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It's in the Genes: Harnessing Employability DNA as the Unit Building Blocks of Sustainable Curricula.

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ABSTRACT

There is a well-documented UK digital skills gap that has deepened due to Covid-19 with digital marketing employers seeking graduates with specific tangible digital marketing knowledge and skills, in addition to relevant soft skills. The IAB'S 2020 Digital Skills Gap Report explains 88% of employers struggle to find qualified individuals with up-to-date digital marketing skills; 65% of those surveyed explained that most new graduates are not ready to take up careers in the digital marketing sector. Moreover, the CIM's latest Digital Marketing Skills Benchmark report (2022) indicates that digital marketing skills have declined since their previous benchmark in 2020. This paper reflects on the creation of a DNA tool which aims to enable educators in HE to audit their units in light of best practice, knowledge, skills and pedagogical approaches needed to nurture work-ready graduates. Key reflections highlight current gaps at varying levels and action planning to address sustainable curricula for employability.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a success profile for marketing graduates in the United Kingdom and discusses the implications that an understanding of this profile might have for the design of undergraduate marketing programmes. Although the acquisition of an undergraduate marketing degree does not necessarily lead to employment into a graduate digital marketing position, students who opt for these programmes need to have confidence that their choice is one that will best equip them with the knowledge, skills and behaviours employers require, from the first year of study. Indeed, prospective students are increasingly prioritising courses and institutions that will most help their employability (Slade, 2017).

Therefore, in order to nurture work-ready gradates, HEI's must ensure that the curriculum design and pedagogical approaches of undergraduate marketing courses are closely aligned with the profile of success in the digital marketing sector. This needs to incorporate technical subject knowledge, application of this knowledge and intrapersonal and competences. Employers need to work more closely with HEI's to articulate this need, as they do with the shaping of apprenticeship standards, including those of the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education's (IATE's) Digital Marketer Integrated Degree. In the undergraduate degree context, this official co-creation does not exist, so it is necessary to provide guidance for educators designing standard full-time courses in higher education in order that they may meet the employability requirements in their chosen subject area.

Moreover, employability is key at a macro level due to the post-1992 university fixation with graduate outcomes, thanks to the mass consumerisation of contemporary UK HE (Sliverio et.al., 2021). Certainly, HEI strategy must work towards the attainment of often challenging graduate outcomes targets and Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework benchmarks, crucial for funding, student recruitment and accreditations.

Accordingly, the paper's objectives are to ascertain a success profile of digital marketing as perceived by the academic literature and industry reports, and subsequently to discuss the implications of this for curriculum design, although a comprehensive translation of this to pedagogic methods is beyond this paper's remit. The present study provides insight for academics in UK HEI's looking to review or develop digital marketing courses to best safeguard employability by focusing on industry requirements.

At this point, it should be acknowledged that this paper is based on a reflective submission as part of the requirements of a completed Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE). As such, it is intentionally critically reflective in nature and also in the initial stages of development.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION

Through a review of the literature, industry reports and internal documents, the following aspects were considered as part of the PGCLTHE reflective submission: defining employability in a digital marketing context, the status of employability at an institutional, faculty and departmental level, evaluating how learning, teaching and assessment can enhance employability and what role individual academics play. The output was the creation of a holistic employability framework that summarises an ideal marketing graduate. This was then applied to a specific undergraduate unit to highlight gaps and suggest improvements through an action plan.

Though an ambitious undertaking due to its multidimensional nature, early soul-searching and research lead to the discovery that there are many areas of employability to consider including: careers services (Terzaroli and Oyekunle, 2019), placements (Bonnard, 2020; Morley, 2018; Fowlie and Forder, 2018), interview skills (Guachalla and Gledhill, 2019; Dinning, T.; 2017), psychometrics (Bradley et.al., 2020), industry certifications (Laverie et.al.,2020; Cowley et.al; 2020; Kim et.al, 2019) and lifelong learning (Boffo and Melcarne, 2019; Nimmi, et.al., 2021), amongst others.

