SELINUS UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCES AND LITERATURE

Evaluating the Real-World Applicability of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing in the Evolving Landscape of the Social Media Industry in Australia

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1. ABSTRACT

This dissertation evaluates the effectiveness of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing in preparing graduates for the dynamic field of social media marketing. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative surveys of 102 graduates and qualitative interviews with eight students who successfully completed the diploma and fulfilled a career in this industry to provide a comprehensive analysis of the programme's strengths and areas for improvement. The research finds that while the programme is generally effective in equipping students with essential skills, there are significant opportunities for enhancement, particularly in updating the curriculum to reflect the latest industry trends and integrating more practical, hands-on experiences. Key findings highlight the importance of a customer-centric approach, advanced technical training, and the role of internships and mentorship in professional development. The study concludes with recommendations for regular curriculum updates, the inclusion of advanced tools and techniques, and fostering a culture of continuous learning to better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of the digital marketing industry.

2. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the individuals and institutions that have supported and contributed to the completion of this dissertation. Their guidance, encouragement, and assistance have been invaluable throughout my research journey.

Firstly, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my academic advisor, Salvatore Fava, for his unwavering support, insightful feedback, and constant encouragement. His expertise and guidance have been instrumental in shaping this research and helping me navigate through the complexities of my study.

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Lastly, I would like to thank KCA Education and Social Media College for providing the support necessary to conduct this research. Their contribution has been vital in bringing this project to fruition.

To all those mentioned and the many others who have supported me in various ways, I am deeply grateful. This dissertation is a testament to your invaluable contributions and unwavering support. Thank you.

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Table 1.1: Summary of Survey Responses

Question	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Total Responses
I believe my degree will improve my career prospects	40	100	80.5	81.82	102
Employers are eager to employ graduates from my college	0	100	66.5	63.57	102
I regard my academic work as a top priority.	0	100	77	77	101
The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for	0	100	78	78	102
I have a good understanding of the job market in my chosen field	0	100	75	75	101
I am confident in my ability to present myself professionally in job applications and interviews	0	100	76	76	101
I have a good understanding of the cultural aspects of the job market in my chosen field	0	100	71	71	101
I am confident in my ability to build a network of career contacts	0	100	73	73	101
I am confident I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant	0	100	78	78	101
I am confident in my ability to assess my progress and identify my learning	0	100	79	79	101

Table 1.2: Survey Summary and Question Statistics

Completion Rate	Typical Time Spent	Most-Skipped Question	Total Respondents	Mean Time Spent on Survey
100%	1m:11s	None of the questions were skipped.	102	81.82s

Figure 1.1: Responses to the question "I believe my degree will improve my career prospects"

Q1 "I believe my degree will improve my career prospects"

Answered: 102   Skipped: 0
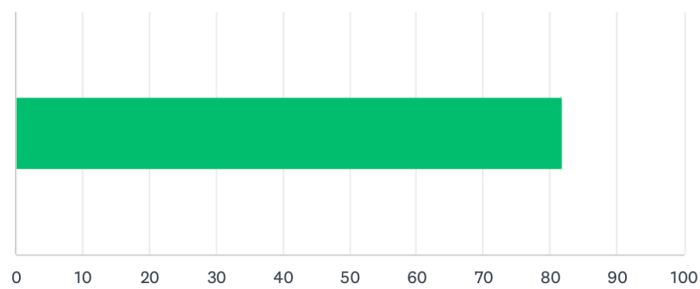
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	82	8,346	102
Total Respondents: 102			

BASIC STATISTICS				
MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	MEDIAN	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
40.00	100.00	80.50	81.82	17.89

Figure 1.2: Responses to the question "Employers are eager to employ graduates from my college"

Q2 "Employers are eager to employ graduates from my college"

Answered: 102   Skipped: 0
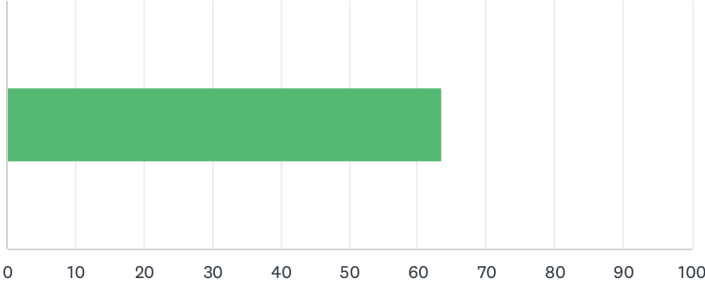
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	64	6,484	102
Total Respondents: 102			

BASIC STATISTICS				
MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	MEDIAN	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
0.00	100.00	66.50	63.57	25.76

Figure 1.3: Responses to the question "I regard my academic work as a top priority."

Q3 "I regard my academic work as a top priority."

Answered: 101   Skipped: 1
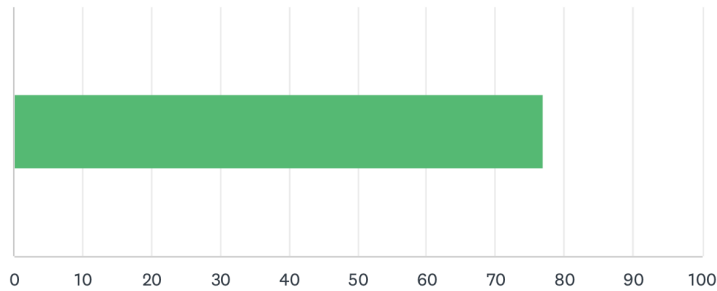
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	77	7,765	101
Total Respondents: 101			

Figure 1.4: Responses to the question "The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for"
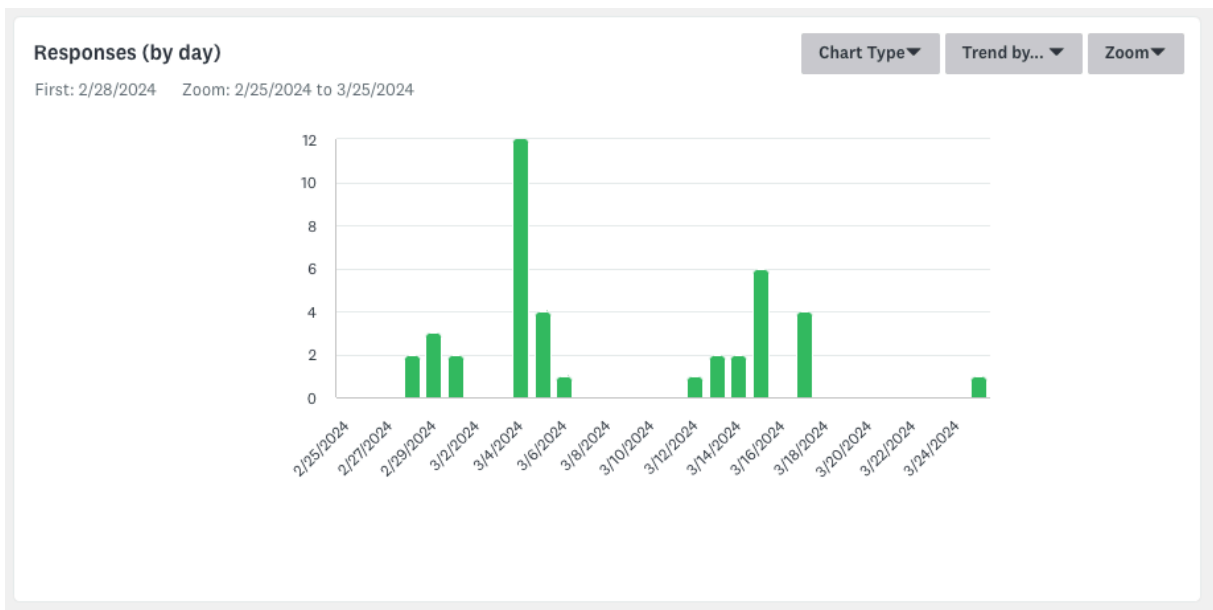
Figure 1.5: Responses to the question "I have a good understanding of the job market in my chosen field"

Q5 "I have a good understanding of the job market in my chosen field"

Answered: 101   Skipped: 1
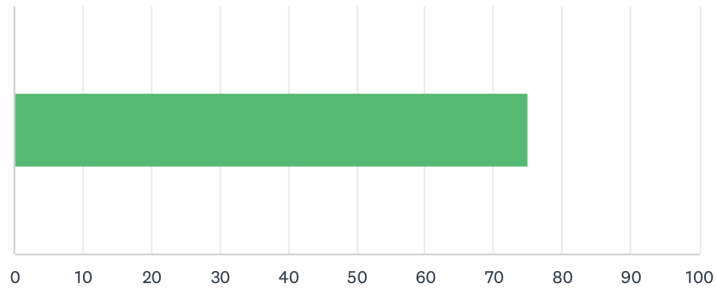
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	75	7,587	101
Total Respondents: 101			

Figure 1.6: Responses to the question "I am confident in my ability to present myself professionally in job applications and interviews"

Q6 "I am confident in my ability to present myself professionally in job applications and interviews"

Answered: 101   Skipped: 1
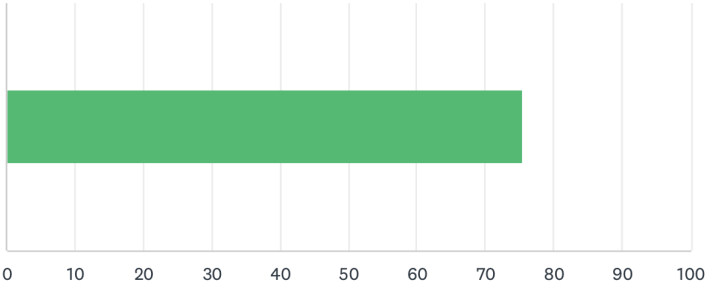
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	76	7,632	101
Total Respondents: 101			

Figure 1.7: Responses to the question "I have a good understanding of the cultural aspects of the job market in my chosen field"

Q7 "I have a good understanding of the cultural aspects of the job market in my chosen field"

Answered: 101   Skipped: 1
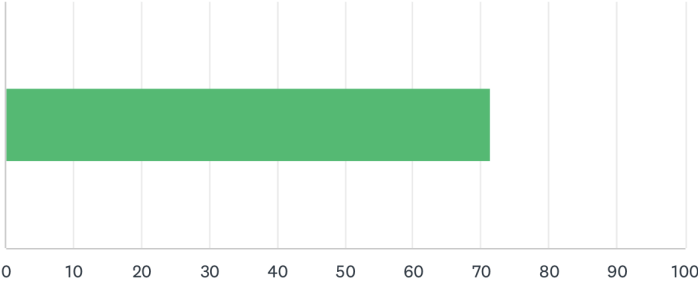
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	71	7,216	101
Total Respondents: 101			

Figure 1.8: Responses to the question "I am confident in my ability to build a network of career contacts"

Q8 "I am confident in my ability to build a network of career contacts"

Answered: 101   Skipped: 1
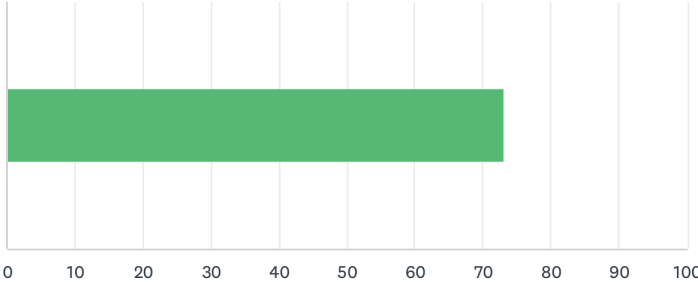
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	73	7,394	101
Total Respondents: 101			

Figure 1.9: Responses to the question "I am confident I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant"

Q9 "I am confident I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant"

Answered: 101   Skipped: 1
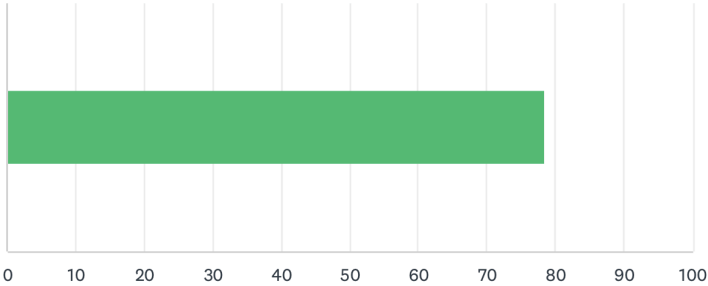
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	78	7,927	101
Total Respondents: 101			

