

University of Liège

Digitization in the Age of Social Distancing: The University of Liège



When the library began providing unprecedented digital-based access to its prized print collections, little did it know how critical that service would become.

“Students and faculty members told us we saved their study year, research paper or dissertation with our digitization service.”

François Renaville, Head of Library Systems, University of Liège.



About University of Liège

The University of Liège, or ULiège, is a major public university based in Liège, Wallonia, Belgium. The university, with four campuses in three cities, has 11 academic departments and 25,000 students. There are 5,500 employees at ULiège, including 1,450 academic staff and 3,000 researchers.

The ULiège library operates in 15 locations and has 105 staff members. Strongly involved in promoting information literacy and open access, the library offers access to more than 700,000 ebooks and 83,000 electronic periodicals. In addition, library holdings include 6,500 manuscripts among approximately 1.5 million print resources. The ULiège library has been an IGeLU (International Group of Ex Libris Users) member since 2009 and an Alma user since 2015.

Overcoming Traditional Limitations

The ULiège library had a scan-on-demand service, in order to meet the need for digitized versions of certain print resources. However, the service was limited to some faculty members and was only available in a few of the library's branches across the ULiège campuses.

Resources from the university's older print collections could not leave the reading room, for example, which limited their exposure and posed a challenge for patrons. In order to provide better service to both patrons and faculty, the ULiège library needed to find new ways to exploit such collections that would overcome traditional physical limitations.

A Workflow for Expanding Digitization

The ULiège library was already familiar with the streamlined and comprehensive workflows of Alma and Primo. Therefore, when the need arose to maximize fulfillment capabilities, it was an obvious step to expand the use of Alma to include digital resources. In 2016, ULiège initiated a six-month Alma pilot program providing greater digitization services and digital resources to university faculty.

The results - as measured using Alma analytics, satisfaction surveys, and discussions with library staff - were very positive. A post-pilot report recommended providing the same digitization options to students. As a result, digital resources management and services were fully integrated into the university library's ecosystem, with all students given access by September 2018.

During the implementation of the digitization services, Ex Libris provided ULiège with close support and guidance. “We enjoyed an excellent relationship with the support team and the documentation was really helpful,” said François Renaville, Head of Library Systems. “They ensured a successful implementation.” The new service that ULiège library implemented is free of charge for the entire university community, including faculty, staff, and students. Digitization requests by library patrons are usually fulfilled within 24 hours by Circulation Desk operators and managers; and no additional staff has been hired since the service was launched.

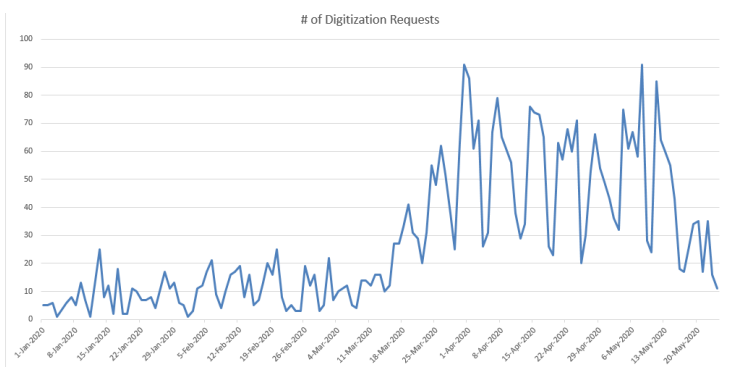
Any item that is eligible for loan and items from the rare book collection can be digitized. In the case of digitization requests for sections of rare books, Digitization Service staff uses specially designated scanners and usually digitizes the whole work, in order to store the file in the library's special collections digital archive.

Greater Access When It Counts Most

ULiège library staff has expressed great satisfaction from the feedback they are receiving from patrons for quickly providing digital copies of sought-after resources. As a result of the expansion of library services to include digitization and digital resource management, librarians across ULiège have also learned new skills. With improved professional capabilities, they have taken on new roles and responsibilities at the university. As an organization, the ULiège library is providing an important, essential service to all members of the academic community, demonstrating its increased value to the university.

“Moreover, certain older print collections and manuscripts that were once limited to reading room use only are now accessible remotely in [DONum](#), increasing the exposure of prestigious or valuable library collections,” said Stéphanie Simon, Head of Digitization Service, noting that DONum is also available as a CDI collection. The cost-effectiveness of the Ex Libris solution has made it a benefit for university students, as well, as the service can be provided at no direct cost to the end user.

In addition to wider access to more resources, patrons have expressed satisfaction with the responsiveness of the ULiège library to digitization requests, with fulfillment generally taking no more than 24 hours. Students have also noted the convenience of being able to read an assigned article or book chapter without having to physically go to the relevant library branch.



The latter benefit became particularly central during the COVID-19 crisis. Due to COVID-19, library branches were closed by mid-March 2020, and all loan and return activities were suspended. Only interlibrary loan (ILL) and digitization request services remained active. General loan and return services only restarted on May 18.

The ULiège library received many more digitization requests than before the crisis hit

From 1 January until mid-May 2020, the library received a total of 3,936 digitization requests. The vast majority of them, more than 3,000, were submitted starting around March 20, with about 51 requests each day, weekends included. During the COVID-19 period, many students and faculty members began using digitization services and digital resources far more extensively and in ways they never did before.

The library's efforts were widely recognized. “We received many notes of thanks from students and faculty members who told us that we had saved their study year, research paper or dissertation with our digitization service,” according to Paul Thirion, Chief Librarian, and Fabienne Prosmans, Fulfillment Coordinator. “When we launched the pilot phase in 2016, we received a lot of positive feedback from the faculty. But with the COVID-19 crisis, that positive feedback has increased. Our digitization service was like a fallback solution for many patrons. With our experience, we were able to go through the crisis and to reduce its adverse impact.”

About Ex Libris

Ex Libris, a ProQuest company, is a leading global provider of cloud-based SaaS solutions that enable institutions and their users to create, manage, and share knowledge. In close collaboration with its customers and the broader community, Ex Libris develops solutions that increase library productivity, maximize the impact of research activities, enhance teaching and learning, and drive student mobile engagement. Ex Libris serves over 7,500 customers in 90 countries. For more information, see our [website](#) and join us on [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#).

