BERT PLATZER / MARJAN BROUWERS

The new normal

Chronicle of the University of Groningen Library in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

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University of Groningen Press

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Foreword

Haren, 4 November 2020

At the end of February 2020, the University of Groningen Library (UB) celebrated its 405th anniversary with an open day, lectures, guided tours, theatre performances, musical performances and an interactive anniversary lunch for UB staff members.

The bustling UB City Centre that welcomes thousands of students every day became a festival ground and was once again the 'place to be' at the University of Groningen (UG).

No wonder it was unreal to walk through the empty and quiet building three weeks later. Our slogan 'University of Groningen Library – where the Shhh happens' suddenly took on a completely different meaning.

The UB did not close during the 'intelligent lockdown', and it was anything but quiet behind the scenes: the UB still offered its services to UG students and staff members during the COVID-19 crisis.

Even when the Cabinet announced on 3 November that some additional measures were being taken on top of the partial lockdown, the UB remained open. While all public libraries, museums and theatres had to close their doors.

As director, I find it remarkable how UB staff members responded to this new norm.

This chronicle describes the adjustments to our services in the period from March to October 2020: our experiences and considerations and the preparations to reopen the reading rooms with measures that changed almost every week. The authors Bert Platzer and Marjan Brouwers interviewed dozens of employees – on behalf of all University Library staff members – about their experiences over the past few months. The result: *The New Normal. Chronicle of the University of Groningen Library in times of the COVID-19 pandemic*.

As director, I find it remarkable how UB staff members responded to this new norm. Thanks to their dedication, flexibility and inventiveness, it was possible to maintain the services of the University Library – to the delight of our users.

I would like to express my gratitude, respect and admiration to all University Library staff members. I dedicate this book to them, about a period which is now part of the 405-year history of the University of Groningen Library.

Marjolein Nieboer
Director of the University of Groningen Library

A new virus

In December 2019, several people in the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan suffered from pneumonia for which no logical explanation could be found. The evildoer turned out to be a new, unknown and, in many cases, deadly virus. The trail of the virus led to a fish market. As with the SARS outbreak in 2002, it was suspected that the virus had jumped from animal to human.

A wide range of live animals were also traded under the counter at this market. The animals were crammed together in tight cages and were often slaughtered on the spot, under not too hygienic conditions. Bats were said to be the origin of the virus.

A day before New Year's Eve, Chinese doctor Li Wenliang from Wuhan sent a prophetic warning to his colleagues: the new virus could lead to an epidemic similar to SARS. The police arrested him for 'spreading rumours'.

The mysterious virus appeared to originate from the corona family, also known from a series of common cold viruses. However, for many infected people, this new

corona strain led to fatal pneumonia – just like SARS and MERS, which are closely related to the new virus. The newcomer was named SARS-CoV-2, nicknamed coronavirus. The WHO coined the name COVID-19 for the disease, a contraction of *coronavirus disease 2019*. Fever, a dry cough and fatigue are the most important symptoms, the transmission mainly takes place through coughing and sneezing.

In the Netherlands, reporting on the coronavirus came across as a far-off scenario. Wasn't the outbreak of SARS in 2002 mainly confined to Asia? And MERS hardly ventured outside the Middle East in 2012, didn't it? And weren't the number of deaths limited to around eight hundred in both epidemics?

In January, a modest outbreak of the coronavirus in a Bavarian company could still be neutralized, but by the end of the month the virus gained a foothold in Germany, France and northern Italy. On 27 February, Minister for Medical Care Bruno Bruins received a note in his hands

during a live broadcast by the NOS (Netherlands Public Broadcasting) on corona. The first infection in the Netherlands was a fact: a businessman contracted the virus in Northern Italy. During spring break, many Dutch skiers, especially from the province of Noord-Brabant, experienced the same thing. Li Wenliang had already died of the virus a few weeks earlier.

Developments followed each other at brisk pace. On 2 March, the University of Groningen (UG) advised its staff members not to shake hands anymore, followed a week later by Prime Minister Rutte's press conference. The UMCG asked employees who had been in areas with infec-

tions to report to the Occupational Health & Safety Department. The first Dutch person died of the virus on 6 March. People in Noord-Brabant were asked to stay at home if they had a cold, a fever or a cough. The WHO qualified the corona epidemic on 11 March as a pandemic.

A day later, on Thursday afternoon 12 March, Marjolein Nieboer, director of the University of Groningen Library (UB), got together with her Management Team members Klaran Visscher and Jan Herman Veldkamp and a large number of employees, in the UB's 'living room'. They watched the press conference of Prime Minister Rutte, Minister Bruins and Jaap van Dissel, director of the Centre for Infectious Disease Control of the RIVM. Additional measures were announced to combat the spread of the virus: anyone suffering from a cold, cough or sore throat, whether or not combined with fever, had to stay at home. Meetings with more than a hundred people were forbidden for the time being, also at work and in education. Universities were urgently advised to offer their lectures online. People who do not work in key sectors such as the fire brigade, police, care or energy supply were urged to work from home as much as possible. The Netherlands went into a lockdown.

2.

A diabolical dilemma

The Groningen room on the first floor of the UB City Centre was already full on Friday the thirteenth at a quarter past eight in the morning. A strange sight at first, because didn't the Cabinet announce the day before that people had to work from home as much as possible?

The attendees had accepted an invitation they had found in their email the night before. Following the press conference, director Marjolein Nieboer had informed her staff of the 'far-reaching decisions taken by the university to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus': all the UG buildings and the reading rooms of the University Library were closed with effect from 13 March. Staff members that had symptoms such as a cold, coughing or fever were urged to stay at home. Where possible, staff members had to work from home, in consultation with their manager.

Apparently not on that Friday. The invitation for the staff meeting mainly concerned the staff members with a direct task in public service: Internal Services, Closed

Stacks and Front Office staff members. Topics for discussion: the measures against the coronavirus and the wish of the President of the University, Jouke de Vries, to keep the physical UB collection available for researchers, students and lecturers. Nieboer ended her email to these staff members with the following words: "We will handle the collection requests that keep coming in. We will do our very best."

Jouke de Vries had followed the press conference that Thursday afternoon at home in Zuidlaren with interest. "The aim of the measures was mainly to prevent large crowds from gathering", says de Vries. "If it's busy anywhere, it's at the UB. This is not just a place for books, it's also a meeting place for students. It was therefore logical to close the UB to the public, but I thought it would be wise to keep making books available, because that is our core activity. It was also simply an assessment of what we were still able to do and the possible associated risks".

Before Nieboer sent her email on Thursday evening, De Vries had put forward his idea during a meeting of the UG crisis team, the Board of the University, the deans and the UB management. Nieboer: “Jouke de Vries then explicitly mentioned how important it was that the UB collection would continue to be available for research and education, and that we should in any case do our best to continue processing incoming loan requests.”

Her first thought: “We’re going to see if that’s feasible”, Nieboer remembers. “I liked the fact that Jouke put so much emphasis on our service. That Thursday evening, I agreed with his idea. But I indicated that I would have to discuss with colleagues how we would handle it, because that wasn’t clear to me at the time. I was aware that we had to fine-tune this internally. I also said at the time that we could not meet the physical service requirements if the building was completely closed down, as was the case with the Central Medical Library and the UB Zernike.

Although Nieboer had sent the invitation for the staff meeting herself, she was surprised by the high turnout. “Together with Management Team members Klaran Visscher and Jan Herman Veldkamp, I explained the corona measures and the intention to remain open to a limited extent”, says Nieboer. “At that time, we also agreed that everyone would work from home, with the exception of those working in direct services.”

“Unreal and a little uncertain”, is what Peter Fokkens, Head of the Content and Front Office departments, calls the staff meeting on Friday morning. “Earlier, some people still joked a bit about coronavirus, but the press conference got everyone’s attention; it was a serious situation. That was also the atmosphere of the crisis meeting.”

