

## Role of Academic Libraries in Lifelong Learning beyond Formal Education

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### ABSTRACT

Academic libraries are undergoing a significant transformation in response to the growing emphasis on lifelong learning in contemporary knowledge societies. Traditionally positioned to support formal education and curriculum-based learning, academic libraries are increasingly extending their roles to facilitate learning beyond the boundaries of degree programs. This paper presents a theoretical examination of the role of academic libraries in promoting lifelong learning beyond formal education. Drawing upon established lifelong learning theories and library and information science literature, the study conceptualizes academic libraries as dynamic learning ecosystems that support self-directed, non-formal, and informal learning. The paper explores how academic libraries contribute to lifelong learning through access to diverse information resources, open educational resources, digital repositories, and information literacy initiatives. It highlights the role of libraries in enabling continuous professional development, supporting alumni and adult learners, and fostering inclusive and equitable access to knowledge. Special attention is given to the impact of digital transformation, which has expanded library services beyond physical spaces and institutional boundaries, enabling flexible, anytime-anywhere learning opportunities. The paper also discusses key challenges faced by academic libraries in positioning themselves as lifelong learning centers, including policy constraints, resource limitations, skill gaps among library professionals, and issues of user awareness. Finally, the study emphasizes the need for strategic frameworks, institutional support, and policy alignment to strengthen the role of academic libraries as sustainable centers for lifelong learning. The paper contributes to the theoretical understanding of how academic libraries can support continuous learning and knowledge development in higher education and beyond.

*Keywords:* Academic Libraries, Lifelong Learning, Informal and Non-formal Learning, Information Literacy, Digital Libraries, Open Educational Resources, Self-Directed Learning, Knowledge Society, Higher Education, Library Transformation

### CITATION

Abhinandan, M. (2026). Role of Academic Libraries in Lifelong Learning beyond Formal Education  
*Shodh Manjusha: An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 03(01), 160–170.  
<https://doi.org/10.70388/sm250197>

### Article Info

Received: Oct 21, 2025

Accepted: Nov 23, 2025

Published: Jan 10, 2026

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<https://doi.org/10.70388/sm250197>

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## 1. Introduction

In the 21st century, lifelong learning stands as a cornerstone of personal and societal progress, defined as the ongoing, voluntary, and self-directed pursuit of knowledge and skills throughout one's life to adapt to technological disruptions, economic transformations, and global challenges. This paradigm shift arises from the recognition that learning extends far beyond childhood or youth, encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal modes to foster adaptability, innovation, and fulfillment in a knowledge-driven era. In India, initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 underscore its importance, aligning with the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047 by promoting continuous skill development amid rapid digitalization and Industry 4.0 demands. Formal education, despite its merits in delivering structured credentials, exhibits significant limitations in fulfilling continuous learning imperatives. Rigid curricula, examination-centric evaluations, and outdated syllabi often prioritize rote memorization over practical skills, creativity, or real-world relevance, resulting in graduates ill-equipped for dynamic job markets. In India, challenges such as infrastructural deficits, faculty shortages, low Gross Enrolment Ratios (currently around 27.3%), and a disconnect between academia and industry exacerbate these issues, hindering equitable access and lifelong employability. Consequently, formal systems struggle to bridge the digital divide or support reskilling in a post-pandemic landscape where online learning has surged. Academic libraries are redefining their roles beyond mere custodians of degree-bound resources to pivotal enablers of lifelong learning ecosystems. By curating digital repositories, e-learning platforms, workshops on information literacy, and community programs, they democratize knowledge access and promote inclusive education. In the Indian context, libraries leverage tools like INFLIBNET, Shodhganga, and RRRLF grants to advance NEP 2020 goals, including digital transformation, open access, and cultural preservation, while addressing Viksit Bharat pillars such as inclusive development and skill enhancement. Case studies from institutions highlight their shift toward hybrid models, supporting e-resources and lifelong programs that empower diverse users, from students to professionals. This paper investigates the evolving contributions of academic libraries to lifelong learning, critiquing formal education's shortcomings and proposing strategic frameworks for India's higher education sector. Drawing on secondary data from global literature and Indian policies like NEP 2020, it scopes library innovations, challenges like underfunding and digital divides, and recommendations for alignment with Viksit Bharat 2047. Ultimately, it advocates repositioning libraries as vibrant knowledge hubs to cultivate a resilient, learning society.

