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REGIONAL LIBRARIES OF UZBEKISTAN: MODERN INFORMATION AND CULTURAL HUBS - A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY

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Annotation: This article presents a comprehensive analysis of regional libraries in Uzbekistan, focusing on their historical evolution, current operational status, digital transformation challenges, and future development prospects. Using a mixed-method approach that includes systematic analysis, comparative case studies across three libraries (Samarkand, Fergana, and Karakalpakstan), surveys of 50 users, interviews with 15 library staff members, statistical data analysis (2018–2023), and document reviews, the study reveals that while regional libraries have made significant progress in digitization and user engagement, they face persistent problems related to insufficient digital infrastructure, low staff digital literacy, and uneven regional development. The article concludes with evidence-based recommendations for transforming these institutions into fully functional information-resource centers aligned with Uzbekistan's "Digital Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy.

Keywords: Regional libraries, information-resource centers, library science, digitalization, cultural heritage, literature review, methodology, library services, Uzbekistan, user engagement, digital literacy.

Introduction

Regional libraries in Uzbekistan have historically served as key intellectual and cultural institutions within each province. From the Soviet era to the present day, these libraries have preserved local literature, supported education, and provided free access to information for millions of citizens. However, the rapid development of information and communication technologies, combined with Uzbekistan's national strategy "Digital Uzbekistan - 2030," has placed new demands on these institutions. They are no longer expected to function merely as book depositories; instead, they must evolve into multifunctional information, cultural, and educational hubs. Despite this vision, many libraries struggle to adapt. Outdated infrastructure, insufficient digital skills among staff, low public awareness of modern library services, and limited budgets for technological upgrades are common problems. Moreover, there is a lack of systematic research that compares different regional libraries and identifies best practices. The purpose of this article is threefold: to analyze the current state of libraries in Uzbekistan, to review existing scholarly literature on the topic and identify research gaps, and to present a robust methodological framework and meaningful findings that can inform policy decisions and future research. The article is structured as follows: after this introduction, a detailed literature review is presented, followed by a comprehensive methodology section. Then, meaningful content (findings) is discussed, and finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered.

Literature Review

The academic literature on regional libraries in Uzbekistan and comparable contexts can be grouped into three thematic directions. Each is discussed below with critical evaluation. M. Rakhmonov (2019), in his book Libraries of Uzbekistan: History and Modernity, provides a foundational historical account. He describes how libraries preserved local literary heritage during the Soviet period, often acting as clandestine guardians of national identity. After independence in 1991, these libraries experienced a period of decline due to reduced state funding. However, Rakhmonov notes that from 2010 onward, renewed government attention led to gradual improvements. N. Karimova (2020) takes a more practical approach in Information Resource Centers: Management and Marketing. She argues that regional libraries must adopt marketing strategies to attract users. Her case study of Tashkent regional library shows that targeted campaigns (e.g., "Library Night," book fairs, reading challenges) increased user visits by 40% within one year. Karimova's work is valuable but focuses on urban libraries; rural branches within may not benefit from the same strategies. International scholarship offers comparative perspectives. E. Smith and J. Valdes (2018), in "Regional Libraries in the Digital Age: A Comparative Study of Europe and Asia," analyze digitization efforts across twelve countries. Their key finding is that successful regional libraries combine centralized digital platforms (e.g., national e-library systems) with locally relevant content (e.g., regional history, dialects, manuscripts). They warn that without local customization, digital libraries fail to attract users. This insight is directly applicable to Uzbekistan, where a national e-library platform exists but regional content remains sparse. R. Abdullayev (2021) provides the most detailed empirical study of a single Uzbek viloyat library - Kashkadarya regional library. Using quantitative methods, he shows that only 35% of the library's collection was cataloged electronically by 2021. Furthermore, only 12% of users accessed the library remotely. Abdullayev identifies three main barriers: lack of computers, unreliable internet, and insufficient staff training. While useful, his study is limited to one region; generalizability is uncertain. T. Usmanova (2017) focuses on manuscript preservation in Bukhara and Samarkand regional libraries. She documents over 1,200 unique Oriental manuscripts held in these two libraries, some dating back to the 12th century. Usmanova argues that physical decay is inevitable unless digitization is prioritized. Her proposed solution - a regional digitization center with mobile scanning units - remains unimplemented. A. Kholmurodov (2020) compares conservation methods across five viloyat libraries (Samarkand, Bukhara, Khorezm, Navoi, and Jizzakh). He finds significant disparities: Samarkand regional library has a climate-controlled manuscript room, while Jizzakh has no dedicated conservation facilities. Kholmurodov recommends a minimum standards framework for all viloyat libraries. Despite these valuable contributions, the literature lacks a systematic comparative analysis across multiple viloyats using a unified methodological framework. Most studies focus on a single region or a single theme (e.g., digitization OR cultural heritage). No study to date has simultaneously examined collections, staff, technical equipment, users, and services across several viloyats. This article addresses that gap.

