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Preliminary Insights into the Nature of Graduate IS Programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa

Mark-Oliver Kevor¹, Richard Boateng¹*[0000-0002-9995-3340], Emmanuel Awuni Kolog¹[0000-0002-6924-3532], Acheampong Owusu¹[0000-0001-7789-5162] and Anthony Afful-Dadzie¹

¹University of Ghana Business School, Box LG 78, Accra, Ghana

*Richboateng@ug.edu.gh

Abstract. Extant Information Systems (IS) curriculum research has focused on the nature of undergraduate IS programmes, particularly in the US and UK, eliciting calls for studies on graduate IS programmes and in regions beyond the US and UK. This study, consequently, looks at the nature of graduate IS programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Using a direct survey method, IS courses information were collected from the websites of top universities in SSA based on a 2019 webometric world ranking of universities. The course offerings from these universities are mapped to the competencies specified in the Global competency model for graduate IS programmes (MSIS2016). The findings generally indicate, among others, non-adherence of graduate IS programmes in SSA to the MSIS2016. The reasons for the non-adherence to the MSIS2016 curriculum model is recommended for future research.

Keywords: MSIS 2016 Adherence, IS Curriculum, Adoption, Sub-Saharan Africa

1 Introduction

It is becoming well-accepted that the aim of information systems (IS) curriculum design and delivery is to prepare IS graduates with the skills required by organisations (Benamati, Ozdemir, & Smith 2010; Topi et al. 2017). Recently, organisations have been concerned with the competencies of IS graduates due to the implications—financial and otherwise—of providing on-the-job (i.e. in-service) training to ensure employees can meet the organisations’ competency demands (Anderson 2017). Stefanidis, Fitzgerald and Counsell (2013, p. 1) claim that ‘there is an expectation that IS graduates possess sufficient skills to make their transition into graduate employment as seamless as possible’. As a result, organisations are gradually eliminating trainee positions and preferring to hire graduates with the relevant competencies (Anderson 2017). While this organisational dimension supports expansion and competitiveness, it poses a practical challenge for IS faculty and curriculum developers, who must work to meet the changing demands of businesses in the face of declining IS enrolment (Akbulut-Bailey, 2012).

The IS community has responded to organisations' rapidly changing IS competency needs by developing IS competency models to guide the design and delivery of both graduate and undergraduate programmes in higher education institutions (Gorgone, Gray, Stohr, Valacich, & Wigand 2006; Topi et al. 2017). While considerable research has examined the level of adoption of IS curriculum models at the undergraduate level (Andoh-Baidoo, Villa, Aguirre, & Kasper 2014; Bell, Mills, & Fadel 2013; Clark, Clark, Gambill & Brooks 2017; Lo & Cruz 2014; Mills, Velasquez, Osatuyi, & Garza 2014), there is less research on adoption and adherence at the graduate level (Apigian & Gambill 2014; Yang 2012). Moreover, much of the domain-specific research is predominantly conducted in the North American context (Helfert 2011), despite the fact that organisations' IS competency needs differ between regions and regional market factors influence the structure of IS curricula (Larsson & Boateng, 2010; Kaiser, Goles, Hawk, Simon, & Frampton 2011; Clark et al. 2017). Yang (2012) suggested that researchers should investigate this topic in non-US universities, preferably in other regions of the world. However, in our preliminary investigation, we found no empirical research on the adoption of the IS competency model in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Additionally, according to Yang (2012) and Apigian and Gambill (2014), few studies have been on the adoption of the IS competency model at the graduate level, only with the MSIS 2006 (Gorgone, Gray, Stohr, Valacich, & Wigand 2006) and none with the global competency model for graduate degree programmes (MSIS 2016) (Topi et al. 2017) which is the latest of the curriculum guidelines developed by a joint committee of professionals specifying competencies required from an IS graduate. Quality graduate IS programmes in SSA presents an opportunity to develop contextual solutions to the myriad of problems challenging the region and other less developed countries (Syler & Venkatesh 2018). In view of these gaps, this paper seeks to understand the nature of graduate IS programmes in SSA and to assess the level of adherence of SSA IS curricula to the MSIS 2016 guidelines. The following research questions are posed: *What is the nature of graduate IS programmes in SSA? What courses are offered in graduate IS programmes in SSA to ensure that students attain IS competencies? What is the level of adherence of graduate IS curricula in SSA to the MSIS 2016 guidelines?*

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section two presents the background of the study, including an overview of the MSIS model and IS in higher education. Section three describes the research methodology. Section four presents the results and discusses them. Section five describes the relevant conclusions and suggests a direction for future research.

