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## **A Preliminary Report on First Year University Students' Knowledge of Basic Grammar: The Case of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana**

William Kodom Gyasi, Theophilus A. Nartey and Wincharles Coker

Department of Communication Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

**Abstract:** Although current research in English for Specific Purposes places premium on sharpening learners' skills in order to enable them to maximally function in the academic world and beyond, it is still felt that students are bereft of basic language concepts. This paper, therefore, reports a preliminary investigation of first year Communicative Skills students' knowledge of parts of speech at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana in November, 2010. Three hundred and fifty (350) students were selected based on a multi-staged sampling method and were asked to respond to a two-pronged instrument. Using an action-driven research design, we examined whether students' gender and programmes of study have an influence on their performance in parts of speech. Key results showed that students who offer Communicative Skills have an abysmal knowledge of parts of speech, and that there was no significant difference among students' programmes of study and their performance in identifying parts of speech. We also found that there was no statistically significant difference between students' gender and their performance on the test. Given these findings, we recommend that a second look be given to the Communicative Skills curriculum of the University of Cape Coast, while encouraging similar studies in other universities.

**Key words:** Action research, communicative skills, parts of speech, performance, students

### **INTRODUCTION**

Motivation for learning a foreign language, including learners' attitude towards the foreign language, plays an important role in female and male students' learning in L<sub>2</sub> classrooms. Attitudes include those towards the language, the language teacher, the language learning materials, and the language learning activities (Litosseliti, 2006).

Language learning in a second language context is no doubt a daunting task. Learners grapple with manifold problems ranging from the sentence to the discourse level (Stern, 1983; Adika, 2003). Even more challenging it is for those who desire to have university as they are required to function effectively in various disciplinary domains. The reason is that high school students entering university education "are seen to have a culture, practices, and values different from those of universities or tertiary institutions" (Alfers and Dison, 2000; cited in Afful, 2007). This is why the Communicative or Communication Skills programme (CS), as taught in many Ghanaian universities and tertiary institutions, is therefore desirable. A number of reductionist studies have shown that university students have difficulties with, for example,

spelling, tense and concord (Yankson, 1994; Dako and Forson, 1997; Edu-Buandoh, 1997). In addition, their writing at the discourse level is typified by lack of cohesion, weak thematic progression leading to flat paragraphs and undeveloped rhemes (Dako and Forson, 1997; Appiah, 2002; Adika, 2003).

Since its inception in 1985, the Communicative Skills programme of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) has aimed "to stem the downward trend in the quality of writing of students in various discipline-specific contexts" (Afful, 2007). Down the years, the programme has, however, come under serious scrutiny. One of such criticisms is that CS is overtly monolithic, unvariant and acontextual (Dzameshie, 1997; Afful, 2005). According to Dzameshie (1997), CS as a current ESL pedagogy in Ghana is deficient because it does not adopt a communicative, skill-oriented approach whose ultimate goal and mission should be not merely to equip the learners with grammatical competence. The proposed emphasis on communicative competence, Dzameshie argues, will enable ESL learners to communicate in socioculturally appropriate ways in English in both native and non-native environments. The author, therefore, opines that teachers of Communicative Skills adopt a multi-faceted approach to the teaching of the programme. Exactly a decade later, Afful (2007) reechoes these

concerns more vociferously. He decries the idea that “the underlying premise of CS as foundation course is that language skills can be decontextualised from the content and that academic language is unvarying across disciplines”. Afful calls for a change in the curriculum of CS from a deeply rooted remediation tradition to one that addresses issues of general and discipline specific writing. This move, he believes, is commonplace in many advanced countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States where CS is known as English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and Freshman Composition or lately Writing in the Disciplines respectively. His initial stance would have been “an outright rejection of the remedial aspect of CS, while declaring an unquestioned preference of (*sic*) the foundational dimension” (Afful, 2007). The proposed change, Afful (2007) intimates, should reflect the current notion of academic writing as a social practice.

