



The Role of Public Libraries in Non-Formal Learning: Results from a Survey Study

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Abstract

Public libraries in Bulgaria increasingly function as open and inclusive spaces for learning, creativity, and community interaction. Beyond their traditional roles of providing access to information and cultural heritage, they have become important facilitators of non-formal learning opportunities for citizens of all ages. This paper explores the role of Bulgarian public libraries in supporting non-formal learning, based on a survey conducted among library users across different regions of the country.

The main objective of the study was to examine users' participation in non-formal learning activities organized or supported by public libraries, their motivations for engaging in such activities, and their perceptions of libraries as learning environments. The survey, completed by 3200 respondents, collected data on the types of educational activities attended, the skills and knowledge gained, and the perceived social benefits of participation.

Results show that public library users in Bulgaria view libraries as accessible and welcoming places for learning and personal development. The most frequently mentioned forms of non-formal learning include digital skills training, cultural and creative workshops, reading programs, and community events. Respondents emphasized the importance of the informal and supportive atmosphere that libraries provide, as well as their role in fostering digital inclusion and lifelong learning. However, the findings also point to challenges such as limited program variety and insufficient promotion of learning opportunities.

The study concludes that public libraries have strong potential to strengthen their position as community learning centers that contribute to lifelong education and social inclusion. By responding to users' evolving educational needs, libraries can continue to play a key role in shaping inclusive and knowledge-based local communities in Bulgaria. The results are especially significant in relation to scientific and STEM literacy, since competencies in digital and information literacy form a fundamental basis for engaging with scientific knowledge, developing critical thinking, and making informed decisions grounded in evidence. In this regard, the study adds to the broader conversation about the evolving role of public libraries as community-oriented spaces that foster scientific understanding and encourage lifelong engagement with science.

Keywords: *Public libraries; Non-formal learning; Lifelong learning; Library users; Bulgaria; Digital inclusion; Survey study*

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, public libraries have gradually expanded their roles in response to the rapid development of the information society, digitalisation, and changing educational needs. From traditional institutions primarily focused on the preservation and provision of documented knowledge, libraries have increasingly developed into active public spaces for learning, cultural exchange, and social engagement. In this context, the role of libraries as centres for non-formal education oriented toward lifelong learning and the development of key competencies has become particularly significant [2,5].

Non-formal education has emerged as a vital component of contemporary educational systems, complementing and extending the possibilities of formal education. It is characterized by voluntariness, flexibility, practical orientation, and responsiveness to the individual needs of learners. These characteristics make non-formal education particularly well suited to library environments, which are inherently open, accessible, and inclusive of diverse social groups [3,6].

In the context of accelerated digitalization and increasing demands for information and digital literacy, libraries increasingly assume roles related to training, guidance, and mediation between users and information resources. Through the organization of courses, workshops, digital skills training, language programs, and cultural initiatives, libraries act as key facilitators of knowledge and skill acquisition beyond the framework of formal education.



In recent years, international research and professional practice have increasingly emphasized the role of public libraries as key actors in non-formal education and lifelong learning. Across Europe and beyond, libraries have expanded their functions by offering educational programs focused on digital literacy, social inclusion, and community empowerment, positioning themselves as accessible learning hubs within local contexts [1,4,7]. Within this broader international framework, public libraries in Bulgaria have been undergoing a similar, though uneven, transformation. While they increasingly adopt educational and community-oriented roles aligned with global trends, their development is shaped by specific national conditions, including institutional capacity, funding structures, and varying levels of public awareness. Examining the Bulgarian experience alongside international practices provides valuable insight into how global models of library-based non-formal education are locally interpreted and implemented.