Rob de Grooth, Team Leader of Printed Collections Management/Closed Stacks was also present. “Everyone wondered what was going to happen and how we were going to proceed.” After seeing the news about the press conference the night before, it crossed his mind that the University Library would have to close. “It soon became clear, however, that we were going to maintain some kind of a service. During the staff meeting it was made very clear that those who did go to work in the University Library would do so on a voluntary basis.”

De Grooth doesn’t recall any discussions following the announcements made by the Director and the Management Team. He wanted to continue working. “Our service is important, because the lectures continued online, of course. We’re not in a position to take the work home with us. To be honest, I didn’t see any problems either.” It turned out that his team felt the same way. “After the meeting, during our regular coffee time together, we sat down at the closed stacks and talked about it right away.

“

Everyone on the team immediately said: ‘We’ll be here.’ There were no doubts whatsoever.

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Who wants to work on location and who wants to stay at home? There was no one who didn't want to work. Everyone immediately said; 'we'll be here'. There were no doubts whatsoever."

It was decided that the UB would reopen on Monday, but only for the collection and return of books. While the rest of the Netherlands spoke of Rutte's 'intelligent lockdown', 'limited closure' became a winged expression within the UB.

Before this could be achieved, the limited closure had to be coordinated with the Groningen Safety Region. "I coordinated everything closely with mayor Koen Schuiling right from the start," General Director Stephan van Galen of the Office of the University recalls. "These were consultations on what could be done within the emergency ordinance in the city of Groningen. Exceptions were possible and the Safety Region's board, which is chaired by the mayor, decided on them. At the request of Jouke de Vries, I sent an email to burgemeester@groningen.nl. Koen Schuiling replied very quickly, '*sent from my phone*'. I was under the impression that the mayor wanted public life to continue as much as possible. He was happy with any initiative that fitted within the rules."

Ina Vrolijk of the Education and Research Support department and Chair of the Employee Council of the UB, was not present in the UB that Friday morning. “The night before, I had seen the news about the press conference and I assumed that the UB was closing. Marjolein Nieboer’s email inviting me to the staff meeting came as a surprise. I thought: meeting? No, we have to stay at home, so I will stay at home. On Friday I was in contact with a colleague who had attended the meeting. He said: ‘I’ll pack my things now and go home as well’. A number of people from my department stayed at home right away just like me, I wasn’t the only one.”

Vrolijk was surprised that the UB would open its doors again on Monday. “The government said it very clearly: ‘stay at home’. If you stay at home, you can’t go to the UB. People with a key profession had to go to work, but in our Employee Council we felt that we did not have a key profession.”

One week after the staff meeting, on 20 March, Vrolijk sent a letter on behalf of the Employee Council to Nieboer with the urgent advice for the Management Team to ‘proceed with the closure of the UB.’ Vrolijk pointed out in the letter that lending University Library books is not one of the key professions and would also contribute to the risk of coronavirus infections. The Employee Council also indicated that it considered it irresponsible that the limited closure would increase the workload for Front Office staff

in particular, especially in the light of recent measures to achieve precisely the opposite.

“The Employee Council was unanimous in its support of that letter and still is”, says Vrolijk. “We received a lot of questions and concerns from our front office. We are not a key profession, should we be doing this? What if a colleague, even on a voluntary basis, still feels obliged to go to work when they feel a little sick? And what if a sick colleague infects others, causing the UB to contribute to the spread of the virus? This is not something you would want. I heard a lot of people say this.”

A number of staff members did not feel heard by the Employee Council, however. “We were mentioned in that letter as a group for which the workload would increase, but that wasn’t an issue at all”, says De Grooth. “The Employee Council only asked us afterwards about our position. They mainly worked at home, not at the UB, but spoke for the people who were working there. If they had shown up for a day and would have talked to people in the closed stacks about their thoughts, they would have been better prepared.”

Vrolijk admits that she had already sent the Employee Council’s letter before she had spoken to anyone from the closed stacks. “We received a lot of reactions from our Front Office and that’s what we responded to. We sent

that letter on Friday 20 March and on the 24th I had contact with Rob de Grooth. Yes, his reaction did change our picture, but we kept thinking that it would be best to close down the UB. For us it was like ‘oh, we skipped a department, we should avoid that in the future’. I had a good talk with Rob, he was happy that I contacted him.”

“Certainly in the beginning, when there was still a lot of uncertainty about the virus, there were two camps”, says Fokkens. “There was quite a bit of unrest among staff members, because the rule was that if you didn’t have a key profession, you had to stay at home. At the same time, teaching had to continue at a distance, and of course we played a part in that. So, we said that we are crucial for the University’s education and research. We did, however, always say that people in a vulnerable position, such as carers or people who fall into a higher risk group, should not go to work. The same applies to those who didn’t feel good about working at the office. However, as the crisis unfolded, it became clear what the situation was like in the Netherlands. The fear slowly disappeared, and people began to understand each other’s position.”

“I did, of course, discuss the Employee Council’s letter in our Management Team”, says Nieboer. “Klaran Visscher and Jan Herman Veldkamp were – more than I – convinced to keep the services running. I was looking for an answer to the question as to whether it would be wise

to keep the services running, or whether I would have to decide to stop over the heads of staff members, because I did not want them to run any risks. A diabolical dilemma. I had mixed feelings because, on the one hand, I had a fairly large group of staff members who were incredibly keen to work, including staff members who belonged to the risk group. At the same time, I heard every other day that UBs across the country were closing.

You then have to ask yourself: To what extent are our services vital for the University? Jouke de Vries and the other members of the Board of the University still found it worthwhile for the services to remain open, in whatever form. Finally, I decided to contact the Health, Safety and Sustainability department and discussed the dilemma with our company doctor Peter Flach. In the end, I decided that we would indeed allow our physical services to continue, subject to safety measures. I told the Employee Council that if they didn't agree, they could escalate with the Board of the University."

"As far as I can tell, Marjolein understood very well what we meant," says Vrolijk. "She actually talked about a diabolical dilemma a few times. It is my impression that she is very conscientious in her considerations." The Employee Council was satisfied with Nieboer's explanation.

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A diabolical dilemma. I had mixed feelings because, on the one hand, I had staff members who were incredibly keen to work. At the same time, I heard every other day that UBs across the country were closing.

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After more than a week it turned out that the limited closure of the UB would become part of the full body of measures that soon became known as ‘the new normal’ in the Netherlands.

3.

Those who stayed behind

During the first weeks of the limited closure, Rob de Grooth sometimes thought he was the only human being on earth who still went to work. Biking through the city, on his way to the UB, the streets were deserted. Even though it was a strange sensation, it did give De Grooth a safe feeling not to encounter anyone. Even at work, as Team Leader of Printed Collections Management, he did not feel unsafe at all. “People were more likely to get infected in the supermarket,” he says. “They walk right behind you, grab something above you. We didn’t have that here. Here, everyone always works in a different part of the closed stacks and they go their own way.”

De Grooth didn’t think that the continued provision of physical services would turn the UB into a source of COVID-19 infections. “I did take this into account at the beginning. Everyone was very distant and cautious back then. But we would work at a safe distance and address each other when things went wrong. In the beginning I would just walk around and remind everyone; ‘don’t

forget, one and a half metre apart’. Yes, that’s right, one and a half metre measure apart!’ they would say. During the breaks in the closed stacks, after pouring our coffee, we would move our chairs back a bit to keep sufficient distance.”

Only on 16 March, the first day of the limited closure, were people still allowed to pick up their requested books from nine to five. During a meeting of the UB’s crisis team that Monday morning, it was decided to introduce a corona schedule: the building would be open from seven in the morning to one in the afternoon. The cleaners arrived at seven in the morning, the closed stacks staff members at eight in the morning. From nine to twelve, requested books could be taken out of the *Blauwe Ruimte* (Blue Room), the self-service area on the ground floor opposite the main entrance. At one o’clock all staff members had left the building and the doors were locked.

In order to minimize the risk of infection with the virus, the logistics of the loan were adapted in a number of

respects. As has been customary since the renovation of 2017, visitors were able to get their books from the *Blauwe Ruimte* without having any contact with UB staff members, including the check-out at the computer, the only difference being that the route was marked with tape. Where the drop-off street is normally used for drop-off, books now had to be deposited in the 24/7 Book Box, a letterbox on the outside of the building in the Poststraat. “It was always there, but normally used very little,” says De Grooth.

