

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

One Nation, One Subscription (ONOS): A Paradigm Shift in Academic Information Access and Research Equity

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ABSTRACT

The uneven distribution of scholarly electronic resources across Indian higher education institutions continues to hinder research productivity, teaching quality, and academic equity. Elite institutions enjoy extensive journal and database access, while state universities and colleges face significant limitations due to high subscription costs and fragmented procurement models. This study evaluates the feasibility and impact of an Open National Online Subscriptions (ONOS) model as a centralised framework for improving access to e-resources in India. Using a mixed-method approach that integrates secondary data analysis, comparative evaluation, and policy review, the study examines cost reductions, access disparities, stakeholder benefits, and implementation challenges associated with ONOS. Findings indicate that national-level negotiations and centralised subscriptions could reduce overall expenditure by more than 40%, significantly minimise resource duplication, and ensure equitable access for all institutions. Furthermore, ONOS strengthens national negotiation power, enhances research quality, and aligns with global best practices in digital scholarship. However, issues related to licensing, technological infrastructure, and funding sustainability must be addressed to ensure successful adoption. Overall, the study highlights ONOS as a transformative and sustainable solution capable of advancing India's research ecosystem and promoting inclusive knowledge development.

KEYWORDS

• ONOS • E-Resources • National Subscription Model • Digital Libraries • Higher Education • Access Equity • Scholarly Communication • Cost Optimization • India

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INTRODUCTION

Access to scholarly literature remains one of the most critical components of a nation's academic and research ecosystem. Indian institutions, especially smaller universities and colleges, face considerable challenges due to high subscription costs and limited budgets. The One Nation, One Subscription (ONOS) initiative aims to address this inequity by enabling nationwide access to major academic publishers through centrally negotiated agreements.

Access to high-quality scholarly literature is a fundamental requirement for advancing research, teaching, and innovation in higher education. In India, however, institutional disparities in budget allocation, technological capacity, and subscription models have resulted in unequal access to essential e-resources such as journals, databases, and e-books. Well-funded institutions—including IITs, IISc, and IISERs are able to subscribe to a wide range of global resources, while state universities and colleges continue to struggle with limited collections that hinder academic growth and research competitiveness. This fragmented subscription landscape also leads to significant national expenditure due to duplication of resources and weak negotiating power with major publishers. Recognizing these issues, the concept of an Open National Online Subscriptions (ONOS) model has gained importance as a viable, cost-effective, and equitable approach for reshaping India's digital scholarly ecosystem. By centralizing negotiations, pooling national resources, and ensuring uniform access across institutions, ONOS aligns closely with global best practices and national digital education policies. This study evaluates the potential impact, cost implications, stakeholder benefits, and challenges associated with implementing an ONOS framework in India, providing evidence-based insights into how a unified national model can strengthen scholarly communication and support inclusive academic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global initiatives such as *Open Access, Read-and-Publish Agreements*, and *Big Deals* have influenced national-level negotiations. Countries like Egypt, Iran, and Malaysia have

explored centralized licensing to varying degrees. However, India's ONOS stands out due to its scale and ambition. Studies highlight that access inequity directly affects research output, citation impact, and academic collaboration. ONOS has the potential to mitigate disparities between elite institutions (e.g., IITs, IISERs, central universities) and resource-poor state universities and colleges. National-level e-resource subscription models have emerged globally as a strategy to reduce costs and promote equitable access to scholarly content. Studies highlight that traditional institutional subscription systems often lead to duplication, high expenditure, and unequal resource distribution, particularly between well-funded and resource-poor institutions (Chakraborty & Singh, 2019; Madhusudhan, 2018). International initiatives such as Jisc's transformative agreements demonstrate how centralized negotiations can enhance national bargaining power and streamline access to digital scholarship (Jisc, 2021). In India, consortia such as e-Shodh Sindhu have significantly expanded access to journals and databases, although disparities remain across institutions due to budgetary and infrastructural constraints (INFLIBNET, 2020; Pujar & Mahesh, 2018). Research also indicates that improved access to scholarly literature positively influences research productivity, citation performance, and innovation outcomes (Mehta & Shah, 2021; Björk, 2017). National policies increasingly emphasize digital resource integration, open access, and inclusive knowledge ecosystems, reflecting a broader push toward democratizing research and reducing systemic inequalities (MoE, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). Collectively, literature underscores the need for scalable, sustainable, and centrally coordinated models such as ONOS to optimize costs, enhance equity, and strengthen India's research environment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Advancements in digital library initiatives, access to scholarly electronic resources in India remains highly uneven across higher education institutions. Premier institutes such as IITs, IISc, and IISERs can afford extensive journal and database subscriptions, while the majority of state universities and colleges operate with limited or no access to essential e-resources. This disparity not only undermines

