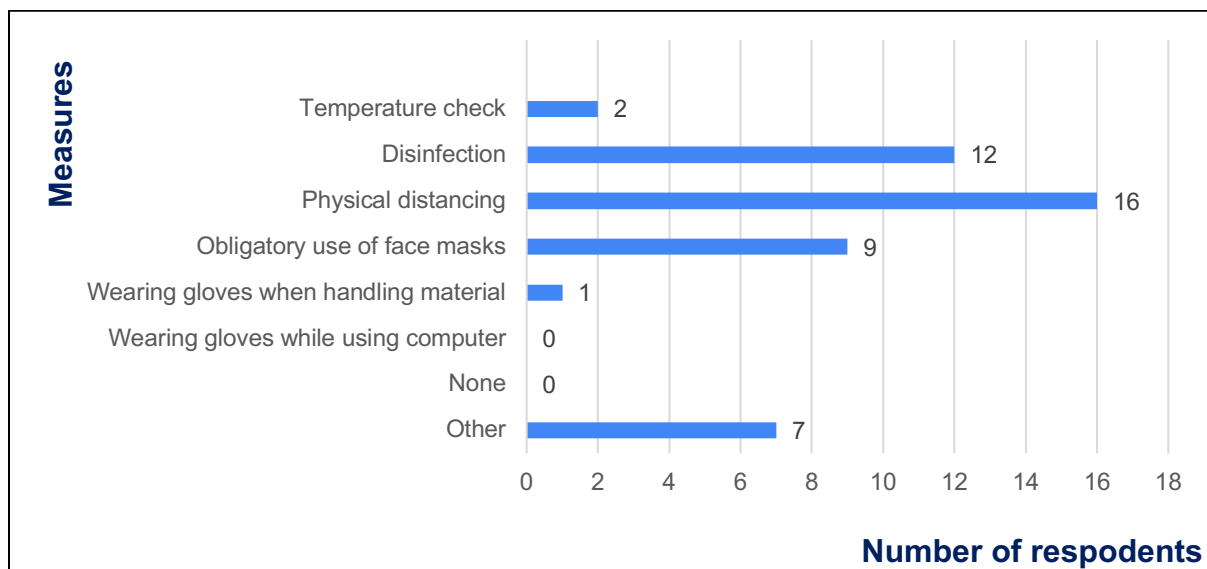

Figure 7: If your library is currently open to patrons, what are health and safety measures for patrons?

The temperature check is not the most common measure for the same reasons that apply in regard to staff. It is performed at the entrance to the institution, or it is not required due to a very small number of visitors. Some libraries demand obligatory use of face masks to patrons, and some apply that measure to external users only. Just one library applied the measure of wearing gloves for handling material. Wearing gloves while using computers seems unnecessary. As stated in *Other*, one library took more flexible measures in this sense; since the library was not staffed, the door was open, and an "honest" self-checkout system was organized.

Regarding space and holdings (Figure 8), it is evident that the libraries put emphasis on disinfection of equipment (66,66%); tables and chairs (38,88%); door and window

handles (5,55%) and on deep cleaning (66%). Sanitizing and quarantine of materials is also widespread (33,33%).

