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## Challenges of Accessibility to Information Resources by Prison Inmates

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### ABSTRACT

Prisons are mostly filled with social deviants and like other correctional institutions, deserve organized information (provision) centers such as library. A study on library resource needs and accessibility by prison inmates was conducted at Kuje prison, Abuja and Kaduna prison, Kaduna, Nigeria, both of which have functional libraries. A sample of 898 inmates was randomly selected from all the convicted inmates in the two prisons. A total of 106 inmates were selected from Kuje prison and 792 from Kaduna prison. A well-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the inmates. All the 898 inmates responded. A total of 786 (87.9%) males and 112 (12.4%) females were involved in the study. With regards to the educational level attained by the inmates, 347 (38.6%) had Junior Secondary School Certificate while 323 (30.0%) had Senior School Certificate both accounting for 74.6% of the sampled population. In areas of information needs, 94.5%, 96.1%, 98.7%, 99.4%, 100%, and 100% of the respondents indicated that information on current affairs, survival and coping, educational support, legal aid, skill acquisition, and health, respectively were highly needed by the inmates. Out of the 12 information resources listed, only newspaper, novel, handbook and manual, and bulletin were readily accessible with percentage accessibility of 60.7, 7.8, 6.8, and 1.9, respectively. One major reason adduced by the respondents for limited access to information resources was the very strict rules and regulations in the prison. Providing more library resources and granting the inmates more access to the library would assist in character reformation and rehabilitation of the inmates.

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## 1. Introduction

In a recent effort to adopt a more humane and enlightened practice to criminal justice in accordance with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there is a shift from punishment to education, rehabilitation and constructive use of time (Wikipedia.com). A prisoner in custody is specifically subjected to restraint of movement and can, therefore, not have total assurance of

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enjoyment of the freedom of personal liberty under the law (Araromi, 2015). A prisoner who is observing the sentence of court by being in custody does not totally lose his rights as a human being and must, therefore, enjoy some basic rights despite being confined to a prison. Accessibility to library resource as a tool to aid the reformation of prison inmates then becomes an important part of the entire prison environment in its support for educational, recreational and rehabilitative programmes. Over the years, librarians have seen inmates utilize library services and resources in various format to enhance their literacy; many learn to read while incarcerated, navigate legal issues for themselves and their families particularly for further appeal, and gain useful life skills (Right to Access of Prisoners, 2016). The prison library, by providing a level of “normalcy” in a highly regulated environment, is a place where individuals are free to make their own choices and engage in self-directed pursuits. The implication of the foregoing is that the prison library should provide inmates with the opportunity to develop literacy skills, pursue personal and cultural interest, as well as life-long learning.

The Education in Prison Report, endorsed by the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 1990) includes a chapter on the prison library where it recommends that the prison library should function with the same professional standards as libraries in the community; should be managed by a professional librarian who should meet the interest and needs of a culturally diverse population; should provide open access for prisoners; and should provide a range of literacy and reading related activities. Indeed, it is not enough that libraries are well-stocked with relevant information materials, accessibility equally plays a key role.

In extolling the importance of accessibility to library resource, Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) asserted that availability of an information source does not necessarily imply its accessibility because the source may be available but access to it is prevented for one reason or the other. To buttress it further, Lee et al. (2015) concluded that while availability is a dimension of accessibility, making a distinction between them enabled us to identify possible impediments to the success of accessibility of information resources. The importance of accessibility has equally been underscored by Iyoro (2004), who recognized accessibility as one of the pre-requisites for information use. Ugah (2008) submitted that the more accessible information sources are, the more likely they are to be used and readers tend to use information sources that require the least effort to access. In essence, Womboh (1991) expressed the view that if the quality and quantity of prison library resources were to be improved, and free access guaranteed, library use by inmates would be on the rise. Although some challenges of accessibility are beyond the means of librarians/information professionals to address, however, there may be ways to mitigate some other challenges, thereby edging towards full utilization of information resources (Lee et al., 2015). This study therefore focuses on challenges of accessibility to library resource resources by prison inmates in Nigeria.

