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Facing the shortage in Benin: a strategy for information and documentation access at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe the response of students to the shortage of materials at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi (Republic of Benin).

Design/methodology/approach – A survey was conducted with over 2,000 students of the Université d'Abomey-Calavi in 2014, and the data were analysed. The paper deals with two questions related to the university library services they use.

Findings – To satisfy their information and documentation needs, students visit several university library services even on different campuses.

Practical implications – The study recommends the setting up and the implementation of a long-term development plan for the University of Abomey-Calavi libraries.

Originality/value – The study describes the behaviour of students of a developing country when faced with a lack of relevant information and documentation resources.

Keywords Academic libraries, Higher education, Information services, Customer service, Delivery services, University libraries

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As in most West African countries, Benin with currently 43 per cent of its population under the age of 15 years encounters serious problems in the educational system. These problems are already visible in the present higher educational system and will continue to grow. How does the National University of Benin now named the Université d'Abomey-Calavi (UAC) cope with them?

The republic of Benin

Benin is a small West African country bounded to the North by Burkina Faso and Niger, to the South by the Atlantic Ocean, to the East by Nigeria and to the West by Togo (Figure 1).

A former colony of France, Benin became independent in 1960 as the Republic of Dahomey. After 10 years of political instability and two decades of totalitarian socialist regime, Benin became democratic in 1990 and ever since has had regular elections. Porto Novo is the capital, although Cotonou is the city best known abroad because for decades, it has hosted major economic and administrative infrastructures (the president's office, nearly all ministry offices, the seaport and

the airport). Cotonou and Abomey-Calavi are by far the largest cities.

Benin has about 11 million inhabitants (United Nations Population Fund, 2015) of which 42.5 per cent are aged under 15 years and 54.6 per cent between 15 and 64 years (African Development Bank *et al.*, 2015). Half the inhabitants live in an urban area. The country's size is 114,625 km^2 with a population density of 96 per square kilometre). In all, 54 per cent of the population in primary education went on to secondary education but only 12 per cent went on to tertiary level (UNESCO, 2015, p. 479). The literacy rate of the population aged between 15 and 24 years is 42 per cent.

The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was US$815 in 2014 (African Development Bank Group *et al.*, 2014). One-fifth of the Beninese population is extremely poor and two-fifths are poor. In 2012, agriculture contributed 36 per cent to the GDP, industry 14 per cent, manufacturing 8 per cent and services 49 per cent. The GDP annual growth

Figure 1 Benin in West Africa

rate ranged from 3 to 6 per cent over the past five years. The country ranked 165 of 187 by the United Nations Development Programme regarding the Human Development Index in 2014 (UNDP, 2014).

Libraries in Benin

Benin lacks all types of library infrastructures whether public, school or university.

During the colonial period, every secondary school was built with a library. However, the secondary schools created after independence were not always endowed with their own library. Some existing school libraries have disappeared over time (Osséni *et al.*, 2015, p. 9). Presently, primary and secondary school libraries are scarce. In 2008, only 80 of the 2,000 secondary schools had their own library (Kindomihou *et al.*, 2009, p. 100).

Not all higher education institutions have a library. Some foreign organisations are offering library services to the Beninese. The main ones being the French embassy through the Institut Français du Bénin, the US embassy through the American Cultural Centre. In addition, there are The Conseil des Activités Educatives du Bénin financed by a French foundation which has libraries in four main cities, and the Centre de Recherche, d'Etudes et de Créativité, a religious institution which has plans to open a full higher education institution and has already opened its library (Hinvi, 2013, 2014).

The Centre National de Documentation et d'Information, created in 1982, should be collecting all documents produced by the administrative bodies of the country, but it has declined because of the lack of financial support (Mêgnigbêto and Hounton, 2013). In 2011, the Centre de Documentation et d'Information Juridique, opened which aims to store all legal information produced by the Beninese courts. The Ministry of Culture manages 22 centres for reading and cultural education throughout the country. These public libraries were created with the financial support of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. There is no library development policy either in the education ministries or at the Ministry of Culture. There exists a policy document on books and reading (Politique nationale du livre et de la lecture, Kindomihou *et al.*, 2009), but the strategies described lack financial support and consequently the planned actions have not been implemented. Thus, the information and documentation infrastructure for Benin in general and for the higher education in particular is indeed very poor.

