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Research Article

Strategic Use of Academic Databases across the Research Lifecycle: A Framework for Universities and Research Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Background: Academic databases are very important tools for research at universities and research institutions. Researchers use academic databases to retrieve literature, check citations, and assess research activity. However, there are differences between various databases in terms of scope, availability, subject area, and citation index. ### Problem Statement/Gap in Literature While existing studies have usually based their comparison on the scope and citation indicators of academic databases, they do not reflect the use of these databases in the various stages of the research process. **Methodology:** In this research note, the major academic databases namely Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PubMed, Dimensions and OpenAlex are compared with each other and with other studies. In addition, a new model is introduced that takes into account the comparison of the suitability of academic databases for research based on purpose, discipline and access factors. **Results:** The results indicate that Scopus and Web of Science are recommended for citation analysis and research assessment, while Google Scholar is useful for literature searches and PubMed remain a key database for medical research. **Conclusion:** The purpose of this research note is to provide a number of recommendations to researchers and organizations for the selection and use of academic databases at various stages of research activities.

Keywords: Academic databases, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PubMed, Bibliographic databases, Research lifecycle.

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INTRODUCTION

Access to scholarly information is very important to any research endeavour. The large body of academic work published online in the last few decades has made scholarly information more available than ever to the researchers (Fry, 2006; Borgman, 2007; Blair, 2010). Today thousands of *scholarly articles, conference papers, books and reports* are being published annually across disciplines. Scholarly academic databases have become a necessity in providing an efficient mechanism for accessing, indexing and retrieval of scholarly information (Bornmann and Mutz, 2015; Gusenbauer, 2022). Universities, research organizations and individual researchers use academic databases to search the literature on *topics of interest, to trace citations, assess the impact of research* and to find out *recent developments* in their field (Jacsó, 2005; Gusenbauer, 2022; Halevi *et al.*, 2017). Research work published in *peer-reviewed articles, theses or books* can be found through databases. Also, literature reviews can be updated quickly through a database. Academic work is also assessed through databases for research assessment, faculty appraisal and institutional ranking (Vernon *et al.*, 2018). *Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PubMed* are among the most popular academic databases which give access to academic content such as *content coverage, indexing rules, accessibility, citation tracking and disciplinary scope* (Falagas *et al.*, 2008; Martín-Martín *et al.*, 2018). *Scopus and Web of Science* apply strict criteria in indexing journals and focus on high impact journals whereas *Google Scholar* offers more literature and academic as well as *non-academic materials such as books, working papers, thesis, reports and newspaper articles* (Martín-Martín *et al.*, 2018; Pranckutė, 2021).

The choice of database may be important because different databases might index different numbers of articles that report on unique research findings (Bramer *et al.*, 2017). Single database searches can lead to omission of important papers published in journals that are indexed elsewhere (Franceschini *et al.*, 2016). This paper reviews the literature relating to comparison of scholarly databases as shown in Table 1. In a broad sense, the literature has dealt with the comparison of databases at the levels

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of citation metrics, journal coverage and indexing (Falagas *et al*., 2008; Martín-Martín *et al*., 2018).

Research Gap

Academic databases have been the subject of many comparisons in the literature, yet less attention has been devoted to the strategic use of databases at various stages within the research process. Some research has been done related to decision-making for the selection of databases and its relation to specific disciplines, goals of a research effort and source availability within the institution where the research will be carried out (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020). Thus, this research work deals with proposing a strategy to utilize academic databases throughout all the research lifecycle stages efficiently.

METHODOLOGY

This study explores the characteristics and appropriateness of major scholarly databases used for scientific literature search through a qualitative comparative approach. The analysis draws on existing literature that have evaluated bibliographic databases and citation indexing systems. By synthesizing insights from these sources, the study aims to identify the *major features, strengths, and limitations* of widely used scholarly databases in the context of academic research.