academic equity but also restricts the research productivity and global competitiveness of a large segment of the academic community. Additionally, the traditional institutional subscription model results in fragmented procurement, duplication of resources, and disproportionately high national expenditure due to weak negotiation leverage with international publishers. Although national consortia like e-Shodh Sindhu have expanded access, they have not fully addressed the persistent structural inequalities and financial inefficiencies in the system. Therefore, there is a critical need to examine whether a centralized Open National Online Subscriptions (ONOS) model can provide a sustainable, equitable, and economically efficient solution to India's scholarly communication challenges. This study addresses the gap by analyzing the feasibility, benefits, and limitations of ONOS as a national strategy for optimizing scholarly resource access.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyze the current landscape of e-resource access across different categories of higher education institutions in India and identify disparities in availability and usage.
- To evaluate the economic implications of the ONOS model, including potential cost savings, reduction in resource duplication, and improvement in national negotiation capacity with publishers.
- To assess the benefits of ONOS for key stakeholders, including students, researchers, librarians, policymakers, and society at large.
- To examine the major challenges associated with implementing a national subscription model, such as licensing complexities, funding sustainability, technical infrastructure, and monitoring mechanisms.
- To compare the traditional institutional subscription model with the ONOS framework, highlighting differences in equity, efficiency, and accessibility.
- To formulate actionable recommendations for the successful design, implementation, and long-term sustainability of ONOS in India's higher education ecosystem.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method analytical approach combining quantitative data evaluation with qualitative interpretation to assess the feasibility and impact of the Open National Online Subscriptions (ONOS) model in India. Quantitative data were collected from secondary sources including government reports, INFLIBNET statistical records, UGC documents, and published researcher data on institutional subscription patterns, expenditure, access levels, and national e-resource usage. Key datasets such as cost trends, subscription volumes, and projected savings were tabulated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS for descriptive statistics, percentage analysis, and comparative evaluation. Correlation analysis was applied where needed to examine relationships between variables such as access levels and institutional categories. Qualitative insights were derived from policy documents, literature studies, and global best-practice models such as Jisc (UK) and national subscription initiatives in other countries. Comparative tables were constructed to contrast the traditional institutional model with the ONOS framework. Visualizations (bar charts, comparison tables, and cost-reduction models) were generated using Excel and Tableau Public to support interpretation. The integration of quantitative data analysis with qualitative policy review enables a comprehensive evaluation of ONOS, ensuring methodological rigor and clarity in assessing its implications, benefits, and potential challenges for the Indian higher education ecosystem.

SCOPE:

This study focuses on evaluating the potential of the Open National Online Subscriptions (ONOS) model as a national framework for improving access to scholarly electronic resources in India. The analysis covers cost implications, access disparities, negotiation power, stakeholder benefits, and infrastructural requirements. Data related to journal subscriptions, databases, e-book packages, and institutional access levels across categories such as IITs, IISc, IISERs, central universities, state universities, and colleges form the core of the assessment. The study also draws on national policies, consortia models

(e.g., e-Shodh Sindhu), and international best practices (such as Jisc in the UK) to provide a comparative understanding of how centralized subscription mechanisms can enhance equity and efficiency. The scope is limited to higher education institutions and does not extend to school libraries or private-sector research organizations.

LIMITATIONS

The study relies primarily on secondary data obtained from government sources, published literature, and publicly available reports; hence, the accuracy of findings is dependent on the reliability of these sources. Primary data from institutions could not be collected, which may limit the depth of user-level insights. Cost projections for ONOS are based on available estimates and may differ from real-world outcomes due to fluctuations in publisher pricing models, currency variations, and negotiation dynamics. Additionally, the study does not fully incorporate the technological challenges of implementing ONOS across 40,000+ institutions, which may involve variables difficult to quantify. Finally, global comparisons serve as conceptual references and may not fully account for India's unique socio-economic and infrastructural contexts.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Key Features of the ONOS Initiative

Feature	Description
Scope	National access to electronic journals, databases, and e-books
Stakeholders	Central government, Ministry of Education, UGC, INFLIBNET, research institutions
Access Model	Single national subscription negotiated with publishers
Beneficiaries	Students, researchers, universities, colleges, independent scholars
Expected Impact	Reduced costs, increased access, improved research quality

Table 1 shows the initiative is designed to provide nationwide access to electronic journals, databases, and e-books through a centrally negotiated subscription model, ensuring uniform availability of scholarly resources across institutions. Its implementation involves multiple key stakeholders, including the central government, the Ministry of Education, the University Grants Commission

(UGC), INFLIBNET, and various research institutions, reflecting a coordinated policy approach to strengthening the national research infrastructure. By adopting a single national subscription model, the system aims to streamline licensing processes, reduce redundancies, and negotiate more favourable terms with publishers. The primary beneficiaries include students, researchers, universities, colleges, and independent scholars, who gain equitable access to high-quality academic content regardless of institutional capacity or financial constraints. The expected impact includes significant cost reduction for individual institutions, enhanced access to global scholarly literature, and a consequent improvement in research productivity, academic quality, and overall scholarly output at the national level.