Figure 1.10: Responses to the question "I am confident in my ability to assess my progress and identify my learning"

Q10 "I am confident in my ability to assess my progress and identify my learning"

Answered: 101   Skipped: 1
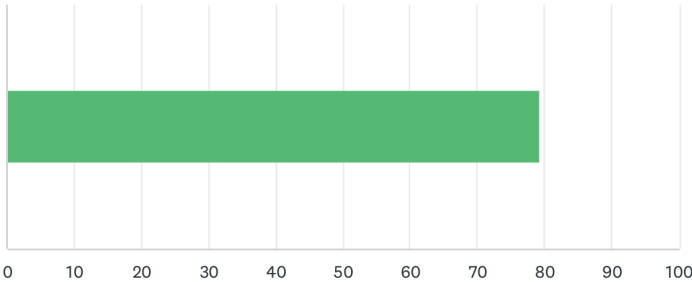
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	79	8,010	101
Total Respondents: 101			

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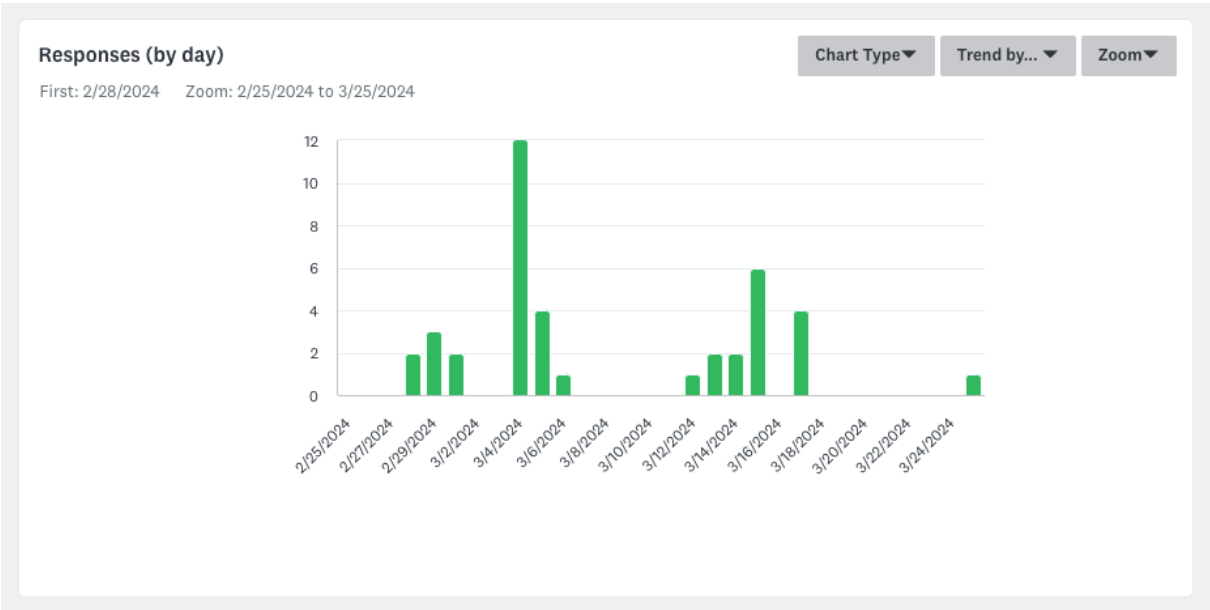
4. INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF STUDY

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, the demand for skilled social media marketing professionals has grown exponentially. In Australia, the Diploma of Social Media Marketing has emerged as a formal qualification that equips individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to excel in this dynamic field.

The Diploma of Social Media Marketing is a nationally accredited course in Australia, developed and owned by Social Media College. (Social Media College, n.d.)

The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), the national regulator for the vocational education and training (VET) sector, has recognised this qualification as the first and only formal credential in social media marketing in the entire world.

According to the information provided on the 'Your Career' website, there are currently 26 Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) across Australia offering the Diploma of Social Media Marketing. (Your Career, n.d.)

This widespread availability ensures that aspiring social media marketers have access to this specialised programme in various regions.

The Diploma of Social Media Marketing is positioned within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) at Level 5, which encompasses diplomas, advanced diplomas, and associate degrees. (TEQSA, n.d.)

As per the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), higher education in Australia consists of qualifications ranging from undergraduate awards, such as bachelor degrees, to postgraduate awards, including graduate certificates, graduate diplomas, master's degrees, and doctoral degrees.

Social Media College, the accredited course owner, has partnered with leading colleges and universities across Australia to deliver the Diploma of Social Media Marketing.

This collaborative approach should ensure that the course content and delivery are aligned with industry best practices and the evolving needs of the social media marketing landscape.

Having been teaching this course for 6 years, I was interested in exploring the applicability of the course teachings and assessments through a quantitative and qualitative research study. By analysing the course content, delivery methods, and student outcomes, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing in preparing students for successful careers in the social media marketing industry.

The central aim of this research is to demonstrate that there are some gaps in the efficiency of the deliverability of the diploma and in the assessments as well.

To achieve this, a quantitative research approach was undertaken, where 102 students who successfully graduated from the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme were surveyed. The survey consisted of 10 validated questions that explored the students' perceptions of the course's effectiveness and their overall satisfaction with the learning experience.

The findings from this quantitative research revealed several areas where the course content, delivery methods, and assessments could be improved to better align with the evolving needs of the social media marketing industry.

To further investigate these findings, a qualitative research component was included. Eight students who had successfully graduated from the Diploma of Social Media Marketing and are currently working in the field were interviewed. These in-depth interviews provided valuable insights into how the students were able to apply the skills and knowledge gained

from the course to real-world digital marketing scenarios, as well as the challenges they faced in doing so.

The qualitative research offered a deeper understanding of the gaps between the course curriculum and industry requirements and proposed potential solutions to enhance the overall effectiveness of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods employed in this study provides a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to evaluating the Diploma of Social Media Marketing. By examining the experiences and perspectives of both educators and students, as well as consulting with industry professionals, the study aims to offer a holistic perspective on the alignment of educational offerings with industry expectations.

The findings from this research study are expected to contribute to the improvement of this diploma in social media marketing course, providing valuable insights for educators, institutions, and students looking to maximise the value of their education in the field of digital marketing.

The research also aims to challenge the conventional assumptions surrounding the effectiveness of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing in addressing the demands and expectations of the ever-evolving social media industry.

As the social media industry continues to shape and reshape the digital landscape, this study endeavours to provide insights and recommendations that challenge conventional wisdom and strive to bridge the gap between formal education and the dynamic realities of the social media profession. By examining the curriculum content, teaching methods, and assessment criteria, the research seeks to determine whether the qualifications conferred by the Diploma of Social Media Marketing genuinely equip individuals with the skills, adaptability, and industry awareness required to navigate and thrive in the fast-paced realm of social media marketing. In summary, this introductory chapter

has provided an overview of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing in the Australian context and the research objectives that aim to evaluate the effectiveness and applicability of this qualification. The subsequent chapters will delve deeper into the research methodology, the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, and the implications of the findings for enhancing the Diploma of Social Media Marketing to better meet the evolving needs of the social media marketing industry.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

The two papers written by author Andrew Rothwell on self-perceived employability, "Self-perceived employability: construction and initial validation of a scale for university students" and "Self-perceived employability: development and validation of a scale," have influenced my research. The paper describes the development of a research instrument to examine business undergraduates' expectations and self-perceptions of employability at three UK universities. In the studies, the first paper, "Self-perceived employability: construction and initial validation of a scale for university students," focuses on the construction and initial validation of the employability scale for university students. The second paper, "Self-perceived employability: Development and Validation of a Scale," details the additional testing of the research tool to scrutinise the expectations and self-perceptions of employability among business students at the post-graduate level, extending the findings from earlier studies with undergraduates. Both focus on the development and validation of a scale to examine university students' employability expectations and self-perceptions. The papers mentioned above provide insights into the development, validation, and deployment of a scale for measuring self-perceived employability among university students and business professionals. (Rothwell et al., 2008, 2009)

Both studies have helped me develop the survey's validation questions and defy the key elements to study. Here are the findings and highlights from the papers I used to create the validating questionnaire, along with the sample sizes:

1. Self-perceived Employability: Construction and Initial Validation of a Scale for University Students

The paper reports the construction and initial validation of a scale for university students to measure self-perceived employability. The scale was found to have a good internal reliability coefficient (alpha =.87) after excluding certain items. They regarded the sample size of 344 cases as adequate for the analyses. The study focused on second-year full-time undergraduate business or business-related honours degree students, with a potential for a third-year work experience (internship) for those in a four-year programme.

2. The study focuses on the development and validation of a scale that measures self-perceived employability.

This paper reports on further testing of the research instrument to examine business students' expectations and self-perceptions of employability at the post-graduate level. The scale was found to have a good internal reliability coefficient (alpha =.84) and discriminant validity based on university commitment. The study analysed 344 cases from a multi-cultural post-graduate sample, deemed an adequate sample size. The results indicated the potential for further studies with refined scales, particularly the combined scale of employability and ambition.

3. The Employability Scale: Development, Validation, and Deployment

This paper focuses on the development, initial validation, and dimensionality of a scale of self-perceived employability, as well as its relationships with subjective career success, professional commitment, and demographic variables. The sample consisted of students from multiple disciplines and over 15 Australian universities, resulting in a final dataset of 10,193 student responses.

The study employed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to establish the underlying structure and reliability of the scale. The scale showed high internal reliability, and the results provided confidence for further statistical analysis of the employability measure. (Bennett & Ananthram, 2021).

Further studies in Australia investigated the relationship between work status and various employability components, including career exploration and awareness, study-career awareness, communication skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration and teamwork, interpersonal and technological skills, and more. They have found a significant positive relationship between paid employment and students' career exploration and awareness, as well as their understanding of how their studies relate to their graduate work and career. (Brosnan et al., 2023).

The literature review yielded the following key findings:

Psychometric Soundness: The papers aim to address the need for a psychometrically sound conceptualization of self-perceived individual employability. They emphasise the importance of developing reliable and valid measures to capture the multidimensional nature of employability. (Asiedu et al., 2023; Baker et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2023; Rothwell et al., 2008).

The papers investigate the relationship between self-perceived employability and demographic variables such as age, gender, and educational qualifications. They seek to understand how these factors may influence students' perceptions of their employability. Researchers (Asiedu et al., 2023; Bennett & Ananthram, 2021) are conducting this study.

Future research directions: The papers acknowledge the potential for further studies and scale refinement. They highlight the need for ongoing research to enhance the understanding of self-perceived employability and its implications for students' career development. Also, they highlight the inconsistency in how researchers define and structure employability attributes, which complicates decision-making for stakeholders (Steurer et al., 2023).

Perceptions of Employability:

For the multi-cultural post-graduate samples, perceptions of employability were positive, with a significant emphasis placed on the university's brand and reputation. The results indicate the potential for further studies with refined scales, particularly the combined scale of employability and ambition (Brosnan et al., 2023; Gamboa et al., 2022; Rothwell et al., 2008, 2009). Perceived employability is associated with career adaptability, career decision-making self-efficacy, job search intentions, and job search behaviours. The internal employability dimension showed stronger associations with these vocational variables. (Le Thai & Phuong, 2019)

The literature review highlights that perceptions of future employability were surprisingly modest, notably for those in arguably the strongest position. This suggests that these self-perceptions may be a product of relative societal expectations, consistent with positional conflict theory.

The researchers discovered a notable correlation between paid employment and students' engagement in career exploration and awareness. Additionally, they observed an improved understanding of how their studies aligned with their future graduate work and profession. (Brosnan et al., 2023)

The studies revealed a gender divide across employability components, with females outperforming males in some constructs and the reverse in others. Additionally, being an international student was associated with some statistically significant differences when compared with domestic students. International students often engage in concurrent work and study. The study found that students who worked part-time or casually with a full-time study load were significantly more confident in their ability to identify and understand the alignment of their studies and graduate career. According to studies conducted by Bennett et al. in 2023, Brosnan et al. in 2023, and Jones et al. in 2015, these findings were significant.

The research papers provide insights into the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding their employability skills. There is a consensus among the participants that critical thinking, problem-solving, and research skills are crucial for success in future work situations. However, there are also concerns about the lack of emphasis on these skills in their university education and the need for better preparation in these areas (Brosnan et al., 2023; Cavanagh et al., 2015; Coetzee, 2014).

