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Chapter 11

Minding the Gap: An assessment of the quality of course information available on the websites of African Universities

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Deciding which university to attend and what course to study are essential choices for prospective students. Given Universities' websites have been considered a vital source of information for prospective students, this study explores the quality and quantity of information about undergraduate programs available in African Universities. The study adopts the ALARA Model of Information Search on website, a novel methodology, which brings together case study research, stakeholder roleplay and netnography. Taking the role of a prospective student, the research explores the availability, location, accessibility, relatability and actionability (ALARA) of information provided on University websites. The study found that prospective students are short-changed as the Universities are not providing enough information for them to decide. More than 70 per cent of the best Universities in Africa did not provide any information for their prospective students about the programs they intend to study. The study offers both theoretical and managerial implication. It extends knowledge about marketing higher education, understanding student information search. The study also highlights implication for University Managers, Academic staff, Marketing Communication Team, Information and Communications Team and other teams responsible for developing and updating the Universities' website with current and relevant information about the programs offered by the University.

Keywords: Information, Students, Website, ALARA, Africa, Universities, Marketing, Course Information

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Introduction

Deciding which university to attend and what course to study are essential choices for prospective undergraduate students. Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith (1989) considered it a sophisticated and multistage process, and factors influencing the process and ultimately, the final decision have been well explored in the literature. Financial support, suitability and availability of the programme on offer, ease and flexibility of enrolment procedure, career prospects after graduation, quality and availability of facilities and institutional reputation are essential considerations that have been shown to influence student choice of University (Maringe, 2006; Ivy, 2001; Iacopini & Hayden, 2017; Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Adefulu, et al., 2019). Students invest time in making an informed choice. They consult different sources of information such as the University's website and prospectus, attend open days and utilise student online forums.

Prospective students want to know the content of the course, number and pattern of assessments, accreditation with a relevant professional body and their career options if they decide to study the course (Mogaji, 2016b). Often, students may want to check the prospectus for information about their program, but there are some restrictions. First, there are limitations on the number of words and pages that can be printed for all the programmes run by the University. Second, as print prospectuses are often published a year or two in advance, the information could be out of date by the time the prospective student accesses it. Finally, in an effort towards sustainability, some Universities no longer provide print copies of the prospectus. This leaves the University's website as an essential source for students to get detailed information about the programs they want to study.

University websites have been considered a vital source of information for prospective students (Mogaji, 2016) as it can be updated regularly, is accessible to a global audience, and content can be well detailed and easily updated. This now puts the responsibility on the Universities to invest in developing and presenting the required content on their website as it is one of the first points of engagement with prospective students.

In the first part of the introduction, the importance of the course and University choice and how students seek out information to help with the decision making has been established. The study adopts the ALARA Model of Information Search on website (Mogaji, 2019), a novel methodology, which brings together case study research, stakeholder roleplay and netnography. Taking the role of a prospective student, the research explores the availability, location, accessibility, relatability and actionability (ALARA) of information provided on University websites.

The University program in the context of this chapter represents the award a prospective student will achieve at the end of a pre-determined course of study (e.g. Bachelor of Arts in Marketing, (BA) Marketing). These programs are made up of a pre-approved combination of core and option courses (sometimes called modules or units) that students register for in each year of study. Each course is attributed to a unit or credit value. Students get their program award upon successful completion of all approved courses. While many Universities may offer the same programme (e.g. BA Marketing), there are often variations in pedagogic approach such as the teaching and learning activities, assessment instruments, support services etc. used across institutions. Understanding the different features and uniqueness of these programmes offers an opportunity for prospective students to compare and make an informed choice.

This study contributes to the understanding of student choice, marketing of higher education and decision-making process. It offers a different perspective from previous studies that place the responsibility on students to look for information but instead, considers the responsibility

of Universities in making the information readily available and accessible. Besides, it offers practical implications for University Managers, Program and Course leaders at Universities, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Marketing Communications and Recruitment Team on how to develop their websites and make the information available to aid the decision process.

The next section of the chapter explores the factors influencing student choices, with a specific focus on courses, followed by the information search process and the role of websites in information gathering. The methodology for the study is subsequently presented, followed by the result and its discussion. To conclude, a summary, highlighting the study's contributions, limitations and ideas for future research, is discussed.

Literature Review

Student Information Search

Deciding between the University to attend and importantly, the program to study requires effort in filtering through information from different sources. Using the Universities website, requesting a prospectus, reading reviews and blog post. This information search can be tedious and not surprising to find that there is a limited active information search on the part of the students (Menon, et al., 2007). Menon (2004) also found this particularly surprising that some of the students did not consider it necessary to become involved in an information search process personally. The reluctance on the part of the student to become involved in information search that would allow systematic comparisons between higher education institutions has been noted. Even when it comes to financial support to attend higher education, Mangan, et al. (2010) found that many students appear to be just as ignorant of grants and loans as bursaries as they had not engaged in a substantial search for information on financial support, the authors noted that many students search for information about local universities and may not search further if they feel their needs have been met.

Taking into consideration the high cost of international education, it can be suggested that prospective students trying to study abroad are more likely to be from a higher socioeconomic status family, understating the importance of the decision and therefore make an effort to search for information (Mogaji, 2016). Pyvis & Chapman (2007) described it as a self-transformative investment as they seek a new way of viewing the world, new habits of thinking and new skills, thereby proactive in search of information regarding which University to attend and it is, therefore, vital for the Universities to make the information available.

While the responsibility can be placed on the student to search for the information, the availability of this information has been questioned. James et al. (1999) found that many applicants were under-informed on essential matters regarding their choice of a higher education institution. They noted that University applicants reported generally low levels of knowledge of specific characteristics of universities and the courses offered by them. Mangan et al. (2007) also found out that the provision of information on financial support was inadequate for many of the UK prospective students; however, they suggested a proactive search for information by the students.

Building on the implication of research by Menon et al. (2007), it is suggested that Universities should stimulate information search among prospective students, providing relevant information through various promotional campaigns, invitations to prospective students for visits of the university premises and well-designed websites. A pro-active promotional strategy on the part of universities, aimed at stimulating information search by prospective students is encouraged (Mogaji, 2016). Menon (2004) concluded that higher education institutions need to encourage prospective in greater information search, based on the idea that information

search among these students is less than what is expected under traditional economic theory. The author suggested that higher education institutions can focus on their comparative strengths, making their University appealing through advertisement, inviting students for the open day and maintaining an informative website.

Universities website has been considered an essential source of information for students. The internet has become an important marketing communication tool for recruiting university students, as prospective students check the websites to get quick information and insight into life at the universities (Mogaji, 2016b). The internet offers geographically remote students a means to access the universities and information on their courses (Armstrong & Lumsden, 2000). The websites function as a unique platform to provide information to the broader community as well, transcending geographical barriers. As information is uploaded into cyberspace, it is not restricted by geographical constraints (Sife & Grace, 2013). Thus, to market higher education in an increasingly global environment, university websites offer a convenient way to reach out to the students across the world.