Manchester Metropolitan University, like many post-1992 HEI's, boasts a range of employability initiatives to respond to this behemoth of a subject, for example, the *RISE* employability skills project, the new *My Five-Year Plan* for personal tutors and its own set of Graduate Attributes. However, to give the submission the specificity it required, embedding employability in the curriculum via digital marketing-specific knowledge and skills, relevant soft skills and employability-focused pedagogy was chosen as the focus. Though an extensive discussion of relevant pedagogy is beyond the remit of this paper.

The reflection was framed around Gibbs' model (1988) because it allows for depth of reflection and feelings and a single incident focus (Middleton, 2017) – a requirement

of the submission. Whilst criticised for not exploring values or linking to future action and change (Finlay, 2008) - something levelled at other models such as Schön's (1987) reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Wilson, 2008) - Gibbs' model offers a clear structure (Middleton, 2017) that also suits the required format. Lack of commitment to future action was tackled by the focus given to impact in an Action Plan.

The starting point for the submission involved a critical self-reflection of the author's own student experience through the crafting of a personal teaching philosophy in an earlier PGCLTHE unit. Reflecting on my own experiences as an MA Marketing student at a Redbrick University, as Brookfield's (1995) "autobiographical lens" encourages, I realised my learning had been almost entirely theoretical, with limited application of it in class, on assignments or to case studies. Outside the classroom, employability support was limited – few opportunities for placements, "meet the employers" events or careers guidance. I had learned the "why" and "how" of marketing but not necessarily the "doing".

Digital marketing "pracademics" (Volpe and Chandler, 2001; Posner, 2009) are well-placed to enhance employability thanks to connecting practical experience to the requirements of academia. Whilst pracademics can experience tensions between academia and practice (Dickinson et.al., 2020), we can ensure students become "knowledge-able" as opposed to merely "knowledgeable" (Wilson, 2015, 29) and help them enhance their learning via application of knowledge. Ensuring graduates are armed both with digital marketing knowledge and the ability to apply it has its roots in the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours of UK apprenticeships, where Behaviours draw parallels to "soft skills" and help to create fully rounded apprentices at the point of End Point Assessment (EPA). This holistic approach to employability provides ample opportunity to enhance the employability of full-time undergraduate programmes.

Reviewing the literature, industry sources on the digital marketing skills gap, and employer requirements, a shortlist of priority digital marketing-specific knowledge/ skills and relevant soft skills was compiled. This is underpinned by active blended learning/marketing-focused pedagogical approaches to enhance employability. Together, these three elements form a graduate employability framework, entitled *Digital Marketing Graduate DNA (see Figure 4),* used to evaluate the current employability of units and to highlight improvements.

De Cupyer et.al. (2011) explain 'employability' is derived from the words 'employment' and 'ability'. University educators can influence the ability element, which refers to knowledge and skills but cannot control the employmen*t* elements as they depend on variable issues, including market demand. Whilst the CareerEDGE Model, (Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2020) based on Yorke's (2006) perspective, describes employability as a multi-faceted characteristic of the individual, we must remember that successfully developing employability does not guarantee graduates satisfying jobs (Clarke, 2008). The scarcity of consensus on what employability means has also been discussed as key challenge preventing the integration of HE research across the intertwined disciplines of graduate employability and career development (Healy, Hammer and McIlveen, 2020).

Through consolidating the literature on the employability curriculum, general themes emerge including discipline-specific knowledge and skills, "soft skills" and employability-focused approaches to pedagogy. In addition, there are several different groups of stakeholders to consider when thinking about these areas: primarily academics, employers and the students themselves (Batra, 2021; Pereira et.al., 2020; Small et.al., 2018). Though challenging, all areas and interests are valid and the discussion of digital marketing employability that follows attempts to consider this plethora of themes and viewpoints.