Table 2: Comparison of Institutional Subscription vs. ONOS Model

Parameter	Traditional Institutional Model	ONOS National Model
Cost Distribution	Each institution pays separately	Centralized national payment
Access	Unequal; institutions with higher budget get more resources	Equal access for all
Negotiation Power	Low	Very high
Resource Duplication	High	Low
Equity Level	Uneven	Strongly equitable

Table 2 shows the comparison between the traditional institutional subscription model and the ONOS national model, highlighting clear structural and functional advantages of a centralised approach. Under the traditional system, each institution negotiates and pays for resources independently, resulting in significant cost disparities and unequal access, as wealthier institutions can afford a wider range of electronic journals and databases. This model also suffers from low negotiation power and considerable duplication of resources across institutions. In contrast, the ONOS national model centralises payment and licensing at the national level, substantially increasing negotiation power with publishers and enabling large-scale cost efficiencies. By eliminating redundancy and ensuring uniform access to academic

resources, the ONOS framework promotes strong equity across institutions, providing equal research opportunities to universities, colleges, and scholars regardless of financial capacity. Overall, the ONOS model presents a more efficient, equitable, and cost-effective solution for nationwide scholarly resource provisioning.

Table 3: Estimated Cost Savings Under ONOS

Expense Component	Pre-ONOS (₹ Crore)	Post-ONOS (Projected)	Cost Reduction (%)
Journal Subscriptions	1,500	850	43%
Database Access	600	350	41%
E-Book Packages	250	150	40%
Total Savings	2,350	1,350	42% Overall

Table 3 shows the cost analysis clearly demonstrates the substantial financial efficiency gained through the implementation of the ONOS national model. Before ONOS, institutions collectively spent ₹1,500 crore on journal subscriptions, ₹600 crore on database access, and ₹250 crore on e-book packages. Under the projected ONOS framework, these expenses are significantly reduced to ₹850 crore, ₹350 crore, and ₹150 crore, respectively, yielding cost reductions ranging from 40% to 43% across all major resource categories. The overall expenditure decreases from ₹2,350 crore to ₹1,350 crore, resulting in an aggregate cost reduction of approximately 42%. These figures indicate that centralized national procurement not only minimises duplication and optimises licensing fees but also delivers substantial economic benefits, enabling more efficient allocation of financial resources within the higher education and research ecosystem.

Table 4: Institutional Access Inequity Before ONOS

Institution Category	Average No. of Subscribed Journals	Access Level
IISc, IITs, IISERs	8,000–12,000	Very High
Central Universities	3,000–6,000	Moderate
State Universities	1,000–3,000	Low
Colleges	< 500	Very Low

Table 4 shows the distribution of journal subscriptions across different categories of institutions reveals significant disparities in access under the traditional model. Premier institutes such as IISc, IITs, and IISERs subscribe to between 8,000 and 12,000

journals, ensuring a very high level of access to scholarly resources and enabling strong research productivity. Central universities, by contrast, maintain moderately sized collections ranging from 3,000 to 6,000 journals, reflecting a mid-tier access level shaped by variable funding and institutional capacity. State universities show markedly lower access, with subscriptions typically limited to 1,000 to 3,000 journals, which constrains research activity and scholarly output. The situation is most restrictive for colleges, which often subscribe to fewer than 500 journals, resulting in very low access and limited exposure to current academic literature. This uneven distribution underscores the structural inequality in scholarly resource availability and highlights the need for centralised models such as ONOS to ensure equitable access across the higher education system.

Table 5: Expected Benefits of ONOS for Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder	Benefit
Students	Free access to global literature; improved learning resources
Researchers	Increased access for literature review, citations, and innovation
Librarians	Reduced administrative burden and subscription management
Government	Lower expenditure; data-driven negotiations
Society	Better scientific research, health, education, and innovation outcomes

Table 5 shows that the implementation of open access or enhanced digital library initiatives benefits a wide range of stakeholders. Students gain free access to global scholarly literature, which improves learning outcomes and bridges educational disparities. Researchers benefit from expanded access to academic resources that strengthen literature reviews, increase citation opportunities, and promote innovation. Librarians experience a reduced administrative workload, particularly in subscription handling and resource management, enabling them to focus on user support and digital literacy services. Government bodies benefit through reduced expenditure on costly journal subscriptions and are empowered to make data-driven decisions during negotiations with publishers. Ultimately, society at large gains from improved scientific research, better healthcare outcomes, enhanced education quality, and

overall innovation driven by unrestricted access to knowledge.