Employability Skills: The papers emphasise the importance of developing employability skills such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, teamwork, and interpersonal and technological skills. These skills are considered essential for preparing students for their future careers and are often mentioned by the participants in the studies as crucial for success in the workplace (Brosnan et al., 2023; Cavanagh et al., 2015).

"Higher Education, Graduate Employability, and Labour Market" presents several ideas and analyses on how to raise graduates' employability. It offers some important suggestions and insights:

a. **Work-Integrated Learning:** This chapter explores the rising use of work-integrated learning as a strategic method to increase graduate employability outcomes. This covers events including field excursions, community-based projects, job placements, internships, practicals, and industry involvement. These useful encounters enable students to acquire the required abilities and qualities needed in the workplace (Tran & Context, n.d.).

b. **Employer Views:** It shows how employers view the main generic abilities, knowledge, and traits new graduates should show to be marketable. Beyond mere technical aptitude, employers seek qualities including intercultural competency, adaptability, constant learning, initiative-taking, and suitable attitudes including responsibility and empathy. Graduate employability can be improved by knowing and matching other expectations (Tran & Context, n.d.).

c. **Curriculum Reform and Professional Training:** The development of graduate employability depends much on academics and university leaders. Curriculum reform and professional development must be their top priorities if they are to give pupils vital employability skills, knowledge, and abilities. Only cooperation between universities and businesses will be able to close the gap between graduate competency and employers' needs (Tran & Context, n.d.).

d. **University Strategies:** Notwithstanding efforts by colleges to improve graduate employability, problems including poor leadership, inadequate resources, poor student quality, and poor job orientation still exist. Universities must solve both internal and external issues, raise student quality, manage resources wisely, and change career orientation to better equip graduates with employability skills (Tran & Context, n.d.).

The chapter presents seven main ideas for improving graduate employability and career capacity building within a coordinated framework for employability. These suggestions seek to support graduates in acquiring information, skills, and traits ready for the workforce by means of a more organised, clear, and consistent framework. It underlines how closely curriculum design and support systems for students depend on institutional viewpoints, the experiences of graduates, and employer impressions (Tran & Context, n.d.).

Higher education institutions, legislators, stakeholders, and researchers can help raise graduate employability by following these suggestions and insights, thus arming graduates for success in the dynamic and competitive labour market.

e. **Assessments:** In summary, the research papers consistently emphasise the importance of employability skills, the positive relationship between paid employment and career exploration, and the need for better preparation of students in critical thinking and problem-solving skills. All the research papers I found consistently emphasise the importance of employability skills, as highlighted in 'Areekkuzhiyil - Assessment Practices in Higher Education Myths.' This paper likely discusses debunking myths surrounding assessment practices and may shed light on the critical role of assessing employability skills in higher education. Moreover, 'Herbert et al. - 2014 - Assessment in Higher Education The Potential for' may contribute to the positive relationship between paid employment and career exploration, providing insights into how assessment practices can support students in developing these skills effectively. Additionally, both papers may underscore the necessity for better preparation of students in critical thinking and problem-solving skills, aligning with the findings of my research.

The robust findings from these papers, coupled with their relevance across different demographic groups, offer valuable insights into the work-study relationship and the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding their employability.

The findings are robust and hold true across different demographic groups, providing valuable insights into the work-study relationship and the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding their employability.

6. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research

Introduction

During the period between the 1st of February and the 30th of March (See figure 1.12) , I ran a survey among the students who successfully graduated from two RTOs, both located in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Both institutions offer the Diploma of Social Media Marketing and other courses within the VET sector; they are both accredited by ASQA and CRICOS, which means they can offer the courses to an international audience. The qualitative research is based on surveying 102 students who have graduated or are about to graduate from the Diploma of Social Media Marketing using a 5-point Likert scale. (Louangrath, 2018). This inference is based on the following observations:

●   Rating Scales: The survey questions ask respondents to rate their agreement or perception regarding various statements related to their education, career prospects, and personal abilities. The use of an average rating for responses indicates that participants were likely asked to respond using a scale (e.g., from strongly disagree to strongly agree), which is characteristic of Likert scale surveys.

●   Quantitative Analysis: The data provided includes average ratings and total responses, suggesting a quantitative approach to analysing participants' attitudes, opinions, or perceptions. Likert scales are commonly used in quantitative research for precisely this purpose, as they allow for the quantification of variables that are otherwise difficult to measure directly, such as confidence, agreement, or satisfaction.

●   Subjective Measures Translated into Quantifiable Data: The survey translates subjective experiences and perceptions into quantifiable data

that can be statistically analysed. This approach is typical of Likert scale surveys, which are designed to capture the intensity of respondents' feelings about a given statement in a manner that can be numerically analysed.

● Broad Range of Topics with Unified Response Mechanism: The survey covers a broad range of topics related to career prospects, personal abilities, and academic commitment. Even though the answers are different, the uniform method of response (likely a scaled response option) suggests a structured quantitative method meant to make analysis easier across different areas of inquiry. This method fits well with the Likert-scale methodology.

The Likert scale is a highly versatile tool in quantitative research, enabling researchers to assess complex and nuanced opinions and attitudes by providing a simple, standardised format for responses. This survey format is particularly useful in educational, social science, and organisational behaviour research, where subjective experiences and perceptions are key areas of interest. (Louangrath, 2018).

This structure indicates that the survey collected quantitative data on participants' beliefs regarding how their degree will affect their career prospects, among other possible questions and topics not immediately visible (Bennett & Ananthram, 2021). To provide a thorough analysis, I will further explore the data to summarise the key findings across all questions included in the survey. Let's proceed to examine the entire dataset for its main points. According to the studies, there is no official set of questions that can measure students' employability competences. However, the studies approached in the literature review reveal that the research contributes to a holistic conceptual framework of employability in higher education and provides a valuable tool for scanning higher education students' employability competences and introducing or adapting educational activities for employability. The authors note that the structure of the validated questionnaire is only partially in line with its

underlying conceptual model, suggesting the need for further refinement and updates (Bennett & Ananthram, 2021).

A group of researchers and experts, including members of the Students Union, career staff, academic colleagues from all faculties, experts in digital pedagogy, and academic colleagues in the field of psychology who had firsthand experience creating psychometric tools, created the Graduate Capital Scale (GCS) and the validated questionnaire. This collaborative effort involved a process of reiteration to ensure that the questions were clear, correctly interpreted, and accessible to suit the needs of a student population (Tomlinson et al., 2021). The GCS aims to capture students' perceptions of their career readiness and provide aggregated data on students' self-perceptions against various aspects of their employability. It has been widely used within the authors' institution and has potential for application in diverse student groups, including those with lower levels of career confidence and preparedness and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The GCS has been used for diverse purposes, such as introducing the concept of employability to students, as a self-reflective tool within tutorials, and as a measure of learning gain for specific interventions like career coaching and mentoring.

Survey Methodology

The survey consisted of ten distinct questions, each designed to measure different aspects of the respondents' perceptions of their education, skills, and career readiness. The questions were part of the Graduate Capital Scale (GCS), a validated tool used to assess students' career readiness and employability. The Likert scale used allowed respondents to express their level of agreement or perception on a scale, providing a structured method to quantify subjective measures for statistical analysis. Here's a summary of the validated questions used in the research. These questions and statements are part of the Graduate Capital Scale (GCS) and are

designed to assess various aspects of students' career readiness and employability. To design the survey's questions, I have used validating questions from similar research (Coetzee, 2014; Ramisetty et al., 2017; Rothwell et al., 2008). See below for the questions:

"I believe my degree will improve my career prospects."

"Employers are eager to employ graduates from my college."

"I regard my academic work as a top priority."

"The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for.

"I am confident in my ability to build a network of career contacts.

"I am confident; I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant."

"I am confident in my ability to assess my progress and identify my learning."

Here are the final questions and statements for the validated questionnaire (GCS) I used for the research:

1. "I believe my degree will improve my career prospects."
2. "Employers are eager to employ graduates from my university."
3. "I regard my academic work as top priority."
4. "The skills and abilities that i possess are what employers are looking for."
5. "I have a good understanding of the job market in my chosen field."
6. "I am confident in my ability to present myself professionally in job applications and interviews."
7. "I have a good understanding of the cultural aspects of the job market in my chosen field."
8. "I am confident in my ability to build a network of career contacts."
9. "I am confident; I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant. t"contacts.

10. " I am confident in my ability to assess my progress and identify my learning."

These questions and statements are part of the Graduate Capital Scale (GCS) and were designed to assess various aspects of students' career readiness and employability. To calculate Cronbach's alpha, I used only these columns and excluded any meta-data or respondent-identifying information.

Cronbach's alpha for the data collected is approximately 0.922. This value indicates a very high level of internal consistency among the items in the survey, suggesting that the questions are measuring similar constructs (Gliem & Gliem, n.d.). The key elements that the survey has analysed are the following:

- Career Improvement Belief: Respondents' belief that their degree will improve their career prospects.
- Employer Eagerness: Perception of employers' eagerness to employ graduates from their programme.
- Academic Work Priority: Viewing academic work as a top priority.
- Skills and Abilities Appropriateness: Belief that their skills and abilities are what employers are looking for.
- Job Market Understanding: Understanding of the job market in their field of study.
- Presentation Skills Confidence: confidence in the ability to present themselves effectively in interviews.
- Cultural and Ethical Understanding: Understanding of the cultural and ethical issues in their field.
- Network Building Confidence: Confidence in the ability to build a network of professional contacts.
- Job Acquisition Confidence: confidence in their ability to secure any job they applied for.

- Opportunities Assessment Confidence: confidence in their ability to assess and take advantage of job opportunities.

Qualitative Research

Introduction

In this research, I delve into a comprehensive qualitative analysis of graduates from the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme, utilising in-depth interviews as the secondary research methodology. In-depth interviews were selected to gain detailed insights into the graduates' experiences, perceptions, and challenges. The qualitative method, particularly in-depth interviews, proves to be highly effective when used in conjunction with quantitative research, as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of complex issues that numbers alone cannot capture. By combining both qualitative and quantitative data, a more holistic view of the graduates' journey can be obtained, leading to a deeper understanding of the impact of the programme. Moreover, the personal stories collected during in-depth interviews can provide important context and depth to the statistical results, improving the overall quality of the research outcomes.

The decision to use in-depth interviews stems from my need to explore the subjective experiences of the graduates in a detailed and nuanced manner. Unlike surveys or structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews offer the flexibility to probe deeper into the respondents' answers, uncovering the underlying reasons behind their perceptions and experiences. This method is particularly useful in understanding the context of the respondents' answers, which is crucial for interpreting the effectiveness of the educational programme and its impact on their careers. It allows researchers to gain valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the success or failure of the programme. Furthermore,

in-depth interviews provide a more personal and interactive experience for the respondents, allowing them to express their thoughts and feelings in a more open and candid manner. This can lead to richer data and a better understanding of the complexities involved in the graduates' experiences. In-depth interviews are advantageous in several ways:

- Rich, Detailed Data: In-depth interviews allow for the collection of rich, detailed data that can provide insights into the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This level of detail is essential for understanding the complexities of their experiences and the impact of the educational programme on their careers.

- Flexibility: The flexibility of in-depth interviews allows me to explore new topics that may arise during the conversation. This is particularly useful when dealing with complex topics that may not be fully understood at the outset of the research.

- Contextual Understanding: In-depth interviews provide the context necessary to understand the participants' responses fully. This context can reveal the motivations, challenges, and nuances that are critical for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

- Personal Interaction: The personal interaction between the interviewer and the participant can build rapport and trust, encouraging more open and honest responses. This can lead to more accurate and detailed data collection.

Effectiveness of In-Depth Interviews in Conjunction with Quantitative Research

Combining qualitative and quantitative research methods offers a comprehensive approach to research. While quantitative methods provide breadth by identifying patterns and general trends, qualitative methods offer depth by exploring individual experiences and insights. This

combination of methods improves the trustworthiness and accuracy of the research results.

Quantitative data reveals the 'what' on a broad scale, while qualitative data uncovers the 'why' behind it. For example, quantitative research could show that many graduates feel ready for the job market. Still, it is through qualitative interviews that I can understand the specific aspects of their education that contributed to this preparedness. This collaborative interaction between quantitative and qualitative data strengthens the overall analysis and results in a more solid summary and implications.

