

ECONOMIC RESEARCH LIBRARIES IN BARBADOS:
their strengths and weaknesses

by

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METHOD

Our study of the strengths and weaknesses of libraries in Barbados for postgraduate research in the field of economics, began with a simple survey of 27 libraries and collections which in our opinion were likely to have publications of use to economists. 18 responses were received.

The survey requested a simple analysis of each collection to provide the main subject areas covered, the size of the collection, the level - graduate or undergraduate, the classification scheme used and the type of catalogue - dictionary, classified or other.

The survey also listed 11 economic subjects which we felt should be covered in any economic research collection in Barbados. These were statistics, economic policy and planning, economic development, monetary economics, public finance, international trade, mathematics, agriculture, business, technology and industry (including tourism). In each of these areas respondents were asked to indicate "under 100 titles" and "over 100 titles" for three categories of publications: books, serials and documents.*

RESULTS

The survey served only to reinforce what we already knew from experience, that there was a small group of five libraries which formed the core for economic research in Barbados. The five core libraries acquire publications in all subject areas, with "over 100 titles" in more than 50% of the subject areas listed.

One other library covers 100% of the subject areas and has "over 100 titles" in over 50% of the subject areas but is not included in our core group, because we feel that although the library is capable of supplying background information in all of the subject areas, the basic collection is largely at the undergraduate level. The other 21 libraries in the group surveyed were small, highly specialized collections in institutions and firms.

The five libraries we identified as the core group are:- the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), the Central Bank of Barbados (CBB), the Barbados Development Bank (BDB), the Library of the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) and the Main Library of the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill.

COVERAGE

In geographical coverage, all five libraries attempt to cover Barbados, the wider Caribbean and the international scene.

In main subject coverage, the collections in general reflect the energy which their users put into the acquisition of the publications which are needed for research, and the areas of research of their parent institutions. CDC lists its areas of concentration as:- socio-economic subjects, banking, finance, agriculture and technology; Central Bank gives theirs as - economics, banking, finance, business management and trade; BDB - economics, business and finance; ISER - economics and the social sciences in general. The Main Library of the University of the West Indies covers economics in general since it supports all areas of the teaching programme of the University, but its major concentration is monetary economics.

The strength of CDB's collection is the government publications of all the Bank's member countries, and the documents from the international organizations to which the Bank belongs - to name a few, the World Bank, UNCTAD, the United Nations Environmental Programme and United Nations Habitat.

The strengths of the Central Bank's collection is its holdings of financial statistics for Barbados, for the Caribbean territories with central banking institutions, and for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (IBRD).

BDB's collection of small business publications - local, regional and international - is its greatest strength. ISER's older publications from the Caribbean Organization and the West Indian Federal Library provide long runs of statistical information on the Caribbean not available elsewhere. They also have a strong collection on demography. The Main Library of U.W.I. shows strength in its collection of United Nations documents in English and the documents of the Organization of American States.

The serial collections in the core libraries cover all of the subjects listed in the survey, and form a very important part of the collections of all of these libraries. None of them has "over 100 titles" in any of the subject areas, but in all of them the serials collection is the most frequently used section of the bookstock, and although they are limitations, most of the libraries attempt to have complete runs of the major economic journals either in hard copy or in microform, for their areas of concentration.

The documents in the core libraries also tend to emphasize the major areas of concentration in the libraries, with those in the three corporate libraries in the core group ranging "over 100 titles" in many areas. Those in the other two libraries - ISER library and the Main Library - were not separated in their collections, therefore no figure could be indicated.

The most noteworthy aspect of all the libraries surveyed - those in the core group - and those not in the core group, is the very valuable specialized collections which they have acquired. There is fine coverage of West India at CDB. The Public Library and U.W.I. Main Library have copyright status and provide extensive collections of Barbadiana as does the Department of Archives, because of the very nature of this institution. CDB and Central Bank together provide a fairly extensive coverage of the annual reports of financial institutions whether local, regional or international. CDB's Technology and Energy Unit has a fine energy collection.

