

ADVANCING SDG FOUR (SDG 4) – QUALITY EDUCATION THROUGH LIBRARIES: THE EVER-EVOLVING ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING QUALITY EDUCATION

Dr Sadie-Jane Huff

ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG 4) which seeks to ensure both inclusive and equitable quality education while promoting lifelong learning remains a critical challenge globally. Although there are national education strategies in place that focus on schools as well as higher education institutions, libraries tend to be under-recognised and under-used partners when it comes to realising this goal. With a focus on Singapore, this opinion article examines how public and academic libraries have a more distinctive role within the learning ecosystem, needing to juggle being functional and accessible, yet ensuring that they create informal learning hubs that complement all educational institutions such as schools and universities while remaining accessible to the various underserved groups outside the sphere. With reference to her own professional leadership experience combined with case studies, this opinion piece examines how Singapore's public and academic libraries can better support the development of a more inclusive and accessible lifelong learning environment. The author further emphasises the importance of strategic inclusion of libraries into education policy frameworks and digital inclusion strategies to fully leverage their potential in advancing SDG 4.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, public libraries, academic libraries, lifelong learning, Singapore, information literacy



INTRODUCTION

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) global agenda directs attention to the systematic inequalities in access to education. SDG 4 emphasises the need for inclusive and equitable quality education, which also promotes equal lifelong learning opportunities for everyone^{5,6}. While we know that school systems and educational ministries are the heart of these efforts, it has been observed that non-formal institutions like libraries appear to be largely absent from mainstream policy dialogues.

Having previously overseen a library, I advocate the need to reframe this narrative. Libraries not just in Singapore, but globally, have been working hard, albeit quietly and persistently, to deliver their services on the SDG 4 promise to the community. In Singapore, this is particularly important given that our government emphasises the importance of lifelong learning – something that is further exemplified through their various offerings like the SkillsFuture programmes to citizens to achieve their ultimate aspiration of becoming a learning nation. Libraries are particularly important in this goal as libraries are the bridge between formal and informal education as libraries offer inclusive yet flexible opportunities to everyone in society, regardless of background, in terms of possible educational engagement.

This opinion piece will outline some of these said contributions to provide mini cases of effective practice, while possibly showing the need for stronger policy recognition for libraries as being crucial partners in national education strategy planning. By showcasing initiatives such as Read@School, THRIVE@Libraries, the Singapore Alliance of University Libraries, and

the Joint-Polytechnic Libraries (JPL), I would like to further demonstrate how important all libraries are in the educational equity. This piece will also attempt to identify systemic challenges like funding, integration into national policy frameworks to the best of my ability and conclude with some recommendations on how libraries can strengthen their role towards achieving SDG 4.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES: THE GATEWAYS TO LIFELONG LEARNING

Public libraries tend to be seen as the people's university. In Singapore (and I am sure as with other public libraries globally), public libraries serve as inclusive, non-judgemental, multipurpose learning hubs that caters across the education spectrum, meaning, it is for children to retirees alike. Thanks to strategic innovative programmes led by the National Library Board (NLB), the reach and relevance has strengthened in the recent years. NLB has further reinforced this role through their vision of libraries as being "accessible knowledge commons" whereby digital, social, and physical resources intersect to support a culture of lifelong learning across society³.

Singapore's public libraries are deliberately aligned with national education and workforce strategies. Take the THRIVE@Libraries initiative for example as reskilling programmes are decentralised in terms of access, this means that mid-career professionals can participate in various workshops that cover topics such as entrepreneurship to even coding at their local branches. This intentional link shows how public libraries are moving beyond being mere custodians and instead, becoming facilitators of applied learning and employability skills⁸. By partnering with SkillsFuture Singapore, free public workshops on a myriad of topics that range from coding to entrepreneurship are run for mid-career professionals and adult learners^{2,8,9}. These programmes complement formal education while preparing learners of any age to be lifelong, adaptable, and future-ready participants in Singapore's ever-evolving knowledge society.

What is even more important is the perceived symbolism of public libraries as neutral public spaces. Unlike schools or institutions of higher education, which tend to be bound by the need to be a student or lecturer, etc, public libraries remain open to everyone. Considering how Singapore is meritocratic in nature and education is highly regarded, public libraries have found a way to counterbalance inclusivity by providing everyone in society with equal access to learning opportunities and knowledge³.