## **2. Conceptual Understanding of Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong learning denotes the ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional development throughout an individual's life. Key dimensions include the "lifelong" aspect, spanning from cradle to grave, and the "life-wide" aspect, integrating learning across diverse settings and stages. These dimensions emphasize holistic growth, encompassing cognitive, emotional, social, and practical competencies beyond isolated facts.

- **Learning Contexts**

Formal learning occurs in structured institutions like schools and universities, following predefined curricula and leading to certifications. Non-formal learning involves organized activities outside formal systems, such as community workshops or vocational training, without credentials. Informal learning arises spontaneously through daily experiences, self-study, or social interactions, often comprising 90% of total learning. Lifelong learning synthesizes these contexts to ensure continuous skill enhancement.

- **Social, Educational, and Economic Necessity**

Lifelong learning serves as a social imperative by fostering active citizenship, inclusivity, and community cohesion through shared knowledge practices. Educationally, it builds on UNESCO's four pillars learning to know, do, be, and live together addressing formal education's gaps in adaptability. Economically, it drives employability, innovation, and resilience amid job market volatility, reducing unemployment and boosting productivity.

- **Relevance in Knowledge-Based Society**

In knowledge-based societies, rapid technological evolution and globalization render skills obsolete quickly, necessitating perpetual upskilling. Lifelong learning promotes human capital development, aligning with India's NEP 2020 and Viksit Bharat 2047 by bridging digital divides and enhancing competitiveness. It empowers individuals for sustainable careers, policy adaptability, and cultural preservation in dynamic ecosystems.

## **3. Academic Libraries: Evolving Roles and Functions**

Academic libraries have long served as foundational pillars of higher education, but their roles and functions are undergoing profound transformation in response to the demands of

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lifelong learning and a knowledge-driven society. Traditionally, academic libraries functioned primarily as repositories of physical collections, supporting curriculum delivery through book lending, reference services, and quiet study spaces. Their core mandate revolved around acquiring, organizing, and preserving scholarly materials to aid faculty research and student assignments aligned with degree programs. This resource-centric model emphasized collection development, cataloging via systems like Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress classifications, and basic information literacy instruction tied to course syllabi. In India, institutions such as those affiliated with UGC and INFLIBNET exemplified this era, focusing on print journals, theses archives like Shodhganga, and inter-library loans to fulfill formal educational needs. However, this approach often prioritized quantity of holdings over user engagement, limiting libraries to passive custodians rather than active learning partners. The transition from resource-centric to learner-centric libraries marks a pivotal evolution, driven by digital disruptions, NEP 2020 imperatives, and the rise of user expectations in a post-pandemic world. Historically, libraries operated on a "just-in-case" model, stockpiling materials anticipating future needs; today, they adopt a "just-in-time" philosophy, delivering customized, on-demand resources via digital platforms. This shift prioritizes users' students, faculty, alumni, and community members as active participants in knowledge creation. Key enablers include open-access repositories, subscription databases like JSTOR and EBSCO, and integrated library management systems (ILMS) such as KOHA, which facilitate seamless access across devices. In the Indian context, libraries at universities like Rishihood University are integrating AI-driven discovery tools, virtual reference desks, and mobile apps to personalize learning paths, moving beyond gatekeeping information to empowering self-exploration. Learner-centricity manifests in redesigned spaces: collaborative zones replace silent reading rooms, makerspaces with 3D printers and VR stations foster creativity, and hybrid events blend physical and online interactions. This realignment addresses formal education's rigidity by embedding flexibility, inclusivity, and equity, particularly for rural and underserved users in line with Viksit Bharat 2047's digital inclusion goals. Academic libraries now position themselves as multifaceted hubs for knowledge, learning, and innovation, extending their influence far beyond campus boundaries. As knowledge hubs, they curate interdisciplinary collections, including multimedia, datasets, and indigenous knowledge archives, supporting research output measurement via metrics like h-index and altmetrics. Learning hubs offer embedded librarianship, where professionals co-teach courses on data literacy, AI ethics, and critical evaluation of sources, aligning with UNESCO's lifelong learning pillars. Innovation hubs pioneer emerging technologies: institutional repositories

