Lack of care penalizes French universities in international rankings

Pascal Bador1,2
Thierry Lafouge2

Résumé

Objectif Voir si la faible visibilité des universités françaises, à travers l'exemple de l’Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, pourrait être due pour partie à un manque de rigueur des chercheurs dans la rédaction de leur adresse dans les publications scientifiques.


Résultats Sur 300 notices bibliographiques étudiées, 44 libellés d’adresses différents ont été trouvés. Seuls 15 % des adresses sont correctes et 44 % ne mentionnent pas l’appartenance à l’Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1.

Discussion Le manque de rigueur des auteurs dans la rédaction de leur adresse et l’absence de libellé officiel et normalisé de celle-ci peuvent expliquer la mauvaise visibilité des universités françaises. Des recommandations dans ce sens pourront aider à valoriser, au plan international, les travaux des chercheurs français.

1 - Centre de documentation pharmaceutique, ISPB-Faculté de pharmacie, Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, Lyon (69)
2 - Équipe URSIDOC, Batiment Omega, Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, Villeurbanne (69)

Correspondence:
Pascal Bador, Centre de documentation pharmaceutique, ISPB-Faculté de pharmacie, Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, 8 avenue Rockefeller, 69373 Lyon Cedex 08 Tel.: 0478777066 pascal.bador@univ-lyon1.fr

Received October 12, 2004
Accepted April 4, 2005
Methods

The visibility of the work of researchers at UCBL was explored from the 3 databases most commonly used by scientists in biomedical fields: Medline Pubmed, produced by the US National Library of Medicine (NLM); Embase.com, produced by Elsevier; and Pascal Biomed, produced in France by the National Institute for scientific and technical information (INIST).

We searched each of these databases for articles including “Lyon” in the “address” category of articles published in 2003. We then manually selected the first 100 references involving UCBL (moving backwards chronologically) to construct a total sample of 300 bibliographic entries from which we extracted the precise wording of the affiliation and address reported by the UCBL researchers. The 300 references were then classified according to whether the address they listed was complete or incomplete. Complete addresses corresponded to the following model: author; laboratory X and/or research team and/or specific faculty; research or academic center; université Claude Bernard Lyon 1; street; postal code – city – cedex (commercial postal code).

Results

The 300 bibliographic entries selected mentioned the university in 44 different forms (sidebar 1) (different capitalization of words, abbreviations, accents, and language – French or English). Only 15% of the addresses (mean of the 300 references from the 3 databases) were complete (table 1). Addresses were incomplete because they did not include the cedex (18%), street or postal code (19%), or the mention of either Claude Bernard or Lyon 1 (44%). Eight percent of the addresses involved university researchers with multiple affiliations or appointments (UHC, CNRS, Inserm, etc.) who indicated only an affiliation other than UCBL.

Discussion

We showed that authors from the UCBL (and by extrapolation, many French authors) are careless in listing their affiliations and addresses. Of the 300 references studied, the official name “Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1” was far from the unanimous choice of authors. Given the different aspects of the style (capitalization, Arab or roman numerals, presence of dashes or periods) and the wording (order of terms, abbreviations, acronyms, use of French or English words), 43 other names were used (sidebar 1). This carelessness sometimes makes it difficult to find UCBL with computerized tools, since these can only find strings of successive characters: they find nothing when the string requested (“Université Claude Bernard”, for example) is not strictly identical to that string in the bibliographic entry (“Univ. Claude B.”, “Claude Bernard University”, “UCBL”, “Universite Claude-Bernard”, for example). The problem is aggravated by the double name “Université Lyon 1”, for which we find the same ambiguities plus the question of the Roman or arabic numeral (“Université Lyon 1”). Moreover, these double or even triple names are fairly widespread among French universities: “University Pierre and Marie Curie” – “Paris 6” – “Paris VI”; “University Paris-South Orsay” – “Paris 11” – “Paris XI”; “University Joseph Fourier” – “Grenoble 1” – “Grenoble 1”, etc.

UCBL, the largest French university outside Paris (28,000 students), specializes in science, technology and health. It is
ranked 338th of 500 in the 2003 Shanghai international classification (and 205th in 2004)\(^1\), placing it 11th among the 22 French universities in this list (in 2004). We note that it is dominated by American universities, 34 of which were in the top 50 in 2003, 35 in 2004.

Whatever criteria might be used to develop international classifications of universities, they will always include the number of publications by researchers or the number of times they are cited. These criteria, objective or not, are based on references in bibliographic databases, most of which are American (produced by the Institute for Scientific Information: Science Citation Index, Current Contents, Journal Citation Reports with the impact factors of journals, Medline, Biosis, etc.). Priority in these databases goes to American and English-language journals, to the detriment in particular of European journals\(^7\).

We wanted to see whether this lack of visibility and underrecognition of French research might be due in part to causes associated with problems of form and presentation within the articles themselves. It seems clear to us if the authors of an article wish to be identified and located, they must begin by listing their address correctly and completely, both in the wording of the name of the institution with which they are affiliated (the university) and in complying with the rules for addresses imposed by the Post Office.