The returned books were collected in a cart and then went into quarantine. “At a fairly early stage, we found a scientific article stating that the virus could survive under certain conditions on various materials, including five days on plastic,” says Peter Fokkens, Head of the Content and Front Office departments. “We determined that the books would have to be quarantined for five days after returning them. The returned books ended up in a cart and were transferred, using gloves, into a large blue container with a date on it. After five days, the books would be available again.”

This was done according to a fixed timetable. “From eight to nine, we removed the uncollected books from the self-service area,” says Fokkens. “Then, at nine, the UB

doors would open for the borrowers, until noon. At noon, the cleaning company would clean everything in the self-service area before staff members went inside. Fifteen minutes later, the staff members could go back in, giving them 45 minutes to prepare the books for the next day. We also had an adapted cleaning regime. Desks were cleaned daily, and the cleaners regularly cleaned all the door handles and other places, such as the banisters.”

All in all, some 25 people worked in the UB during the limited closure, of whom 10 to 12 were present every day. “We made sure that people were sitting one and a half metre apart in their workplaces,” says Fokkens. “We reminded each other of the need to keep a distance from each other and we had disinfectant gels everywhere to complement the hand-washing policy. We followed all government instructions. We had plastic gloves ready for picking up the returned books and no more than three people were allowed in the self-service area. The service desk would be manned during opening hours. An Internal Services staff member supervised remotely and gave instructions where necessary. If too many people came in, he asked them to stand in line and wait at a suitable distance. Companies that came in occasionally to do some maintenance work also cooperated with our measures.”

Selfservice terminals
Return books

Intercom? Gebruik de 24/7 Bookbox

Intercom? Gebruik de 24/7 Bookbox

For closed stack staff members, the work didn't really change much. "Only the afternoon shifts were cancelled," says De Grooth. "We normally work in shifts: at eight, ten, twelve, two and four o'clock, we receive a series of requests. This would now only be at eight, ten and twelve o'clock. The next morning, we would include the two- and four-hour shifts into the eight o'clock shift. Because only three people were allowed to be in the *Blauwe Ruimte*, we would prepare the books only after twelve o'clock, so they could be picked up the next day."

The commitment of De Grooth's team remained the same: the closed stacks team was the only team that was fully present on a daily basis. "The Front Office was also present five days a week, although there were only two or three people present each time," says De Grooth. "Their composition also changed, while we constantly had the entire staff present. We worked as usual, just not in the afternoons". And they liked that. "I have quite a few people on the team who are single. They really enjoyed working in the morning and seeing other people. Otherwise, they would be at home alone all day."

Although Marjolein Nieboer maintained her decision to keep the physical collection accessible, the letter from the Employee Council advising her to close the UB did get her thinking. "We had several staff members who belong to a

higher risk group, but who really wanted to keep working. Did I have to decide to pull the plug and shut down a wonderful service for this university, because I thought that some of the colleagues involved were better off not coming to work? I continued to struggle with that, which is why I thought that, where possible, we should scale down even more: not with 20 people in the building, but with 10, just like they did with another UB. We wouldn't be open five times a week, but preferably twice." Peter Fokkens was asked to come up with scenarios for further scaling down staff deployment.

In 'Scenario A: No way back (for books)', the UB would only be open on Mondays and Thursdays for collecting books. The return and processing of borrowed books would be stopped. In this scenario, however, working hours had to be extended to avoid backlogs in work. Also, the number of people who came to collect books spread over five days would now have to be spread over two days, which could lead to undesirable crowds. And, after the reopening, getting rid of the wave of returns would require additional efforts on the part of student staff.

These problems could perhaps be solved with 'Scenario B: Employees only', with which the Utrecht University Library also worked. Only staff members would 'exceptionally, under the condition of necessity, continue to be

able to borrow books'. In this scenario, too, no more books would be taken in. As an alternative to collecting the books in the *Blauwe Ruimte*, sending them by mail was suggested. Here too, however, objections arose. Staff members would only be able to make requests by email and with a justification of the need, but how were Front Office staff members supposed to assess the extent to which there really was a need? And didn't students, like lecturers and researchers, also need books for their lectures? What's more, preparing mail would require an extra staff member.

Working with a daily lending quota was the idea behind 'Scenario C: Lending by numbers'. There would be a limit to the number of requests handled, for example one hundred per day. The requests that were not processed would be carried over to the next day. Returns could be processed in a three-day working week however, not in a two-day working week. Apart from the fact that there would be large backlogs, there was an important, practical question to be answered: how could such a quota be implemented? Could it be set in the UB Catalogue SmartCat? The teams involved in this scenario were clear about this: 'too complex a scenario, don't do it!'

Finally, the 'Scenario D: Bol.com' idea revolved around web shops having to solve it. The Front Office, together with the Acquisition department, would purchase new

works and have them delivered to staff members – and possibly also students – at home. Although it sounded simple, this scenario was also labelled ‘too complex’. Apart from the high costs and backlogs in cataloguing all the purchased works, the following question arose: what do we do with all the purchased material later on?

“It was logical that we had to minimize our service to reduce the risk of contamination and spread of coronavirus”, says Fokkens. “But the disadvantages were too great in all scenarios.” Nieboer and her Management Team also came to that conclusion. “None of the scenarios turned out to be a good alternative to the way we worked,” she says. “All four scenarios presented more risks.”

Nieboer had put a lot of effort into downscaling staff numbers. “I put a lot of pressure on formulating the scenarios, because I thought this should be possible with fewer people. Other UBs succeeded too.”

In the end, nothing changed in the physical service as continued during the limited closure from mid-March. Nieboer: “On 1 April, our crisis team and Management Team decided that we would not change our way of working, with a good explanation to the Employee Council and support from the Board of the University. After that, there was peace.”

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At Easter we came across comments on the loan notes from users that said ‘Thank you very much for doing this for us.’.

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Ina Vrolijk, chair of the Employee Council, also agreed to that decision. “We were in complete agreement with the decision to stick to the five mornings and not to open for fewer days. Otherwise, there would be extra workload on the few days that you’re open. As Employee Council, we preferred to see the UB closed, but if you stay open, stay open on those five mornings.”

Meanwhile, the number of loan requests did not show that the Netherlands was in lockdown and the UB was struggling with the scale of its physical services. “In the first week we had 712 requests, the second 599, the third 618, the fourth 523, but that included Easter,” De Grooth

reads from the double folded A4 on which he noted the weekly loan requests. “642, 618, 625”, he continues. “So that’s pretty even. These were regular numbers, just like we had before the lockdown. We also noticed that most of the requests were collected. Normally, there would be some left in the *Blauwe Ruimte* and after two weeks we would take them from the bookcase and return them to the closed stacks. But that doesn’t happen as much now.”

The closed stacks staff regularly found personal messages on loan requests, which demonstrated the usefulness, necessity and appreciation of our services. “In order to know which book to take from the bookcase, we print out the note with the request,” De Grooth explains. “On Good Friday and Easter, we came across comments on the loan notes that said, ‘thank you very much for doing this for us’. Unfortunately, those notes are returned with the book to the client, so we were unable to keep them. But that, together with the high number of requests, gave us a lot of energy to continue”.

4.

Working at the kitchen table

For many UB staff members, the staff meeting on 13 March was the last time they saw their workplace. From now on they would be working from home and no one knew how long it would take. Two weeks perhaps? A month?

User Services sector head Klaran Visscher still vividly remembers how the lockdown started. “It all went very fast. In the week before the lockdown, we already noticed unrest within the University and other libraries. We were still thinking about what to do in case the UB had to close for a fortnight. We hadn’t even got around to drawing up a roadmap when the reading rooms closed on Friday 13 March and then the whole building.”

