Use of Present Tense in Online University Prospectus

Aisha Nasir*   Dr. Aleem Shakir
Department of English and Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan
* E-mail of the corresponding author: Aishanasir629@gmail.com

Abstract
The language of online university prospectus, a promotional variety, is receiving an increasing amount of attention in the literature of higher education (HE) marketing. The studies conducted within the linguistic framework, all of them based on limited data, report that the 'present tense' appears with a great frequency in online university prospectus. The current research, based on a very large corpus, explores how far present tense is frequent in online university prospectus. For the said purpose, the corpus of total 500 universities from Pakistan, India, Australia, U.K. and the U.S.A was built and used to investigate the research question. Taking the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE) (Biber et al., 1999) as a reference guide, the use of present tense was explored in university prospectus. The results were analyzed on the basis of frequency of present tense use in online university prospectuses of Pakistan, India, Australia, U.K. and the U.S.A. The results showed that frequency of present tense is higher than frequency of past tense in all sections of online university prospectus as it satisfies the purpose of using 'on-line' language.
Keywords: online university prospectus, higher education (HE) marketing, corpus

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions compete for their customers and benefits, i.e., students, research grants, tuition benefits, etc. Applying the term "higher education marketing", universities have been studied as brand and identity focused institutions. The fact that university prospectus is more cost-effective to produce *online* from universities' perspective and easier to view from that of customers is responsible for the growing popularity of online prospectus among viewers. The universities issue an academic prospectus every year for the guidance of prospective students. For an institution with a large number of programmes, providing comprehensive information using the print media is just not feasible. It is both costly and too bulky to handle. According to Anctil (2008), about forty-four percent prospective students prefer using institutional websites, instead of print prospectuses, as source of information. Taking an online tour, prospective students are greeted by "Digital Handshake" that attracts them to select right university for themselves (Anctil, 2008; Carnevale, 2005). This confirms to the fact that universities websites play the role of online prospectuses to attract prospective students. Universities use specific language for their promotion and identity in their prospectuses keeping in view the communication strategies of marketization, commodification and corporatization (Roggendorf, 2008). Likewise the websites of universities use specific language to enhance their admission and establish specific identity. The textual analysis of prospectuses and university websites presents the use of specific linguistic features for fulfilling the specific communicative purposes. The university websites use offertory, direct language to promote their identity including the use of ampersand, personal pronoun *We*, tenses and modal selection for controlling student response (Saichaie, 2011). Universities use present tense to attract the prospective students (Roggendorf, 2008).

The analysis of linguistic characteristics with perspective of contextual use of language is combined in the *register analysis*. The linguistic differences among registers are not arbitrary. For example, it is not sufficient to merely note that the language of conversation has many second person pronouns and questions because it is an accepted convention to use these features in conversation. Rather, register analyses always include description of the situational context and interpretation of why particular linguistic features commonly occur in that context. The functional associations between linguistic patterns and situational factors are at the heart of studying register variation (Biber and Conrad, 2009, p.10). The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE) (Biber et al., 1999) offers an extensive register variation analysis of four registers: fiction, academic prose, conversation and newspaper writing. The relative frequency of a feature within different registers has been found to be functionally motivated. The comparison of frequencies further shows the results that present tense is most common in conversation in comparison with its frequency in academic prose, newspaper, and fiction. On the other hand, fiction has the highest density of the past tense.

The only works which, to the best of my knowledge, offer some comment on the appearance of the linguistic features fall within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These studies are usually based on the 'About' page of prospectuses. The *About* page has been found to contain self-promotional language extending the notion of 'prestige fore-grounded' on the institutions' *Home* pages. The language speaks to the traditions of the institutions and their decorated histories. For promoting their identity and maintain difference university websites use pronoun *We*, Present tense for mission statement and *historic present* for elaborating

history (Saichaie, 2011). In the *Welcome* page, universities use present tense and the modal *will* for attracting prospective students and maintain discourse of certainty (Roggendof, 2008). Thus specific selection of features has a specific purpose and context.

2. Register Analysis and Previous Studies on Prospectus

Register analysis or feature analysis of a selected genre requires huge data in the form of corpus. Previous researches on prospectus as Roggendorf (2008), Saichaie (2011) contain less data. As the researches were based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of prospectuses or websites so the data was taken from maximum 8-12 universities. In CDA features are pointed out but for practical demonstration of co-occuring features register analysis is required based on corpus methodology. The research on university prospectuses with register perspective is a novel field of research in the area as previously researches have been done with CDA and marketing perspective. As the aim of the present research is to find out use of present tense in online university prospectuses the corpus based two layered register approach of Biber and Conrad (2009) has been followed.

