INTERNET ACCESS AND USAGE BY NIGERIAN ACADEMICS: A CASE-STUDY OF THE OBAFEMI AWOLOWO UNIVERSITY, NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated academics access to the computer and Internet, their purpose of using them and the problems they face. The academic staff of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria were used as a case study.

The study reveals that a high percentage has access to both the computer and the Internet, mainly at the cyber-cafes and in their offices. They use the Internet for communication with family members and for academic purposes to aid them in their research. However, in this quest, they encounter problems which included lack of basic infrastructure and a maintenance culture, slowness of the Internet and lack of technical know how. It is concluded that despite these problems Nigerian academics are willing to and are actually embracing the Internet.

KEYWORDS: INTERNET, CYBER-CAFÉ, INTERNET ACCESS, DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, ACADEMICS.

Introduction

The Internet no doubt has imparted a lot of changes into the information flow among academics who are active researchers. The effect of this has been far reaching since the result of the researches has to be widely circulated amongst peers across cultural and language barriers. The Internet has broken down known barriers to communication and

information access globally. Goodrum et al (2001) say that the web "is revolutionizing the entire scholarly communication process and changing the way researchers exchange information. No academic set-up can function maximally without the web"

For academics in the developing world, the impact can be tremendous. Their quest for current information which is required to assist them in their research could now be easily acquired, if they are opportune to access the Internet. The days of dearth of information is rapidly disappearing.

The Internet is slowly spreading in African campuses. Connectivity is available in almost every African country though in different degrees/forms, ranging from institutional low cost dial-up networks to large Internet service providers. Internet access in Africa has been made possible through assistance from various foreign bodies. Such bodies include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which sponsored the African Network Initiative and International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Aranachalam (1999) discussed extensively the stage of developing countries with regards to information technology and knowledge of electronic communication. His conclusion is that Africa still lags behind because the vast opportunities made available by the Internet have not reached majority of the African population and the effects are felt largely on the university campuses. Hence previous studies on developing countries have concentrated on the use and access to the Internet by either staff or students in the universities. These studies include Ojedokun (2000), Aguolu (1994), Ehikhamenor (2003), Ojo-Igbinoba

(1994) and Sangowusi (2003), Abels et al (1996), Kaminer and Braunstein (1998), Bane and Milheim (1995), Bao (1998), Lwehabura and Matovelo (1999).

Sangowusi (2003) researched into the impact of ICT on academic publications and concluded that academics should use it more, while Ehikhamenor (2003) dwelt on Internet resources in Nigerian universities.

The availability of connectivity to the Internet in any environment does not guarantee its use. The use of the Internet and computer in developing countries is affected by many factors. These factors include electricity supply, affordability and knowledge. It is not an understatement that most developing countries do not have the necessary infrastructure. The objectives of this study are to investigate the level of access of academic staff to computers and the Internet and if they use this access for academic purposes. Consequently, the research questions are as follows:

(1) Do academic staff have access to computers and the Internet at an appreciable level?

(2) Are there differences between male and female academics in the use of computers and the Internet?

(3) Are there differences between sciences and non-sciences academic staff in the use of computers and the Internet?

(4) How often do respondents use the Internet facility?; and

(5) Are there problems facing the academics in the use of computers and the Internet?

Background to the study

Only a few Nigerian University campuses are hooked to the Internet, though others are making efforts to get connected. The few that are connected are at different levels of connectivity. Obafemi Awolowo University is a pacesetter, as it got hooked to the Internet in 1996. The project took off under the auspices of the Information and Technology Unit (INTECU) of the University. The fund was provided by the International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP), Trieste, Italy. It was part of the Academic Computer Network project, for developing countries, embarked upon by ICTP. Currently, the university has been able to move from one VSAT with a bandwidth of 256/128 kilobytes per second to 2 VSATS. These VSATS cover almost the whole campus. Many faculties, departments and the University Library are connected.

Methodology

Academic staff of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, formed the population for this study. All cadres of lecturers were sampled. The academic staff were chosen because they are expected to be exposed to current information so as to be able to undertake research and teach their students. They are also requested to publish papers both in local and international journals for them to be promoted.

A self-designed questionnaire was used to collect data. The study was conducted in July, 2005 academic session. The 11 faculties and the University Library were covered. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed (Table I) while only 235 (47%) were returned after

frequent personal visits were made to the lecturers. The total population of academic staff was a little over 800 at the time of the study.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information on the background of the respondents, their use of the computer and Internet, their experience with the computer and Internet, their point of access, the purpose of using the Internet, etc.

The 235 (47%) returned questionnaires were analyzed and used for this study. The respondents were 188 (80%) males and 47(20%) females.