An important issue concerns items returned to the library after lending. The suggested quarantine for books is normally set at 72 hours, but rules differ in Europe from state to state (A European library agenda for the post-Covid 19 age Work in Progress. http://www.eblida.org/Documents/EBLIDA-Preparing-a-European-library-agenda-for-the-post-Covid-19-age.pdf). According to comments, it seems that some EURASLIC libraries have even longer quarantine periods as the returned books remain in quarantine for five days in a special box. There are four EURASLIC libraries, or 22,22%, that didn't implement any measures regarding space and holdings, although all of them were opened fully or partially during lockdown.
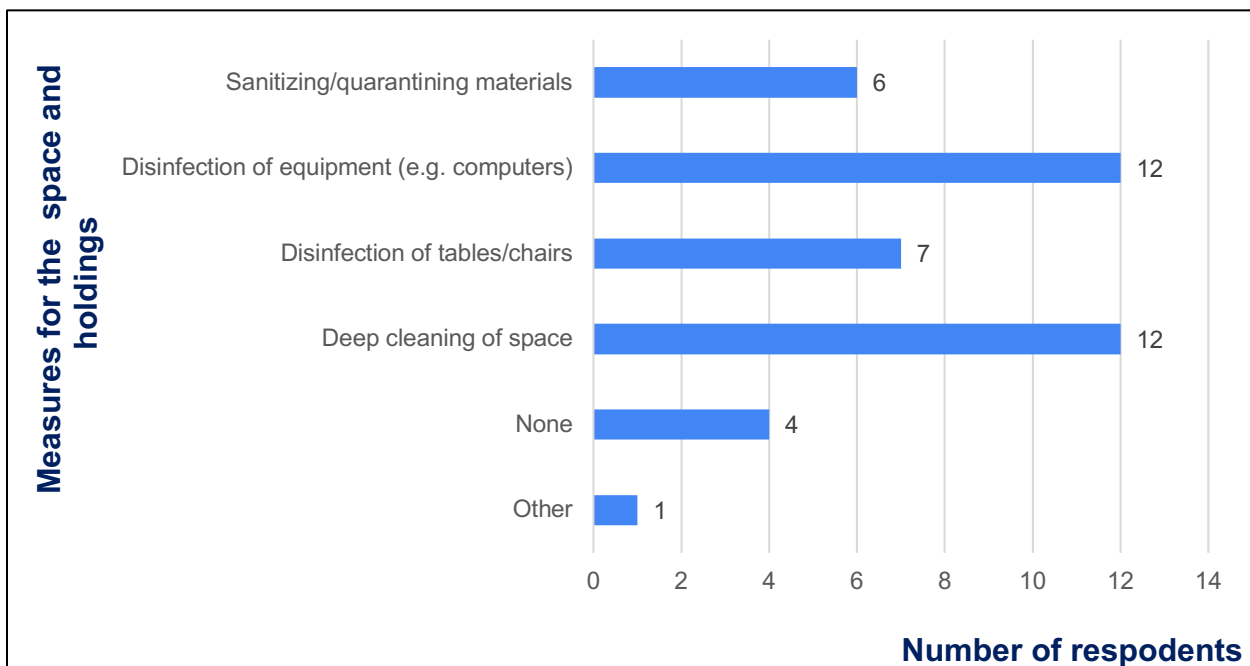

Figure 8: What are health and safety measures for the library space and holdings?

In order to implement the measures for the usage of library premises, eight libraries (38.09%) issued their own guidelines, three libraries (14,28%) didn't issue any guidelines, and seven (33,33%) followed guidelines issued by some other bodies (National and University Library, head organization or institution) or followed some recommendations (the answers did not specify which ones) (Figure 9). All 21 libraries replied to this question.
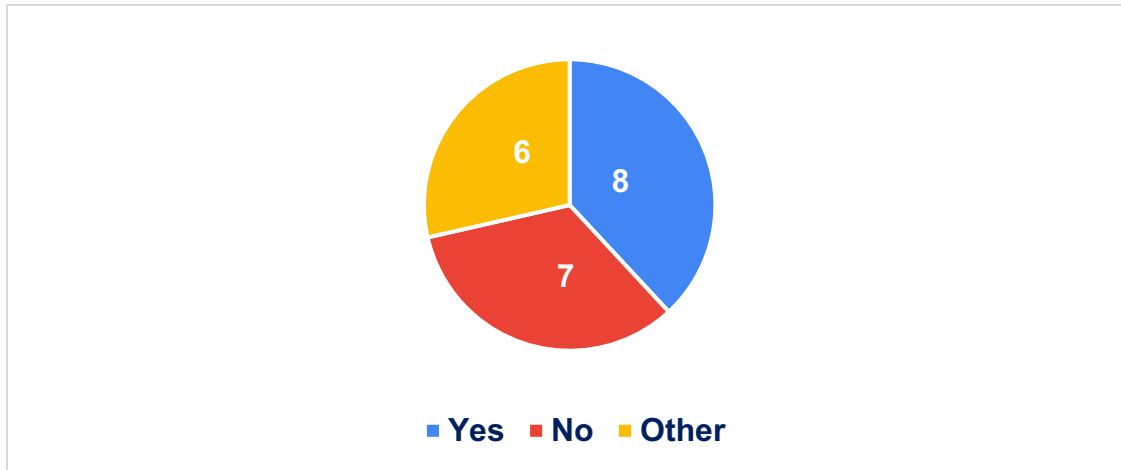
Figure 9: Did your library issue official guidelines and recommendations for library services/library functioning during the pandemic?