Scientific literacy is identified as a key competence in today's knowledge society, as it develops skills for understanding scientific information, which supports informed decision-making. As partners in this process, public libraries support digital and information literacy, which are widely recognized as key components of scientific education. Through seminars, training programs, and access to digital resources, libraries provide opportunities for informal and non-formal engagement with science, technology, and innovation.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Study

The role of public libraries has undergone a significant transformation in response to broader societal shifts associated with the knowledge economy, digitalization, and the growing emphasis on lifelong learning. Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes public libraries not merely as repositories of information, but as dynamic community-based learning environments that support non-formal and informal education across the life course. Within this evolving framework, libraries are recognized as accessible infrastructures that facilitate skills development, social inclusion, and civic participation [12,13]. Non-formal education occupies a central position in lifelong learning policies and scholarly discourse due to its flexibility, learner-centered orientation, and responsiveness to rapidly changing social and labor market demands. Unlike formal education, non-formal learning is characterized by voluntariness, adaptability, and practical relevance, making it particularly compatible with library settings. Studies emphasize that libraries provide favorable conditions for non-formal learning by offering inclusive spaces, professional guidance, and access to both digital and physical resources that support self-directed and experiential learning.

At the international policy level, the educational role of public libraries is explicitly acknowledged. The IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022 defines public libraries as key institutions for education, information, and social cohesion, emphasizing their responsibility to support lifelong learning and non-formal educational opportunities for all members of society [15]. The manifesto highlights libraries' contribution to digital inclusion, equitable access to knowledge, and community development, positioning them as integral components of contemporary learning ecosystems.

Similarly, recent analyses by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) underscore lifelong learning as a strategic priority for education systems worldwide. The Education Policy Outlook 2025 stresses the need for diverse learning environments capable of supporting continuous skills development beyond formal educational pathways, particularly for adults and disadvantaged groups [11]. Within this policy context, public libraries emerge as institutions well suited to complement formal education by offering flexible, community-based learning opportunities aligned with everyday life and work-related needs.

Further insights are provided by publications of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), which emphasize the importance of inclusive and locally embedded learning infrastructures in achieving sustainable lifelong learning systems. UNESCO reports highlight non-formal education as a key mechanism for addressing educational inequalities, promoting active citizenship, and supporting digital and information literacy across different population groups [16]. These policy perspectives reinforce the relevance of libraries as spaces where global educational objectives intersect with local community needs.

Within the field of library and information science, empirical studies increasingly document the expansion of library-based non-formal learning initiatives, including digital skills training, cultural and creative workshops, language courses, and community education programs. However, the literature also points to persistent challenges, such as limited institutional recognition of libraries' educational role, uneven participation among user groups, and gaps between policy ambitions and everyday practices. These findings suggest the need for further empirical research that examines users'



perceptions, participation patterns, and expectations in relation to non-formal learning activities in public libraries. Against this backdrop, the present study contributes empirical evidence from the Bulgarian context to the international discussion on public libraries as non-formal learning environments. By focusing on users' awareness, participation, and perceptions, the study complements existing research and policy frameworks, offering insights into how global trends in lifelong learning and digital inclusion are manifested at the local level.

2.1. Non-Formal Education in the Context of Lifelong Learning

Non-formal education occupies an increasingly prominent position in contemporary lifelong learning paradigms, functioning as a flexible mechanism for the acquisition of knowledge and skills outside institutionalized educational structures. Unlike formal education, it is not constrained by rigid curricula, certification requirements, or standardized outcomes, but is instead defined by adaptability, voluntary participation, and orientation toward concrete practical needs [8,14].

Within the information society, non-formal education fulfills a compensatory and complementary role in relation to formal education. It creates opportunities for rapid knowledge updating, acquisition of new competencies, and addressing educational gaps associated with digitalization, labor market dynamics, and broader social transformations. Consequently, non-formal education is widely regarded as a key instrument for social inclusion, professional mobility, and civic participation.

From the perspective of library and information science, non-formal education represents a domain in which libraries can fully realize their potential as intermediaries between information and knowledge. The library environment, free from the formal constraints of educational institutions, offers favorable conditions for learning grounded in personal interests, intrinsic motivation, and experiential practice.

2.2. Libraries as Educational and Information Infrastructures

Contemporary libraries function as complex information infrastructures that extend beyond their traditional role as repositories of documents. They provide access not only to printed and digital resources, but also to educational services, technological environments, and professional support. In this sense, the library is increasingly recognized as an institution that integrates informational, educational, and social functions.

The educational role of libraries manifests in several interconnected dimensions: the provision of resources for self-directed learning, support for formal education, and the organization of targeted non-formal learning initiatives. Through these activities, libraries contribute to the development of information-seeking, evaluative, and application skills-competencies that are particularly critical in conditions of information overload [8,9].

