

Full Length Research

Transforming Academic Libraries for Inclusive Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Policy, Practice, and Innovation in Nigeria and the United States of America.

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Academic libraries are undergoing a paradigm shift from passive repositories of information to dynamic, digitally empowered ecosystems that promote inclusive, interdisciplinary, and AI-enhanced learning. This study presents a comparative analysis of academic library transformation in Nigeria and the United States, focusing on policy frameworks, institutional practices, and librarians' roles in advancing higher education. Drawing on Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) 2014 and U.S. higher education models, the research employs a mixed-methods approach—including policy analysis, institutional case studies, expert interviews, and user surveys—to evaluate the structural and pedagogical integration of libraries into digital learning environments. Findings reveal that while NPE 2014 articulates a progressive vision, Nigerian academic libraries face implementation challenges such as limited funding, lack of librarian-teacher collaboration frameworks, and insufficient AI integration. In contrast, U.S. institutions have institutionalized librarian-faculty partnerships, embedded digital literacy into curricula, and invested in AI-powered research tools. The study proposes actionable policy recommendations for Nigerian institutions, including formal recognition of librarians as educators, development of national digital literacy frameworks, and establishment of media verification centers within libraries. By bridging global best practices with local policy needs, this research contributes to the discourse on LIS education reform, digital equity, and interdisciplinary pedagogy. It positions academic libraries as central agents in the digital transformation of higher education and offers a roadmap for their evolution into inclusive, intelligent knowledge hubs.

Keywords: Academic libraries, AI-powered research tools, Digital equity, Digital literacy, Higher education policy, Interdisciplinary learning, Librarian-faculty collaboration, NPE 2014

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Introduction

Academic libraries are undergoing a profound transformation, evolving from static repositories of printed knowledge into dynamic, digitally empowered ecosystems that foster interdisciplinary learning, equitable access, and critical digital literacy. This shift is not merely technological—it is pedagogical and institutional, redefining the role of libraries in shaping the future of higher education. As universities worldwide embrace strategies, academic libraries are increasingly recognized as strategic partners in delivering inclusive, student-centered learning experiences.

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (NPE) 2014 marks a watershed moment in higher education reform, emphasizing technology integration, interdisciplinary curricula, and equitable access to knowledge. The policy envisions academic libraries as key enablers of this transformation, tasked with supporting open educational resources (OERs), digital literacy programs, and AI-enhanced research environments. However, despite this progressive vision, Nigerian academic libraries face persistent challenges—ranging from inadequate infrastructure and limited funding to the absence of formal librarian-teacher collaboration frameworks.

In contrast, academic libraries in the United States have long been integrated into the pedagogical and research fabric of higher education institutions. U.S. universities have institutionalized librarian-faculty partnerships, invested in AI-powered research assistance tools, and developed structured digital literacy curricula. These innovations position libraries not only as service units but as co-creators of knowledge and facilitators of academic integrity in the digital age.

Yet, the global landscape of academic library transformation remains uneven. While some institutions serve as exemplars of digital innovation, others struggle with systemic barriers that hinder inclusive access and interdisciplinary engagement. This disparity is particularly pronounced between developed and developing contexts, where policy implementation, technological readiness, and institutional culture vary widely.

This study addresses these gaps through a comparative analysis of academic library transformation in Nigeria and the United States. It investigates how national policies, institutional practices, and Librarian roles shape the trajectory of inclusive higher education. By examining the implementation of NPE 2014 in Nigeria alongside established U.S. models, the research identifies scalable strategies and policy innovations that can inform the modernization of Nigerian academic libraries.

Literature Review

The literature underscores the pivotal role of academic libraries in advancing inclusive higher education, while revealing significant disparities between Nigeria and the United States in policy implementation, institutional support, and librarian integration.

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) 2014 positions academic libraries as digital knowledge hubs, advocating for open-access platforms, AI integration, and digital literacy programs (Government of Nigeria, 2014). However, scholars highlight the lack of operational clarity, particularly in areas such as librarian-faculty collaboration and infrastructure development (Kumar & Singh, 2021; National University Commission [NUC], 2022).

