

Kuwait University faculty's use of electronic resources during the COVID-19 pandemic

Use of
electronic
resources

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the extent of benefits Kuwait University faculty received from the electronic resources offered by Kuwait University Libraries Administration, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Design/methodology/approach – An online survey was distributed using Google Forms via different social media platforms and official emails. The sample was Kuwait University faculty from all 16 colleges.

Findings – The results showed humble use of electronic resources during this critical time. The faculty mostly used the electronic resources for writing research papers, and databases and e-journals were their most preferred resources. The majority of nonusers indicated that they did not need these resources, and the rest referred to their unawareness of these resources. The results also showed that the majority of nonusers were willing to learn more about the electronic resources and how to use them.

Originality/value – The results and recommendations of this study are expected to be beneficial to Kuwait University and Kuwait University Libraries Administration, specifically, in terms of knowing what the faculty members use and prefer and the problems they face when searching electronic resources.

Keywords Kuwait University, Faculty, Electronic resources, Libraries, Coronavirus, COVID-19, Academic libraries

Paper type Research paper

Throughout the past two decades, technology and the World Wide Web have imposed themselves in practically all fields and sectors of life. This technology revolution was accompanied by a rapid evolution in the amount and type of available information and online resources. Accordingly, the role of libraries and the duties of librarians have shifted dramatically to handle the new user demands, technology and collections. In academic libraries particularly, as the heart of their learning communities, librarians and library staff are facing several challenges in providing students and faculty numerous services to address their diverse information needs, characteristics and interests (Simmonds, 2001).

This paper focuses on faculty members' use of the academic library collection during a period when they could not reach the library physically, with an emphasis on the faculty's use of the electronic resources (ER) of Kuwait University (KU) libraries during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. During this COVID-19 pandemic, schools and universities in Kuwait were closed, as they were in many other countries. In addition, all the libraries and information centres were closed before the lockdown and the curfew in the country during March and April 2020. Fortunately, faculty and researchers were able to access the



The author would like to thank Kuwait University Libraries Administration for its assistance in distributing the survey, with special thanks going to Mahmoud Al-Ghadhban, director of KU libraries, and Sayed Ali Hamza for their cooperation.

information and resources they needed through the internet, and they also had access to the ER – such as databases, e-books, e-journals and the OPAC – that KU libraries offered.

Context

KU libraries are supervised administratively and technically by Kuwait University Libraries Administration (KULA). KU libraries offer different services and resources, including an online catalogue service for Arabic and non-Arabic books and periodicals. Information resources at KU libraries include 322,964 titles and 447,629 Arabic and non-Arabic volumes of books, references and dissertations in different fields of knowledge; 75 subscribed databases in Arabic and other languages; and over 10,000 e-books, 555 printed journals and 1,575 online journals. In addition, they offer an audiovisual collection including 9,808 scientific films; 1,254 original manuscripts; and 23,378 copied manuscripts (KULA, 2020).

Related studies

This topic – the faculty's use and awareness of ER – has gained significant consideration by scholars worldwide. Some scholars have investigated the use and awareness of ER, and others focused mainly on the use of e-books, but all of the selected articles shared an emphasis on faculty's use of these resources. Some included scholars in their sample, and others included graduate students. Because all of these studies cannot possibly be covered, several from different countries were selected and presented chronologically, linking similar results where applicable.

The earliest study found was completed in Turkey, where [Atilgan and Bayram \(2006\)](#) evaluated the faculty's use of the digital library at Ankara University. The goal of the study was to examine the faculty's awareness of the digital library and their preferences for the databases. Of the respondents, 86.5% showed an awareness of the digital library resources, 24.8% had no information about these resources, 45.9% knew a little about the ER, and 29.4% knew several of the resources.

In Greece, [Korobili et al. \(2005\)](#) conducted a study on the faculty of a higher educational institute in Thessaloniki to investigate the effective use of resources for academic purposes. The majority of the faculty used printed sources more often than electronic sources, though they used the ER quite frequently. The use was higher in the School of Business Administration and Economics and among PhD holders and young faculty members.

