

Strategic Priorities for AI Integration and Digital Transformation in Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This study develops a strategic framework for the integration of artificial intelligence and digital transformation in academic libraries to enhance knowledge management and user services in higher education. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzes strategic plans from the top 25 universities according to the Times Higher Education 2024 World University Rankings. Qualitative content analysis (validated by Cohen's Kappa, $\kappa = 0.737$), Shannon entropy for component prioritization, and sensitivity analysis were used to identify key priorities and assess result stability. The findings reveal that digitization and digital preservation constitute the dominant strategic priority, followed by digital learning environments, open access initiatives, and data analytics. While interest in AI is growing, the implementation of advanced AI applications such as chatbots and intelligent agents remains limited. Key barriers include legacy infrastructures, ethical concerns (algorithmic bias, privacy, and transparency), and a shortage of AI skilled professionals' challenges that are particularly acute in resource-constrained settings. The proposed scalable strategic framework adopts a phased approach: beginning with foundational digitization, advancing to data analytics and AI-powered services, and culminating in mature integration with strong ethical governance. This framework is specifically tailored for developing countries, offering contextual recommendations for academic libraries in Iran. By systematically mapping strategic priorities from leading institutions and integrating theoretical and practical dimensions, this study advances knowledge management theories particularly Nonaka's SECI model and provides actionable guidance for library administrators seeking to build inclusive, intelligent, and sustainable academic libraries worldwide.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Academic Libraries, Digital Transformation, Strategic Framework, Knowledge Management, Developing Countries, Phased Implementation

1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence into academic libraries has transformed their role as dynamic knowledge hubs in higher education, aligning with global trends in digital transformation. Technologies such as natural language processing, machine learning, automated

chatbots, and big data analytics have revolutionized library operations, enhancing information retrieval, resource digitization, personalized user services, and more effective knowledge management (Adilovic, 2024; Gasparini, 2022; Van Thinh, 2026). These advancements streamline workflows, support interdisciplinary research, and position

academic libraries as critical drivers of academic excellence and innovation.

As universities worldwide face unprecedented growth in scholarly resources, with over three million articles published annually in Scopus-indexed journals (Semantic, 2024), AI has become a strategic imperative for modernizing library systems and improving access to information. Leading institutions have pioneered AI adoption, setting important benchmarks for academic libraries worldwide (Padilla, 2019). For example, the University of Hong Kong has employed AI-driven analytics for collection management, the University of Toronto has leveraged machine learning to enhance search precision, and the Bodleian Libraries at Oxford University have prioritized digitization and automation in their Strategic Plan 2022–2027 (Bodleian Libraries, 2022).

Despite these promising developments, prior studies have largely focused on specific AI tools (e.g., chatbots or automation) or isolated aspects such as ethics and knowledge management, while comprehensive analyses of strategic priorities across institutions remain limited (Huang et al., 2023). Furthermore, there is a noticeable gap in the development of scalable and contextually adaptable frameworks, especially for resource-constrained academic libraries in developing countries.

Technical barriers significantly hinder widespread AI adoption. Legacy infrastructures incompatible with modern AI systems, the high computational requirements of large language models, and challenges related to interoperability with existing integrated library systems continue to present major obstacles. Ethical and human resource challenges further complicate the process. Issues such as algorithmic bias, user privacy, lack of transparency, and a shortage of AI-skilled professionals are frequently reported, with particular severity in developing countries like Iran (Cox et al., 2023; Oladokun & et al., 2025; Rahmani, 2023).

A critical research gap persists: the lack of systematic, comprehensive frameworks for strategic AI integration in academic libraries that can bridge global best practices with diverse economic and cultural realities (Huang, 2023). While some studies have examined AI ethics (Cox et al., 2023) or knowledge management, few have analyzed the strategic plans of leading universities to identify prioritized components and derive adaptable implementation models. Additionally, the potential of advanced AI technologies such as large language models (LLMs) in library contexts remains underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a mixed-methods analysis of publicly available strategic plans from the top 25 universities (Times Higher Education 2024 ranking). The selection of these institutions is based on their recognized leadership in research, innovation, and digital initiatives, providing valuable benchmarks for academic libraries worldwide. The study examines approximately 1,200 pages of strategic documents to map AI-related priorities, identify implementation barriers, and propose a scalable strategic framework with particular attention to resource-limited settings such as Iran.