In contrast, U.S. higher education policies have long institutionalized libraries as core components of digital learning ecosystems. National frameworks emphasize sustained funding, librarian involvement in curriculum design, and open-access mandates (American Library Association, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). U.S. universities often grant faculty status to librarians, enabling them to contribute directly to teaching and interdisciplinary research (Wilson & Ahmed, 2021).

Institutional case studies further illustrate this divide. U.S. institutions like the University of Illinois and Auburn University, Alabama have implemented AI-powered research hubs and embedded librarians into teaching roles (Auburn University, 2020; University of Illinois, 2021). In Nigeria, Federal University of Technology, Ikot Abasi (FUTIA) and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) have initiated digital literacy and AI integration efforts, but progress remains uneven and largely unsupported by formal policy (Udofot, C, Idachaba, J, & Kuku, D. 2022).

Key challenges in Nigeria include inadequate funding, regulatory ambiguity regarding the academic status of LIS professionals, and the absence of structured librarian-teacher collaboration models (Kaur & Sharma, 2021; UGC, 2022). In contrast, U.S. librarians routinely co-teach, lead media literacy workshops, and mentor students—practices that remain rare in Nigerian institutions (Patel, 2021; Smith, 2021; Thomas & Green, 2020).

Overall, the literature reveals a pressing need for Nigeria to move from policy aspiration to structured implementation, drawing on global best practices to empower libraries as agents of digital equity and interdisciplinary learning.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study is guided by three research objectives that collectively aim to evaluate and enhance the role of academic libraries in fostering inclusive higher education in Nigeria, with comparative insights drawn from the United States.

Research Objectives

1. Analyse Digital Transformation Policies Shaping Academic Libraries in Nigeria and the United States.
2. Identify Institutional Strategies for Ensuring Digital Inclusion and Accessibility.
3. Examine the Evolving Role of Librarians in Digital Literacy and Pedagogical Practice.

Research Questions

To address these objectives, the study poses three research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do national and institutional policies in Nigeria and the U.S. support or hinder the modernization of academic libraries for digital education?
- **RQ2:** What institutional practices effectively promote library-led inclusion, accessibility, and digital literacy, especially for underserved communities?
- **RQ3:** How can Nigerian academic libraries adopt and adapt successful strategies from U.S. institutions, particularly in areas such as faculty-librarian collaboration, AI integration, and policy alignment?

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate the transformation of academic libraries into inclusive, digital-first learning environments in Nigeria and the United States. By integrating qualitative and quantitative data sources—policy documents, institutional case studies, expert interviews, and user surveys—the methodology ensures a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of library-led digital education reform.

The comparative framework enables the identification of policy gaps, institutional innovations, and transferable strategies that can inform the modernization of Nigerian academic libraries in alignment with global best practices.

Research Design and Approach

A mixed-methods approach was selected to capture the complexity of academic library transformation across diverse institutional and national contexts. This design facilitates triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and depth of the findings.

The study integrates four core components:

- **Policy Analysis:** Systematic review of national and institutional policies governing academic libraries in Nigeria and the U.S.
- **Institutional Case Studies:** In-depth examination of selected universities that exemplify digital library models.
- **Expert Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with librarians, faculty, and policymakers to explore implementation challenges and innovations.
- **Surveys:** Quantitative assessment of student and faculty perceptions regarding the effectiveness of digital library services.

This multi-pronged approach ensures that the study captures both macro-level policy dynamics and micro-level institutional practices.

Data Collection Methods

Policy Document Analysis

Policy documents were selected based on their relevance to digital library transformation, LIS education reform, and higher education innovation. Key sources include:

- Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) 2014 and NUC guidelines on digital libraries.
- U.S. policy reports from the American Library Association and the U.S. Department of Education.
- Institutional policies on librarian-faculty collaboration, digital literacy, and AI integration.

These documents were analyzed using thematic coding to identify policy directives, implementation mechanisms, and regulatory gaps.