Methodology

To ensure a comprehensive and meaningful analysis, this study employed a mixed-method approach consisting of five integrated components. Each component is described in detail below. Regional libraries were studied as holistic systems. Five key components were identified and analyzed: Collections: total size (number of books, manuscripts, periodicals), age distribution, language composition. Staff: number of employees, qualifications (degrees, certifications), digital literacy self-assessment. Technical equipment: number of computers, scanners, printers; internet

speed and reliability; presence of electronic catalog. Users: total registered users, demographics (age, occupation, purpose of visit), frequency of visits. Services: types of services offered (lending, reference, digital access, cultural events, training). Interconnections between these components were mapped. For example, the relationship between staff digital literacy and availability of digital services was analyzed. Three libraries were selected for comparison using purposive sampling: Samarkand regional library (representing a well-resourced, historically significant library), Fergana regional library (representing an innovative but moderately resourced library), and Karakalpakstan regional library (representing a geographically remote and under-resourced library). The comparison criteria included: Additionally, annual plans, internal reports, and strategic development documents of the selected libraries were reviewed to assess stated goals versus achieved outcomes. All three viloyat libraries now provide electronic catalogs, remote access to certain databases (primarily legal and economic information), and cultural events (book exhibitions, literary evenings, author meetings). However, only Samarkand regional library offers a fully functional digital lending system allowing users to borrow e-books from home. Fergana has a partially functional system, while Karakalpakstan has no digital lending at all. Cultural events are most frequent in Fergana (47 events per year), followed by Samarkand, and Karakalpakstan .

The most impressive achievement is in Bukhara regional library (included as an additional comparative case), where over 500 Oriental manuscripts have been digitized and made available on a local server. Samarkand regional library has digitized approximately 200 manuscripts. In contrast, Karakalpakstan regional library has digitized less than 5% of its unique collection (only 18 manuscripts out of over 400). The main barriers cited by Karakalpakstan staff were lack of high-quality scanners (they use a single office scanner) and lack of trained personnel (no staff member has formal digitization training). Statistical data from 2018 to 2023 show that the number of registered users in libraries increased by an average of 22–25% across the three libraries. Fergana regional library showed the highest growth (31%), which staff attribute to the launch of their "Book Lovers Club" that attracted over 300 young participants in its first year. Samarkand saw a 24% increase, while Karakalpakstan saw a more modest 15% increase.

Survey results (n=50) showed that:

68% of users visit regional libraries primarily for study or research purposes

22% for cultural events

Only 10% for leisure reading

Users aged 18-25 expressed the highest demand for digital services - 83% requested better online access and a mobile app. Users aged over 60 preferred physical books (76%) and were least satisfied with digital services (average satisfaction score 2.1 out of 5). Users aged 26-40 showed mixed preferences: 52% preferred digital for work-related research, but 48% preferred physical for leisure reading. Interviews with 15 staff members revealed that 12 out of 15 rated their digital literacy as "low" or "very low" on a self-assessment scale. Only three libraries had a dedicated IT specialist - Samarkand (2 specialists), Fergana (1), and Karakalpakstan . Training opportunities were rarely provided: on average, staff received training once every two years. When training did occur, it focused on basic computer skills rather than library-specific digital tools (e.g., digital cataloging, digitization standards, online user engagement). One department head in Karakalpakstan stated: "We want to digitize our manuscripts, but none of us know how to do it properly. We need a trainer who can come here for at least a month."

Samarkand regional library: $45,000 per year

Fergana regional library: $38,000 per year

Karakalpakstan regional library: $12,000 per year

Karakalpakstan's budget is only 27% of Samarkand's, despite serving a geographically large and culturally distinct region. Staff in Karakalpakstan reported that most of their budget goes toward salaries and utilities, leaving almost nothing for new equipment or digitization. Despite challenges, innovative projects are underway. Fergana regional library launched a mobile library service - a van carrying 500 books that visits remote villages twice a month. In its first six months, the mobile library served over 2,000 rural users. Samarkand regional library partnered with a local university to offer digital literacy classes for seniors, which were attended by 120 older adults. Karakalpakstan, despite limited resources, created a community-driven oral history project recording elders' stories - a low-cost but culturally valuable initiative. Regional libraries in Uzbekistan are at a critical turning point. They have begun the transition from traditional book repositories to modern information and cultural hubs, as evidenced by digitalization efforts, increased user numbers, diverse service offerings, and local innovations. However, significant gaps remain: inadequate digital infrastructure in under-resourced regions, low staff digital literacy, uneven digitization of cultural heritage, persistent budget disparities, and a lack of region-specific training programs. Establish a national digitization center for regional libraries with standardized protocols, mobile scanning units, and centralized training. This center should prioritize under-resourced libraries like Karakalpakstan. Provide annual mandatory digital skills training for all library staff, with a curriculum tailored to library-specific tools (digital cataloging, metadata standards, online user engagement). Training should be delivered regionally to reduce travel costs. Allocate targeted budgets for IT equipment in under-resourced libraries. A minimum standard should be defined (e.g., at least 5 high-resolution scanners, 20 public access computers, 100 Mbps internet). Launch public awareness campaigns about modern library services, especially targeting younger users (18-25) who currently demand digital access but may not know it exists. Create a regional library performance dashboard with publicly available indicators (user numbers, digitization percentage, event frequency) to encourage transparency and healthy competition. Encourage peer-to-peer mentoring between better-resourced libraries (Samarkand) and under-resourced ones (Karakalpakstan), funded by the Ministry of Digital Development.Future research should conduct longitudinal studies measuring the impact of digital transformation on user satisfaction and cultural preservation outcomes. Comparative studies with regional libraries in neighboring countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) would also be valuable.

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