The study majorly focuses on four widely used scholarly databases *Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar,* and *PubMed.* These databases were selected because they are commonly used in academic research across different disciplines and represent different indexing models and search systems. For instance, some of these databases operate as *subscription-based curated indexing systems*, while others function as *open-access academic search engines*. In addition to these established databases, emerging scholarly platforms such as *Dimensions and OpenAlex* were also examined to reflect recent developments.

The comparison of databases was conducted using several evaluation criteria commonly discussed in the literature on bibliometrics and scholarly communication. These criteria include *database coverage, indexing standards and quality control mechanisms, citation tracking and analytical capabilities, accessibility and subscription requirements, and relevance* across different fields of study. Examining these dimensions enables a comprehensive understanding of how different databases support literature discovery and research evaluation.

The aim of this research note is not to conduct a large-scale quantitative bibliometric analysis of database outputs. Instead, the study provides a conceptual and practical comparison of scholarly databases. The study seeks to provide insights that may assist researchers, academic institutions, and libraries in making informed decisions regarding the strategic use of databases for research evaluation.

Major Academic Databases Used in Research

Scopus

Scopus is an abstract bibliographic database developed by Elsevier. It is a bibliographic and abstract database covering peer-reviewed literature, research papers and reviews in various fields. It also indexes *books and conference proceedings*. Scopus includes a *citation tracker and analysis tools*, and is often used in research assessment and for the evaluation of institution performance (Glänzel *et al*., 2006; Baas *et al*., 2020). It is best suited for the *Systematic literature reviews, Citation analysis, Multidisciplinary research and Institutional research evaluation.*

Web of Science

The Web of Science is a scientific indexing, research, and analysis database developed by Clarivate. The process of indexing is selective and the database comprises citation indexes. It is widely used in citation analysis and determining the impact factor of journals (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016). It is best suited for the *high-quality journal research, bibliometric analysis, citation tracking* and *impact factor evaluation.*

Google Scholar

Google Scholar is a search engine specialized on scholarly literature across all disciplines including *theses, books, conference papers* indexed electronically. It is a free internet search engine that indexes scholarly literature across many disciplines and sources in an easily searchable index (Harzing and Wal, 2008). It is best suited for the *initial literature exploration, searching grey literature and researchers without institutional subscriptions.*

PubMed

Public Med or PubMed is a free database service supplied by the U.S. National Library of Medicine. It supplies access to the literature in biomedical and life sciences research. The PubMed database is the most popular database in the medical and health sciences because of its accuracy and comprehensiveness (Williamson and Minter, 2019). It is useful for the *biomedical research, clinical studies* and *evidence-based medical literature.*

ScienceDirect

ScienceDirect is a leading full-text scientific database developed by Elsevier that provides access to a large collection of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers. The platform hosts many high-impact journals and is widely used by researchers for accessing full-text scholarly literature (Tenopir *et al*., 2008). It is best suitable for *accessing full-text peer-reviewed journal articles, literature review, scientific and technical research.*

Emerging Databases

New sources like *Dimensions, OpenAlex* have been making waves in the academic community. These databases use open scholarly metadata and integrated research analytics across scholarly publications, grants and patents (Ortega and Delgado-Quirós, 2024). This is part of the broader movement for open scholarly infrastructure, and we may see these types of databases become an alternative to traditional journal citation index systems.

Comparative Overview of Major Databases

Database Reliability and Indexing Standards

One of the features that differentiates academic databases from one another is the reliability of the content they cover (Gusenbauer, 2022). While all academic databases have some level of reliability and quality, in *Scopus* and *Web of Science*, journals are selected based on specific criteria in order to guarantee the *editorial standards, quality and reliability* of the publications indexed in the database (Crane, 1967). In case of publication of any content that is not up to these standards, the journal may be excluded from the database, which guarantees the reliability of the content.