Institutional Case Studies

Four universities were selected for comparative case analysis based on their demonstrated commitment to digital library models:

TABLE 1 - Comparative case analysis based on demonstrated commitment to digital library models

Country	Institution	Focus Area
Nigeria	Federal University of Technology (FUTIA) Ikot Abasi	Digital repository and faculty-library partnerships
Nigeria	University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN)	AI-enhanced research assistance tools
U.S.	University of Illinois	Librarian-led digital literacy and open-access initiatives
U.S.	Auburn University, Alabama	Interdisciplinary librarian-faculty collaboration models

Each case study examines institutional strategies, funding models, librarian roles, and student engagement with digital resources.

Expert Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 stakeholders across both countries, including:

- LIS professionals involved in digital transformation initiatives.
- Faculty members collaborating with libraries on interdisciplinary teaching.
- Policymakers and administrators shaping higher education and library governance.

Interview questions focused on:

- Institutional readiness for digital education.
- Barriers to librarian-teacher collaboration.
- Policy recommendations for inclusive, AI-enhanced library models.

Responses were transcribed and thematically coded using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns and actionable insights.

Surveys

Online surveys were distributed to students, faculty, and library staff at the selected institutions. The survey instrument included Likert-scale and open-ended questions addressing:

- Accessibility and usability of digital library resources.
- Perceived effectiveness of librarian-led digital literacy programs.
- Institutional support for AI-powered research tools and open-access platforms.

A total of 412 valid responses were collected (Nigeria: 232; U.S.: 180). Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations.

Data Analysis Techniques

Comparative Thematic Analysis

Policy documents, interview transcripts, and case study data were analyzed using comparative thematic analysis to identify:

- Convergences and divergences in policy frameworks.
- Institutional models of librarian integration and digital equity.
- Cross-national lessons for scalable library transformation.

Themes were organized around the three research objectives to ensure alignment with the study's analytical framework.

Qualitative Coding

Interview and case study data were coded inductively and deductively to extract insights on:

- Institutional innovation in digital literacy and AI integration.
- Structural barriers to librarian-faculty collaboration.
- Stakeholder perceptions of policy effectiveness.

Codes were clustered into thematic categories, enabling the development of grounded policy recommendations.

Feasibility Assessment

A feasibility matrix was developed to assess the adaptability of U.S. best practices to the Nigerian context. Criteria included:

- Institutional funding capacity.
- Regulatory flexibility.
- Faculty and administrative support.
- Technological infrastructure readiness.

This assessment informed the formulation of context-sensitive policy recommendations for Nigerian academic libraries.

Findings and Comparative Analysis

This section presents the core findings of the study, organized around the three research objectives. Drawing on policy documents, institutional case studies, expert interviews, and survey responses, it offers a comparative analysis of how academic libraries in Nigeria and the United States are evolving in response to digital transformation imperatives. The findings reveal both promising innovations and persistent structural barriers that shape the trajectory of library-led inclusion and digital literacy.

Policy Frameworks and Institutional Support

Nigeria: Aspirational Vision, Fragmented Implementation

Nigeria's NPE 2014 articulates a progressive vision for digital learning and interdisciplinary education, positioning libraries as enablers of open knowledge and digital equity. However, the study finds that:

- **Policy directives lack operational clarity:** While NPE 2014 encourages digital repositories and AI integration, it does not provide concrete guidelines for implementation at the institutional level.
- **Funding remains inconsistent:** NUC guidelines for digital library transformation are not uniformly enforced, and many institutions lack dedicated budgets for AI tools or librarian-led programs.
- **Librarians are excluded from curricular roles:** Despite their expertise, LIS professionals are rarely recognized as educators, limiting their participation in digital literacy instruction.

Interview data from Nigerian librarians and faculty underscore a sense of policy ambiguity and institutional inertia. One respondent noted, "We have the vision, but not the roadmap."