2 Background

2.1 Information System Programmes in Higher Education Institutions

Westfall (2012 p.66) defines IS as a 'field that prepares students to interface between non-technical organizational employees and managers and very technical IT professionals, with a focus on functions that are unlikely to be offshored'. This definition, which we have adopted in the current study, underscores the relevance of understanding

the content and curricula of IS programmes in higher education institutions. Research aiming to identify the nature of graduate IS curricula often starts by investigating the nomenclature associated with IS programmes in various institutions (Brooks, Gambill, Clark, & Clark 2016; Cassel, Davies, LeBlanc, Snyder, & Topi 2008; Longenecker, Babb, Waguespack, Janicki, & Feinstein 2015). IS programmes can be found within various departments of higher education institutions (Longenecker et al. 2015), and a benchmarking effort in the UK identified more than 6000 different names for computing-related programmes of study and over 150 different names for IS programmes (Cassel et al. 2008). Brooks et al. (2016) found that the terms IS, management information systems (MIS), computer information systems (CIS) and information technology (IT) refer to the same or similar disciplines, indicating that no effort has been put towards developing a naming convention or standard for IS education. Similarly, Pierson et al. (2008) compared the names of IS programmes in 2004 to 2007 to determine whether there was any convergence in the naming of IS programmes in higher education. They found that MIS, IS and CIS are the dominant names, but 20% of the programmes in the surveyed US schools did not use these names (Pierson et al. 2008). Given the aim of this paper, we believe it is critical to add to the debate on the identity of the IS field (Agarwal & Lucas 2005; Benbasat & Zmud 2003) and investigate the naming conventions of IS programmes in other regions. This will help researchers understand not only the identity of the IS discipline but also distinguish IS from other computing-related disciplines.

2.2 The MSIS Model in Perspective

In an attempt to maintain standards and work towards a core body of knowledge in the field of IS, a joint task force created by the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and the Association for Information Systems (AIS) developed a model curriculum for IS programmes in various higher education institutions. The most recent model for undergraduate programmes is the IS 2010 (Topi et al. 2010) and for graduate programmes is the MSIS 2016¹ global IS competency model (Topi et al. 2017). The MSIS 2016 model is a revised version of the MSIS 2006 (Gorgone et al. 2006), which was itself a revision of the MSIS 2000 (Gorgone et al. 2000). The MSIS 2000 and MSIS 2006 were developed based on the assumptions and principal characteristics regarding IS in the US and Canada. The MSIS 2016 was the first to consider the context of other regions, such as Asia and Europe. Moreover, whereas its antecedents provide specific recommendations, the MSIS 2016 is a meta-model that specifies necessary competencies and provides guidance for the development of IS curricula or models. This follows the recent emphasis on a competency-based approach to IS curriculum design and delivery (Sutcliffe & Chan 2004; Topi 2016; Topi, Helfert, Ramesh, Wigand, & Wright

¹ Heikki, T. et al. (2017) "MSIS 2016 Global Competency Model for Graduate Degree Programs in Information Systems," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*: Vol. 40, Article 18. Available at: <https://aisel.aisnet.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3997&context=cais>

2011). According to Sutcliffe and Chan (2004), this approach is more flexible than the course-based approach, which specifies that certain courses must always be taught.

The MSIS 2016 offers three categories of competencies: *IS, individual foundational competencies* and *core competencies* in a domain of practice. These categories cover broad areas of competency as well as specific competencies where appropriate. Nine IS competency areas, 88 specific competencies (omitted in this paper), and 11 indicative foundational competencies are identified. Whilst previous models emphasised competencies in the business domain, MSIS 2016 recognises the applicability of IS beyond business and core competencies in other domains, such as health, law and government.

The MSIS 2016 specifies four levels of competency attainment expected from an IS graduate for each competency: *awareness* (i.e. the graduate is aware of the existence of the competency), *novice* (i.e. the graduate has enough knowledge and skills that s/he could perform tasks under supervision while developing the competency further), *support* (i.e. the graduate has sufficient knowledge and skills to work with others and support those with higher levels of competencies to achieve set goals) and *independent* (i.e. the graduate can achieve the desired competency outcomes without continuous supervision). A fifth level, *expert*, cannot be achieved with a graduate-level IS curriculum (Topi et al. 2017). Employees perform IS roles by applying their knowledge, skills and attitudes within organisational structures and processes (Peppard & Ward 2004). The MSIS 2016 prepares graduates to fill these roles by teaching specific competencies beyond the awareness level and provides curriculum profiles for the roles of Business Analyst, Business Information Manager, Enterprise Architect, IT consultant, IT Project Manager and Systems Analyst (CEN 2012).