Table 1: Distribution of questionnaire

DISCIPLINE	GIVEN	RETRIEVED	GENDER	GIVEN	RETRIEVED
Humanities	192	112	Male	380	188
Science	308	123	Female	120	47
Total	500	235	Total	500	235

Results and discussions

(A) Access to computer and Internet (Table 2)

This study reveals that 181 (77%) of all the respondents own a computer while 221 (94%) indicated that they have access to the computer. This leaves 34 respondents who have access but do not own a personal one. This suggests that many academics at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria have access to the computer. The breakdown further shows that 187 (84.6%) of the respondents, who have access to the computer, use the Internet. A high percentage of respondents own a Personal Computer probably because the university has a computer loan scheme for academic staff.

Table 2: Access to the computer/Internet n = 235

Gender	Access to computer	Non-access to computer	Access to Internet	No access to Internet
Male	176 (93.6%)	12 (6.4%)	145 (77.1%)	43 (22.9%)
Female	45 (95.7%)	2 (4.3%)	42 (89.3%)	5 (10.6%)
Total	221 (94%)	14 (6%)	187 (79.6%)	48 (20.4%)

There is no gender bias in access to the computer and Internet. From the table above, 93.6% of the male, and 95.7% of the female have access to the computer. Also, 77.1% and 89.3% of the male and female respectively, have access to the Internet.

The distribution according to discipline was also identified from the responses (Table 3).

**Table 3: Access according to Discipline**

Discipline	Access to computer	No access	Access to Internet	No access
Sciences n = 123	120 (97.6%)	3 (2.4%)	113 (91.9%)	10 (9.1%)
Humanities n = 112	101 (90.2%)	11 (9.8%)	74 (66.1%)	38 (33.9%)
Total	221	14	187	48

Both scientists and lecturers in the Humanities have access to the computer and use the Internet. The scientists have a slightly higher percentage of use but this is not a significant difference. According to Kanamugire (1994), many developing countries have come to realize that information is crucial for their development. A major constraint to research in Nigeria has always been access to current and relevant scholarly literature.

According to the findings of this study, academic staff at Obafemi Awolowo University are fast embracing the Internet.

The respondents were requested to indicate their point of access to the Internet. Multiple choices were allowed, as it is possible for an individual to use the Internet at more than one access point. The result is shown in Fig 1.