Biber et al. (1999) presented a register analysis of lexico-grammatical features in LGSWE. He presented the corpus based comparative results of each linguistic feature in four registers, i.e., Fiction, Conversation, Academic Prose and Newspapers. He presented results of register distribution of tense and modality. His Corpus findings proved that from a grammatical point of view, tense and modality comprise a single system, since all finite verb phrases (excluding imperatives) are marked for either tense or modality (but not both). His corpus findings presented the following results:

- Overall, tensed verb phrases are modal verbs across registers more common than verb phrases with modals.
- About 85% of all finite verb phrases in LGSWE Corpus are tensed.
- Overall, present tense verbs are somewhat more common than past tense verbs.
- The distribution of present and past tense verbs differs considerably across registers: Conversation and academic prose are alike in showing a strong preference for present tense forms.
- Fiction shows the opposite pattern, more preference for past tense
- News uses both tenses about the same extent (with slightly more present tense than past tense).
- Verb phrases with modals comprise 1045% of all finite verb phrases in all registers.

Biber (1988) presented a multi-dimensional approach towards register analysis. His work was based on determining variation across speech and writing. For this purpose he selected 67 linguistics features to be determined in corpus of speech and writing. The co-occurrence of features was divided in factor or dimension analysis. The interpretation of the factors was based on the assumption that co-occurrence patterns indicate an underlying communicative function shared by the features; that is, it was assumed that linguistic features co-occur frequently in texts because they are used for a shared set of communication functions in those texts. Multi Dimensional (MD) analysis was originally developed to study the overall patterns of variation among spoken and written registers in English. Academic prose was one of the registers included in those analyses, described in comparison to 24 other spoken and written registers. Biber (1988, pp 180–195) additionally provided more detailed MD descriptions of the variation among selected sub-disciplines within academic prose (e.g., Natural Science, Medicine, Social Science etc.). Grabe (1987) also used MD analysis to study the overall patterns of variation among academic disciplines, in comparison to other written registers.

Biber and Conrad (2009) point out that register analysis based on linguistic features has to be quantitative and qualitative. A register analysis, based on linguistic features as well as taking a comparative and quantitative approach, may further be conducted either based on individual linguistic features or sets of co-occurring features. This approach led to corpus based analysis of tense, aspect and modal verbs in different varieties, genres and registers. The present research focuses on the use of present tense in Online University Prospectus (OUP) as important register feature of online promotional genre. The previous researches on online prospectuses or university websites (Saichaie, 2011) are based on CDA and small corpus of studies. Till now present tense has been studied in corpus of newspapers, conversation, academic prose and fiction (Biber and Conrad 2009) with register perspective but promotional registers need work in this area.

O'Donnell (2001) conducted a corpus based register analysis of two sub- texts of newspaper genre (Editorials vs. Front Page News). For this study corpus was collected from 7 newspapers (6 US and 1 British).Out of 558 tokens 312 were from editorials and 246 from FPN. The results proved that realis is conditioned by text-type. And tense selection is dependent on text-type. FPN shows complete process while editorials show on-going process. According to this study Editorials used 96% simple present tense while FPN used 90% simple tense depending upon the *realis* of the text.

Chovanec (2003) investigated the uses of present tense in newspaper headlines. In order to reveal the patterns of use of the present tense in headlines, an analysis was carried out on a set of 242 headlines from the Electronic Telegraph. The headlines were analyzed into two broad areas. One major group consisted of headlines

which, despite being presented in the form of block language (the term for the 'style' of headlines used by Quirk et al., 1985), contained a finite verb form in the main clause. Because of the focus of the study on the present tense, this subset of headlines with tensed verb forms was selected. The other group was made up of headlines which did not contain a finite verb form in the main clause and were either nominal or condensed by means of ellipsis of auxiliaries. The analysis indicated that there were differences between headlines as to whether they include a single tensed verbal form or several (usually two) finite verb forms in various syntactic relationships.