Within this framework, libraries position themselves as accessible and inclusive learning spaces that do not require prior educational credentials or specific social status. This makes them particularly suitable for engaging diverse target groups, including children, youth, adults, disadvantaged populations, and older learners. Educational initiatives implemented in library settings are often practically oriented and directly applicable to everyday life and professional contexts.

2.3. Information and Digital Literacy as a Core of Library-Based Non-Formal Education

One of the central aspects of non-formal education in libraries is the development of information and digital literacy. In the context of digital transformation, individuals' ability to locate, evaluate, interpret, and use information effectively has become a fundamental competence. Libraries play a pivotal role in this process by providing not only access to technologies, but also guidance for their meaningful and responsible use.

Digital literacy training in libraries encompasses a broad range of topics, from basic computer skills and internet use to access to e-government services, personal data protection, and critical evaluation of online content. These initiatives have a strong applied orientation and are aimed at reducing digital inequalities within society.

Information literacy, in turn, is widely viewed as a foundation for self-directed learning and informed participation in public life. Through non-formal learning formats, libraries support the development of critical thinking, source evaluation skills, and ethical information use. This positions the library not merely as a service provider, but as an active contributor to the formation of an informed and engaged civil society.



Methodology

This study applies a quantitative survey-based approach to examine public library users' perceptions of libraries as environments for non-formal learning in the context of lifelong learning and digital transformation. The object of the research is public libraries as educational spaces, while the subject focuses on users' awareness, participation, and preferences regarding non-formal educational activities.

Data were collected through an anonymous questionnaire administered in March 2025 using a mixed distribution method, combining online dissemination via library websites and social media and on-site distribution in public libraries across different regions of Bulgaria. Participation was voluntary. A total of 3200 valid responses were included in the analysis. Although the sample is not nationally representative, its size allows for exploratory insights into user attitudes and emerging trends.

The survey consisted of closed-ended questions, including multiple-choice items and five-point Likert-scale statements assessing awareness, participation, perceptions of libraries as learning environments, and preferences for thematic areas and learning formats.

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, primarily frequency and percentage analysis, to identify dominant patterns and discrepancies between awareness and participation.

The study has several limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and a non-representative sample, which restrict the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the results provide valuable empirical evidence on the evolving role of public libraries as centers for non-formal learning.

Results

The results of the empirical study reveal a clear tendency toward the recognition of libraries as significant spaces for non-formal education, despite notable discrepancies between positive attitudes, levels of awareness, and actual participation in educational initiatives.

The analysis indicates a high level of general engagement with libraries as institutions. A substantial proportion of respondents report regular library use, confirming the library's stable role in the cultural and informational life of local communities. However, frequent library visits do not consistently correlate with participation in educational activities, suggesting that libraries continue to be perceived primarily as places for accessing resources rather than as active learning environments.

A closer examination of the data indicates that preferences for non-formal learning formats vary across user groups. Younger respondents tend to express a stronger preference for hybrid and online learning formats, while older users more frequently favor face-to-face activities, particularly in the context of digital skills training.

With regard to awareness of non-formal educational initiatives, the findings demonstrate relatively high levels of familiarity. Most respondents are aware that libraries offer courses, training sessions, and thematic workshops (Fig.1). Nevertheless, only a portion of informed users have participated in such activities. This discrepancy between awareness and behavior highlights the presence of structural and motivational barriers, including lack of time, insufficiently targeted communication, and the perception that libraries are not primarily educational spaces. The identified gap between awareness and participation suggests that information about educational initiatives alone is insufficient to stimulate active engagement. This finding may be interpreted in light of the traditionally resource-oriented perception of libraries, which continues to shape user expectations and limits their recognition as active learning environments.