Visscher combined working from home with working at the UB. “As the Management Team, we decided that we would be present in rotation in case of a crisis situation or if decisions had to be made. I was there on Monday mornings and Friday mornings. The silence in the building was unreal those first weeks. We maintained the one-and-a-

half-metre distance and we had removed chairs from the coffee room. We walked around with approximately ten people every day. And thanks to those colleagues we lent out some 700 books every week for the first few months. I noticed that those colleagues were really proud to be able to do this. We made visible what they do every day: very important work for the University.”

In order to avoid homeworkers having to work on a hard kitchen chair, everyone was given the opportunity to collect suitable furniture. Visscher: “That Monday, many colleagues came to collect laptops, office chairs, keyboards, ergonomic chairs and wobble stools. Management controller Sietske Mulder was very happy with this opportunity. “I remember that Marjolein Nieboer came by on her bike to bring a laptop. We live in Haren and Glimmen and I hadn’t been to the UB. My own laptop is too old to make video calls, so I was very happy that she brought me that

laptop from work. I don't know how else I would have been able to attend all those online meetings."

In practice, working from home often meant holding online meetings with colleagues, which had hardly ever happened before. Visscher: "We learned a lot in a very short time. Before you knew it, we met in Google Hangouts. We received instructions from the university and it actually turned out to be quite simple. Those facilities were already in place, but because we were always present at the UB, we never needed them. After a week or two it was as if we had never done anything else. I don't hear many people craving to go back to the office." Soon everyone

was used to seeing each other only through screens. HR advisor Ryanka Hazekamp was happy to see everyone's homes. "One colleague would be sitting in a beautifully renovated house and the other in a messy attic room or in a children's bedroom."

Rienk Withaar, Head of Education Support and the Special Collections departments, had just taken his camper out of storage at the beginning of March to have it checked when the UB closed. The fact that the camper was parked in his driveway was particularly convenient. "It became my workplace, which was ideal. When you sit in your living room behind the computer, your children immediately start talking to you. But because I was in my camper, they knew I was working. It was a pleasant time for me, and I got more work done than in the office."

Nevertheless, the first weeks of the lockdown were a tough challenge, especially for colleagues with young children. A toddler showing up to report that he wanted to become a veterinarian at a dinosaur zoo would steal all our hearts, of course. But for parents, these kinds of interruptions were stressful. Withaar: "It is indeed an entirely different story if you live in a small flat or if you have a few small children running around. It's logical to be less productive in this case. As managers, we have emphasized from the start that we understand that very well."

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I noticed that employees were really proud of their work. We made visible what they do every day: very important work for the University.

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However, I noticed that some colleagues felt guilty about that, even though they really didn't have to.”

As a single mother of two boys aged nine and ten, Siet-ske Mulder found the combination of working from home and homeschooling tough. “Try doing a video call and keeping your children calm at the same time. Retreating upstairs wasn't a success either: I can't leave them alone for too long. And teaching wasn't easy either. I don't have all those grammar rules readily available anymore, and I don't use the long divisions that I used to know anymore either, but I did manage to teach them. When they were allowed to go back to school, I celebrated it with cake, as if it was Liberation Day.”

Hazekamp found the combination less stressful, because her partner was able to take care of their three children. “Still, I noticed that I could do less work than in the office. I do hear from colleagues that they can concentrate well at home and are much more productive. That didn't apply to me. When you're at home, you're available. I was working in a bedroom that we had turned into a study and the children were not allowed to disturb me there. But as soon as I went to get some coffee, I stumbled across laundry or I was thinking about peeling beans.” On the one hand, it was intense, spending the whole day together at home, on the other hand, she also enjoyed it. “The children had a

good time together. We started with a joint workout before breakfast every day. Special times.”

Human contact is essential to her work, which obviously is not as good online as it is in real life. Hazekamp: “For example, online I couldn’t clearly see whether people were comfortable or not. Or having a discussion with colleagues or pointing out something you’d read or heard. To do that, I had to organize a meeting via Google Hangouts.” She urged managers to stay well connected with homeworkers. “Also with the long-term sick, who may experience this crisis very differently.”

Especially for new staff members, the lockdown was an unreal situation. Hazekamp: “We got a few new colleagues in February and March and even one in April. Imagine how bizarre that is. How do you find your way in your new work from home? We obviously try to help them as much as we can, but it remains a very difficult situation.”

Several international colleagues from countries where the virus struck hard at an early stage also work at the UB. As early as February, they sent out signals that something was going completely wrong. Ane van der Leij, Head of the Research Support department: “At that time the coronavirus was just a news item for us, but for those colleagues it was already a reality and they warned us not to take the virus too lightly. While we were still making silly jokes about coronavirus during the coffee breaks, they

already knew that the consequences could be very serious. They were absolutely right of course.”

One of those international staff members was research impact specialist Shaya Abdolazadeh from Iran, where the virus struck earlier. “Colleagues asked if I had COVID-19 anxiety because I was washing my hands in the canteen before I grabbed something to eat. But I knew how serious it was back then in Iran. My parents are over 60 and I was worried. Luckily, they didn’t get sick. During that first period, my colleagues thought that things would not go so fast in the Netherlands. Until we went into lockdown two weeks later.”

Abdolahzadeh was at home when the UB closed. “I had a cold and was advised not to come to the office. She didn’t expect that it would take so long before she would leave her house again for something other than groceries. “It wasn’t until June that we first met with friends again, but outside and from a distance.” In the meantime, she was again the one who warned about the virus at the beginning of July. “At that time, there was a second wave in Iran. People kept no distance and went to weddings and parties again. This could happen in the Netherlands too. I heard many people say it was over, but the virus was invisible and still among us. Iran showed us what could happen next.”

She can’t go to Iran for now, and her parents can’t visit the Netherlands either. Travelling back and forth is still not allowed. “We had booked a ticket last year but had to postpone our journey and then COVID-19 hit us.” She is fervently hoping that a good working vaccine will come soon, so that she can finally visit her family again.

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When the children were allowed to go back to school, I celebrated it with cake, as if it was Liberation Day.

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5.

All facilities are in order

When will there ever be a chance to get a building right? During the pandemic, do-it-yourself shops were doing business like never before. Masses of people took the opportunity to thoroughly renovate their homes. So why not the UB?

It would have been a good opportunity, but no, the UB building is up to date, Albert van der Kloet said. Only two and a half years ago it was reopened after a major renovation and so no major work was needed in the summer of 2020. Van der Kloet: “We did have work carried out that we had planned earlier. This could continue during the summer months. Obviously with the necessary restrictions: workers could only do the work between seven o’clock in the morning and a quarter to one in the afternoon. When we went home, the workers of those companies also had to leave the building.”

So, after 13 March, the UB was quiet. That week, Rienk Withaar walked through the building one more time to pick up some things and remembers the almost spooky

calm in the otherwise overcrowded reading rooms. “Tables and chairs were neatly lined up, as if the students could enter at any moment. I found that alienating. Shortly afterwards, Albert van der Kloet locked the doors of all the reading rooms.”

In order for the UB services to continue, everything had to be organized: in the building, but also online. While requesting and lending books could continue with the necessary restrictions, other activities suddenly had to take place at home. “We all had to get used to online meetings,” said Ane van der Leij. “That big obstacle turned out to be just a little one in the end. Working with Google Hangouts went fine, as long as there are clear agreements, such as turning your microphone and camera on or off if you have a meeting with more than three people.”

His colleague Rienk Withaar added: “In any case, we weren’t hesitant about online meetings anymore, and this will

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We had to get used to online meetings. That big obstacle turned out to be just a little one in the end.

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remain so after COVID-19. We were also used to providing physical workshops for researchers. We started doing this digitally and we're now skilled enough to do it well. We also converted our summer school for lecturers into a webinar and that went well.

Digitally, a lot was possible for the homeworkers. For example, a group of staff members kept the digital library running from home so that students and researchers could access the material they needed. Peter Fokkens: “Many colleagues were working at home to unlock the digital works. We also have a team that supports research output validation. All UG research should be included in a database, the so-called Pure system. We also had colleagues working on this at home.

