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SYSTEMS ANALYSIS OF PREPARATION FOR DEGREE SUBJECT CHOICE WITHIN BENIN'S PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

In Benin, whilst the official choice of university degree course takes place following success in the baccalaureate, preparation for this decision occurs much earlier during secondary education where there is no guidance action. This research presents a systems analysis of preparation for university course selection within Benin's public educational guidance framework, examining the articulation between institutional provision and the self-guidance strategies adopted by prospective university entrants. A mixed-method methodology was employed with 464 participants across three target groups: lower-sixth and upper-sixth secondary school students, school administrators, and heads of Training and Research Units (UFRs) at the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC). Quantitative data (questionnaires analysed using IBM SPSS 29) and qualitative data (semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis) reveal a major structural and temporal misalignment. While public guidance mechanisms have been focused exclusively on the post-baccalaureate period since the 2020 reform (comprising an information prospectus and a digital portal), secondary students build their educational choices in an information vacuum. In the absence of dedicated guidance services and qualified careers advisers within schools, future school leavers rely on self-guidance driven largely by personal interest (75.3%), prior academic grades (33.0%), and the pursuit of university scholarships or bursaries (32.0%). The study highlights the necessity of reshaping public policy through a systems approach: introducing structured guidance services from lower secondary education onwards and fostering strong synergies between secondary schooling, higher education institutions, and the labour market.

Keywords: Educational Guidance; Secondary-to-Tertiary Transition; Educational Governance; Degree Subject Choice

1 INTRODUCTION

Education plays a decisive role in the socio-economic development of nations and the empowerment of individuals (1). Internationally recognised as an inalienable human right, notably by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organization (2), it serves as a foundational pillar of societal advancement. In Africa, education represents an indispensable lever for achieving the continent's strategic development objectives, as articulated in the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2026–2035 (3). According to Parly (4), national education addresses three core imperative challenges: fostering social cohesion, driving collective national development, and promoting the personal fulfilment of students. It is therefore vital to accord education a central place in public policy, anchoring it in a genuine vision of holistic development and embedding it within a well-structured operational framework.

At the heart of educational initiatives, career and educational guidance stands out as a high-value link in the human capital development chain. Guidance across all educational tiers is paramount, as it informs pivotal choices throughout individuals' academic and professional trajectories (5,6). Its overarching objective is to provide comprehensive information regarding subject pathways and career prospects, facilitate sound decision-making, and promote the alignment between learners' interests, aptitudes, and career aspirations (7). However, guidance frameworks frequently face complex challenges, particularly the over-reliance on academic marks for guidance decisions, despite the fact that grades do not always reflect an individual learner's unique potential or vocational aspirations (8). Furthermore, the absence of a coherent, long-term support policy can generate substantial structural mismatches between training provision and graduates' eventual employment prospects (9).

In Benin, education lies at the forefront of national priorities. The Education Sector Plan 2018-2030 explicitly provides for the strengthening of the university guidance system in synergy with secondary education and vocational training. This policy focus is driven by persistent structural challenges: intense demographic pressure on educational infrastructure, widespread skills mismatches in the labour market, weak guidance mechanisms, and a disproportionate student preference for administrative civil service roles. In practice, guidance decisions remain heavily reliant on students' academic marks and overall grade point averages, a methodology whose severe limitations have been extensively documented (10). Academic assessments, originally designed to monitor learning progress and certify attainment (11–13), are thus diverted from their primary pedagogical purpose to serve as the sole criterion for educational sorting. As Bah (14) observes, across Africa and within Benin specifically, formal educational guidance is often treated as a luxury, with existing institutional frameworks tending to disorient rather than constructively guide students.

Beninese legislation formally guarantees guidance rights. Article 55 of Law No. 2003-17 of 17 October 2003 on National Education Policy (as amended by Law No. 2005-33 of 6 October 2005) enshrines 'the right to educational and vocational guidance counselling and information regarding courses and professions' as an 'integral component of the right to education' (15). Nevertheless, this statutory provision fails to mandate the establishment of dedicated guidance committees or operational bodies. Consequently, the burden of educational guidance falls predominantly upon families or the students themselves, a scenario that presents acute challenges in a context where a significant proportion of parents are illiterate (14). Furthermore, Law No. 2022-01 of 25 January 2022 (the Framework Act on Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Benin) defines educational and vocational guidance as "a process aimed at assisting learners in selecting a field of study or professional pathways in accordance with their aptitudes, preferences, and interests" (16), thereby conspicuously overlooking the alignment of choices with broader labour market requirements. While a statutory framework exists on paper, its operational implementation warrants rigorous empirical evaluation.

