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IFRS in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study

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The University of Southern Mississippi

IFRS in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study

by

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A Thesis
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The University of Southern Mississippi
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of the Requirement for the Degree of
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Abstract

Globalization of capital markets and technological advances enhancing global communications has led to the need for a set of international accounting standards. Comparability among financial statements prepared by numerous accounting standards depending upon the regulations of the country in which these statements are prepared is seriously impaired. Accordingly, serious convergence efforts have been made for the last few decades. Accordingly, higher education in the United States must reflect these changes in accounting curriculum available to students entering this environment. This exploratory study presents evidence that progress is being made in institutions. The progress, however, is not spread equally among the different regions in the United States. Additional efforts must be made to increase the offering for students to be prepared when entering the work force in the current environment.

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Introduction

As global market capitalization of corporate entities, technological advances enhancing communications, and nations' stock exchanges saw the necessity of listing stocks not domiciled in the host country, discussions began among the exchanges of differing nations of the need for global accounting standards. These events pointed out the necessity of comparable financial statements among countries for efficiency in the markets. An international commission, currently named the International Accounting Standards Board (hereinafter referred to as IASB), was formed as an independent accounting standard setting commission tasked with bringing "transparency, accountability and efficiency to financial markets around the world." Theoretically, in addition to increased comparability of financial statements, international accounting standards should enhance capital markets and world trade while lowering the cost of capital (Bolt-Lee and Smith, 2009). It has been argued, however, that countries already having high quality accounting standards will not qualitatively benefit by adopting IFRS. Additionally, the cost may be prohibitive relative to the benefit derived. With the objective of promulgating one set of accounting standards to be adopted by all countries, structuring a "roadmap" of agreed upon and adopted standards along with a schedule of convergence has proven difficult.

Currently, approximately 165 countries have adopted parts of the resulting International Financial Reporting Standards (hereinafter referred to as IFRS). The European Union mandates that member countries partially adopt IFRS. Partially adopting IFRS has led to most countries converging their previously accepted standards to some IFRS standards but not all of the international standards. This mix of applicable standards, unique to differing countries, has not led to enhanced comparability of financial statements, the primary objective of promulgating international standards.

Elemental to any change of Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (hereinafter referred to as GAAP) to IFRS for the United States involves a change from rules-based accounting to principles-based accounting. Convergence plans for the United States have proven problematic. Among the many issues to be determined are the merits of principle-based accounting over rules-based accounting. Currently, while many stakeholders of GAAP believe that it is time to move toward principle-based accounting (Derstine and Bremser, 2010), no scientific research has given evidence of the merits of one system over another. While some authors feel there will be eventual adoption and convergence of IFRS as the United States' generally accepted accounting principles, other authors feel that this objective is not attainable. Accordingly, the need for formal education of accounting students and professionals is not resolved. With globalization of capital markets and the international nature of many conglomerates, the need for United States accounting graduates to have a familiarity with IFRS exists. As evidence of this, the CPA exam began testing knowledge of IFRS in 2011 (Bandyopadhyah and McGee, 2012). The path that educators in the United States have taken, in light of the uncertainty of the ability to benefit from U.S. adoption of IFRS, is probed in this study.

Literature Review

Convergence of IFRS and U.S. GAAP

As with most countries, over decades the United States has adopted a set of nationally developed standards known as GAAP. These standards are required accounting methods for publicly held companies. The Securities and Exchange Commission, as the regulator of these companies, requires that financial statements be independently audited resulting in the auditors' opinion as to the entity's compliance with GAAP before being publicly issued. GAAP is a rules-

based method of accounting which, in most instances, requires recording of accounting transaction using historical cost. In contrast, IFRS is a principle-based form of accounting predicated on the ability to value transactions at fair market value. The rules-based approach is “said to provide companies with the opportunity to structure transactions to meet requirements for a particular accounting treatment” (Van der Meulen et al, 2007). Thus, GAAP allows for more creative ways to account for certain items because of the exceptions to its rules, if certain conditions apply. Conversely, the principle-based approach would “continue to be developed from the conceptual framework, but would apply more broadly than under existing standards, thereby providing few exceptions to the principles” (MacDonald, 2002). IFRS would make it harder for rules to be broken because it would allow fewer exceptions and would be able to guide the accounting rules. Principle-based standards require more professional judgment than rule-based standards. Judgment is much more subjective than stated rules. This concept has obstructed the agreed upon adoption of international accounting reporting standards. Adoption is necessary before convergence.