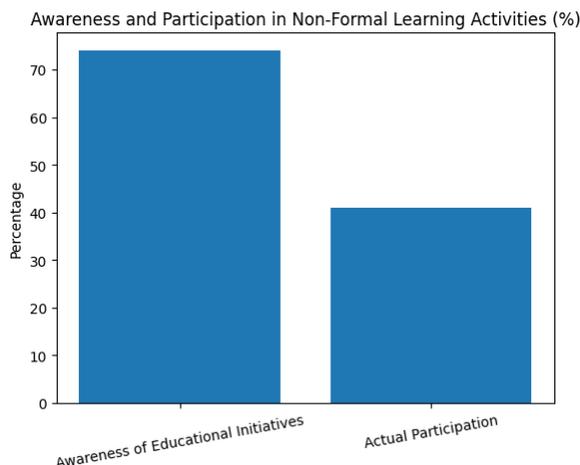


Fig. 1. Awareness of non-formal educational initiatives offered by public libraries compared to actual participation rates among respondents.

Preferences related to the content and format of non-formal learning are particularly revealing. The highest levels of interest are observed in practically oriented activities, such as digital literacy training, the use of online services, and financial and information literacy programs. These findings confirm the growing role of libraries as mediators in processes of digital inclusion and the reduction of information inequality. These competencies are closely linked to scientific literacy, as the ability to search, evaluate, and interpret information is essential for engaging with scientific knowledge, digital technologies, and evidence-based problem solving.

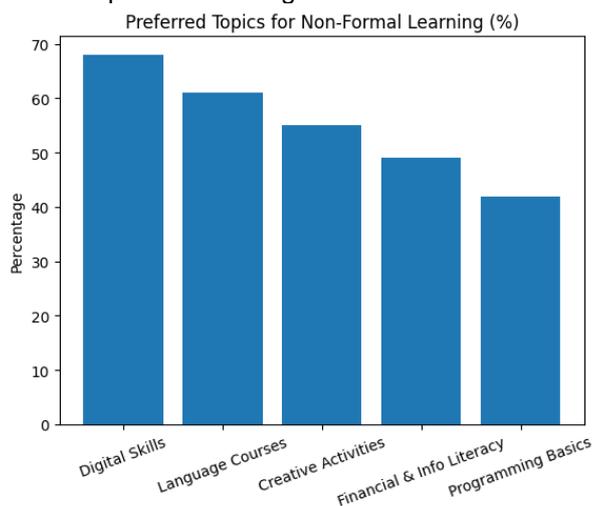


Fig. 2. Preferred thematic areas for participation in non-formal learning activities in public libraries.

Language courses and creative initiatives also occupy an important place among user preferences, being perceived not only as means for skill development but also as opportunities for personal enrichment and social interaction. This underscores the dual educational and socio-cultural function of libraries within the broader context of non-formal learning.

Regarding learning formats, the results clearly indicate a preference for hybrid models that combine face-to-face and online participation (Fig.2). This preference reflects the need for flexibility and adaptability in contemporary lifestyles and confirms users' expectations for modern, technologically supported educational services. Exclusively face-to-face or exclusively online formats are perceived as less effective when not complemented by opportunities for personal interaction or access to additional resources. The strong preference for hybrid learning formats can be interpreted as a response to contemporary time constraints and the need for flexible learning opportunities, particularly among working-age users, rather than as a rejection of face-to-face interaction.

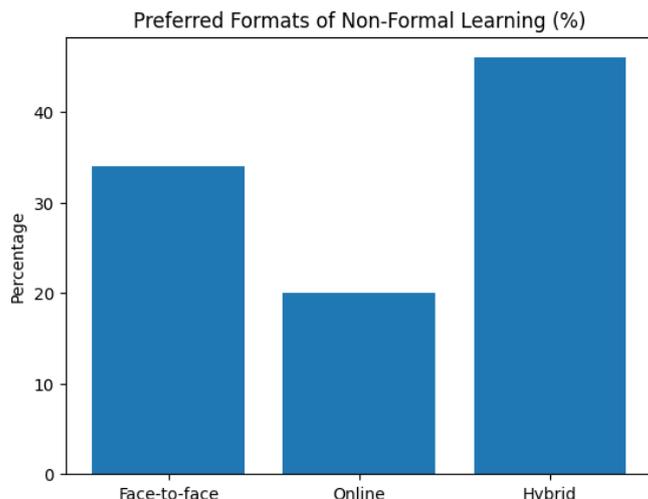


Fig. 3. Respondents' preferred formats for non-formal learning activities organized by public libraries.