In Benin, formal choices for university degree programmes are registered strictly after candidates pass the baccalaureate examinations. This procedural arrangement was introduced in 2020, reforming the previous system under which examination candidates selected their preferred fields of study directly prior to sitting their final exams (17). Current post-baccalaureate guidance measures consist primarily of publishing an annual degree prospectus, launching a dedicated online portal ('apresmonbac.bj'), and hosting nationwide and local information sessions. Crucially, these institutional initiatives take place after students have completed secondary school, during which time they receive virtually no structured support or guidance regarding course selection. The absence of dedicated guidance units within secondary schools is exacerbated by a lack of teacher training in educational guidance and the non-implementation of legal mandates requiring continuous, long-term career preparation throughout the schooling lifecycle (14,15,17).

Given this operational landscape, it is crucial to document and evaluate the mechanisms currently in place to support prospective university entrants in making informed degree choices. The central research question guiding this study is therefore: How does Benin's public educational guidance framework prepare prospective baccalaureate holders for selecting their university degree courses?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-method research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather comprehensive data required to fulfil the research objective. A mixed-method approach is particularly suited to capturing the inherent multidimensional complexity of educational and vocational guidance systems (18). The quantitative component provided statistically actionable, empirical metrics, while the qualitative component extended beyond closed-ended queries to explore how structural guidance deficits manifest in practice and evaluate existing remedial measures. These two data streams were combined within a pragmatic framework aimed to synthesise quantitative and qualitative insights to maximise findings' robust validity (19).

2.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study target population was heterogeneous, comprising three distinct stakeholder groups: upper secondary school students in lower-sixth and upper-sixth forms (sixth and seventh forms in Benin) across public and private general secondary schools; secondary school administrative heads; and directors of Training and Research Units (UFRs) at the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC). Fieldwork was conducted in municipalities within UAC's primary catchments: Abomey-Calavi, Cotonou, Sèmè-Podji, Porto-Novo, and Adjarra.

Two distinct sampling techniques were employed. Purposive non-probability sampling was applied for secondary school administrators and university UFR directors. Simple random probability sampling was utilised for secondary school students. Minimum required students sample size was determined using the formula by Rodríguez Del Águila & González-Ramírez (20):

$$n = t^2 \times p(1-p) / m^2.$$

Assuming a 95% confidence level (t = 1.96), an estimated proportion p = 0.23 based on national enrolment statistics (21), and a margin of error m = 0.05, the minimum required sample size for lower and upper-sixth students was calculated at 272 subjects. Ultimately, 464 respondents (437 students, 15 secondary school administrators, and 12 university UFR directors) participated in the study, comfortably exceeding theoretical sampling thresholds and ensuring findings can be generalised with a 5% margin of risk.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques and Tools

Quantitative data were collected via self-administered student questionnaires, facilitated on-site by trained field enumerators to prevent comprehension biases. Beyond socio-demographic indicators, questionnaires assessed school guidance practices, projected degree choices, academic motivation, perceived institutional support, motivational dynamics, and guidance service needs.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with secondary school administrators and university UFR leaders. Interview guides explored national guidance policies, institutional guidance practices, academic pathways, student support systems, guidance practice evaluations, and inter-institutional collaboration. Notably, due to participant resistance regarding audio recording, field researchers utilised active note-taking and compiled verbatim transcripts immediately post-interview.

2.4 Data Processing and Analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data were entered into Excel 2021, cleaned, and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) to generate descriptive and analytical statistics, expressed as absolute frequencies and percentages. Qualitative interview data were transcribed in Microsoft Word 2021 and analysed using thematic coding aligned with recurring interview topics. To guarantee participant anonymity, secondary school administrators are coded as 'LYCOL' and university UFR directors as 'UFR'.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Post-Baccalaureate Aspirations and Student Information Levels

When queried regarding post-baccalaureate plans, 76.9% of the 437 surveyed students reported having given thought to their post-secondary future. Among them, 90.2% intended to pursue university studies upon graduation, reflecting how deeply higher education aspirations are embedded in the student collective consciousness. Of those planning to enter university, 83.2% indicated awareness of their intended degree field, primarily concentrated in arts and humanities, law, medicine, and teacher education.

