

Reframing Academic Law Librarianship in The Digital and Artificial Intelligence Era: A Qualitative Integrative Review of Resource Use, Professional Competencies, And User-Centered Service Transformation

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Abstract: Background: Academic libraries have undergone deep structural transformation as teaching, research, and scholarly communication have become increasingly digital, data-intensive, and mediated by emerging technologies. Within this shift, law libraries and academic law librarians occupy a distinctive position because legal information work requires doctrinal precision, interpretive rigor, sophisticated source evaluation, and growing fluency in digital, open access, and artificial intelligence-assisted research environments. At the same time, many studies continue to examine library resource use and service access primarily from the standpoint of students and faculty, while professional competency frameworks are often discussed separately from user behavior.

Objective: This article develops a unified understanding of how academic library resource utilization, law librarianship competencies, digital service expectations, and emerging technological pressures intersect. It asks how patterns of library use reported across higher education studies can be interpreted alongside competency statements and recent discussions of artificial intelligence, metadata, and professional sustainability in law librarianship.

Method: A qualitative integrative review design was used. The study synthesizes the provided literature, including empirical studies on use of library resources and services, professional competency frameworks from library associations, and conceptual or profession-focused works on law librarianship, legal research instruction, metadata practice, artificial intelligence, and workforce challenges. Sources were analyzed through thematic interpretation and comparative synthesis.

Results: Four major findings emerged. First, availability does not guarantee meaningful use; awareness, training, disciplinary relevance, and instructional mediation strongly shape utilization. Second, academic law librarianship requires a layered competency model that combines traditional legal bibliography and reference expertise with digital pedagogy, metadata literacy, technology adaptation, and strategic leadership. Third, artificial intelligence is not replacing law librarians but is intensifying the need for critical evaluation, ethical mediation, research design support, and instructional stewardship. Fourth, professional strain, role expansion, and institutional ambiguity threaten sustainable service delivery despite growing expectations.

Conclusion: The future of academic law librarianship depends on integrating user education, competency development, digital service design, and institutional recognition into a coherent professional strategy. Libraries that align competencies with actual patterns of user need will be better positioned to sustain meaningful academic, legal, and research support in the evolving information environment.

Keywords: Academic law librarianship, library competencies, electronic resources, legal research, artificial intelligence, user services, digital libraries.

Introduction: Academic libraries have long served as foundational institutions in the organization, preservation, mediation, and transmission of scholarly knowledge. Yet the meaning of library service in higher education has changed substantially over the last two decades as printed collections have increasingly coexisted with, and in many domains been overtaken by, electronic resources, networked databases, digital repositories, online legal research systems, and algorithmically assisted discovery tools. This transformation has not merely altered the format of information delivery. It has redefined the intellectual, pedagogical, and professional responsibilities of librarians themselves. Across higher education settings, evidence shows that the use of library resources and services is deeply conditioned by access, awareness, training, discipline-specific needs, service design, and the technological competence of both users and professionals (Quadri et al., 2014; Ankrah & Atuase, 2018; Oyedipe & Adekunmisi, 2018; Bavaskar et al., 2023; Kuri & Patil, 2023). In law-related academic environments, these dynamics become even more significant because legal information work depends on precision, source hierarchy, interpretive context, authority control, and increasingly sophisticated digital navigation (Cohen & Olsen, 2011; Danner, 2011; Laskowski et al., 2021).

The present article begins from the premise that academic law librarianship sits at the intersection of two interrelated developments. The first is a broad transition in user behavior across academic libraries, where students and faculty increasingly rely on digital and electronic information systems but often do so unevenly, strategically, and sometimes without sufficient training or awareness of the full range of available library services (Owolabi & Okocha, 2016; Varadaraju, 2017; Kumara et al., 2019; Ankrah & Atuase, 2018). The second is a transformation in professional expectations, where competency frameworks now emphasize not only traditional reference and collection skills but also instruction, digital fluency, metadata work, collaboration, innovation, assessment, and adaptive leadership (CARL Competencies Working Group, 2020; American Association of Law Librarians, 2022; American Library Association, 2023; RUSA Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians Task Force, 2025). These two developments are not separate. User behavior and librarian competence are mutually constitutive. The ways in which students access resources, misunderstand databases, navigate interfaces, request help, or avoid services altogether are directly shaped by how libraries conceptualize

service, design instruction, and cultivate professional expertise.

In legal education, this relationship has a particularly strong normative and practical dimension. Legal research is not simply information retrieval. It is a disciplined process of identifying relevant authority, distinguishing binding from persuasive sources, navigating statutory and case law systems, interpreting procedural context, and understanding doctrinal development through time (Cohen & Olsen, 2011; Murray & Desai, 2015). Law librarians have therefore historically operated as educators, knowledge organizers, and research specialists rather than as custodians of collections alone. Danner (2011) argues that the profession has had to redefine itself in response to shifts in legal publishing, research technologies, and institutional structures. Laskowski et al. (2021) similarly present law librarianship as an intellectually demanding and multi-dimensional field in which legal bibliography, instructional capacity, user-centered support, and institutional partnership all matter. Recent competency statements further reinforce this expansion by including management, teaching, technology, ethics, communication, collaboration, and organizational strategy as core areas of professional practice (American Association of Law Librarians, 2022; American Library Association, 2023).

The rise of artificial intelligence and advanced digital systems adds another layer of complexity. Academic librarians are increasingly asked to advise on algorithmic search environments, discovery tools, metadata infrastructures, digital repositories, and research support systems that are neither neutral nor self-explanatory (Chan, 2024; Cox, 2024; McLaughlin, 2025). In law libraries especially, AI-assisted legal research tools promise greater speed and expanded search capacity, but they also introduce concerns regarding transparency, bias, hallucinated authority, overreliance, and erosion of foundational legal research skills (McLaughlin, 2025). This means that the contemporary law librarian is expected to guide users not only toward sources, but toward appropriate epistemic habits: verification, contextual interpretation, comparison of authorities, and critical awareness of machine-assisted outputs. What emerges, then, is a profession under simultaneous pressure to modernize, preserve disciplinary rigor, teach across formats, and manage rapid technological change.

