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# Public Access to Books and University Libraries in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges

## I. Introduction

Pakistan is a developing country located in the South Asian region that was created on August 14, 1947, as a result of British India's partition. Pakistan has a territory of around 881,913 sq. km in total size. According to the current census in 2023, the country's total population has crossed the figure of 241.49 million (Consulate General of Pakistan, 2024). The primary source of income for two-thirds of the people who reside in villages is agriculture. The state of Pakistan is a combination of multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural communities. Primary and secondary schools use the official language, Urdu, for education. English remains the official language of Pakistan and is frequently used in business and trade. Higher education also uses it as the primary language of instruction, especially for courses in science and technology. In Pakistan, 62.3 % of people are literate. Four provinces Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan as well as the Federal Capital Area of Islamabad make up Pakistan's political federation (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2024). The book industry in Pakistan is underdeveloped and only publishes approximately 4000–5000 titles annually. Access to books and libraries plays a critical role in fostering education, intellectual growth, and community development. In Pakistan, however, access remains a complex issue shaped by economic, cultural, geographic, and technological factors. This article explores the current state of access to books and university libraries in Pakistan, the barriers faced, and some potential strategies for improvement.

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II.  Role of University Libraries in Education and Research

University libraries are essential for developing "creative thinkers" who can address the issues facing the country (Memon, 1983). Additionally, university libraries are crucial to the success and significance of academic programs offered in a university. A university library's significance in research and higher education is well acknowledged; as are the services it is supposed to offer to its patrons. On the other hand, with the invention of the Internet, the role of university libraries has transformed from merely reading spaces of printed materials to centers of digital information resources and services. University libraries today deal with various digital information resources accessible through the internet. Because of this transition university libraries continuously strive to improve their services to meet the evolving information needs of their different categories of academic communities (Sheikh, 2015).

III.  History of University Libraries in Pakistan

The history of university libraries in Pakistan dates back 116 years when the first library was established at the University of the Punjab in 1908 during British rule. The University of Peshawar, founded in 1950, was the first educational institution to be formed after the creation of Pakistan; however, its library was not created until 1951. According to Haider (1986) the University of Karachi was founded in 1951, and its library was also established a year later in 1952. Asa Don Dickinson, an American librarian, arrived in the Subcontinent in 1915, which marked the beginning of modern library services in the areas that now make up Pakistan. At the University of the Punjab, he was tasked with "organizing the university library and teaching the librarians of the Punjab modern library methods." Therefore, in 1915, he founded the first library school in Asia at the University of the Punjab in Lahore. This school had a significant influence on the later library developments in British India (Haider, 2004).

IV.  Current Status of University Libraries

The construction of the library is the first priority whenever a university is being built anywhere. In Pakistan, the majority of university libraries were founded in the same year as the corresponding university. However, a study conducted by Ali (1990) reported that academic planners in 33 % of Pakistani universities did not see the value of the library, which has been a major flaw in the past. The government of Pakistan established the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002 as a governing body for universities. Funding, supervising, regulating, and certifying the nation's higher education institutions are the primary responsibilities of HEC. In 2002, the HEC issued a policy for universities "each university must have a library to retain the status of university". Today, the university libraries in Pakistan are one of the most cutting-edge

libraries in the country. The 10 universities existing in 1981 have grown to 266 by 2024 and almost all these universities have their own library buildings (HEC, 2024).

## V. Automation of University Libraries in Pakistan

Library automation in Pakistan started in the late 1980s. Initially, librarians used computers only for cataloging and inventory purposes. However, later on, the university libraries also managed to start automated circulation, serials management, and acquisition. The Netherlands Library Development Project (NLDP) for Pakistan began in the 1990s and had a major impact on the library automation landscape by introducing IT into curriculum development, hardware and software development, networking, and librarians training (Haider, 1998). Today a majority of university libraries in Pakistan are partially automated and use different types of library software in their daily operations (Ramzan & Singh, 2009). Even a few university libraries in Pakistan are also using costly international commercial software e.g. Virtua, and Insignia, etc. Some Indigenous free software has also been developed by Pakistani library professionals that are being used in university libraries e.g. LIMS and Koha.