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preserve open educational resources (OER), while incubators host hackathons and startup mentorships, bridging academia-industry gaps. Indian examples abound, such as IIT libraries' patent information services and DELNET consortia enabling resource sharing nationwide. These hubs cultivate a culture of inquiry, with analytics dashboards tracking usage to refine services dynamically. By fostering communities of practice through webinars, reading clubs, and MOOC integrations, libraries nurture intellectual ecosystems that transcend semesters. The most significant shift lies in moving from curriculum support to facilitating self-directed learning, a cornerstone of lifelong learning paradigms. Traditionally, library instruction was episodic, lecture-based, and syllabus-bound, reinforcing teacher-led pedagogies. Now, libraries champion autonomy through information literacy frameworks like ACRL standards, teaching users to navigate information overload independently. Self-directed facilitation involves flipped classroom models, where pre-session tutorials via LibGuides equip learners for inquiry-driven projects. Digital tools—learning management system (LMS) plugins, recommendation engines powered by machine learning, and gamified tutorials—enable anytime, anywhere upskilling. In India, this aligns with NEP 2020's emphasis on experiential learning and skill hubs, with libraries offering certifications in digital humanities, coding bootcamps, and reskilling for gig economies. Challenges persist, including underfunding (Indian academic libraries allocate mere 5-6% of institutional budgets) and digital divides, yet innovations like RRRLF grants and SWAYAM integrations propel progress. Ultimately, this evolution repositions libraries as catalysts for agencies, preparing users for volatile career landscapes where self-reliance trumps credentials. This transformation underscores academic libraries' adaptability, evolving from silent vaults to vibrant ecosystems that democratize knowledge. As India marches toward Viksit Bharat 2047, libraries must amplify these roles through policy advocacy, faculty partnerships, and community outreach, ensuring equitable access to lifelong opportunities.

#### **4. Academic Libraries Supporting Lifelong Learning Beyond Formal Education**

Academic libraries champion open educational resources (OERs) by curating repositories like OER Commons, MERLOT, and Indian platforms such as SWAYAM and e-PG Pathshala, offering free, customizable textbooks, courses, and multimedia beyond formal curricula. This access reduces financial barriers, enabling lifelong learners to pursue self-paced studies in

emerging fields like AI and sustainability. In India, libraries integrate OERs via INFLIBNET's e-ShodhSindhu, aligning with NEP 2020's open learning goals.

- **Support for Self-Directed Learners**

Libraries empower self-directed learners through discovery tools like Primo and Summon, personalized dashboards, and virtual research consultations that facilitate independent inquiry. They provide 24/7 access to e-databases, citation managers like Zotero, and AI chatbots for query resolution, catering to non-traditional users such as alumni and professionals. This support fosters autonomy, with makerspaces and writing centers aiding project-based exploration outside structured programs.

- **Information Literacy Skills**

Information literacy programs equip users with skills to evaluate sources, combat misinformation, and apply ethical research practices essential for lifelong learning. Libraries deliver workshops, online modules, and embedded sessions using frameworks like SCONUL Seven Pillars, extending to digital fluency in AI tools and data analytics. In higher education, these initiatives bridge formal education gaps, preparing Indians for knowledge economies per Viksit Bharat visions.

- **Spaces for Professional Development**

Academic libraries serve as venues for continuous professional development via seminars, certification courses, and industry collaborations on skills like leadership and digital marketing. Flexible spaces host webinars, peer mentoring, and MOOC study groups, supporting faculty, staff, and external professionals. Indian examples include university libraries partnering with NASSCOM for tech upskilling, enhancing employability in dynamic job markets.