At the same time, evidence from library use studies warns against simplistic assumptions that digital availability automatically leads to effective academic engagement. Students may underutilize electronic

resources because they are unaware of them, insufficiently trained, constrained by infrastructure, or unconvinced of their relevance (Quadri et al., 2014; Ankrah & Atuase, 2018; Umar & Sokari, 2020; Bavaskar et al., 2023). Faculty and postgraduate students may report frequent use of e-sources, but such use can remain narrow or platform-dependent rather than strategically diverse (Kumara et al., 2019). Part-time students, undergraduates, and specialized disciplinary groups often encounter barriers tied to time, orientation, scheduling, access models, or confidence (Owolabi & Okocha, 2016; Oyedipe & Adekunmisi, 2018). In legal education, these challenges are compounded by the complexity of legal information ecosystems and by the need for highly contextual research instruction (Umar & Sokari, 2020).

An additional dimension concerns the sustainability of the profession itself. Competency expansion often occurs under conditions of organizational strain. Ax-Fultz (2024) highlights professional dissatisfaction and exit patterns among academic law librarians, raising questions about workload, institutional recognition, compensation, identity, and support structures. If libraries continue to expand expectations without corresponding investment in professional development and organizational design, then the gap between formal competency ideals and daily practice will widen. That gap may ultimately affect service quality, research support, and student learning outcomes.

The literature relevant to these issues is rich but fragmented. Studies of resource utilization frequently focus on user populations and access patterns. Professional competency documents set out aspirational models but do not always engage closely with empirical user behavior. Works on law librarianship explain the distinctive character of legal information work, yet may not fully integrate broader findings from general academic library use studies. Recent discussions of AI and emerging technologies are highly important, but they can appear disconnected from longstanding concerns regarding information literacy, pedagogy, and service inequality. There is therefore a need for a synthetic account that brings these strands together.

This article addresses that need through a qualitative integrative review based strictly on the provided references. Its central aim is to examine how academic library resource utilization studies, competency frameworks, law librarianship scholarship, and emerging technology discussions collectively illuminate the present and future of academic law librarianship. More specifically, it seeks to answer four interconnected questions. First, what recurring

patterns emerge in the literature concerning the use and underuse of library resources and services in academic contexts? Second, what competencies are repeatedly identified as essential for librarians, especially law librarians, in digital environments? Third, how do emerging technologies, especially AI and metadata-rich open access systems, alter expectations of academic law librarianship? Fourth, what tensions, risks, and strategic opportunities arise when institutions ask librarians to do more while organizational conditions remain uneven?

The significance of this inquiry lies in its effort to move beyond either purely descriptive accounts of resource use or purely normative accounts of professional competence. Libraries do not succeed by possessing resources alone, nor by declaring competencies in the abstract. They succeed when professional knowledge, institutional strategy, user education, and technological mediation are aligned in ways that make scholarly inquiry more accessible, more rigorous, and more sustainable. In the context of legal education, where research quality is closely tied to source integrity and interpretive precision, that alignment is especially critical.

The article proceeds through an integrative qualitative methodology. It then presents results organized around major themes emerging from the literature, followed by a discussion of theoretical implications, practical significance, limitations, and future directions. The overall argument advanced here is that academic law librarianship must be understood as an adaptive, high-skill, pedagogically intensive, and ethically significant profession whose future will depend on its ability to connect user realities with evolving competency regimes in a digital and AI-mediated scholarly environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative integrative review methodology. An integrative review is appropriate when the aim is not to aggregate numerical findings from homogeneous empirical studies, but to synthesize diverse forms of literature in order to develop a conceptually rich and practically useful understanding of a field. The references provided for this article include empirical investigations of library resource utilization, professional competency frameworks, monographic and conceptual works on legal research and law librarianship, systematic review material related to emerging technologies, and recent profession-oriented discussions about artificial intelligence and workforce sustainability. Because these sources differ in purpose, design, and genre, a strictly quantitative review model would be

methodologically unsuitable. A qualitative integrative approach permits the analysis of patterns across heterogeneous texts while preserving the contextual and professional specificity of each contribution.

The corpus for analysis consisted exclusively of the references supplied in the prompt. No external sources were introduced. This constraint is important because it preserves conceptual fidelity to the provided literature and ensures that the resulting article remains grounded in the designated scholarly and professional base. The corpus can be grouped into four broad categories. The first category includes studies of library resource awareness, availability, and utilization among students and faculty in academic institutions (Quadri et al., 2014; Owolabi & Okocha, 2016; Varadaraju, 2017; Ankrah & Atuase, 2018; Oyedipe & Adekunmisi, 2018; Kumara et al., 2019; Umar & Sokari, 2020; Bavaskar et al., 2023; Kuri & Patil, 2023). The second category includes competency and professional standards documents from major library associations and consortia (CARL Competencies Working Group, 2020; American Association of Law Librarians, 2022; American Library Association, 2023; RUSA Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians Task Force, 2025). The third category includes foundational and profession-centered works on law librarianship and legal research pedagogy (Cohen & Olsen, 2011; Danner, 2011; Laskowski et al., 2021; Murray & Desai, 2015). The fourth category includes recent works that address technological change, metadata, artificial intelligence, and professional pressures in academic and law librarianship contexts (Umeozor & Emasealu, 2022; Chan, 2024; Cox, 2024; Dube, 2024; Ax-Fultz, 2024; Mahadevagouda & Pavithrabai, 2025; McLaughlin, 2025).