## VI. University Library Services

The services of a library are a core function of its existence and today the university libraries in Pakistan are offering various modern services to their patrons. These services have been specifically designed considering the information needs of the users and the current technological developments around the world. Some common university library services include:

- Lending services
- Internet service
- Digital library services
- Digital reference services
- Research support services
- Current awareness service
- Online catalogue
- Scanning services
- Plagiarism detection
- Electronic document delivery
- Online video conferencing
- Remote access to e-resources
- Multimedia resources & services
- Quiet reading spaces
- Collaborative study spaces
- Computer workstations
- Inter library loans

- Books purchasing
- Photocopying service
- Information literacy programs
- Book exhibitions
- Library web portals

## VII.  Development of Modern University Libraries in Pakistan

Over the last two decades, some modern and state-of-the-art libraries have been established in Pakistani universities. These modern libraries are well-equipped in terms of printed and digital collections, automated services, professional staff, modern architecture, and ICT facilities. Some examples of such modern libraries include Junaid Zaidi Library at COMSATS University Islamabad; Gad & Birgit Rausing Library at LUMS; NUST Central Library at NUST; Ewing Memorial Library at FCC University and IBA Library at IBA Karachi. All these libraries are comparable to the modern libraries of the developed world.

## VIII.  Challenges of Accessing Books and University Libraries in Pakistan

Although university libraries play a pivotal role in higher education and research in Pakistan however, there are some challenges regarding the accessibility of these libraries and their collections and services throughout the country for the general public. Some of these challenges have been discussed in the following section.

### 1.  Geographical Disparities

A majority of the university libraries in Pakistan are based in urban areas, leaving rural populations underserved. Most university libraries are located in the big cities like Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Islamabad. Therefore, students in rural regions face significant difficulties in accessing library resources, affecting their academic performance. Governments and private institutions prioritize developing universities in cities where the population is larger and education levels are higher. Rural areas mostly lack proper roads, public transport, or library buildings, making it difficult for people to reach nearby towns or cities to access libraries. The masses in rural areas have fewer interests in education than urban areas, so governments see less "return on investment" for building libraries in those areas. Ultimately, people in rural areas have limited opportunities to access books, knowledge, and research materials. On the contrary, urban students can easily access library resources, which widen the educational gap between rural and urban citizens of Pakistan.

## 2. Economic Constraints

Funding shortages limit the establishment of new universities and university libraries as well as the maintenance of existing ones in Pakistan. Whereas the high price of books makes personal collections unaffordable for many citizens. University libraries largely depend on government support, but due to budget cuts, libraries are often the first to lose funding (Mahmood et al., 2006). Books, journals, and online databases are expensive, and libraries struggle to purchase them, especially research-oriented materials (Akhtar, 2007). Libraries require money for staffing, books preservation, and new technologies like e-books and digital resources. Libraries cannot buy updated versions of books, leading to collections that no longer meet the needs of students or researchers. University libraries also struggle to pay for subscriptions to research journal databases like Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, Science Direct, Wiley, etc., which are essential for research. Wealthy students can buy books but students from low-income families rely solely on university libraries, which usually do not have adequate titles for every student. In developing countries like Pakistan, many university libraries cannot afford full access to international research databases. Therefore, students and researchers mostly struggle to access essential journal articles for their theses, dissertations, and research assignments.

## 3. Technological Barriers

Limited internet access and digital literacy hinder the use of online resources in rural areas. Many libraries in Pakistan also lack the infrastructure to digitize their collections. Rural areas often lack internet facilities, which are essential for online libraries and e-learning. People in rural areas mostly do not have access to laptops, or computers required to use digital libraries. Many people, especially in remote areas, do not know how to use online platforms, access databases, or navigate e-books. Students and researchers in rural areas cannot access online libraries, e-books, or research journals, affecting the quality of their work. While students in urban areas benefit from access to digital libraries, rural students are excluded, causing an imbalance in education. HEC Digital Library in Pakistan provides free access to research databases for university students. However, students in remote areas with no internet access or limited IT skills mostly struggle to use these resources (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2021).