Digital Marketing Skills Gap

There is a well-documented UK digital skills gap that has deepened since Covid-19 (CIM 2022, CIM, 2021; Eliot, 2021; IAB, 2020), with digital marketing employers seeking graduates with specific tangible digital marketing knowledge/skills in addition to relevant soft skills. As technology continues to evolve at breakneck speed, we may have to accept there will always be a digital skills gap, but also that there is perhaps an opportunity for our graduates to help companies reduce skills gaps by keeping pace with technological developments through employability-focused digital marketing units/courses.

There is a noticeable gap in the academic literature on the specific digital marketing knowledge / skills required of graduates, with the focus historically on more generic marketing employability. A notable exception is Key et.al. (2019). Therefore, this framework has been led by the digital needs of employers. Though order of priority varies by industry, sector and company size, there is a consensus that the digital marketing knowledge and skills that are most needed and therefore included in the framework are: Data/ Analytics (CIM, 2020; IAB, 2020; Flight,2021; Mintu-Wimsatt and Lozada, 2018; Michael Page Recruitment, 2019; ClickThrough, 2020; Key et.al, 2019), Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) (CIM, 2020; IAB, 2020; Michael Page Recruitment, 2019; ClickThrough, 2020; McCoy, 2020), Paid Advertising (CIM, 2020; IAB, 2020; Michael Page Recruitment, 2019; Key et.al., 2019), Social Media (CIM, 2020; IAB, 2020; ClickThrough, 2020; Key et.al, 2019), Email Marketing (CIM, 2020; IAB, 2020; Clickthrough, 2020; Michael Page Recruitment, 2019), and User Experience (UX) (CIM, 2020; IAB, 2020; ClickThrough, 2020; Michael Page Recruitment, 2019). An analysis of this list in relation to the level 4 undergraduate Digital Marketing Essentials unit can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

	Status / Priority	Explanation
Data / Analytics	1	Area not currently covered in lecture or tutorial content. Knowledge content for lectures and skills application for tutorials needs actioning ASAP
Search Engine Optimisation	2	Knowledge covered in lecture content but outdated due to industry updates, needs updating. Skills covered in tutorial / assessment tasks
Paid Advertising	3	Knowledge covered in lecture content. Skills covered in tutorial / assessment tasks. Up to date - no current action required
Social Media	3	Knowledge covered in lecture content. Skills covered in tutorial / assessment tasks. Up to date - no current action required

Soft Skills

There is much written about the "soft skills" graduates of all disciplines require. As with the digital skills, employers also report they struggle to find marketing graduates with these required soft skills. In a survey by the DMA (2019), over 50% of employers found it difficult to find at least one of the social/personal skills they deem important in graduates when recruiting. The WonkHE (2021) *Skills to Thrive* report explained that the most required skills of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences graduates are: communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration/ teamwork and independent working – a list largely shared with the respondents of the IAB's (2020) Barometer report. In a post-Covid-19 world, new soft skills are rising in importance to employers such as adaptability and resilience (McKinsey, 2020) and we may see this category top lists in future.

There is another gap in the academic literature with regards to digital-marketing specific soft skills, but the wealth of articles on generic marketing soft skills agrees largely with the industry reports, stating that the following are most in need: communication skills (Dusek et.al., 2021; Yeoh, 2019; McCarthur et.al., 2017), critical thinking (Dusek et.al, 2021; Yeoh, 2019, Schlee and Karns, 2017), creativity (Dusek et.al, 2021, McCoy, 2020, Pollicott, 2019), teamwork / collaboration (Dusek et.al, 2021; Schlee and Karns, 2017, M, 2021; Pollicott, 2019) and working independently / time management (Dusek et.al; 2021; Yeoh, 2019; Schlee and Karns, 2017, McCarthur, et.al., 2017; Pollicott, 2019).

