

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines the contributions of academic libraries to human development and knowledge acquisition, with particular attention to their roles in supporting lifelong learning, information literacy, educational equity, digital transformation, and community engagement within higher education. The review followed a modified PRISMA 2020 framework to identify, screen, and select relevant peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual studies published between 2021 and 2025. Studies were retrieved from databases including SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, IFLA Journal, and Information Development. Following the application of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, ten studies were included for thematic synthesis. The analysis revealed five major themes: academic libraries as agents of lifelong learning and educational equity; library support for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a human development framework; the role of information literacy in enabling knowledge acquisition and higher-order cognitive development; the impact of digital transformation and learning analytics on library-supported student success; and community engagement as a mechanism for extending library-enabled human development beyond formal academic boundaries. The findings indicate that academic libraries contribute significantly to capability development, equitable access to knowledge, and civic participation. This review synthesises recent evidence on the relationship between academic libraries, human development, and knowledge acquisition. It highlights the evolving role of academic libraries as multidimensional institutions that support not only information access but also human capability enhancement, social inclusion, and sustainable development.

Keyword: academic libraries, human development, knowledge acquisition, information literacy, sustainable development goals, capability approach

Introduction

Academic libraries are central to the knowledge and educational infrastructure of higher education institutions. Over the past two decades, they have evolved from traditional repositories of books and journals into dynamic institutions that support teaching, learning, research, and community engagement across both physical and digital environments. In addition to providing access to information resources, academic libraries facilitate the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge, thereby contributing to individual and societal development.

Human development, as conceptualised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the capability approach advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, refers to the expansion of people's capabilities, freedoms, and opportunities to achieve well-being. It includes cognitive growth, civic participation, cultural expression, informed decision-making, and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2021). Through their commitment to information access, intellectual freedom, and educational inclusion, academic libraries are well positioned to support these dimensions of human development.

Although the contributions of academic libraries to teaching, research, and student learning are widely acknowledged, their broader role in advancing human development remains insufficiently synthesised within the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature. Existing studies have largely examined specific aspects of library services, such as information literacy instruction, digital resource provision, student academic achievement, and research support. Similarly, recent scholarship has highlighted the contribution of libraries to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education and lifelong learning. However, there remains limited systematic evidence that integrates these diverse strands of research into a comprehensive understanding of how academic libraries contribute to human development and knowledge acquisition across different contexts and regions (Devi et al., 2024; Bangani, 2023).

This systematic review addresses this gap by synthesising peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual studies published between 2021 and 2025 to answer the following research questions:

- (1) In what ways do academic libraries contribute to human development and knowledge acquisition, as documented in the recent peer-reviewed literature?
- (2) What theoretical frameworks have been used to understand the library's role in human development?
- (3) What barriers and enablers shape the library's capacity to fulfil its human development mandate?
- (4) What are the implications for policy, practice, and future research?

The review makes three original contributions to the LIS literature. First, it synthesises evidence across thematic strands information literacy, SDG alignment, community engagement, digital transformation, and learning analytics into a unified human development framework. Second, it critically evaluates the theoretical bases for understanding the library-human development relationship, identifying both the strengths and limitations of existing conceptual frameworks. Third, it develops an evidence-based agenda for policy and practice that is applicable across diverse institutional contexts, including those of developing countries where academic library capacity is most constrained and human development need is most acute.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a systematic review design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review followed the core PRISMA procedures of identification, screening,

eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. The review is described as a modified PRISMA approach because, unlike clinical systematic reviews that often include meta-analysis, the present study adopted a qualitative thematic synthesis due to the conceptual and methodological diversity of the included literature. The modification therefore relates only to the method of evidence synthesis and not to the study identification and selection procedures.

A qualitative thematic synthesis approach was adopted because the included studies employed diverse research designs, contexts, and outcome measures, making statistical meta-analysis inappropriate. Thematic synthesis enabled the systematic identification, coding, and interpretation of recurring themes across studies to generate a comprehensive understanding of how academic libraries contribute to human development and knowledge acquisition.

Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, IFLA Journal, Information Development, and Google Scholar. While Google Scholar is not a conventional bibliographic database, it was included as a supplementary search source to identify potentially relevant studies, institutional reports, and grey literature that may not have been indexed in the selected databases. All records identified through Google Scholar were subjected to the same screening and eligibility criteria as records retrieved from the other databases.

Search terms included combinations of the following keywords: "academic library", "university library", "human development", "knowledge acquisition", "information literacy", "lifelong learning", "sustainable development goals", "community engagement", "student learning outcomes", "learning analytics", and "capability approach". Searches were limited to publications published between January 2021 and December 2025.

Studies were included if they: (1) focused on academic or university libraries as the primary subject; (2) addressed at least one dimension of human development, knowledge acquisition, or capability development; (3) were published in peer-reviewed journals or recognised institutional reports from organisations such as UNESCO or IFLA; and (4) were published in English between 2021 and 2025. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on public, school, or special libraries without relevance to academic library settings; lacked substantive analytical content; or were unavailable in full text.

The search process yielded forty-seven records. Following title and abstract screening, twenty-two studies were retained for full-text assessment. After the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria and quality appraisal procedures, ten studies met the eligibility requirements and were included in the final review. Although the number of included studies is relatively small, it reflects the limited body of recent literature that explicitly addresses the intersection of academic libraries, human development, and knowledge acquisition within the specified review period.

Quality Appraisal

To enhance methodological rigour, the included studies were subjected to quality appraisal using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. The appraisal considered the clarity of research aims, appropriateness of methodology, research design, data collection procedures, analytical rigour, validity of findings, and overall contribution to knowledge. Studies that failed to demonstrate minimum methodological quality were excluded from the final synthesis. The quality appraisal process strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the review findings.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data were extracted using a standardised template that captured author(s), year of publication, country or region, study design, participant or data characteristics, theoretical framework, key findings, and study limitations. The extracted data were analysed using thematic synthesis following the procedures outlined by Flemming and Noyes (2021): (1)

line-by-line coding of findings; (2) development of descriptive themes through the grouping of related codes; and (3) generation of analytical themes that synthesised findings across studies. This process resulted in five analytical themes that form the basis of the review findings.

Results and Findings

The ten studies included in this systematic review span four geographic regions, six publishing journals, and five methodological approaches. Table 1 provides a summary of the evidence base. Thematic synthesis yielded five analytical themes, presented below with supporting evidence from included studies.

Table 1: Summary of Studies Included in the Systematic Review

Study	Focus / Theme	Method	Region	Key Contribution
Bangani (2023)	Academic libraries, quality education, community engagement, and SDG 4	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	South Africa	Libraries promote lifelong learning and human development through community engagement
Bangani and Dube (2023)	Libraries and SDGs 2, 3, and 13: food security, health, and climate action	Qualitative interviews	South Africa	Libraries contribute to several dimensions of human development beyond formal education
Devi, Gupta, and Arahova (2024)	IFLA's role in mobilising libraries for the SDGs globally	Review and document analysis	Global	Libraries are vital actors in achieving the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda
Page et al. (2021)	PRISMA 2020 systematic review methodology	Methodological guideline	International	Provided the updated framework for reporting systematic reviews used in this study
Liu (2025)	Information literacy, critical thinking, and knowledge acquisition through library resources	Empirical study	International	Library resources enhance information processing, critical thinking, and knowledge acquisition skills

Rabelo, Teixeira, and Mendes (2024)	Student experience, academic development, and library services	Bibliometric analysis	International	Academic libraries play a central role in student learning, intellectual development, and future research directions
Masumbika and Ngulube (2025)	Learning analytics, personalised library services, and student success	Systematic review	International	Libraries use learning analytics to improve student outcomes and personalised support services
Bangani (2022)	Gender equality and library contribution in patriarchal societies	Qualitative study	South Africa	Libraries support SDG 5 by promoting gender equality and inclusive development
Adeyemi et al. (2024)	Green library practices and sustainability in Nigerian university libraries	Survey and mixed methods	Nigeria	Academic libraries support environmental sustainability and national development goals
UNESCO (2021)	Education, lifelong learning, and the social contract for education	Policy framework	Global	Establishes the role of knowledge institutions in promoting lifelong learning and human flourishing

Theme 1: Academic Libraries as Agents of Lifelong Learning and Educational Equity

Across the reviewed studies, academic libraries emerge as important institutions for promoting lifelong learning and educational equity, both of which are central dimensions of human development. UNESCO (2021) positions libraries as critical infrastructure for lifelong education, arguing that equitable access to knowledge is fundamental to individual and societal development. This perspective is reinforced by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2022), which emphasises the role of academic libraries in developing learners' information competencies, independent learning skills, and critical engagement with knowledge.