1. Inclusive Literacy and Digital Programming

Public libraries have a wide range of literacy and learning programmes ranging from digital literacy workshops for seniors, multi-language storytelling sessions, and reading initiatives for the lower-income households. These programmes directly support lifelong learning which thus provide foundational skills that enable the community to navigate a world that is getting more informed and digitally savvy day-by-day⁹.

Libraries have been instrumental in addressing intergenerational literacy gaps for eons. NLB's collaborative programmes like "Read@School" and "Seniors Tech & Read" for example help libraries to bridge the gaps that are not covered by formal institutions. These collaborative programmes align closely with SDG 4 Target 4.7 which emphasises

knowledge and skills for sustainable development, which includes information literacy, digital literacy and fluency, as well as intercultural understanding.⁶

Given that these programmes could be and were scaled up proves their systemic importance. Take for example Read@School. Annually, the programme reaches over 30,000 students which thus proves the public libraries ability to complement formal education at scale. Another example is the various digital literacy workshops that are co-run with various community organisations for senior citizens, who tend to be overlooked from more formal upskilling means, to help empower them and thus making them relevant and active participants in this fast-changing digital society^{8,9}.

2. Community Anchors for Impartial Entry

Singapore's libraries (as with many libraries globally) provide more than just digital, audio, or physical books. They offer the community access to Internet connectivity, spaces to work or relax especially for those from lower-income families, and technology. Many students from various backgrounds still turn to their local library to be their safe and conducive haven where they can complete their homework and study for exams in peace³. In a highly dense country where many do not have conducive home environments for study, libraries have stepped up to fill that indispensable gap for all to equalise access for learning opportunities.

In underserved areas of Singapore, NLB's mobile library initiative, MOLLY, offers reading and multimedia materials to special needs schools, orphanages, homes, and lower income families to provide an equal opportunity to lifelong learning to as many as possible. By doing so, MOLLY ensures that everyone, even the marginalised groups, have access to lifelong learning. Such initiatives further showcase the public libraries' broader role as key community anchors who work towards ensuring that knowledge and resources are available for everyone¹⁰.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Academic libraries are the anchors responsible for achieving the SDG 4's ambitions while public libraries serve the communities. Academic libraries are instrumental in ensuring that resources are accessible to all students, enhancing the quality of higher education, and cultivating the much-needed research and literacy skills. Singapore's academic libraries are being positioned as key partners in research support, creating knowledge, and innovating pedagogy, all of which are well-aligned to Singapore's aim to increase and improve its knowledge economy.

1. Access to Resources and Open Education

Singapore's academic libraries are finding new ways to maximise their dollar while aiming to achieve their shared vision of providing students and faculty with a wide range of digital and physical materials. The answer is simple, band together. All seven autonomous Singapore universities have come together to form the Singapore Alliance of University Libraries (SAUL) which comprises of six task forces with different areas of focus⁴. Similarly, the four local polytechnics have banded together to form the Joint-Polytechnic Libraries (JPL) where they have launched initiatives that promote educational equity and reducing

costs while maximising very tight budgets ⁷. By doing this, the academic libraries can leverage on their strength in numbers and thus reduce cost barriers to high quality academic content and spread it across the board, which thus leads to an instrumental step towards educational equity. This collaborative approach both promotes educational equity as well as demonstrates the importance of libraries acting as enablers of both open education and accessibility to knowledge.

2. Librarians – Key Scholastic Partners

The current day academic librarians are equal partners in teaching and curriculum planning by cultivating their students' fundamental skills like enabling students to think critically, conduct independent research, and one cannot forget the importance of informed civic engagement, all of which are competencies highlighted in SDG 4 ⁶.

Academic librarians mentor postgraduate researchers, help to navigate scholarly communication and ensure they steer within ethical publishing practices to ensure scholarly development which thus leads to scholarly success. They somehow still find time to conduct workshops, provide research data management services, be mentors, and run one-to-one consultations when needed so that students can achieve their academic goals. These contributions show the ever-evolving role of academic librarians as being instrumental as not only research collaborators but also as educators and that these same librarians should not be seen merely as ancillary staff ¹.