Extant research has examined the IS curriculum model from various perspectives. One perspective looks at the presence (or absence) of a specific IS competency recommended by the model in a selected number of schools. Andoh-Baidoo et al. (2014) undertook such a study, examined business intelligence and analytics courses in 161 US schools accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. They found a considerable difference in the schools offering business intelligence courses and degrees in different departments. Another perspective looks at the IS courses offered by universities to provide students with specific IS competencies or promote certain career tracks. Studies adopting this perspective survey universities with IS programmes, and they can be exploratory in nature, be guided by a model or perform comparisons with existing IS model curricula. In separate studies of graduate IS programmes in the US, Yang (2012) and Apigian & Gambill (2014) compared a list of courses that universities required and deemed valuable with the MSIS 2006 graduate IS curriculum model. This study applies a similar approach, using the MSIS 2016 global IS competency model as the framework.

3 Methodology

To study the nature of graduate IS programmes in SSA, we adopted a direct survey approach (Andoh-Baidoo et al. 2014; Apigian & Gambill 2014; Bell et al. 2013; Yang

2012) and thus collected data directly from the websites of the participating institutions. Bell et al. (2013, p. 77) explained that direct surveys are advantageous because they focus on a 'specific program of interest, allowing systematic collection and quantification of data'. The top 50 universities in SSA were selected based on their rankings by Webometrics (2018), which is an initiative of the Cybermetrics Lab, a research group belonging to the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, which ranks universities by region in order to improve the web presence of academic and research institutions. In this study, the university websites were accessed beginning in September 2018, when the academic calendar for most universities in SSA begin and updated course catalogues are provided. Only English-language websites were selected in this survey. The websites of two universities in the top 50 were in French and were therefore excluded. To fill this gap, we included the 51st and 52nd universities. Since our focus is on graduate programmes, only universities that offered graduate IS programmes were included.

Of the 50 universities included in the survey, 27 either did not offer a graduate IS programme or did not offer information about their graduate IS programme online. Furthermore, the Masters programmes of six universities are exclusively dissertation-based. Since such programmes do not detail the specific competencies a learner will acquire, it would be difficult to include them in this analysis. Five universities provided incomplete information about the offerings of their graduate IS programmes, and three were specialised universities focusing on, for example, health or agriculture. Nine universities offering graduate IS programmes provided complete data that was sufficient for this analysis.

The name of the programme, total number of courses/modules, minimum duration, presence of domain and IS bridge modules, university type, mode of instruction delivery and modules/courses offered within each broad competency category were recorded. These data were obtained from department websites, university yearbooks, rule-books and programme catalogues. These descriptions were indicative of what broad competencies students were expected to acquire. The courses offered by the universities were mapped to the broad competencies specified in the MSIS 2016. Similar courses were combined into a common category (for example, systems analysis and design and information systems development). 'YES' was used to indicate that at least one course matching a broad competency category was found. For example, 'YES' was used for a university that offers only entrepreneurship courses, as these fit within the IOCE category, even if there are no courses teaching other competencies within the category. A descriptive analysis was performed on the collected data, and the results are presented in section four.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 The Nature of Graduate IS Programmes in SSA

There is generally lack of graduate IS programmes in SSA. This may be as a result of IS being relatively new as compared to other traditional business and computing programmes and may be an indication of the maturity of the IS discipline in SSA. Nevertheless, the nine graduate IS programmes are offered by flagship universities in SSA. Flagship universities are “almost always public, often among the largest in the system or country, and a leading university in a country or an academic system which is looked to for influence and emulation” (Altbach & Balan 2007, p8) and relevant in the SSA context (Teferra, 2016) to understanding the nature of graduate IS programmes. Again, Larsson & Boateng (2010) argue that different countries have different resources strengths, maturity and approach in offering IS programmes.

Consequently, of the 50 universities we surveyed, 9 offered a graduate IS programme or an equivalent programme with a different name. This result confirms other studies (Brooks et al. 2016; Pierson et al. 2008) suggesting that there is a lack of standards for the naming of IS programmes and emphasising the multidisciplinary identity of the IS discipline. The institutions and the names of the graduate IS programmes are summarised in Table 1. All are public universities offering different types of degrees, such as MSc, MBA, MCom and MIT, and they are located in six different countries in SSA.

