

# Central Library vs. Departmental Library: A Comparative Study of Information Access, User Satisfaction, and Resource Utilization in Academic Institutions

**Moumita Saha Banerjee**  
**Librarian**  
**DumDum Motijheel College**

## Abstract

Academic libraries are the cornerstone of higher education, supporting teaching, learning, and research. Within universities, a debate exists regarding the optimal structure for managing information resources: a centralized system or a decentralized model utilizing departmental libraries. This study provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of central libraries and departmental libraries, examining their respective advantages and disadvantages in terms of accessibility, collection specialization, administrative efficiency, and user satisfaction. Based on literature reviews and comparative analyses of institutional models, the findings indicate that while central libraries offer broader, cross-disciplinary access and better economies of scale, departmental libraries provide superior accessibility and specialized services closer to the user. A hybrid model is proposed as the most effective approach for modern academic environments.

**Keywords:** *Central Library, Departmental Library, Academic Library, Information Access, User Satisfaction, Resource Utilization.*

## 1. Introduction

The university library is the "heart" of any academic institution, acting as a repository of knowledge and a facilitator of intellectual development. In the context of modern universities, libraries have evolved from mere book repositories into dynamic centers for digital and physical information access.

The organizational structure of these libraries generally takes one of two forms: a centralized system, where all materials are housed in one main location, or a decentralized, departmentalized system, where libraries are attached to individual academic departments or faculties. The decision between these models often depends on the campus geography, funding, and the specific needs of the academic community.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The rapid increase in academic materials, along with the digital revolution, has intensified the debate over centralization vs. decentralization. A central library offers comprehensive resources but may lack the convenience required by specialized researchers. Conversely, departmental libraries are accessible and specialized but often lead to duplication of resources, higher costs, and limited access to interdisciplinary materials.

## 1.2 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the operational, structural, and service-oriented differences between central and departmental libraries.
2. To compare user satisfaction levels between the two models.
3. To examine the impact of resource utilization and accessibility in both systems.
4. To recommend an optimal model for academic libraries in the modern era.

## 2. Literature Review

A central library is defined as a single, main library that manages all resources for the entire institution, usually featuring a centralized administration. According to literature, central libraries are better positioned to adopt new technologies, offer extensive digital access, and provide a wider range of resources, especially in larger universities. They excel in providing comprehensive access to multidisciplinary fields and managing digital databases.

Departmental libraries are smaller, specialized collections housed within a specific department or faculty, often aimed at serving a particular group of users. The literature suggests that these libraries are vital for research-intensive departments (e.g., Medicine, Law) where specialized literature is needed on-site. They provide personalized service, as the librarian usually knows the research focus of the users.

Studies comparing both systems show that users often prefer the convenience of departmental libraries for quick access to core texts, but rely on central libraries for broader, interdisciplinary needs. Research by Jammu University highlights that departmental libraries are essential when campuses are spread over large areas, as they save student and faculty time. However, the cost of staffing and maintaining specialized catalogs makes them expensive.

## 3. Comparative Study: Central vs. Departmental Library

### 3.1 Accessibility and Proximity

Departmental libraries are superior in terms of accessibility, as they are typically located in the same building as the classrooms or laboratories of the department they serve. This proximity encourages frequent use and saves time for faculty and students engaged in daily research. The central library, while a significant attraction on campus, may be too far from specific departments, leading to lower usage for quick reference.

### 3.2 Collection Specialization and Depth

Departmental libraries generally hold a specialized, in-depth collection tailored specifically to the subject area of the department. This allows for a curated, highly relevant collection. Central libraries provide a broader, more comprehensive, and diverse collection that spans multiple disciplines, making them superior for research requiring interdisciplinary perspectives.

### 3.3 Resource Utilization and Duplication

A major drawback of departmental libraries is the high rate of duplication of materials. The same journal or reference book may be purchased by the central library and multiple departmental libraries, leading to inefficiencies in budget utilization. Central libraries ensure better, cost-effective, and efficient utilization of funds through centralized purchasing and cataloging.