The research is guided by three main objectives: (1) to identify and prioritize key AI and digital transformation components in leading university library strategies; (2) to assess technical, ethical, and resource-related barriers to AI adoption; and (3) to develop a scalable and adaptable framework for AI integration across diverse contexts. These objectives are pursued through the following research questions: (1) What AI-related components are prioritized in the strategic plans of top-ranked university libraries? (2) What are the main barriers hindering AI adoption in academic libraries? (3) How can global insights from leading institutions inform contextually appropriate AI strategies for libraries in developing countries?

By systematically mapping strategic priorities and proposing a practical framework, this study contributes to knowledge management theories, particularly Nonaka's SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), and provides actionable guidance for library administrators aiming to build inclusive, intelligent, and data-driven academic libraries.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopts an applied mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative content analysis with quantitative prioritization techniques to develop a strategic framework for artificial intelligence (AI) integration in academic libraries. The research was conducted in three distinct phases to ensure systematic collection, rigorous analysis, and objective prioritization of data from strategic plans of leading university libraries. This methodology aligns with established standards in library and information science research, emphasizing reliability, transparency, and replicability (Bazeley, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Design and Data Collection: The study examined strategic plans from the top 25 universities according to the Times Higher Education (THE) 2024

World University Rankings. These institutions were selected as they represent global leaders in research, innovation, and digital initiatives, providing valuable benchmarks for best practices in academic libraries.

Data consisted of 25 strategic documents published or updated primarily between 2018 and 2024. These included standalone library strategic plans, university-level digital transformation strategies, and institutional plans with substantial library components. When a dedicated library strategic plan was unavailable, the most relevant university-wide document addressing library services or digital strategies was selected. A detailed list of all documents—including titles, publication years, document types, and access URLs (where available)—is provided in Appendix A.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) publicly available on official university or library websites; (2) written in English or with sufficient English content for analysis; and (3) explicitly addressing library services, digital transformation, scholarly communication, or emerging technologies. Documents were retrieved between October and December 2024. The final corpus totaled approximately 1,200 pages. This pragmatic approach acknowledges that not all leading universities maintain separate, recent library-specific strategic plans, but all address relevant themes at the institutional level.

6. Data Analysis

Phase 1: Qualitative Content Analysis Strategic documents were analyzed using conventional qualitative content analysis. The process began with open coding to identify initial concepts directly from the data (e.g., “digitization of collections,” “digital preservation,” “data analytics,” “machine learning,” “AI,” “chatbot,” “algorithmic bias,” “open access”). Through axial coding, these concepts were grouped into broader categories and sub-categories. Categories were iteratively refined through constant comparison. MAXQDA 2024 software was used for systematic coding, memo-writing, and data management. Two researchers (the author and an independent coder with expertise in library science) independently coded the documents to enhance rigor. Disagreements were resolved through detailed discussion and consensus until full agreement was achieved on the final coding scheme.

Phase 2: Intercoder Reliability To assess the reliability of the coding process, a second researcher independently recoded a random sample of 20% of the documents (5 documents). Intercoder reliability was measured using

Cohen’s Kappa coefficient, yielding $\kappa = 0.737$, which indicates substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Although double-coding 20% of the corpus is a common and accepted practice in content analysis studies of complex documents, all discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussions, further strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings.

Phase 3: Quantitative Prioritization Following qualitative coding, Shannon entropy was employed to prioritize the identified components based on their frequency of mention and strategic emphasis across the 25 documents. This method was chosen because it provides an objective measure of the relative importance and distribution of priorities, accounting for both frequency and diversity rather than relying solely on raw counts. The entropy formula used was:

$$H = -\sum(p_i \log_2 p_i)$$

where p_i represents the probability (relative frequency) of each component. Higher entropy values indicate greater diversity (less dominance) in priorities. Sensitivity analysis was then conducted by systematically removing each component one at a time and recalculating the entropy value to evaluate its impact on the overall model stability. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation) were calculated using SPSS Version 29.

Alternative Approaches Although large language models (LLMs) could have been used for initial coding or keyword extraction, this study prioritized manual qualitative content analysis due to its superior ability to capture contextual nuances, institutional priorities, and subtle differences between “digital transformation” and explicit “AI” initiatives. The strengths and limitations of LLM-assisted approaches are discussed in the Discussion section.

Ethical Considerations: As the study utilized only publicly available documents, no institutional review board (IRB) approval was required. Institutions were not identified beyond their aggregated strategic priorities in the reporting of findings to maintain focus on patterns rather than individual cases. The research adhered to ethical guidelines for data handling and scholarly reporting (American Psychological, 2020).