Gomes and Murphy's (2003) study explored how educational institutions use their websites to market to prospective students, suggesting a two way communication between the University and the prospective students, the Universities will have to provide the information for the student and it is expected that it will be relevant and timely for the searching prospective students (Mogaji, 2016b). Previous studies as also suggested that it is essential for universities to pay attention to how they communicate with their prospective students through their websites, and to update them regularly. They note that the words, images and symbols contained in these marketing materials constitute the basis on which the institutions begin forming relationships with their students (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Mogaji, 2016a). In this age of advancement in information technology, the importance of university websites for those in search of information should not be under-estimated.

This study aims to hold the Universities responsible for the quality of the information provided on their website, specifically with regards to the programs being offered by the university. There is a range of programs available for the students to study as they envisage their career prospect, making an informed decision is therefore essential, suggesting the need for students to know how the courses will be taught. Many programs may have a similar name (BSc Marketing or BSc Marketing Management); having detailed information can help the student different between the plethora of programs available. While it is the responsibility of students to search, University needs to provide the information as students should not make choices based on inaccurate knowledge and insufficient information (Brennan, 2001).

Information Searching and Search Models

The emergence of the Internet has enabled many end-users to search for information themselves as there is a practically immeasurable amount of information, with its own unique set of information characteristics (Knight & Spink, 2008; Xie, 2010). Information searching can be defined as 'users' purposive behaviours in finding relevant or useful information in their interactions with information retrieval (IR) systems. (Xie, 2010, p. 2592). This information search is characterised with several complex processes which can be user-related or system-related (Knight & Spink, 2008). Information retrieval (IR) systems are considered as the websites provided by the Universities to aid the information search process (ISP). The ISP describes the cognitive processes involved in searching activities (Knight & Spink, 2008) of the prospective student.

The information search is influenced by three factors which possess unique characteristics depending on the situation, and they also have a considerable influence on each other (Knight & Spink, 2008). There is the information need (Broder, 2002) which is the motivation to start the quest for information, as there is an information need that should be met, this can also refer to the users' goal and task. Secondly, there is the information Searcher (Kuhlthau, 1991) who is the individual who has recognised the need for the information and making an effort to search. Thirdly, the information Environment (Johnson & Meischke, 1993), in this case, the website design, the interface design and the organisational context to aid the information search as the design of IR systems have been found to affects users in their selections of search strategies (Xie, 2010). The complexity of task and stages of task play significant roles in influencing search strategies (Xie, 2010), likewise context of the information needs of the searcher, processes of searching and the environmental factors relating to the information has been found to influence the information search behaviour (Heinström, 2000), suggesting that the design of a website may encourage the desire to keep searching for information or consider a different website for the information.

Many theoretical insights have been offered in understanding this information search behaviour. Wilson's (1981) Model of Information Behaviour argued that the personality of the searcher and the environment in which search is being carried out are core variables that continually influence each other and the overall information seeking process. The Behavioral Model for Information System Design (Ellis, 1989a; Ellis, 1989b) presented six information-seeking actions/strategies regarding information behaviour - Starting, Chaining, Browsing, Differentiating, Monitoring, Extracting. The model was further refined with an additional two actions - verifying and ending, while Browsing, Chaining and Monitoring were more (Ellis, et al., 1993). Another Information-Seeking Model was developed by Kuhlthau (1991), which model people's information-seeking behaviour in the context of assumed rather than observed cognitive processes (Knight & Spink, 2008). Marchionini (1995) made an effort to integrate all these models, recognising the concept of information need, information searcher, and information Environment and then introduced the fourth factor which is the various interactions between the entities of the searcher, the information need and environment. This recognises the partnership between the user (the prospective students) who has recognised the information need (to know the programs offered by the Universities) and retrieving that information from the Universities' information Environment (the website).

Theoretical Framework

While acknowledging that many theoretically-based, contextual, macro model for investigating Web-based information behaviour has been developed, they are however from the user's perspective - the user recognising the need for information and doing the search with little expectation from the custodian of the IR system, especially with regards to the provision of the information, its availability and accessibility. As earlier stated, this study takes an alternative perspective to the information search process, laying the expectations on the Universities to provide the information for the students. There is no empirical evidence yet that Universities are not providing information about their program and therefore, the purpose of this study to fill that gap in understanding.

To achieve this, a novel theoretical and methodological approach is adopted. ALARA Model of Information search on Website (Mogaji, 2019). ALARA is an acronym that stands for Availability, Location, Accessibility, Relatability and Actionability (Figure 1). The model explores the website with a specific intention of understanding if the Information is available, and if so, the location of the information. This is often indicated by the buttons, which may be

situated on the home page as a form of importance or a drop-down menu or at the footer of the website. Once the location of the information is identified, the accessibility becomes essential as well. Perhaps the button links to a dead-end, has a broken link or the page has no content. Besides, the relatability of the information that has been accessed is essential. It questions how relevant it is if the information is incorrect or inconclusive and importantly if the information is actionable, question the visitor's action or perhaps there is a prominent call-to-action (CTA).
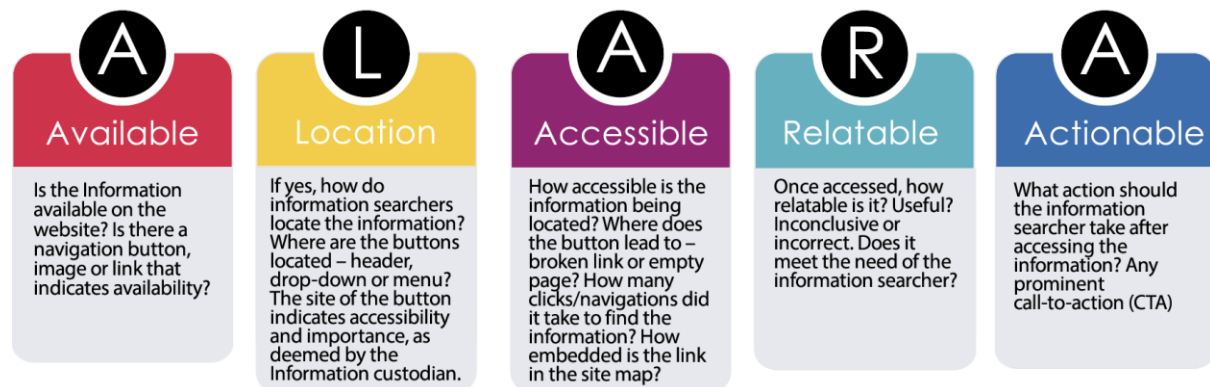