Due to the strict selection criteria of the journals included in these databases, the Curated databases are highly regarded as a trustworthy resource for performing research assessment (Gusenbauer, 2022). Researchers and universities also use the Curated databases to measure the productivity and impact of scholars/universities (Buneman, 2003).

Unlike Google Scholar, which uses a large index built by software programs that scour the Web for *scholarly articles, conference papers, theses, and other research document*s stored in institutional repositories and journals. Google Scholar returns a broad array of documents that may not all be of scholarly quality (Harzing and Van, 2008). It is thus important to use caution when referencing sources found through open indexers. Using the combination of specialized databases for literature reviews and open search tools can provide the best of both worlds in terms of reliability and breadth of search as shown in Table 2.

Strategic Use of Databases Across the Research Lifecycle

This work is the first to systematically describe the use of evolutional stages in relation to the selection of appropriate databases. The findings show that there is no database applicable for all purposes at all stages of a research project. Rather, the use of different databases may be necessary at different stages of a research project.

Conceptual Framework for Database Selection

This paper discusses and demonstrates using a comparative analysis that there are a multitude of variables that must be weighed and taken into consideration when making a decision about which database(s) should be used for a particular topic of study. It provides an introductory model known as a Strategic Database Framework (SDF) for knowledge to aid in choosing appropriate databases for desired fields of study as shown in Figure 1.

By modelling database selection processes, this research aims to enhance the understanding of how researchers engage with

Table 1: **Overview of Major Databases.**

Database	Access Type	Coverage	Citation Tracking	Major Strength	Limitations
Scopus	Subscription	Journals, books, conferences	Yes	Broad multidisciplinary coverage	Paid access
Web of Science	Subscription	Selective journals	Yes	High-quality indexing	Limited coverage
Google Scholar	Free	Very broad including grey literature	Limited reliability	Wide accessibility	Quality control concerns
PubMed	Free	Biomedical journals	Limited	Reliable medical literature	Discipline specific
Dimensions/OpenAlex	Mixed	Publications, grants, patents	Yes	Emerging analytics tools	Still developing coverage
ScienceDirect	Subscription	Full-text journals, books, and conference papers	No	Extensive access to peer-reviewed full-text research	Focuses on content access rather than citation analytics
UGC-CARE List	Free	Approved academic journals for Indian higher education	No	Ensures journal quality and academic integrity	Limited global coverage and not a citation database

Table 2: Strategic Use of Databases across the Research Lifecycle.

Research Stage	Recommended Database	Purpose
Developing research ideas	Google Scholar	Broad literature exploration
Literature review	Scopus + Web of Science	High-quality indexed research
Discipline-specific search	PubMed or specialized databases	Field-specific research
Citation analysis	Scopus / Web of Science	Reliable citation metrics
Grey literature search	Google Scholar	Theses and reports
Institutional research evaluation	Scopus / Web of Science	Research performance analysis

databases across different subject domains. The results indicate that database selection could be a complex function of three variables namely, *research goals, discipline requirements, and accessibility*.

Dimension 1 (Research objectives): The purpose of the literature search is referred to the research objectives of the database filter. Researchers may search a database for various purposes such as *locating studies, literature reviews or citation analysis* (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016). The functionality of the databases filters may differ for various purposes of the literature searches. Citation analysis and research evaluation for instance may require access to databases such as Scopus and Web of Science (Zhu and Liu, 2020).

Dimension 2 (Disciplinary requirement): Highlights the importance of some subject-specific databases. Some of these sources can index for years, decades or in some cases, even centuries. Biomedical research at GGC uses PubMed to search for information on its vast collections of journals relating to medicine and the life sciences (Williamson and Minter, 2019).

Dimension 3 (Accessibility): Accessibility refers to the degree to which it is possible for researchers to access paid databases via institutional subscriptions (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016; Baas *et al*., 2020). This dimension contrasts researchers from well-funded universities with those from smaller institutions. While researchers from well-funded universities typically have access to commercial databases *(Scopus and Web of Science)*, researchers from smaller institutions rely on free-of-charge databases like *Google Scholar* (Gusenbauer, 2022).