## 2. Literature Review

Information is power, and learning is a continuum. Therefore, the need to constantly to update and improve upon previously acquired knowledge for human capacity development and empowerment

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cannot be overemphasized. In order for meaningful learning to take place in the prisons, the inmates must be provided with functional libraries, well stocked with relevant and current reading materials. Oluwadare (2016) opined that the more accessible information sources are, the more likely they are to be used. In this regard, the prison library presents a window to the outside world and can provide much useful information for those preparing for release. Lehman (2005) stated that an incarcerated person has not relinquished the right to learn and to access information, and the prison library should offer materials and services comparable to community libraries in the free world. He emphasized that restrictions on the access to library materials and information should be imposed only when such access is known to present a danger to prison security. Similarly, every institution should have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners should be encouraged to make full use of it.

Ogunesan (2005) noted that access to information and participation in a democratic society are mutually interdependent. Ghenn (1990) observed that information can be construed to be the “blood and oxygen” of a democratic society. Indeed, access to and proficiency in the manipulation of information defines, in part, the citizen of the modern democratic state. Turn (1985) and Kantor (1982) stated that the concept of a free and democratic society mandates the access to certain types of information which the citizens need for their socio-political and socio-economic decisions.

There are challenges in the provision of library resources as studies have shown that access to library resource materials is often impeded by constraints of cognitive and non-cognitive barriers such as distance, noise, and inability to identify and locate information material with ease (Budd, 1987; Hudson, 1988; Kraut, 1989; Hiltz & Johnson, 1989; McCreadie & Rice, 1999). Prison inmates are even more adversely confronted with the challenges of accessibility to information in their peculiar environment where censorship and other factors such as location of facilities, conduciveness of the library environment and equipment, which often militate against successful access to library resource materials. McCreadie & Rice (1999) identified physical, cognitive, affective, economic and social constraints as factors that can impede access to information by any group of people. It is, therefore, a matter of necessity to provide inmates with relevant information materials, as such information resources upon use would empower them to become changed persons as they are granted unhindered access. This is with the hope that they would improve their learning capabilities and contribute their quota to nation-building upon release from the prison. The overall well-being of inmates is impaired when they are unable to gain access to the few available information resources and utilize same to solve their information need problems. This unfortunate situation has caused inmates constant psychological battles and they are, thereby, faced with challenges on how to survive and be reformed as better citizens.

This research is on information needs, and accessibility of library resources by prison inmates in Nigeria. The research adopted the Specific Deterrence Theory (SDT) as the theoretical base upon which this study is hinged. The Specific Deterrence theory was postulated by Andenaes in 1968. The theorists assume that individuals experiencing a severe sanction are likely to reduce their criminal activities in future. This theory, advocated largely by economists (Von Hirsch, Bottoms, Burney, & Wikstrom, 1999), posits that incarceration imposes direct and indirect costs on prison inmates. Such costs include loss of income and stigmatization (Nagin, 1998; Orsagh

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& Chen, 1988; Pyle, 1995; Wood & Grasmick, 1999). The implication here, is that prison inmates having experienced life in prison, and having developed rational thinking would choose not to engage in further criminal activities. Incarceration also has psychological 'cost' implication in that, if prison life is a degrading and dehumanizing experience, then it must be considered as an additional psychological cost of serving time which in most cases leads to such psycho-social problems as depression, a feeling of alienation, paranoia and neurosis (Gendreau & Ross, 1980) Basically, the theory posits that while general deterrence focuses on potential offenders, Specific Deterrence theory targets offenders who have already been convicted. The specific deterrence theory is an approach to control crime. The theory is predicated on the belief that punitive measures administered to chronic violent offenders should earn mandatory sentence, but first offenders should be treated as chronic recidivists.