The difficulties in accessing university library services in Benin have been addressed in several studies. User satisfaction and the perception by students of the central library of the UAC were dealt with by (Mêgnigbêto, 2006). In an issue of their monthly newspaper, students had pointed out, among others, the irrelevance of the library catalogue, noise and lack of seats in the library (Agbétou, 2010). Library and Information Science students devoted their dissertation to different aspects of university libraries; specifically (Hanlannon, 2007) proposed the setting up of a regular training programme for students in the use of library services to make them more independent of the librarians (Sossouhounto, 2008) recommended the creation of a union catalogue of all the libraries at UAC and (Cakpo, 2014) suggested the creation of a welcome desk to help information users, from entering the library to their departure. The common objective of these works is the improvement of library services. Sossouhounto (2008) suggested the pooling of the UAC libraries information resources to compensate for the lack of personnel, materials and finances. However, the above studies did not describe the behaviour of the library users in this context of information shortage.

A UNESCO report in 1982 noted the shortage of seats in the reading room of the central library of the Université Nationale (UNESCO, 1982, p. 172). The study concluded that the library was already by that time largely insufficient in seating capacity and poorly equipped with books for the information and documentation needs of the 3,160 registered students. The study warned that this shortage constituted a serious hindrance to the quality required for higher education and that the situation would become worse with the expected

increase in the number of students. In 2013 for example, all the UAC libraries acquired only 1,600 documents (Mêgnigbêto, 2014).

The universities

Benin has eight public universities, seven private universities and over 100 private higher education institutions. Of the public universities, the UAC has as many students as all the other public and private universities and higher education institutions put together. The private universities are all located in Cotonou with branches in some parts of the country. The higher education institutions are spread between the larger cities.

The University of Abomey-Calavi

The Université du Dahomey, the first in the country, was created in 1970, 10 years after independence, and at that time had three faculties:

1 faculty of sciences and techniques;
2 faculty of letters, arts and humanities (FLASH); and
3 faculty of economics, law and political science.

A library was installed at the same time to serve 300 students and the staff. In 1971, the Faculty of Health Sciences was created with its own library. The UAC has expanded with other schools and faculties being created, all with their own library. Table I lists bodies (faculties, schools and libraries) of the UAC that appear in this paper.

The Université Nationale du Bénin, created in 1975, replaced the Université du Dahomey and has become subsequently the UAC in 2001. It inherited the infrastructures built for 2,000 students. Since then, the number of students has exploded, rising to 102,000 in the academic year 2013-2014 (Mêgnigbêto, 2014, 2015, p. 5). The UAC libraries together possess 140,000 volumes of documentation, an average of 1.4 documents per student (Mêgnigbêto, 2014). These data hide disparities in both faculties and libraries.

Indeed, some faculty or school libraries are reserved for their faculty or school students only. The volume of the documentation available at the UAC is only slightly higher than that recommended in Canada for a university with only 5,000 students (Bisbrouck and Renoult, 1993). The central library of the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal, has 500,000 documents for 75,000 students or 6.7 documents per student. In other words, the volume of documentation available at UAC is 5 to 15 times lower than it should be according to the Canadian recommendations (Mêgnigbêto, 2014). In France, 1.5 documents per student are recommended, and each title may have up to 10 copies for the undergraduates and at least two for the post graduates (Bisbrouck and Renoult, 1993). As far as journals are concerned, the Canadian recommendations suggests 3,000 titles for a university of 5,000 students (Bisbrouck and Renoult, 1993), whereas the UAC has only 322 journals for which the subscription has been frequently interrupted by financial shortage. The library catalogue home page of the UAC lists some free access databases such as HINARI, DOAJ, OARE, etc., but it is hard to assess how and to what extent these are referred to by students or lecturers. Almost all the UAC schools' libraries give access to the electronic theses and dissertations of their students.

Under these conditions, the UAC libraries are not able to satisfy the information and documentation needs of their users. As a consequence, the central library has suspended all loans since 2010, and a response to a request for consultation in the library with positive or negative result takes about 30 min (Mêgnigbêto, 2014).