Table 1: Student reflection on post-baccalaureate plans and university intentions

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Post-baccalaureate reflection		
No	101	23.1
Yes	336	76.9
Total	437	100.0
Intention to pursue university studies		
No	43	9.8
Yes	394	90.2
Total	437	100.0
Clear idea of intended degree subject		
Known	328	83.2
Not known	66	16.8
Total	394	100.0

The primary motivation driving degree subject selection was personal interest in a discipline, cited by 75.3% of respondents. Secondary factors included strong academic performance in relevant subjects (33.0%), degree prestige (26.9%), and career opportunities (21.6%). This hierarchy underscores students' focus on areas where they feel subjectively performant or interested, rather than engaging in forward-looking planning centred on objective employability.

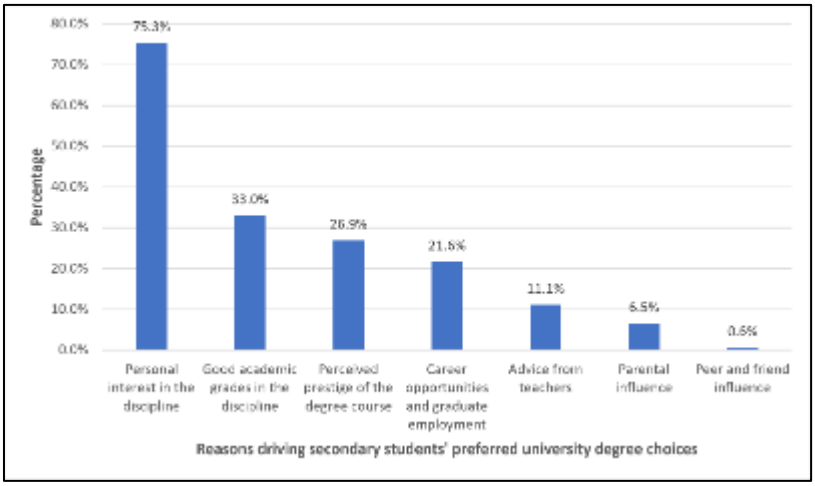

Figure 1: Reasons driving secondary students' preferred university degree choices

Regarding self-perceived information levels, 78.1% of students considered themselves generally well informed about available university courses, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Secondary students' self-assessed level of information on available university programmes

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Very poorly informed	63	14.4
Fairly poorly informed	33	7.6
Fairly well informed	127	29.1
Very well informed	214	49.0
Total	437	100.0

However, analysing information sources reveals overwhelming reliance on informal channels. Parents and extended family constituted the primary information source for 56.6% of students, followed by teachers (38.2%) and peers/classmates (27.6%). Conversely, only 20.0% accessed information via the Internet, and attendance at university open days was negligible (1.2%), leaving 20.0% with no structural information at all.

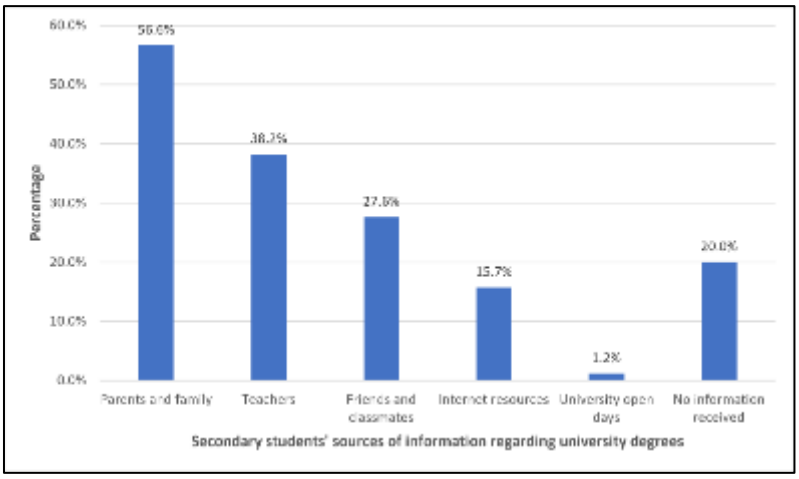

Figure 2: Secondary students' sources of information regarding university degrees

3.2 Institutional Guidance Provision in Secondary Schools

Student survey findings demonstrate that 70.0% of respondents received no guidance sessions whatsoever within their schools. Among the 30.0% who attended a guidance session, 50.4% reported that sessions were delivered by class teachers, 21.4% by school administrative staff, and merely 6.9% by 'qualified' careers advisers. Crucially, 94.7% of surveyed students stated that their secondary schools lacked dedicated guidance units or structured career planning initiatives.