The specific deterrence theory is related to this study because prison inmates are mandatorily engaged in different treatment programmes while in incarceration. The implication is that prison authorities, while administering treatment programmes on inmates, must first identify the cause (s) of the crime committed and then provide library resources based on individual information requirements. The world as a global village derive so much power through information, therefore, information is paramount to reformation. Jordet (2008) noted that reading is a powerful tool for people in every walk of life, but it takes special significance for the inmate. Reading books not only build their knowledge and vocabulary, but it also develops their capacity for internal reflection-a crucial skill often lacking among criminals. Consequently, it is believed that upon the internalisation and utilisation of the information resources they are provided with and exposed to, inmates would have cause to embrace attitudinal/behavioural change. On the long run, inmates would be empowered to be self-reliant and productive individuals upon release from prison.

### **3. Methodology**

The study employed a descriptive research design. Descriptive research design according to Isaac and Michael (1979), is used to provide a portrayal, or account of characteristics of an individual, situation or group; these studies are means of discovering new meaning, describing what exists, determining the frequency with which something occurs and/or categorizing information. This design was, therefore, adopted to study the challenges of accessibility to information resource in prison libraries by inmates.

The study was focused on prisons with libraries that are stocked and offer full or partial library services to inmates to utilize the resources. The target population of this study comprised prison inmates. Therefore, the study selected two prisons; Kuje prison, Abuja, Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and Kaduna prison, Kaduna State, Nigeria, with functional prison libraries. Kuje prison was established in 1989 at the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The prison is one of the most famous prisons in Nigeria, it has a maximum-security area and a medium security area, where law breakers are confined as stipulated by the law. Kaduna state prison was established in 1915 as an old convict prison with a capacity of about 578 inmates. It is one of the prisons

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servicing mostly the northern region of Nigeria. These two prisons have functional prison library and therefore comprised the locale for the study focus sample population. A sample of 898 prison inmates of both sexes was randomly selected from all the convicted inmates in the two prisons.

For the purpose of actualizing the objectives of this research, questions were drafted based on what was obtainable in the prison at the time of conducting this research. In order to guide against ethical issues, appropriate approval for this study was given by the Nigerian Prison Service, having explained the objectives of the study. These set of questions were written in cognizance of the expressed information needs by inmates through random discussions, and professionally established information needs of inmates, and also, situations that were observed as constituting a barrier to information resources in Nigerian Prisons, which formed the research instrument. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire tagged “Information Accessibility of Prison Inmates.” The first section was designed to access the demographic characteristics of inmates, the second section was designed to determine the information needs of inmates, the third part of the instrument was focused on determining the level of accessibility to library resources by inmates, the fourth part was designed to find out the reasons for lack of access to library resources, while the last part of the instrument was designed to determine the challenges to library resource accessibility by inmates. The instrument was validated and utilized in collecting data for the research. The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics of mean and standard deviation.

## 4. Results

The population of the inmates, sample size, number and % responses are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The study population and sample population of prison inmates

Prison libraries	Total Population of inmates	Sample Size	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Kuje (Abuja)	176	106	106	11.8
Kaduna (Kaduna State)	1,321	792	792	88.2
Total	1,497	898	898	100

### 4.1 Demographic characteristics of prison inmates

The demographic characteristics of the prison inmates are shown in Table 2. This result indicates the overall sexes of the respondents were 786 males and 112 females among the 898 prison inmates. This translates to 87.6%, and 12.4% for males and females, respectively, indicating that there were fewer female prisoners than males in the Nigerian Prisons. The study further indicates that the majority of respondents possess SSCE (36.0%) and 38.6% of this were very active youths who were still in their prime and needed to be reformed and reintegrated into society.