However, while the views of Dzameshie (1997), Adika (2003) and Afful (2007) among others are commendable, it is astonishingly worrying that university students are still bereft of the basic knowledge of grammar to say the least. This development, according to Dako and Forson (1997), is the outcome of turning away from prescriptivism to structuralist, transformational generative grammars and other modern linguistic developments. Using a three-section questionnaire, the authors focused on students of the departments of English of the University of Ghana and the then University College of Education, Winneba. Their results showed that students lack adequate knowledge of grammatical and idiomatic correctness. The authors also identified poor structure, spelling and punctuation errors as examples of grammatical infelicities among students. Edu-Buandoh (1997) opines that students’ abysmal performance in the English language may be caused by such factors as inadequate time allotted to grammar, lack of proper attitude of teachers in handling grammar, lack of reading among students and the very nature of the language curriculum.

Given this background, we examined CS students’ knowledge of one of the fundamental concepts of grammar: parts of speech. This motivation stems from our informal interviews with undergraduate students at the University of Cape Coast which yielded the following responses:

- Parts of speech are direct and indirect speech
- Parts of speech are dangling modifiers and ambiguity
- Parts of speech are subject-verb agreement

**Purpose of the study:** The present study sought to ascertain the level of students’ knowledge of parts of speech through the following specific objectives:

- To investigate whether students’ programmes of study have an influence on their performance of parts of speech
- To find out whether the gender of students influences their performance of parts of speech

## METHODOLOGY

**Research design:** The present study is an action research. Action research is a context-specific intervention programme geared towards identifying solutions to problems with the view to improve practice (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). The design was suitable for this study because it is a form of practitioner research intended to help practitioners to improve upon professional practices in their work places. We therefore, employed this design to enable us to diagnose problems faced by CS students in order to inform teaching practices. Action research, thus, thrives on the assumption that problems of participants can be solved only when the problems are systematically and rigorously identified.

**Research setting:** The study was conducted at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in November, 2010, a public university in Ghana established in 1962. This research site was selected for two main reasons. In the first place, UCC was chosen mainly because of its ethnic heterogeneity. The research setting reflects a microcosm of the larger Ghanaian society as it captures students from nearly all cultural, social and ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The study was carried out at UCC because we aimed at identifying difficulties CS students in this university encounter, and how best they could be surmounted.

**Population, sampling method and sample size:** The total population of first (including second) year students admitted into the 2010/2011 academic year stood at 4,500 (UCC Student Record Management and Information Services). A three-staged sampling method was employed to determine the sample size. First, we relied on the simple random sampling method since it guarantees fairness of representativeness (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000; Cresswell, 2003). Drawing on Cohen *et al.*’s (2000) chart for determining sample sizes, we obtained an accessible population of 354 from the target population of 4,500. However, for the sake of convenience and given that the study is intended to be preliminary, 350 participants constituted the sample size of the present study.

The participants were then selected, using the quota sampling method. They were sampled based on the five groupings provided by the Department of Communication Studies of UCC (Table 2). Seventy (70) students were sampled from each of the groupings. The selection was proportional, comprising 35 males and 35 females.

Lastly, respondents were selected through the convenience sampling technique. Given that CS is taught among forty five classes, it was prudent that we focused on our own classes. Besides, we teach students from all the five major groupings.

**Data collection procedure and instrumentation:** Data were collected by administering a questionnaire to participants (Appendix A for the instrument). The first section of the instrument was made up of twenty isolated sentences which participants were supposed to identify the classes (i.e., parts of speech) of emboldened words. In the second section, participants were instructed to do same but this time sentences were contextualised in a paragraph. The aim of this test was to ascertain whether differences in scores could be realised by the two unique modes of testing, and whether participants could have any difficulties on the tasks.

**Method of data analysis:** The study employed the mixed method of data analysis. The mixed method of analysing data serves as a form of methodological triangulation because it combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the purpose of this study, we relied on inferential statistics. This method was useful in the present study because of its rigour and relevance in clarifying data and its ability to render data into forms which facilitate the comparison of disparate kinds of information (Cresswell, 2003; Payne and Payne, 2004). Moreover, this statistical package enabled us to validate the results by reinforcing the qualitative claims. Data were analyzed qualitatively in order to describe and understand the level of mastery of parts of speech among CS students in the select programmes.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis and discussion of the data. The discussion is done with reference to the objectives of the study.