Bangani (2023) demonstrates how South African academic libraries support educational equity through community engagement initiatives such as information literacy

programmes, reading promotion campaigns, and skills development workshops that extend beyond the university population. These activities align with SDG 4's objective of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Similarly, Rabelo, Teixeira, and Mendes (2024) highlight the importance of library spaces, digital services, and learning support systems in fostering student academic development and intellectual growth. Their findings suggest that academic libraries have evolved from traditional repositories into active learning environments that support both formal and informal learning processes. Collectively, these studies indicate that academic libraries contribute significantly to lifelong learning by expanding access to educational opportunities and supporting diverse learner populations.

Theme 2: Library Contributions to the SDGs as a Human Development Framework

The reviewed literature consistently identifies the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an important framework through which academic libraries contribute to human development. Devi, Gupta, and Arahova (2024) provide a comprehensive analysis of how IFLA has mobilised libraries globally to support the SDGs through initiatives such as the Green Library Award, the Library Map of the World, and SDG Stories. Their findings demonstrate that libraries contribute to multiple development goals by facilitating access to information, supporting education, and promoting social inclusion.

Bangani and Dube (2023) further show that academic libraries contribute to SDGs related to food security, health, and climate action through community-based programmes and information services. Beyond the South African context, Adeyemi et al. (2024) document how Nigerian academic libraries are incorporating green library practices to support environmental sustainability and national development objectives. Witt (2024) similarly argues that academic libraries are increasingly integrating sustainability, information literacy, and community engagement into their operations, thereby strengthening their contribution to sustainable development. Together, these studies demonstrate that academic libraries function as development partners whose contributions extend beyond education to encompass environmental sustainability, health promotion, social inclusion, and community empowerment.

Theme 3: Information Literacy as Capability Building

Information literacy emerged as one of the most significant mechanisms through which academic libraries contribute to knowledge acquisition and human development. Liu (2025) demonstrates that information literacy extends beyond the ability to locate information to include critical thinking, evaluation, synthesis, and knowledge creation. These competencies are closely aligned with the Capability Approach's emphasis on developing individuals' capacities to make informed decisions and participate effectively in society.

The ACRL (2022) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education further supports this perspective by conceptualising information literacy as a transformative process that enables learners to become critical consumers and producers of information. Haider (2025) provides additional empirical support by demonstrating that university students' online searching proficiency is strongly associated with critical thinking and research skills. Bangani's (2023) findings add an important equity dimension by showing how information literacy programmes delivered through community outreach initiatives can benefit school learners and underserved populations who may have limited access to formal educational opportunities. These findings collectively suggest that information literacy serves as a key pathway through which academic libraries enhance human capabilities, educational achievement, and lifelong learning.

Theme 4: Digital Transformation and Personalised Human Development Support

Digital transformation has significantly expanded the capacity of academic libraries to support human development and knowledge acquisition. Masumbika and Ngulube (2025) document how libraries increasingly use data-driven approaches to personalise services,

identify at-risk students, and improve learning outcomes. Through learning analytics and personalised support systems, libraries are becoming proactive institutions capable of responding to users' evolving educational needs.

Similarly, Rabelo et al. (2024) highlight the transition from predominantly physical library environments to hybrid and digital learning ecosystems. This transformation has expanded access to information by enabling students and researchers to engage with library resources regardless of time or location. Such developments are particularly beneficial for distance learners, part-time students, and other non-traditional learners whose educational participation may otherwise be constrained.

However, the benefits of digital transformation are not equally distributed. Adeyemi et al. (2024) reveal that inadequate digital infrastructure, unstable electricity supply, and limited internet connectivity continue to hinder the effective implementation of digital library services in many Nigerian universities. These challenges underscore the importance of institutional investment and supportive policy frameworks if academic libraries are to realise their full human development potential in the digital era.