Questions Used in the In-Depth Interviews

The following questions were asked during the in-depth interviews to explore various aspects of the graduates' experiences with the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme:

1. Considering the results after completing the Diploma in Social Media Marketing, how much do you think the assessments adequately prepared you for real-life difficulties and provided you with the required skills to actively participate in the workforce?
2. Did the teaching method and course materials provide you with a skill set that enhances your employability, in your opinion?
3. Would a well-planned internship under the supervision of a mentor have improved your readiness by giving you the skills you needed for employment?
4. Were there any uocs (units of competency) not included in the curriculum that you believe would have improved your employability?
5. What specific skills were you lacking when you entered the job market?

I am going to analyse each question to explain the purpose behind it. See the list below:

1. "Considering the results after completing the Diploma in Social Media Marketing, how much do you think the assessments adequately prepared you for real-life difficulties and provided you with the required skills to actively participate in the workforce?"

Purpose: This question aims to evaluate the practical relevance and effectiveness of the programme's assessments. It seeks to understand whether the assessments equipped graduates with the skills needed to tackle real-life challenges in their professional roles. It also aims to gather feedback on how well the programme prepared graduates for the demands of the workforce and if there are any areas that could be improved upon in future iterations of the course.

2. "Did the teaching method and course materials provide you with a skill set that enhances your employability, in your opinion?"

Purpose: This question assesses the overall quality and impact of the teaching methods and course materials. It is designed to gather insights into whether the educational content and delivery methods contributed to the graduates' employability. The feedback will help inform future curriculum development and ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their careers. Additionally, this information will be used to make improvements to the programme in order to better meet the needs of students and employers in the future.

3. "Would a well-planned internship under the supervision of a mentor have improved your readiness by giving you the skills you needed for employment?"

Purpose: The objective here is to explore the perceived value of internships and mentorship in the educational programme. This question aims to determine whether practical, supervised work experience would have enhanced the graduates' readiness for the job market. Understanding the impact of internships and mentorship on graduates'

preparedness for employment is crucial for ensuring the educational programme's effectiveness. By gathering feedback on this aspect, educators can make informed decisions on how to enhance the curriculum and better equip students for success in their careers.

4. "Were there any units of competency (UOCs) not included in the curriculum that you believe would have improved your employability?"

Purpose: This question seeks to identify gaps in the curriculum by asking graduates to reflect on any missing competencies that could have made them more employable. It helps in understanding whether the curriculum covered all necessary areas or if there are suggestions for additional content. This information can be valuable for curriculum review and revision to ensure that graduates are well-prepared for the workforce. Additionally, it allows educators to tailor the curriculum to meet the evolving needs of industries and provide students with relevant skills and knowledge.

5. "What specific skills were you lacking when you entered the job market?"

Purpose: This question aims to pinpoint specific skills that graduates felt unprepared for when entering the job market. It provides insights into potential areas for improvement in the programme to better prepare future graduates. By identifying these specific skills, educators can make targeted adjustments to the curriculum to address any gaps and better equip students for success in their chosen fields. This feedback can also help educational institutions stay current with industry trends and demands, ultimately benefiting both students and employers.

The questions selected for the in-depth interviews were carefully designed to cover multiple dimensions of the graduates' educational and professional experiences. Each question serves a specific purpose and collectively, they provide a holistic view of the effectiveness of the Diploma

of Social Media Marketing programme. Here's why I included each question:

- Evaluating Practical Relevance: The first question focuses on the practical relevance of the assessments, ensuring that the programme's evaluations are aligned with real-world demands. By understanding how well the assessments prepared graduates for actual job scenarios, I can gauge the programme's effectiveness in bridging the gap between education and employment.

- Assessing Teaching Methods and Materials: The second question looks into the teaching methods and course materials, which are fundamental components of any educational programme. By evaluating these elements, I can identify strengths and areas for improvement in the instructional design and content delivery.

- Exploring the Role of Internships and Mentorship: The third question addresses the role of internships and mentorship in enhancing job readiness. Practical experience and guidance from industry professionals are crucial for skill development and confidence building, making this an important area of inquiry.

- Identifying Curriculum Gaps: The fourth question seeks to identify any missing units of competency that could have improved employability. This question helps in pinpointing specific areas where the curriculum could be expanded or updated to better meet industry needs.

- Pinpointing Skill Gaps: The final question aims to identify specific skills that graduates felt were lacking as they entered the job market. Understanding these gaps can inform curriculum enhancements and additional training opportunities to better prepare future graduates.

Key Benefits of Using In-Depth Interviews in This Research

In-depth interviews were particularly beneficial for this research for several reasons:

● Detailed Insights: The in-depth nature of the interviews allowed for comprehensive discussions, providing a wealth of information that would not be possible through more superficial survey methods. This depth of understanding is crucial for evaluating the nuances of the educational programme.

● Personalised Feedback: Interviews provided a platform for personalised feedback, where participants could share their unique experiences and perspectives. This personalised approach helped uncover specific strengths and weaknesses of the programme that may not have been evident through quantitative data alone.

● Flexibility to Explore New Topics: The conversational nature of in-depth interviews allowed for the exploration of new topics that emerged during the discussions. This flexibility ensured that all relevant aspects of the graduates' experiences were captured and analysed.

● Enhanced Participant Engagement: The interactive format of in-depth interviews encouraged greater engagement from participants, leading to more thoughtful and reflective responses. This level of engagement is often harder to achieve with other research methods.

● Contextual Understanding: In-depth interviews provided the context necessary to understand the participants' responses fully. This contextual understanding is critical for interpreting the data accurately and drawing meaningful conclusions.

Integrating qualitative and quantitative research

Combining qualitative, in-depth interviews with quantitative research methods offers a comprehensive approach to evaluating the effectiveness

of educational programmes. Quantitative methods, such as surveys and statistical analysis, provide a broad overview of trends and patterns, while qualitative methods, like in-depth interviews, offer deeper insights into individual experiences and perceptions.

Quantitative data can show what is happening on a larger scale, but qualitative data can explain why it is happening. For example, quantitative research might reveal that a significant percentage of graduates feel prepared for the workforce. Still, it is through qualitative interviews that I can understand the specific aspects of their education that contributed to this preparedness. This complementary relationship between quantitative and qualitative data enriches the overall analysis and leads to more robust conclusions.

In this research, quantitative data from surveys or statistical analysis could provide a general understanding of graduates' satisfaction and employability rates. However, the in-depth interviews offer a deeper exploration of the reasons behind these statistics, uncovering the specific elements of the programme that were most beneficial or in need of improvement.

Conclusion

In-depth interviews have proven to be a highly effective research methodology for this qualitative analysis of graduates from the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme. The detailed, flexible, and contextual nature of in-depth interviews has provided rich insights into the experiences and perceptions of the graduates. When used in conjunction with quantitative research, in-depth interviews offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex issues, enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the research findings. The carefully designed interview questions have covered multiple dimensions of the graduates' educational and professional experiences, providing a holistic view of the programme's

effectiveness. Understanding the practical relevance of assessments, the impact of teaching methods and materials, the role of internships and mentorship, potential curriculum gaps, and specific skill deficiencies allows for drawing meaningful conclusions and providing informed recommendations to enhance the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme.

In conclusion, the use of in-depth interviews in this research has been instrumental in uncovering valuable insights and providing a thorough evaluation of the educational programme. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research provides a strong foundation for comprehending and improving the effectiveness of educational initiatives.

7. CONTENTS AND RESULTS

Quantitative Research

The analysis of the survey results highlights the respondents' perceptions and confidence regarding their education, skills, and career prospects (Table 1.1). Table 1.2 provides a summary of the survey completion metrics. The completion rate for the survey was an impressive 100%, indicating that all participants completed the survey. The typical time spent on the survey was 1 minute and 11 seconds. The survey had a total of 102 respondents. On average, respondents spent 81.82 seconds on the survey, reflecting a consistent and efficient completion rate across the sample population. This table highlights the effectiveness of the survey design in capturing complete and comprehensive responses from all participants.

Data Analysis and Findings

Question 1: "I believe my degree will improve my career prospects."

- Average Rating: 81.82
- Total Responses: 102

Analysis: A high average rating of 81.82 indicates that the majority of respondents strongly believe that their degree will enhance their career prospects. The relatively low standard deviation suggests a consistent belief across the cohort, highlighting a shared confidence in the value of their educational attainment (Figure 1.1).

Question 2 : "Employers are eager to employ graduates from my college."

- Average Rating: 63.57
- Total Responses: 102

Analysis: With an average rating of 63.57, students are moderately optimistic about employers' eagerness to hire graduates from their institutions. The higher standard deviation indicates varying levels of confidence, suggesting that some students may feel less certain about their employability compared to others (Figure 1.2).

Question 3: "I regard my academic work as a top priority."

- Average Rating: 76.88
- Total Responses: 101

Analysis: A strong commitment to academic work is evident, with an average rating of 76.88. This suggests that students prioritise their studies, recognising the importance of academic excellence in achieving career success (Figure 1.3Figure 1.4).

4. Skills and Abilities Appropriateness

Question 4: "The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for."

- Average Rating: 78.17
- Total Responses: 102

Analysis: The high average rating of 78.17 reflects confidence among students that their skills and abilities align with employer expectations. This perception is crucial for career readiness, as it indicates that students feel well-prepared to meet the demands of the job market (Figure1.4).

Question 5: "I have a good understanding of the job market in my chosen field."

- Average Rating: 75.12
- Total Responses: 101

Analysis: Students rate their understanding of the job market relatively highly at 75.12. This suggests that they are well-informed about the opportunities and challenges within their field, which is essential for effective career planning and job search strategies (Figure 1.5).

Question 6: "I am confident in my ability to present myself professionally in job applications and interviews."

- Average Rating: 75.56
- Total Responses: 101

Analysis: With an average rating of 75.56, students express confidence in their ability to present themselves effectively in professional settings. This competence is critical for securing employment, as it directly impacts their performance in job applications and interviews (Figure 1.6).

Question 7: "I have a good understanding of the cultural aspects of the job market in my chosen field."

- Average Rating: 71.45
- Total Responses: 101

Analysis: The average rating of 71.45 indicates a reasonable level of cultural awareness among students. Understanding cultural and ethical issues is increasingly important in a globalised job market, suggesting that students are somewhat prepared to navigate these complexities (Figure 1.7).

Question 8: "I am confident in my ability to build a network of career contacts."

- Average Rating: 73.21
- Total Responses: 101

Analysis: Students rate their confidence in networking at 73.21, reflecting a positive but varied level of assurance in their ability to build professional relationships. Networking is a vital skill for career development, and this rating suggests that students feel confident, capable, and that there is room for growth (Figure 1.8).

Question 9: "I am confident; I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant."

- Average Rating: 78.49
- Total Responses: 101

Analysis: A high average rating of 78.49 shows that students are optimistic about their job prospects, provided their skills and experience match the job requirements. This confidence is crucial for motivation and persistence in job searching (Figure 1.9).

Question 10: "I am confident in my ability to assess my progress and identify my learning."

- Average Rating: 79.31
- Total Responses: 101

Analysis: The average rating of 79.31 indicates strong confidence in self-assessment and learning identification among students. This ability is essential for continuous professional development and career progression (Figure 1.10).

Summary of the survey's results:

1. Career Improvement Belief: The majority of respondents (average rating of 81.82) strongly believe that their degree will enhance their career prospects. This high confidence indicates that students

perceive their education as a valuable investment in their future professional success.

2. Employer Eagerness: The moderate average rating of 63.57 for employer eagerness to hire graduates from their colleges suggests a mixed perception. While some students feel optimistic about their employability, others remain uncertain about how favourably employers view their qualifications.

3. Academic Work Priority: With an average rating of 76.88, students demonstrate a strong commitment to their academic work, recognising it as a top priority. This dedication is globalised for academic success and translates into a solid foundation for their professional endeavours.

4. Skills and Abilities Appropriateness: The high average rating of 78.17 reflects confidence among students that their skills and abilities align with employer expectations. This perception is essential for career readiness, as it indicates that students feel well-prepared to meet the demands of the job market.

5. Job Market Understanding: Students rate their understanding of the job market relatively high at 75.12, suggesting they are well-informed about the opportunities and challenges within their field. This knowledge is vital for effective career planning and job search strategies.

6. Presentation Skills Confidence: With an average rating of 75.56, students express confidence in their ability to present themselves professionally in job applications and interviews. This competence is critical for securing employment, impacting their performance in professional settings.