**Characteristics of respondents:** Table 1 shows the demographic data of respondents' sex, level and age brackets.

With respect to the sex of students, the analysis indicates that male students outnumbered their female counterparts by 2%. The difference was, however, marginal. This implies that difference in the sex of students did not bring about a difference in their ability to identify parts of speech in the test items.

A difference was, however, recorded in terms of students' level of study at the university. While responses of level 100 students totaled 92.9%, only 7.1% responses were recorded among level 200 students. This observation

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Freq.	Valid %	n
Sex			
Male	178	51.0	
Female	171	49.0	
Level			
100	325	2.9	
200	25	7.1	
Age (Years)			
17-21	253	72.7	
22-25	40	11.5	
26-30	35	10.1	
32-34	13	3.7	
35 and above	7	2.0	

n = 350; Field Data (2010)

Table2: A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showing differences in students' performance across programmes of study

Programme	Mean	SD	F-ratio	Sig.
TourismAnd Hospitality	36.0	16.2	3.661	0.06
Science	43.6	20.5	3.661	0.06
Arts	45.8	15.1	3.661	0.06
Business	51.8	16.4	3.661	0.06
General group	46.6	45.8	3.3661	0.06

n = 350  
\*:p<0.05; Field Data (2010); Scale: 80-100%=Excellent (E), 70-79%=Very High (VH), 60-69%= High (H), 50-59%= Low (L), 0-49%= Very Low (VL)

is clearly understood given that majority of CS students are level 100 students. What this means is that any comparison of first year and second year students in terms of academic performance favoured the former. Arguably, such a development may be attributable to the age brackets of respondents. As can be appreciated, students aged between 17 and 21 years old, recorded the highest percentage that is 72.7%, followed by those aged between 22 and 25 years old, which recorded 11.5%. Evidently, most first year students were between the age brackets of 17 and 21 years old, presumably because they had direct entry from senior high schools, and that only a few of them applied as mature students (most of whom are trained teachers of colleges of education). The least percentage, that is 2.0% were either 35 years old or above. Thus, the table shows that more young adults (aged between 17 and 30 years old, comprising 94.3% of the sample size) participated in the research than old adults (who fell between the brackets of 31 years old and above) and constituted only 5.7% of the sample size (For a detailed discussion on university students' background knowledge on academic performance at UCC (Ababio, 2009).

### Students' performance and programmes of study:

Table 2 presents the level of knowledge of parts of speech among students from five programmes of study put in place by the Department of Communication Studies. We used M for Mean; SD for Standard Deviation and F for Frequency for Table 2, 3 and 5. Sig. and p were also used

Table 3: Performance levels of students across programmes of study on test 1

Item	Correct response		Wrong response		Unanswered response	
	Freq.	Valid %	Freq.	Valid %	Freq.	Valid %
1	297	85.1	46	13.2	6	1.7
2	144	32.7	203	58.2	3	29.2
3	184	52.7	121	34.7	44	12.6
4	72	20.6	222	63.6	55	15.8
5	122	35.1	184	52.9	42	12.1
6	112	32.1	196	56.2	41	11.7
7	217	62.2	129	37.0	3	0.9
8	262	75.1	65	18.6	22	6.3
9	48	3.82	69	77.1	32	9.2
10	178	51.0	124	35.5	47	13.5
11	138	39.5	153	43.8	58	16.6
12	162	46.4	176	50.4	10	2.9
13	117	33.5	207	59.3	25	7.2
14	148	42.5	172	49.3	29	8.3
15	141	40.4	134	38.4	74	21.2
16	262	75.1	56	16.0	31	8.9
17	168	56.7	109	31.2	42	12.0
18	86	24.6	225	64.5	38	10.9
19	143	41.0	188	53.9	18	5.2
20	50	14.4	25.1	72.1	47	13.5

n = 350; \*: p<0.05; Field Data (2010); Scale: 80–100% = Excellent (E), 70–79% = Very High (VH), 60–69% = High (H), 50–59% = Low (L), 0–49% = Very Low (VL)