Manchester Metropolitan University's own Graduate Attributes is an institutional-wide set of shared soft skills, that directly map to the marketing-specific soft skills discussed above (see Appendix 1). Indeed, this approach is becoming more commonplace - WonkHE (2021) reports that 36% of institutions have universal graduate attributes and 66% of them report that these attributes are used as a reference point in curriculum design. Due to Manchester Metropolitan University's graduate attributes having such an overlap with the literature's prioritised skills and them also being a marker of institutional best practice, these attributes inform the soft skills of the Digital Marketing Graduate DNA. They are: Collaboration, Creativity Self-motivation, Professionalism, and Social Awareness. An analysis of these skills as applied to this paper's selected case study unit can be found in Figure 2.

Figure 2

MMU Graduate Attributes	Status / Priority	Explanation
Collaboration	2	Some team tasks take place in tutorials, but this is unstructured. Need to introduce more collaborative formative tasks for early experience of teamwork
Creativity	3	Tutorial and assessment tasks encourage creative thinking and skills at appropriate level, no current action required
Self-motivation	3	Level-appropriate individual formative and summative tasks such as quizzes, essential asynchronous reading and assignment tasks allow for development of independent, self-directed learning skills, no current action required
Social Awareness	1	Limited coverage of inclusion / diversity consideration in lecture or tutorial content. Urgently needs actioning to ensure a more inclusive and diverse curriculum
Professionalism	3	Digital connectivity is covered by the use of Moodle and Teams for lecture, asynchronous and synchronous activities - professional digital tools / technologies used for level appropriate assignment tasks, no current action required.