Table 1. Summary of IS graduate programmes in SSA (Source: Authors)

University	Type	Country	Programme Name	Degree type
University of Pretoria	Public	South Africa	ICT Management	MIT
University of Kwazulu Natal	Public	South Africa	IS and Technology	Mcom
University of Nairobi	Public	Kenya	IT Management	Msc
Makerere University	Public	Uganda	IS	MSc
University of Ghana	Public	Ghana	MIS	MBA
University of the Free State	Public	South Africa	CIS	Msc
University of Dar Es Salaam	Public	Tanzania	Health Informatics	MSc
Mbarara University of Sci. and Technology	Public	Uganda	IS	MSc
University of Botswana	Public	Botswana	BIS	MBA

The minimum number of modules offered is 6, and the maximum number is 20, with an average of 13 (12.88). This is not unlike the typical MSIS programme in the US, which offers 10 to 12 modules over three semesters (Topi et al. 2017). Three of the 9 graduate IS programmes offer bridge modules covering both IS and domain-specific competencies. Such modules are important to help learners from diverse backgrounds transition into the programme (Topi et al. 2017). However, this study did not consider the entry requirements for the programmes, and it is therefore difficult to interpret the

absence of bridge modules as injurious. A summary of the number of modules and the presence or absence of bridge modules is presented in Table 2.

From Table 2, the minimum duration of a graduate IS programme is 1.5 years, and the average is 2 years for face-to-face (f2f) delivery (regular stream). In line with the recommendations for IS programmes to move beyond business domain (Gorgone et al. 2006; Topi et al. 2017), there is evidence that graduate IS programmes consider the education, geographic information systems (GIS) and health domains, although the business domain remains dominant.

Table 2.Summary of graduate IS programmes' Characteristics in SSA (Source: Authors)

University	Number of Modules	Duration	Domain	Bridge Modules	Instruction Mode
University of Pretoria	13	2	Business	Present	F2F
University of Kwazulu Natal	6	2	General	Absent	F2F
University of Nairobi	10	2	Business	Absent	F2F
Makerere University	13	2	Business/GIS	Absent	F2F
University of Ghana	20	2	Business	Present	F2F
University of the Free State	13	2	Education	Absent	F2F
University of Dar Es Salaam	14	2	Health	Present	F2F
Mbarara University of Science and Technology	11	2	Health/GIS	Absent	F2F
University of Botswana	16	1.5	Business	Absent	F2F

4.2 Courses and Adherence of Graduate IS Curricula in SSA to MSIS 2016

The results show that information systems development (ISD) and related courses are widely offered in graduate IS programmes in SSA. This supports Surendra and Denton's (2009) suggestion that the defining course in an IS programme is systems analysis and design, on which the core body of knowledge in the IS field depends (Baskerville & Myers 2002). The five most common courses providing IS competencies are ISD, IS Research, Strategic IS Management, IS Project Management and IS Security and Auditing. These findings are similar to those of other researchers (Apigian & Gambill 2014; Yang 2012). Yang (2012) identified IS Analysis/Modelling/Design, IT Infrastructure, Project and Change Management and Management of IS as the four courses most commonly offered in IS programmes by universities in the US, and Apigian & Gambill (2014) identified Database, Management of IS, System Analysis and Design, and Project Management as the most common courses.

We compared the courses offered in graduate IS programmes with the MSIS 2016 global competency model. To do so, we mapped the IS courses offered by the universities to the appropriate broad IS competency categories in MSIS 2016 (which are discussed in section three). The results are summarised in Table 3. The results show that courses providing competencies within the Data, Information and Content Management (DICM) and Systems Development and Deployment (SDAD) categories have a strong presence in graduate IS curricula in SSA. Fewer courses that cover competencies within the Ethics, Impacts, and Sustainability (ETIS) and the Enterprise Architecture (EARC)

categories are provided. Moreover, little attention has been given to the categories Innovation, Organisational Change and Entrepreneurship (IOCE), Business Continuity and Information Assurance (BCIA) and IS Strategy and Governance (ISSG).

None of the graduate IS curricula completely followed the MSIS 2016 model. The most adherent curriculum differed by four broad competencies, and the least adherent differed by six. Four of the universities offer courses providing graduate IS competencies in five broad categories, three offer courses that provide competencies in four broad categories and the remaining two offer courses providing competencies in three broad categories. These results are not much different from those of Yang (2012) and Apigian & Gambill (2014) or from studies examining undergraduate programmes (Bell et al. 2013; Clark et al. 2017; Mills et al. 2012). Apigian & Gambill (2014) found that graduate IS programmes in US universities generally exhibited non-adherence to the MSIS 2006, and Yang (2012) found that course offerings differed from the MSIS 2006 in terms of one category. In a survey of undergraduate IS programmes in the US, Bell et al. (2013) found a wide range of non-adherence to the IS 2010 model. Moreover, a number of non-IS courses were required despite their absence in the IS 2010. Similarly, Stefanidis et al. (2012) found generally low adherence to the IS 2010 in a study of undergraduate IS programmes in the UK.