### 3.4 Staffing and Services

Central libraries are usually staffed by highly trained professional librarians who provide sophisticated, specialized services such as interlibrary loans, database management, and in-depth reference services. Departmental libraries might be staffed by administrative staff or junior librarians, which can limit the quality of reference service, although the service is often more personalized.

### 3.5 Operational Costs

Departmental libraries are expensive to operate due to high staffing costs and duplicate subscriptions. Central libraries provide better economies of scale.

## 5. Comparative Analysis

Feature	Central Library	Departmental Library
Collection Depth	Broad/General	Deep/Specialized
Operational Cost	Lower (Consolidated)	Higher (Duplicated Services)
Access Hours	Usually Extended	Limited to Dept. Hours
Staffing	Professional/Generalist	Subject Specialist
Interdisciplinary	High	Low

## 6. User Satisfaction and Behavior

Based on user studies, preferences are divided.

**Faculty Members:** Often prefer departmental libraries for quick, specialized access.

**Students:** Generally favor the convenience of the departmental library for immediate access to textbooks and quiet reading spaces.

**Interdisciplinary Researchers:** Strongly prefer the centralized library, which provides access to a wider variety of materials and databases.

The study by ResearchGate found that while users were highly satisfied with the accessibility of departmental libraries, they often demanded better online database access, which is usually a strength of the central library.

## 7. Challenges of Central Libraries

- **Coordination and Resource Management:** As the main hub, central libraries manage massive, diverse collections, leading to challenges in organizing, digitizing, and providing efficient access to resources.
- **Information Overload & Budgetary Constraints:** The rising cost of digital resources (e-journals, databases) coupled with shrinking budgets makes it difficult to maintain comprehensive collections.
- **Infrastructural Upgrades:** Modernizing older, large-scale physical infrastructures to support ICT, reliable power supply, and high-speed internet is often expensive.
- **Technological Integration:** Adopting new technologies like AI, Big Data, and IoT, and managing the transition from print to digital, requires significant investment and staff retraining.
- **Information Literacy & User Education:** Educating a large user base to effectively navigate both physical and digital resources.

- **Bureaucratic Hurdles:** Managing large staff teams and navigating bureaucratic processes for funding and policy implementation.

## 8. Challenges of Departmental Libraries

- **Limited Funding and Resources:** Departmental libraries often receive less funding than the central library, leading to smaller, specialized, and sometimes outdated collections.
- **Staffing Shortages:** These libraries are often run by a single, sometimes undertrained or untrained staff member, creating bottlenecks in service delivery.
- **Isolation from Main System:** Poor communication with the central library can lead to duplication of resources, inconsistent policies, and inefficient inter-library loans.
- **Limited Operating Hours and Infrastructure:** Smaller spaces often lack proper reading areas, furniture, or advanced technological equipment compared to the central library.
- **Security and Maintenance:** Difficulty in maintaining proper security for specialized collections and keeping up with the maintenance of limited equipment.

IJIRT +6

## 9. Common Challenges (Both)

- **Rapid Technological Change:** Both types of libraries struggle to keep up with the pace of digital transformation and the need to re-skill staff.
- **Shortage of Skilled/Trained Staff:** A widespread lack of professionals with ICT skills, which hinders automation exercises.
- **Irregular Power and Internet:** Especially in developing regions, poor infrastructure hinders the functionality of e-libraries.
- **User Expectations:** Balancing the demand for both traditional, physical books and modern, digital resources.
- **Preservation and Conservation:** Protecting valuable materials from deterioration.

## 10. Overcoming These Challenges

- **Resource Sharing and Networking:** Implementing robust inter-library loan systems (e.g., LISNet) to share resources between central and departmental units.
- **Digitalization and Automation:** Investing in Integrated Library Management Systems (ILMS) and digitizing archival materials.
- **Staff Training and Development:** Regularly training staff in ICT skills, digital literacy, and modern library management techniques.