Accessibility and Institutional Considerations

Access to a database is generally dependent on the financial situation and the infrastructure of a research institution. Larger universities and institutions with a high budget usually have access to the institution versions of databases such as *Scopus and Web of Science* (Arzberger *et al*., 2004). In addition to several functions for *research analysis, the citation tracking feature*, as well as targeted selections of relevant journals in different disciplines, make the databases highly applicable for the production of research studies.

While many universities and organizations rely heavily on commercial database products to meet their information needs, a considerable number of smaller universities, institutions in developing countries, and research organizations are not able to afford these products (Vieira and Gomes, 2009). Such information sources are often only available under institutional site licenses, which can represent a considerable financial burden. Moreover, a full site license for a comprehensive search tool such as *Science Citation Index, or Scopus* is frequently not affordable for an individual researcher (Bergstrom *et al*., 2014). In this case, it is very important to have free access to websites like *Google Scholar or PubMed*. While open access databases might not offer the same level of indexing, organization or analysis tools as a paid database, they are vital for promoting access to knowledge and making it more equitable (Björk and Solomon, 2012). Therefore, when choosing databases to use for research, researchers and institutions should consider not only the coverage and functionality of the database but also access issues and institutional resources.

Economic Barriers and Database Accessibility

Another important issue in the use of academic databases is the economic barrier associated with subscription-based platforms. Major databases such as *Scopus and Web of Science* require institutional subscriptions that involve considerable licensing costs (Björk and Solomon, 2012). While well-funded universities and research-intensive institutions often have access to these databases, smaller universities, teaching-focused institutions, and many universities in developing countries may find it difficult to afford such subscriptions.

Free access to commercial databases is not available in many institutions, creating difficulties for researchers who need to conduct comprehensive literature reviews, citation analysis, and research evaluation. Without access to these resources, it becomes challenging to assess the importance of publications and analyze citation networks effectively (Bergstrom *et al*., 2014; Larivière *et al*., 2015). As a result, researchers with limited institutional resources often rely on freely accessible platforms such as Google Scholar or PubMed to access a wide range of scientific literature. While Open-Access Databases (OADs) provide a more equal access to scientific literature, they lack some of the curation, quality control, and analytical tools available in commercial databases, potentially affecting research capabilities (Baas *et al*., 2020; Gusenbauer, 2022). It has long been recognized that unequal access to scientific resources poses a barrier for researchers at less privileged institutions, affecting the breadth of their work.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Researchers

Combining multiple databases in literature reviews leads to higher quality and greater depth of search results. Using a combination of specialist databases and wider search engines also allows the retrieval of a wider range of items, from rigorous peer reviewed papers to working papers, proceedings and other grey literature (Falagas *et al*., 2008). Careful selection of databases to be searched can also help avoid omission of crucial sources.

Implications for Institutions

It is also important to realize that each database has its unique features and strengths and weaknesses. Decisions are made in an academic setting regarding which databases to subscribe. Many universities across the nation spend thousands of dollars each year on subscription databases to aid research. Knowing more about the researchers, their needs and priorities within the university can aid in making the right decisions when it comes to choosing databases and how much to spend on them (Pranckutė, 2021).

LIMITATIONS

This research note contributes to discussions on challenges and biases in science mapping and literature reviews. However, several limitations arise from using a conceptual and qualitative comparative approach. The analysis is based on literature review and database documentation rather than large-scale empirical data. Therefore, further research is needed to validate and quantify the findings, particularly through quantitative bibliometric studies examining database coverage, citation patterns, and indexing.