From mid-March, Team Leader Communications Babette Knauer and her team had to make every effort to ensure that communication about the UB during COVID-19 ran smoothly. “Immediately after Rutte's first press conference, we prepared information about the impact on the services of the UB. On Thursday evening before the lockdown, we sat down online with the whole team until ten thirty at night to prepare all our internal and external communication: emails, news articles for the website, social media posts, posters, messages on narrowcasting. We communicate bilingually as standard. Together with the UG's central communications department, we coordi-

nated the communication terms so that there could be no ambiguity. This continued throughout the following weekend, because things changed all the time.”

The following weeks, Knauer and her colleagues were busy drawing up FAQs and kept up with the questions on social media. Knauer: “In addition to COVID-19-related communication, communication about the (digital) services of the UB continued as usual. For example, webinars were organized instead of workshops and these had to be brought to the attention. People really liked the fact that the services of the UB continued; we received compliments for that.” Over time, the Communications Team made sure that colleagues who continued to work physically at the UB were put in the spotlight by having them photographed. “This is how we showed the personal side of the UB.”

From the beginning of the crisis, Knauer also thought about how she would organize the online activities of the UB after the summer. “For example, how were we to ensure that the open research event in October was attractive online for participants? Such an event always includes a networking section. Those conversations over coffee are just as important as the event itself.”

Looking back, she is satisfied with how her team stayed connected and she liked the way she could cooperate with the UB’s crisis team. “It’s extraordinary and admirable to

see how flexibly everyone has responded to the situation. I found it difficult sometimes to do my job from home. It's just better to be on site to see for example how a printed poster or a message on the monitors comes across."

The financial consequences of COVID-19 became visible soon after the lockdown in March. The hospitality industry was hit hard, as well as flex workers and self-employed workers, and companies were on the verge of collapsing. What would COVID-19 mean for the financial position of the UB? Marjolein Nieboer and Sietske Mulder examined the figures at an early stage. Nieboer: "If the UB receives a substantially lower intake of students from abroad, the large faculties in particular can expect a huge loss of income. This will have an impact on the budgets and possibly on the distribution of resources. In that respect, the UB is in a unique situation, because we are saving on costs." Mulder: "At the outset, we filled in the financial consequences for two scenarios. According to the first scenario, the library would remain closed until 1 September and in the second scenario until 1 February 2021. We thought the first scenario was the most likely, although we would save even more in the second scenario. These are, of course, savings against our will."

The largest expenses that dropped during the lockdown were personnel costs (around €125,000) and conference and training costs (around €25,000). Mulder: "We work

with a flexible set-up of student staff and external security guards at hours when our own staff members are not working or only work a little: in the evenings from ten to twelve and at weekends. We did not have to incur these costs until September. The starting point of the first scenario was that the UB would be open again from September onwards and that we would need that flexible set-up again."

The COVID-19 crisis also meant that UB had to incur higher costs in other areas, for example for cleaning and possible accommodation adjustments. Mulder: "We budgeted €60,000 for adapting the building to a one-and-a-half-metre society. Keeping the facilities in the building clean means having cleaners over more often, also to frequently clean computer screens and keyboards."

After reopening the UB, these costs will continue to weigh on the budget: as long as the virus persists, the situation in the UB will also differ from the situation before COVID-19.

Entrance
only

6.

The tipping point

While the limited closure set-up became ingrained in the UB, and home-based UB staff members slowly got used to the limitations and in some cases blessings of online meetings, skyping, the kitchen table and jogging trousers, the COVID-19 pandemic reached its peak at the beginning of April. Noord-Brabant and Limburg were hit particularly hard. The northern part of the Netherlands turned out to be largely unaffected: nowhere else were there so few infections as in Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe.

At its peak, there were more than 4,000 COVID-19 patients in hospitals in the Netherlands, more than 1,300 of whom were in intensive care. By way of comparison, the number of people in intensive care (ICU) with non-coronavirus conditions was around 350. To relieve the burden on ICUs in the south of the country, COVID-19 patients were taken by ambulance to hospitals in other parts of the country, including the UMCG, and even to Germany. From the start of the lockdown, *'flatten the*

curve' became a winged slogan: everything was about muffling and spreading the outbreak to avoid a shortage of intensive care beds. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the ICU capacity in the Netherlands was 1150 beds, but it was hastily expanded to 2400, of which 1900 were for COVID-19 patients.

On 21 April, NOS reported the first major fall in the number of ICU patients. We seemed to have passed the peak of the pandemic in the Netherlands. People began to long for the end of the lockdown. The walls were starting to come down on them, and the beautiful weather urged them to go outside.

Entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry and cultural sector were eager to reopen their doors. Despite economic growth in the first two and a half months of 2020, the lockdown caused the economy to shrink by 1.7% in the first quarter compared to the first quarter of 2019. The number of applications for assistance increased by 56% in March compared to February.

The number of vacancies made the biggest dip ever: at the end of March there were 21% fewer vacancies than at the end of 2019.

Prime Minister Rutte announced in his press conference of 21 April the first, careful, easing of the lockdown. As of 28 April, children up to the age of twelve were allowed to go to their sports club again to train, competitions were out of the question for the time being. The same applied to young people up to eighteen years old, provided they kept the one-and-a-half-metre distance. On 11 May, primary schools and childcare reopened.

Two weeks later, on 6 May, Prime Minister Rutte presented his roadmap to the old normal. In four phases – on 11 May, 1 June, 1 July and 1 September – the Netherlands would be carefully led out of the lockdown. The first step included that anyone with an outgrown lockdown haircut could – only by appointment – go to their hairdresser again. Other ‘contact professions’, such as masseurs and physiotherapists, could also get back to work. One sentence by Rutte, spoken almost casually, came as a surprise to everyone at the UB: “And as of 11 May, libraries can also be reopened, adhering to the one-and-a-half-metre agreement.”

Out of lockdown

Open, what do you mean open? That was pretty much what Facility Manager Albert van der Kloet thought, following Prime Minister Rutte's announcement. "They can say that libraries can reopen, and the UB is of course a library, but I see the UB more as a study factory", he said the day after Rutte's press conference. "We have 2,100 study places that are filled every day to a large extent by people who are only studying. During very busy periods, the entire building is fully occupied from early in the morning until late at night. You can compare our library to people sitting together in cinemas, it's not a public library in the countryside."

Stephan van Galen, General Manager of the Office of the University, was also surprised to hear Rutte's words. His thoughts: "We also have a library. I called the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. I've been working in this sector for 25 years and I've worked in The Hague for thirteen years; you know who to talk to. I said that as a university we also have libraries and asked if they could be

reopened. The answer: 'oh, we haven't thought about that'. The ministry had forgotten for a moment that there are university libraries too, which are larger than the average library. That same evening, the ministry said that reopening libraries also applied to university libraries."

Van Galen didn't just call his contact person at the Ministry. The evening after Rutte's announcement, he called director Marjolein Nieboer. "I called her at about nine o'clock, she was walking outside, and I said 'Marjolein, the libraries are reopening'. I can still hear her say 'but not the UBs'. No, not just the public libraries, I said."

Normally, universities would have been informed of Rutte's announcement in his press conference. Van Galen: "The Ministry produces service documents in which they already made a practical translation of the measures announced by the Cabinet during the press conference. In the case of the libraries, this would normally have been submitted to the Association of Universities in the Nether-

lands (VSNU). The Ministry hadn't thought of the universities, however."

In fact, it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. After initial confusion, Rutte's sudden communication was accepted for what it was. In an email to the UB staff members, the Management Team emphatically stated that there was no obligation to reopen: 'We will take a little more time. After all, we do not want to restart our services until we have been able to take sufficient precautions. One step at a time, responsibly and under our own direction; that is our motto. The health of our staff and our clients comes first.'

Even before Rutte's press conference, the UB had plans to reopen the Special Collections research room to the public on 18 May. "In May it became possible to reopen the natural sciences laboratories on the Zernike campus" says Van Galen. "At that time, we designated the Special Collections research room as a laboratory for the humanities, which was nice for humanities scholars, because research in the Special Collections can only be done from home to a limited extent."