for Level of Significance and n represents the total number of respondents in these tables.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed to determine whether statistically significant differences existed among the mean levels of students' knowledge of parts of speech across various programmes of study. The results, as shown in Table 2, revealed that statistically insignificant differences (sig. 0.06) existed among students' ability to identify parts of speech across the five programmes of study. This means that students' knowledge of word classes generally fell between the performance scale of between very low and low (i.e., 36.0 to 51.8%). Despite this gloomy picture, Business students (p = 51.8, SD = 16.4) outperformed those from other programmes of study. This performance may arguably be due to the quality of results they entered the university with. Given that Bachelor of Commerce students are required to enter the university with aggregates 08 and 09 for both males and females respectively, it was not surprising that most of them may have as well had an A or at least a B in their English language paper in their West African Senior High School examinations (i.e., SSCE or WASSCE) (Appendix B). As Quansah (2002) among others have observed, the educational background of students to a large extent has an impact on their subsequent academic performance.

Regrettably, students' inability to identify categorial elements even at the university level may be attributable to their morbid fear of or disdain for the English language. Our observations during the data collection process

revealed that a number of respondents expressed misgivings and negative attitudes on the test. Below are some observations they made:

- What do I need parts of speech for at this level?
- How do parts of speech enable us pass CS?
- I don't even remember what parts of speech are!
- Aren't these questions too difficult?
- They are too basic for my liking; in fact, I seem have forgotten!

Interestingly, the observations above reflect Edu-Buandoh (1997)'s claim that students' poor performance in the English language may be caused by such factors as the very nature of the language curriculum, inadequate time allotted to grammar and lack of proper attitude of both teachers and students in handling grammar. For as Litosseliti (2006) rightly points out:

Motivation for learning a foreign language, including learners' attitude towards the foreign language, plays an important role in female and male students' learning in L<sub>2</sub> classrooms. Attitudes include those towards the language, the language teacher, the language learning materials, and the language learning activities.

Thus, it is also important that the attitudinal and affective dispositions of students be factored into the discussion on students' poor performance of parts of speech since a change in behaviour may positively affect the scores.

Further, a frequency test was done to determine the level of performance of respondents on parts of speech on the first test which comprised twenty questions (Appendix A). The results, as shown in Table 3, revealed that students' responses to correct test items was averagely low, that is between 50 and 59%. This statistical breakdown indicates that students have an abysmal knowledge of parts of speech as wrong responses were averagely high ranging between 60 and 69%. In all, the number of unanswered responses fell below 50% (i.e., between 0-49%). Higher performances which fell between 75 and 85%, were, nonetheless, recorded by students in their ability to identify three main categorial elements, namely, the noun, verb and adjective. This might be so because these three parts of speech are the most frequently used in many interactive discourses. The analysis therefore shows that students lack an active knowledge of parts of speech in Test 1, although the items were tested in single sentences, outside of the context of continuous writing as found in Test 2.

Table 4 shows the frequency distribution of students' performance across their programmes on the second test.

Table 4: Performance levels of students across programmes of study on test 2

Item	Correct response		Wrong response	
	Freq.	Valid %	Freq.	Valid %
1	222	63.6	127	36.4
2	179	51.3	170	48.7
3	106	30.4	243	69.6
4	228	65.3	121	34.7
5	41.5	145	204	58.5
6	239	68.5	110	31.5
7	96	27.5	253	72.5
8	118	33.9	230	66.1
9	71	20.4	277	79.6
10	56	16.1	291	83.9

n = 350; Field Data (2010); Scale: 80–100 % = Excellent (E), 70-79% = Very High (VH), 60–69% = High (H), 50-59% = Low (L), 0 – 49% = Very Low (VL)

Table 5: Performance levels between male and female students on tests 1 and 2

Variable	Sex	N	Mean (M)	SD	MD	T-ratio	Sig.
Test 1	Male	178	9.30	8.42	0.70	0.91	0.38
	Female	171	8.67	3.50	0.69	0.92	
Test 2	Male	177	4.28	2.28	0.27	0.42	0.73
	Female	171	4.16	2.37	0.27	0.43	

n = 350; \*: p < 0.05; Field Data (2010)

On the average, students’ performance on Test 2 recorded 41.9% implying a very low performance. On the other hand, their wrong responses totalled 58.1%. This means that students fared poorly on the test because their wrong responses exceeded right answers by 16.2%. This observation confirms the study by Dako and Forson (1997) that university students lack adequate knowledge of grammar.