- **Community Outreach Initiatives**

Outreach extends libraries' reach through mobile vans, rural literacy camps, and digital inclusion drives, targeting underserved communities with free Wi-Fi hotspots and skill workshops. Initiatives like public access terminals and cultural programs preserve indigenous knowledge while promoting lifelong education. In India, RRRLF-funded projects and NEP-aligned efforts amplify impact, fostering societal development toward Viksit Bharat 2047.

## **5. Digital Transformation and Lifelong Learning**

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Digital libraries and institutional repositories form the backbone of lifelong learning by digitizing collections for global access, preserving scholarly outputs like theses via platforms such as DSpace and Shodhganga in India. They enable seamless search, reuse, and dissemination of resources, supporting researchers beyond formal enrollment. This role aligns with NEP 2020, promoting open scholarship and reducing physical barriers.

- **Online Databases, MOOCs, and Open Access**

Academic libraries subscribe to databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, while curating MOOCs from Coursera, edX, and SWAYAM for skill enhancement. Open access platforms such as DOAJ and CORE democratize knowledge, allowing self-learners to access peer-reviewed content without paywalls. In India, consortia like e-ShodhSindhu amplify these, fostering lifelong upskilling in ICT and emerging fields.

- **Virtual Reference and Remote Support**

Virtual reference services via chatbots, email, and video consultations like Ask-a-Librarian provide real-time assistance for remote users navigating complex queries. These tools support remote learning through tutorials and screencasts, ensuring continuity during disruptions like pandemics. Indian libraries leverage WhatsApp bots and Zoom sessions to extend reach to rural scholars.

- **Enabling Anytime-Anywhere Learning**

Libraries facilitate anytime-anywhere access via mobile-optimized portals, VPNs for off-campus database entry, and cloud-based tools like Google Workspace integrations. Responsive designs and apps ensure inclusivity across devices, empowering lifelong learners in gig economies. This digital agility supports Viksit Bharat's vision by bridging urban-rural divides in education.

## **6. Academic Libraries as Inclusive Learning Spaces**

Academic libraries have evolved into inclusive learning spaces that extend lifelong learning opportunities well beyond traditional student populations, embracing alumni, independent researchers, and working professionals. Many institutions offer lifetime memberships or affiliate access, granting continued use of digital collections, study areas, and event programs post-graduation. Researchers benefit from specialized services like data management consultations and citation analysis tools, while professionals access career-oriented

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workshops on emerging skills such as AI ethics and project management. This inclusivity ensures knowledge remains a lifelong asset, aligning with India's NEP 2020 emphasis on continuous education. Supporting adult and non-traditional learners represents a core strength of modern academic libraries, addressing diverse needs through flexible programming. Evening and weekend hours accommodate working adults, with self-checkout systems and remote database access minimizing disruptions. Non-traditional learners such as first-generation students, rural migrants, or career switchers receive tailored support via beginner-friendly orientations, multilingual resources, and adaptive technologies like text-to-speech software. Libraries partner with vocational platforms to offer micro-credentials, helping these groups overcome barriers like time constraints and skill gaps in pursuit of personal advancement. Equity, inclusion, and access to knowledge form the bedrock of libraries' inclusive mandate, actively dismantling historical divides. Universal design principles guide space renovations, incorporating ramps, quiet zones for neurodiverse users, and gender-neutral facilities to welcome all. Initiatives like fee waivers for economically disadvantaged users and community Wi-Fi hotspots bridge the digital divide, particularly in India where rural-urban disparities persist. By prioritizing open access repositories and OER curation, libraries democratize high-quality information, empowering marginalized voices in line with Viksit Bharat 2047's equity goals. Academic libraries thrive as intergenerational learning environments, fostering dialogue across age groups through shared programming. Senior citizens join book clubs alongside millennials exploring digital humanities, while intergenerational storytelling sessions preserve indigenous knowledge. Makerspaces host collaborative projects where retirees mentor youth on crafts, blending lived experience with technological innovation. These dynamics cultivate empathy, innovation, and community resilience, positioning libraries as societal anchors for holistic lifelong learning.