The researches on present tense have reported its use in newspaper register focusing on present tense use in news headlines, editorials and FPN. But in case of online university prospectus no study exists on use of tense. CDA of prospectuses and university websites provides a framework for linguistic feature research but no corpus-based research has been done on present tense   in online prospectus. Secondly the previous data was collected from a few universities 12 or 8 universities so it does not provide sufficient base for determining a linguistic feature to be used for promotion on online university prospectus. Therefore the present research was based on quantitative analysis of present tense   in sub-texts of corpora of 500 online university prospectuses.

3. Data Collection

Depending on the nature of the research a huge corpus was collected. To fulfill the requirement for register analysis as pointed out by Biber and Conrad (2009), a corpus was needed with large size to become representative of OUP and comparative comprising data from different countries. With this purpose in mind five sections of OUP namely About Page, VC Message, Facilities, Department and Library were selected for data collection from five countries, i.e., Australia, U.K., U.S.A., Pakistan and India. For data collection list of universities was got from the official websites of the concerned countries. Table 1 presents the address:

Table. 1
Official Website Address of Countries

Sr. No.	Country	Address
1.	Australia	http://www.australianuniversities.com.au/list/
2.	India	http://www.medindia.net/education/indian/universities/universitylist
3.	Pakistan	http://www.hec.gov.pk
4.	U.K.	http://www. universitiesuk.ac.uk
5.	U.S.A.	http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ/alpha/

Ideally the data was to be collected from 500 universities comprising 2500 files, i.e., 100 files in each section. But depending on the variability of universities' websites available in the countries the corpus comprised of 2164 files. The reason is that OUP of different countries presented information in different sections depending on their preference and most of the universities lacked in one section or the other .Australian universities were less in number for data collection therefore the data of institutes had to be added in corpus to reach at the minimum decided target collection. In case of U.K. some universities did not allow copying text or the website design did not comprise the selected five sections for the data collection. The same is the case with Pakistani universities. Depending on all these difficulties in data collection total corpus were compiled comprising 2164 files.

4. Data Tagging and Analysis

For data tagging and analysis Multidimensional Analysis Tagger **(v. 1.0)** was used. The Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT) is a programme for Windows that replicates Biber's (1988) tagger for the multidimensional functional analysis of English texts, generally applied for studies on text type or genre variation. The programme generates a grammatically annotated version of the corpus or text selected as well as the statistics needed to perform a text-type or genre analysis. The programme plots the input text or corpus on Biber's Dimensions and it determines its closest text type, as proposed by Biber (1988). Finally, the programme offers a tool for visualizing the Dimensions features of an input text.

MAT also provides frequency counts for each linguistic feature included in Biber's (1988) analysis. MAT tags Present tense as VPRT and Past tense as VBD. Depending on the nature of research the frequency counts for these tags were noted in corpus. Biber's (1988) work points out that frequency counts of linguistics features needs to be normalized to a text length of 1,000 words (except for type/token ratio and word length). This normalization is crucial for any comparison of frequency counts across texts, because text length can vary widely. A comparison of non-normalized counts will give an inaccurate assessment of the frequency distribution in texts. Therefore the raw frequency of Present tense (VPRT) and Past tense (VBZ) were normalized using following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Frequency of particular linguistic feature}}{\text{Total length of the text}} \times 1000$$

The mean frequency was calculated with minimum and maximum value to see the variation in use of

present tense across sections and countries. The textual analysis was done manually to see the pattern of use of present tense in different sections of OUP of different countries. For making analysis more comprehensive present tense functions were analyzed keeping in view Biber's (1988) elaboration of present tense use with relevance to co-occurring features on Dimension 1, i.e., Involved VS Informational Production. As dimension analysis involves analysis of all features included in it, the present analysis was focused only on the results with relevance to use of present tense. For this purpose MAT provided 'inspect a text for dimension features' files were used as this function of MAT marks features as involved or informational. To analyze function and communicative purpose of use of present tense in different sections these text files were used to construct textual analysis.

5. Results and Discussion

The research aimed at investigating the use of the present tense in online university prospectus as an important registerial feature of this promotional variety. Selecting five categories of online university prospectus namely About Page (ABT), VC Messages (VCM), Facilities (FC), Library (LIB) and Departments (DPT) the relative occurrence of the present tense was analyzed in the corpus. For the quantitative analysis the results were extracted for occurrence of the present tense using Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT).The tag used for the present tense in the software is VPRT which includes all occurrences for VB or VBZ (Present tense or third person present verb). The description of the data has been presented in the tabular form with detailed interpretation of the results in this chapter.