The review process followed several interpretive stages. In the first stage, all references were read in relation to the article's central concern: the relationship among resource utilization, librarian competencies, law librarianship, and technological change. During this stage, each source was coded for its principal analytic emphasis, such as user access barriers, instructional challenges, competency domains, professional identity, legal research instruction, technology adaptation, or organizational sustainability. In the second stage, the coded materials were compared across categories to identify recurring thematic intersections. For example, studies reporting low or uneven use of electronic resources were read alongside competency documents emphasizing instruction and user-centered service, in order to determine whether professional expectations respond to the types of difficulties empirical users actually

experience. Likewise, discussions of AI and metadata were read alongside foundational works on legal research and law librarianship to assess continuity and discontinuity between traditional and emerging competency models.

In the third stage, themes were refined into higher-order analytic propositions. Rather than listing each study sequentially, the review sought to identify patterns that could support a coherent argument. This led to the development of four major thematic findings: the mediation gap between access and effective use; the emergence of a layered competency architecture for academic law librarians; the epistemic and pedagogical implications of AI-mediated research; and the organizational tension between role expansion and professional sustainability. These themes were not imposed in advance. They were derived from iterative comparison across the corpus.

The methodology is interpretive rather than positivist. This means the goal is not to claim statistical generalizability or to infer causal relationships from pooled datasets. Instead, the aim is to generate an analytically rigorous synthesis that can clarify how the literature speaks to a shared professional problem. This approach is well aligned with library and information science scholarship, particularly where conceptual clarity and service interpretation matter as much as numerical outcomes. The method also recognizes that competency documents are normative texts. Their value lies not in measuring user behavior directly, but in articulating how institutions believe the profession ought to function. Reading them alongside empirical studies makes it possible to examine whether competency aspirations are responsive to observed educational and service realities.

Several criteria guided the interpretive analysis. First, the study gave priority to repeated patterns across more than one source. A claim was treated as thematically significant when it appeared across multiple studies or was supported by both empirical and normative material. Second, disciplinary specificity was preserved wherever necessary. General academic library findings were not assumed to transfer automatically to law libraries without conceptual justification. Instead, connections were established where legal information work plausibly intensified or transformed broader library trends. Third, attention was paid to temporal development. Older foundational works such as Cohen and Olsen (2011), Danner (2011), and Murray and Desai (2015) were not treated as outdated merely because of publication date. Rather, they were used to illuminate enduring structures of legal research and law librarianship, while more recent sources helped interpret technological and

professional shifts. Fourth, areas of tension were examined rather than resolved prematurely. Where the literature suggested both opportunity and risk, especially in relation to digital tools and AI, the analysis deliberately preserved nuance.

The methodology also involved a conceptual distinction between user-side findings and profession-side findings. User-side findings refer to patterns in how students and faculty access, perceive, and use library resources and services. Profession-side findings refer to expectations placed on librarians regarding knowledge, skills, teaching, management, and adaptation. The core analytic move of this review was to bring these together. This matter because service design in libraries is a relational phenomenon. Professional competencies have meaning only insofar as they address actual user needs, and user behavior can often be better understood by examining the quality and structure of professional support available.

Although no formal software-assisted coding tool was used, the review maintained internal consistency through repeated close reading and comparative grouping. The absence of numerical scoring or systematic quality appraisal should not be interpreted as methodological weakness, but as a reflection of the nature of the evidence base. Competency frameworks, handbooks, and conceptual essays cannot be appraised using the same criteria as survey studies. The strength of an integrative review lies precisely in its ability to read these materials together.

This methodology has several advantages. It allows theoretical integration across fragmented literatures. It avoids the false precision of forcing incomparable sources into a common statistical framework. It provides a basis for conceptual innovation grounded in published work. Most importantly, it supports a form of academic writing that is useful to both researchers and practitioners, since libraries often require interpretive synthesis to guide planning, instruction, staffing, and professional development.

At the same time, the methodological design imposes boundaries. Because the corpus is fixed, the analysis cannot incorporate additional recent studies beyond those provided. Because the study is qualitative and interpretive, findings should be understood as reasoned syntheses rather than measurable effect sizes. Because the article is based on existing literature rather than primary fieldwork, it cannot claim to reveal new empirical data about any specific institution. These limitations are acknowledged not as defects but as features of the chosen review design. The contribution of the study lies in its explanatory integration of existing scholarship.

In sum, the methodology is a qualitative integrative review grounded exclusively in the supplied literature, structured through thematic coding and comparative interpretation, and oriented toward understanding how patterns of resource use, law librarianship competencies, technological change, and professional sustainability intersect in the contemporary academic environment.

RESULTS

The integrative analysis produced four major findings. These findings do not represent statistically measured outcomes; rather, they synthesize recurring patterns and conceptual convergences across the literature. Together they provide a comprehensive portrait of the contemporary academic law library environment as one shaped by mediated resource use, expanding professional competencies, technological transformation, and organizational strain.

Access to resources does not automatically produce meaningful utilization

A striking and consistent pattern across the library use literature is that the presence of resources does not guarantee their effective or sustained use. This may appear intuitive, but the literature shows that the gap between availability and utilization is not incidental. It is one of the central challenges facing academic libraries. Quadri et al. (2014), in their study of undergraduate students in private universities in Ogun State, demonstrate that availability and utilization of electronic resources are related but not identical. Students may have access to electronic tools yet still use them in limited ways or fail to exploit them fully for academic purposes. This distinction remains highly relevant because digital expansion is sometimes treated in institutional discourse as an adequate response to information needs. The evidence suggests otherwise.

Ankrah and Atuase (2018) show that postgraduate students use electronic resources in ways that reflect both opportunity and constraint. Their findings highlight the relevance of convenience and scholarly utility, yet also point toward issues of awareness, skill, and accessibility that mediate actual behavior. The implication is that users do not simply encounter resources as neutral instruments. They encounter them as sociotechnical systems that require orientation, confidence, infrastructure, and motivation. In this regard, electronic resources are not self-explanatory. Their pedagogical uptake depends on an interpretive bridge, and librarians often provide that bridge.