**Students’ performance and gender:** Finally, Table 5 presents an independent t-test, means and standard deviations of the performance levels of both male and female students’ knowledge of parts of speech on Tests 1 and 2.

As can be seen from the table, the mean scores confirm that both male (M = 13.58, SD = 10.01) and female (M = 12.95, SD = 6.09) students across all programmes do not have a sound knowledge of parts of speech. However, males outperformed their female counterparts. This observation is at variance with earlier findings that suggest that females are inherently verbally superior to males in the language acquisition process (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Quansah, 2002), although reports appear conflicting (e.g., Ekstrand, 1980; Hirst, 1982). This may be so because behavioural variation is a function of cultural factors which are themselves socially constructed (Ekstrand, 1980).

### CONCLUSION

This paper sought to examine the knowledge of parts of speech of students who offer Communicative Skills at

the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. Major results showed that students have a low understanding of word classes both at micro and macro levels. Their knowledge of the concept was most evident in three major categorical elements, namely, the noun, verb and adjective, although their performances were, nonetheless, unimpressive. Second, the analysis revealed that differences in students’ programmes of study had an insignificant bearing on their ability to identify parts of speech. Here also, performances were abysmal across programmes. Further, it was found that there were no statistically significant differences between male and female students’ performances, even though the former outperformed the latter. This claim appears contradictory in view of the literature on gender and academic performance (e.g., Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974, Quansah, 2002; Litosseliti, 2006).

Seen as possible tendencies, the above findings bear a number of implications. In the first place, the study resonates with urgency for a needs analysis, especially in the context of English as a Second Language. This is because determining students’ needs is seen as a direct way to inform the curriculum and objectives of a given programme. Thus, any effective Communicative Skills syllabus design, Munby (1978) intimates, must consider situational effects toward the development of the design.

Again, concerns raised in this paper call for a multivariate approach to the teaching of Communicative Skills. The difficulty of making a choice between teaching for the sake of remediation and commodification (Stern, 1983; Dudley-Evans and John, 1998; Afful, 2007) may be surmounted when it is understood that, though the world is now a global village, learner-needs will for the most part remain culture-specific by focusing on, for example, the acculturation model (Cook, 1991; Richards, 2001).

Finally, the findings discussed in this research are such that they can hold or be repudiated by replication in other universities or tertiary institutions. It is also important that future research investigates why university students’ mastery of word classes is so abysmal. Such studies will further illuminate our understanding of, for example, literacy among students.

### Appendix A:

#### Questionnaire for communicative skills students:

Dear Student,

The objective of this questionnaire is to enable us to obtain first hand information on Communicative Skills students’ knowledge of parts of speech, a basic concept in the teaching of the course. We would, therefore, appreciate it if you could respond to the items of the instrument as honestly as you can. For this reason, all your responses will be kept confidential.

Thank you.

#### Part 1:

In the spaces provided below, provide your personal information as honestly as possible.

Background information:

- Sex: M [ ] F [ ]
- Level: 100 [ ] 200 [ ]
- Age Group: (Tick where appropriate)
  - 17-21 [ ]
  - 22-25 [ ]
  - 26-30 [ ]
  - 30-34 [ ]
  - 35 and above [ ]
- Programme of Study: (e.g. B.A. (Arts), BSc (Human Biology).
- Educational Background: (Tick where appropriate)
  - SSCE/WASSCE [ ]
  - O'LEVEL [ ]
  - HND [ ]
  - DIPLOMA [ ]
  - OTHERS [ ]
- Previous School Attended:

**Part 2:**

**Test 1:** Identify the parts of speech (e.g. noun, verb, preposition, etc) of the emboldened words in the following sentences:

- The Golden Jubilee House, which was commissioned by the president, is magnificent. ( )
- This task is not beyond your ability. ( )
- Kwame studied hard, yet he wasn't successful. ( )
- The sheep had got out of open and were loose in the road. ( )
- Not anybody can qualify for the chairman's position. ( )
- They will in due time people the auditorium. ( )
- David is a fast runner ( )
- The labourers went to the site last month. ( )
- The president travelled abroad two weeks ago. ( )
- Workers went on strike because of poor working conditions ( )
- Wow, what a great goal Micheal Essien scored! ( )
- Every morning, they walk fast to school. ( )
- The parliamentarian lives near the castle. ( )
- The Vice Chancellor gave the matriculats some kindly advic ( )
- Oh, what a lovely surprise! ( )
- We booked the appointment lately. ( )
- The students attempted to party last night ( )
- There was so much excitement at the party. ( )
- The athlete runs extremely fast. ( )
- VKwame found one under the bed. ( )