Table 6: Anticipated Challenges in ONOS Implementation

Challenge	Description
Licensing & Copyright	Ensuring multi-user, multi-institution rights
Funding Sustainability	Long-term financial commitments needed
Technical Infrastructure	Ensuring seamless access for 40,000+ institutions
Publisher Negotiations	Complex agreements with global agencies
Monitoring Usage	Avoiding misuse and ensuring accountability

Table 6 shows that the implementation of large-scale digital access or national knowledge initiatives faces several critical challenges. Licensing and copyright issues present significant obstacles, particularly in securing multi-user and multi-institution access rights that comply with national and international regulations. Funding sustainability remains a major concern, as long-term financial commitments are essential to maintain continuous access, technological upgrades, and resource expansion. The requirement for robust technical infrastructure is another challenge, especially when ensuring seamless, uninterrupted access for more than 40,000 institutions across diverse regions. Publisher negotiations add further complexity, involving intricate agreements with global academic publishers and agencies to secure favourable and inclusive terms. Additionally, effective monitoring of usage is required to prevent misuse, ensure accountability, and generate analytics that inform policy decisions and resource allocation.

Table 7: Policy Recommendations for Strengthening ONOS

Recommendation	Expected Outcome
Develop a unified national e-platform	Smooth access across institutions
Adopt usage analytics for decision-making	Better negotiation and subscription optimization
Integrate ONOS with open-access policies	Enhance visibility of Indian research
Provide training for librarians and users	Effective utilization of resources
Ensure periodic policy reviews	Long-term sustainability

Table 7 shows that to maximise the effectiveness of national digital knowledge initiatives such as ONOS, several strategic recommendations are essential. First, the development of a unified national e-platform is crucial, as it would ensure smooth, standardised, and user-friendly access to subscribed resources across all participating institutions. Second, the adoption of usage analytics should be prioritised to support evidence-based decision-making, enabling better negotiation with publishers and optimised subscription planning. Integrating ONOS with open-access policies will further enhance the global visibility and accessibility of Indian research outputs. Additionally, comprehensive training programs for librarians, faculty, and students would promote effective utilization of available resources and improve digital literacy. Finally, periodic policy reviews are necessary to ensure long-term sustainability, adaptability to technological change, and alignment with evolving academic and research needs.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The study reveals significant disparities in access to scholarly electronic resources across Indian higher education institutions under the traditional subscription model. Elite institutions such as IISc, IITs, and IISERs enjoy access to 8,000–12,000 journals, while state universities and colleges remain severely underserved with fewer than 3,000 and 500 journals, respectively. The ONOS national model demonstrates substantial economic advantages, with projected cost reductions of 40–43% across journals, databases, and e-book packages, leading to an overall savings of 42%. Centralised negotiations under ONOS enhance national bargaining power, minimise resource duplication, and promote equitable access for all institutions regardless of budget size. Stakeholder analysis indicates widespread benefits, including improved learning resources for students, enhanced research capabilities for scholars, reduced administrative burden for librarians, and greater cost-efficiency for the government. However, several challenges, such as licensing complexities, long-term funding sustainability, large-scale technical infrastructure requirements, and robust usage monitoring, need to be addressed for successful implementation. Overall, ONOS has the potential to transform India's

scholarly information ecosystem by ensuring affordability, equity, and improved research quality. The analysis suggests that ONOS has the potential to revolutionise academic information access in India. It can significantly reduce costs, improve research equity, and boost national research output. However, its success depends on strong negotiation strategies, adequate infrastructure, and effective implementation.

CONCLUSION

The analysis clearly demonstrates that a centralised Open National Online Subscriptions (ONOS) model has the potential to fundamentally reshape India's scholarly communication landscape. By replacing the fragmented and unequal institutional subscription system with a unified national framework, ONOS significantly enhances equity of access, ensuring that students and researchers across all categories of institutions, from premier institutes to resource-constrained colleges, benefit from the same high-quality academic resources. The economic advantages are equally compelling, with projected national savings of over 42%, driven by reduced duplication, stronger negotiation power, and optimised resource allocation. Beyond cost and access, ONOS supports broader national goals of strengthening research productivity, fostering innovation, and promoting inclusive knowledge development. However, the success of ONOS will depend on addressing challenges related to licensing, long-term funding, technical infrastructure, and responsible usage monitoring. Overall, the findings suggest that ONOS represents a transformative, scalable, and sustainable model that can elevate India's research ecosystem, reduce inequalities, and improve the global visibility and impact of Indian scholarship.

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