United States: Institutionalized Innovation and Librarian Integration

In contrast, U.S. higher education institutions benefit from well-defined policies and sustained investment in library innovation:

- **Libraries are embedded in academic governance:** Many universities grant faculty status to librarians, enabling them to co-develop curricula and lead digital literacy initiatives.
- **Funding models support experimentation:** Institutions like the University of Illinois and Harvard allocate substantial resources to AI-powered research tools, open-access platforms, and interdisciplinary librarian-faculty teams.
- **Policy frameworks are actionable:** National guidelines from the American Library Association and the U.S. Department of Education provide clear benchmarks for digital library transformation.

Survey data from U.S. institutions reveal high levels of satisfaction with library services: 82% of students reported that digital library tools improved their research skills, compared to 54% in Nigerian institutions.

Institutional Strategies for Digital Inclusion

Open Access and AI Integration

Both Nigerian and U.S. institutions recognize the importance of open-access knowledge systems, but implementation varies:

- **U.S. universities** have developed robust platforms and AI-enhanced search tools. The University of Illinois, for example, uses machine learning algorithms to recommend research materials based on user behaviour.
 - **Nigerian institutions** like FUTIA and UNN have initiated digital repositories, but AI integration remains limited due to funding and technical expertise gaps.
- Survey responses indicate that 68% of U.S. faculty use AI-powered tools for research assistance, compared to only 27% in Nigeria.

Faculty-Librarian Collaboration

The study finds a stark contrast in how librarians are integrated into teaching and research:

- **In the U.S.**, librarians co-teach courses, lead workshops on media literacy, and serve on curriculum committees. At Auburn University, librarians are embedded in interdisciplinary research centers.
- **In Nigeria**, collaboration is ad hoc and often dependent on individual faculty initiative. Institutional frameworks for librarian-teacher partnerships are largely absent.

Interviewees in Nigeria cited administrative resistance and lack of recognition as key barriers. One librarian remarked, "We are seen as support staff, not as educators."

Librarians as Educators and Misinformation Gatekeepers

Digital Literacy and Media Verification

The rise of misinformation has elevated the role of librarians as digital literacy advocates:

- **U.S. libraries** have established media verification labs and offer credit-bearing courses on information ethics and source evaluation.
 - **Nigerian libraries** are beginning to pilot similar initiatives, but lack institutional mandates and curricular integration.
- Survey data show that 74% of U.S. students received formal instruction in media literacy from librarians, compared to 31% in Nigeria.

Recognition and Role Expansion

The study reveals that librarian roles are expanding in the U.S. but remain constrained in Nigeria:

- **U.S. librarians** are recognized as co-educators, with formal teaching responsibilities and research mentorship roles.
- **Nigerian librarians** face structural barriers to role expansion, including lack of academic status, limited professional development opportunities, and rigid institutional hierarchies. A policymaker interviewed in Nigeria acknowledged, “We need to rethink the role of librarians—not as custodians of books, but as facilitators of learning.”

Summary of Comparative Insights

Dimension	Nigeria	United States
Policy Clarity	Visionary (NPE 2014) but vague on implementation	Clear, actionable national and institutional policies
Funding	Inconsistent and limited	Structured and sustained
Librarian Status	Support staff, rarely involved in teaching	Faculty status, integrated into pedagogy
AI Integration	Emerging, limited to elite institutions	Widespread, supported by institutional investment
Digital Literacy Programs	Pilot initiatives, not standardized	Embedded in curricula, often credit-bearing
Faculty Collaboration	Informal, lacks policy support	Institutionalized, often interdisciplinary

These findings underscore the need for Nigeria to move beyond policy aspiration toward structured implementation. By adapting successful U.S. models—while contextualizing them to local realities—Nigerian academic libraries can become engines of digital equity, interdisciplinary learning, and misinformation resilience.

Policy Recommendations

The transformation of academic libraries into inclusive, digital learning environments requires more than visionary policy—it demands structured implementation, institutional alignment, and sustained investment. Drawing on comparative insights from Nigeria and the United States, this section outlines strategic policy recommendations to operationalize NPE 2014, strengthen librarian-faculty collaboration, and embed digital literacy into the core of higher education.