7. Cultural and Ethical Understanding: The average rating of 71.45 for understanding cultural aspects of the job market highlights a need for greater emphasis on global competencies. Understanding cultural and ethical issues is increasingly important in a globalised job

market, suggesting that students are somewhat prepared but could benefit from further development in this area.

8. Network Building Confidence: Students rate their confidence in networking at 73.21, reflecting a positive but varied level of assurance in their ability to build professional relationships. Networking is a vital skill for career development, and this rating suggests that while students feel capable, there is room for growth.

9. Job Acquisition Confidence: A high average rating of 78.49 shows that students are optimistic about their job prospects, provided their skills and experience match the job requirements. This confidence is crucial for motivation and persistence in job searching.

10. Opportunities Assessment Confidence: The average rating of 79.31 indicates strong confidence in self-assessment and learning identification among students. This ability is essential for continuous professional development and career progression.

The survey results provide a comprehensive view of the perceptions and attitudes of students graduating with a Diploma of Social Media Marketing and a nuanced landscape of perceptions among respondents regarding their educational journey and its implications for their future careers. While there is strong internal confidence in personal abilities, career prospects, and academic commitment, there is a noticeable gap in perceptions of employer eagerness and cultural understanding. Here's a more detailed exploration of the concept:

Lower Confidence in Employer Eagerness and Cultural Understanding

Employer Eagerness: Respondents gave a relatively moderate average rating (63.57) to the statement about employers' eagerness to employ graduates from their course. This suggests that while there is some optimism, there's also a palpable sense of uncertainty or scepticism about

how eagerly employers are looking to hire graduates with their specific qualifications. This moderate level of confidence might stem from a perception of a competitive job market, changes in industry demands, or possibly a disconnect between academic programmes and industry needs. Cultural and Ethical Understanding: The average rating given to the understanding of cultural and ethical issues in their field was 71.45, indicating a reasonable level of insight but also room for improvement. This aspect of their education appears to be viewed as less solidly grounded compared to other areas. It might reflect challenges in fully grasping the complexities of cultural and ethical considerations that are increasingly important in a globalised job market, or it could point to a curriculum that needs to place greater emphasis on these critical issues.

High Confidence in Personal Abilities, Academic Commitment, and Career Advancement Opportunities

Personal Abilities and Academic Commitment: Respondents showed strong confidence in their personal abilities and academic commitment, with high ratings for possessing skills and abilities that employers look for (78.17), regarding academic work as a priority (76.88), and having a good understanding of their job market (75.12). These responses reflect a strong belief in their preparedness and the relevance of their skills, underpinned by a serious approach to their studies. It suggests that respondents see their academic efforts as closely aligned with their career goals and believe they are developing the competencies that will make them attractive to employers. They feel equipped with the necessary skills and confident in their ability to secure employment and progress in their careers.

Career Advancement Opportunities: The survey also revealed high confidence levels in career advancement opportunities, evidenced by high ratings for beliefs that a degree will improve career prospects (81.82),

confidence in securing any job applied for (78.49), and confidence in assessing and taking advantage of job opportunities (79.31). This optimism about career advancement may stem from the respondents' strong belief in their own qualifications and the effectiveness of their education in preparing them for the future. This commitment is likely to translate into strong professional performance.

Implications for Educational Programmes

These findings underscore the importance of bridging the gap between academic preparation and the realities of the job market. Educational institutions should consider the following strategies to enhance career readiness and employability among students:

●   Strengthening Industry Connections: Developing partnerships with industry stakeholders can help align academic programmes with employer needs, providing students with clearer pathways to employment.

●   Enhancing Cultural Competence: Integrating courses on cultural awareness and ethical considerations can better prepare students for the globalised job market.

●   Fostering Continuous Learning: Encouraging a mindset of lifelong learning through workshops, online courses, and professional networks can help students stay updated with industry trends and technological advancements.

●   Practical Experience: Offering internships, live projects, and practical experiences can provide students with real-world exposure and enhance their readiness for diverse job roles.

Conclusion

The findings from the survey conducted among graduates of the two colleges reveal significant insights into their perceptions of career

readiness and employability. The survey, utilising a 5-point Likert scale, covered various aspects of career prospects, skills, academic commitment, and confidence levels. This conclusion synthesises the main findings and discusses the implications for educational institutions, students, and the broader workforce. The survey results provide valuable insights into the perceptions and attitudes of students graduating with a Diploma of Social Media Marketing. While there is strong internal confidence in personal abilities and career prospects, the findings highlight areas for improvement, particularly in employer perceptions and cultural competencies. By addressing these areas through enhanced industry connections, cultural competence, lifelong learning, practical experience, and comprehensive career support, educational institutions can better prepare students for the dynamic and evolving landscape of social media marketing. This holistic approach will ensure that graduates are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to thrive in their careers and contribute effectively to the workforce.

Overall, the survey reveals a generally optimistic view among respondents about their career prospects, skills, and understanding of the job market. While confidence in employer eagerness and cultural understanding is relatively lower, on the other hand, overall confidence in personal abilities, academic commitment, and career advancement opportunities is notably high.

This contrast between the lower confidence in employer eagerness and cultural understanding versus the high confidence in personal abilities and career prospects paints a picture of individuals who are internally confident and committed to their academic and career development, yet aware of external uncertainties and areas that may require further growth or adaptation. It suggests a need for educational programmes to further bridge the gap between academic preparation and the realities of the job market, especially in terms of employer expectations and the global context of work, including cultural and ethical competencies. Additionally,

it highlights the importance of cultivating not just hard skills but also soft skills and global awareness, which are increasingly critical in diverse and evolving professional environments.

The findings from the survey underscore a significant dichotomy in the perceptions of individuals regarding their education and career readiness. This dichotomy reveals a strong internal confidence among respondents in their personal abilities and the potential for career advancement, juxtaposed with a more cautious outlook towards external factors such as employer eagerness to hire and an understanding of cultural nuances in the workplace. This situation particularly resonates with students completing programmes like the Diploma of Social Media Marketing, where the rapid evolution of the field and its diverse demands can present unique challenges.

Qualitative Research

Introduction

This research delves into a comprehensive qualitative analysis of five interviews conducted with graduates from the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme. These eight individuals graduated between 2021 and 2023 and have since embarked on successful careers as social media and digital marketing managers in various industries. The interviews provide insights into how their education prepared them for the workforce, the challenges they faced, and the skills they found valuable or lacking. This analysis aims to identify common themes, key findings, and actionable recommendations to enhance the curriculum. Additionally, the analysis will explore any trends or patterns that emerge from the data, shedding light on potential areas for improvement in the programme. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of these graduates, valuable insights are provided for future students and educators in the field of

social media marketing. Through this research, I aim to bridge the gap between academia and industry by understanding the real-world implications of social media marketing education. The ultimate goal is to ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their careers.

Methodology

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed and analysed to extract significant themes and patterns. The participants' names have been anonymized to maintain confidentiality. During the interviews conducted over the period of February and May 2024, eight participants agreed to participate in the research. The following sections will discuss the key findings and common points derived from the interviews, supported by direct quotes from the participants. The findings will shed light on the effectiveness of social media marketing education in preparing graduates for the industry. Recommendations for curriculum improvements and future research directions will also be provided based on the analysis of the data. Overall, the analysis of the data revealed valuable insights into the impact of social media marketing education on graduates' preparedness for the industry. By examining the key findings and common points from the interviews, we can better understand how to enhance curriculum content and research in this field. This study actively contributes to the ongoing conversation about improving educational practices to meet the evolving needs of the digital marketing industry.

Key Findings

1. Effectiveness of Assessments

The assessments within the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme were pivotal in preparing graduates for real-world challenges.

The hands-on nature of these assessments allowed students to simulate real-life scenarios and apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. Participants appreciated the realistic nature of the assessments, which helped them develop practical skills essential for their roles as social media managers. One participant mentioned, "The assessments were pretty real. They are about things we do on our day-to-day social media. I've learned a lot of tools, like how to organise myself, like all this work behind a piece of content" (Participant A). Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating, "I learned how to sell myself, prepare my resume, cover letter, portfolio, and for the interviews. Additionally, I learned how to keep updated with market trends" (Participant B).

Numerous participants emphasised the effectiveness of these assessments, feeling that they were directly applicable to their day-to-day tasks in professional settings. For instance, one participant noted, "The practical nature of the assessments helped me understand the kind of work I would be doing and prepared me to handle similar tasks in my job" (Participant C). Another participant (Participant D) expressed a similar opinion, saying, "The hands-on projects and case studies were particularly useful in teaching me how to approach real-world problems and find solutions." Overall, the participants found that the practical nature of the assessments provided them with valuable skills and knowledge that they could immediately apply to their work. These hands-on projects and case studies were instrumental in preparing them to tackle challenges in their professional roles.

2. Customer-Centric Approach

The shift towards a customer-centric approach in marketing strategies was not only emphasised by the course curriculum but was also reflected in the practical experiences of the participants. Understanding and anticipating customer needs were seen as critical skills that the course

successfully imparted to its students. One participant stated, "I felt that they were more like customer-needed vision. This is what the customer is going to maybe ask of you" (Participant F). Another added, "The biggest lesson I got from the course was learning what the customer needs and how to meet those needs effectively" (Participant D). This focus on customer-centricity helped participants develop marketing strategies that were not only effective but also resonated with their target audiences.

Participants consistently noted that this approach allowed them to tailor their marketing efforts to achieve better results. One participant highlighted how this approach changed their perspective on marketing: "Before the course, I used to think more about what we wanted to promote than what the customer needed. The course taught me to shift my focus and think from the customer's perspective, which made my campaigns much more effective" (Participant E). Another participant emphasised the practical applications of this approach, stating, "In my current role, understanding the customer's journey and pain points has been crucial. The training I received in the course helped me develop these insights and apply them in my job" (Participant B).

3. Teaching Methods and Course Materials

The teaching methods and course materials were generally well-received, with participants noting their relevance and practicality. The inclusion of current industry practices and tools in the curriculum was particularly beneficial. One participant commented, "The teaching method was very adequate from the perspective of getting in touch with the things being done now" (Participant C). Another stated, "The resources facilitated by the course were good. They provided a solid foundation, but it was up to us to go beyond and stay updated" (Participant H).

The blend of theoretical knowledge and practical application provided a robust foundation that enhanced the employability of graduates.

Participants appreciated the balance between learning fundamental concepts and applying them in real-world scenarios. One participant mentioned, "The mix of theory and practice was perfect. We learned the principles of social media marketing, but we also got to apply them through projects and case studies, which made the learning experience much richer" (Participant A).

However, some participants felt that while the course materials were strong, there was room for improvement in ensuring that the content stayed up-to-date with the rapidly changing landscape of social media marketing. One participant noted, "The industry evolves so quickly that some of the materials felt a bit outdated by the time we were applying them. It would be beneficial to have more frequent updates to the curriculum to reflect the latest trends and tools" (Participant D).

4. Importance of Internships and Mentorship

Participants who had the opportunity to undertake internships found them incredibly valuable. Internships provided real-world experience, allowing students to apply their learning in a professional context and gain confidence in their skills. One participant mentioned, "I started in my company as an intern. And now they're giving me the opportunity to stay and they are investing in me because they saw potential" (Participant D). Another participant emphasised the importance of mentorship, stating, "Having a mentor who is patient and supportive was crucial. It helped me navigate my new role effectively" (Participant G).

Mentorship during internships was also highlighted as a crucial factor in developing practical skills and navigating the complexities of the job market. One participant shared their experience: "My mentor was instrumental in helping me understand the nuances of the industry. They provided guidance on everything from technical skills to interpersonal communication, which was invaluable in my growth" (Participant B).

The structure and quality of internships varied among participants, with some receiving more comprehensive support than others. One participant noted, "While my internship was beneficial, I felt that it could have been more structured. Clearer goals and more regular feedback would have helped me make the most of the experience" (Participant A). Another participant highlighted the importance of having meaningful projects during internships, stating, "Working on real projects during my internship gave me a sense of responsibility and allowed me to see the impact of my work. This was crucial in building my confidence and skills" (Participant C).

5. Curriculum Gaps and Suggestions for Improvement

While the overall curriculum was praised, several participants suggested areas for improvement. These included more hands-on workshops and practical training sessions, particularly in using advanced tools and techniques prevalent in the industry. One participant suggested, "We could have more practical work, like diving into business suites and learning more about digital marketing platforms" (Participant B). Another highlighted the need for more up-to-date content, stating, "The course needs to be more updated. Social media marketing is changing every minute, not every day" (Participant C). The participants also expressed a desire for more training on specific tools and software, which would have better prepared them for their roles.