5.1. Distribution of Present Tense in OUP

From structural point of view, English verbs are inflected only for two tenses: present and past. (Biber *et al.,* 1999). As the relative occurrence of present or past tense in register underlines the communicative purposes of the register, the mean frequencies from corpora consisting 2164 texts were calculated. Figure 1 presents the results of overall tense distribution for the tags VPRT (Present tense) and VBD (Past Tense) using MAT.
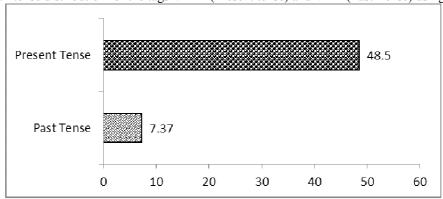

Figure 1 Distribution of Tense in Online University Prospectus

Figure 1 has provided a good comparison. The distribution of the present tense in the corpus represents the higher frequency of occurrence as compared to the past tense. The mean of past tense is 7.37 as compared to the mean value of present tense in OUP which is 48.5. This clearly infers that present tense is mostly used in online university prospectus to fulfill the communicative purpose of the promotional register. As present tense can refer to present states, future time, past events, habitual action and cover time distinctions, it has high frequency of use in OUP. It suits best to online university prospectus as it helps in creating identity, attracting prospective students by creating a sense of specification and generalization with its marked and unmarked form.

The distribution of present tense verbs differs considerably across different sections of online university prospectus. A comparison of mean frequencies of present tense across above mentioned five sections have been presented in Figure 2:
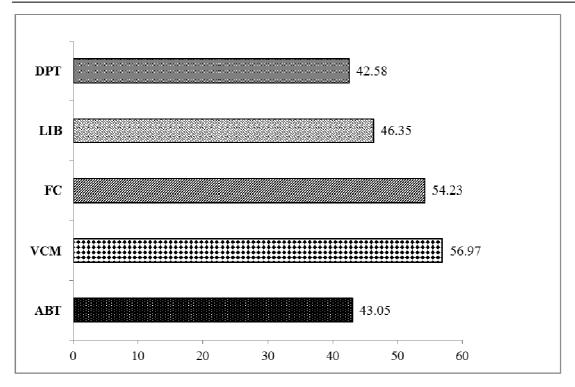
Figure 2 Section Wise Distribution of Present tense in OUP

Figure 2 shows that present tense is most frequent in VCM and least frequent in DPT. FC is near to VCM with mean frequency 54.23 and ABT and LIB are near to DPT with mean frequency 43.05 and 46.35 respectively. The highest frequency of present tense in VCM helps to infer that the messages of VCs or Rectors are strongly persuasive. The difference in frequency counts of present tense in each section highlights different communicative function served by each category.

TEXT VCM (VCM_BNIT_AUS)

I'**_m_** pleased to welcome you to Curtin University. As Curtin's Acting Vice-Chancellor, I **_am_** pleased to welcome you to Western Australia's largest and most multi-cultural university. We **_maintain_** campuses in Malaysia and Singapore while also conducting face-to-face teaching in a number of countries. This cultural diversity **_adds_** a rich and valuable dimension to our campus atmosphere and also **_prepares_** our graduates to live and work in an increasingly global environment. Curtin **_is_** a vibrant international institution with an exciting future and I **_invite_** you to join with us as we **_move_** forward.

The above text shows high dependency on present tense in VCM. As the textual representation shows present tense has been used with first and second person pronouns, it is apparent that here present tense is used as persuasive technique to attract prospective students and maintain identity (e.g. We **_maintain_** campuses in Malaysia and Singapore while also conducting face-to-face teaching in a number of countries……. I **_invite_** you to join with us as we **_move_** forward.) The high frequency of present tense in VCM is based on the fact that present tense can be used to express wide range of meanings. It can be used to refer to events in the past, to present states, to present habitual behavior, or to future events. It is the verb form of 'all-inclusive time reference'. As VC Message packs information including different time references so present tense   is commonly used in this section. It should be noted here that as mentioned above the communicative purpose of present tense is involved as it controls and affects the discourse. As the purpose of VCM and FC is to attract prospective students and establish university identity present tense   is used to show habitual action and to refer to time distinction.