Survey methods and results

Methods

Facing these unhealthy conditions, a survey of the UAC students was carried out from March 1 to May 30, 2015. Interviews were also conducted with the deans and vice-deans, directors and

Table I List of names and acronyms in the UAC

Acronyms	French names	English translation
UAC	Université d'Abomey-Calavi	University of Abomey-Calavi
BU	Bibliothèque de l'Université (or Bibliothèque Universitaire Centrale)	University Library or Central University Library
Chaire UNESCO	Chaire UNESCO des Droits de la Personne et de la Démocratie	UNESCO Chair for Human rights and Democracy
ENAM	Ecole Nationale d'Administration et de Magistrature	National School of Administration and Magistracy
ENEAM	Ecole Nationale d'Economie Appliquée et de Management	National School of Applied Economy and Management
ENSET/L	Ecole Nationale Supérieure de l'Enseignement Technique de Lokossa	National Graduate Technical School of Lokossa
EPAC	Ecole Polytechnique d'Abomey-Calavi	Polytechnic School of Abomey-Calavi
FADESP	Faculté de Droit et de Sciences Politiques	Faculty of Law and Political Science
FASEG	Faculté des Sciences Economiques et de Gestion	Faculty of Economic Sciences and Management
FLASH	Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines	Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities
FLASH/CUP	Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines/Centre Universitaire de Porto-Novo	Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities / Porto-Novo
FSA	Faculté des Sciences Agronomiques	Faculty of Agricultural Sciences
FSS	Faculté des Sciences de la Santé	Faculty of Health Sciences
IMSP	Institut de Mathématique et de Sciences Physiques	Institute of Mathematics and Physics Sciences
INJEPS	Institut National de la Jeunesse et d'Education Physique et Sportive	National Institute for the Youth and Physical and Sports Education

deputy-directors of faculties and schools of the UAC, the secretary general and the two vice-rectors. However, in this article, we only look at data collected from the student survey because they constitute the major group of users of the library services. Questionnaires were distributed to 2,000 students over the UAC campuses with a response rate of 69.5 per cent, evenly spread between faculties and institutes. The responses were manually encoding. A textual database was created with the CDS/ISIS (UNESCO, 1989) to record the responses. Owing to the CDS/ISIS formatting language[1], data are extracted and put into a text file for analysis or handled with the content analysis software *R* statistical software (R Development Core Team, 2014). In the framework of this paper, only the responses to two questions are explored:

RQ1. Which university library do you most visit?

RQ2. What other university libraries do you visit besides the main library?

Profile of the students that responded to the survey

In all, 75 per cent of the surveyed students are aged 18 to 24 years and 67 per cent were male (Table II).

In all, 25 per cent of the surveyed students are registered at the FLASH, followed by the Faculty of Science and Techniques (FAST) with 13.15 per cent, and the National School of Applied Economy and Management (ENEAM) with 10.60 per cent (Figure 2).

In all, 50 per cent of the surveyed students are in their first year, 15 per cent in the second and 15 per cent in the third. Overall, graduate students (Master 1 & 2) constitute 10 per cent of the population participating in the survey and about 3 per cent are doctoral students; around 6 per cent of the 1,300 respondents did not indicate their level – see Figure 3.
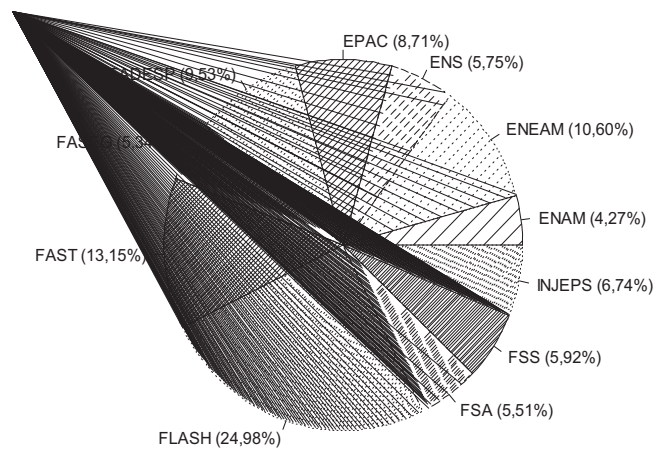
In all, 33 per cent of the respondents had already visited a library before their entrance to the university. In all, 16 per cent visited none of the university libraries, among them 54 per cent first year undergraduates, 9 per cent second year and 11 per cent third year. A total of 8 per cent are graduate students and 1 per cent are doctoral students, and 17 per cent of the ones visiting none of the university libraries did not indicate their level of studies.