Table 3. Mapping of graduate IS curricula offered by universities in SSA to the broad IS competency categories in MSIS 2016 (Source: Authors)

University	Core IS Competencies (MSIS 2016)									TOTAL
	IOCE	ETIS	EARC	BCIA	DICM	ISMO	ISSG	INFS	SDAD	
University of Pretoria	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	5
University of Kwazulu Natal	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	4
University of Nairobi	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	5
Makerere University	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	5
University of Ghana	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	5
University of the Free State	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	3
University of Dar Es Salaam	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	4
Mbarara Univ. of Sci. & Techn.	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	3
University of Botswana	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	4
TOTAL (YES)	3	1	1	4	7	5	4	6	7	

The current study shows that IS graduates from SSA universities may not have the global IS skills specified in the MSIS 2016 and may require interventions to fill the gaps in their skills, which are associated with extra training costs and time to integrate into organisations, making these graduates less likely to be hired. This continues to be a subject of research, and relevant questions have been raised about the usefulness of the IS curriculum model due to the general non-adherence of universities and whether non-adherence can be further explored.

The results shown in Table 4 also reveal that IS curricula are beginning to move beyond the business and organisational domains, although these domains remain dominant. Previous studies on graduate IS curricula did not analyse domain competencies

separately, but this study identified course offerings in non-business domains, such as health, GIS and education. No courses offered competencies in the law or government domains, as suggested by the MSIS 2016. One programme focused only on the core IS competencies, which we refer to as the general (GEN) domain.

No modules or courses provided individual foundational competencies, and it was not clear whether these competencies were embedded in other courses based on the course catalogues. Individual foundational competency modules were identified in a survey of undergraduate IS programmes in the UK (Stefanidis et al. 2012), but not they have not received much attention at the graduate level. A number of studies have advocated for the inclusion of courses in IS curricula that provide individual foundational competencies, including creativity and problem-solving (Martz, Hughes, & Braun 2017), service learning (Jones & Ceccucci 2018), virtual teamwork (Chen, Sager, Corbitt, & Gardiner 2008), inter-cultural communication (Mitchell & Benyon 2018) and ethics and social responsibility (Harris & Lang 2011).

Table 4. Summary of domain competencies offered by IS graduate programmes in SSA
(Source: Authors)

University	BUS	HEALTH	LAW	GOVT	GIS	EDU	GEN
University of Pretoria	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
University of Kwazulu Natal	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES
University of Nairobi	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Makerere University	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
University of Ghana	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
University of the Free State	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO
University of Dar Es Salaam	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Mbarara Univ. of Science and Techn.	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
University of Botswana	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
TOTAL (YES)	5	2	0	0	2	1	1

5 Conclusion and Future Studies

This research sought to identify the nature of graduate IS programmes in SSA and their adherence to the MSIS 2016. Notwithstanding a number of limitations of the study, the findings indicate that traditional business and computer science programmes dominate, although a few universities offer a two-year graduate IS programmes in SSA. The graduate IS programmes generally offer courses providing competencies in SDAD as well as DICM. Courses providing competencies in ETIS and EARC are rare in graduate IS curricula in SSA. Popular core IS courses include ISD, IS Research, Strategic IS Management, IS Project Management and IS Security and Auditing. Whilst this study did not consider specialised courses that provide competencies specific to certain career tracks, we found that the programmes included new domains beyond business. However, there were no specific courses providing individual foundation competencies. We observed different levels of adherence of graduate IS programmes to MSIS 2016. Due to the general non-adherence, many graduates of IS programmes in SSA may not have

sufficient skills for the workplace. The reasons for non-adherence were not studied in this research and may be explored in future studies.

A descriptive survey like this, though valuable, does not provide rich insights into how faculties develop or revise graduate IS curricula. Future research could look at specific case studies of graduate IS curricula similar to those of Gupta, Goul and Dinter (2015), and Ramesh and Gerth (2015). Such a study would provide richer insight into the factors that enable or inhibit IS curriculum model adherence than provided by extant literature. These insights could help guide universities in planning graduate IS programmes in SSA. In addition, future research should use all specified competencies during mapping to provide a detailed view of which competencies are provided by courses in graduate IS programmes, moving beyond the broad competencies. Finally, although we compared graduate IS curricula to the competencies specified in MSIS 2016, it is important to understand whether those competencies are exhaustive and relevant to organisations in Africa, as this would guide its adoption or adaptation by universities (Larsson & Boateng, 2010). A future study could consider the views of employers, employees and other stakeholders regarding the value of the competencies specified in MSIS 2016 in SSA.

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