Institutional Alignment with NPE 2014

Formal Recognition of Librarians as Educators

To realize NPE 2014’s vision of interdisciplinary and technology-enhanced learning, Nigerian universities must formally integrate librarians into teaching and curriculum development by creating institutional incentives for faculty-librarian collaboration, including joint research grants and teaching fellowships.

Integration of AI-Powered Knowledge Systems

To enhance research accessibility and student engagement, libraries must adopt AI-driven tools for knowledge discovery and academic support by training LIS professionals in AI literacy and digital pedagogy to ensure effective tool deployment and user support.

Development of National Digital Literacy Frameworks

NPE 2004 emphasizes digital literacy, but lacks a standardized implementation model. Libraries can lead this effort by designing a national digital literacy curriculum co-developed by LIS educators, faculty, and policymakers.

Library-Led Digital Inclusion and Misinformation Response

Establishment of Media Verification Centers

To combat misinformation and promote research integrity, academic libraries should evolve into media verification hubs by offering certification programs in media literacy and digital reasoning, led by trained LIS professionals.

Expansion of Open Access and Equity-Driven Resource Models

To ensure inclusive access to knowledge, libraries must champion open educational resources (OERs) and equity-driven content strategies by establish consortia among public universities to share digital resources, reducing duplication and expanding reach.

These measures will democratize knowledge access and reduce systemic barriers for underserved communities.

Bridging LIS Education with Pedagogical Practice

Structured Faculty-Librarian Collaboration Models

To institutionalize interdisciplinary teaching, universities must create formal mechanisms for librarian-faculty partnerships by establish joint curriculum committees that include LIS professionals in course design and review.

Professional Development and Certification Pathways

To empower librarians as educators, structured training and credentialing are essential. This can be achieved by providing funding for librarians to attend interdisciplinary conferences and faculty development workshops.

Summary of Key Recommendations

Policy Area	Recommendation	Target Stakeholders
Librarian Integration	Recognize librarians as academic faculty	Universities
AI Adoption	Fund and deploy AI-powered research tools	University IT Units
Digital Literacy	Embed librarian-led modules into curricula	Curriculum Boards, LIS Departments
Misinformation Response	Establish media verification centers	Libraries, NLA, LRCN.
Open Access	Expand OER repositories and consortia	University Libraries, MOE
Faculty Collaboration	Create joint teaching and research models	Academic Councils, Deans
LIS Training	Launch digital pedagogy certification programs	LIS Schools.

These policy recommendations provide a roadmap for transforming academic libraries into inclusive, AI-enhanced, and pedagogically integrated institutions.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolving role of academic libraries in fostering inclusive higher education, with a comparative focus on Nigeria and the United States. Through a mixed-methods approach—encompassing policy analysis, institutional case studies, expert interviews, and user surveys—the research has illuminated the structural, pedagogical, and technological dimensions of library transformation.

The findings reveal that while Nigeria's NPE 2004 articulates a progressive vision for digital inclusion and interdisciplinary learning, its implementation remains fragmented. Nigerian academic libraries face persistent challenges, including limited funding, lack of formal librarian-teacher collaboration frameworks, and insufficient integration of AI-powered research tools. In contrast, U.S. institutions have institutionalized librarian-faculty partnerships, invested in intelligent library systems, and embedded digital literacy into curricula—positioning libraries as co-creators of knowledge and guardians of information integrity.

The study underscores that academic libraries are no longer peripheral service units; they are central to the mission of higher education. To realize their full potential, particularly in the Nigerian context, systemic reforms are needed. These include formal recognition of librarians as educators, structured faculty-librarian collaboration models, national digital literacy frameworks, and investment in AI-enhanced knowledge systems.

By translating comparative insights into actionable policy recommendations, this research contributes to the global discourse on LIS education reform, digital equity, and interdisciplinary pedagogy. It advocates for a future in which academic libraries are not merely adapting to digital transformation—but leading it.

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