

The present study is a genre of analysis of selected Master of Arts (MA) and Master of Science (MSc) theses of Kenyan universities. First, the study uncovers the competencies expected in the MSc and MA thesis. Second, it explores and describes how writers use generic features such as moves, tense, citation, authorial stance, and hedging to realise the typical competencies. Third, the study specifies the similarities and differences found in the use of the generic features. Finally it describes the linguistic rationale for the MSc and MA thesis in the light of the generic features identified above. The motivation for studying the thesis stemmed from the view that it is high stakes document in higher studies which has not been given adequate scholarly attention in terms of research. Six theses produced in the 2003/2004 academic year were selected using non-probability sampling methods to represent the then six public universities in Kenya. Three theses were drawn from the MA disciplinary culture. Guided by theoretical perspective of the salient generic featured in the literature, my institution and introspection, I manually elicited the tokens representing moves, tense, citation, writer stance, and subjected them to both quantities and qualitative analysis procedures. A number of fundamental outcomes emerged from the analysis. First, all but one thesis adopted the Standard/Traditional format with the one thesis following the topic-based one. Variations were noted in the number and sequence of moves and/or elements in the two disciplinary cultures. However, MA these were found to employ more simple present tense forms than the simple past while MSc these recorded a higher incidence of simple past than present. Thirdly, the agentless passive point of view was the most preferred form of expressing writer stance in both disciplinary cultures. While the agentless passive predominated all rhetorical moves in MSc theses, MA theses employed a variety of forms of expressing writer stance such as the personified, third person, and first person singular pronoun points of view. With regard to citations, MSc these had a much lower density than MA theses. In the two disciplinary cultures, the Results and discussion move recorded the highest incidence of citations. It also emerged that the frequency of non-integral citations was higher than that of integral citations in both disciplinary cultures though MA theses recorded higher occurrences of both forms than MSc theses. In addition, the present study revealed that the general incidence of hedges in MA theses was marked higher than in MSc theses. It also emerged that epistemic lexical verbs were the most frequently employed hedging devices followed by epistemic modal verbs with epistemic nouns being the least frequently used. Lastly, the study revealed that the notion of communicative purposes is very versatile as the various levels of the thesis express diverse purposes. Such purposes can be traced to the thesis as a whole in relation to the context in which it is produced; the rhetorical moves, and the elements in each move. The findings of this study have implications for the development of classroom or reference materials, teaching academic genres, syllabus design, and academic genre-based research, hence adding to on-going work in applied linguistics.