Overall, the evaluation of libraries as educational environments is predominantly positive. Respondents emphasize the calm atmosphere, accessibility, and sense of inclusiveness as key advantages. At the same time, expectations for improvement emerge, particularly in relation to more active promotion of educational initiatives, expanded timeframes for participation, and clearer structuring of training programs.

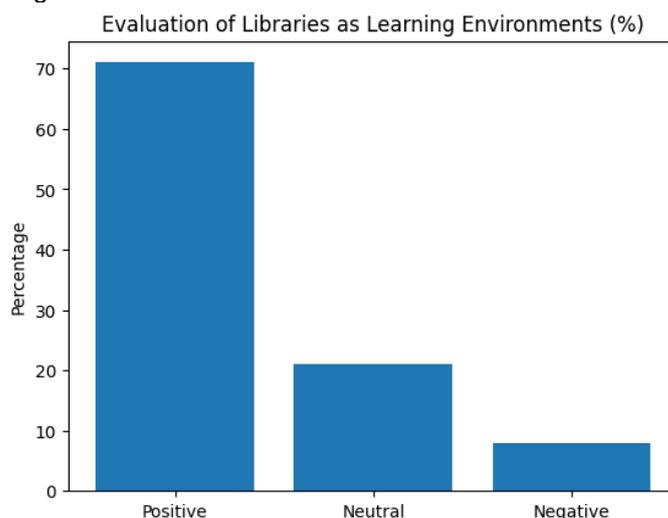


Fig. 4. Overall evaluation of public libraries as learning environments by survey respondents.

The findings indicate that while public libraries are widely recognized as accessible and supportive environments, their potential as centers for non-formal education is not yet fully translated into sustained user participation. Differences in preferences across user groups and learning formats suggest the need for more differentiated and targeted approaches to non-formal education. These results point to structural rather than individual barriers, highlighting the importance of institutional strategies that align library services with users' everyday learning practices and expectations.

Conclusion

This study examines the role of public libraries as centers for non-formal education within the context of lifelong learning and the growing importance of information and digital literacy. Through an applied empirical approach and an analysis of library users' attitudes and behaviors, the research highlights the contemporary position of libraries as institutions that transcend their traditional functions and increasingly establish themselves as active educational and social spaces.

The results demonstrate that libraries are positively perceived as potential environments for non-formal education, characterized by accessibility, a supportive atmosphere, and inclusiveness. At the



same time, a clear discrepancy is identified between high levels of awareness of educational initiatives and actual participation in them, emphasizing the need for targeted strategies to engage users and more clearly articulate the educational identity of libraries.

The study confirms that users show the greatest interest in practically and digitally oriented training, as well as flexible hybrid learning formats. These preferences reflect contemporary educational needs and outline concrete directions for the further development of library services in response to the dynamics of the information society.

Viewed within an international perspective, the findings of this study contribute to the broader understanding of public libraries as evolving learning environments that support non-formal education and lifelong learning. While many of the identified trends—such as the emphasis on digital skills, hybrid learning formats, and inclusive educational spaces—resonate with international research, the Bulgarian case highlights the importance of contextual factors in shaping library practices and user engagement. By situating empirical evidence from Bulgaria within a wider global discourse, the study demonstrates how public libraries in different national settings negotiate shared challenges and opportunities. In this sense, the Bulgarian experience offers not only a local perspective, but also a meaningful contribution to international discussions on the future role of public libraries in community-based learning and social inclusion.

The future development of libraries as educational centers depends largely on their ability to adapt services to the evolving needs of local communities, integrate digital solutions, and more clearly articulate their educational mission. Strengthening this role requires sustained institutional support and strategic long-term planning.

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings highlight the need for a clearer institutional recognition of public libraries as integral components of lifelong learning systems. Library development strategies at local and national levels should explicitly incorporate non-formal education as a core function of public libraries, supported by targeted funding, staff training, and cross-sector partnerships with educational and community organizations. In addition, policies aimed at digital inclusion and adult education may benefit from systematically integrating public libraries as accessible learning hubs capable of reaching diverse and underserved populations.

In this sense, public libraries hold substantial potential to function as key actors in lifelong learning ecosystems by bridging educational policy objectives with community-based non-formal learning practices and promoting inclusive, knowledge-oriented societies.

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