Second, the landscape of academic databases is changing dynamically. Indexing practices, journal coverage and the technological features of databases are subject to alteration. The current findings are based on the current configuration of a few prominent academic databases and will need to be updated as databases grow and as new features are introduced. This chapter considers a third criterion not previously examined in the literature search research area the extent to which diverse sources are searched. The study focuses mainly on major multidisciplinary databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PubMed, while specialized databases like IEEE Xplore, PsycINFO, and ERIC are not examined in detail. As a result, some field-specific literature may not have been captured. Future

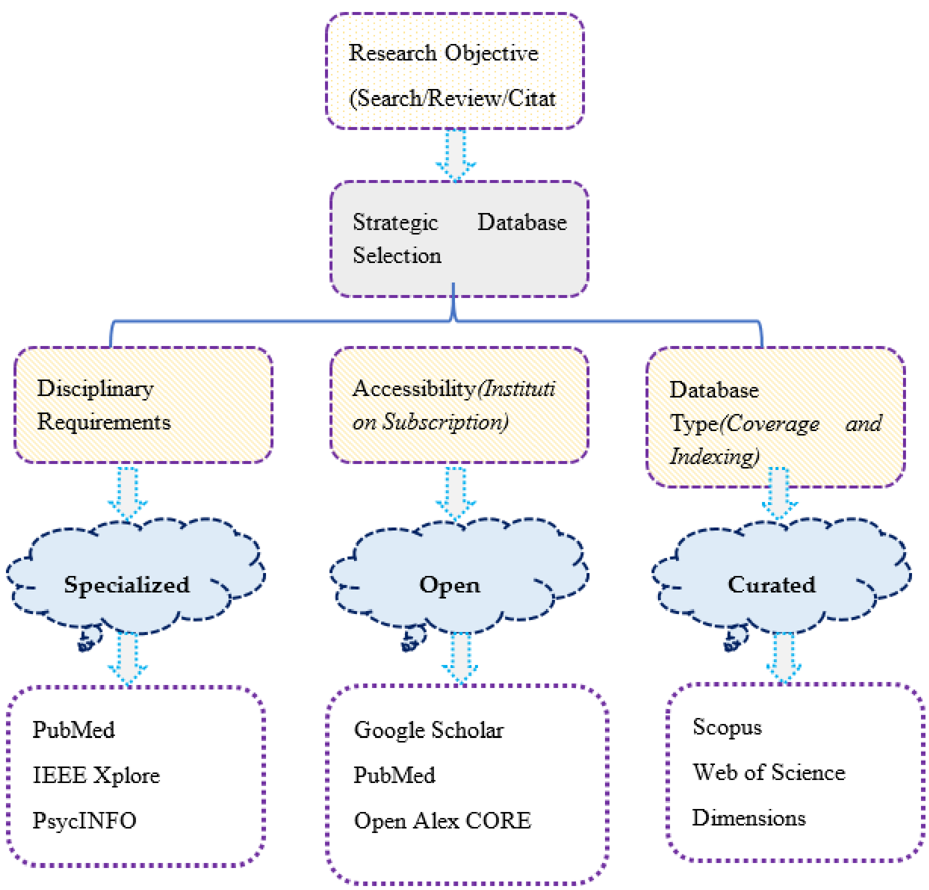

Figure 1: Strategic Academic Database Selection Model. Source (s): Author's illustration.

Table 3: Emerging AI and Digital Tools Supporting Academic Research.

Tool	Type of Tool	Key Function	Use in Research	Accessibility
Semantic Scholar	AI-powered academic search engine	Uses machine learning to identify influential papers and provide summaries	Literature discovery and citation analysis	Free
ResearchRabbit	Literature discovery tool	Creates visual citation maps and suggests related research papers	Literature review and research exploration	Free
Connected Papers	Research visualization tool	Displays relationships between papers	Identifying related and foundational research	Freemium
Elicit	AI research assistant	Searches, summarizes, and extracts key findings	Literature review and research synthesis	Freemium
Scite	Smart citation analysis tool	Shows whether citations support, contrast, or mention a study	Evaluating citation quality	Freemium
SciSpace	AI research assistant	Explains complex research papers and provides summaries	Understanding and analyzing academic articles	Freemium
Litmaps	Literature mapping tool	Visualizes citation networks and research trends	Tracking developments in research fields	Freemium
Consensus	AI evidence search tool	Uses AI to answer research questions	Evidence-based research discovery	Freemium

Source (s): Author`s Illustration.

research could empirically test this framework and examine how researchers across disciplines use academic databases.