The intent of following the strict guidelines is to protect both the staff and patrons/researchers. The disinfection of equipment and deep cleaning of space provided a neat and safe environment, which is evidenced by the very low number of the COVID-19 infected patients among the library staff. The question regarding infection of the staff wasn't mandatory, as it might be considered as an invasion of privacy. However, almost all respondents (20 out of 21) responded (Figure 10). Unfortunately, one response indicated that a library staff member was infected by COVID-19. All the other librarians "stayed safe and healthy,, and hopefully it will remain that way in the future. The survey also shows that physical distancing appears to be the most applicable measure in the library spaces, which indicates that so far the libraries are a safe spot in disseminating information and even encouraging for staff's enthusiasm.
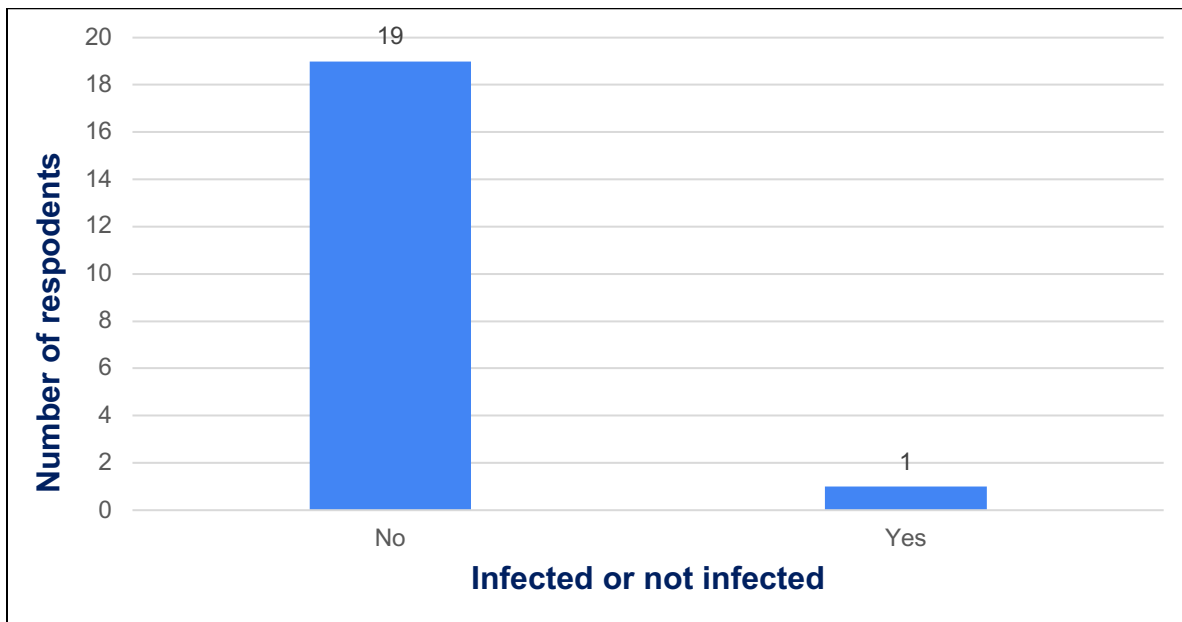

Figure 10: Was any library staff member infected by COVID-19?

Crisis situations can lead to an unstable environment, opening the risk of staff dismissal or even closure of libraries. Still, most of the libraries (80,95%) continued to exist and kept the same number of staff members. One library faced both staff dismissal and closure and one had staff dismissal. Small one-man libraries pointed out that in their case a dismissal would also mean a closure of the library (Figure 11).
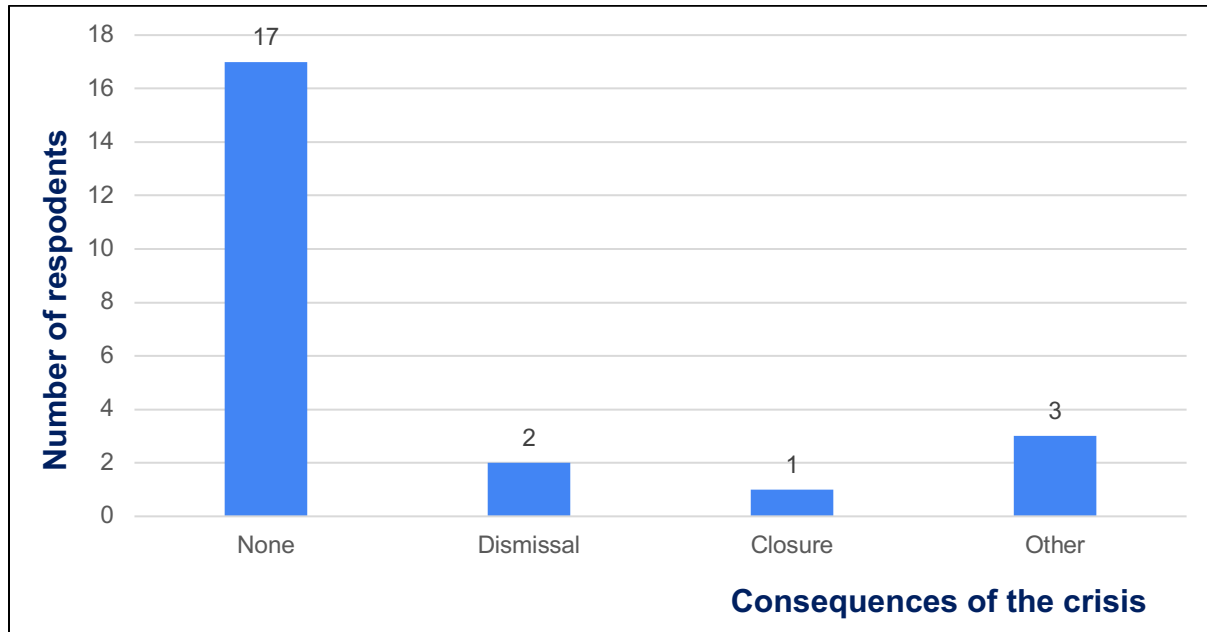