The reasons why students do not visit any university library are diverse: obsolescence of available documentation, restricted opening hours or visiting non-UAC libraries. Of those who visit at least one university library, 70 per cent use the services in only one library, 25 per cent the services in two libraries and the remaining (about 5 per cent) the services in three or four university libraries. About four students in ten mostly visit the

Figure 2 Surveyed students by faculty and school

central library; the library of ENEAM is ranked second with 9 per cent (Figure 4).

Faculty and schools of origin of students

Figure 5 shows the faculties or schools of study of the respondents in relation to the main library they visit. University libraries are represented in this figure as circles and faculties or schools as squares.

The larger a node (a square or a circle), the larger the number of respondents connected to the university library, faculty or school. Thus, the BU represents the largest circle, meaning it is the most frequented university library. The FAST and the FLASH provided the largest number of students participating in the survey. The width of the line linking libraries and faculties or schools indicates the student flow. Thus, BU users come from many schools or faculties, with the dominance of the FLASH, the FADESP and the FAST. These three faculties were those for which the BU was built and for which students it cares primarily, as they do not have their own library. The libraries of schools and institutes are frequented mainly by the students of the schools or institutes they depend on. That is why the line width joining a school to its library is broader. However, the libraries of ENEAM and ENAM are frequented by students from the FADESP as well due to the similarity of the fields of science they cover.

Strategy to access information and documentation

The arrows in Figure 6 indicate the direction of movement. The figure shows the strategy adopted by the UAC students when faced with their information and documentation needs.

Table II Respondents by age and gender

Age	Male (%)	Female (%)	No information	Number	%
Less than 22	29.06	19.14	0.79	681	48.99
22–25	28.85	7.41	1.29	522	37.55
26–30	4.75	1.29	0.22	87	6.26
More than 30	3.24	1.01	0.22	62	4.46
Missing	1.65	0.86	0.22	38	2.73
Total	67.55	29.71	2.73	1,390	100