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of the prison inmates

Sex	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	786	87.5
Female	112	12.5
Total	898	100
Educational level attained by the prison inmates		
Primary six	124	13.8
JSSCE	347	38.6
SSCE	323	36.0
ND	18	2.0
B.Sc/HND	41	4.6
M.Sc/M. A/M.Ed.	9	1.0
Others	36	4.0
Total	898	100

*Key to demographic characteristics on table 2.*

**JSSCE:** Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination

**SSCE:** Senior Secondary Certificate Examination

**ND:** National Diploma

**B.Sc/HND:** Bachelors in Science/ Higher National Diploma

**M.Sc/M.A/M.E.d.:** Master in Science/ Master in Art/ Master in Education

**Others:** other professional certificates.

#### 4.2 Information needs of prison inmates

The results in Table 3 revealed that all the listed items are highly needed by the prison inmates. More specifically, the mean scores were calculated in the hierarchy order as: current affairs 3.0 education support 3.0, skill acquisition 3.0, survival and coping 3.0, health 3.00, study and life-long learning 2.9, psychological need 2.9, economics information 2.8, vocational training 2.7 and legal aid 2.1. These means portray the high demand in information need among inmates since it would foster their reformatory process. This is also evident in the weighted mean ( $2.8 \geq 2.0$ ).

**Table 3.** Information needs of prison inmates

S/N	Areas of information needs	Highly Needed %	Occasionally Needed %	Not Needed %	Mean	S.D
1	Current affairs	849(94.5)	34(3.8)	15(1.7)	3.0	0.12
2	Study and Life-long Learning	810(90.2)	61(6.8)	27(3.0)	2.9	0.11
3	Education Support	886(98.7)	9(1.0)	3(0.3)	3.0	0.01
4	Skill Acquisition	898(100)	0	0	3.0	0.03
5	Survival and Coping	863(96.1)	31(3.5)	4(0.5)	3.0	0.06
6	Legal Aid	893(99.4)	5(0.6)	0	2.1	0.03
7	Health	898(100)	0	0	3.0	0.9
8	Psychological Need	807(89.9)	47(5.2)	44(4.9)	2.9	0.11
9	Economic Information	734(81.7)	125(13.9)	39(4.4)	2.8	0.21
10	Vocational Training	674(75.1)	178(19.8)	46(5.1)	2.7	1.32
Weighted Average $2.82 \geq 2.00$						

### 4.3 Accessibility of library resource resources to prison inmates

The result in the Table 4 shows that most of the information resources are hardly accessible. For instance, dictionary, encyclopedias, bibliography, directory, maps and atlas, and novels which are important information resources are not accessible as the result indicated. This is clearly seen from the individual mean strength of the items: dictionary 1.0, encyclopedia 1.0, bibliography 1.0, internet 1.0, map and atlas 1.0, and textbook 1.0, newsletter 1.1, journal 1.1, bulletin 1.3, handbook and manual 1.4, novel 1.5, and newspaper 2.4, The weighted mean is  $1.2 \leq 2.0$ . This result revealed that only a few information resources such as handbooks/manuals and textbooks are occasionally accessible, with majority of essential information resources not easily accessible.

**Table 4.** Accessibility of library resource resources to inmates

S/N	List of Information Resources	Readily Accessible %	Occasionally Accessible %	Not Accessible %	Mean	S.D
1	Dictionary	4(0.5)	11(1.2)	883(98.3)	1.0	0.22
2	Encyclopedia	0	0	898(100)	1.0	0.00
3	Bibliography	0	0	898(100)	1.0	0.17
4	Handbook and Manual	61(6.8)	233(25.9)	604(67.3)	1.4	0.06
5	Novel	66(7.3)	287(31.9)	545(60.7)	1.5	1.81
6	Newspaper	545(60.7)	127(14.1)	226(25.2)	2.4	0.20
7	Newsletter	0	54(6.0)	844(93.9)	1.1	0.88
8	Journal	0	82(9.1)	816(90.9)	1.1	0.60
9	Internet	0	0	898(100)	1.0	1.23
10	Bulletin	17(1.9)	228(25.4)	653(72.7)	1.3	1.35
11	Map and atlas	0	0	898(100)	1.0	2.03
12	Textbook	0	0	898(100)	1.0	0.13

Weighted average  $1.22 \leq 2.00$

### 4.4 Reasons for lack of access to library

The result in Table 5 revealed that the most serious reason adduced by respondents for lack of access is that prison rules and regulations were too strict (N=353; 39.3%). This is followed by irrelevant materials which do not meet prisoners' information needs (N=171; 19.0%) and non-conducive library environment (N=153; 17.0%). Others reported that unfriendly attitude of staff and distance of the library from their cell units prevented them from accessing information resources in the library.