Table 3: Guidance services and support mechanisms in secondary schools

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Organisation of guidance sessions in school		
No	306	70.0
Yes	131	30.0
Total	437	100.0
Lead facilitator of guidance sessions		
School teacher	66	50.4
School administrator	28	21.4
Careers / guidance adviser	9	6.9
External speaker	28	21.4
Total	131	100.0
Presence of dedicated guidance service or structured actions in school		
No	414	94.7
Yes	23	5.3
Total	437	100.0

Qualitative interviews with secondary school leaders corroborated and expanded upon these quantitative findings. Administrators unanimously confirmed the complete absence of specialised guidance structures within their institutions. As one administrator stated:

Guidance structure? My dear sir, we have no specialised structure for that here. The academic dean and sometimes the senior class teachers... we cope as best we can with whatever makeshift means we have. (LYCOL06, Field Data, 2025)

Institutional policy reforms represent a key explanatory factor underlying this deficit. The 2020 national reform, which shifted formal degree selection strictly post-baccalaureate, effectively relieved secondary schools of institutional responsibility for student guidance. As one school head observed:

The 2020 reform created an institutional vacuum. Previously, secondary schools played an active role; now we are told it is no longer our concern. But who is actually taking care of it then? (LYCOL12, Field Data, 2025)

School leaders further highlighted the complete lack of formal institutional links with higher education providers. Their accounts reflected deep professional isolation and institutional neglect:

Relationships with UAC? Extremely limited! They never visit our schools. We are the ones who have to chase after them whenever we need information. (LYCOL06, Field Data, 2025)

Furthermore, administrators openly acknowledged their own severe limitations regarding knowledge of university degree offerings and career pathways:

Let us be frank: we do not properly understand all the degree programmes offered at UAC ourselves. How can we advise students on courses we do not master? That is our primary limitation. (LYCOL07, Field Data, 2025).

This lack of knowledge precludes any concrete guidance for students, even when the willingness to act is present.

3.3 Post-Baccalaureate Institutional Guidance Mechanisms in Benin

The post-baccalaureate guidance framework currently operating in Benin and applied at UAC relies on two primary instruments: an annual degree prospectus published by the Ministry of Higher Education detailing available courses, entry criteria, and career outlets; and a single briefing session organised by university faculties prior to opening the national digital portal ('apresmonbac.bj'). On this online platform, baccalaureate holders submit their preferred degree choices, which are subsequently processed algorithmically based on weighted subject grades obtained in the national baccalaureate examination.

Interviews with university UFR responsible elucidated the operational logic governing university admissions. Baccalaureate grades represent the central, if not exclusive, admission criterion:

The system is purely mathematical, if I may put it that way. We use mathematics, physical sciences, and biology/earth sciences as core reference subjects. The calculated GPA determines the candidate's national rank. It is an equitable process in that everyone is judged by the exact same rule. On the other hand, we must admit it is not necessarily the ideal system, but it is what we have. (UFR03, Field Data, 2025)

Faculty leaders conceded the clear limitations of this grade-centric approach while citing insurmountable administrative constraints that preclude alternative selection methods:

Baccalaureate marks are indeed the primary, if not the sole, admission criterion. It is unfortunate, but that is the reality. We are fully aware that exam grades do not always reflect candidates' actual aptitudes or motivation, but we currently have no viable alternative. How else could we manage thousands of applications? Aptitude tests or individual interviews would be logistically unmanageable. (UFR02, Field Data, 2025).

Briefing sessions hosted by university faculties were similarly criticised for lacking substantive pedagogical value. A secondary school head expressed blunt criticism:

They talk about guidance sessions organised at the university before course selection. But let us be serious: what purpose is served by a single mass session where information is dumped on students, just to fulfil an administrative tick-box requirement? (LYCOL07, Field Data, 2025).

