Academic libraries and coronavirus: a view from Italy

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Academic libraries and coronavirus: a view from Italy
The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of open access and open science, writes Rossana Morriello

Italy was the first of the Western countries to be widely affected by coronavirus disease.

Shortly after Italy, most other countries were affected by the health emergency that, on 11 March, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined as 'pandemic'.

Governments reacted in different ways. The Italian government decided to impose gradual measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak.

They first closed all schools and universities, cultural services and institutions, and then with a law issued on 11 March, they shut down shops, so that at present only some necessary shops can open, such as pharmacies and food shops.

At the same time people were firstly encouraged and then obliged by law to stay at home, now in a complete lockdown. Universities were therefore the first institutions to close, together with schools, at the beginning of March, but in a first stage only for students, while employees were still inside campuses and libraries still open.

Then, with a law issued on 8 March, universities had to close all services and libraries too. Apart from those strictly necessary to face the situation, like IT departments, people had to work from home using smart working modes where possible or taking summer holidays or other kind of leaves.

From the very beginning of the emergency, universities had to shift all teaching activities to online learning mode. According to recent figures, at the date of 20 March, after about a month since the closing of universities, 94 per cent of courses were organised online, 1.2 million students (about 80 per cent of enrolled students in Italian universities) have followed lessons online, 70,500 course examinations and 26,000 final degree examinations were made in distance learning mode.

However, with libraries closed, researchers and students cannot obtain all materials they need, so the Association of Italian PhD students asked the Ministry of Education to postpone deadlines for PhD as they already did for other deadlines linked to research assessment and other

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evaluation procedures. On the other hand, the association of researchers and professors of Italian universities, ANDU, wrote an open letter to the Ministry of University and Research to ask a policy to better support academia and research with adequate funding and broad-minded approach, so to be able to face such emergencies now and in the future. Nevertheless, many libraries immediately tried to support students and researchers in their activities by improving access and promoting digital resources.

Some academic library services also collected open access resources about Covid-19 to help researchers involved in the hard tasks connected to Covid-19 outbreak. The network of biomedical libraries, as an example, created a web page of resources launched by libraries in Lombardy and Veneto, the two regions with the highest number of cases of coronavirus.

A few publishers opened access to textbooks for students (but not so many indeed). Some Italian publishers and vendors followed the invitation that has come from many libraries and institutions to open up their collections, like that promoted by the Wellcome Trust.

Many publishers responded positively and created free open access hubs to help researchers all over the world to find a cure for this terrible disease, and libraries highlighted them on their web pages. However, most publishers, either in Italy or internationally, just opened a selection of resources – and in some cases upon request – that they believe are useful to Covid-19 research, but they did not open all their publications to allow researchers to see and choose what can be really useful from the different scientific perspectives necessarily implied in this urgent aim.

Definitely, what has emerged quite clearly from this pandemic emergency are the many obstacles and walls that prevent access to knowledge and science, as well as all the restrains current acquisitions methods for digital resources in libraries impose through clauses included in subscription licenses.

The acquisitions models imposed to libraries and library consortia have restrains in document delivery, walk-in users, number of downloads, and sometimes in simultaneous access to resources if this is the subscription model. In the current situation, in which all researchers are working from home for their regular academic activity and many

are working at finding a cure for Covid-19, this is a big limitation.

Therefore, a group of academic and research libraries in Italy wrote a petition to ask publishers to help libraries in supporting researchers during this emergency.

In the petition, libraries ask publishers to allow digital lending and direct document delivery with no restrains, and to allow opening of library collections temporarily to all users, including doctors and researchers not affiliated to academia who, according to license clauses, normally cannot access academic library resources. Moreover, The Library Commission of the Conference of Italian University Rectors

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(CRUI) signed the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) Covid-19 petition for access to electronic resources from publishers.

Italian national consortium for the acquisition of digital resources, CARE, asked to publishers with which they have a deal to co-operate in this goal and created a web page with information from publishers which showcased their relevant information. This pandemic outbreak has clearly shown how crucial open access and open science have become. Researchers all over the world need to access data and knowledge quickly, as soon as it is produced, freely and without any limitation, in order to be able to defeat coronavirus.

For this reason, AISA, an Italian Association for the promotion of Open Science, wrote a public letter to the President of the Italian Republic to ask for a serious and urgent national policy for open science, starting from rethinking research assessment and copyright laws.

The coronavirus outbreak shows us how science could progress in giant steps if it was always open. Now the time has come to follow this road. Ri

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Product Spotlight

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