Participants also suggested the inclusion of more case studies and real-world scenarios to enhance their learning experience. One participant mentioned, "Case studies are a great way to learn from real-world examples. I would have liked to see more of these in the curriculum, focusing on both successful campaigns and ones that faced challenges" (Participant E). Another participant emphasised the need for more workshops on specific skills, stating, "Workshops on topics like video editing, graphic design, and advanced analytics would have been very

helpful. These are skills that are increasingly important in the industry" (Participant D).

Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of learning about emerging technologies and platforms. One participant noted, "Social media platforms and tools evolve rapidly. It would be beneficial to have more content on emerging technologies like AI in marketing, new social media platforms, and advanced analytics tools" (Participant C). Another suggestion from participants was to incorporate hands-on practical exercises in the workshops to enhance learning and skill development. By providing opportunities for participants to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios, they can better understand and retain the information presented. This interactive approach can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, ultimately preparing individuals for the demands of the industry.

6. Need for continuous learning

Given the rapidly evolving nature of social media marketing, continuous learning and staying updated with the latest trends and tools are imperative. Participants emphasised the need for the curriculum to keep pace with industry advancements. One participant noted, "The course needs to be more updated. Social media marketing is changing every minute, not every day" (Participant C). Another participant added, "It's important to keep learning and adapting. The industry is always evolving, and we need to stay ahead of the curve" (Participant E).

Participants also stressed the importance of fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development. One participant mentioned, "The course provided a good foundation, but it's up to us to continue learning and improving our skills. Encouraging lifelong learning is crucial in this field" (Participant H). Another participant added, "Professional development opportunities, such as workshops, conferences,

and online courses, should be promoted as part of the curriculum to help students stay current and competitive" (Participant B). These sentiments highlight the need for ongoing education and skill enhancement in the field. By incorporating professional development opportunities into the curriculum, students can better prepare themselves for success in their careers.

Skill Development and Application

The interviews consistently highlighted the importance of developing practical skills that could be directly applied in professional settings. The realistic assessments and practical internships were instrumental in bridging the gap between theory and practice. The practical approach of the course proved to be extremely helpful in preparing participants for their careers. One participant mentioned, "The assessments and internships were crucial in helping me develop the skills I needed to succeed in my job" (Participant A). Another participant added, "The practical application of what we learned was one of the best aspects of the course" (Participant B). Overall, the course's emphasis on practical skills and real-world experience received high praise from participants. The combination of theoretical knowledge and hands-on training truly sets this programme apart in terms of preparing individuals for their future careers. Participants also appreciated the emphasis on skill development through various course components. One participant noted, "The course was designed to help us build a comprehensive skill set. From content creation to analytics, we covered a wide range of topics that are essential in the industry" (Participant E). Another participant emphasised the importance of continuous practice, stating, "The more we practiced, the more confident we became in our abilities. This was a key factor in our success" (Participant C). Overall, the hands-on approach of the programme allowed participants to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, enhancing

their learning experience. The combination of theory and practice sets this programme apart from others in terms of providing a well-rounded education for future career success.

Support and mentoring

Access to mentors and industry professionals was crucial for the participants. Mentorship provided guidance, support, and real-world insights, helping students build confidence and competence in their roles. One participant stated, "Having a mentor was one of the most valuable parts of my internship. It gave me the confidence to apply what I had learned and navigate the challenges of my new role" (Participant D). Another added, "The support from mentors and trainers was essential in helping me transition from student to professional" (Participant E).

Participants also noted the importance of having mentors who were actively working in the industry, as this provided them with current and relevant insights. One participant mentioned, "My mentor was a marketing manager at a well-known company, and the real-world advice and tips they provided were incredibly valuable" (Participant B). Another participant highlighted the role of mentorship in networking, stating, "Through my mentor, I was able to connect with other professionals in the industry, which opened up more opportunities for learning and career advancement" (Participant C). Overall, mentorship was seen as a crucial aspect of professional development by the participants, not only for gaining industry knowledge but also for expanding their network. Direct access to experienced professionals through mentorship programmes was seen as a valuable resource for career growth and success.

Adaptability and continuous improvement

The dynamic nature of social media marketing requires professionals to be adaptable and committed to continuous improvement. Participants

recognised the need to stay current with industry trends and tools, suggesting that the curriculum should incorporate more up-to-date content and practical training. One participant noted, "The industry is always changing, and we need to keep learning and adapting to stay relevant" (Participant C). Another participant added, "The course provided a good foundation, but it's up to us to continue learning and improving our skills" (Participant E).

Participants also stressed the importance of being proactive in seeking out learning opportunities and staying ahead of industry trends. One participant mentioned, "Staying updated with the latest tools and trends requires continuous effort. Attending webinars, reading industry blogs, and participating in professional development courses are essential" (Participant A). Another participant emphasised the role of curiosity and self-motivation in continuous improvement, stating, "Being curious and eager to learn new things has helped me stay competitive in the field. The course encouraged this mindset, which I find very valuable" (Participant D). Participant D also highlighted the importance of seeking feedback from peers and mentors to identify areas for growth and improvement. This collaborative approach can provide valuable insights and support in achieving professional development goals. Additionally, Participant A mentioned the importance of setting specific goals and milestones to track progress in their professional development journey. This structured approach can help individuals stay focused and motivated towards achieving their desired outcomes. Overall, the participants highlighted the multifaceted nature of continuous learning and improvement in professional development. They emphasised the significance of seeking feedback from various sources, such as supervisors, colleagues, and clients, to gain diverse perspectives and enhance their skills. By incorporating feedback into their development plans, participants can adapt and evolve in their careers effectively.

Differences and Unique Insights

While many themes were common across the interviews, there were also unique insights and differences in the experiences and perspectives of the participants. These differences highlight the diverse backgrounds and career paths of the graduates, as well as the varying ways in which they applied their education to their professional roles. These unique insights can provide valuable learning opportunities for others in similar fields, allowing them to consider different approaches and strategies. Embracing these differences can lead to a more well-rounded and adaptable professional development journey.

Background and prior experience

Participants came from diverse backgrounds, with varying levels of prior experience in social media and digital marketing. Some participants had extensive experience in related fields, while others were new to the industry. This diversity influenced their perspectives on the course and its impact on their careers. One participant, who had a background in journalism, mentioned, "Coming from a journalism background, the course provided me with a great entry point into social media marketing" (Participant D). Another participant, with prior experience in marketing, stated, "The course helped me build on my existing knowledge and refine my skills" (Participant C).

Participants with different backgrounds also highlighted how their prior experience influenced their learning process. One participant noted, "Having a background in communications made it easier for me to grasp the content quickly, but I still learned a lot of new concepts and tools" (Participant B). Another participant, who transitioned from a different field, stated, "I was new to digital marketing, so everything was a learning curve for me. The course was challenging, but it provided a comprehensive introduction to the field" (Participant A). Overall, the

diverse backgrounds of the participants enriched the learning experience by bringing unique perspectives to the course. Individual strengths and areas for improvement shaped each participant's journey through the programme, which ultimately contributed to a well-rounded educational experience.

Career aspirations and goals

The participants had different career aspirations and goals, which influenced their experiences and outcomes. Some participants aimed to specialise in specific areas of social media marketing, while others sought broader roles that encompassed various aspects of digital marketing. One participant mentioned, "I wanted to focus on content creation and strategy, and the course provided me with the skills to do that" (Participant A). Another participant, who aspired to a managerial role, stated, "The course gave me the confidence and knowledge to take on a leadership position in my company" (Participant E).

Participants also shared how the course helped them clarify their career goals and aspirations. One participant noted, "Before the course, I wasn't sure which area of digital marketing I wanted to specialise in. The exposure to different aspects of the field helped me identify my interests and strengths" (Participant G). Another participant mentioned, "The practical projects and internships allowed me to explore various roles within social media marketing, which helped me decide on my career path" (Participant D). Overall, the course provided participants with valuable hands-on experience and networking opportunities that enhanced their confidence in pursuing a career in digital marketing. As a result, many felt more prepared to take on leadership roles within their organisations or pursue further education in the field.

Application of Learning

The way participants applied their learning varied based on their job roles and responsibilities. Some participants found that the course directly prepared them for their tasks, while others had to adapt and build on their knowledge to meet the demands of their jobs. One participant mentioned, "The course gave me a solid foundation, but I had to learn a lot on the job as well" (Participant C). Another participant stated, "I was able to apply most of what I learned directly to my job, which was very beneficial" (Participant B).

Participants also highlighted the importance of adapting their learning to the specific needs of their roles. One participant noted, "While the course provided a general understanding of social media marketing, I had to tailor my approach to fit the unique requirements of my company" (Participant A). Another participant emphasised the value of on-the-job learning, stating, "Learning on the job allowed me to apply theoretical concepts in practical situations, which reinforced my understanding and helped me develop new skills" (Participant D). These insights suggest that while formal training programmes can provide a solid foundation, the ability to customise and apply that knowledge in real-world scenarios is crucial for success in the field. Overall, participants recognised the importance of both structured learning and hands-on experience in their professional development.

Recommendations

Enhancing practical training by increasing the number of hands-on workshops and practical training sessions will better prepare students for real-world challenges. This approach will bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, ensuring that students are well-equipped to handle the tasks they will encounter in their professional roles. Participants consistently emphasised the value of hands-on practice

in developing their skills. One participant mentioned, "The more hands-on practice we have, the more confident we become in applying what we learned" (Participant A). Another participant added, "Workshops and practical sessions were the most beneficial parts of the course. More of these would be very helpful" (Participant B).

Regularly updating the curriculum to reflect the latest trends, tools, and techniques in social media marketing is crucial. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the industry, it is imperative that educational content keep pace with these changes. This will ensure that graduates are knowledgeable about current industry practices and can stay competitive in the job market. Participants emphasised the need for up-to-date content. One participant noted, "The industry changes so quickly. Keeping the curriculum current with the latest trends and tools is essential" (Participant C). Another participant mentioned, "Having the latest information and techniques is crucial for staying relevant in the field" (Participant D).

Expanding internship opportunities and ensuring they are well-structured with effective mentorship will maximise learning outcomes. Internships provide invaluable real-world experience, allowing students to apply their learning in professional contexts. Mentors play a critical role in this process by providing guidance, support, and insights that help students navigate their new roles. Participants highlighted the value of internships and mentorship. One participant mentioned, "Internships are where we apply what we've learned. Having a good mentor makes a huge difference" (Participant E). Another participant added, "Structured internships with clear goals and regular feedback would enhance the learning experience" (Participant B).

Integrating advanced tools and techniques into the curriculum will provide students with a comprehensive skill set. This includes training on the latest software and platforms used in the industry, which will enhance their employability and prepare them for the technological demands of

their jobs. Participants suggested the inclusion of more advanced tools and techniques. One participant noted, "Learning about the latest tools and platforms is critical for our jobs. More training on these would be very beneficial" (Participant C). Another participant added, "Advanced tools and techniques should be an integral part of the curriculum to prepare us for the industry's demands" (Participant D).

Encouraging a culture of continuous learning and professional development will help graduates stay current with industry advancements. By fostering an environment that values ongoing education and skill enhancement, graduates will be better equipped to adapt to the dynamic nature of social media marketing and maintain their relevance in the field. Participants emphasised the importance of continuous learning. One participant mentioned, "The course provided a good foundation, but it's up to us to continue learning and improving our skills. Encouraging lifelong learning is crucial in this field" (Participant A). Another participant added, "Professional development opportunities, such as workshops, conferences, and online courses, should be promoted as part of the curriculum to help students stay current and competitive" (Participant B).

By addressing these recommendations, the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme can better equip its students with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the ever-evolving field of social media marketing. This comprehensive approach will ensure that graduates are prepared to meet the demands of the industry and thrive in their careers. Implementing these suggestions will enhance the programme's reputation and appeal to students seeking a cutting-edge education in social media marketing. Ultimately, this improvement will directly contribute to a higher success rate for graduates entering the workforce.