There are unique collections of world fertility studies and Women's Studies at ISER and a valuable small business collection on Barbados at EDB, regional and world data on meteorology and films at the Caribbean Meteorological Institute; utility case hearings and transcripts at the Barbados Light and Power's Trade Information Centre, an appropriate technology collection at the library of the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC).

There are also the sugar-cane agriculture and utilization resources of the West Indies Sugar-Cane Breeding Station and the collection of sugar industries of the world, at the Sugar Technology Research Unit.

There were four libraries in the group which responded, which although not having any specific specialized collections, were specialized enough in content to be mentioned here - the library of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs with its collection on agriculture in Barbados; the collection at the Ministry of Trade and Industry which lists in its documents - publications on countertrade; the Export Promotion Corporation's Trade Information Centre with its collection on export marketing and the manuscript collection of the Shiltone Memorial Library at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, which can provide valuable historical background material for any research on Barbados.

What are the weaknesses in coverage which we discovered? We are aware that research in economics often covers some non-economic subject areas and that it is gradually becoming more multidisciplinary. It is here we found the outstanding weaknesses in coverage:-

1. The absence of a comprehensive business collection in Barbados.
2. The absence of an organized general collection on agriculture.
3. The need for a general science and technology library other than the small technology unit of CDB and the collection at the Main Library at U.W.I.

Besides coverage, there are two other factors which determine the strengths and weaknesses of libraries for research in economics - timeliness and availability.

TIMELINESS

Timeliness of the bookstock implies the up-to-dateness of the collection and the provision of material in areas of emerging and developing importance. These affect the library's capacity to respond to sudden upheavals in economic affairs. The five core libraries have all been established in the last twenty years so that editions of works even when not the latest, are not too out-of-date. At any rate, in most of these libraries some attention has been paid to the continual updating of their stock, and researchers are quick to point out the rapid changes in subject areas.

All of the libraries have parent institutions which publish works. These they freely exchange with institutions whose publications they value for their collections, or donate to libraries which in their opinion could use the information.

The country's relatively good communications links provide good delivery from extra-regional centres - though intra-regional communications leave much to be desired.

There are never-the-less blatant weaknesses in the libraries' ability to keep up-to-date. There is first of all, the distance away from centres of publishing. This means a considerable time-lag between seeing a review of a work and being able to examine that work, or use it.

Then there is the problem of tardiness in publishing. Institutions publish works as much as two years after the date listed on the publication.

There is also the difficulty of getting publishing institution to honour requests to be placed on mailing lists, a problem especially evident among government institutions - both local and regional.

There is also the difficulty of knowing who to contact in order to obtain study of conference proceeding or a scantily documented government report

AVAILABILITY

Once we can establish that information is available in the country there little problem with obtaining it. Credit for this must be given to the excellent rapport between librarians, and the inter-lending arrangements they have set up between themselves. We must also consider it a strength that in Barbados available information is only a telephone call away.

Borrowing a publication never-the-less might be somewhat more difficult. Most of the collections have been established to support research being done in their parent institutions, therefore there are limitations in removing a document from use by the research staff of that institution for any period of time.

Because of the confidential nature of much of the information in project analyses and appraisals and in some documents in these libraries, there are also limitations of access even to bona fide researchers, and this must be respected.

There are also weaknesses in the tools used for research. First there is the absence of a good regional economics database. There is the need for a sound databank of primary statistical data. Some five years ago J.E. Greene and Reivé Robb published "Socio-economic data structures in the English - speaking Caribbean: Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago", as a basis for the institution of the Development Out-put Evaluation Research Services (DOERS) project of ISER, Mona. This databank is now the Documentation and Data Centre at ISER, Mona and is available I think to Jamaica only, since little is known, and little or no use made of it in this part of the world.