Figure *11: Did the crises cause threat of dismissal of staff or closure of your library?*

Even confronted with unprecedented challenges, it is evident that EURASLIC libraries responded to the crises efficiently. There is no library whose efficiency was poor. Only two libraries (9,52%) rated their services as fair. One of the reasons was the fact that access to digital collections was provided via IP addresses of the institution and therefore accessible only from the institution, but not from home. Consequently the library was unable to provide remote access. The majority of respondent libraries rated their effectiveness as very good (33,33%), and six libraries (28,57%) evaluated their effectiveness either good or even excellent (Figure 12).
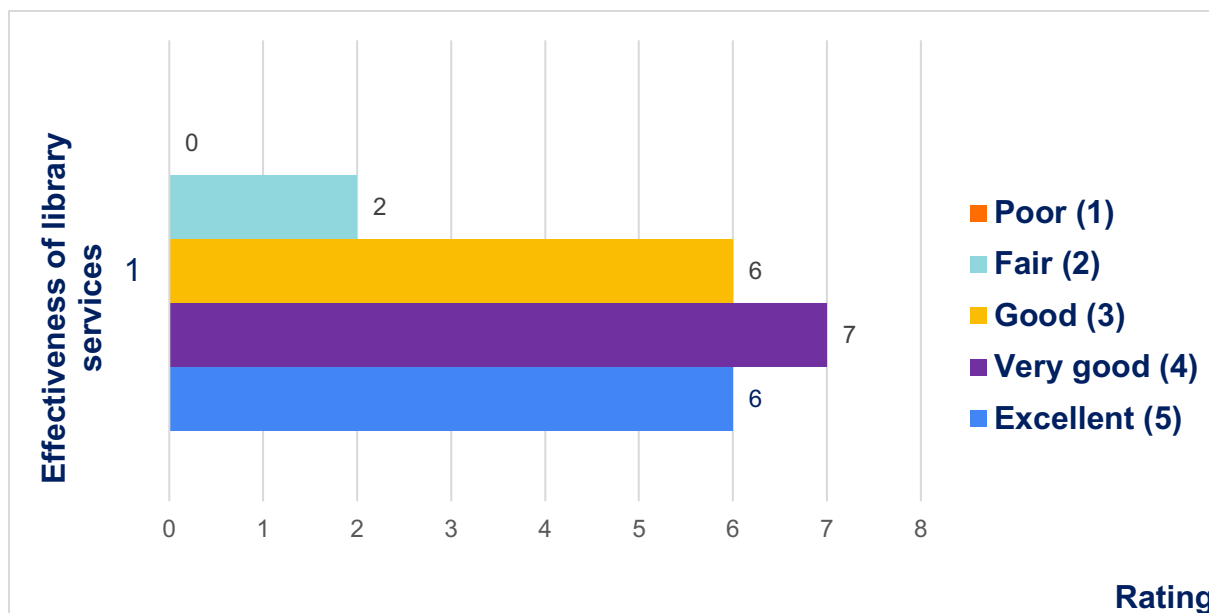
Figure 12: How would you rate the effectiveness of library services throughout this period ?

During the time when all attention was directed to COVID-19, three EURASLIC libraries had to confront other difficulties or disasters as well. At the end of last year one EURASLIC library along with its parent institute was burnt down in a fire. The scientific library with all its collections was completely destroyed. A few months before pandemic the employees started to work from home or from substitute offices and laboratories. Since that day the physical library has ceased to exist. Remote access to digital collection is provided. The librarian also performs some administrative duties. The institute is in the process of re-organizing with the aim of ensuring a return to normal.