3. Access via Digital Infrastructure

When COVID-19 hit, academic libraries had to pivot quickly to digital service models. I remember working with my team to ensure that we had ways to provide a range of expanded services to our students that ranged from remote access to academic databases, innovative ways to borrow physical books, and ensuring that we could continue to provide the same level of support to our students. Colleagues across institutions responded similarly by removing any roadblocks and dealing with any issues that may arise efficiently and effectively to ensure easy transitions and continuous learning. This quick turnaround highlighted how resilient academic libraries are and shows their capability and ability to safeguard continuous learning, which once again highlights the importance of their role as being instrumental partners when it comes to achieving SDG 4.

OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Despite their tireless contributions, libraries continue to struggle for visibility, funding, and manpower. Misconceptions persist as many view libraries as air-conditioning refuges rather than learning hubs. So, what can they do?

To maximise their impact on SDG 4. In no particular order, libraries should:

- **Integrate policies:** Libraries need to find ways to start a conversation with the Ministries of Education, Culture, and Digital Development and Information to voice their need to be involved when it comes to digital inclusion and strategic education planning,

- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Libraries need to continue their partnerships with schools, higher institutions, NGOs, and even the private sector to increase outreach and share resources,
- **Lifelong learning and professional development:** Continued training and development of librarians is fundamental as they need to be at the top of their game in terms of areas like pedagogy, technology, and even community engagement skills, and
- **Data-driven advocacy:** Libraries need to monitor and evaluate their impact regularly as this can further support their increased recognition and hopefully, increase their funding as well ¹.

CONCLUSION

Singapore's libraries quiet yet powerful revolution in advancing SDG 4 is underway. Singapore's public and academic libraries continue to serve as crucial pillars by being spaces where knowledge is not just stored, but transformed, activated, and shared among lifelong learners.

Having inclusive and innovative programmes allows public libraries to extend educational opportunities across society, which means that no one is left behind, especially when there tends to be some limitations on academic libraries who are only able to address what their formal institutions require of them.

However, to achieve the 2030 Agenda aspirations, local libraries need to take a step back and really understand what education currently looks like and what it will look like and where it will take place. While libraries offer flexible programmes and remain inclusive, they need to show their importance as one of most underutilised yet fundamental collaborators needed to achieve educational equity ⁵.

This can be done by showing their measurable impact while at the same time, working towards strengthening their cross-sector partnerships. This will further help libraries gain the much-needed recognition that they can leverage on to gain more resources which thus help expand equitable access to education for as many as possible.

Libraries need to remind users that they are not just spaces with books, but instead, an opportunity for achieving a brighter future. When pursuing SDG 4 (Quality Education), libraries need to prove that they see themselves as a door to opportunity, and instrumental to building a nation that is both inclusive and gunned towards lifelong learning as a society.

References

1. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. (2019). Libraries, development and the United Nations 2030 Agenda. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/libraries-development-and-the-united-nations-2030-agenda/>
2. Ministry of Education Singapore. (2023). MOE's addendum to the President's address: Strengthening lifelong learning and SkillsFuture support. Ministry of Education Singapore. <https://www.forwardsingapore.gov.sg/newsroom/moe-s-addendum-to-the-president-s-address/>
3. Yeo, G., (2023). 'We want you to still feel at home': How NLB designs its libraries to be more than just for reading. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/public-libraries-nlb-design-more-reading-home-3680971>
4. NUS Libraries. (2023). A year in review: Building NUS' libraries of the future – today. National University of Singapore Libraries. <https://nuslibraries-highlights.shorthandstories.com/2023-building-nus-libraries-of-the-future-today/index.html>
5. United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
6. United Nations. (n.d.). Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>
7. Wee, A., Koh, S. G., Khoo, A. L., & Yeow, P. (2024). Joint-Polytechnic Libraries Collaboration (JPL). Singapore Journal of Library and Information Management, 50, Article 3. https://www.las.org.sg/wp/sjlim/files/SJLIM-2024-3-Joint-Polytechnic-Libraries-Collaboration-JPL_final.pdf
8. National Library Board Singapore. (2024). Press Release *Discover new ways to work and live better at THRIVE@libraries*. <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/about-us/press-room-and-publications/media-releases/2024/THRIVE-at-libraries>
9. National Library Board Singapore. (2025). Library of Communities. <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/site/learnx/explore-communities>
10. Chia, L. H. (2025). *Reading on the move: How MOLLY brings books to everyone*. *BiblioAsia*, 21(2). <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-21/issue-2/jul-sep-2025/reading-molly-national-library-board>