**Table 5.** Reasons adduced for lack of access to the library by the respondents

Item	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
1	The library is far from my cell	108	12.0
2	The environment is not conducive	153	17.0
3	The staff are unfriendly	113	12.6
4	The prison rules and regulations are too strict	353	39.3
5	The materials are irrelevant and do not meet my needs	171	19.0
Total		898	100

#### 4.5 Challenges of accessibility to library resource resources

Factors affecting access to information resources by inmates are shown in Table 6. The hierarchical order of the mean scores obtained were: material format, 3.1, language barrier 3.0, restriction/censorship 2.9, Noise has a mean of 2.9, availability has the mean of 2.9, users' attitude 2.7, level of education 2.6. These outlined the factors posing challenges to full access and utilization of library resource resources by inmates in Nigerian prisons.

**Table 6.** Factors affecting access to library resource resources

S/N	Items	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Mean	S.D
1	User's Attitude	269(30.0)	202(22.5)	282(31.4)	145(16.1)	2.7	0.14
2	Level of Education	229(25.5)	239(26.6)	264(29.4)	166(18.5)	2.6	0.16
3	Material Format	443(49.3)	224(24.9)	136(15.1)	95(10.6)	3.1	0.19
4	Language Barrier	404(50.0)	229(25.5)	165(18.4)	100(11.1)	3.0	0.03
5	Restriction/Censorship	387(43.1)	183(20.4)	146(16.3)	182(20.3)	2.9	0.07
6	Noise	379(42.2)	200(25.3)	157(17.5)	162(18.0)	2.9	0.06
7	Availability	401(44.7)	165(18.4)	169(18.8)	163(18.2)	2.9	0.04

Weighted mean  $2.87 \geq 2.50$

## 5. Discussion

Access to information facilitates rational decision-making and overall quality of life and as such, people in the confinement of the prison environment, for one reason or the other, require information as much as they could be provided with. Campbell (2005) opined that prisoners need to know how to survive and how they might get out of the prison. They also need to know what is right, what is trendy in the society they are secluded from, and how to survive upon release. These translate to the need for inmates to be granted hitch-free access to information materials if they are to improve on their lives while incarcerated.

The very essence of the prison institution is for character reformation and successful re-integration of incarcerated persons into the society. This objective would be defeated if they are denied access to information resources. Therefore, accessibility to information plays a central role in the reformation process. The UN (1995) set standards for the convicted prisoners include treatment, classification and individualization, privileges, work, educations and recreations, and social relations and after-care. This means there is provision for self improvement even while convicts are in incarceration. So when the prison gates are slammed behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self-respect does not end; nor is his quest for self-realization concluded. If anything, the needs for identity and self-respect are more compelling in the dehumanizing



prison environment (American Library Association, 2010).

The study found that factors affecting information accessibility by inmates was hitherto not considered, and as such, the few available materials that could support their mental and social well-being are not accessible. Even though resources are available, the challenges of censorship, restriction, language barrier, material format, and availability would account for unsuccessful accessibility. Sambo, et al. (2017) averred that the factors affecting the prisoner's information seeking behavior is problem of uncomfortable nature of the prison, poor funding of the library, and lack of free access to the libraries. However, Neelamegham (1981) noted that availability of information should not be equated with accessibility. Consequently, accessibility should be considered as a pivotal factor in the use of the prison library in rehabilitating prison inmates.

The findings also revealed that accessibility to information materials in prison libraries is abysmally poor, indicating that information needs and requirements are not met. Among other reasons such as distance from the cell to the prison library, the non-conducive prison environment, the unfriendliness of prison staff, and the irrelevance of materials in the prison libraries. It was observed that prison rules and regulations are too strict for inmates to maximally access and utilize the prison library. Kiefer et al. (2003) reported that negative attitudes have been demonstrated in the findings of studies concerning attitude of prison officers towards inmates. Prison officers have even been described as cynical, authoritarian and pessimistic, some seem to hold the view that the correctional facilities' main objective is to offer passive storage of criminals rather than to promote rehabilitation and prevention (Philiber, 1987). Such attitude would see to strict and stringent rules on the use of the prison library by inmates.