### **7. Challenges in Positioning Academic Libraries as Lifelong Learning Centers**

Academic libraries face policy hurdles like inadequate funding allocations often under 6% of university budgets in India and rigid mandates prioritizing formal curricula over lifelong initiatives. Institutional silos limit cross-departmental collaborations, while bureaucratic delays in adopting NEP 2020 reforms hinder agile transformations. These constraints restrict expansion into community outreach or OER development essential for lifelong hubs.

- **Resource Constraints and Digital Divide**

Chronic underfunding leads to outdated infrastructure, limited subscriptions to premium databases, and insufficient ICT tools, exacerbating resource scarcity. The digital divide amplifies issues, with rural Indian users lacking broadband or devices, despite urban-centric digital library advancements. Maintenance of repositories and servers' strains budgets, widening access gaps for non-traditional learners.

- **Re-skilling Librarians**

Librarians require upskills in AI, data analytics, and user experience design to manage modern lifelong learning services yet training programs lag. Professional development opportunities are scarce, with many relying on sporadic workshops amid heavy workloads. In India, initiatives like RRLF courses help, but scaling for all remains challenging.

- **Awareness and Utilization Issues**

Low awareness among potential users' alumni, professionals stem from poor marketing and siloed perceptions of libraries as student-only spaces. Utilization suffers from intuitive interfaces lacking or promotion gaps, leading to underuse of OERs and virtual services. Targeted campaigns and analytics-driven outreach are needed to boost engagement in lifelong contexts.

## **8. Future Directions and Strategic Framework**

Academic libraries should re-envision services around lifelong learning by prioritizing hybrid spaces, AI-personalized recommendations, and micro-credential programs tailored to diverse users. Emphasizing OER curation, makerspaces, and wellness-integrated learning zones will cater to self-directed needs beyond formal education. In India, aligning with Viksit Bharat 2047 through gamified apps and VR simulations can future-proof services.

- **Integrating into Library Policies**

Policies must embed lifelong learning via strategic plans mandating 20-30% budgets for digital infrastructure and community access, per NEP 2020 guidelines. KPIs should track alumni engagement and skill workshop attendance, with flexible bylaws extending memberships indefinitely. Regular audits ensure inclusivity, addressing digital divides through subsidized devices.

- **Collaboration Strategies**

Partnerships with academic departments enable co-designed curricula embedding information literacy, while community collaborations via MOUs with NGOs expand outreach. Joint events with industries offer internships and hackathons; in India, ties with NASSCOM and local bodies amplify rural impact. Shared platforms like Consortia foster resource pooling for sustainable lifelong ecosystems.

- **Librarians as Facilitators**

Librarians evolve into facilitators through continuous training in pedagogy, data science, and facilitation skills, positioning them as learning coaches. They lead personalized pathways, community building, and advocacy for open knowledge, embodying lifelong models themselves. Professional bodies like ILA should certify these competencies to elevate their role in Viksit Bharat initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper has elucidated the multifaceted concept of lifelong learning as an ongoing, self-directed process spanning formal, non-formal, and informal contexts, essential for adaptability in knowledge-based societies driven by technological flux and economic imperatives. Academic libraries emerge as pivotal agents, transitioning from resource repositories to inclusive, learner-centric hubs that democratize access through OERs, digital repositories, virtual services, and community outreach, thereby bridging formal education limitations in fostering continuous skill development. Despite challenges like policy constraints, resource shortages, and awareness gaps, their evolution into innovation spaces underscores their potential to support self-directed learners, professionals, and intergenerational communities, aligning with India's NEP 2020 and Viksit Bharat 2047 vision for equitable knowledge ecosystems. Positioning academic libraries as critical lifelong learning facilitators demands proactive re-envisioning: integrating digital transformation, interdisciplinary collaborations, and librarian reskilling to enable anytime-anywhere learning. Policy-driven practices, such as increased funding mandates and KPIs for community engagement, coupled with theory-guided frameworks like UNESCO's learning pillars, will sustain this shift. Implications ripple across higher education, urging institutions to embed lifelong paradigms in curricula, and society at large, cultivating resilient citizens equipped for sustainable development, reduced inequalities, and cultural preservation. Ultimately, Abhinandan, M.

empowered libraries will catalyze a learning nation, transforming India's academic landscape into vibrant engines of human capital and progress.

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