TEXT FC(FC_JNTUK_IND)

JNTU Kakinada **_supports_** your need to be successful in your Undergraduate / Postgraduate Programme. We **_create_** a congenial environment for peer advising, student mentoring, tutoring and more. Admissions and Records division at the University **_provides_** admission, registration, GE certification, enrollment verification, and graduate services. There **_is_** no place for ragging or eve-teasing on the campus. We **_guarantee_** complete safety and security to our students; parents can be assured of this. We have arranged for supply of text books, and for this we have tied-up with all text book publishers.

In this text habitual present tense has been used to create university identity as facilitative institute. (e.g. Kakinada _supports_ your need,….. We _create_ a congenial environment,……. Admissions and Records division

at the University *provides* admission,……) Here again like VCM the first and second person pronouns have been used with present tense   verbs. The frequent use of first and second person pronouns has a persuasive connotation in promotional registers. The similarities between VCM and FC

In the use of present tense make it clear that frequency of present tense   is higher in both the sections as communicative purpose of VCM and FC is almost similar. Here present tense   is used to refer to immediate context.

The categories with less frequencies, i.e., DPT, ABT and LIB are used to serve different communicative purpose; mostly information related to the concerned department, university and library. The discourse here is mostly informational and not involved.

TEXT Present tense   in DPT(DPT_BEUTK_PK)

The Electrical Engineering Department (EED) at the Balochistan University of Engineering and Technology Khuzdar was established in the year 1987. Since then the EED has witnessed an impressive growth in all aspects. The Electrical Engineering Department has significance in the development of the Province. The graduates from this university *are* playing a great part. Electrical engineering *is* a discipline of much interest and demand that *exists* both within the country and elsewhere. The Electrical Engineering Department *provides* a programme that *develops* the necessary skills and competence required to design and implement electrical power and communication systems. The curriculum *emphasizes* the area of electrical power, electrical machines, communication and electronics. Adding up, sufficient emphasis *is* given to the study of energy management and systems.

The Text illustrates the reason of least mean frequency in DPT. Here the present tense has been used to provide habitual working of the department (e.g. The Electrical Engineering Department *provides* a programme that *develops* the necessary skills….. The curriculum *emphasizes* the area of electrical power). The BE form has been used to present facts:

1. The graduates from this university *are* playing a great part.

2. Electrical engineering *is* a discipline of much interest.

3. Adding up, sufficient emphasis *is* given to the study of energy management and systems. In the first example be+ing verb form shows marking of present tense verbs. But the overall purpose is to provide information about previous students success. The second example shows the use of is as part of predicate, highlighting information related to the department. The third example follows pattern NP+BE+ V3 and carries passive sense. Here this pattern has been used to generalize the given practice and to cover time dimensions. The textual analysis of the text from DPT clearly elaborates the communicative function of the said section. As the purpose of Department section is to provide information about achievements of department, previous students workings and ongoing courses it uses passive constructions, past tense and modal verbs for elaboration along with present tense. This is the reason that it depends less on present tense as compared to VCM and FC.

ABT and LIB have the same communicative function. About Page provides information related to university history, workings and achievements of progressive students. Library in itself serves as a department of university. Therefore communicative purposes of ABT and LIB are almost similar to DPT.

TEXT ABT

The University *is* located at a distance of 10 km from the city center. The University started functioning in 1975 in rented buildings with 8 departments. The University *offers* a wide range of programmes: M.A., M.Sc., MBA, M.Com., MCS, M.Phil, and Ph.D. Additionlly, in recent years, the University has taken a lead in introducing 4-Year Undergraduate programmes in Science, Commerce, Business, Pharmacy, Engineering, and English Literature and Linguistics. The University *is* widely known as an institution of strong performance and high ambition because it has continued to make excellent progress toward its goals. It *plays* a significant role in developing indigenous human resources through its highly productive achievements, both in sciences and humanities.

TEXT LIB

The library *aims* to enrich learning, teaching and research Programmes of the University by providing timely access to high quality scholarly information and learning material in a variety of formats. Currently located in the basement of administration block, the library has a print collection of more than 16,000 volumes. About 20 serial publications and 8 newspapers *are* on subscription list. Campus wide access to more than 22,000 electronic journals and more than 40,000 e-books *is* available through the HECs National Digital Library Programme.