It was also observed that the information need of inmates is high; this was ascertained through the weighted mean of  $2.82 \geq 2.00$ . Information is the heart of the world's development and a major resource in human development as access to it could improve their knowledge. Gbashima, Akpe, and Iorfa (2016) echoed that the reformation and rehabilitation objectives of the prison can be achieved when there is proper exposure of inmates to adequate and timely information. They stated that information is generally considered important for the survival of convicted persons during incarceration. However, investigation indicates that prison inmates information needs particularly those found in Nigeria have been grossly undermined and not adequately catered for. Chiemezie (2005) asserted that most inmates found in Nigeria's prisons are not only youths of great strength but of unique intelligence. He stated that prison inmates are not empty headed, neither are they a lazy lot as most people perceive them to be. Omagbemi and Odunewu (2008), opined that most of the prison inmates desired information on the current events in the society (news and current affairs) on the outside, while others wanted educational information. They also need information on legal aid, study and life-long learning, skill acquisition, survival and coping, economic information, vocational training, health and psychological needs.

Importantly, the findings are in agreement to the theoretical base for this research. The theory posits that incarceration imposes direct and indirect severe sanctions on prison inmates, and as such they are likely to reduce their criminal activities in future. Accordingly, Jordet (2008) stated that it is only through access to information resources that inmate could develop internal reflection-a crucial skill for attitudinal change often lacking among criminals. Therefore, inmates at all times,

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need access to information resources for reformation and self-development. All these will be deficient if not properly attended to and the resultant effect would be a failed reformation and reintegration process.

## 6. Conclusion

Prison inmates desire standard libraries that are well equipped. The library must be stocked with relevant and useful books and other information resources of different formats such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, bibliographies, handbooks, manuals, novels, newsletters, journals, bulletins, maps, atlas and textbooks. It has been observed that in Nigerian prisons most of these information resources are not available and a few others available are only occasionally accessible. This paper concludes that accessibility to library resources by prison inmates can be addressed if prison libraries are provided with sufficient information resources and inmates are granted easy access to such resources. Also, prison officials should see the prison library as means of character reformation and rehabilitation; and, the government and other stakeholders should provide adequate information materials for their use that would help change attitudes of inmates that should give them a focus even after leaving the prison.

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### [ About the author ]

**Helen Uzoezi Emasealu** studied at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where she obtained the following degrees: Bachelor of Arts (B.A. Hons.) Russian Language in 1991; Masters in Library Science (MLS) in 1998, and Ph.D in Library Science in 2014. She was appointed as Librarian II in 2006 at the University of Port Harcourt. She has worked in this University as subject librarian in the Faculty of Social Sciences (2006-2008); Faculty of Humanities (2008-2010); Reference Librarian in Reader Services Unit and as Research Librarian on secondment to the Institute of Petroleum Studies (IPS) (2010-2014). She pioneered the building and development of the IPS Library Collection, and the management of its electronic resources. She was Editor of *IPS Newsletter*, *Egbogah Lecture Series* and Coordinator, *IPS Publications*. Dr. Helen Emasealu also served as medical librarian, College of Health Sciences (2014-2015). She is currently the Head, Reader Services Unit, Donald Ekong Library, University of Port Harcourt. Among other publications, she co/authored, "Bridging the Gap between Town and Gown: Roles of Librarians in Community Service Programmes" and "Information Needs and the Enhancement of Psychological Well-being of Nigerian Prison Inmates". These have garnered over 848 downloads in the International Journal of *Library Practice and Philosophy*. She is an advocate of the provision, availability, access and utilization of information resources by researchers in general and people with special need in particular. Dr. Helen Emasealu is currently a Principal Librarian. She has attended several international and local conferences, workshops and seminars.

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