Figure 1: The ALARA Model of Information Search

This theory builds on the Marchionini (1995) effort to recognise the various interactions between the entities of the searcher, the information need and environmental local of the information. In this study, it is hypothesised that Universities will make the information about the course available on their website for prospective students who have recognised the need. It is anticipated that information will be accessible, through icons and navigation menus that are easily identified. Importantly, the information will be relevant to the students, and they will be prompted to act. The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 2 below, recognising the role of the Universities in providing accessible and relevant information which meets the student's expectation. The methodological approach for the ALARA model is discussed in the subsequent section.
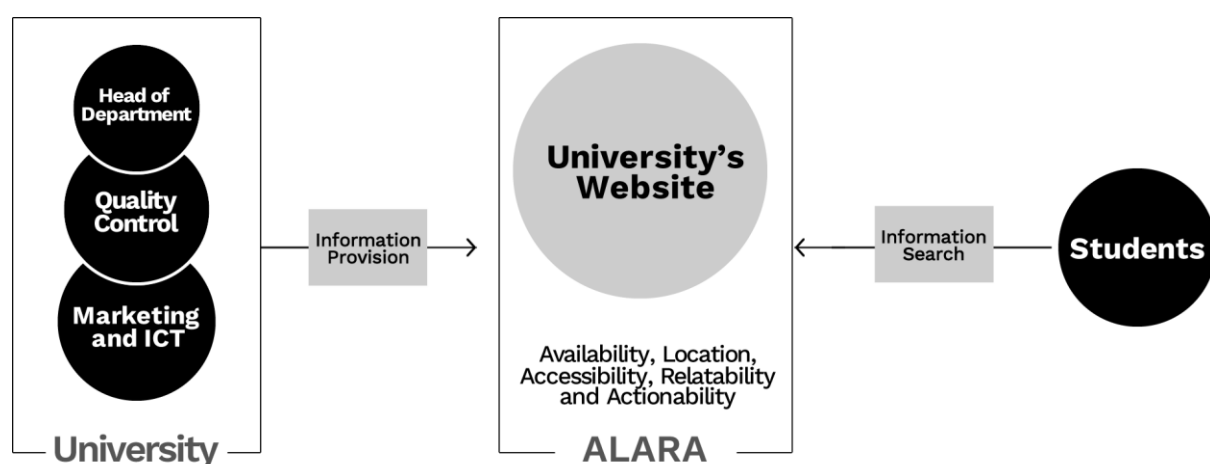

Figure 2: The Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study adopts a novel research methodology, the ALARA Information Search Model, as an approach to studying information search and experiences on Websites. The methodology takes up the role of an information searcher and incorporates the idea of netnography and user experience design. The methodology highlights the provision of information for the prospective visitor to make an informed choice. It places the responsibility on the website owner, the Universities, in this case, to provide the needed information for prospective students in a user-friendly and engaging manner. The methodology enhances understanding of digitally occurring interactions, experiences and phenomena of information search on websites. Seven key stages are outlined in using this method. These stages are discussed in subsequent subsections.

Stage 1: The Role

The research adopts the role of a prospective student in Africa looking at studying in one of the best Universities in Africa. The student is willing to explore several University website to find an institution offering a bachelor's degree in marketing or any related programme (Advertising, Public Relations or Business Management).

Stage 2: The Information

The student is interested in knowing more about the programs on offer. The research looked out for information (provided in Table 1) on the University's website:

Table 1: Information Descriptors for University Programs

S/N	Information	Code	Description
1	Program Overview	PO	Welcoming the prospective students to the program, highlighting the value of the program, what students will gain on the program and the type of industry they are being prepared for. This section also highlights career opportunities for prospective students.
2	Program Structure	PS	The provision of the number of years on the program. The course/modules to be covered in the different years of the program.
3	Entry Requirements	EQ	As entry requirements are relative to the University, individual students and the course, this information provides the entry requirement for the students. It shows the grade that the Universities are expecting. This could also cover information about i=equivalent of International grades.
4	Fees and financial support	FS	The information section covers the fees for the course; if it is different from other courses? If students are charged per credit/unit? This information also includes financial support, in the form of scholarship

			and Bursaries available for prospective students
5	Assessments	AS	Exams, Group Presentations or Business Report. This information section covers manners in which students will be assessed on their courses.
6	Teaching and Learning	TL	This information covers how students will be taught on those modules. Will it be seminars, tutorials or Lecture? Would they be involved in any activities learning activities outside the University?
7	Teaching and Learning Facilities	TF	This information presents the facilities provided by the University to enhance the student' teaching and learning experiences. This may include simulation tools, software for analytics, Library and information technology, including access t0 Internet.
8	Faculty on the course	FA	Providing the Staff Profile on the course. This is to reassure the students of the knowledge and expertise of those to teach them on that model. The Head of Department 's picture could be provided to welcome prospective students.
9	Accreditation	AC	These are external validation of the courses, often to reassure the students. This could be from the regulatory body for Universities or professional bodies 9which gives students some exemptions when they want to take their professional exams.)
10	Ranking	RA	Universities are showcasing their rankings on the league table. This could be for the University (Top 10 University in the Country), the student experience (No 1 University for Student Experience) or ranking of the program (No 1 for Marketing in the country)
11	Employability and job prospects	EM	Highlight plans put in place to enhance the employability of the students. This may include internship opportunities, connections with the industry, or helping students with their CV.

| 12 | Successful Alumni | AS | Showcasing an alumnus, this could be a picture and a quote or an interview where the alumni share experience and acknowledge the contribution of the program to their career progression. |

Stage 3: The Website.

The study is carried out to understand the quality and quantity of information about undergraduate programs available in African Universities. As it may be difficult and time-consuming to collect data from all the Universities in Africa, the study focused on the best Universities in the continent using the approach that was adopted by Vasudeva & Mogaji (2019). The sampled Universities were the top 30 ranked African Universities in the 2019 Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE, 2018). These rankings are widely known and generally accepted as the benchmarks for numerous comparisons of schools and universities (Kiraka, et al., 2019). According to the ranking, 47 Universities were ranked in the top 30. Some Universities shared the ranking number, for 11 Universities shared example number 6. These Universities were located in 9 different countries. Egypt has the highest number with 19 Universities while Ghana, Kenya and Uganda have one each. Table 2 presents the list of Universities and sample for the study

Table 2: List of Universities and sample for the study

S/N	Africa Rank 2019	University	Country
1	1	University of Cape Town	South Africa
2	2	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
3	3	Stellenbosch University	South Africa
4	4	University of KwaZulu-Natal	South Africa
5	5	Makerere University	Uganda
6	=6	American University in Cairo	Egypt
7	=6	Benha University	Egypt
8	=6	Beni-Suef University	Egypt
9	=6	Covenant University	Nigeria
10	=6	University of Ibadan	Nigeria
11	=6	University of Johannesburg	South Africa
12	=6	Kafrelsheikh University	Egypt