Employability-focused pedagogy

It is crucial to utilise appropriate pedagogical approaches to learning, teaching and assessment to ensure holistic constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011) within the Digital Marketing Graduate DNA model. Admittedly, my panicked pandemic planning did not allow this focus, but next year offers huge opportunities to enhance employability via pedagogy. Reviewing the marketing-focused pedagogy literature on enhancing employability, active learning seems to be the preferred approach.
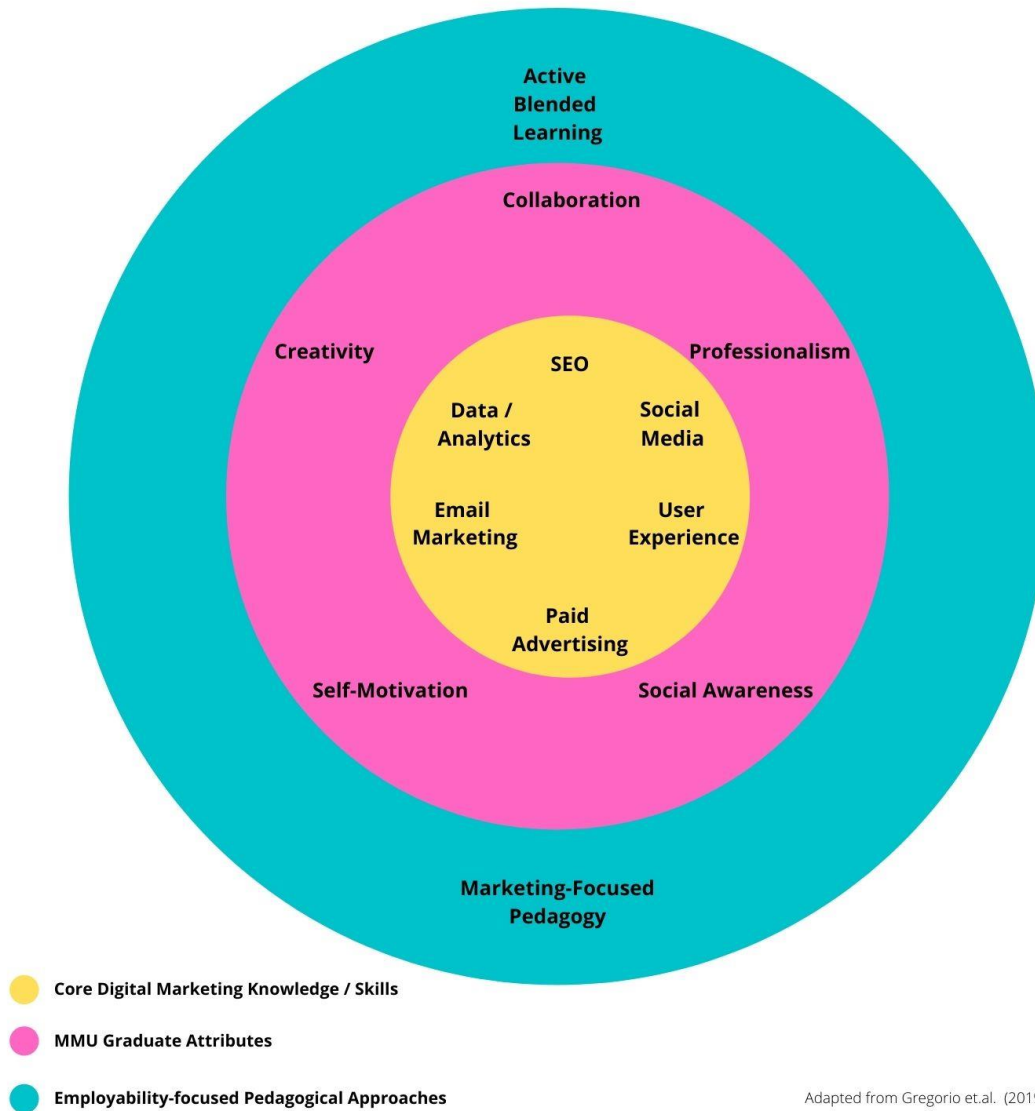
With students in charge of their own learning, supported by appropriate 'scaffolding' (Bruner, 2002) in the 'zone of proximal development' (Vgotsky, 1978), they are best able to think about and apply what they are learning – a good fit for my pracademic, employability-focused model. Moreover, incorporating active learning activities such as case studies and problem-based learning into lessons enables students to practise skills that are essential for future workplaces (University of Leicester, n.d.) In the marketing pedagogy context, the most cited examples of active learning activities include case studies, live client briefs, pitches / presentations and group work (Cowley, 2020; Cowley, 2017; Corrigan et.al. 2014).

Active blended learning makes classrooms resemble real-world work more closely. The substantial literature review of the area revealed one of the most neglected areas regarding active learning is traditional lectures, as listening to a lecturer is still the primary learning "activity" (Armellini, 2020) - something I can relate to in my own unit analysis below. The University of Birmingham (n.d.) also provides a rich list of practical active learning activities that can be adapted for use in lectures including polls, "fishbowls", think-pair-share and one-minute papers. An analysis of active learning approaches in relation to this paper's focus unit can be found in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Teaching / Learning Activities	Status / Priority	Explanation
Synchronous Lectures	1	No current active learning in synchronous lectures, needs actioning ASAP
Tutorials	2	Active learning is a key focus of current tutorials with applied work on case studies, use of industry standard technology, tools and presentations. More team-based active learning could be facilitated
Assessment	3	Students think and apply their knowledge in both formative and summative assessment, no current action required.

Figure 4: Digital Marketing Graduate DNA

Active Blended Learning

Collaboration

Creativity

Professionalism

SEO

Data / Analytics

Social Media

Email Marketing

User Experience

Paid Advertising

Self-Motivation

Social Awareness

Marketing-Focused Pedagogy

● Core Digital Marketing Knowledge / Skills

● MMU Graduate Attributes

● Employability-focused Pedagogical Approaches

Adapted from Gregorio et.al. (2019)

Whilst the analysis of the unit in line with the DNA framework has shown that there is scope for several changes, we must remember that the framework is an ideal view of a digital marketing graduate. As this paper deals with a 15 credit Level 4 unit only, that is being taught within the constraints of 6-week block teaching, it is necessary to prioritise elements of each part of the model for action. Further development towards the complete DNA can be facilitated across other units and levels of the programme. The following discussion is based on the Action Plan of the critical reflective submission and covers recommendations for priority areas of action.