These different names of our universities, for which no official names seem to be used consistently (if there ever is an official name), thus create a major documentary void. It explains a part of lack of visibility of French universities in the databases and their consequent poor classification in international comparisons. It is understandable that someone outside the French research system would not pursue their research into French universities so far as check all the possible synonyms and names. Accordingly, even though it may appear tedious or quasi-military, French researchers must apply some minimum discipline and standardization in writing the name of the university with which they are affiliated, if they wish to promote their work. These requirements appear extremely simple and easy to implement: the university administration needs to sensitize researchers to the need for strict systematic use of unambiguous official names for each institution.

We note in table 1 that only 15% of the addresses in the bibliographic entries were correct and complete. Two reasons may explain this very low percentage.

- **First, the authors themselves do not seem sensitive to the usefulness of writing an address according to post office rules** (which guarantee the quick and reliable distribution of mail). Our study showed that only 26% of the addresses in the 100 bibliographic entries from Embase (the most reliable of the 3 databases because it is the only that copies the addresses directly from the article) were complete. In 15% of the cases, the authors omitted the cedex; we were quite surprised to find that 13% of the addresses included neither the street nor the postal code. These incomplete addresses probably make it very difficult for foreign individuals or bodies who wish to do so to contact our researchers for a possible collaboration.

- **Moreover, 44% of the addresses studied did not mention UCBL**, although some of these were correct from the post office’s point of view; data from the Medline, Embase and Pascal databases were totally consistent on this point. Thus nearly half the articles from our university cannot be found by a simple search for the exact name of the institution (“Université Claude Bernard” or “University Lyon 1”). This is the heart of the issue: the underevaluation of French universities seems to be due at least in part to the failure of our university researchers to mention systematically the university with which they are affiliated in the referencing of their work. Most sim-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of addresses of Université Claude Bernard mentioned in bibliographic entries</th>
<th>Medline (%)</th>
<th>Embase (%)</th>
<th>Pascal Biomed (%)</th>
<th>Mean of all 3 databases (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complete address (with cedex)</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Complete” address without cedex</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No street or postal code</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention of the laboratory, faculty, center, or institute, with no mention of street, postal code, or Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No mention of Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses for researchers and clinicians with multiple appointments and mentioning an affiliation other than Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

\(^1\) The 22 French universities included in the 2004 Shanghai classification

- 41th
- 48th
- 82nd
- 85th
- 143th
- 154th
- 176th
- 183th
- 207th
- 245th
- 265th
- 278th
- 291th
- 300th
- 311th
- 312th
- 360th
- 377th
- 379th
- 385th
- 453th
- 487th
- 58th
- 82th
- 85th
- 143th
- 154th
- 176th
- 183th
- 207th
- 245th
- 265th
- 278th
- 291th
- 300th
- 311th
- 312th
- 360th
- 377th
- 379th
- 385th
- 453th
- 487th

---

Tableau 1

**Characteristics of addresses of Université Claude Bernard mentioned in bibliographic entries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address characteristics</th>
<th>Medline (%)</th>
<th>Embase (%)</th>
<th>Pascal Biomed (%)</th>
<th>Mean of all 3 databases (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complete address (with cedex)</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Complete” address without cedex</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No street or postal code</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention of the laboratory, faculty, center, or institute, with no mention of street, postal code, or Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No mention of Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses for researchers and clinicians with multiple appointments and mentioning an affiliation other than Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of care penalizes French universities in international rankings

Authors' affiliations and addresses in published articles

This is especially the case for university-hospital clinical researchers, who mention only their hospital affiliation, and for mixed research teams (CNRS, Inserm, etc.), who also do not refer to their university. Our study shows that 8% of the bibliographic references were incomplete for this reason. Moreover, this figure is probably a substantial underestimate, since we do not know and therefore could not identify all of the research and teaching-research staff at UCBL (more than 2,000 persons!).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study, although ad hoc and limited to UCBL, can probably be extrapolated to many French universities.

It clearly shows that their poor international visibility may be due in part of the researchers' lack of sensitivity to the importance of mentioning the name and address of their institution according to strict standardized rules. Sidebar 2 offers some recommendations to improve the visibility of French institutions.

References


The authors thank Professor Jean-François Jal, responsible for the project for evaluating scientific production for all organisms belonging to Pôle universitaire de Lyon, for having sensitized them to this issue and inspired them to conduct this study.

Sidebar 2

Recommendations for listing addresses

Recommendations for universities

• Define a graphic charter that mandates a single official standardized name for the university.
• Distribute to all staff this official standardized model of the institution's name and address.
• Sensitize researchers to the importance of complying with this charter and standardized model, from the points of view not only of the university but also its research teams, and the researchers individually, both nationally and internationally.

Recommendations for researchers

• Be extremely careful in writing the name of your institution and its address (cut-and-paste to use the official standardized model) because you otherwise risk underrecognition of your work in international classifications.
• Researchers with double or triple appointments (university, hospital, other research body) should include every affiliation by its official standardized name.

Articles published by researchers with double or triple appointments are still more difficult to identify.

The authors thank Professor Jean-François Jal, responsible for the project for evaluating scientific production for all organisms belonging to Pôle universitaire de Lyon, for having sensitized them to this issue and inspired them to conduct this study.

References