Strategy for information and documentation access

Eustache Mêgnigbêto and Khadidjath Kouboura Osseni Bachabi

Interlending & Document Supply

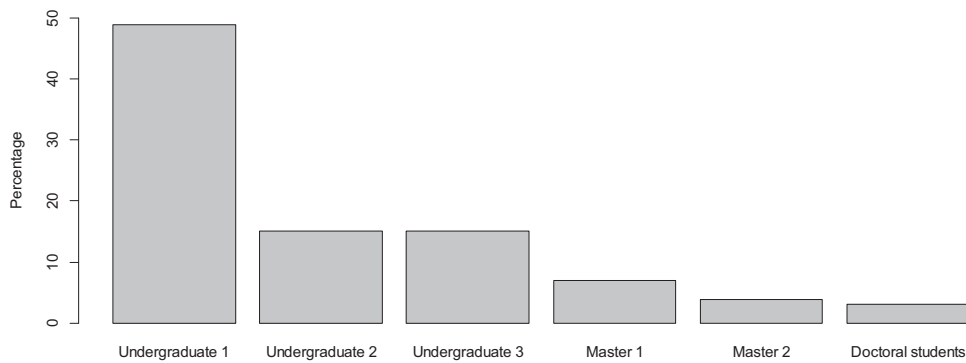*Volume 44 · Number 3 · 2016 · 97–103*

Figure 3 Respondents by level of education

Figure 4 Main university libraries frequented by the UAC students
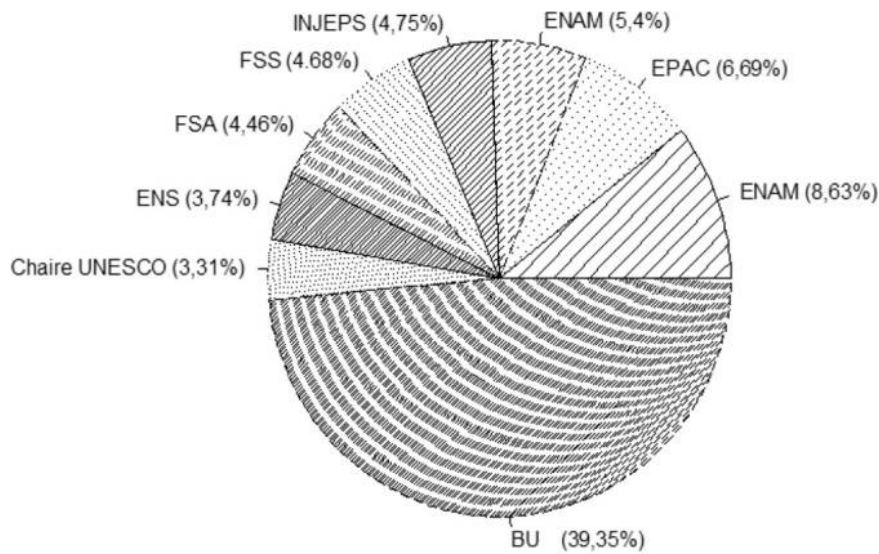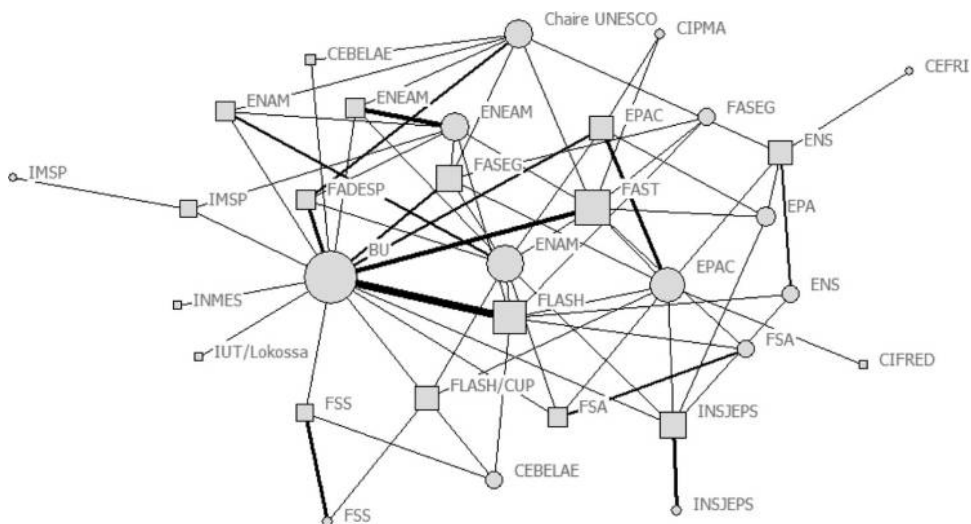

Figure 5 Schools or faculties of the respondents

The users frequenting the BU mainly use other university libraries as well:
- 22 per cent the ENAM library;
- 20 per cent the CEBELAE library;

- 20 per cent the EPAC library;
- 14 per cent the FSA library;
- 9 per cent the Chaire UNESCO library;
- 5 per cent the FSS library;