Visualization and Rigor: To enhance methodological transparency, this research presents the three-phase research process, including data collection, coding procedures, reliability checks, and prioritization steps. This visualization supports accessibility for diverse readers and aligns with best practices in information science research.

3. Findings and Results

All 25 universities in the sample possessed formal strategic plans or digital transformation documents. Eighteen of these documents (72%) were published or updated after 2020, reflecting recent institutional priorities on digital futures. Plan durations varied from 4 to 10 years, with most spanning 4–6 years. The documents ranged from

high-level vision statements to more detailed implementation roadmaps.

Content analysis demonstrated that all universities addressed digital transformation and emerging technologies. While the explicit use of the term “Artificial Intelligence” varied, concepts such as machine learning, data analytics, automation, and intelligent systems appeared across the sample in different forms and levels of emphasis.

Table 1

Frequency and Prioritization of Key Components in Strategic Plans

Rank	Component	No. of Universities	Significance
1	Digitization and Digital Preservation	22	High
2	Digital Learning Spaces, Skills & Environments	19	High
3	Open Access, Open Science & Scholarly Communication	16	High
4	Data Services, Analytics & Interdisciplinary Collaboration	15	High
5	AI Applications & Advanced Technologies	13–14	Medium-High
6	Ethical, Social & Responsible Technology Considerations	8–9	Medium

Shannon entropy analysis ($H = 2.259$) was used to quantify the distribution of priorities. As shown in Table 2, sensitivity analysis confirmed that Digitization and Digital

Preservation, along with Data Analytics, are the most influential components.

Table 2

Sensitivity Analysis – Impact of Component Removal on Entropy

Component	Initial Entropy	Entropy after Removal	Change
Digitization and Digital Preservation	2.259	2.214	0.315
Artificial Intelligence & Data Analytics	2.259	2.198	0.330
Open Access and Open Publishing	2.259	2.210	0.319
Interdisciplinary Research & Digital Collaboration	2.259	2.215	0.314
Digital Learning Spaces and Environments	2.259	2.238	0.291
Ethical, Social & Responsible Technology	2.259	2.345	0.184

Strategic interest in AI is growing; however, explicit implementation of advanced AI tools remains limited and in early stages for most institutions.

Table 3

Examples of Specific AI Applications Mentioned

University	Specific AI / Advanced Technology Applications
University of Oxford	AI-driven resource management and collection processing
Peking University	Xiaotu AI chatbot and RFID-based intelligent systems
Imperial College London	AI training for staff and automation of digital services
Carnegie Mellon University	Advanced search systems and resource management automation
MIT	Machine learning for information discovery and computational research
University of Cambridge	Data mining and machine learning for research support

Attention to ethical aspects remains emerging.

Table 4

Examples of AI Ethics and Risk Considerations

University	Mentioned Ethical/Risk Issues
University of Oxford	Transparency, privacy, and data protection
University of Cambridge	Algorithmic bias and privacy
ETH Zurich	Security risks and ethical challenges of AI
Carnegie Mellon University	Transparency and responsible AI use

A comparative analysis of the strategic plans reveals notable regional differences in emphasis:

Table 5

Regional Comparison of Strategic Priorities

Region	Digitization & Preservation	Digital Learning & Skills	Open Access & Scholarly Comm.	Data Analytics & AI	Ethical & Social Considerations	Overall Pattern
Europe (e.g., Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, UCL, ETH Zurich)	Very Strong	Strong	Strong	Medium	Medium	Infrastructure-first, preservation-focused
North America (e.g., MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Chicago, CMU)	Strong	Very Strong	Very Strong	Strong	Medium-High	Innovation & open scholarship-oriented
Asia (e.g., Tsinghua, Peking)	Strong	Strong	Medium	Strong	Medium	Interdisciplinary & skills development focus

Note: Categorization is based on the relative emphasis and frequency observed in the reviewed strategic documents.

The results clearly show that leading universities are prioritizing foundational infrastructure especially digitization and long-term digital preservation as the critical first step before advancing toward AI-driven analytics and user-centered services. This phased approach provides valuable lessons for libraries in resource-limited contexts.

While strategic interest in AI is widespread, concrete deployment of advanced applications (such as chatbots or intelligent agents) is still limited. Most references to AI appear within broader digital transformation initiatives. Ethical considerations are receiving increasing attention but have not yet become a central strategic priority for the majority of institutions.