Since the commission working toward these international standards was formed, there has been a movement towards the intended convergence of U.S. GAAP and IFRS by the United States. Convergence is defined as “the process of the gradual elimination of differences between IFRS and U.S. GAAP” (Razaee et al, 2010). In the United States, there are many who argue that replacing GAAP with IFRS can “increase comparability for investment analysis, improved efficiency of capital allocation, decreased cost of capital, and elimination of barriers associated with costly reporting and reconciliation requirements for multinational firms” (LeJeune, 2015). Some stakeholders believe that, if U.S. GAAP would converge with IFRS, it would lead to an overall increase in accounting comparability of financial statements with other countries’

companies as all statements would be prepared using one set of accounting methods. Of necessity, “the move from local GAAP to IFRS requires the re-education of existing accounting practitioners, investors, and other users of financial information.” (Jackling et al, 2012).

The United States has yet to decide whether or not to converge with IFRS, either fully or partially. However, as more and more countries adopt IFRS, the United States will have to determine a way to adapt to reconciling with these countries that are using various standards. For listing on United States stock exchanges, initially the SEC required a scheduled reconciliation between GAAP and IFRS to be included with financial statements. “Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) eliminated the reconciliation requirement for non-U.S. filers effective March 2008” (Yoon et al, 2013). As the United States and IASB members have been unable to compromise on some basic foundational issues, convergence does not appear to be possible in the near future. As time passes, the convergence roadmap delineated by the SEC becomes more and more vague. Under these circumstances, the U.S. has a long way to go in its efforts towards convergence between IFRS and U.S. GAAP. In this atmosphere, the United States’ accountants will have to be very familiar with IFRS in order to continue to keep up with the ever increasing globalization of businesses and possibility of US adoption of these standards, in whole or partially.

Teaching IFRS in the United States

When U.S. accounting students enter into the workforce as accountants, there is a need for them to have a working knowledge of the differences between U.S. GAAP and IFRS. Public accounting firms’ client base includes companies with foreign subsidiaries where the financial statements are prepared under the accepted standards of the foreign country. Accountants in industry are oftentimes charged with the internal preparation of these financials. Accordingly, even

though GAAP is still the required standards in the U. S, accountants must have a level of IFRS knowledge to be relevant and competitive in today's professional environment. The foundation for this knowledge begins with their accounting education. There is an increased need for better education in IFRS reconciliation. The American Accounting Association and KPMG conducted a survey of the current status of IFRS education in higher education in 2008. Their findings indicated that 39% of accounting academics felt that students were receiving an adequate foundation in IFRS through their coursework; the class of 2014/2015 was predicted as the first graduating class of accounting students with adequate IFRS knowledge for entry-level positions (Munter and Reckers, 2009).

Derstine and Bremser (2010) reported that accounting professors feel that there is not enough classroom time to incorporate an IFRS topic in financial accounting courses. Additionally, administrators do not see the urgency to add IFRS to the curriculum when setting educational priorities, and practitioners are seeking basic but not in-depth knowledge of IFRS.