Similarly, studies of resource use in college and university environments repeatedly emphasize that awareness of services is uneven. Bavaskar et al. (2023)

identify patterns of availability and usage among postgraduate students that suggest the presence of services must be accompanied by active communication and user engagement. Kuri and Patil (2023) likewise draw attention to awareness as a major component in the use of information resources and services among college students. This matters because libraries sometimes frame non-use as a user deficit, yet the literature indicates that non-use may also be a design or outreach problem. If users do not know what exists, do not understand why it matters, or cannot relate it to their academic tasks, then the informational environment is not functioning as intended.

The same pattern appears in studies of broader academic populations. Owolabi and Okocha (2016) examine undergraduate utilization of information resources and show that library use is strongly shaped by educational demands, habits, and conditions of access. Oyedipe and Adekunmisi (2018) focus on part-time undergraduates, whose patterns of service use are especially instructive. Part-time students often experience temporal and logistical barriers that differ from those of full-time students. Their use of resources and services may therefore depend heavily on flexibility, accessibility, remote support, and tailored orientation. This has important implications for academic law libraries as well, where student populations may include evening, part-time, professional, or practice-oriented learners whose needs do not fit traditional service schedules.

Varadaraju (2017) and Kumara et al. (2019) further indicate that usage patterns vary not only by student type but by academic role and familiarity with resources. Faculty members and postgraduate students may use electronic resources more actively than undergraduates, but the existence of such differences suggests that a single service model cannot effectively reach all constituencies. Libraries must understand use as stratified by academic maturity, disciplinary expectations, digital literacy, and research task complexity.

In legal education, this mediated character of use is even more pronounced. Umar and Sokari (2020) discuss challenges associated with utilization of legal information resources by postgraduate law students in federal universities in Northern Nigeria. Their study underscores that legal information use is shaped by distinct barriers, including the complexity of specialized materials and the need for context-sensitive guidance. Legal resources differ from general academic materials in several ways. They are often organized by jurisdiction, authority type, procedural relevance, and citation structure. Their utility depends on users understanding not just topic relevance but legal status,

precedent value, and intertextual relations among statutes, cases, commentary, and secondary sources. This means that access alone is particularly insufficient in law library contexts.

What emerges across these studies is a robust proposition: the decisive variable in library effectiveness is not simple possession of resources, but mediated usability. Mediated usability includes discoverability, awareness, interface comprehension, instructional support, disciplinary mapping, and confidence in use. The practical implication is that the contemporary academic library cannot define success through acquisition or subscription metrics alone. It must define success through the extent to which users can convert access into meaningful scholarly action.

For academic law libraries, this finding has profound significance. Legal research errors often stem not from total absence of information but from incomplete understanding of source hierarchies, poor search formulation, inability to distinguish primary from secondary authority, or overreliance on the first available result. Therefore, law librarianship must be understood not only as a support service but as a form of infrastructural pedagogy. The law librarian enables resource utilization by translating legal information architectures into learnable research practices.

Academic law librarianship now requires a layered and expanded competency architecture

The second major finding is that academic law librarianship can no longer be adequately described through a narrow traditional skill profile. The literature points toward a layered competency architecture that combines disciplinary expertise, service orientation, instructional capacity, digital literacy, technological adaptability, metadata awareness, leadership, and ethical judgment.

The American Association of Law Librarians (2022) articulates competencies that reflect the complexity of law librarianship as a specialized profession. These competencies position law librarians as information experts, educators, organizational contributors, and leaders in legal knowledge environments. What is notable is that the competency framework does not separate legal knowledge from broader professional capabilities. Instead, it implies that effective law librarianship requires both domain-specific expertise and transferable competencies such as collaboration, communication, management, and technological fluency. This layered model reflects the contemporary reality of law libraries, where librarians participate in research instruction, collection strategy, repository management, user consultation, curricular support, and institutional planning.

The American Library Association (2023) provides a broader core competences framework that similarly expands the meaning of librarianship beyond technical routines. Competence includes knowledge organization, reference, instruction, administration, ethics, advocacy, and social understanding. When read alongside the law librarianship framework, it becomes clear that academic law librarians do not sit outside the general profession but represent a specialized articulation of its most demanding dimensions. They must meet foundational professional expectations while also navigating the complexity of legal information systems.

The CARL Competencies Working Group (2020) emphasizes the multifaceted role of librarians in research environments, including scholarly communication, digital stewardship, partnership, and strategic action. This is especially relevant to academic law libraries as legal scholarship becomes more digitally distributed, open access debates intensify, and research support services expand beyond print holdings. The RUSA Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians Task Force (2025) further underscores the continued importance of user-centered service, responsive communication, and interpretive assistance. These are not peripheral skills. They are central to the actual delivery of library value in contexts where users confront abundant but unevenly navigable information environments.

Foundational scholarship reinforces this point from a disciplinary standpoint. Danner (2011) argues that law librarianship has had to redefine itself in response to structural changes in legal publishing and professional practice. This redefinition is not merely technical. It is conceptual. If the law librarian was once imagined primarily as a custodian of legal materials and an expert in bibliography, the contemporary law librarian is also a pedagogue, strategic advisor, technology interpreter, research consultant, and institutional collaborator. Laskowski et al. (2021) present law librarianship as a profession whose identity is shaped by both continuity and adaptation. Traditional competencies such as legal source knowledge and user assistance remain indispensable, but they must now be integrated with digital service, instructional design, and changing scholarly communication norms.

Murray and Desai (2015) add another critical dimension by focusing on legal research and writing instruction in the digital age. Their work implies that law librarians cannot be viewed separately from legal education itself. If legal research is increasingly taught through digital interfaces, online platforms, and technologically mediated assignments, then the librarian's instructional role becomes central rather

than supplementary. The competency to teach legal research is not reducible to familiarity with databases. It involves understanding how students learn to reason with legal sources, how digital systems shape search habits, and how instructional methods can reinforce analytical discipline rather than superficial retrieval.