In Algeria, [BouKerzazh \(2010\)](#) focused on the use of electronic scientific journals by the faculty at Mantoury University. About half of the participants used electronic journals, with 44% of them using these journals for writing theses and dissertations and 24.8% using them for research papers. The latter reason was related to the university's regulations on faculty publishing research within a particular time frame. The main challenges were a slow connection, lack of required skills, language barrier and sudden disconnection of the internet.

In Iraq, [Saeed \(2011\)](#) reported the faculty of the College of Engineering at Takreet University also showed high-volume use of digital resources (78%), which they associated with the quick reach of information and the ability to find more updated information, and 22% of the participants indicated an unawareness of how to search the internet.

[Thanuskodi and Ravi \(2011\)](#) investigated the utilisation of digital resources by faculty and research scholars at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University in Tirunelveli, India. Their results showed the majority (67.14%) of participants were familiar with the digital resources and mainly used them for research purposes. The participants also indicated that they learned the required skills for searching digital resources through self-study. In terms of

faculty preferences among ER, a prior study in India (Swain and Panda, 2009), conducted at a business school in Orissa, indicated that the faculty had a high preference for using electronic articles and a low preference for electronic theses and dissertations.

In Nigeria, Bashorun *et al.* (2011) investigated the perception of ER of the academic staff at the University of Ilorin. Their results showed a low frequency of use of these resources, which the participants related to a lack of time and a lack of awareness about using ER. The main challenges they indicated were power outages, ineffective communication channels and a slow network. However, in 2010, Isah also examined the use of ER among academic faculty at the same university and showed that the academic staff were fully aware of the electronic library resources, but 70% of them did not use these resources and only 36% of them had accessed the electronic library. Again, the same challenges were noted: slow internet, power shortage and the absence of resources that met their information needs.

Cassidy *et al.* (2012) focused on the use of e-books among faculty and graduate students at Sam Houston State University in Texas, in the USA. Although their results indicated that a significant portion of the participants appreciated the convenience of e-books, those participants were not using any of the library's e-books. Cassidy *et al.* linked the participants' not using e-books to their unawareness of the e-books available and/or these e-books' features, like the capability for downloading, highlighting and note-taking. Hence, the researchers recommended marketing by librarians to increase e-book use among faculty and students, especially distance learning students, and to highlight the e-books' features.

A similar study was done in Oman, wherein Al-Suqri (2014) examined the use and acceptance of e-books by the faculty at Sultan Qaboos University. He found that participants who perceived e-books as easier to use were using them more. The frequent e-book users were more often younger male than older female faculty members and more often those whose first language was not Arabic. In addition, the number of e-book users was higher in the Colleges of Arts, Humanities, Business, Engineering and Physical Sciences than in the Colleges of Social Sciences and Life and Health Science.

In Pakistan, Ahmed and Amjad (2014) evaluated the satisfaction level with ER of researchers from two universities: The Islamia University of Bahawalpur and Bahauddin Zakariya University of Multan in Punjab. The majority of the researchers were very satisfied with their use of the ER, and the most frequently used databases were ScienceDirect and Emerald. However, the participants designated the following as the main challenges they have faced while searching these resources: lack of internet connection, interface design problems, power outages, technical problems, lack of knowledge of search techniques and discomfort with online reading.

In Fiji, Sohail and Ahmad (2017) conducted a study on the use of ER and services by faculty and students of Fiji National University Library. The researchers surveyed eight of 16 libraries, and their results revealed a growing awareness of ER and services in the field of academic research. The challenges the participants named were slow downloads and the blockage of websites.

In Palestine, Hanawi (2018) studied the faculty of the Educational Sciences College at Al-Quds Open University to reveal the role ER play in educational publications. The majority of participants believed that ER have a significant role in research production and said they occasionally use these resources.

In Taiwan, Chen (2019) focused on the document types preferred by humanities scholars in their research and publications at Fu Jen Catholic University. The main type of document was books, and they used ER regularly throughout their processes of idea generation and document searching. The participants in Taiwan used several languages to search ER: Chinese, English, German, French, Japanese and Latin.