These empirical findings form the basis for the scalable strategic framework proposed in the Discussion section.

Proposed Strategic Framework for Developing Countries (e.g., Iran) Based on the observed global patterns, the following phased recommendations are suggested:

1. **Phase 1: Foundation:** Large-scale digitization and robust digital preservation systems.

2. **Phase 2: Intelligence:** Development of data analytics, AI-powered search, and user insights.
3. **Phase 3: Integration & Maturity:** Implementation of advanced AI tools with comprehensive ethical governance.

Cross-cutting Elements: Continuous staff training, international collaboration, open-source solutions, and sustainable funding models.

4. Discussion

This study offers a systematic analysis of strategic priorities for digital transformation and artificial intelligence integration in academic libraries through the examination of strategic plans from the top 25 universities according to the Times Higher Education (THE) 2024 World University Rankings. The findings identify six primary domains of focus: digitization and digital preservation, digital learning spaces and skills development, open access and scholarly communication, data services and analytics, AI applications and advanced technologies, and ethical and social considerations. These

results provide a realistic roadmap of current institutional priorities while highlighting the substantial gap between strategic aspirations and the actual implementation of advanced AI tools.

The clear dominance of digitization and digital preservation as the foundational priority aligns strongly with previous research, which consistently emphasizes that robust digital infrastructure is a prerequisite for effective deployment of advanced AI applications (Cox et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2023). Similarly, the strong emphasis on data services, analytics, and digital learning environments reflects the growing recognition of data as a strategic asset and the need to prepare users for data-rich academic environments. However, explicit and advanced AI applications—such as chatbots, intelligent recommendation systems, or large-scale machine learning deployments—remain limited, confirming that AI adoption in academic libraries is still in an emergent phase (Hervieux & Wheatley, 2021).

Regional differences further enrich the findings. European institutions tend to prioritize infrastructure and long-term preservation, North American universities show stronger emphasis on open scholarship, innovation, and AI experimentation, while Asian leading universities place notable focus on interdisciplinary collaboration and digital skills development. This comparative perspective underscores that strategic priorities are shaped by institutional context, resources, and cultural factors.

This study contributes to the literature by moving beyond single-tool or ethics-focused analyses to provide a broad, empirical mapping of strategic priorities across leading institutions. While Cox et al. (2023) primarily addressed ethical frameworks (Cox et al., 2023), and Jin (2025) examined AI in knowledge management through a case study approach, the present research offers a comparative view of actual institutional plans (Jin, 2025). It complements theoretical discussions on large language models (LLMs) in libraries by demonstrating why foundational digitization continues to precede sophisticated AI implementations in practice. Unlike many previous studies that remain conceptual, this research grounds its conclusions in documented strategic intentions of elite universities.

This research advances knowledge management theory by empirically linking strategic priorities to Nonaka's SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The strong emphasis on digitization corresponds to the Externalization phase (converting tacit knowledge into explicit digital resources),

while data analytics and interdisciplinary collaboration support the Combination and Internalization phases. The proposed framework extends the SECI model by adding two critical layers: contextual adaptation for resource-limited settings and ethical governance as a cross-cutting dimension. This extension provides a more comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding AI-enabled knowledge creation and digital transformation in contemporary academic libraries.

4.1. Practical Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for academic library administrators, particularly in resource-constrained environments. The proposed scalable strategic framework adopts a phased approach that mirrors the patterns observed in leading universities:

1. **Foundation Phase:** Prioritize large-scale digitization and robust digital preservation systems.
2. **Intelligence Phase:** Build data analytics capabilities and introduce AI-powered tools for search optimization and user insights.
3. **Integration and Maturity Phase:** Deploy advanced applications such as chatbots and recommendation systems alongside comprehensive ethical frameworks.
4. **Cross-cutting Elements:** Implement continuous staff training, user feedback mechanisms, and sustainable international collaborations throughout all phases.

For developing countries such as Iran, direct transplantation of strategies from elite Western or Asian universities is neither feasible nor advisable. Significant differences in infrastructure, funding, human resources, and policy environments must be considered. Therefore, the framework stresses contextual adaptation: leveraging open-source and low-cost AI solutions, focusing on high-impact applications (e.g., AI-assisted metadata generation), and integrating training programs with national digital literacy initiatives. Ethical considerations including privacy, algorithmic bias, and transparency should be embedded from the earliest phases to build public trust and ensure regulatory compliance.