Data and Analytics

Academics should research new analytics technology/regulations and create relevant content. Marketing analytics has become increasingly important due to Data Protection legislation such as GDPR. Over 98% of marketers use data during their decision-making processes while 80% of marketing-related problems use data to aid solving them (Flight, 2021). By using data to make marketing decisions students will become better data-driven decision makers (Flight, 2021) and will stay ahead of gradates on other courses who cannot evaluate marketing results (Mintu-Wimsatt and Lozada, 2018).

SEO

SEO is a constantly changing area (Niñofranco, 2018) and teaching content requires frequent updating. The area needs an employability focus, (Cowley, 2020) - with over 90% of online experiences starting with a search engine (WebFx, 2021), and by understanding SEO, students will become customer-centric marketers (Cowley, 2017).

Social Awareness

Academics should Research equality and diversity best practice including diverse professional inclusion, authorship, and case studies. There is a 13.3% awards gap between white and BME UK domiciled first degree undergraduates (Advance HE, 2020) which then affects the employability of these students in addition to other factors. Through nurturing a safe, inclusive environment that promotes a diversity of skills, knowledge and backgrounds as strengths, all students are more likely to thrive (Thomas and May, 2010) and be socially aware upon entering the workplace. By understanding employability through the lens of the BME awards gap and graduate outcomes, academics can become more aware of inclusivity and diversity issues and more confident in providing a supportive environment for learning for all students.

Collaboration

Best practice on team-based formative tasks (e.g.) live client briefs and incorporate in tutorials should be a priority area of focus for academics - digital marketers will work in teams on projects. Through social constructivist (Dewey,1938; Vgotsky,1978) formative team tasks in tutorials, construction of knowledge through social activities on real- world case studies can enhance learning and employability skills. Soft skills cannot be forced upon students, nor can they exist independently of a subject – they must have a professional context (Wonk HE, 2021). As a result, students will be armed with teamwork skills and evidence of work-based application of learning for interviews.

Blended Active Learning

Academics should incorporate active learning into lectures - research suggests attention in lectures starts to waiver after 10-20 minutes (Gifkins, 2018). As they remain a key leaning activity, it is crucial to increase active learning in this format with activities such as polls to vote on 'best answers' to scenarios and minute papers where students consider what the most important thing they learnt is, and also the least clear (Uni. Of Leicester, n.d.) Technology easily facilitates this and students can think deeply about what they have learned and provide feedback on what needs covering again (Uni. Of Birmingham, n.d.), whilst gaining a better understanding of the value of self-determined learning.

CONCLUSION AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To tackle the burgeoning challenge of the digital marketing skills gap, graduates today must evidence a complex set of subject-specific knowledge, demonstrate the ability to apply it in a working environment and showcase more general soft skills that are also a growing priority for employers. Academics can play their part by supporting this approach with appropriate pedagogical approaches. The proposed Digital Marketing Graduate DNA framework, combined with a reflective evaluation, is recommended as a starting point that academics across disciplines can use and adapt to suit the nuances of their subjects. It is not intended as a stand-alone tool but can play a useful role in early discussions of the programme and unit planning processes.

Moreover, the proposed framework is iterative – its constituent parts should be reviewed on an annual basis in line with evolving literature and industry need. To truly be holistic, it should be implemented at a programme level and reviewed in line with current Programme Learning Outcomes. Further research should focus on appropriate pedagogical approaches and tracking its success more long-term, over a minimum of 3-4 years, in line with actual graduate outcomes and frequent dialogue with
employers.

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