Theme 5: Community Engagement as Human Development Extension

Community engagement represents one of the most direct ways through which academic libraries extend their human development impact beyond university campuses. Bangani (2023) documents a wide range of community-focused initiatives, including reading promotion programmes, school partnerships, computer literacy training, educational material donations, and health information services. These initiatives address educational and social inequalities while promoting access to knowledge among underserved populations.

Bangani (2024) further demonstrates that community engagement activities contribute to broader development outcomes, including employment support, skills development, and sustainable urban development. These findings indicate that academic libraries can function as catalysts for economic participation and community empowerment. Devi et al. (2024) similarly highlight the role of libraries in advancing global development agendas through programmes that support social inclusion and community capacity building. UNESCO (2021) reinforces this perspective by recognising libraries as essential institutions for lifelong learning and civic participation.

The broader significance of community engagement is also reflected in Witt's (2024) argument that libraries increasingly combine sustainability initiatives, information literacy programmes, and outreach activities to strengthen their developmental impact. Viewed through the lens of the Capability Approach (Barreno-Alcalde et al., 2024; Kuhumba, 2021), these activities contribute to the expansion of human freedoms, capabilities, and opportunities for flourishing. The evidence therefore suggests that academic libraries are not merely information providers but active partners in community development and social transformation.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review indicate that academic libraries contribute to human development through a range of interconnected activities that extend beyond their traditional role as providers of information resources. While earlier library and information science literature largely focused on collections, access to information, and support for teaching and research, the studies reviewed in this paper suggest a broader developmental role encompassing lifelong learning, capability building, social inclusion, and community engagement. This finding is consistent with earlier scholarship that recognised libraries as institutions that support educational advancement and social development. However, the reviewed studies extend this understanding by demonstrating how contemporary academic libraries contribute to wider development agendas through information literacy programmes, digital services, sustainability initiatives, and community outreach activities. The evidence

therefore suggests that the contribution of academic libraries should not be assessed solely in terms of resource provision or library usage statistics, but also in terms of their capacity to enhance learning opportunities, support informed decision-making, and promote equitable access to knowledge. The Capability Approach provides a useful framework for interpreting these findings. As noted by Kuhumba (2021) and further discussed by Barreno-Alcalde et al. (2024), development should be understood as the expansion of people's capabilities and opportunities to achieve valued outcomes. Viewed from this perspective, academic libraries contribute to development not merely by providing access to information, but by enabling individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for educational, professional, and civic participation. This interpretation broadens the understanding of library impact beyond traditional performance measures and highlights the developmental value of library services.

One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed studies is the importance of information literacy as a mechanism through which academic libraries contribute to human development and knowledge acquisition. The studies by Liu (2025), Haider (2025), and ACRL (2022) collectively demonstrate that information literacy involves more than information retrieval skills. It includes critical evaluation, analysis, synthesis, and the ability to use information effectively in solving problems and making decisions. This finding aligns with previous literature that identifies information literacy as a foundational competency for lifelong learning. However, the studies reviewed here place greater emphasis on the relationship between information literacy and human capability development. Rather than viewing information literacy solely as an academic skill, recent research increasingly positions it as a means of empowering individuals to participate effectively in educational, professional, and social environments. This shift reflects a broader understanding of the role of academic libraries in supporting human development outcomes.

The review also highlights the growing importance of digital transformation in shaping library contributions to human development. The studies by Masumbika and Ngulube (2025) and Rabelo et al. (2024) demonstrate how digital technologies, learning analytics, and personalised services are expanding opportunities for learning and student support. Through digital platforms, academic libraries can provide flexible access to information resources, facilitate remote learning, and offer targeted support to diverse user groups. At the same time, the findings reveal significant challenges associated with unequal access to digital infrastructure. Evidence from Adeyemi et al. (2024) shows that inadequate internet connectivity, unreliable power supply, and limited technological resources continue to restrict the effectiveness of digital library initiatives in many developing-country contexts. These findings suggest that the benefits of digital transformation cannot be fully realised without corresponding investments in infrastructure and digital inclusion. Consequently, digital innovation should be accompanied by policies that address existing inequalities in access to technology and information resources.