For their part, university UFR directors openly admitted the weakness of their outreach efforts:

Information dissemination is admittedly our weak point. We participate in general orientation days organised by the central university administration and post degree outlines online, but we do not actively reach out to secondary schools. (UFR03, Field Data, 2025).

Secondary school heads recognised certain specific strengths in the post-baccalaureate framework, such as preventing premature specialisation, ensuring objective candidate sorting via standard grades, and providing an accessible national degree handbook. However, these positive aspects were overwhelmingly overshadowed by major structural deficiencies: the complete absence of qualified guidance counsellors, highly inadequate timing (information arriving only after secondary graduation), and reducing a student's entire educational trajectory to marks obtained during a single three-day examination.

University UFR responsible shared a virtually identical diagnosis, with one director summarising the system's core tension:

The main positive point is objectivity. Exam grades are measurable and indisputable. But that is also its greatest limitation: guidance is reduced to an arithmetical calculation. It takes no account of students' personal career plans, specific aptitudes, or intrinsic motivations. A true guidance system should guide, not merely allocate. We are currently operating a distribution mechanism rather than genuine guidance. (UFR03, Field Data, 2025).

3.4 Determinants of Degree Subject Preferences Among Secondary Students

Analysis of factors shaping degree preferences highlights a heavy reliance on higher education bursaries and scholarships. A university UFR director described this reality candidly:

One of the most decisive factors, if not the single most important, is the university bursary. Many baccalaureate holders come from families facing severe financial hardship. Consequently, rather than selecting courses based on genuine aptitude or long-term employment prospects, they prioritise pathways that offer the highest probability of securing a government scholarship. (UFR01, Field Data, 2025)

This finding was directly confirmed by student data: 32.0% of secondary students stated a preference for degree courses that offer government bursaries, irrespective of personal interest or future career outlets. This proportion slightly exceeded the percentage of students seeking pathways out of pure vocational passion despite uncertain employment prospects (31.8%).

Table 4: Secondary students' core driving preferences when selecting a university degree pathway

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
A field pursued out of passion, even if employment prospects are uncertain	139	31.8
A field with strong employment prospects, even if less personally interesting	55	12.6
A field aligned with parental wishes and demands	2	0.5
A field aligned with academic capabilities and grades	101	23.1
A field offering scholarship opportunities, regardless of interest/outlets	140	32.0
Total	437	100.0

While students rarely reported direct parental influence on paper (0.5%), university leaders highlighted substantial indirect social and family pressures during interviews:

Financial bursaries are undeniably decisive. But family pressure plays a huge role. Many parents push children toward what they consider 'noble' or 'safe' professions. Unfortunately, parents rarely understand the actual labour market reality. (UFR02, Field Data, 2025).

Social prestige similarly emerged as a powerful driver of degree choice:

Bursaries matter, but social prestige is equally influential. STEM disciplines enjoy immense societal prestige. Parents take pride in stating their child is studying medicine or engineering, even when the student possesses neither the aptitude nor the interest for it. (UFR03, Field Data, 2025).

3.5 Vocational Indecision and Decision-Making Readiness

Analysis of student decision certainty revealed widespread underlying vocational ambiguity. Although 74.2% of surveyed students claimed to feel 'fairly certain' or 'very certain' regarding their intended degree subject, detailed assessment of their actual readiness painted a far more problematic picture.

Table 5: Degree choice certainty levels among upper secondary school students

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Very uncertain	31	7.1
Fairly uncertain	82	18.8
Fairly certain	218	49.9
Very certain	106	24.3
Total	437	100.0

The primary barrier encountered by students in making guidance decisions was an acute lack of comprehensive information regarding university degree courses, cited by 74.9% of respondents. This difficulty stems directly from the absence of school-based guidance services and information activities.