Emerging Trends in Academic Databases

Scientific databases are undergoing rapid development due to digital technologies and the open science movement. AI and machine learning is becoming more and more integrated into academic search engines. It can be used for functions such as semantic search, citation analysis and for recommendation systems to aid in research and to help researchers quickly find relevant research papers by applying AI to citation networks and research subject relationships. There are several other developments that are of relevance. One is the emergence of open scholarly infrastructures. We can for example use OpenAlex or Dimensions to access large amounts of scholarly metadata and perform research into networks of publications, authors, affiliations and funders. Open scholarly infrastructure is a core component of the open science movement and is an important mechanism for increasing transparency in the way research is disseminated. Beyond traditional academic databases, a new wave of artificial intelligence (AI) based research tools is appearing in the various stages of the research workflow, including literature discovery, citation analysis and research synthesis. New innovations in machine learning technology and scholarly knowledge bases are allowing researchers to gain valuable insights in a fraction of the time.

Table 3 summarizes a few examples of applications used for finding AI-based tools to assist in academic research and literature review.

The development of these tools will soon change the way researchers work with data on a daily basis. The researchers are moving towards fully data-driven, automated, and connected workflows. All these new research tools leverage scholarly databases and citation networks, which are at the core of most of these tools, for recommending papers and for analyzing patterns in scientific literature (Beel *et al*., 2016). As more AI-based research tools start to interact with the traditional academic databases, it is possible that academic databases and research tools will become far more interconnected and far more user-friendly, with advanced features for literature discovery, citation analysis, and knowledge mapping.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A number of possible avenues for future research are identified. First, several possible empirical studies may be conducted. Data in SciLitDB can be compared with more general datasets for example, *PLOS, Pubmed, or Google Scholar*. This will lead to a clearer understanding of the respective advantages and disadvantages of the databases and the metrics they provide, also by comparing their precision and recall and providing a better idea of the variations in citation metrics between the databases for different subject areas. Second, one might study more closely the variations in database use between different disciplines. Different databases are used in medicine and engineering, social sciences, humanities, and the practices of scholars. Third, it is also time to examine the effect of new technologies on academic databases. Emerging possibilities such as search engines based on the principles of semantic search, and applications of artificial intelligence and machine learning in citation and literature analysis, promise great possibilities for streamlining the process of searching.

It is expected that future work could investigate the feasibility of applying the proposed conceptual framework. Currently, this research is continuing with a qualitative approach by involving faculty members from several universities and colleges in empirical studies to investigate the validity of the framework in the context of database selection for their research activities.

CONCLUSION

Academic databases are essential tools for discovering, accessing, evaluating, and managing scholarly information, with each database offering unique strengths in coverage, indexing quality, citation analysis, and accessibility. This study highlights that no single database can effectively support all stages of the research process; therefore, researchers should strategically select and combine databases based on their research objectives, disciplinary requirements, and resource availability. Curated databases such as Scopus and Web of Science provide high-quality indexing and advanced analytical capabilities, while freely accessible platforms such as Google Scholar and PubMed improve access to scholarly literature, particularly for researchers in resource-limited settings. The proposed Strategic Database Framework (SDF) offers a practical approach to database selection, helping researchers optimize literature searches, research evaluation, and knowledge discovery. Furthermore, emerging platforms such as Dimensions and OpenAlex, along with advances in artificial intelligence and open science initiatives, are transforming scholarly communication and creating new opportunities for more efficient, transparent, and inclusive research practices.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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