Text ABT and LIB almost use the same pattern of present tense   as it has been used in Text DPT. The following examples present the same pattern as used in TEXT (DPT).

1. The University *is* located at a distance of 10 km from the city center.(ABT)
2. The University *offers* a wide range of programmes.(ABT)
3. The University *is* widely known as an institution of strong performance and high ambition.(ABT)

4. About 20 serial publications and 8 newspapers _**are**_ on subscription list.(LIB)
   Example 1 uses the pattern NP+BE+V3 which resembles with example 3 in DPT text. Here the purpose of use of passive is to inform about the university location as in Example 3 of DPT the purpose is to inform the reader about the practices applied by the department for betterment of students. Example 2 clarifies the fact that here the present tense   with verb *offers* has been used to blur the habitual action and time distinction. Example 3 resembles to example 1 and the use of passive sense with coupla BE helps in providing authenticity to the argument. Example 4 serves the purpose of conveying information using BE form.

The findings of analysis of five categories of online university prospectus are as follows:
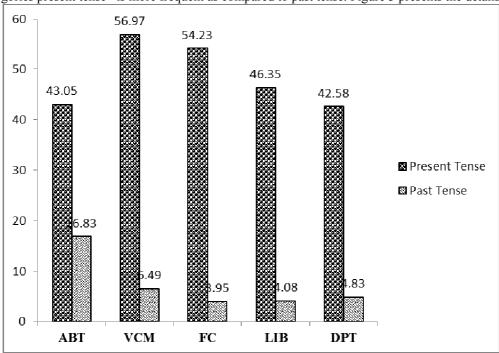In all categories present tense   is more frequent as compared to past tense. Figure 3 presents the details:

Figure 3 Distribution of Present and Past Tense in Categories of OUP

The results shown in Figure 3 present a marked difference between the use of present and past tense. Online university prospectuses use present tense in high frequency as online language or promotional language aims at presenting topics and actions of immediate relevance. According to Biber (1988) analysis present tense belongs to the section of involved features. Involved features control discourse of communication being a matter of choice. Thus high frequency of present tense in online university prospectus is due to the removing online viewers focus from any temporal sequencing of information. But at the same time variation of present tense frequency across different categories of online university prospectus is due to the communicative purposes associated to the relevant section as above analysis presents the facts.

The frequency of present tense is higher in VCM and FC as compared to DPT, ABT and LIB. The above analysis presents the underlined differences as follows:

➢ VCM and FC sections of OUP are used to create identity image of universities so they make frequent use of first and second person pronouns. As the use of first person pronouns highlights ego-involvement so present tense is used to address 'you' and attract their audience by using present form of mental or cognitive verbs.
➢ DPT, ABT and LIB are used to provide information about concerned department, university or library. Here the information is usually less packed as compared to VCM and FC as the major purpose of these sections is providing information. So present tense is less frequent in these sections. But compared to past tense the higher frequency of present tense helps to infer that it is the most frequent tense in the online university   prospectus as it best suits to the marketing purposes of online language being a verb form of 'all- inclusive time reference' (Biber,1999).

6. Conclusion
The research focused on the corpus-based analysis of present tense use in OUP as significant registerial feature. The findings of the research proved that frequency of present tense use is higher than past tense in corpus of

OUP. As the research was based on linguistic feature analysis, the textual analysis of present tense was done. The results highlighted that frequency of present tense use is higher in VCM and FC sections of OUP in all five countries. The frequency counts showed the use of present tense according to the communicative function of the section. As VCM and FC are used with involved focus to attract students and DPT, LIB and ABT focus on informational purpose the frequency of present tense shows variation in use.

Based on these findings the research can prove helpful for content writers and website designers. As involved language helps in attracting students and covering time distinctions, VCM and FC sections content can be used as Home page text. The about section can be transformed in pattern of VCM to make text more involved excluding history. The use of present tense in active and passive voice can further enhance the division of content of website as passive voice is more informational taking noun phrases as subject they can be commonly used in DPT, LIB and ABT section along with simple present tense. But VCM and FC sections can be made more involved with use of present tense taking pronouns as subject. As language of websites is online and have an effect of face-to-face conversation and then written so use of present tense can result in sharing time and space of communication.

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Appendix 1. List of abbreviation

	Abbreviation
About Us	ABT
Facilities	FC
Department	DPT
Library	LIB
Vice Chancellor Message	VC

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

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