Conclusion

The findings from these interviews underscore the importance of a practical, hands-on approach to social media marketing education. While the Diploma of Social Media Marketing provided a strong foundation, there is room for improvement, particularly in updating the curriculum and increasing the focus on practical skills. Incorporating more workshops, advanced tools, and current industry practices could further enhance the employability and readiness of future graduates. By adapting to the ever-evolving landscape of social media marketing, educational institutions can better prepare students for the demands of the industry. This will not only benefit graduates in securing employment but also contribute to the overall success of businesses utilising social media as a marketing tool. The participants' experiences highlight the critical role of practical training, mentorship, and continuous learning in their professional development. By integrating these elements into the curriculum and fostering a culture of adaptability and innovation, the programme can better prepare students for the dynamic and fast-paced nature of the social media marketing industry.

Overall, the qualitative analysis of these interviews provides valuable insights into the strengths and areas for improvement of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme. By implementing the recommendations outlined above, the programme can continue to evolve and provide a comprehensive education that meets the needs of its students and the industry. Furthermore, incorporating real-world case studies and practical projects can enhance students' understanding and application of social media marketing concepts. This hands-on approach will better equip graduates with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the competitive job market.

8. DISCUSSION

Introduction

This discussion aims to interpret the findings from both quantitative and qualitative research conducted on graduates of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme. The research explores the practical relevance of the course, the preparedness of the graduates for the workforce, and the effectiveness of the curriculum in meeting industry needs. By comparing these findings with existing literature and theories, this discussion will provide a comprehensive understanding of the programme's strengths, limitations, and areas for improvement. Additionally, I will analyse the potential implications of the research findings for future programme development and enhancement. By synthesising both quantitative and qualitative data, I aim to offer valuable insights that can inform decision-making processes within the field of social media marketing education.

The Complexity of Transitioning from Education to the Workforce

Students who have completed a Diploma of Social Media Marketing are entering a vibrant and fast-paced field. They often possess a solid foundation in the principles of social media marketing, including content creation, strategy development, and analytics. However, the social media landscape is not only vast but also in a constant state of flux, with new platforms emerging, algorithms changing, and consumer behaviours evolving. This dynamic nature can make it challenging for recent graduates to feel fully prepared for every aspect of the workforce they encounter, particularly when it comes to:

- **Diverse Workforce Expectations:** Employers may seek a wide array of specific skills and experiences, ranging from expertise in niche platforms to the ability to engage with global audiences. For instance, a company targeting a younger demographic might prioritise skills on emerging platforms like TikTok or Twitch, while another focused on B2B marketing might value LinkedIn expertise more. Graduates might find themselves well-versed in certain platforms but less familiar with others, highlighting a gap between their education and the diverse requirements of the job market.

- **Rapid Technological Advancements:** The tools, platforms, and software used in social media marketing are continually evolving. While students may learn to master certain tools during their studies, the digital marketing landscape can shift dramatically by the time they enter the workforce. New software for analytics, content management, and customer engagement can emerge, requiring ongoing learning and adaptation. This rapid pace of change underscores the importance of cultivating adaptability and a commitment to continuous learning.

- **Cultural and Ethical Considerations:** Understanding the cultural and ethical implications of social media campaigns is crucial yet complex. Social media platforms are global, and content that resonates in one cultural context may not translate well or could even cause offence in another. Additionally, ethical concerns, such as data privacy and misinformation, are increasingly at the forefront of social media marketing. This aspect of the job requires not only an understanding of cultural nuances but also the ability to navigate ethical dilemmas, areas where confidence among graduates may be lower.

Interpretation of Results

Effectiveness of Assessments

The assessments within the programme were found to be highly effective in preparing graduates for real-world challenges. The hands-on nature of these assessments enabled students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, which is crucial for skill development in social media marketing. The participants appreciated this approach, as it provided them with practical skills that are directly applicable to their professional roles. This finding suggests that practical, hands-on assessments are essential for bridging the gap between education and employment. This aligns with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasises the importance of experiential learning in skill acquisition. By simulating real-life scenarios, assessments can enhance the employability of graduates, making them better prepared for the workforce. However, the research also highlighted some limitations. While the assessments were practical, there were areas where graduates felt unprepared, such as advanced technical skills and industry-specific tools. This suggests that while the current curriculum is effective, there is a need for continuous updates to keep pace with industry advancements. Incorporating regular feedback mechanisms and industry collaborations can help bridge these gaps and ensure that graduates are equipped with the most relevant skills upon entering the workforce. By staying agile and responsive to changing industry demands, educational institutions can better prepare their students for success in their careers. Additionally, providing opportunities for hands-on experience and internships can also help bridge the gap between academia and industry. This practical exposure can further enhance students' readiness for the workforce and their ability to adapt to real-world challenges.

Customer-Centric Approach

The shift towards a customer-centric approach in marketing strategies was another significant finding. The course curriculum's emphasis on this strategy struck a chord with the graduates and assisted them in creating marketing plans that successfully met customer needs. This aligns with contemporary marketing theories that stress the importance of customer-centricity in achieving marketing success. The focus on a customer-centric approach is critical in today's marketing landscape, where customer experience is paramount. By teaching students to prioritise customer needs, the programme equips them with a mindset that is essential for creating successful marketing campaigns. Despite this strength, some participants felt that the curriculum could further emphasise customer journey mapping and advanced customer analytics. These areas are becoming increasingly important in digital marketing and should be incorporated into the curriculum to enhance the programme's relevance. By integrating these components, students will be better prepared to navigate the ever-evolving digital marketing landscape and meet the demands of modern consumers. This adjustment could further enhance the programme's effectiveness in preparing students for successful careers in marketing. Additionally, giving students hands-on experience with industry platforms and tools could give them practical skills that employers highly value. By incorporating real-world applications into the curriculum, students can gain a deeper understanding of how to apply theoretical knowledge in a professional setting.

Teaching Methods and Course Materials

The teaching methods and course materials were generally well received. Participants noted that the inclusion of current industry practices and tools in the curriculum was particularly beneficial. This blend of theoretical knowledge and practical application provided a robust foundation that

enhanced the employability of graduates. The positive feedback on teaching methods and course materials underscores the importance of aligning educational content with industry practices. This approach not only makes the learning experience more engaging but also ensures that graduates are well-prepared to meet the demands of their profession. However, there were suggestions for improvement. Some participants felt that the course could include more advanced tools and techniques. This highlights the need for continuous curriculum development to incorporate the latest industry trends and technologies. By regularly updating course content to reflect current industry standards, educational institutions can better equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their careers. Additionally, seeking feedback from both students and industry professionals can help ensure that graduates are well-prepared for the ever-evolving job market.

Importance of Internships and Mentorship

Participants who had the opportunity to undertake internships found them incredibly valuable. Internships provided real-world experience, allowing students to apply their learning in a professional context and gain confidence in their skills. According to the participants, the best way to embody learning is through practice. Mentorship during internships was also highlighted as a crucial factor in developing practical skills and navigating the complexities of the job market. The structure and quality of internships varied among participants, with some receiving more comprehensive support than others. While some participants had well-structured internships with clear goals and regular feedback, others felt that their internships could have been more organised and impactful. This variation underscores the importance of standardising internship programmes to ensure that all students receive meaningful and beneficial experiences. The personal interaction between the mentor and the mentee

during internships can build rapport and trust, encouraging more open and honest exchanges of knowledge and experience. This interaction is essential for students to gain insights into the industry's nuances and build the confidence needed to navigate their new roles effectively. Standardising internship programmes can also help ensure that students are matched with mentors who can provide valuable guidance and support throughout their internship. By establishing clear expectations and goals for both parties, students can make the most of their internship experience and develop important skills for their future careers. Furthermore, standardising internship programmes can also help streamline the onboarding process for students and mentors alike, making it easier to track progress and measure success. This structured approach can lead to more meaningful and impactful learning experiences for students, ultimately preparing them for success in their chosen field.

Curriculum Gaps and Suggestions for Improvement

While the overall curriculum was praised, several participants suggested areas for improvement. These included more hands-on workshops and practical training sessions, particularly in using advanced tools and techniques prevalent in the industry. Participants also suggested the inclusion of more case studies and real-world scenarios to enhance their learning experience. There were calls for more in-depth training on customer journey mapping and advanced customer analytics. Overall, participants felt that incorporating these suggestions would better equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their careers. By addressing these curriculum gaps, the programme can ensure that graduates are well-prepared to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving industry landscape. These areas are becoming increasingly important in digital marketing and should be incorporated into the curriculum to enhance the programme's relevance. Additionally, participants highlighted

the importance of learning about emerging technologies and platforms. Social media platforms and tools evolve rapidly, and it would be beneficial for the curriculum to include content on emerging technologies like AI in marketing, new social media platforms, and advanced analytics tools. Participants also expressed a desire for more training on specific tools and software, which would have better prepared them for their roles, such as Hubspot and Mailchimp. This highlights the need for continuous curriculum development to incorporate the latest industry trends and technologies. By staying up-to-date with industry advancements, participants can better position themselves for success in their careers. Continuous curriculum development is essential to ensure that professionals are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the ever-changing digital landscape.

The need for continuous learning

Given the rapidly evolving nature of social media marketing, continuous learning and staying updated with the latest trends and tools are imperative. Participants emphasised the need for the curriculum to keep pace with industry advancements. Participants also stressed the importance of fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development. The course provided a good foundation, but it is up to the graduates to continue learning and improving their skills. Encouraging lifelong learning is crucial in this field. Professional development opportunities, such as workshops, conferences, and online courses, should be promoted as part of the curriculum to help students stay current and competitive. The dynamic nature of social media marketing requires professionals to be adaptable and committed to continuous improvement. Participants recognised the need to stay current with industry trends and tools, suggesting that the curriculum should incorporate more up-to-date content and practical training. The more hands-on practice students have,

the more confident they become in applying what they learned. Continuous learning through workshops, conferences, and online courses helps graduates stay current with industry trends and maintain their relevance in the field. By engaging in these opportunities, professionals can enhance their skills and knowledge, ultimately making them more competitive in the ever-evolving social media landscape. Graduates who prioritise ongoing education and practical experience are better equipped to navigate the challenges of this fast-paced industry and stand out among their peers.

Interpretations

The findings from this research underscore the critical importance of practical, hands-on learning and a customer-centric approach in social media marketing education. By continuously updating the curriculum to include advanced tools and techniques, educational programmes can better prepare graduates for the dynamic and fast-paced nature of the digital marketing industry. This research highlights that experiential learning, when combined with a strong theoretical foundation and a focus on customer needs, significantly enhances the preparedness and employability of graduates. It also suggests that incorporating real-world case studies and industry partnerships can further enrich the learning experience and provide students with valuable insights into current industry practices. By prioritising these elements in social media marketing education, institutions can ensure that graduates are well-equipped to succeed in the ever-evolving digital landscape. Furthermore, integrating hands-on projects and internships into the curriculum can offer students practical experience and networking opportunities that are crucial for career advancement in the field of social media marketing. This holistic approach to education not only equips graduates with the necessary skills but also fosters a deeper

understanding of industry trends and challenges. Ultimately, this comprehensive approach prepares students to adapt to the rapidly changing demands of the industry and empowers them to make meaningful contributions in their future careers. Graduates who have received this type of education are better positioned to thrive in the competitive world of social media marketing. Here is a list of the key findings:

- Enhancing Industry Connections

One of the key areas for improvement is strengthening connections between academic programmes and industry stakeholders. By developing partnerships with businesses and industry leaders, educational institutions can ensure that their curriculum aligns with current employer needs. This alignment can help bridge the gap between academic training and practical job market requirements, providing students with clearer pathways to employment. Initiatives such as industry advisory boards, guest lectures from professionals, and collaboration on real-world projects can enhance students' understanding of industry expectations and improve their employability.

- Promoting Cultural Competence

The lower rating for cultural and ethical understanding indicates a need for greater emphasis on global competencies within the curriculum. Educational institutions should integrate courses on cultural awareness, diversity, and ethical considerations into their programmes. These courses can better prepare students to navigate the complexities of a globalised job market and ensure they are equipped to work effectively in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, institutions can offer opportunities for international exposure, such as study abroad programmes, internships

with global companies, and virtual exchanges with students from other countries.

- Fostering Lifelong Learning

Given the rapid pace of technological advancements and the evolving nature of the social media marketing field, fostering a mindset of lifelong learning is crucial. Educational institutions should encourage students to engage in continuous professional development through workshops, online courses, and professional networks. By promoting a culture of ongoing learning, institutions can help students stay updated with industry trends and technological advancements, ensuring they remain competitive in the job market.