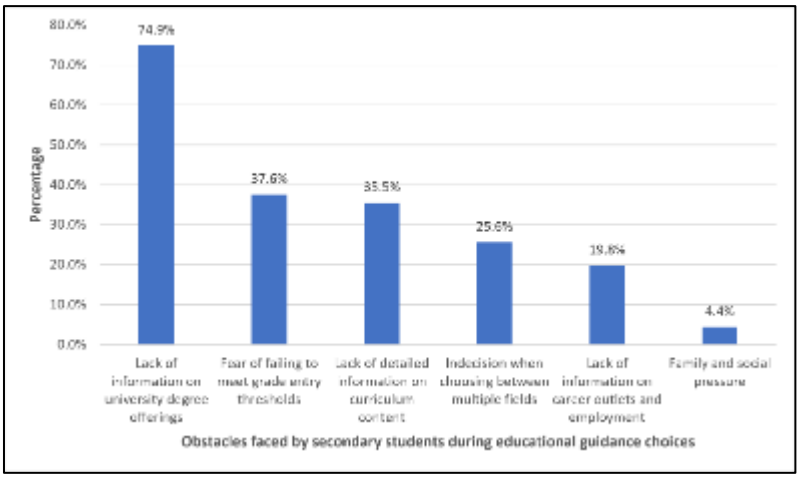

Figure 3: Primary obstacles faced by secondary students during educational guidance choices

Students' self-diagnostics of decision readiness revealed pervasive vocational unpreparedness. A vast majority reported unawareness of their personal academic strengths and weaknesses needed for course selection (78.7% agreeing overall), complete unfamiliarity with career options required for realistic professional projection (88.0% agreeing), and profound anxiety regarding future employment (63.8% agreeing). Additionally, 63.4% feared that their eventual exam marks would fall short of entry cut-offs for desired programmes.

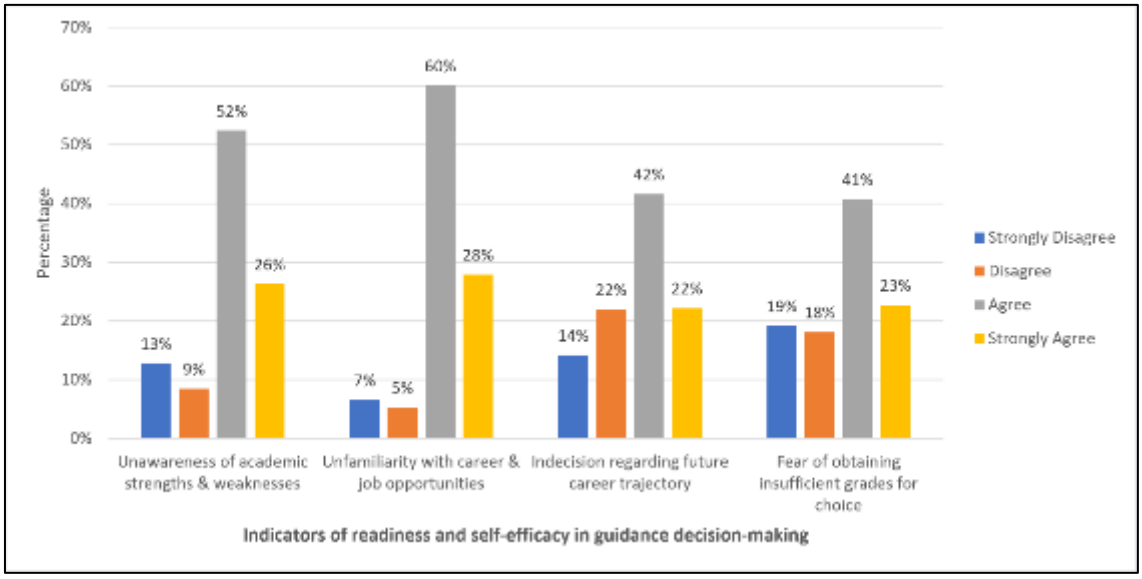

Figure 4: Student self-assessment of readiness and self-efficacy in guidance decision-making

Furthermore, 22.4% of respondents had no idea of what career they wished to pursue, 37.1% held only a vague notion, and only 40.5% expressed a specific career goal.

Table 6: Clarity of future career ambitions among secondary school students

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
No, not yet	98	22.4
Yes, but only vaguely	162	37.1
Yes, a very specific career goal	177	40.5
Total	437	100.0

Most striking was a severe disconnect between professional ambitions and secondary academic streams. Several humanities stream students expressed desires to pursue medical degrees or biomedical analysis, pathways strictly inaccessible to humanities graduates under university admission regulations. Such misalignments reflect an utter absence of systematic information bridging secondary specialisation streams and tertiary degree requirements.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Self-Guidance as an Inevitable Response to Institutional Deficits

This research demonstrates that university degree selection at UAC is overwhelmingly dominated by individual self-guidance strategies arising directly from institutional structural deficits. Personal discipline interest served as the primary driver for 75.3% of students, a figure that might appear positive in isolation. However, this self-guidance occurs within an information vacuum. Students lack essential benchmarks to assess whether personal interests align with rigorous degree requirements or actual employment demands. This vacuum persists despite the Ministry of Higher Education publishing an annual prospectus, because institutional interventions occur exclusively post-baccalaureate. These findings align with prior studies lamenting that students, when confronting critical career decisions, operate without vital data on course structures, career pathways, and labour market outlets (22–24).