Two days after lockdown started, another EURASLIC library was hit by an earthquake. Fortunately the damage was not that bad. Damage was in the reading rooms and staff offices. Some shelves fell, some tilted and several walls cracked. There was small damage to the IT equipment, too. After the library re-opened, not all reading rooms were immediately open to the public, not because of the pandemic, but due to repair work and fixing of shelves after the earthquake. By the end of the year, it is expected that all reading rooms will be open to the public.

During lockdown nature recovered and animals have started to take advantage and to appear in places they were not seen before - even in the libraries. During the time that people were away, cockroaches came to power within one of the EURASLIC libraries. Cockroaches haven't been seen there since the 1990's, and now regiments of cockroaches populate library space. Even though the collection is not damaged, their presence is very stressful to library staff and will require a long-term extermination process.

Although one of the libraries didn't claim to be affected by any other disaster, in the comments it was mentioned that they have to move to other premises, and packing all the holdings during the pandemic can be considered as an equivalent to disaster.

Conclusion
The year 2020 was quite turbulent, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many governments in the world and in Europe implemented lockdown as a preventive measure, although in a different way. However, all those measures brought some impediments in our personal and professional lives, and had its implications on libraries as well. For the first time libraries around the world were closed to the public and most of the services were moved to a virtual environment. For many years libraries were developing online services, providing access to digital collections and moving slowly towards digital libraries; nevertheless closure emphasized its importance.

The pandemic forced libraries to redesign services, introduce new ones, and redefine strategies. As some suggest (Guo, 2020) the duty of libraries is to provide guidelines for patrons to use library digital resources conveniently, integrate all kinds of digital resources and improve the online access mode of digital resources and negotiate and cooperate with database suppliers. Reference services should be provided by email, live chat, online forms, social media, etc. Libraries should provide education and training services to help patrons to improve their information literacy.

COVID-19 has become one of the main research subjects in the current year. It is studied from different angles, and from different disciplines. Most frequent are researches from the medical, psychological, sociological or legal point of view. Also there are many studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the economy, finance, culture or society as a whole. The researchers within library and information science are giving attention to the COVID-19 pandemic impact on libraries and their response to the crisis.

The lockdown period was certainly a new experience for EURASLIC libraries and also an opportunity to learn new things and do things differently in order to provide patrons with better services. Libraries whose services and activities were already based on IT technologies and on an online environment have not noticed significant changes, and were able to perform their usual tasks and to keep a high level of services. As some claim, researchers are quite familiar with remote access and it is possible for many of them to work from home; therefore the physical library is less used and there is a certain concern about implementing the option of working from home permanently after COVID-19, which could lead to closure of physical libraries. There are some that found working from home effective, as most services were provided as before, and their digital collection enlarged in respect.

According to the survey results, it becomes clear that the majority of the aquatic and marine science libraries throughout Europe showed an appropriate response in providing the scientific staff with information services. The majority of respondents claimed that their services were either partly or fully accessible online, including access to print/digital collections, interlibrary loan, and bibliometric services, reachable during

the normal working hours and also via online research support. Participation in the international and national library events was not terminated either. Although correlation analysis was not performed, it is notable that the libraries with just one or two staff members provided an equal amount of services as those with more staff.

Concern about permanent work from home in the future was mentioned, leading to the conclusion that physical libraries might become obsolete. It should not be forgotten that libraries are not just storage of print books or journals, they are also meeting points and its space can be used for studying, workshops, meetings and other activities. As the online meetings via Zoom, BigBlueButton and other applications became popular during the pandemic, after re-opening it was noticed that libraries proved to be a quiet spot to perform those online meetings. In their comments respondents claim that what was missed most is social interaction in person with colleagues and patrons.

Upon analyzing the results, one thing was obvious: during the COVID-19 pandemic, all libraries on the list fulfilled their duties and received positive feedback from their customers, which helped the administration of the institutes keep up the regular workflow of the departments. Once again the libraries proved that even staying at home, librarians can be efficient and valuable for their target users.

As the COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet, the results shown in this survey represent the situation until September 2020. As autumn came, the number of infected people increased, therefore some countries announced more restrictive measures and even the possibility of new lockdown. As the situation has changed for the worst, even some EURASLIC libraries introduced a new lockdown or advised staff over 65 to stay and work from home, while some started to work partially. Thus, the overall impact of the crises on the libraries, including the EURASLIC libraries, and effects of the measures implemented, will be visible only in the foreseeing future.

Relying on the results of this survey, it is to be expected that EURASLIC and all other libraries will successfully overcome the crisis and continue to exist in both physical and virtual environments, continually providing all necessary services and introducing new ones.

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