13	=6	Mansoura University	Egypt
14	=6	University of Pretoria	South Africa
15	=6	Suez Canal University	Egypt
16	=6	University of the Western Cape	South Africa
17	=17	Alexandria University	Egypt
18	=17	University of Béjaïa	Algeria
19	=17	Cairo University	Egypt
20	=17	Fayoum University	Egypt
21	=17	Ferhat Abbas Sétif University 1	Algeria
22	=17	University of Ghana	Ghana
23	=17	University of Marrakech Cadi Ayyad	Morocco
24	=17	Mohammed V University of Rabat	Morocco
25	=17	University of Sfax	Tunisia
26	=17	Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University	Morocco
27	=17	Sohag University	Egypt
28	=17	Tanta University	Egypt
29	=17	Tshwane University of Technology	South Africa
30	=30	Ain Shams University	Egypt
31	=30	Al-Azhar University	Egypt
32	=30	Assiut University	Egypt
33	=30	Badji Mokhtar University – Annaba	Algeria
34	=30	University of Constantine 1	Algeria
35	=30	Helwan University	Egypt
36	=30	Menoufia University	Egypt
37	=30	Minia University	Egypt

38	=30	University of Monastir	Tunisia
39	=30	University of Nairobi	Kenya
40	=30	University of Nigeria Nsukka	Nigeria
41	=30	University of Sciences and Technology Houari Boumediene	Algeria
42	=30	University of South Africa	South Africa
43	=30	South Valley University	Egypt
44	=30	University of Tlemcen	Algeria
45	=30	University of Tunis El Manar	Tunisia
46	=30	Université Hassan II de Casablanca	Morocco
47	=30	Zagazig University	Egypt

Stage 4: The Search.

This stage involves visiting the websites to extract the information. The 47 University websites were visited in July 2019 from Google Chrome, a web browser developed by Google in South West England. This allowed some of the website to be translated into the English Language. The websites were searched to identify the twelve essential information highlighted in Step 2.

Stage 5: The Location.

The location of the essential information on the websites was noted in a Notepad by the Researcher. Importantly, if the information was not available, the location becomes irrelevant. The location in this context recognises the location of the buttons leading to the program information. The stage involves identifying if the button was located on the top button, as header images or the footers. The drop-down and subpages were also identified. The location gives an indication of hierarchy and how important the University has deemed the. Information. This stage recognises how embedded the information can be, and it is, therefore, essential to make considerable effort to search around the website even though there could be an initial indication that the information is not available.

Apart from the buttons, the location of the information was also noted. While the University may have different pages for their staff and faculty, the analysis was looking for Faculty that are teaching on the Program. Likewise, as Universities may have information on fees and entry requirement on a specific page for all prospective students, this location search looked for information that is specific for the programme. The quality and quality of the information were also observed and recorded as part of extraction in Stage 6. The Action on those pages was also recorded. This includes actionable links for the prospective students such as link to other relevant information from the University, contact details of the Program Leaser, Opportunity for web chat or link to download other useful information about the program.

Stage 6: The Extraction

On visiting the website, both quantitative and qualitative information is collected during the location stage. The quantitative information requires the use of a coding sheet that codes the websites and the amount of information available. While there is the opportunity for using a paper coding sheet, a Google form was used for the data collection. The form asks for the University, Country and if any of the 12 information is available on the website. In addition to the form, a Visit Note (VN) is also prepared on each visit to the websites. These VNs are a qualitative insight into the information search process. The Researcher can either write out these observations or type it out as word documents. The VNs for this study were typed out. The VNs includes description of buttons, the quantity and quality of information, accessibility issues and challenges with the website and other information that was not covered by the coding sheet (such as some Universities providing closing date for their applications and the duration of the courses). The VNs also contained screenshots from the website, which visually illustrates the observed points such as empty pages and irrelevant content. There were individual VNs prepared for each website.

At the end of the extraction, the Google Form data was extracted into Microsoft Excel and then into SPSS for descriptive analysis of how the information is presented on the website. Likewise, the 47 VNs, with an average of 378 words and three screenshots were saved as PDF and exported into NVivo for thematic analysis using the ALARA Model. Stage 7 is the reporting stage which is presented in the subsequent section. A Summary of Methodology is presented in Figure 3.

1	Role	The researcher takes up the role of the searcher who is willing to search for information on the website. This role influences the type of information that will be explored.
2	Information	Prepare a list of crucial information that will be searched. This information is compiled from the literature review, interview with real people seeking the information or preliminary visit to the sites.
3	Website	A list of sites to be searched, this list is often a limited and defined sample. This list will be used for the analysis. This list should be well defined to offer a holistic overview of the available information.
4	Search	Searching the information collected in Stage 2. Researcher to take note of the time the websites were visited, web browser used, the geographical location and the device used for the search.
5	Location	Navigating the website, looking for the information (Stage 2) on the site (Stage 3) and taking notes of ALARA. The location gives an indication of hierarchy and how important the Information custodian has deemed it.
6	Extraction	Coding sheet for collecting quantitative information, exported into SPSS for analysis. A Visit Note (VN) prepared for each website. VNs are qualitative insights into the information search process. The VNs can be exported to NVIVO for thematic analysis.
7	Reporting	Reporting the result of the analysis. This stage presents the quantity (if the information is available) and quality (if the information is actionable) of the information using the ALARA model.

Figure 3: A Summary of Methodology Approach for The ALARA Model of Information Search.

Results

Websites of the best Universities in Africa was viewed to understand the amount of information provided for prospective students about the programs they intend to study. To achieve this, the chapter adopts the ALARA Model of Information Search on Website, and the result of the findings are presented in subsequent sections.

Availability

Twelve 'information descriptors' (Table 1) were identified and sought out for on the website to understand the frequency at which this information was being provided. Overall only 12 Universities out of 47 provided one or more 'information descriptors' about their programs on their website. This shows that 74,46% (n = 35) of the best Universities in Africa do not provide any information about their program. There was no information about the program, the course under the program, the assessment or career opportunities. None of the Universities in Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Tunisia and Uganda provided information about the program. Prospective students considering these Universities have no insight into the program they will be studying as there is no information on the Universities websites.

Universities in South Africa, specifically Stellenbosch University, University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of Pretoria provided the highest number of information for prospective students. Their program webpage had five out of the expected 12 essential information. They provided information about the program, courses that students will be taking under the program, how the programs are being taught, faculties on the program and career options. The University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa also provides 4 of 12 information while University of Cape Town and University of Johannesburg offered 3 of 12 information. It is also acknowledged, and as included in the VNs, these South African Universities also presented some relevant information that was not included in the 12 prepared lists of information such as Application process specific to the program, closing dates of Application, Mode of study and duration. Four other Universities from Egypt - American University in Cairo, Assiut University, Suez Canal University, Tanta University, One University from Nigeria - Covenant University and another from Algeria - Ferhat Abbas Sétif University 1, provided one or more information about their program, often this is an overview of the program.

Location

For Universities that made this information available, the first touchpoint on the website is the header button, often the third or fourth button after the Home, About the University and Academic Button. This information is often located under the Faculty Button which then has a drop-down menu to either all the faculties in the University or further split it into Undergraduate or Post Graduate studies and then students can click to have a list of the programs. Some Universities do not have the drop-down menu but lead to another page which contains all the Faculties.