The reliance on informal advice, principally family (56.6%) and peers (27.6%), reflects what Bah (14) characterises as a guidance process driven by peer-following and family tradition, propelling learners blindly into tertiary education. This empirical reality supports Bourdieu and Passeron's (25) theory of social reproduction in education. Students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds benefit from inherited informational capital and social networks that inform choices, whereas disadvantaged students rely on intuition or ill-informed lay advice.

4.2 The Paradox of Proclaimed Statutory Rights versus Operational Reality

A striking paradox highlighted by this study is the sharp conflict between Benin's progressive legislative guidance framework and operational reality. While Law No. 2003-17 enshrines guidance counselling as an inalienable right integral to education (15), 94.7% of surveyed students confirmed that their schools provided no structured guidance services. This stark decoupling illustrates classic public policy implementation failure (26).

The 2020 national reform, which shifted formal guidance strictly post-baccalaureate, inadvertently exacerbated this disconnect by relieving secondary schools of operational responsibility. As Hounkonnou et al. (17) emphasise, a meaningful guidance process cannot be implemented in a single multi-hour briefing session hosted weeks before university entry. Educational guidance is thereby reduced to an administrative sorting mechanism based solely on exam grades, completely ignoring developmental, identity formation, and vocational exploration dimensions. This operational model departs radically from modern guidance theory, which positions guidance as a continuous process helping learners build professional identity by integrating personal abilities with labour market realities (27,28). It similarly diverges from Canzittu & Demeuse's (29) 'guidance-oriented school' model, which embeds career development across all curriculum levels. In Benin, guidance remains an afterthought, a superficial administrative hurdle rather than an integral component of school education.

4.3 Scholarship Pursuit as a Socio-Economic Determinant

The finding that securing university bursaries drives course selection for 32.0% of students represents a major contribution of this study. This insight extends beyond traditional Western guidance models, which focus primarily on personal interest, academic ability, and career prestige, to reveal a critical socio-economic driver unique to low- and middle-income countries. In resource-constrained settings, higher education access is constrained by severe financial

barriers that overshadow educational preferences. This aligns with prior Beninese studies highlighting bursary capture as a dominant course selection driver (17,30).

This dynamic generates systemic inefficiencies. Channelling students into degree programs based on financial grant availability rather than personal aptitude fosters academic demotivating and high dropout rates. University UFR directors confirmed that students enrolling purely for financial support exhibit fragile engagement and elevated failure rates. This observation accords with Ryan & Deci's (31) Self-Determination Theory, which posits that non-internalised extrinsic motivation fails to sustain long-term academic perseverance compared to intrinsic motivation.

5 CONCLUSION

This research evaluated Benin's public educational guidance framework in supporting prospective university students entering the University of Abomey-Calavi, highlighting the interplay between individual self-guidance and institutional provision. Findings reveal that the post-2020 public guidance mechanism, focused strictly on the post-baccalaureate period, is restricted to publishing an annual degree prospectus and hosting single mass information briefings. In the total absence of guidance services within secondary schools, prospective university entrants formulate choices in an informational vacuum, relying on personal interest, informal family advice, and, for a significant proportion, the pursuit of financial bursaries.

To address these systemic shortcomings, public guidance policy should be restructured across three strategic pillars. It is important to design and implement formal guidance curricula starting in lower secondary education (third form in Benin), enabling students to explore career pathways long before sitting final baccalaureate exams. Apart from that, there should be actions to train and recruit qualified careers advisers across secondary school districts, equipped with resources to provide continuous individual guidance. To have a better guidance framework, a cross-sectoral institutional synergy is necessary. This will lead to establish operational coordination mechanisms linking secondary schools, higher education institutions, government ministries, and industry stakeholders to align guidance practices with national labour market demands. Implementing these systemic reforms will align student talents with national developmental priorities, enhancing internal university efficiency and improving human capital outcomes across Benin.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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