**Test 2:** Read the passage below and identify the parts of speech of each emboldened word enter from "One cannot but" wonder what a flash of<sup>1</sup> the headlights means on any occasion. Like many other occurrences in life, there is no answer to this now<sup>2</sup>. It can mean 'Be careful. I am<sup>3</sup> coming through like a storm!' It is a haughty silent threat: the flasher means he will brook no interference in his head long advance. But there is another driver who flashes his lights and smiles<sup>4</sup>, "Come on, friend. After<sup>5</sup> you." This is a cordial consideration of the other road user's needs. It does not need much imagination to foresee the consequences when the two interpretations are mixed up, and<sup>6</sup> the observer is confused. A third use of a flash of the headlights is for social<sup>7</sup> rapport: friendly drivers flash their headlights as a greeting<sup>8</sup>. In yet other instances, professional drivers flash their headlights to warn each<sup>9</sup> other that there is a group of unscrupulous policemen round<sup>10</sup> the corner

collecting bribes for vital omissions in one's set of documents (Adapted from Sackeyfio's, (1997) *Comprehension Plus*).

- |         |          |
|---------|----------|
| 1 ..... | 2 .....  |
| 3 ..... | 4 .....  |
| 5 ..... | 6 .....  |
| 7 ..... | 8 .....  |
| 9 ..... | 10 ..... |

**Appendix B:**

University of Cape Coast Division of Academic Affairs 2010/2011 Admissions Cut Off Points

Programme	Male	Female
Bachelor of Management Studies	10	11
Bachelor of Commerce	8	9
B.A. (Social Sciences) Econs/Geo/Maths	15	15
B.A. (Population & Health)	16	16
B.Sc (Tourism Management)	16	16
B.Sc (Hospitality Management)	16	16
B.A. (Arts)1919		
B.A. (Theatre Studies)	19	19
B. Music	20	20
B.A. (African Studies)	18	18
Bachelor of Medicine & Bachelor of Surgery		
B.Sc. (Biological Sciences)	17	17
B.Sc. (Human Biology)	17	17
B.Sc. (Computer Science)	15	15
B.Sc. ( Optometry)	10	10
B.Sc. ( Laboratory Technology)	17	17
B.Sc. (Medical Laboratory Technology )	15	15
B.Sc. (Chemistry)	17	17
B.Sc. (Industrial Chemistry)	17	17
B.Sc. (Water & Sanitation)	16	16
B.Sc. (Physics)	17	17
B.Sc. (Engineering Physics)	17	17
B.Sc. (Information Technology)	14	14
B.Sc. (Mathematics)	16	16
B.Sc. (Actuarial Science)	9	9
B.Sc. (Statistics)	17	17
B.Sc. (Mathematics with Economics)	12	12
B.Sc. (Mathematics & Statistics)	17	17
B.Sc. (Mathematics with Business)	12	12
B.Sc. (Agriculture)	20	20
B.Sc. (Psychology)	14	14
B.ED. Home Economics (Food & Nutrition)	16	16
B.ED. Home Economics (Clothing & Textiles)	18	8
B.ED. (Physical Education)	20	20
B.ED. (Social Sciences) Business*	10	11
B.ED. (Social Sciences) Geo/Econs/History	13	13
B.ED. (Arts)	16	16
B.ED. (Social Sciences)	17	18
B.ED. (Basic Education)	20	20
B.ED. (Science)	20	20
B.ED. (Mathematics)	18	18
B.ED. (Computer Science)	18	18
B.ED. (Management)	11	12
B.ED. (Early Childhood Education)	20	20

\*: For candidates with Business Electives; Note: The cut-off point stated above were for the 2010/2011 admissions only are solely for the guidance of applicants in the choice of their programmes

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