Rienk Withaar, Head of Special Collections, remembers that the way was pretty much paved for his department. "The UB's crisis team played a central role in reopening the research room. When we were told on a Friday evening, more than a week in advance, that we would be

reopening, we immediately started thinking about all sorts of things that needed to be organized. I thought; we really do need a week, because it's quite tough to organize it all. On Monday 11 May, the entire department came to work, and Albert van der Kloet gave us an update. It turned out in the first half hour that 80% of all the questions we had, had already been sorted out and resolved by him a long time ago. He had, so to speak, already numbered all the tables and told us which lines we had to follow in order to have as many people next to each other as possible. At that time, it was mainly a question of how we would deal with the schedule."

What Withaar saw as solutions, Ina Vrolijk, chair of the UB Employee Council, saw above all as a *fait accompli*. "At seven o'clock on Friday evening, 8 May, an email was sent to all colleagues informing them of the intended reopening of the Special Collections room on 18 May," she says. "I received this email in draft form on Friday afternoon at half past three. It was actually already decided then. And I'm thinking; employee participation? It's more like communicating the facts afterwards. That also applied to reopening the other rooms. We were informed, but the decision had usually already been taken. By the way, Vrolijk does think that the Management Team acted carefully. "We did not hear from colleagues that odd things

were happening. If that did happen, the Employee Council would obviously have been on top of things."

A day before Vrolijk found the message about the Special Collections research room in her mailbox, Van der Kloet was already able to explain the procedure for visitors. "A visitor must first make a reservation. After receiving a reservation confirmation, they can report to the service desk at the entrance to the UB. Because the rest of the building is empty, someone from the Internal Service will walk along with the visitor, after that person has their hands. They can then enter the room and are assigned a place to work. When the visitor is ready, the reverse applies: they first have to go to the bathroom to wash their hands, after which they are escorted out of the building."

Plexiglas sneeze guards were placed near the service desk in the research room and, in the words of Withaar, pumps with disinfection gel and alcohol wipes could be found "everywhere". Alcohol wipes were also placed near the safe, which contained precious works, to disinfect the keys and latches after use. Staff members arriving for their shift would find a computer without a mouse and keyboard. In order to rule out the risk of infection, each team member was given their own keyboard and mouse. Seven of the fifteen workstations remained available, and only for UG researchers. These workstations were cleaned by a cleaner after use. As with the loan of books, the consulted

works were quarantined for five days before being returned to the closed stacks.

All requests for Special Collections via the catalogue were blocked. Visitors had to use an online request form to indicate their visit and which works they wanted to consult. “We sent an email to that particular person that the works are ready to be picked up, including the pick-up time. The entrance to Special Collections is a fairly narrow corridor where it is difficult to maintain the one-and-a-half-metre distance, so we scheduled visitors at ten-minute intervals. We schedule them at a specific time, and they’re supposed to show up at that time. The books for those people are then already waiting for them in a bin. If the visitors are not ready referencing the books by the end of the morning, they can make an appointment for the next morning at the service desk.”

Withaar wasn’t nervous at all when he biked back to work on 18 May for the first time in more than two months. “I wasn’t worried at all about how things would go. Above all, it was going to be a fun day. On top of that, Hans Biemans from the Board of the University happened to visit the UB on that day. That visit was primarily aimed at encouraging the closed stacks staff members who would go to work every day while the rest of the Netherlands was at home. Because the Board had indicated how important they thought it was that our room would reopen, we were

pleased that there were indeed reservations from visitors. We took a photo of the very first visitor.”

That first week – during Ascension Day – the Special Collections room was open on Monday and Wednesday morning. And the working hours were in line with those of the closed stacks staff members. “We would have Tuesday morning to adjust things if necessary,” says Withaar. “We didn’t exactly have an idea of the possible risks in practice, we only knew we had to work safely. We were curious to see what we had overlooked. But that wasn’t the case at all. Everything went well.”

After three visitors on the first day, another three visitors followed two days later. In the weeks and months that followed, the daily visitor numbers continued to be around three. Just like before the COVID-19 crisis in fact, when, according to Withaar, there were usually around three people working in the reading room every day. *Business as usual?* Not quite. “Normally, people also walk into our reading room to briefly check reference materials, without sitting down”, says Withaar. “We don’t have those kinds of visitors now. Instead of fifteen workplaces we now have seven, but in the past those places had never been occupied at the same time. We therefore drastically reduced capacity, but that has little impact on the capacity we need.”

Although: Withaar likes to make plans to get more students to come to the reading room to familiarize them

with the collection. “After all, we have an outreach agenda as a department. The more people come over, the better. There’s no point in sitting on your Special Collections and hiding them from the outside world. In that sense, it’s a pity that corona throws a spanner in the works. We can’t host lecture groups or supervise trainees right now.”

Although the reopening of the Special Collections research room didn’t really affect the number of visitors, it was symbolically and practically an important test case. Nieboer: “With the opening of Special Collections, we developed the protocol that would also be used for opening the

Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties and the Centre for Russian Studies, both of which are located in the UB.

Last but not least, despite the restrictions, the turnaround was a fact. The name change of the UB’s crisis team was significant, which was now called the Taskforce UB Open, abbreviated to TUBO. “That changed our approach right away,” says Nieboer. “The lockdown and limited service feeling turned into; it’s important to open up our reading rooms to students again.

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There's no point in hiding your Special Collections from the outside world. The more people come over, the better. In that sense it's a pity that COVID-19 throws a spanner in the works.

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8.

Getting ready

On 18 May, the day of the reopening of the Special Collections room, the university newspaper *Ukrant* filmed a video of Facility Manager Albert van der Kloet. With a tape measure and construction drawings in his hand, he walked through the UB. In the computer room he concluded that of a table with four workplaces – two opposite each other – only one could remain if one and a half metre had to be observed. With a blueprint of the fourth floor of the UB spread out on the table, he explained that 45 of the 207 study places could be used after reopening. This would amount to 450 study places for the entire building, 420 of which would be in the reading rooms and there would be 30 study booths available, just over a fifth of the 2,100 available in the *precovidium*. Jokingly, he spoke of a ‘UG diploma, a traffic diploma for walking routes in buildings’ when explaining which traffic flows to and from the reading rooms and toilets would have to be kept apart by tape and, if necessary, traffic lights. When, in his opinion, could the UB be reopened to the new max-

imum number of visitors? At the earliest with effect from the new academic year, he estimated.

A complicating factor in maximizing the number of study places under the one-and-a-half-metre measurement regime was that it was very tough to move the furniture. “With the 2017 renovation, the furniture was drawn in by the architect and all electrical connections were tinkered into the tables,” says Klaran Visscher. “This means that you can’t just move tables and place them one and a half metre apart. If we did want that, it would have involved a major renovation, but at the time we didn’t know for how long it would last. So we didn’t.”

As part of the Taskforce UB Open (TUBO), the so-called APK group – named after the initials of the members Albert van der Kloet, Peter Fokkens and Klaran Visscher – drew up scenarios from mid-May onwards to scale up access to the UB: which (reading) rooms would follow Special Collections, how many students would be admit-

university of
 groningen

Welkom / Welcome

Wij hanteren de onderstaande richtlijnen om de verspreiding van het coronavirus tegen te gaan.
The most important measures we take to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

We houden 1.5 meter
 afstand
 *We keep 1.5 meter
 distance*

We niezen of hoesten in
 onze elleboog
 *Cough and sneeze into
 your elbow*

We volgen de looproute
 *We use the walking
 route*

We schudden geen
 handen
 We do not shake hands

We hanteren een
 handhygiëne protocol
 *Wash your hands with
 soap regularly*

Spreek elkaar aan op
 de richtlijnen
 *Make each other aware
 of the rules*

www.rug.nl/corona

ted during the various steps, and at what pace should the steps be taken?

For students, it couldn't happen fast enough. Some Student Organisation Groningen (SOG) members brought this to the attention on 6 June by sitting down to study demonstratively on Broerplein. They obviously sat at an appropriate one-and-a-half-metre distance from each other. Another important detail: the elections for the student representation of the University Council and the Faculty Boards would take place a week after the protest.