In entering the Faculty page, there is often a link for the departments within the faculty where the student can then select which program they want to study as seen with the Stellenbosch University which offered an easy flow in the information search for a prospective student looking to study marketing. University Home Page (Stellenbosch University) > Faculty Page (Economic and Management Science) > Department Page (Business Management) > Program Page (Marketing Management). Each page maintained the same look and feel but often differentiated with the name of faculty, College or department on the header. While it could be

seen that not all the information about the program are there on that single page, at least some key information like an overview of the program, career possibilities in the field of marketing and Undergraduate courses offered in Marketing Management are at the student's disposal after clicking just four links.

The location of the links is considered necessary in the information search process. As with the University of Marrakech Cadi Ayyad, most of the buttons on the home page did not indicate what program the University is offering. There are buttons like Research and Cooperation, Company Relations, Training, Training Continues and Campus life on the main page of the University. There is nothing like the commonly used terms like Admission, Faculties or Study here which may be of more interest to prospective students. Instead, the University has information about its program almost at the bottom of their home page. Instead of using standard terms like Faculties, School or Division, they called it Establishment, which again may not be what students are used to, especially International students.

Clicking on the National School of Commerce and Management (ENCG) Establishment to have an insight into the Marketing course offered by the University, the same issue with the location of the information was observed. On the ENCG webpage, there was no information about the programs offered. Some of the buttons were *Discover the ENCG, Study at the ENCG, Research and Cooperation*. On clicking the *Study at the ENCG,* which offers the closest ideas to what to study, the information was again irrelevant. There is no clear path to understanding the programs offered by this University.

This inappropriate location of the navigation menu on Homepage was also seen with Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University Morocco which had seven navigation menus on the home page which includes *The University, Governance, Culture and Press*, with no indication about the programs they are offering. In terms of hierarchy and user experience design, it appears student recruitment and program information are not given priorities. Formation menu (drop-down menu) which offers closest idea does not highlight these programs for prospective students to consider.

In addition to the top banner buttons for easy navigation around the websites, some Universities has made an effort to present information to prospective students on the sidebars of their website, and an example is Covenant University

Accessibility

The inappropriate location of these navigation menus has an impact on how accessible this information is. Especially for prospective students who have to search through different University websites to make an informed decision. In addition to this, other key issues are affecting the accessibility of the information.

Language

Taking into consideration that there are many languages spoken and used as a means of teaching in different countries in Africa, the language on the website poses an issue for students who may not be familiar with French or Arabic. Even though Google Translate was able to translate some of the pages and some websites also have inbuilt translators, the language offers a barrier in fully accessing the information, primarily when the University websites direct students to download course information as a Portable Document Format (PDF) which has not been translated into English.

Empty Webpages

Most of the websites do not contain any information. Even though they have a navigation button that leads to the page (passing the Stage Two of location), the pages are empty and

contain no information. As seen with Makerere University Business School and the University of Nigeria, the pages and the menu buttons have been created, but they have not been populated with relevant information. Any prospective student following the navigation button will only discover that there is no information for them.

Pages under Construction

While some pages are left empty, there are some which are populated with their webpages with irrelevant information because the web pages are still under construction. As example is the University of Ibadan where the Faculty news is not a real word but a replacement/placeholder text - *Sodales neque vitae justo sollicitudin aliquet sit amet diam curabitur sed fermentum* and so also was their address - *Sailor company Inc, Sailor suite room. Someplace 71745.* Besides, there was a silhouette image for the head of the department.

Broken Links

Likewise, sometimes when the link is available to either access more information about the program or download the course information, there is a broken link as the document on websites cannot be accessed. So, the fact that there is a button does not resolve the issue of missing information. For example, to see what is being offered under BSc marketing at Covenant University, the student has to click a link for more details, the website link is http://bus.covenantuniversity.edu.ng/marketing/, but the page cannot be found. This page was accessed on June 2019, accessed again in July 2019 and as at 09:23 hrs GMT on 13th August 2019, the page still cannot be found. That suggests that prospective students who want to study marketing at the university will not have enough information about the program from the University's website.

Loop Links

While some universities may not want to have an empty page or a page under construction, the link to their information ends up in a loop where nothing happens. An example was found with the University of Ghana, where they had a link to the marketing degree - https://www.ug.edu.gh/departments/m# but upon clicking, it takes the visitor back to the page that was initially clicked (accessed on 13th August 2019). So instead of providing a dead link or an empty page, they had to loop the link. On observation, the Marine and Fisheries Sciences worked as it led to the departmental page. The page for the marketing department has not been hyperlinked, or it was intentional to leave it in a loop, albeit the fact remains that prospective students are not getting the information they need to make an informed choice.

Relatability

This section of the ALRA model explores how useful, and relevant this information can be. While Universities may think they are offering information, the presentation may be confusing to prospective students.

The Program Faculties

Where programmes are located within the institution's academic structure differs across the continent. Usually, the program (BSc Marketing) is run within a department (Department of Business Administration) which is under a Faculty (Faculty of Commerce). This is the three form of hierarchy often adopted, but sometimes the term and hierarchy are different. While some Universities uses Faculty, some use colleges or Schools.

Sohag University Egypt and University of the Witwatersrand South Africa, for example, uses the 3-step hierarchy – Program > Department > Faculty while University of Ghana, Covenant University and Makerere University had a 4-step hierarchy- Program > Department > School

> College while Stellenbosch University has Program > Department > Division > Faculty. Students searching for information about their degree might find it difficult to relate with these different terms and hierarchy as they come across different terms on different Universities across the continent.

Apparently, to address this inherent confusion, University of Cape Western added a link on their Faculty drop-down menu to allow prospective students explore 'All areas of Study', perhaps if the student is not sure of where marketing fits in in the different faculties of the University, the student can explore all areas. Likewise, the University of Pretoria had a link for 'What to Study' which allows the student to explore various programmes through a search function. While Tshwane University of Technology South Africa has the 'I want to study' link. Student can search for their degree, and it brings relevant programs, and student can filter according to degree or faculty.

The number of faculties can also be confusing for the prospective student. While the University of the Witwatersrand South Africa has five faculties, Stellenbosch University, South Africa has ten faculties, University of Nigeria, Nigeria has 17 faculties and South Valley University Egypt has 24 faculties. These faculties also have many other departments and programs which can make the decision process more confusing for prospective student.

The amount of Information

Prospective student wants to enhance their career prospects, and they have decided to get a degree with requires studying and passing some course. Likewise, the entry requirement for the course and the application fees is essential. Though Universities are making an effort to provide this information, they are not enough to justifiably decide. As earlier stated, 74,46% (n=35) of the best Universities in Africa do not provide any information about their program, and for those who provide it is not enough.

To make an informed choice, students' needs to have an overview of the program, how each University is approaching it and students can consider how this fit into his/her learning style.