4.2. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, reliance on publicly available strategic

documents may exclude internal or unpublished plans, potentially biasing results toward more transparent institutions. Second, the sample was limited to the top 25 globally ranked universities, restricting generalizability to mid- or lower-ranked and resource-constrained institutions. Third, although intercoder reliability measures were employed, the qualitative nature of the data inevitably involves some degree of interpretive judgment. Finally, given the rapid evolution of AI technologies, strategic plans analyzed in late 2024 may already be partially outdated by the time of publication.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the transformative potential of artificial intelligence in evolving academic libraries into intelligent, user-centered knowledge ecosystems. By systematically analyzing strategic plans of leading universities, it identifies digitization as the current dominant priority while revealing persistent gaps in advanced AI implementation and ethical integration. The proposed scalable and contextually adaptable framework offers a practical pathway for libraries worldwide especially in developing countries to navigate digital transformation effectively.

Theoretically, the research enriches knowledge management and information science by bridging empirical strategic priorities with established models such as Nonaka's SECI. Practically, it equips library administrators and policymakers with realistic, phased strategies for investment and implementation. Ultimately, successful AI integration depends not only on technological capabilities but also on human capacity building, ethical responsibility, and sensitivity to local contexts.

Future research should evaluate the cost-effectiveness and real-world impact of specific AI applications, examine adoption patterns in non-elite institutions, explore hybrid LLM-qualitative analysis methods, and conduct longitudinal studies to track the evolution of library strategies over time. Bridging the gap between global best practices and local realities will be essential for creating inclusive, equitable, and intelligent academic libraries that effectively serve 21st-century scholarship and society.

Authors' Contributions

This research was conducted solely by the author. The author conceptualized the study, conducted the research, analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, I have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request via email.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

Not applicable, as this study did not involve human or animal subjects requiring ethical approval.

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Appendix A. List of Strategic Documents Analyzed

No.	University	Document Title / Focus	Year	Document Type
1	University of Oxford	Bodleian Libraries Strategy 2022–2027	2022–2027	Library Strategic Plan
2	Stanford University	Stanford PACS Strategic Plan 2021–2024	2021	Center Strategic Plan
3	MIT	Institute-wide Task Force on the Future of Libraries	2016	Task Force Report (updated references)
4	Harvard University	Countway Library Strategic Plan 2017–2022	2017-2022/2019-2023	Library Strategic Plan
5	University of Cambridge	Cambridge University Libraries Digital Preservation Strategy	2019–2024	Digital Strategy
6	Princeton University	Princeton Campus Plan & Library References	2020	Institutional Plan
7	University of California	Princeton Campus Plan & Library References	2019	
8	Imperial College London	Library Services Strategic Plan 2023–2024	2023	Library Strategic Plan
9	University of California, Berkeley	Berkeley Library Strategic Plan 2017–2021	2017	Library Strategic Plan
10	Yale University	Yale University Library Sustainability Action Plan	2016	Library Strategic Plan
11	ETH Zurich	Strategy and Development Plan 2021–2024	2021	University Strategic Plan
12	Tsinghua University	Tsinghua University Strategic Documents & Library Guide	2020–2023	University & Library Documents
13	University of Chicago	University of Chicago Library Strategic Plan 2025–2028	2024	Library Strategic Plan
14	Peking University	Peking University Strategic Planning Documents	2021–2023	University Strategic Plan
15	Johns Hopkins University	Progress and Purpose – Strategic Plan Update	2022	University Strategic Plan
16	University of Pennsylvania	Penn Libraries Strategic Plan 2020–2025	2020-2025	Library Strategic Plan
17	Columbia University	Columbia University Libraries Strategic Plan	2019	Library Strategic Plan
18	UCLA	UCLA’s 2023 strategic plan	2023-2028	UCLA’s 2023 strategic plan
19	National University of Singapore	National University of Singapore strategic plan	2018	strategic plan
20	Cornell University	Cornell University Library Repository Principles and Strategies Handbook	2018	Library Repository Principles
21	University of Toronto	University of Toronto Mississauga Library Strategic Plan	2017	Library Strategic Plan
22	UCL	Library Services Strategic Operating Plan 2021–24	2021-2024	Library Strategic Plan
23	University of Michigan	University of Michigan Library Strategic Directions	2023-2025	Library Strategy
24	Carnegie Mellon University	Carnegie Mellon University Libraries Strategic Plan	2025	Library Strategic Plan
25	University of Washington	UW Libraries Strategic Plan 2023–2026	2023-2026	Library Strategic Plan