Another important finding is the growing alignment between academic library activities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The studies reviewed indicate that libraries increasingly support development objectives related to quality education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, health information, and community development. Devi et al. (2024), Bangani and Dube (2023), and Adeyemi et al. (2024) provide evidence that academic libraries are participating in initiatives that extend beyond traditional academic support functions. This finding supports emerging international discussions regarding the role of libraries in sustainable development. However, the review also suggests that the extent of library involvement varies considerably across institutions and regions. While some libraries have integrated sustainability objectives into their strategic activities, others remain constrained by limited funding, infrastructure, and policy support. The evidence therefore

points to the need for stronger institutional and governmental recognition of libraries as contributors to national and global development agendas.

Implications

The findings suggest that academic librarians should increasingly position their services within broader human development and sustainable development frameworks. Information literacy programmes, community engagement initiatives, and digital support services should be designed not only to support academic success but also to enhance users' long-term capabilities and opportunities. Libraries should also develop mechanisms for assessing and documenting their contributions to educational equity, lifelong learning, and community development.

University administrators should recognise academic libraries as strategic partners in achieving institutional goals related to student success, community engagement, and sustainable development. Investment in library infrastructure, digital technologies, information literacy programmes, and outreach activities should be viewed as investments in human capital development rather than solely as operational expenditures. Institutional strategic plans should explicitly incorporate the developmental role of academic libraries.

The findings have particular relevance for Nigerian academic libraries. Evidence from Adeyemi et al. (2024) indicates that many libraries face infrastructure and resource constraints that limit their developmental impact. Nevertheless, the experiences documented in South Africa and other contexts demonstrate that academic libraries can make meaningful contributions to educational equity, community development, and sustainability even within resource-constrained environments.

Nigerian academic libraries should therefore consider strengthening community information literacy programmes, expanding outreach initiatives, aligning strategic objectives with the SDGs, and pursuing partnerships with national and international organisations such as IFLA. Greater emphasis on digital inclusion and infrastructure development will also be necessary if libraries are to maximise their contribution to human development and knowledge acquisition.

At the national level, policymakers should recognise academic libraries as important components of educational and human development systems. Policy frameworks should support investments in library infrastructure, digital access, information literacy, and community engagement. At the international level, organisations such as IFLA, UNESCO, and UNDP can continue to strengthen initiatives that promote the integration of libraries into broader development strategies and sustainability programmes.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined the contribution of academic libraries to human development and knowledge acquisition by synthesising evidence from studies published between 2021 and 2025. The review demonstrates that academic libraries play an important role in supporting lifelong learning, information literacy development, digital inclusion, community engagement, and sustainable development initiatives. Collectively, these functions position academic libraries as active contributors to educational and social development rather than merely custodians of information resources.

A key contribution of this review is the application of the Capability Approach as a lens for interpreting library impact. While previous studies have often assessed academic libraries in terms of resource provision, service delivery, or academic support, this review highlights how libraries contribute to the expansion of human capabilities through learning opportunities, knowledge creation, critical thinking development, and equitable access to information. This perspective provides a broader understanding of the developmental value of academic libraries within higher education and society.

Despite these contributions, the review has several limitations. First, the evidence base was relatively small, comprising only ten studies, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Second, the reviewed literature was concentrated in a limited number of geographical contexts, particularly South Africa, creating the possibility of regional bias in the synthesis. Third, the review relied primarily on studies published in English and may therefore have excluded relevant evidence from other linguistic contexts. Finally, although the review followed PRISMA 2020 principles, the absence of a detailed PRISMA flow diagram and the limited number of included studies should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Future research should expand the evidence base by examining academic libraries across a wider range of countries and institutional contexts, particularly in underrepresented regions such as West Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There is also a need for longitudinal studies that investigate the long-term effects of library programmes on educational attainment, information literacy, employability, and community development outcomes. Additionally, researchers should apply the Capability Approach more explicitly in library and information science research to generate stronger empirical evidence on how academic libraries contribute to human flourishing, social inclusion, and sustainable development. Such research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of academic libraries in advancing human development in the twenty-first century.

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