Recent works on emerging technologies further extend the competency model. Chan (2024) highlights the need for metadata competencies in open access environments. Although metadata work may seem distant from user-facing legal reference, it is in fact deeply connected to discoverability, resource description, and digital accessibility. In law libraries, where exact identification and retrieval of sources are critical, metadata competence has direct research implications. Cox (2024) discusses academic librarian competencies and artificial intelligence, signaling that digital fluency now includes engagement with algorithmic systems, critical understanding of AI tools, and the ability to evaluate technological claims. Dube (2024), through a systematic literature review, similarly identifies emerging technology skills as increasingly relevant for academic librarians.

Mahadevagouda and Pavithrabai (2025) focus on capacity building for library professionals in law college libraries, underscoring that competencies cannot remain aspirational statements. They require training infrastructures and institutional commitment. This is important because competency frameworks often appear polished and comprehensive, but their practical value depends on whether librarians are given time, resources, organizational support, and recognition to develop them.

The notion of a layered competency architecture is useful because it captures the cumulative rather than substitutive nature of modern librarianship. New competencies do not simply replace old ones. AI literacy does not replace legal bibliography. Metadata skills do not replace reference interview competence. Leadership training does not replace user-centered service. Rather, the profession grows by addition, integration, and recombination. This layered structure, however, has consequences. It increases the cognitive and organizational demands placed upon librarians. It also raises the risk that institutions will expect highly specialized and continually updated performance without proportionate support.

In practical terms, the literature suggests that academic law librarians must now be competent in at least six interrelated domains: legal information knowledge; instructional and pedagogical capability; digital and technological fluency; user-centered service and consultation; organizational and collaborative

leadership; and reflective ethical judgment. These domains are mutually reinforcing. A librarian cannot teach legal research well without legal source expertise. A librarian cannot support digital scholarship without technological fluency. A librarian cannot guide AI-assisted research responsibly without ethical and evaluative judgment. The contemporary competency model is therefore integrative by necessity.

Artificial intelligence and advanced digital systems intensify, rather than diminish, the educational role of academic law librarians

A third major finding is that emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence and advanced digital systems, do not make academic law librarians obsolete. Instead, they make their educational, evaluative, and mediating roles more important. This conclusion emerges from reading the recent technology-oriented literature in relation to foundational works on legal research and law librarianship.

Cox (2024) argues that academic librarian competencies must now account for artificial intelligence. This is not because AI is merely another tool to be added to the librarian's toolkit, but because AI changes the conditions under which information is sought, interpreted, and trusted. AI systems can summarize, recommend, generate, cluster, and predict. Yet these functions do not eliminate the need for human expertise. On the contrary, they create new requirements for critical evaluation. Librarians must understand what AI systems do, what they fail to do, and how users may misunderstand their outputs.

McLaughlin (2025) addresses this issue specifically in relation to law librarians and law students. AI-assisted legal research introduces a paradox. It can lower the threshold of entry for finding potentially relevant materials, but it can also encourage premature confidence. Legal research is not complete when a system provides an answer-like output. It is complete only when authorities are verified, jurisdictional relevance is established, procedural posture is understood, and doctrinal fit is assessed. Law students who rely on AI-generated synthesis without learning these underlying research habits may develop superficial competence. This places law librarians in a crucial instructional position. They must help students distinguish convenience from authority, fluency from accuracy, and output from evidence.

The significance of this cannot be overstated. In legal education, a mistaken source, misread precedent, or fabricated citation has consequences beyond ordinary academic error. It affects legal reasoning itself. Cohen and Olsen (2011) emphasize the disciplined structure of legal research, while Murray and Desai (2015)

demonstrate the importance of teaching these methods in technologically changing environments. When these works are read together with McLaughlin (2025), a clear insight emerges: AI does not alter the necessity of legal research foundations. It raises the stakes of teaching them.

Chan (2024) contributes another dimension by focusing on metadata competencies for description and discovery of open resources. AI and advanced discovery systems often operate atop metadata structures. Search quality, retrieval pathways, and interoperability depend on accurate description and classification. In open access and digital environments, the invisibility of metadata work can obscure its importance. Yet for law libraries, where discoverability and specificity are paramount, metadata is not back-end trivia. It is part of the epistemic architecture through which knowledge becomes retrievable and trustworthy. This means that the law librarian's role in organizing digital knowledge environments is part of the educational value chain.

Umeozor and Emasealu (2022) discuss web technology as a pathway for academic libraries in developing countries. Their work reminds us that technological transformation is not uniform across institutions or regions. Infrastructure, connectivity, funding, training, and policy contexts shape what digital advancement actually looks like in practice. Therefore, the incorporation of AI and advanced tools must be understood in relation to institutional realities. A technologically ambitious model that ignores uneven access conditions may deepen rather than reduce inequality. Librarians, particularly in academic settings, often become the professionals who navigate this mismatch between technological possibility and institutional constraint.

The literature also suggests that technological systems shift the balance of user expectations. When users encounter intelligent search features, conversational interfaces, recommendation engines, or expansive digital databases, they may assume that independent research has become easier and that professional mediation is less necessary. Yet the evidence from general library use studies already shows that users often underutilize resources even in less complex digital environments (Ankrah & Atuase, 2018; Bavaskar et al., 2023; Kuri & Patil, 2023). It would therefore be misguided to assume that adding AI naturally resolves the problem of meaningful use. In many cases, it may obscure it. Users may feel more confident while actually relying on more opaque systems.

Thus, the educational role of the academic law librarian expands in three ways under AI conditions. First, the librarian becomes an interpreter of tools. This includes

explaining what systems do, how results are produced, and where limitations lie. Second, the librarian becomes a guardian of research standards. This includes insisting on verification, source tracing, and doctrinal context. Third, the librarian becomes an ethical mediator. This includes helping institutions and users think about trust, bias, accountability, privacy, and responsible use.