While the available literature focuses on IFRS education in higher education, accounting students as the preparers of financial information and users of the statements must also be educated as to the standards incorporated in the reports. In a 2011 survey conducted by Jason Cherubini, Kevin Rich, Hong Zhu, and Alfred Michenzi, the authors' results indicated that those surveyed felt that the Principles of Accounting course was the appropriate place to focus on IFRS. All business majors, being required to take the Principles of Accounting, should have a basic understanding of IFRS, not just accounting majors. With a sample of 348 accounting educators from 238 institutions, over 30% of those surveyed indicated finance and international business majors needed an understanding of IFRS and GAAP. Additionally, results indicated that less than 30 minutes of class time during the Principles of Accounting course, as taught, was dedicated to

IFRS. The need for additional coverage of IFRS is acknowledged, both for preparers and users. Supporting Drestine and Bremser, these educators gave four major reasons for the lack of incorporation in to the current curriculum. These include:

- uncertainty of U. S. adoption,
- availability of teaching materials,
- availability of class time, and
- IFRS knowledge among educators.

Very little empirical research has been done in the area of assessing the direction IFRS education is being driven in higher education. A study of curriculum offerings in the Midwest states, as defined by the American Accounting Association, was undertaken. The study incorporates the 283 institutions, both two-year and four-year accounting programs, being taught in the nine states defined as Midwest. Data collected included:

- Accreditation maintained,
- If offered, is the international course required or elective,
- If offered, at what level in the curriculum is the course offered; and
- If offered, is the institution public or private.

From their 2011 study, the authors gave evidence that international accounting offerings were “geographically heterogeneous” among the states within the region studied. Additionally, the most advanced schools in the study, defined as to highest degree offered, have less than a 30% adoption rate for an international course offering. Of the 87 AACSB accredited programs (presumable at the college level rather than the discipline level) in the study, 37 programs had international programs (44%). Public institutions, with 32.41% offering an international course, are more prepared than private institutions, with 14.86% of the schools with a class offering. The

authors collected anecdotal comments during the 2012 American Accounting Association annual conference. One reason, given often, for not including IFRS during the undergraduate financial accounting series, was the concerns of information overload. There is the feeling that introducing GAAP and IFRS simultaneously is thought to be very confusing.

After reviewing the literature, this study incorporates the following research questions:

1. Is IFRS being taught in the classroom of four-year higher educational institutions?
2. Is IFRS education more prevalent in different regions of the United States?
3. Of the schools offering IFRS related courses, are most AACSB Accredited?
4. If so, at what level, undergraduate or graduate, is the international course offered?
5. If offered, is the course a required course or an elective course?

Methodology

Recognizing the need for accounting students to receive a foundation in IFRS during their educational process, accessing the level of incorporation of this topic into current curriculums is the focus of this study. An exploratory study approach is designed. Archival data is retrieved from publicly available information on university websites and catalogues. Data will be analyzed demographically. For correlation analysis, Pearson's Chi Square test will be used to analyze the data categorically.

Variables

Region. Dividing the U.S. into four sections allows for comparisons among the regions. The four regions are separated as Northeast, Midwest, West, and South. For this study, the regions are defined to include states in Table 1 below. Thirty samples from each region were selected. Only four-year degree granting institutions are investigated in this study.

TABLE 1 States Included in Regional Analysis			
Northeast	Midwest	West	South
Connecticut Maine Massachusetts New Hampshire New Jersey New York Pennsylvania Vermont Rhode Island	Illinois Indiana Iowa Kansas Michigan Minnesota Missouri Nebraska North Dakota Ohio South Dakota Wisconsin	Alaska Arizona California Colorado Hawaii Idaho Montana Nevada New Mexico Oregon Utah Washington Wyoming	Alabama Arkansas Delaware Florida Georgia Kentucky Louisiana Maryland Mississippi North Carolina Oklahoma South Carolina Tennessee Texas Virginia West Virginia

International Accounting Class. Does the institution offer an IFRS course? As the focus of the study, this data will be gathered using two standards. With the specific topic of study being IFRS, the offering of an international accounting class by an institution will indicate the possibility of IFRS being covered in the subject materials of this course. Those courses with a specific mention

of IFRS in the course description or other available information on the course (i.e., syllabi, available lectures, and available slides) will be noted as the reality of an IFRS course rather than the possibility of IFRS class coverage. This study makes the assumption that an International Accounting Course would have some materials concerning IFRS in the course.