The University of Pretoria described their BCom (Marketing Management) as;

> *'A three-year full-time programme. Customers constantly pressurise organisations to act responsibly to provide quality products and services and to offer exceptional customer service. BCom (Marketing Management) equips students with the knowledge and skills to address decisions regarding product price, distribution and promotion. Students are also exposed to the principles of services marketing. Attention is given to consumer behaviour, marketing research, personal selling, brand management marketing issues and strategic marketing.'*

While the University of the Witwatersrand makes a personal appeal to their prospective student, asking them about their interest and perhaps to make sure marketing interests them.

> *'Are you fascinated by trends and fashions, and why certain brands are so much more successful than others? Do you ever wonder what makes last season's cool "must-haves" suddenly "so last year"? Would you love to shape the world's desires? Then Marketing could be your dream career.* https://www.wits.ac.za/bcom/marketing/

Also, to this overview, courses to be studied as part of their program is essential for the students. While some Universities did not provide any information, University of the Witwatersrand made an attempt in providing the various courses as part of the Program, University of KwaZulu-Natal provided the specific course and title, American University in Cairo and

Stellenbosch University provided an additional insight into the course offered, not just the title and code but describing what the course entails. Here is a description of a course on Stellenbosch University Marketing Management programme.

> *Advertising and Sales Promotion 244*
> *Advertising and the marketing process; the consumer audience; portfolio planning and research; functioning of advertising; advertising planning and strategy; advertising media; media planning and buying; printed media; creative advertising; integration of the elements of marketing communication.*

The form of assessment for these programmes was, however, not presented on the website. Students are not aware of how they will be accessed on what they have studied to get the grades. Likewise, the teaching and learning facilities to enhance learning on the programme were not presented. Accreditation and partnership with professional bodies were rarely presented on these web pages. Likewise, fees that are specific for the course, ranking for the course as a sense of external recognition were not mentioned as well. Testimonies and comment of alumni, to serve as a motivation for student and word of mouth to market the courses are absent. Students will be interested in knowing what their predecessors have gone on to achieve, their challenges and perhaps what to expect when they start the course. The career options and possibilities in the field of marketing were, however, present on some of the Universities.

Outdated Information

There were incidences of outdated information on the Universities' websites. This information becomes irrelevant and of no use to the prospective student. Some of the websites have not been updated in years and still contains information about previous years which may be misleading and irrelevant in the academic years in which the student hopes to study. This also aligns with some evidence of irrelevant information as one of the Universities included names of former heads of department on the welcome page of the program; these former head of departments are of no use to a prospective student looking for information about what to study.

Actionable

Upon visiting the program webpage and reading the information, Students are expected to take actions after seeing a prominent call-to-action (CTA). However, this is not always the case. Taking into consideration that there are unresponsive pages, broken links, incomplete pages and pages with few information, there are limited actionable links on the website. Notwithstanding, some do stand out which are worth mentioning.

Stellenbosch University invited students to find out more about other courses within the faculty. The University of Pretoria has many calls to actions on the right side of the program web page. The department invites students to click on the application icon which leads to online applications portal, invited them to come and take a look around the campus, to get in touch by email to ask a question or give us general feedback. They also included the link to the faculty brochures, inviting the students to read more about the faculties and programmes they offer. Likewise, University of the Witwatersrand provided a link for those who want to read more. Perhaps those who feel few words of overview was not enough. Also, the University had the 'Apply Now' button in different colour on the right side of the programme page, contrasting the design of the page as they invite students to apply for a place.

12 Universities provided information, and only four provided actionable points. While some thought they did (providing additional information and course content), they were broken links and empty pages.

Discussion

Previous studies have confirmed that the program offered by universities influences student choices (Briggs, 2006; Maringe, 2006). Providing information about course choice is critical in making decisions about what to study and where to study.

Our work suggests an alternative approach, putting the responsibility on the Universities to provide information. With that premise, this study sought to explore how African Universities are presenting information about their programs for prospective students. In addition to its theoretical contribution to marketing higher education, this study offers implication for Academic staff responsible for programme development, Universities' Marketing Communication Team responsible for communicating with prospective students and the Information and Communications Team responsible for developing and updating the Universities' website with current and relevant information.

The study adopted a novel theoretical underpinning methodological approach to understanding the availability of relevant information on African Universities' website. The availability, location of the information and how relevant the information is for the students were explored. The study found that prospective students are short-changed as the Universities are not providing enough information for them to decide.

More than 70 per cent of the best Universities in Africa did not provide any information for their prospective students about the programs they intend to study. None of the Universities in Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Tunisia and Uganda provided information about the program. South African Universities were the most proactive in term of information being provided, albeit not enough as there can still do more. The universities that provided information gave the student insight into the programme, course to be taken on the programme and career opportunities. However, information around fees specific to the program, the form of assessment, tutors on the programme and testimonies from prosperous alumni of the program were not presented.

The layout and design of the Universities were also concerning, especially Universities form the north of Africa with few exemptions like the American University in Cairo, Egypt. Makerere University, Uganda had a good design as well, and most of the Universities in South Africa were well designed with the user in mind, they were engaging and easy to navigate. The design of Stellenbosch University, South Africa, is worthy of mention; it was easier for a prospective student to select the program they want in just four clicks. The pages had the same look and were easy to navigate. For some other Universities, they had incomplete web pages, with broken links and irrelevant text. If this is happening on websites of some of the best Universities in Africa, it indicates what to expect in other Universities on the continent.

This study further questions previous findings which suggest that students are interested in the program and will make a conscious effort to search. How much interest do they have in the courses? How much effort are they making in searching for information and perhaps if the Universities are the ones not making the information readily available? This study also questions if the Universities are aware of the need to provide information about their programs? Importantly if Universities cannot declare what they are offering the students in terms of course content, it raises a concern about the quality of information the students are receiving and likewise how employable the students become.

The pedagogic approach of the Universities also become concerning the analysis of these websites. Taking into consideration the lack of information about teaching and learning, facilities and assessment, it suggests that if students were to rely solely on the University website as a source of information about the programme, they are perhaps making an

uninformed decision. They are not aware of how they will be taught, who will be teaching them and way they will be assessed. It is essential for students to know this and check that it aligns with their style of learning, perhaps an International student who has always been taught in French language and those with learning difficulties may be better prepared and seek assistance before starting the program.

Websites play a prominent role in recruiting students in the global North (Mogaji, 2016b; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014; Ortagus & Tanner, 2019), this study provides that this may not be the case in Africa as the information provided is not sufficient enough to make an informed decision for the prospective student. There were evidence of broken links, empty pages, pages with text placeholder, and separate pages opening in another window with a different layout and design. This shows that these University have not been checking and auditing their website. Those responsible for the website needs to keep it refreshed and updated.

While the argument that the demand for higher education is greater than the supply seems correct in the African context (Olaleye, et al., 2019), as there are many more people willing to study than the available university space and therefore if Universities do not market themselves, they will still have students, this does not, however, remove the responsibility of Universities to teach, impact knowledge prepares the students for their career through quality education. Reclining on this responsibility influences the employability of the students and the impact they will be making in the community.