These roles do not imply technophobia. The reviewed literature does not support an anti-technology position. Rather, it supports a critical adoption model. Academic law librarians should be technologically capable and open to innovation, but they should resist narratives that equate automation with intellectual sufficiency. This is entirely consistent with broader competency frameworks, which emphasize adaptation, instruction, and user-centered service rather than passive acceptance of technology (American Library Association, 2023; RUSA Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians Task Force, 2025).

In effect, AI intensifies the distinction between information access and information judgment. If access becomes easier, judgment becomes more valuable. Academic law librarians stand at that point of judgment. Their continued relevance lies precisely in the fact that information abundance does not eliminate the need for expert mediation; it amplifies it.

Role expansion is producing sustainability challenges for the profession

The fourth major finding is that the growing complexity of academic and law librarianship brings organizational and professional risks. The literature points not only to expanding competencies and rising expectations, but also to tensions surrounding workload, identity, support, and retention.

Ax-Fultz (2024), examining why academic law librarians quit, offers especially important insight into the profession's human sustainability. Exit patterns do not emerge in a vacuum. They often reflect accumulated pressures such as role ambiguity, emotional labor, institutional undervaluation, inadequate advancement, workload expansion, or mismatch between expertise and recognition. In the context of this review, Ax-Fultz's contribution is crucial because it complicates any celebratory narrative about competency expansion. It is easy to list desirable skills. It is much harder to build institutions in which professionals can enact those skills sustainably.

Danner (2011) had already identified the profession's redefinition as a structural issue, not simply a personal one. When professions change, organizational expectations change with them. Yet institutions do not

always revise staffing models, reward structures, or governance assumptions accordingly. A law librarian may be expected to support digital research, teach advanced legal research, manage electronic resources, advise on repositories, contribute to faculty scholarship, engage with AI, maintain user services, and participate in institutional planning. Each of these tasks may be justified individually. Their cumulative effect, however, can become burdensome if not strategically managed.

The competency frameworks themselves indirectly reveal this tension. The American Association of Law Librarians (2022), American Library Association (2023), and CARL Competencies Working Group (2020) all articulate broad and ambitious professional expectations. These frameworks are valuable and necessary, but they can also generate institutional misunderstanding if administrators treat competencies as effortless benchmarks rather than developmental trajectories. Competence is not a checklist to be imposed. It is a cultivated capacity supported by training, mentorship, staffing, reflective practice, and time.

Mahadevagouda and Pavithrabai (2025) highlight capacity building in law college libraries, which suggests a practical response to this problem. If institutions want stronger professional performance, they must invest in structured development. Capacity building implies more than occasional workshops. It includes ongoing learning ecosystems, peer exchange, professional recognition, and organizational commitment to growth. Without such investment, competency discourse risks becoming performative.

Recent technology-focused works reinforce the sustainability problem by showing how rapidly the knowledge base is expanding. Chan (2024) identifies metadata-specific competencies connected to open access resource description and discovery. Cox (2024) points to the growing importance of AI-related competencies. Dube (2024) surveys skills needed for emerging technologies. Each of these areas is substantial in its own right. Their accumulation produces a professional field in which lifelong learning is not optional. While this can be energizing, it can also contribute to fatigue if every new development appears as an additional obligation without corresponding reprioritization.

The literature on user resource utilization adds another layer. Because users often require more orientation, personalized assistance, and instructional support than institutions assume (Quadri et al., 2014; Ankrah & Atuase, 2018; Umar & Sokari, 2020), librarians may be drawn into increasingly intensive service relationships.

In law libraries, where the stakes of research quality are high, this intensification may be especially pronounced. The result is a profession that is simultaneously intellectual, pedagogical, technical, relational, and strategic. That combination is impressive, but also demanding.

One of the most important implications of this finding is that sustainability should be considered a core component of library quality. A library cannot be effective in the long term if its professionals are overextended, under-supported, or institutionally marginalized. Service quality is inseparable from workforce conditions. Moreover, if law librarians leave the profession or experience chronic strain, the institution loses not only labor but accumulated interpretive expertise. This matters because legal information work depends heavily on tacit knowledge, context sensitivity, and pedagogical judgment—qualities that are not easily replaced by systems or short-term staffing substitutions.

The literature therefore suggests that the future of academic law librarianship must be planned as an organizational issue rather than merely a professional aspiration. Competency development, technological modernization, user education, and retention should be treated as interconnected priorities. Otherwise, institutions may unintentionally create a self-defeating cycle: they expand service expectations to meet digital-era needs, but fail to support the professionals who make those services possible.

Taken together, the results of this integrative review show that academic law librarianship now operates within a dense field of expectations and dependencies. Resources require mediation. Competencies are layered and expanding. AI increases the need for judgment and instruction. Professional sustainability has become a strategic concern. These findings provide the basis for a deeper discussion of what the profession represents and what institutions must do if they are to preserve and strengthen its value.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review suggest that academic law librarianship should be understood as a high-complexity profession whose central function is no longer reducible to access provision, collection maintenance, or even conventional reference service. Instead, the profession now occupies a pivotal space in the epistemic, pedagogical, and organizational architecture of higher education. This is particularly true in legal education, where the quality of research depends not simply on obtaining information, but on recognizing authority, understanding doctrinal relationships, and applying interpretive discipline to

sources that carry different legal weight. The discussion that follows interprets the results in relation to broader theoretical questions about mediation, professionalism, technology, and institutional design.