AACSB Accreditation. Numerous accreditation agencies exist for business schools. Quality of business schools are represented by the accreditation received and maintained. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation “represents the highest standard of achievement in teaching and research for business schools worldwide (AACSB, 2011). As a desirable accreditation for business/accounting programs, higher program standards are required to receive this accreditation. AACSB accesses one quality of continuous review for this accreditation for colleges of business/accounting departments as the offering of an international accounting course. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that the accounting programs with this accreditation will incorporate IFRS education more than will those programs without this accreditation.

Is the Class an Elective or Required? This variable hinges on the fact of the sampled colleges providing an international accounting course. In the interest of this research, is the international course offering a required course for majors or if it is an elective. As a required course in the major’s curriculum, one can infer that the international course is of importance for all students. This variable is important because, as previously stated, an international accounting course provides different ways of thinking and addressing certain accounting issues. By having the class, the student can be seen as more competitive in the job market. If the class was an elective, the student may not have chosen said class and thus would be less competitive when compared to someone who had to take it as a requirement.

Is the class an Undergraduate or Graduate class? The level in the curriculum in which an international accounting course is placed can proxy the importance that the college believes the class to have. If the class is taught in the undergraduate program, it would mean that the college believes that all students of the accounting field should know at least the basics. If the class is only taught in the graduate level, it means that fewer students will see the material.

Chi Squared

This research uses the statistical Pearson's Chi Squared testing in analyzing the data collected. Pearson's chi squared test is useful for researching nominal or categorical data of a non-parametric nature. The purpose is to evaluate how likely it is that any difference between categorical data samples arise by chance and reflect a real difference inference to the population. In this statistical method, the degrees of freedom are determined. Once the degrees of freedom are found and an alpha level of significance is determined, it is possible to determine the p-value by comparing the chi squared statistic to the chi squared distribution. Pearson's Chi Squared test works from the null hypothesis. Accordingly, each categorical difference will be assessed from the hypothesis that there is no difference between the two categories. The level of significance for this study is set at $p < .01$.

Results

Research Question 1.

From the sample of 120 schools, 58 of the schools, 48.3%, have an international accounting course. Further inquiry, using course descriptions and syllabus, when available, finds evidence that, of the 58 international accounting courses offered, 26 course descriptions specifically mention IFRS as part of the course subject material.

Research Question 2.

Of the 58 schools with international accounting course, Table 2 divides those schools by regions.

TABLE 2 International Accounting Course Offerings by Regions					
	Northeast n = 30	Midwest n = 30	West n = 30	South n = 30	Total n = 120
International Course	10 33.3%	19 63.3%	15 50%	14 46.7%	58 48.3%

Of the 58 schools with an international course, Table 3 shows, by region, where supplemental sources discuss IFRS as being part of the international accounting course coverage materials. Twenty six groups in the sample of the 58 schools actually have a reference to IFRS in information sources for this variable, which is 44.8% of schools with an international course

TABLE 3 International Courses Specifically Mentioning IFRS by Region					
	Northeast n = 10	Midwest n = 19	West n = 15	South n = 14	Total n = 58
Mentions IFRS	5 50.0%	10 52.6%	8 53.3%	3 21.4%	26 44.8%

Further analysis uses the 58 courses as the foundation for comparisons.

Research Question 3.

Of the 58 schools offering international accounting courses, 32 of them maintain AACSB Accreditation. Table 4 distributes these 32 accredited programs by regions and provides analysis.

TABLE 4 AACSB Accredited Program by Region					
	Northeast n = 10	Midwest n = 19	West n = 15	South n = 14	Total n = 58
AACSB Accredited	2 20.0%	12 63.2%	7 46.7%	11 78.8%	32 55.2%
Non-AACSB Accredited	8 80.0%	7 36.8%	8 53.3%	3 21.2%	26 44.8%
Chi-Square Analysis of Institutions by AACSB Accreditation					
Chi-Square	5.3208672				
D.F.	1				
Significance	0.0000				

Research Question 4.