The most recent study was done in 2020 in Saudi Arabia ([Ahmad and Mohammad, 2020](#)) examined how the faculty at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University benefitted from the ER available; the study included the Department of Library and Information in the College of Arts. The study revealed a high rate of use (93.7%); over half of the users were searching in Arabic (56.8%), and about a quarter were searching in English (25%). The main purposes for their use of ER were finding support for their course materials and updating their knowledge. In contrast, the nonusers referred to their unawareness of these resources. In an earlier similar study also done in Saudi Arabia, [Alhadeeb and Alanz \(2013\)](#) examined the use and awareness of ER of faculty and graduates of King Faisal University, with a comparable outcome: a high percentage of awareness (86.8%) among the faculty. However, the participants indicated the following challenges: inability to browse the archived databases for many previous years; inability to download, print or save some articles; lack of availability of the full-texts of document in some databases; and the language barrier. A third study in Saudi Arabia ([Athmaa and Aloufi, 2009](#)) designated more barriers faced by the faculty of Taibah University in Holy Madinah. In addition to the barriers previously mentioned, they indicated their poor skills in searching the databases, the lack of information specialists in the library to assist them in searching these resources, the databases' being English based and the need for a password to search these databases.

Overall, most of the cited studies reported comparable outcomes: There was an awareness of ER among the faculty that varied from one country to another, but faculty in the majority of countries, such as Turkey, Iraq, India, Fiji, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia and others, shared a high level of usage and awareness, and the unawareness level fluctuated at around a quarter or less of faculty members, such as those in Turkey and Nigeria, claiming no information at all about ER. The challenges shared by different countries (Nigeria, Pakistan, Fiji, Algeria and Saudi Arabia) in searching ER can be categorised into eight main types, as shown in [Table 1](#).

In Kuwait, which is the focus of this study, a paper ([Rehman and Ramzy, 2004](#)) focused on the awareness and use of ER at the Health Science Centre of Kuwait University. The study explored the reasons behind the low volume of ER use despite the rich variety and wide range of information resources the centre offers. The reasons revealed were mainly time constraints, lack of awareness and similar to the previous study, absence of basic searching and computer skills.

Type of challenge	Example
1. Power problem	Power outages
2. Internet connection	Slow network Lack of internet connection Slow downloads Sudden disconnection of the internet
3. Website problem	Interface design problems Blockage of websites
4. Search skills	Lack of or poor search skills
5. Language	Language barrier because most resources are in English
6. Resources	Absence of resources that meet the faculty's information needs Unable to download, save, or print documents Databases cover only a few previous years Password required
7. Specialists	Lack of specialists for assistance
8. Reading preferences	Discomfort with online reading

Table 1.
Categorization of the challenges faculties face in searching electronic resources

Another related study focused on Kuwait University faculty and investigated their patterns of internet use, including the information resources they used and the problems they faced (Al-Ansari, 2006). The outcomes revealed that the majority have been using a computer and the internet for the past five years, mainly using search engines, email and Web resources. Their internet use was primarily for communication purposes, research and publication, and they believed it helped them save time and locate up-to-date information. The main challenges were similar to those found by Rehman and Ramzy (2004): lack of time, slow speed and lack of access from home. Interestingly, the majority of the faculty indicated concern about improving their internet-use skills; hence, now, about 16 years after the latter study was conducted, the assumption here is the majority is aware of and uses these resources.

Significance and objectives of this study

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of the digital resources KULA offered KU faculty members during the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties the faculty members faced (if any). The following were the key objectives of the study:

- to examine faculty members' use of ER of KU libraries;
- to explore faculty members' reasons for using these resources;
- to explore faculty members' most frequently and infrequently used resources;
- to determine the difficulties faculty members' face during their searches; and
- to file a report with the results to the KULA for their consideration.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper was to explore KU faculty members' use of the ER of KU libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the faculty's purposes for using these resources and the difficulties they faced. Particularly, the aim is to answer these questions:

- Q1.* To what extent do KU faculty use the ER of KU libraries?
- Q2.* What are the purposes of their use?
- Q3.* What are the more frequently used sources?
- Q4.* What are the difficulties (if any) they face when using KU libraries' ER?