Figure 6 The strategy for information and documentation access at the UAC
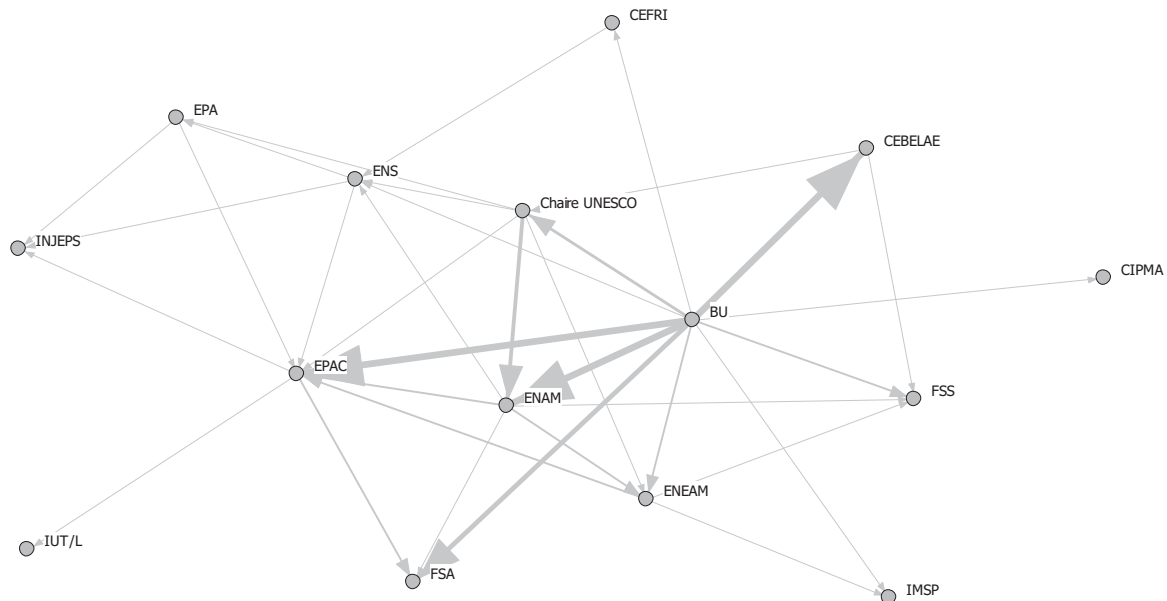
- 3 per cent the ENEAM library; and
- 2 per cent the IMSP library.

In almost all the schools, students limit themselves to the resources of their own school library. They use the resources of other university libraries rarely. However, the users of the libraries of the ENAM frequent also the libraries of the ENEAM, the FSA and the EPAC. Those of the Chaire UNESCO frequent the libraries of ENAM, ENEAM and EPAC. Those from EPAC also use the services of the libraries of FSA and IUT/Lokossa. These movements illustrate the lack of user satisfaction in the library they frequent mostly, the complementarity between the UAC information and documentation resources, and more importantly, the incapacity of the BU to satisfy the information and documentation needs expressed by the university community originating from the three faculties it should primarily serve. As Professor Maxime Da Cruz, Vice-Rector in charge of academic affairs and scientific research stressed:

> the development of faculty and school libraries may be interpreted as the reactions of faculties or schools to the BU failing to satisfy the university community's information and documentation needs (Mêgnigbêto, 2014).

Conclusion of the survey

The UAC is facing a shortage in documentation and information provision due to the lack of investment in resources, management and further development. Conversely, the number of students is increasing year after year. So, to access information and documentation, students develop a strategy of moving from one library to another on the same or other campuses. Out of despair, they even frequent libraries where normally they could not expect to find any relevant information resource.

The UAC has diversified its training offer since 2000. It has initiated many reforms with the objective of producing better qualified human resources for the development of the national economy. However, one of its Achilles' heels is still the lack of appropriate documentation and information resources. Despite technological progress enabling the democratization of access to

digital information and documentation, namely, the internet resources, the library is still a unique institution that facilitates the transition from the status of a pupil to that of a student (Coulon, 1996, 1999).

The future solution to the UAC case lies in the implementation of a long-term development plan for its libraries. Such a plan should aim at improving information access for students and professors of the UAC. It should encompasses measures to build and maintain library premises on all the campuses of the University, taking into account the trend in the number of registered students. Because building requires heavy investment, the UAC could seek for assistance not only from the national budget but also in the framework of the international collaboration. The UAC should annually allot a percentage of its budget to the management of its libraries including equipment and information resources acquisition, recruitment of personnel, training of personnel and users, etc.

Note

1 The formatting language allows one to define precise formatting requirement for database records. Through this language, one may select one or more specific data elements in the order required and optionally insert constant text of your choice, e.g. to label some or all the fields, as well as specify vertical or horizontal spacing requirements [. . .]. The formatting language is therefore the core of many operations and an efficient use of CDS/ISIS requires a thorough knowledge of this techniques (UNESCO, 1989).

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