Of the 58 schools with an international course, there are 32 AACSB accredited which Table 4 shows, by region. Of the 58 courses, Table 5 depicts the degree program in which the class is taught

TABLE 5
Undergraduate or Graduate Course Offering at AACSB Schools

	Northeast n = 2	Midwest n = 12	West n = 7	South n = 11	Total n = 32
% Graduate	2 100%	9 75%	6 85.71%	7 63.64%	24 75%
% Both	0	3 25%	1 14.29%	3 27.27%	7 21.88%
% Undergraduate	0	0	0	1 9.09%	1 3.13%

Research Question 5.

AACSB Accredited Schools with International Courses that are offered as either Required, Elective, or as Both Of the 32 schools with both an AACSB accreditation and an international course, Table 6 shows, by region, the percentage of courses offered for degree requirements as elective or required.

TABLE 6
Course is Required or Elective

	Northeast n = 2	Midwest n = 12	West n = 7	South n = 11	Total n = 32
% Elective	2 100%	10 83.33%	5 71.43%	8 72.73%	25 78.13%
% Both	0	1 8.33%	0	1 9.09%	2 6.25%
% Required	0	1 8.33%	2 28.57%	2 18.18%	5 16.63%

Discussion

At the inception of convergence efforts, with global expansion and technological advances, eventual convergence was inferred. Efforts and timelines of these efforts have changed and evolved during the process. Global expansion is taking a new path in that Brexit (Britain's exit from the European Union) is currently reshaping efforts to combine separate countries into economic units. Other countries in the union are considering incentives and constraints unity offers. Regardless of the ability to adopt one set of international financial reporting standards, numerous countries adopted the IFRS standards in part while simultaneously maintaining their domestic standards. With the United States as a world economic entity, understanding international standards is necessary for U.S. accountants who are charged with working with foreign entities related to U.S. companies. Thus, it is imperative that the academic community of our schools offer, at the least, foundational knowledge of the IFRS standards. As an exploratory study in a research stream that is just beginning, this study shows that efforts, especially in AACSB accredited higher education institutions, are not ignoring this need.

This study's definition of the South region is leading the other regions with 78.8% of the sample maintaining an AACSB accreditation. The outreach of the South's efforts is, however, diluted because offered courses are mainly at the graduate level and are not required. The Midwest, as do the other regions, mirrors this finding. International accounting courses, where offered, are mainly at graduate levels and not required.

While convergence becomes less definite, exposure of accountants as a result of globalization to a variety of accounting standards, whether international or country specific, is a growing reality. Formal education in IFRS is a step towards closing-the-loop in acquiring the

basic knowledge. While efforts in higher education are being made, these efforts need to be enhanced. One means of enlarging the pool of students exposed to the reality is offering the courses already in place as an undergraduate required course. Additionally, four-year accounting programs that do not offer introductions to IFRS should integrate the subject into their curriculum either as a stand-alone course or as segments in existing courses. Research into the appropriate level for an introduction of international standards is beginning, although the majority is anecdotal rather than empirical.

Of note, although the samples are different, prior research (Kang, et al) indicates that the percentage of AACSB accredited programs offering an international accounting course has grown from 44.04% on 2012 data to 55.2% on 2016 data. With this accreditation agency focusing on member schools enhancing IFRS's and international accounting offering, this statistic should consistently increase.

Limitations present in the data include the accuracy of the data. Using websites to gather the data has inherent limitations as to the paucity and currency of information. The first limitation has to do with data collected. The data was collected from 120 4-year public universities in the United States, divided between the four geographical regions, resulting in 30 colleges per region. As such, regions had differing numbers of states included. This leads to different regions having larger, better funded institutions than other regions. Most colleges were chosen by being either well known or being part of the state university systems. However, after exhausting that list, lesser known colleges were used, which could possibly skew data due to unequal resources. Some assumptions made could be erroneous. Some of the institutions did not specify whether the international class was designated for undergraduates or graduates. Unless specifically stated, the study assumes that classes with a designation code of 5000 or higher are intended for graduate

students. Furthermore, a few of the colleges did not specify whether or not a class was an elective or requirement. For this research, it is assumed that, unless specified, the course is considered to be an elective. Erroneous assumptions will also skew the results. Future research opportunities would include limiting data to comparable institutions and surveying academics to clarify assumptions.