The study offers both theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, it contributes to the study on factors influencing the choice. Recognising that while students are expected to search for information, universities are expected to provide the information to enhance the choice-making process. If university programs are essentials, then the university needs to provide the information. Secondly, it added to the study of marketing higher education in Africa, notably as the study identified the poor user interface design of University websites, the lack of information and its impact on marketing. Universities need their website to market their programs, so it should be well presented. Thirdly, it contributed towards the deployment of the ALARA Model and the novel methodology.

There are managerial implications from this study which will be relevant for University Managers, Academic and Non-academic/professional services staff and even regulatory bodies. Universities Managers must take responsibility for the content of their website. The Top Management Team, Marketing communications, ICT and the Quality Assurance team must also take responsibility for the quality of the information being offered to prospective students. The information should be relevant and up to date, presented engagingly.

All the programs at the University should have a page containing specific information about the program. This page should contain information about the program structure and all the courses to be taken under the program, entry requirements, fees and financial support, how students will be assessed, teaching and learning, including facilities like laboratory or studios; lectures teaching on the program, accreditation which can give an exemption for professional exams, ranking, specific to the course; career options and testimonials of successful alumni. As much as possible, this information should be provided on a page to allow the student to have full information on one page. This can be presented in tabs or accordion. Tabs are horizontally aligned while accordions are vertically stacked (Bassi, 2019). Access to this page should also be easy to navigate, perhaps - Home > Faculty > Department > Program. Search bottom for programs are also recommended.

The Academic staff must also take responsibility for providing information about their program. The ICT team may have created the pages; it should, therefore, be populated and not left empty. There are many best practices to adopt in Africa (especially South African Universities), Europe and North America. Some students will need this information to make an informed choice, Course and Program leaders should push for this information to be made available on their program pages.

The ICT team needs to make sure that all broken links are fixed, the empty pages should be populated with text; pages with text holders should be removed and replaced with the relevant information. This sort of inconsistencies does not say well of the University. University should look into redeveloping their website to be more responsive and user-friendly, ensuring that that prominent information is available on the home page. This also builds on the marketing communications stakeholders in higher education; prospective students need to know the information that is directed towards them and should be able to access it easily. There are websites with information about the tender process on the home page banner buttons, and this is not important enough to justify a place on the home banner. Universities need to recognise their stakeholders and be able to develop website contents to meet their needs (Farinloye, et al., 2019).

Some factors are thought to be responsible for the gaps in the provision/quality of information available on websites — first, the lack of awareness of the importance of such information to students' decision-making process. Second, the lack of technical know-how or infrastructure (Human/ technical resources) to deal with traffic/requests demanded and lastly, the lack of understanding of pedagogical underpinning for teaching and learning. These factors highlight training needs for University administrators and academic staff to understand the need of program information and the ability to design courses that are relevant to current needs and learning style of the student and the economy.

Policymakers also need to be mindful about the quality of information offered by Universities. It is not just about approving new universities or validating course but to ensure that the courses are pedagogically rich, program information for prospective students are available as many efforts should be made at standardising it across the countries. Universities should be encouraged from a quality point of view to have this information on their website. Importantly there could be moved towards a unified term, especially with regards to the use of faculty, colleges, schools and division.

Getting this right has enormous potentials for the University and the quality of students they are likely to attract. There is the potential for developing an institutional brand and gaining international recognition. Potential for profit-making and improving quality standards. In developed countries, higher education is an export making a significant contribution to GDP, this drives investment, suggesting the needs for African Universities, especially the Private Universities to ensure that website is up to date as it is often the first point of contact for international students (Ndofirepi, et al., 2019). Some of the Universities in this study are privately owned and if they want to increase their source of revenue, must make significant investment in information provision online.

Also, the growing population is becoming more tech-savvy; they are searching for information to make an informed decision. Universities are therefore expected to invest in their IT infrastructure, in other to be globally competitive. Universities in the developed countries are providing information about their programs, and it will be a loss to African universities if they do not improve on the quality and information they provide – engaging with prospective students who want information and profile their staff to position them for international partnership and collaboration.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the University short-changes prospective students in Africa. This study is considered the first attempt to investigates the provision of course information on University websites in Africa. The study analysed content of the best Universities in Africa finding reveals that the universities are not given the students enough information to make their choice. The students are not adequately prepared as they go in for their study. It appeared they are walking into their programs with their eyes closed. Perhaps the students are not even aware that they are not receiving enough information from the Universities. The Universities, therefore, needs to take responsibility for providing relevant information for students.

Ideally, the program information should be easily accessible to prospective students. There should be no more than four clicks before accessing the information.

Home Page: As illustrated in Figure 4a, the University home page should contain a navigation button for Faculties/Department or Programme, preferably a drop-down menu which allows students see all the faculties at a time.
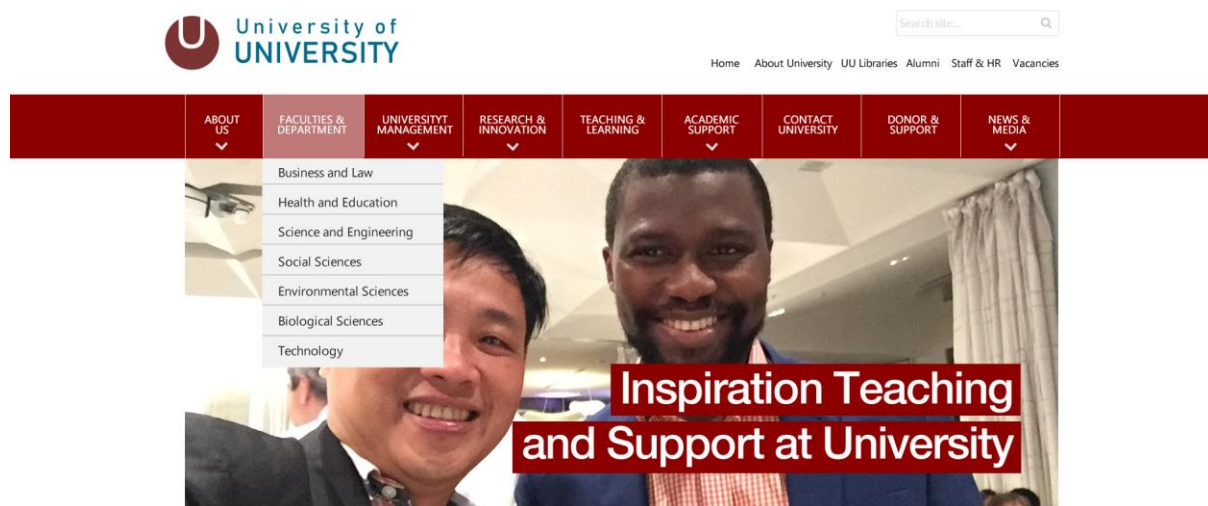

Figure 4a – Landing page of the University

Faculty Page: Figure 4b shows a sampled faculty page that provides information about the courses and various department. The page may also contain a link to all the undergraduate course and importantly as search bar to allow student search for courses based on subject, course title or keywords. This search feature allows students to fast track their information search process.