Figure 1: Access Point to the Internet
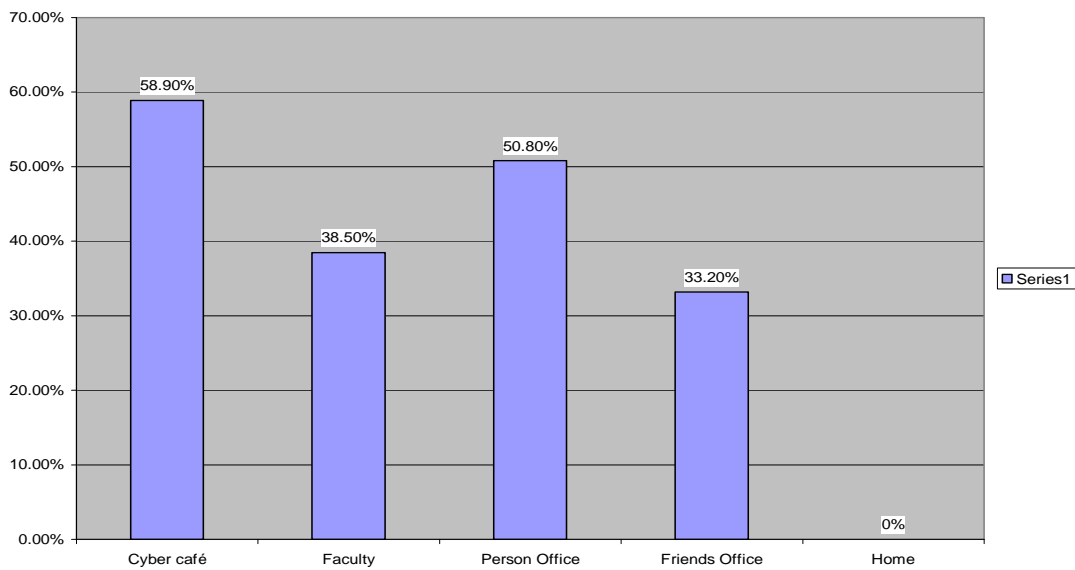
The survey shows that majority (58.9%) of the academics patronize the cybercafés on the campus, while a significant percentage (50.8%) also have Internet connectivity in their personal offices. Of great concern is the fact that none of them have Internet connectivity in their homes. The Obafemi Awolowo University staff quarters is not hooked to the Internet yet. Those who live off campus hardly have access to the Internet in the Ile-Ife town.
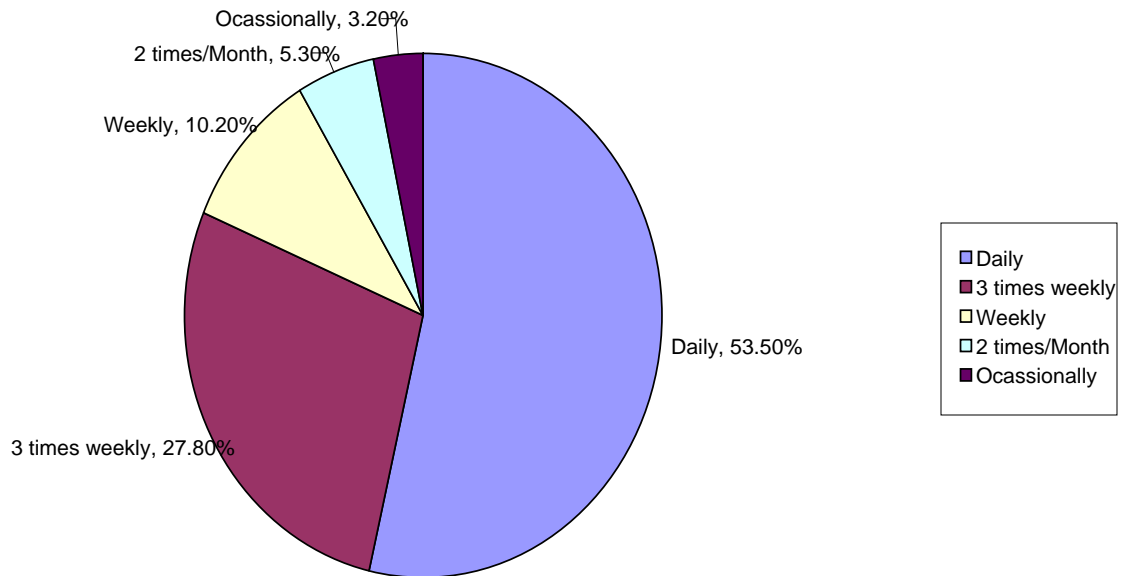
Figure 2: Internet Experience (n = 187)
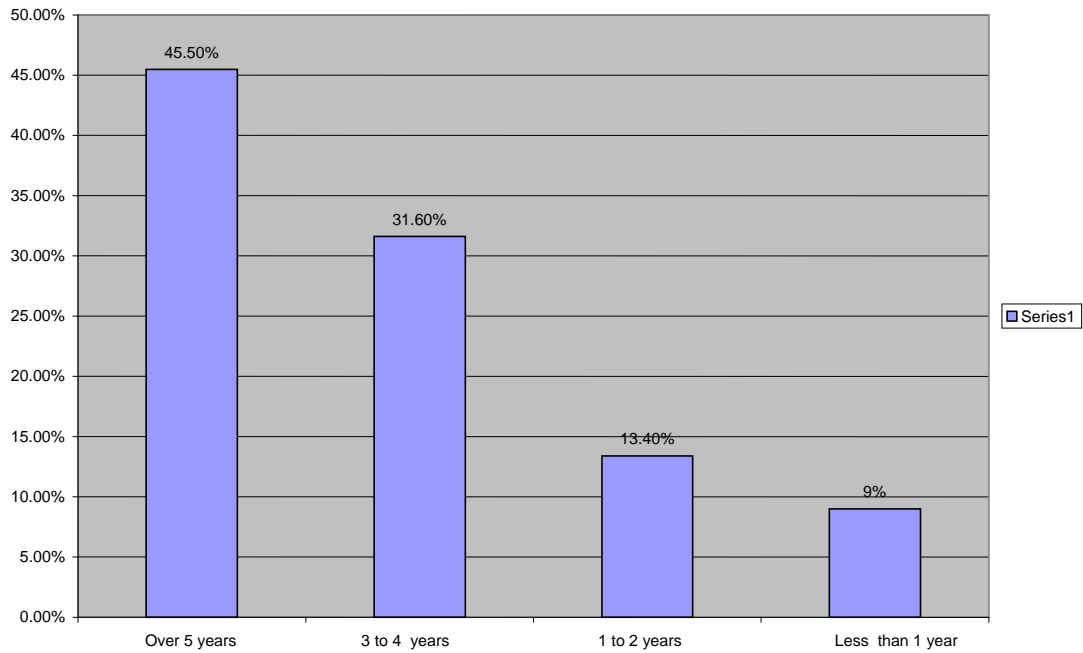
On their Internet experiences as depicted in figure 2 above, the survey shows that 45.5% have over five years experience, and 31.6% have between 3 and 4 years experience.

Figure 3: Time Spent on Surfing/Browsing the Internet Percentage

On duration of time the respondents spent surfing the Internet, the study reveals that 53.5% of respondents surf the Internet everyday, 27.8% 3 times a week. Responses to this are as shown in Fig. 3 above.