"We do know that this is all very difficult and that a lot of people are working behind the scenes, but we think that the UB should be reopened," said SOG member Marieke Klijnsma a few days after the protest. "We wanted to create visibility for the problems many students are experiencing. We hear from a lot of students that they find it very difficult to do everything at home during exams. The protest was not really meant as an actual protest, but more as a compassionate protest."

The symbolism was clear: Students became so desperate that they studied sitting in front of the UB. *Lijst Calimero*, another student group in the University Council, had already made it clear that the need among the students was high, especially for computer workstations.

The prayers – and protests – of the students were answered quicker than suspected: on 10 June, the com-

puter room on the first floor was reopened. Van der Kloet's inexorable tape measure had determined that of the 150 PCs, 42 could be used. With the remaining workstations, 92 people could use the computer room.

Preparations for the opening of the computer room had already started before the SOG protest. Yet the protest was not an overdue statement, according to Nieboer: "That protest really made the people in the organisation realize that we now had to hurry up. We did that in full."

After all, not only the students, but also the Board of University felt that scaling up should be speeded up. "The pace at which the various forms of our services would become available again was somewhat generous on the part of the APK group," says Nieboer. "According to their schedule, we would be back to maximum capacity on 1 September. When we met with the Board of the University at Google Hangout on 2 July for our biannual Administrative Meeting, they told us to 'speed it up, this is going too slow for us'. Peter Fokkens adjusted the schedule so that within three weeks, on 22 July, we would already have a maximum capacity of 420 study places available in our reading rooms. Albert van der Kloet ordered materials very quickly to tape the signage to the floor, determined the walking routes and taped off the chairs and workstations that could not be used."

On 22 June, the first 30 students came back to study at the UB. The big question was: which students would be admitted? The Board asked for a widely supported choice, this took some time. “Together with the student representation in the University Council, the student assessors and the student advisors, we talked a lot about whether there were specific target groups that should be given priority,” says Nieboer. At the urgent request of the student representation, it was decided not to apply a priority policy for the reading rooms, except for the 30 one-person study booths that were used for special target groups. Nieboer: “The student advisors supervise students who, for example, have concentration problems or do not have good technical facilities at home. The student advisors drew up a list of these students, 30 people in total. I can tell you that they were very happy when we approached them. They were the very first to be allowed to study at the UB again. This was done on a low-key basis, as a pilot project, to see whether they would adhere to the guidelines and whether we could arrange this properly logistically. That went well. I welcomed them and gave them energy bars to get them going.”

One week later, on 29 June, the first reading room was also opened to other students. “We started with 30 study places on the first floor and two half-day sessions,” says Visscher. The fact that the Board wanted to be at the max-

imum capacity much faster than the APK group had initially thought did not lead to panic. “We figured that if the Board wants that from us, we will implement it. We then took our original schedule as a basis, accelerated it and implemented it in larger steps. Instead of once a week, we scaled up on Monday and also on Wednesday afternoon. This brought us to maximum capacity on 22 July. That went very well. The reservation system worked well, and students were very willing to abide by the rules.”

Per step, an additional 30 students were allowed to study per floor. The first three ‘upscaling days’ were opened up to 30 students each time, on each of the first three floors. After ten days, 30 extra students were admitted on all three floors, and again after two weeks, with the first floor already reaching its maximum capacity. On 15 July, the fourth floor was also opened and one week later the last 30 places on the second, third and fourth floors were granted. This reached the maximum ‘corona capacity’ of 450 study places. Of these – the 30 studios – remained reserved for students appointed by the UG’s Joint Meeting of Study Advisors.

Meanwhile, the Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties opened on 6 July, followed on the 29th by the Centre for Russian Studies. “DNPP and CRS came up with the request to reopen, responding to requests from their own users and visitors”, says Visscher. “For both rooms,

we drew up a protocol and a roadmap, which we presented to the UG’s Task Force Business Operations for a green light.

As of the new academic year, the UB had reopened again until ten o’clock in the evening. This meant that the UB was operating at full strength again, insofar as this was possible within the one-and-a-half-metre measures.

Reservations for the 420 regular study places were made on a first-come, first-served basis. “The availability of the four-hour parts of the day are made available exactly one week in advance,” says Nieboer. “Initially, students could reserve one part of the day per week, but that was scaled up quickly. During the holiday period, people were able to book unlimited parts of the day for about six weeks. But since the beginning of the academic year, the number of people has increased, resulting in a maximum of four half-day sessions per person per week. In the 420 places we were able to offer we already had a *full house* by mid-September.” The 30 study booths for students with an indication via study advisors were also in full use.

LibCal was set up as a reservation system for the study places. “We were already using this system at the university for signing up for workshops and the like”, says the library’s IT developer Willem Struiksma. “It could be deployed fairly quickly, and it met the need. For each study area, parts of the day are created as workshops with

a maximum number of participants. The students register with a registration form, for which a UG email address is required. They will then receive a confirmation that they have to show at the library's service desk, before they're allowed to enter. All faculties have been using LibCal since the summer to reserve study places.

Banners with a number of 'seats left' drew attention to study areas where workplaces were still available for a certain part of the day. The reservation system worked fine, but there was a problem: when exchanging half-days, queues arose at the five service desks at the entrance to the UB. Struiksma worked with his colleague Dorine Kieft on the implementation of a new LibCal module. "This new module allows people to check in via a QR code. Every study place gets its own number and QR code so students can reserve a particular spot. The idea is to speed up the check-in at the gate so that less time is needed to let people in. Starting 1 October, we will be participating in a pilot on the fourth floor. The idea is to let go of the four-hour blocks and offer more flexibility for reserving a study place. Right now, people reserve a block of four hours, but they may have a lecture or an exam halfway through. In that case, a study place is not fully used."

During the closure, several student organisations were allowed to scream blue murder about the great need of students to study at the UB, in practice it didn't seem so

bad. Since the reopening of the reading rooms, a remarkable trend emerged during the summer: around 20% of the students who had made a reservation did not show up. "This is far too high for a facility that is so scarce," says Klaran Visscher. "Especially when the exam period starts again. Certainly at that time, there are students who would have liked to come, but couldn't because it was already full. We are still figuring out how to deal with that."

Despite the high proportion of *no shows*, the UB would still offer four-hour study shifts with 30-minute intervals for the time being. Upon arrival, students disinfected their hands and reported to the service desk, where they showed their reservation and were subjected to triage. They then proceeded to their study place following a marked walking route, keeping a distance of one and a half metre at all times. Van der Kloet's comparison of the UB with a 'study factory' turned out to be more striking than ever.

9.

Working from home after COVID-19

After months of working from home, many people were looking forward to going back to the office. This also applied to the UB staff members. Since the beginning of September, they would slowly return to the UB. How did they like working from home? And did people really want to go back to the situation before the coronavirus appeared? At the end of June, all UG staff members were invited to take part in a survey on working from home. A number of UB staff members also filled in the questions.

In short, the survey showed the following: not all UG staff members were enthusiastic about their work situation at home: no less than 65 percent were less enthusiastic about working at home than about working in the office. This was often due to the lack of a good workplace. Many employees also found online meetings tiring and missed informal, mutual contact. Staff members with school-age children had a particularly hard time, especially in the beginning, when they had to teach their children in combination with their own work.

Despite these negative experiences, many employees were happy to continue working partly from home in the future. Some 65% wanted to make a habit of this. However, it was important to better organize the home workplace, including a good chair and solid IT facilities. Working entirely from home was not an option for anyone, especially as they felt it was important to meet colleagues again during work meetings or simply over coffee. According to UG staff members, there were also positive aspects to working from home: less travel time, more time for family and sports, flexible working hours, a quiet environment and short, better structured meetings.

Before the summer, the library had already talked about a combination of working from home and working at the office. In the spring, Klaran Visscher was already looking forward to the discussions about working from home in the future. “I’m curious how it will go when more and more people come back to the office,” she said back then. “What will the new reality bring? Can we combine the achievements of working from home with being in the office?”