The first major theoretical implication concerns mediation. Much of the language surrounding digital libraries and electronic resources has historically been framed by notions of access, convenience, and empowerment. These are important values, but the literature reviewed here repeatedly demonstrates that access is only the first layer of informational participation. Resources become academically meaningful only when users can discover them, understand them, evaluate them, and integrate them into research practice (Quadri et al., 2014; Ankrah & Atuase, 2018; Bavaskar et al., 2023; Kuri & Patil, 2023). This has direct relevance for academic law libraries because legal research is especially dependent on methodological literacy. Users may have access to case databases, statutes, open repositories, and secondary commentaries, yet still fail to construct sound legal arguments if they do not understand the hierarchy and function of those materials (Cohen & Olsen, 2011; Murray & Desai, 2015).

This insight challenges a persistent misconception in digital higher education: the idea that technological progress reduces the need for professional mediation. The literature reviewed here points in the opposite direction. As resources become more abundant and interfaces more sophisticated, mediation becomes more complex rather than less necessary. The law librarian is not an obstacle between user and information; the law librarian is the interpretive infrastructure that turns information abundance into research competence. This reframing is important because professional invisibility often results from successful mediation. When systems appear seamless, the labor that made them usable can disappear from view. Yet discoverability, metadata quality, instructional design, responsive consultation, and ethical guidance are all forms of professional work.

A second theoretical implication concerns the nature of competence itself. The competency frameworks and profession-centered writings reviewed here suggest that librarianship, and especially law librarianship, should be understood through an integrative rather than segmented model of expertise (American Association of Law Librarians, 2022; American Library Association, 2023; CARL Competencies Working Group, 2020). In such a model, competencies are not isolated technical skills but interrelated capacities embedded in practice. For example, legal source expertise is inseparable from pedagogy because legal knowledge must often be translated into teachable research

habits. Technology competence is inseparable from ethics because digital tools alter the conditions of trust and decision-making. Metadata knowledge is inseparable from service because discoverability affects what users can find and how they understand collections. Communication is inseparable from user-centeredness because reference work depends on identifying and clarifying need. Leadership is inseparable from adaptation because institutional change requires advocacy and strategic participation.

This integrative view resists both nostalgia and reductionism. It resists nostalgia by refusing the idea that the profession can or should return to an earlier, more stable role structure. The digital transformation of scholarship is real, and academic law librarianship must continue to evolve in response to it (Danner, 2011; Laskowski et al., 2021). At the same time, it resists reductionism by rejecting the notion that future competence can be reduced to technological literacy alone. The reviewed literature makes clear that new technologies add to, rather than replace, the core values of professional judgment, educational support, and service interpretation.

The emergence of AI sharpens this point. There is a tendency in some discussions of artificial intelligence to frame expertise as something that can be outsourced to tools. In the context of legal information work, this framing is especially hazardous. McLaughlin (2025) rightly points to the need to prepare law students for AI-assisted legal research rather than for AI dependence. The distinction matters. Assistance presumes active human oversight, source checking, and methodological understanding. Dependence implies epistemic surrender. Academic law librarians are crucial to maintaining that distinction because they operate at the boundary between tool use and research standards.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the reviewed literature supports a model of legal research instruction that is developmental, critical, and context-sensitive. Murray and Desai (2015) demonstrate that legal research and writing instruction in digital contexts must attend to how tools shape student habits. This remains highly relevant in AI-mediated environments. Students need more than procedural demonstrations of databases or platforms. They need to understand why certain sources count, how to verify them, when digital summaries are insufficient, and how technological affordances can distort research judgment. Thus, the educational role of the law librarian is not ancillary to curriculum; it is constitutive of research formation.

This leads to a broader discussion of user-centeredness. The RUSA Professional Competencies for

Reference and User Services Librarians Task Force (2025) emphasizes user-centered service, but the empirical studies reviewed here suggest that user-centeredness is often misunderstood in purely customer-service terms. In academic libraries, and especially law libraries, user-centeredness does not mean uncritical accommodation of every immediate preference. It means understanding users' real informational situations, which often include confusion, overconfidence, under-preparation, or hidden barriers. A truly user-centered law librarian may need to slow a student down, redirect them from an inappropriate source, teach a more demanding method, or challenge their assumptions about sufficiency. User-centeredness in this context is pedagogical respect, not mere convenience optimization.

The literature also invites reflection on the relationship between professional standards and institutional realities. Competency frameworks can be empowering because they articulate the breadth and seriousness of librarianship. They also provide a vocabulary for advocacy. When library professionals can point to recognized frameworks, they can better explain the intellectual, technological, and instructional nature of their work (American Association of Law Librarians, 2022; American Library Association, 2023). However, the review also suggests a danger: competencies can become detached from working conditions. If institutions adopt competency rhetoric without investing in staffing, development, and organizational support, then frameworks may raise expectations while masking structural insufficiency.

Ax-Fultz (2024) makes this tension visible by focusing on why academic law librarians leave. Professional sustainability is not a secondary issue to be addressed after service innovation. It is part of service innovation. Institutions that want agile, technologically capable, pedagogically active librarians must create conditions under which such work is possible. This includes manageable workloads, recognition of expertise, pathways for advancement, mentoring structures, and serious support for continuing education. Otherwise, the profession risks burnout and attrition precisely when its expertise is most needed.

There is also a geopolitical and infrastructural dimension to the discussion. Umeozor and Emasealu (2022) remind us that digital transformation occurs unevenly across contexts, especially in developing environments where web technology may be both promising and constrained. Many discussions of AI and advanced service models assume robust infrastructures and stable funding. Yet academic libraries operate across wide variations in institutional

capacity. This means that a globally relevant vision of academic law librarianship must include adaptive pluralism. Competence in one setting may involve sophisticated repository and AI integration; in another, it may involve creative web-based service expansion under constrained conditions. The core principle is not identical technological form but thoughtful alignment of competencies with institutional context.