A UNDP (1997) report indicates that for every person who logs on to the Internet in developing countries, 149 people log on in the industrial world. It can be deduced from the current study that majority of the academics in Obafemi Awolowo University now log on to the Internet regularly.

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It was necessary to find out the purpose of logging on to the Internet, as the Internet means different things to different people. Options were given and the lecturers' responses are as shown in Table 4 (a) below:

Table 4(a): Purpose of using the Internet

Purpose of using the Internet	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	187	100
Literature Search	102	54.5
Overseas Job Search	79	42.3
Fellowship Search	67	35.8
General Browsing	28	14.97
Sporting News	12	6.4
E-conferencing	2	1.1%

All respondents use the e-mail, a method of sending messages, data, files, etc, electronically. This shows that academics in Nigeria rely heavily on the e-mail facility to send messages across the world. The e- mail has the advantage of being cheaper and faster. It thus favourably compares with telephone services (which are erratic in Nigeria) and the Nigerian postal services which are unpredictable and slow. Bane and Milheim (1995), among others, also found that academics use the Internet more often for this purpose than for other academic purposes like literature and fellowship searches.

The case of potential "brain drain", a common incident among academics in developing countries, especially Nigeria, was also noted. This is because 42.3% of the academics use the Internet for overseas job searches while very few (1.1%) use it for e-conferencing. E-conferencing is an area where academics in Obafemi Awolowo University need greater

exposure as this study shows that they are not yet familiar with this medium of interacting with professional colleagues.

To further find out if the purpose of the e-mail is for academic purposes, respondents were required to indicate the actual purposes for using the e-mail. Table 4 (b) shows the analysis of the respondents.

Table 4 (b): Purposes for using the e-mail

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Communication With Friends	187	100
Sending Articles for Publication	89	47.6
Communication With Lecturer Colleagues	85	45.5
Communication With Colleagues Overseas	77	41.2
Participation in Global Discussion	30	16.0
Communication with University Management	25	13.4
Participating in Local Discussion Groups	25	13.4

Communicating with friends and relatives (a non-academic use) topped the purpose list while 47.6% use it for sending articles for publication, 45.5% and 41.7% use it for communication with academic colleagues and overseas colleagues respectively.

Respondents were asked to indicate their commonly used search engines. Yahoo is the most common search engine with 102 users (55.8%), followed by Google with 79 users (42.2%) while only three users (2%) use other search engines.

The use of the Internet is not without its problems. Table 5 shows the respondents' responses to the types of problems they either face or believe are associated with the use of the Internet. All the 235 respondents reacted to this part of the questionnaire.

Table 5: Rank order distribution of problems faced by respondents in using Internet

Problems	Respondents	Percentage
Maintenance	221	94
Fluctuation of Electricity	203	86.4
Slowness/Congestion	187	79.6
Lack of Computer Know-How	95	40.4
Lack of Funds	92	39.1

Maintenance was revealed as the major problem. This entails system breakdown due to constant problems with the servers, breakdown of personal computers, lack of spare parts coupled with lack of technical know-how. The University had only one VSAT, which often broke down and consequently was frequently off. A second VSAT was added during the period of this study. Since all the cyber-cafes and faculties are hooked to the VSATs, the system is overloaded and always very slow. Fluctuation of electricity supply (on a daily basis) posed major problems too. Besides, not all those who use the Internet know how to exploit it for full benefit. Their knowledge is very limited as 40.4% are not quite knowledgeable in the use of computers and the Internet. Even some of those who use the Internet rely on assistance regularly from colleagues to send attachments, down load and search for needed materials. Finally, lack of funds is another problem. Academic

staff have to pay for connectivity to their offices and pay a certain amount every month to stay connected.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of the findings of this study using Obafemi Awolowo University as a case study reveals that many academics in Nigerian universities have embraced ICT, own personal computers and have access to the Internet. It also shows that there is no gender bias in the use of computers and the Internet. Besides, no discipline bias was discovered as many in the humanities use the computer and browse the Internet as in the sciences.

A fairly high percentage use the Internet on a regular basis for academic purposes, like literature searches, fellowship searchs, sending articles for publication, etc. All respondents use the e-mail facility. The problems associated with the computer and Internet usage are related to the lack of basic infrastructure in developing countries. These are lack of regular supply of electricity, absence of maintenance culture, low and/or inadequate connectivity, inadequate technical know-how to operate a computer and slowness in access response time.

To solve these problems, the following recommendations/suggestions are proffered:

(a) The necessary basic infrastructure that will facilitate Internet use by academics in Nigeria (and other developing countries) should be put in place. This will encourage them in using the Internet,

(b) University management should ensure connectivity both to staff offices and their homes, especially those who live in the staff quarters where this is applicable, and

(c) Academics should invest and be interested in undergoing training in the use of the computer and the Internet.

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