The guideline ‘keep working from home if you can, and only come to the UB if you have to’ was paramount during the months of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a manager, she actively promoted that standard. “We are now a few steps ahead,” she continued in the course of September. “It has become clear that social cohesion is also an important factor for our working community. That’s why we encourage colleagues to come to the UB for a day or two if they want to increase their social contacts. We also need more people at the UB, because our services to students and staff have been expanded step by step.”

Visscher soon realized that colleagues appreciated being able to come back to the UB from time to time. “Sometimes they were a bit apprehensive about whether it would be safe. As soon as they see how we adopted the measures to ensure sufficient space to keep a safe distance, they will be very happy to be back at the workplace from time to time I’m sure. Fortunately, we’ve already seen more faces at work since then.”

Of course, staff members were not allowed to just drop in. Before they were allowed to enter the building, they had to fill in the compulsory attendance registration of the UG in advance. Visscher: “It goes without saying that everyone must comply with all preventive measures, such as washing hands, keeping a distance and the like.”

During the summer, Marjolein Nieboer expected the reopening of the buildings and the offices to take place gradually. Looking ahead to reopening, she said: “We are considering a 50% spread of staff members at the various locations and 50% at home in due course. It will then be up to the managers to organize this well. Perhaps colleagues who belong to a higher risk group will continue to work more from home after all. Each unit will make its own plans for this, and so will we. I do expect, however, that it will go one step at a time and that we should be able to switch back if it becomes apparent that this is necessary in connection with the spread of the virus.”

Shortly after the opening of the new Academic Year, she sent an email to all UB staff members to thank them for their efforts during the corona crisis and to inform them about the new state of affairs. She stressed that working from home would remain the norm for the time being, in line with RIVM’s advice. In the meantime, however, the library’s working environment was corona-proof, provided everyone adhered to the guidelines. In her email, Nieboer wrote: “As MT, we recognize that an important part of job satisfaction and your bond with the work benefits from meeting each other – not online, but physically. We would like to facilitate this. So, if you want to come to the UB for an appointment or a job that needs concentration or if you need to work

with your team and catch up with your colleagues in the coffee room – you’re welcome to do so!

Rienk Withaar and Ane van der Leij were present at the UB more often after the summer holidays. Van der Leij: “The main reason for that was that I was in the middle of the annual round of results and development interview at the time and I prefer to do these in person, not online. There were also other discussions or meetings in which you prefer to look each other in the eye. In these cases, meeting with your colleagues simply works better. I discovered that I had missed my colleagues, even though I still like working from home. I decided I will be back at the UB from time to time in the near future.

Withaar expected it would take quite a while before everyone could get back to work in the office. And he was fine with that. ‘Hang in there and keep going’ has always been our message. We have shown that working from home is going well. Many colleagues tell me that they can concentrate better at home and work out texts more quickly. The use of online meeting techniques also makes it easy to get a hold of each other. What working at home alone does not offer is solidarity between colleagues, the possibility of quickly discussing something with someone, and accidental contact moments that can be very beneficial for work. That’s why I expect a hybrid approach to our business, also after COVID-19.”

Babette Knauer also liked working from home. “When it was very busy at the UB, you could go to a so-called cockpit, but at home you can really work quietly. However, I do miss the short lines of communication, the interaction with colleagues and, above all, the fun dynamics at the office with the team. A combination of working from home and at the UB would be ideal for me.” Ryanka Hazekamp also enjoyed working from home. “I would like to continue to work from home in part in the future, fifty-fifty for example. Now that the children are back in school, I like working from home. I can focus well and it’s easier to combine home and private life. However, my work is still mainly ‘people work’ and I prefer to look colleagues in the eye, without a computer screen in between.”

Working at home with her children at the kitchen table was quite tough, was Sietske Mulder’s experience, but when the schools reopened, things immediately went a lot better. “I think I would like to continue working at home for part of my work in the future. It gives me peace and quiet and it is possible. We all experienced that. I wouldn’t want to work at home all week, because I would miss the interaction with my colleagues. It’s nice to be able to walk up to someone to discuss work, I’m looking forward to that.” After the summer holidays, she only worked at home for one day a week. “I enjoyed seeing my colleagues and talking to them again at the office.

According to Klaran Visscher, it was too early in September for a well-founded HR policy on working from home. Her idea was to get through the second wave first. A combination of working from home and at the office seemed like a good idea to her: “There is a great need and willingness to work towards a hybrid model. I’m confident that we’ll come out stronger, and that we’re going to have a lasting new reality for working as professionals at the UB.”

Not everyone was physically working at the UB at the time, according to Nieboer’s email. “Within the one-and-a-half-metre capacities available it is possible that everyone can work at the office from time to time so we will have the chance to see each other more often. We think we will all benefit from using these capacities available in our building.. We do understand that some colleagues may have mixed feelings about that.” Colleagues who were worried about this could contact their supervisor or HR advisor Ryanka Hazekamp.

As far as working from home in the future is concerned, the COVID-19 pandemic changed some minds. As Ane van der Leij put it: “Working from home can stay as far as I’m concerned, it has become a new reality”. Klaran Visscher saw this trend coming before the summer holidays: “The perception of the working environment has changed, and we have to let that spirit out. I think this is a positive development.

Epilogue

While everyone at the UB breathed a sigh of relief at the return of life between the bookcases, and students willingly submitted to the new discipline, the number of COVID-19 cases in parts of the Netherlands, including student cities, began to rise dangerously in September. In Groningen, thirteen members of student association Navigators and fifteen members of student association Vindicat were found infected mid-September. With effect from 25 September, all students working at UMCG were required to wear a surgical mask. Almost two-thirds of the forty coronavirus infections discovered among staff since 1 August could be traced back to students.

On 27 September, eight security regions, including Groningen, were subject to additional corona measures. These were overtaken a day later by a press conference by Prime Minister Rutte and Minister of Health De Jonge. As of 29 September, the maximum size of groups that could come together at home, in the open air and in catering businesses was limited. Sports competitions, both professional and ama-

teur, were only allowed to take place without an audience. Contact professions such as hairdressers were required to keep a record of customers in order to facilitate any contact investigation in the event of infection.

It turned out to be an effective measure: almost 10% of the traceable infections could be traced back to the workplace. Rutte warned us that in the event of ‘serious contamination in the workplace’, that workplace could be closed for a fortnight. The new national measures would first apply for three weeks. A dark cloud was looming; according to Minister De Jonge, a new (partial) lockdown was imminent if the measures did not work sufficiently or were not properly implemented.

And so the invitation sent out by the Management Team mid-September to come to the office from time to time to maintain contact with colleagues quickly became obsolete. The UB staff received a new email from the Management Team on 2 October, announcing that working from home remained the norm, but: ‘Exceptions to this rule are possible

because we think it's important that colleagues can meet each other one day a week at the office'. The Management Team also took over the urgent advice from the Cabinet to wear a face mask in public spaces. 'That's why we choose to, as of today, have all UB staff members wear a face mask when they move around in the public space of the building (behind the service desk, reading rooms, stairwell). We also urgently advise to wear a face mask in the office environment (stairwell, to/in the coffee room, in the corridor) when moving around. You don't have to wear a face mask in your own workplace'. Incidentally, the face masks, with the inscription 'University of Groningen Library – where the Shhh happens', had already been ordered.

"We follow the news closely," says Nieboer. "Especially when it comes to student groups in Groningen, because these are also students who come or have come to the UB. We keep in mind that we may have to scale down again. We already have the schedules for scaling up, we can use these to start scaling down again if necessary. The first thing we would stop would be the capacity in the reading rooms. In a worst-case scenario, the reading rooms will be closed again. We would like to keep the Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties and the Centre for Russian Studies, Special Collections and the self-service area open the longest in such a scenario."

It seemed that the centres of infection in town had not yet moved to the UB for now. "We have not yet been approached for contact research by the GGD (Municipal Health Service) or the Health, Safety and Environment Service," says Nieboer. "You would have expected that, but it hasn't been an issue. We are now in a steady state. As long as it goes the way it goes, we are going steady."

Groningen, 29 September 2020

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p. 73: Communications Team UB

Social distance 1,5m