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Appendix

University of Connecticut- <http://uconn.edu/>
Central Connecticut State University- <http://www.ccsu.edu>
Eastern Connecticut State University <http://www.easternct.edu/>
University of Maine <https://umaine.edu/>
University of Southern Maine <https://usm.maine.edu/>
University of Massachusetts Boston <https://www.umb.edu/>
Bridgewater State University <http://www.bridgew.edu/>
University of New Hampshire <http://www.unh.edu/>
Plymouth State University <http://www.plymouth.edu/>
Rutgers University <http://www.rutgers.edu/>
Rowan University <http://rowan.edu/home/>
Montclair University <https://www.montclair.edu/>
William Patterson University of New Jersey <http://www.wpunj.edu/>
University at Albany <http://www.albany.edu/>
University at Buffalo <http://www.buffalo.edu/>
Queens College <http://www.qc.cuny.edu/Pages/home.aspx>
Binghamton University <https://www.binghamton.edu/>
Pennsylvania State University <http://www.psu.edu/>
Temple University <http://www.temple.edu/>
University of Pittsburgh <http://www.cba.pitt.edu/>
Lincoln University <http://www.lincoln.edu/>
University of Rhode Island <https://www.uri.edu/>
Rhode Island College <http://ric.edu/>
University of Vermont <https://www.uvm.edu/>
Lyndon State College <http://lyndonstate.edu/>
Western Connecticut State University <http://www.wcsu.edu/>
Framingham State University <https://www.framingham.edu/>
The College of New Jersey <http://tcnj.pages.tcnj.edu/>
Southern Connecticut State University <http://southernct.edu/>
Kean University <http://www.kean.edu/>
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Kent State University <https://www.kent.edu/>
Ohio State University <https://www.osu.edu/>
Ohio University <https://www.ohio.edu/>
University of South Dakota <http://www.usd.edu/>
South Dakota State University <http://www.sdstate.edu/>
University of Wisconsin <https://wsb.wisc.edu/>
Bowling Green State University <http://www.bgsu.edu/>
Central Michigan University <https://www.cmich.edu/Pages/default.aspx>
University of Alaska <https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/>
Arizona State University <https://www.asu.edu/>
University of Arizona <http://www.arizona.edu/>
Northern Arizona University <http://nau.edu/>
University of California <http://haas.berkeley.edu/>
California State University <http://www.calstatela.edu/about>
San Jose State University <http://www.sjsu.edu/>
University of Colorado <http://www.colorado.edu/catalog/2016-17/>
Colorado State University <http://www.colostate.edu/>
University of Northern Colorado <http://www.unco.edu/>
University of Hawaii <http://www.catalog.hawaii.edu/index.html>
Boise State University <https://www.boisestate.edu/>
University of Idaho <https://www.uidaho.edu/>
Idaho State University <http://www.isu.edu/>
Montana State University <http://www.montana.edu/>
University of Montana <http://www.umt.edu/>
University of Nevada <http://www.unr.edu/>
Nevada State University <http://nsc.edu/>
University of New Mexico <http://www.unm.edu/>
New Mexico State University <https://nmsu.edu/>
Western New Mexico University <http://wnmu.edu/>
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Southern Utah University <https://www.suu.edu/>
Utah State University <https://huntsman.usu.edu/>
Utah Valley University <http://www.uvu.edu/>
University of Washington <http://www.washington.edu/>
Washington State University <https://wsu.edu/>
Central Washington University <http://www.cwu.edu/>
Western Washington University <http://www.wwwu.edu/>
University of Wyoming <http://www.uwyo.edu/>

University of Alabama <https://www.ua.edu/>
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University of Arkansas <http://www.uark.edu/>
Arkansas State University <http://www.astate.edu/>
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