There needs to be more abstracting and indexing services. The only ones so far, for this area, are CARISPLAN Abstracts produced by the Caribbean Development and Co-operation Committee of the Economic Commission for the Latin America in Port-of-Spain. This lists abstracts of Caribbean materials, published or unpublished, in the fields of economics and sociology, and offers a document delivery service, CARINDEX - originally Caribbean Social Science Periodical Index - now is extended to include the humanities. This is produced under the auspices of the Association of Caribbean Universities Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL). The Automatic Retrieval Service (AIRS) of the West India Reference Library of the Institute of Jamaica - an index of the Daily Gleaner Newspaper since 1975, and The Social and Economic Studies, Author Keyword Index Volume 1-26, 1953-1977 compiled by Reive Robb as part of the DOERS project. We must also acknowledge here the computerized monthly "Current Awareness bulletin; an index to periodical articles on the Caribbean region", produced by the Caribbean Development Bank and distributed to libraries and institutions, and to individuals upon request.

Another notable weakness in research tools in the Caribbean is the absence of bibliographies. Most of the national bibliographies of the Caribbean territories which started about 10 years ago are now having publishing difficulties, including the National Bibliography of Barbados. The Caricom Bibliography which attempted to cumulate these, has run into as much trouble as CARICOM itself and is now dormant. This limits a library's capacity to know what is published and when, and affects the availability of its materials.

There is also a paucity of subject bibliographies. Except for the excellent ones produced by ISER (Eastern Caribbean), there are few others available to economic researchers in the region.

Another weakness is the absence of a union list of serials and a union catalogue of books for Barbados. We had hoped that with the establishment of ELAIN these would have been realized, but we have not yet given up. My fellow librarians know how valuable it would be, in responding to your requests for a specific journal or book, to be able to look at one source and say whether that book or journal is available in the island or not.

There are pockets of strength in availability though - for once one can establish that the journal exists and there are enough finances, the international collection of the British Lending Library Division at Boston Spa in Yorkshire is at our disposal. This institutions aims at dispatching a photocopy or a microform of any article requested which is available in their collection, within 36 hours of receiving the request.

This service is available to Barbados direct or through the University's Main Library. There is also the recent advantage of Dialog - the computerized information retrieval service which provides contact with over 150 databases on a variety of subjects. This service can often provide a comprehensive listing of what has been written on a given subject.

In preparing this paper we could not overlook the irritating little local weaknesses in obtaining information in Barbados. They were like 'the little foxes which spoil the vines'.

1. The inconsistency of bibliographic description in locally produced works which makes the task of locating an item of information infinitely more difficult. The absence of author's name, date of publication and publisher or producer constantly recur.
2. The frequent changes in names and portfolios of government departments with no notes in the publication as to when the change came into effect.
3. The absence of the address of an institution in its publication. A street or P.O. Box address would be of considerable help in a region with so few directories.
4. The frequent disappearance and reappearance of publications under different names without indication of the previous title.
5. The failure of writers to deposit copies of the works they produce in depository libraries and even in our own libraries.

6. The difficulty of local librarians making speedy direct checks or the availability of a U.N. publication in the depository library at U.W.I. - I must apologise for a pet peeve of mine.
7. The absence of a database of economic literature available in Barbados. Some four of five years ago the librarians of the core libraries identified here, saw this need and looked forward to getting this started, using as a base the collection of CDB and using their computer. This fell apart for lack of support from CDB, but the librarians, even more determined because they will soon be within a one-mile radius of each other, have not given up. They still see this as a weakness and look forward to the support of the heads of institutions of the core libraries to get it started in the not too distant future. One database with a terminal in each library would assist with cooperative acquisition, cooperative cataloguing and most important of all, accurate and speedy response to your enquiries.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to identify a few of the strengths and weaknesses of libraries in Barbados for postgraduate research in economics. In the short time given us to prepare this paper we had to rely very heavily on the results of the short survey sent out. If time had permitted we could have visited the libraries which had not responded and could have given you a more comprehensive treatment of the subject.

I hope though, that this will serve to highlight the areas in which we can respond fairly readily to your requests for information, and on the other hand, the areas where we cannot respond and why.

Furthermore I must point out that on the local treatment of a subject our ability to respond to your requests depends very heavily on what you as economists produce. If none of you has written on a given subject you cannot expect the library to produce local information on that subject. If you limit your research to a few subjects our librarians can only supply material on those subjects. The ball is in your court.

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