Design and instrument

To answer these questions, an online survey was created using Google Forms. The Google Forms tool, which is provided freely by Google Inc., is a cloud-based data management instrument for creating online questionnaires (Harinarayana and Vasantha, 2016). The questions in the survey were in Arabic and English. Based on the participants' answers, they were divided into two groups, leading them to different questions accordingly: ER users and nonusers. Both had to answer the demographic questions at the beginning (gender, faculty and academic rank) and the last question about their notices and recommendations. Data, statistics and data charts were collected and imported using Google Forms.

Sample

The online survey was distributed via different social media platforms (mainly Twitter and WhatsApp) and via the faculty members' official email addresses, in coordination with KULA. KU has 16 colleges, all of which were included, and the target was all of the faculty and the academic support staff, including professors, associate professors, assistant professors, teaching assistants and language instructors.

Approach

I adopted a descriptive quantitative approach for this paper. According to [Polit and Beck \(2010\)](#), "The goal of most quantitative studies is to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases" (p. 1452). The significance of this approach is that it enables researchers to generalise the findings of their studies to represent the surveyed societies by measuring the answers of a number of participants to identify a general pattern of their responses regarding a particular treatment or program ([Hendal, 2019](#)).

Originality and implication

Based on my knowledge, this is the first paper to focus on faculty members' ER use during the pandemic, in Kuwait specifically. The results and recommendations of this study are expected to be beneficial to KU and KULA specifically, in terms of knowing what the faculty members use and prefer and the problems they face while searching the ER and helping KU and KULA improve their services and resources.

Results and discussion

Respondents

I received 100 responses, representing 12 colleges; unfortunately, no responses were received from four colleges: dentistry, pharmacy, public health and architecture. Over half of the participants were female – 60 – and 40 were male, embodying all academic ranks; the majority were assistant professors, followed by teaching assistants, associate professors, professors and language instructors. [Table 2](#) shows the participants' demographic distribution.

Over half of the respondents, 60%, did not use ER during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 40% of them did use these resources.

College		Academic rank		Gender	
College of Allied Health Sciences	1	Professor	7	Male	40
College of Arts	10	Associate Professor	14	Female	60
College of Business Administration	17	Assistant Professor	41		
College of Computing Sciences and Engineering	1	Teaching assistant	33		
College of Education	15	Language instructor	5		
College of Engineering and Petroleum	9				
College of Law	1				
College of Life Sciences	5				
College of Medicine	1				
College of Sciences	19				
College of Sharia and Islamic Studies	5				
College of Social Sciences	16				

Table 2.
Distribution of
participants

Electronic resource users

Purposes for using ER. Respondents were asked about their main purpose for using these resources; their answers, as shown in Figure 1, indicated that research writing is the dominant purpose (80%), followed by reading and updating knowledge (55%), and updating course material (47.5%).

Language. The languages used most frequently in searching were English, 32 (80%); Arabic, 14 (35%); and French, 2 (5%).

Frequently used sources. The respondents indicated their most frequently used sources (Figure 2), which were primarily databases (80%), e-journals (67.5%), subscribed journals (40%), e-books (37.5%), unified searches (27.5%), open-access journals (17.5%), open-access books (15%), KU theses and dissertations (12.5%), videos (10%) and OPAC (7.5%). The results designated the faculty needs to reach full-text documents, which are available on their preferred sources such as databases and e-journals, which the least used sources lack, such as the OPAC that shows only the bibliographic information about the book and videos.

Frequently used databases. The respondents were asked about their most frequently used databases and selected several Arabic and English databases.

As shown in Figure 3, 19 of the respondents (47.5%) uses Scopus, 16 used Web of Science (40%), 12 used the Arabic database Dar Almandumah (30%), 9 each used Emerald and ProQuest (22.5%), 6 used Al Manhal – also Arabic (15%), 5 used EBSCO (12.5%), and 4 used IEEE (10%). The next databases were added by the participants: ScienceDirect, 3 (7.5%) and Alshamela (online library and not included in the KU library) 2 (5%); the following were each selected once (2.5%): JSTOR, OnePetro and IOP publishing.