The discussion also points toward a conceptual convergence between general academic librarianship and law librarianship. On one hand, law librarianship is distinct because legal research has specialized methods, authoritative structures, and disciplinary requirements (Cohen & Olsen, 2011; Laskowski et al., 2021). On the other hand, the profession increasingly shares with broader academic librarianship a set of challenges related to digital discovery, user training, scholarly communication, open access, metadata, AI, and service design (Chan, 2024; Cox, 2024; Dube, 2024). This suggests that academic law librarianship should be conceptualized as both distinctive and connected: distinctive in its legal epistemology, connected in its engagement with wider transformations in information work.

Another important issue is the meaning of professionalism in a rapidly changing field. Professionalism has often been associated with mastery of a fixed domain. The reviewed literature suggests a more dynamic conception: professionalism as adaptive stewardship. The librarian is a steward of standards, access, interpretation, and institutional memory, but must perform this stewardship under changing technological and educational conditions. This model helps explain why the profession continues to expand rather than contract. Change does not eliminate professional work; it redistributes and redefines it.

The present review also highlights a subtle but important tension between visibility and value. Much library labor becomes visible only when it fails. If users cannot access a source, if discovery systems mislead, if instruction is absent, or if AI use results in error, then the need for librarians becomes obvious. But when systems work well and students succeed, the professional mediation behind that success may be underacknowledged. This invisibility can contribute to institutional undervaluation. Competency frameworks and profession-centered scholarship therefore serve not only internal development but external explanation. They help make visible the intellectual and pedagogical labor that sustains scholarly ecosystems.

Several practical implications flow from this discussion. Academic law libraries should invest in integrated

instructional programs that connect legal research, source evaluation, digital literacy, and AI awareness. They should align staff development plans with competency frameworks, not as compliance mechanisms but as supports for reflective growth. They should treat metadata and open access work as strategically relevant to user success, not as isolated technical functions. They should design services around demonstrated patterns of user non-use and confusion, rather than assuming that resource provision solves access problems. They should also address sustainability as a leadership issue by recognizing the cumulative impact of role expansion on staff wellbeing and retention.

Future professional development in academic law librarianship should therefore move in at least three coordinated directions. The first is depth preservation: ensuring that foundational legal research expertise remains strong. The second is adaptive expansion: developing competence in AI, metadata, digital pedagogy, and emerging technologies. The third is organizational realism: recognizing that not every librarian can do everything at once, and that institutions must prioritize, specialize, collaborate, and resource accordingly.

The discussion ultimately supports a central conclusion: academic law librarianship is becoming more important precisely because academic information environments are becoming more complex. The profession's value lies not in controlling scarcity but in cultivating judgment amid abundance. In a world of proliferating digital tools, open resources, and AI-mediated systems, the academic law librarian remains essential as educator, interpreter, strategist, and guardian of research integrity.

There are, however, limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from this review. Because the article relies exclusively on the supplied references, it cannot engage with the full global literature on academic law librarianship, digital scholarship, or AI in legal education. The included studies also vary in their empirical depth and institutional scope, which means that some findings are more illustrative than universally generalizable. In addition, the literature base contains more material on competencies and resource use than on direct institutional outcomes such as student performance, faculty productivity, or long-term library impact. These limitations mean that the review is best understood as a conceptually grounded synthesis rather than a definitive empirical map of the entire field.

Even so, the literature reviewed here provides sufficient depth to support a strong and coherent

interpretation of present trends. It shows that the profession is undergoing not a simple technological upgrade but a structural transformation in which educational labor, critical mediation, digital expertise, and institutional sustainability are becoming tightly interwoven. Future research would benefit from empirical studies that directly connect competency development to user outcomes in law school settings, examine how AI-assisted legal research changes student learning trajectories, and explore how organizational culture affects recruitment and retention in academic law libraries. Comparative international studies would also be valuable, especially given the importance of infrastructural and jurisdictional context in shaping library service models.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to synthesize the literature on academic library resource utilization, librarian competencies, law librarianship, and emerging technologies in order to better understand the contemporary condition of academic law librarianship. The review reveals a field defined by complexity rather than decline. The central issue is no longer whether libraries possess resources, but whether users can meaningfully engage with those resources through systems of support, instruction, and professional mediation. Across the reviewed studies, a consistent message appears: awareness, usability, training, disciplinary fit, and interpretive guidance remain decisive factors in whether library resources actually contribute to academic work (Quadri et al., 2014; Ankrah & Atuase, 2018; Bavaskar et al., 2023; Kuri & Patil, 2023).

For academic law libraries, this reality is intensified by the nature of legal information. Legal research requires authority recognition, contextual reading, source hierarchy awareness, and methodological discipline. Accordingly, law librarianship has evolved into a layered profession that combines legal information expertise with pedagogy, digital fluency, metadata understanding, user-centered service, leadership, and ethical judgment (American Association of Law Librarians, 2022; Laskowski et al., 2021; Cox, 2024; McLaughlin, 2025). The rise of artificial intelligence does not weaken this professional role. Instead, it amplifies the need for critical evaluation, source verification, research instruction, and responsible mediation. In environments where access becomes easier but trust becomes more complicated, expert judgment becomes more valuable.

At the same time, the literature makes clear that expanding expectations create sustainability pressures. Competency frameworks are aspirational and

necessary, but they must be matched by institutional investment, staff development, and professional recognition. Without such support, the profession risks overload and attrition, undermining the very services institutions increasingly depend upon (Ax-Fultz, 2024; Mahadevagouda & Pavithrabai, 2025). The future of academic law librarianship therefore depends not only on professional adaptability, but on organizational seriousness.

The broader significance of this review lies in its argument that academic law librarians are essential actors in the knowledge economy of higher education. They do not simply facilitate access; they shape how research is learned, judged, trusted, and sustained. In the digital and AI era, their work is best understood as a form of intellectual stewardship grounded in disciplinary expertise and oriented toward user empowerment through critical guidance. Institutions that recognize this will be better equipped to support high-quality legal education, trustworthy scholarship, and more equitable participation in complex information environments.

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