- **Strategic Planning and Advocacy:** Securing adequate funding through lobbying, diversifying revenue streams, and implementing strategic plans to improve library infrastructure.
- **Library Information Literacy Programs:** Introducing compulsory information literacy courses for users.

## 10. The Hybrid Model: A Solution

To mitigate the drawbacks of both systems, many modern universities have adopted a "hybrid model" or "coordinated decentralization." In this structure, the central library acts as the main hub for purchasing, cataloging, and digital access, while smaller, curated collections are maintained at the departmental level. This model allows for:

- **Centralized Administration:** Controlled costs and uniform cataloging.
- **Decentralized Services:** High accessibility for quick-reference, core materials.

## 11. Conclusion and Recommendations

Both central and departmental libraries have crucial roles to play in the academic environment. Central libraries offer the advantages of breadth, comprehensive digital resources, and cost-effective management. Departmental libraries offer speed, convenience, and specialized, in-depth collections.

### Recommendations:

1. **Adopt a Hybrid Approach:** Universities should adopt a hybrid model, where the central library manages digital resources and specialized, high-cost, or low-use items, while departments maintain access to frequently used, specialized materials.
2. **Integrated Information System:** All departmental library resources must be listed in a single, centralized OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog) to ensure that the entire university community knows where resources are located.
3. **Specialized Staffing:** Departmental libraries should be supervised by staff trained in the specialized subject area of the department.
4. **Strengthen Digital Infrastructure:** Even with departmental libraries, the focus on providing campus-wide access to electronic databases should be managed centrally to avoid high costs.

## References

- Jammu University. (n.d.). Departmental Libraries. (<https://www.jammuuniversity.ac.in/departmental-libraries>)
- Jetir.org. (n.d.). LIBRARY AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTE & ROLE OF LIBRARIAN. (<https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIRGE06024.pdf>)

- Informaticsjournals.com. (n.d.). ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA. (<https://www.informaticsjournals.co.in/index.php/conference/article/download/46493/30780/96977>)
- Scribd.com. (n.d.).Centralization. (<https://www.scribd.com/document/268920562/Centralization>)
- ScienceDirect. (n.d.). Departmental Library – an overview. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/computer-science/departmental-library>)
- ResearchGate. (2020). Availability And Utilization Of Departmental Library For Quality Production Of Graduates In Accounting Programmes Of Universities In North East, Nigeria. ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343141350\\_Availability\\_And\\_Utilization\\_Of\\_Departmental\\_Library\\_For\\_Quality\\_Production\\_Of\\_Graduates\\_In\\_Accounting\\_Programmes\\_Of\\_Universities\\_In\\_North\\_East](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343141350_Availability_And_Utilization_Of_Departmental_Library_For_Quality_Production_Of_Graduates_In_Accounting_Programmes_Of_Universities_In_North_East))
- ResearchGate. (2015). Role of departmental library in satisfying the information needs of students. ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290655894\\_Role\\_of\\_departmental\\_library\\_in\\_satisfying\\_the\\_information\\_needs\\_of\\_students\\_A\\_survey\\_of\\_two\\_departments\\_of\\_the\\_Islamia\\_University\\_of\\_Bahawalpur](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290655894_Role_of_departmental_library_in_satisfying_the_information_needs_of_students_A_survey_of_two_departments_of_the_Islamia_University_of_Bahawalpur))
- ScienceDirect. (2019). The academic library: Structure, space, physical and virtual use. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0099133319302228>)
- University of Chicago Press Journals. (n.d.). Central versus Departmental Libraries. (<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/615892>)
- Neverskip.com. (n.d.). Discover the Advantages of a Robust Library Management System. (<https://www.neverskip.com/discover-the-advantages-of-a-robust-library-management-system/>)
- Quora.com. (n.d.). What are the differences between an academic library and non-academic one? (<https://www.quora.com/What-are-the-differences-between-an-academic-library-and-non-academic-one-for-example-university-vs-public>)
- Egyankosh.ac.in. (n.d.). UNIT 1 ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: OBJECTIVES AND FUNCTIONS. (<https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/11272/3/Unit-1%20%282%29.pdf>)

#### Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.