The most frequently used databases, Scopus and Web of Science, can be associated with KU's regulation of promotion, which conditions the faculty to publish in any journal listed in these two databases. Although the reason for the high-volume use of Dar Almandumah is

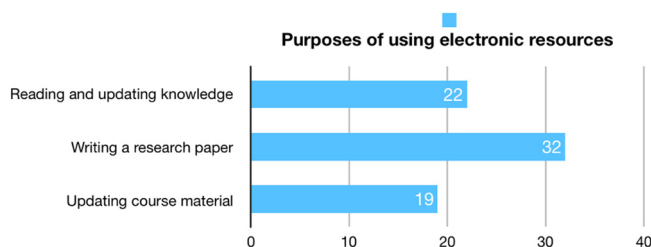


Figure 1.
What was the main purpose for using ER?

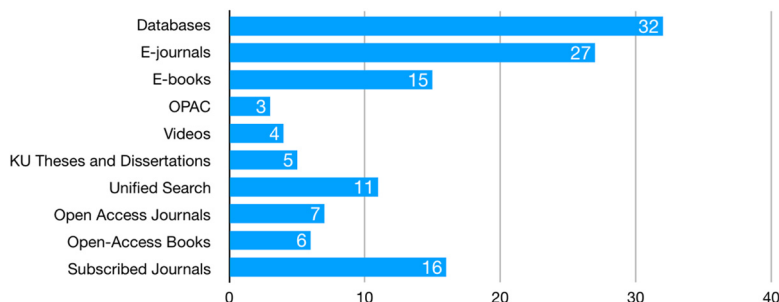


Figure 2.
What were the most frequently used resources?

that it is the main comprehensive database that serves many specialists and is mainly Arabic, it contains English documents as well.

Frequency of use. When asked about their frequency of using these resources, the majority of participants reported using them weekly (37.5%), daily (30%) and, as needed, (30%), and only one (2.5%) reported using these sources monthly.

Users' satisfaction with the resources. Respondents were asked if the ER were able to meet all their research needs. Half of them (50%) replied positively, 35% indicated that they sometimes found what they needed and 15% could not find what they needed.

Challenges ER users faced. In total, 60% of respondents faced some challenges while searching the ER, and 40% did not face any trouble. The participants who faced challenges mentioned the following: the majority denoted a lack of the needed sources or a limited number of journal and database subscriptions serving their colleges, as well as subscriptions such as for PsychINFO database not being renewed and a lack of ER in general. Others indicated the shortage of full-text documents, the database or journal not offering full text or further subscription being required, such as for the Al Manhal database; some users could locate articles but could not access the full text. Several respondents mentioned technical issues with their authentication information when they had to sign in using their ID and password several times or could not access the databases even if they input the password. Other challenges mentioned were slow download speeds, the server being down sometimes and some journals displaying content from only the past two years. The latter challenge was mentioned previously in a study done in Saudi Arabia (Alhadeeb and Alanz, 2013), as were some of the other challenges, like slow downloads in Fiji (Sohail and Ahmad, 2017) and Kuwait (Al-Ansari, 2006).

Respondents also made a few recommendations: to create a virtual private network they can access directly from their browsers without the need for a unified search; to find an alternative way to request unavailable manuscripts, like an online interlibrary loan; and to subscribe and cooperate with international or regional libraries to have access to their online collections. Finally, respondents said that more subscriptions to Arabic resources that serve Arabic language majors are needed, as are legal resources for law colleges.