- Providing Practical Experience

Practical experience is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Educational institutions should offer internships, live projects, and practical experiences as part of their programmes. These opportunities provide students with first-hand exposure to the demands of the workforce and help them develop the practical skills needed for various job roles. Collaborations with industry partners can also facilitate internships and job placements, enhancing students' readiness for diverse career opportunities.

- Addressing Employer Perceptions

The moderate confidence in employer eagerness suggests a need to address employer perceptions of graduates. Educational institutions can work to enhance the reputation of their programmes by showcasing the success of their graduates, engaging in industry partnerships, and participating in accreditation and quality assurance processes. Additionally, institutions can support students in developing strong professional profiles

through career services, resume-building workshops, and mock interviews. By helping students present themselves effectively to potential employers, institutions can improve graduates' job prospects and overall employability.

- Supporting Students' Career Development

To support students' career development, educational institutions should provide comprehensive career services, including career counselling, job search assistance, and networking opportunities. Careers can help students identify their strengths and areas for improvement, set career goals, and develop personal identities. Job search assistance can include resources such as job boards, career fairs, and employer networking events. Networking opportunities can be facilitated through alumni networks, industry associations, and professional organisations for students to build connections and gain insights from experienced professionals.

- Encouraging Self-Assessment and Reflection

The high confidence in opportunity assessment and self-learning highlights the importance of self-assessment and reflection in career development. Educational institutions can incorporate reflective practices into their programmes, encouraging students to regularly evaluate their progress, set learning goals, and identify areas for improvement. Tools such as reflective journals, self-assessment questionnaires, and mentorship programmes can support students in this process, helping them develop a proactive approach to their professional growth.

Limitations of the Research

While this research provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size for the qualitative research was relatively small, which

may limit the generalizability of the findings. The qualitative data is rich and detailed, but the small sample size means that the findings may not be representative of all graduates from the programme. Additionally, the research relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to bias. Current circumstances may have an impact on participants' memories and perceptions, and there is always a chance that respondents will give answers that are socially acceptable. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to validate these findings further. Expanding the sample size and including graduates from different cohorts and backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the programme's effectiveness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme. To keep pace with industry advancements, the curriculum should be regularly updated to include the latest tools and techniques in social media marketing. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the industry, it is imperative that educational content keep pace with these changes. This will ensure that graduates are knowledgeable about current industry practices and can stay competitive in the job market. Continuing to focus on hands-on assessments that simulate real-world scenarios is essential for developing practical skills that enhance employability. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of practical experience in developing their skills. Workshops and practical sessions were the most beneficial parts of the course. More of these would be very helpful. Incorporating more in-depth training on customer journey mapping and advanced customer analytics would better prepare graduates for the demands of the industry. The focus on a customer-centric approach is critical in today's marketing landscape, where customer experience is paramount. Including more advanced tools and techniques in the curriculum will ensure that the

educational programme is aligned with current industry practices. Learning about the latest tools and platforms is critical for the jobs of the future. Advanced tools and techniques should be an integral part of the curriculum to prepare students for the industry's demands. Encouraging continuous learning through professional development opportunities, such as workshops, conferences, and online courses, will help graduates stay current with industry trends and maintain their relevance in the field. By fostering an environment that values ongoing education and skill enhancement, graduates will be better equipped to adapt to the dynamic nature of social media marketing. This will ultimately lead to greater success in their careers and help them stay ahead of the competition. Graduates who are able to continuously update their skills and knowledge will be more attractive to employers and have better job security in the rapidly changing field of social media marketing.

The findings from these interviews underscore the importance of a practical, hands-on approach to social media marketing education. While the Diploma of Social Media Marketing provided a strong foundation, there is room for improvement, particularly in updating the curriculum and incorporating advanced tools and techniques. By addressing these areas, the programme can better equip its students with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the ever-evolving field of social media marketing. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods employed in this study provides a comprehensive evaluation of the programme, offering valuable insights for educators, institutions, and students alike. The participants' experiences highlight the critical role of practical training, mentorship, and continuous learning in their professional development to be able to embody learning. By integrating these elements into the curriculum and fostering a culture of adaptability and innovation, the programme can better prepare students for the dynamic and fast-paced nature of the social media marketing industry. The use of in-depth interviews in this research has been instrumental in

uncovering valuable insights and providing a thorough evaluation of the educational programme. This qualitative approach, combined with quantitative research, offers a robust framework for understanding and enhancing the effectiveness of educational initiatives. The findings suggest that a strong emphasis on practical learning, continuous curriculum updates, and a focus on customer-centric strategies are essential for preparing graduates to meet the demands of the digital marketing industry. Additionally, the research highlights the importance of incorporating real-world experiences and industry partnerships into educational programmes to bridge the gap between theory and practice. By aligning curriculum with industry needs and trends, educational institutions can better equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the dynamic field of digital marketing. This approach ensures that graduates are not only knowledgeable about current industry practices but also have the practical experience needed to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of digital marketing. Ultimately, this holistic approach to education better prepares students for the challenges and opportunities they will encounter in their careers. In addition, fostering strong partnerships with industry professionals can provide students with valuable networking opportunities and real-world insights. By integrating hands-on projects and internships into the curriculum, educational institutions can further bridge the gap between theory and practice, giving students a competitive edge in the job market.

The contrast identified in the survey results suggests a pressing need for educational programmes in social media marketing and related fields to adopt a more holistic approach. This approach would not only cover the technical and strategic aspects of marketing but also emphasise the development of soft skills, cultural competence, and ethical reasoning. Examples of strategies to bridge this gap might include:

- Integration of Real-World Projects and Internships: Incorporating practical experiences through live projects, internships, or collaborations with diverse organisations can help students gain firsthand exposure to the varied demands of the workforce and develop a broader range of competencies.

- Continuous Learning and Professional Development: Encouraging a mindset of lifelong learning where graduates remain engaged with emerging trends, platforms, and tools through workshops, online courses, and professional networks. This ongoing engagement can help them stay ahead in a rapidly evolving field.

- Cross-cultural Communication and Ethical Training: Offering courses or modules focused on global communication strategies, cultural sensitivity, and ethical decision-making in digital marketing. This training can better prepare students to navigate the global and multifaceted challenges they will face in their careers.

In conclusion, while graduates of social media marketing programmes may feel confident in their foundational knowledge and skills, the dynamic and diverse nature of the field poses significant challenges. Educational institutions have a critical role in preparing students not just for the jobs of today but for the evolving demands of tomorrow, ensuring they are equipped to adapt, grow, and thrive in the global digital marketing landscape.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Diploma of Social Media Marketing in preparing graduates for the rapidly evolving landscape of the social media marketing industry. Utilising a mixed-method approach that combined both quantitative and qualitative research, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement within the programme. The findings from both the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews reveal that the Diploma of Social Media Marketing is generally effective in equipping students with essential skills and knowledge. Graduates expressed confidence in their abilities to meet the demands of their professional roles, highlighting the practical relevance of the course assessments and the customer-centric approach emphasised in the curriculum. However, the research also pinpointed areas for enhancing the curriculum to align more closely with industry advancements and employer expectations. Suggestions for improvement include incorporating more hands-on practical experience, updating course content to reflect the latest trends in social media marketing, and providing opportunities for networking with industry professionals to enhance job prospects post-graduation. Additionally, a stronger focus on data analytics and emerging technologies could further enhance the competitiveness of graduates in the ever-evolving field of social media marketing. By integrating more real-world projects and case studies into the curriculum, students can gain valuable experience applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations. Furthermore, offering workshops or seminars on emerging platforms and tools in social media marketing can ensure graduates are well-equipped to navigate the rapidly changing landscape of digital marketing.

The practical, hands-on nature of the assessments was found to be highly beneficial in preparing graduates for real-world challenges. These assessments allowed students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world

scenarios, thereby improving their skill development. This approach aligns well with experiential learning theories and is crucial for bridging the gap between education and employment. Despite this strength, some graduates felt unprepared for advanced technical skills and industry-specific tools, indicating the need for continuous curriculum updates. Emphasising a customer-centric approach in the curriculum assisted graduates in crafting marketing strategies that addressed customer needs effectively. This aspect of the programme aligns with contemporary marketing theories that stress the importance of understanding and prioritising the customer experience. However, there is room for further emphasis on advanced customer analytics and customer journey mapping to enhance the programme's relevance and effectiveness in today's digital marketing landscape. By incorporating these advanced techniques, graduates will be better equipped to navigate the complexities of modern marketing practices and stay ahead of industry trends. Additionally, integrating real-world case studies and practical exercises could provide students with valuable hands-on experience applying these concepts in a professional setting.

The teaching methods and course materials received positive feedback for their inclusion of current industry practices and tools. This blend of theoretical and practical knowledge provided a solid foundation that enhanced graduates' employability. However, some participants suggested that the curriculum should include more advanced tools and techniques, underscoring the need for continuous updates to keep pace with industry trends and technologies. Internships and mentorship were highlighted as crucial elements in the professional development of graduates. These experiences provided real-world exposure and practical skills that are essential for career readiness. The differing quality and structure of internships among participants indicate the necessity for standardised internship programmes that provide valuable and comprehensive learning opportunities. Participants also emphasised the importance of mentorship

in providing guidance and support as students navigate their career paths. They suggested that mentorship programmes be formalised and expanded to ensure all students have access to valuable guidance from industry professionals.

The implications of these findings are important for educational institutions that provide the Diploma of Social Media Marketing. Practical, hands-on learning and a customer-centric approach are essential for preparing graduates to meet industry demands. Regular curriculum updates and the inclusion of advanced tools and techniques are necessary to keep the programme relevant and effective. Additionally, well-structured internships and mentorship programmes are vital for bridging the gap between academic learning and professional application. This research is not without limitations. The sample size for the qualitative research was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data can introduce bias. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to further validate these findings. Furthermore, incorporating a mixed-methods approach could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. By combining numerical data with qualitative insights, researchers can obtain a more complete view of the programme's effectiveness. This approach would help to address potential limitations and enhance the overall validity of the research findings.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance the Diploma of Social Media Marketing programme. Firstly, it is essential to incorporate regular curriculum updates that reflect the latest industry trends, tools, and techniques. This ensures that graduates are well-prepared for the current job market and can adapt to its dynamic nature. Emphasising practical learning through hands-on assessments and real-world projects is crucial for developing practical skills that enhance employability. Such an approach aligns with experiential learning theories, providing students with the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in

practical settings. Additionally, fostering strong industry partnerships can provide students with valuable networking opportunities and potential job placements upon graduation. By engaging with professionals in the field, students can gain insights into the industry and build relationships that may lead to future career opportunities.

Moreover, integrating more in-depth training on customer journey mapping and advanced customer analytics is necessary to better prepare graduates for the demands of the industry. These advanced techniques are becoming increasingly important in digital marketing and can significantly enhance the effectiveness of marketing strategies. Developing well-structured internship programmes with effective mentorship will provide comprehensive real-world experience, bridging the gap between academic learning and professional application. Internships and mentorship are critical for career readiness, offering students practical exposure and the guidance needed to navigate their professional roles successfully.

Fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development through workshops, conferences, and online courses will help graduates stay current with industry trends and maintain their relevance in the field. Encouraging lifelong learning ensures that graduates can adapt to changes in the industry and continue to develop their skills throughout their careers. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods employed in this study provides a robust evaluation of the programme, offering valuable insights for educators, institutions, and students alike. The findings suggest that a strong emphasis on practical learning, continuous curriculum updates, and a focus on customer-centric strategies are essential for preparing graduates to meet the demands of the digital marketing industry.

In conclusion, the Diploma of Social Media Marketing has been effective in preparing graduates for careers in the dynamic field of social media marketing. However, continuous improvement is necessary to keep the

programme aligned with industry advancements and employer expectations. By addressing the identified areas for improvement, educational institutions can enhance the programme's effectiveness, thereby better equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their careers. Implementing the recommendations outlined in this study will help ensure that the programme remains relevant and effective in preparing graduates for the ever-evolving social media marketing landscape. This research adds to the continuous dialogue on enhancing educational practices to address the changing requirements of the digital marketing industry. By continuously updating the curriculum, emphasising practical learning, and fostering a culture of continuous professional development, educational programmes can provide a comprehensive education that meets the needs of their students and the industry. Furthermore, collaboration with industry professionals and regular feedback from graduates can also help ensure that the programme stays up-to-date and responsive to changing trends. Moreover, by incorporating real-world case studies and hands-on projects, students can gain valuable experience and skills that will better prepare them for success in the field of social media marketing.

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