Figure 4b: A sampled faculty page

Search Result Page: Figure 4c illustrates a sampled search result page. The page provides different courses based on the keyword search. This allows the prospective students to see the course that interests them and possibly other options that they may not have even considered.
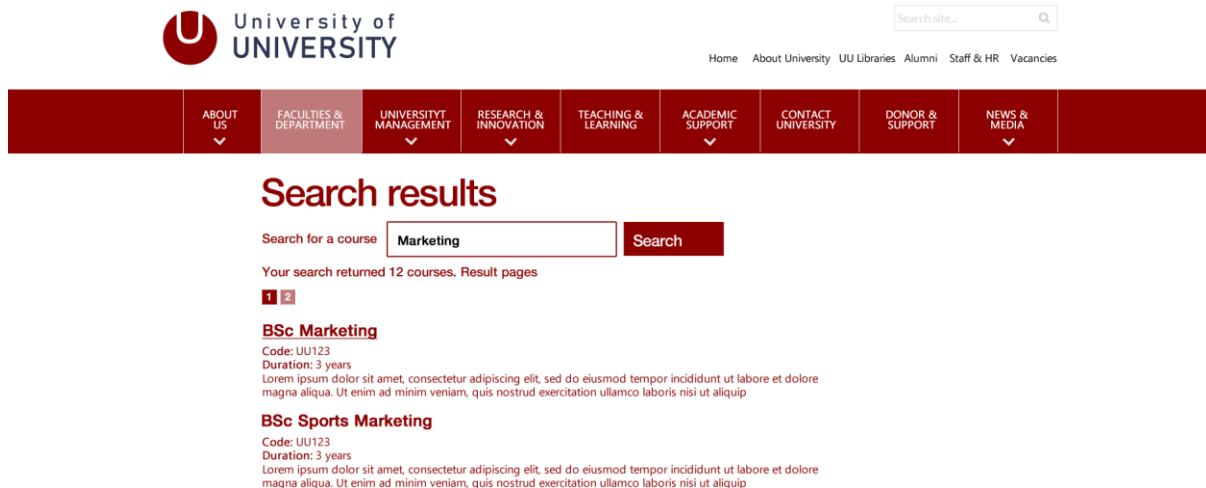

Figure 4c: A sampled search result page

The Programme Page: This should be the destination in search of information for a program. Figure 4d provides a sampled program page which contains an overview of the programme, the structure of the program and the entry requirements. These are information that is specific for the program. The assessment for the program, teaching and learning and accreditation for the program are essential. Besides, faculty on the course and testimonies from alumni should also be provided.
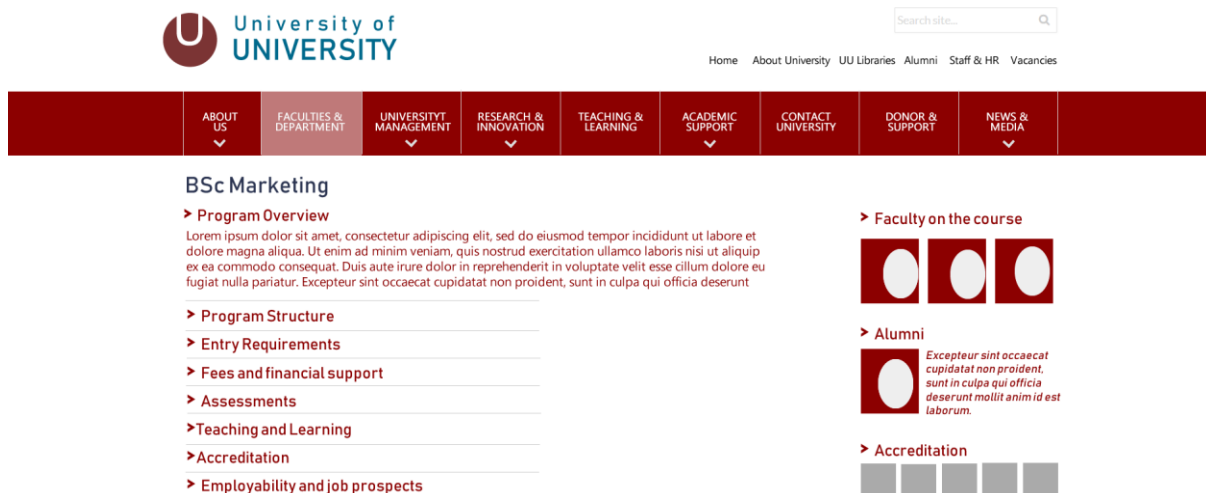

Figure 4d: Sampled Program Page

The links, navigation and pages are not that important compared to the information on those pages. As seen with some Universities, they have the pages but not the information. University should, therefore, ensure that the information is available in order to support the students make an informed choice. University lectures responsible for the programme development should provide the information, marketing and IT team should make sure it is uploaded and updated

on the website. Quality Assurance team to ensure that it remains relevant to prospective students.

The study offers both theoretical and managerial implication. It extends knowledge about marketing higher education, understanding student information search and the user interfaces design of African university websites. In like manners, the study further develops the ALARA Model of information search on Website. The study also implication for University Managers, Academic staff, Marketing Communication Team, Information and Communications Team and other teams responsible for developing and updating the Universities' website with current and relevant information about the programs offered by the University.

Although the study was carefully designed and conducted, providing valuable information and insight, this study has limitations which warrant attention and future research. These limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the result.

First, the results may not be widely generalizable because the study only used a single undergraduate programme. Future research may want to consider if Universities provide more information for postgraduate studies and or another program.

Secondly, the study focused only on 47 Universities out of hundreds of Universities on the African continent. These 47 universities however are the best Universities which are expected to be a leading example. So, if the best Universities in Africa are not getting it right with their information, future studies might want to examine how other Universities in individuals' countries are providing information for prospective students.

Thirdly, the study adopts a novel methodology which is still evolving in its development, though it offers an insight into the level of information provided by the University. Further studies can endeavour to test the model using quantitative scales and considering other sectors for information search such as hotels or banks. The involvement of the researcher, taking up the role of a prospective student in the search process should also be noted. Besides, future studies might explore the possibilities of developing an ALARA Scale to quantitatively identify the way Universities are offering information for prospective students. As indicated that some Universities (especially those from South Africa) are providing more information, there is a possibility for ALARA score, to rank universities and establishing if there is a correlation between ALARA score and league table ranking.

Lastly, websites were accessed at a particular time in July 2019, and changes could have been made to these websites before the publication of this paper, notwithstanding, an insight into the reduced level of information provided by African universities has been unveiled.

While acknowledging that one of the main benefits of attending University is to acquire quality education to enhance career prospects, it is therefore imperative on the part of the Universities to provide information about the program as this allows students make an informed decision about where and what to study. Getting information about the programs on offer by the University is therefore essential.

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