Nonusers

Sixty percent of respondents reported not using ER during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. When asked about their reasons (Figure 4), the majority (48.3%) said they did not need to access any resources during the lockdown, 28.3% were unaware of these resources and 11.6% were unaware of how to use them. A few (8.3%) said their reason was a lack of the resources they needed; one participant used other university's resources, and

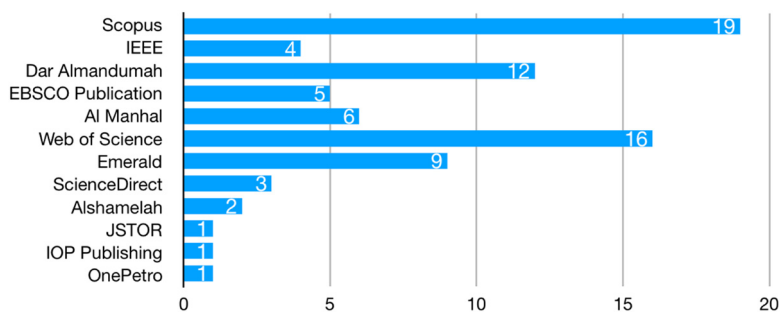


Figure 3.
What were the most frequently used sources?

unexpectedly, one respondent declared not having received a username and password, which all KU affiliates have by default. Regardless of the percentages of unaware respondents, the latter reason raises serious questions about KULA's responsibilities in enlightening all affiliates on the basics of accessing their resources.

Interestingly, the bulk of nonusers (85%) showed an interest in learning more about these resources, but a few (15%) were not concerned with knowing about them. Additionally, some showed an interest in attending workshops to learn how to use these resources.

Comparing my results with related works cited earlier, The researcher finds that participants' reasons for not using ER matched several studies, particularly those of [Al-Ansari \(2006\)](#) and [Rehman and Ramzy \(2004\)](#) in Kuwait, in that participants' said they lacked awareness and basic search skills. The nonusers' willingness to learn about these resources confirmed Al-Ansari's outcomes, in which the same sample (faculty) in the same location (KU) lacked awareness about ER and were willing to learn more about them; the difference is that Al-Ansari's study was conducted 16 years ago.

Conclusion

This study presents the results of examining KU faculty's use of ER during the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown in 2020. The results showed a humble use of these resources by less than half the sample, although during this time no libraries or information providers were open. Respondents used ER mostly for research writing purposes, with databases and e-journals being their most preferred resources. The majority of nonusers indicated that they did not need these resources, and the rest referred to their unawareness of these resources and unawareness of how to use them. The results also showed that the majority of nonusers were willing to learn more about the ER and how to use them.

Most of the main challenges respondents discussed were similar to the challenges of other universities in other countries, such as the lack of full-text manuscripts and the need for more database subscriptions. However, the challenges KU faculty mentioned in related studies are still about the same, although KU's administration and KULA are putting tremendous effort and budgets into supporting the electronic services and facilities in general and ER in particular. For example, one of the services that libraries offer is reference management software, like EndNote and RefWorks, yet the majority of faculty are not using these tools because they lack awareness and training ([Hendal, 2019](#)). This confirms the necessity for awareness of KULA's services and resources on a large-scale level in KU to reach all faculty and students.

The findings of this study denote the need for updating the ER in KULA based on the information needs of users, including faculty and graduates. However, developing the collection would be insufficient without increasing the awareness of the services and resources that the library offers. To reach this goal, several recommendations need to be born in mind, the first being a comprehensive awareness campaign for all KU affiliates starting with the services and resources the libraries have and how to access these

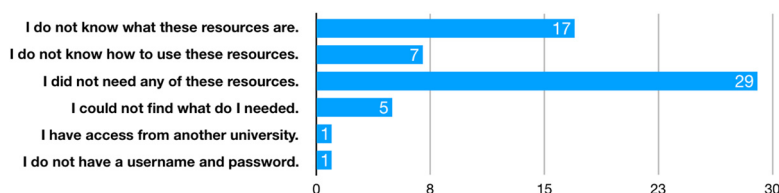


Figure 4.
What were the
reasons for not
using ER?

resources. For example, a reminder of those services and resources could be sent via email at the beginning of each semester. The second recommendation is creating a communication channel with users to understand their needs and the problems they are facing. Finally, KULA should review all studies concerning KU libraries, such as those by [Al-Ansari \(2006\)](#) and [Rehman and Ramzy \(2004\)](#) that shed the light on users' needs and problems, to improve their services and resources and eventually to meet all users' information needs.

For the future, there is a need to investigate the effects of coronavirus on libraries in general and academic libraries in particular to explore the role they played during the pandemic and the facilities they offered society.

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