## 4. Limitation of Membership for General Public

Lastly, the university libraries are mostly accessible only to the respective university academic community; therefore, only university members can avail of the library resources. Almost in all cases, the accessibility, services, collections, and membership of university libraries remain closed to the general public which is a real challenge

for the masses in Pakistan. However, a few university libraries also offer external membership to the general public but this is only available for a limited timeframe.

## IX. Conclusion and Recommendations

Access to libraries and books is essential for education, knowledge creation, and lifelong learning. However, several challenges limit this access in Pakistan. Geographical disparities leave rural areas underserved, while economic constraints limit the development of libraries and personal book ownership. Technological barriers exclude people from the benefits of online libraries, and the limitation of library membership restricts access to library services and their collections. Nevertheless, in this age of information, university libraries in Pakistan are trying to offer up-to-date services to their patrons. Even with certain challenges, university libraries in Pakistan are striving to offer modern services to their patrons. Moreover, the country has some excellent examples of modern university libraries that are on par with those in the developed world. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan is actively contributing to the development of Pakistani university libraries. HEC offers university libraries various funding programs as well. Consequently, the condition of Pakistan's university libraries has significantly improved over the years. Improving access to books and libraries in Pakistan requires a multifaceted approach involving government support, technological innovation, and community engagement. By addressing these challenges, Pakistan can unlock the potential of its people and foster a culture of knowledge and learning.

In light of these conclusions, it is suggested that universities with affiliated libraries should be established in rural areas of Pakistan. Moreover, the budget of university libraries should also be increased. This will help in building their printed collections and subscribing to expensive journal databases. University libraries should also seek book donations from NGOs, publishers, or international organizations like UNESCO to increase their collections. The government should take measures to provide internet facilities in rural areas. University libraries should also offer external membership to the general public so that they can access and avail themselves of the services and collections of libraries. These measures can bridge the access gap and ensure that everyone, regardless of location, gender, or economic status, can benefit from libraries and books.

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**Zusammenfassung:** Der Zugang zu Büchern und Universitätsbibliotheken ist ein Eckpfeiler des Bildungs- und intellektuellen Wachstums, steht in Pakistan jedoch vor erheblichen Herausforderungen, die durch wirtschaftliche, geografische und technologische Barrieren geprägt sind. Dieser Artikel untersucht die historische Entwicklung, den aktuellen Status und die Dienste von Universitätsbibliotheken in Pakistan und beleuchtet ihre Entwicklung zu modernen Zentren für digitale und gedruckte Ressourcen. Er erörtert die ungleichmäßige geografische Verteilung von Bibliotheken, wirtschaftliche Einschränkungen, die sich auf Sammlungen und Abonnements auswirken, technologische Barrieren in ländlichen Gebieten und den eingeschränkten Zugang für die breite Öffentlichkeit. Trotz dieser Herausforderungen haben Fortschritte wie Automatisierung und die Einrichtung hochmoderner Bibliotheken ihre Rolle in der Wissenschaft aufgewertet. Zu den Empfehlungen gehören die Ausweitung der Bibliotheken auf ländliche Gebiete, die Erhöhung der Finanzierung, die Suche nach Buchspenden, die Verbesserung des Internetzugangs und die Ausweitung der Mitgliedschaft auf die breite Öffentlichkeit. Die Bewältigung dieser Herausforderungen kann Zugangslücken überbrücken und eine Kultur des Wissens und des lebenslangen Lernens in Pakistan fördern.

**Summary:** Access to books and university libraries is a cornerstone of educational and intellectual growth, yet in Pakistan, it faces significant challenges shaped by economic, geographic, and technological barriers. This article examines the historical development, current status, and services of university libraries in Pakistan, highlighting their transformation into modern hubs of digital and printed resources. It discusses the uneven geographical distribution of libraries, economic constraints affecting collections and subscriptions, technological barriers in rural areas, and restricted access for the general public. Despite these challenges, advancements like automation and the establishment of state-of-the-art libraries have elevated their role in academia. Recommendations include expanding libraries to rural areas, increasing funding, seeking book donations, improving internet access, and extending membership to the general public. Addressing these challenges can bridge access gaps and foster a culture of knowledge and lifelong learning in Pakistan.