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The Development of Competent Marketing Professionals

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The process of transition from university undergraduate to business professional is a crucial stage in the development of a business career. This study examines both graduate and employer perspectives on the essential skills and knowledge needed by marketing professionals to successfully perform their roles. From in-depth interviews with 14 graduates and 14 employers, it is apparent that the transition trajectory is both diverse and dynamic. The first main finding is that the transition from marketing graduate to employee is marked by a lack of skills to organically “fit the organization.” Another finding is related to specific competencies such as the ability to have and, most importantly, apply marketing knowledge. These findings have strong implications for the development and redesign of curricula to produce highly skilled, employable graduates and to assist universities in retaining a competitive advantage within the tertiary sector.

Keywords: *competencies; skills; marketing graduates; employees*

Marketing professionals and academia debate and rigorously seek to identify the critical components of marketing education, in particular what skills, knowledge, and competencies graduates should be equipped with to secure employment and transform into competent marketing practitioners (Gray, Ottesen, Bell, Chapman, & Whiten, 2007; Melaia, Abratt, & Bick, 2008). Some hold the view that tertiary degrees should develop problem-solving and analytical skills (Floyd & Gordon, 1998), whereas others perceive specialist marketing skills to be the key requirements (Hill, McGowan, & Maclaran, 1998). Varied opinions and the difficulty in isolating the marketing function from business operations (Hill et al., 1998) have contributed to the problem of identifying the specific competencies required for a marketing professional. Marketing professionals are employed in a wide spectrum of industries, posing challenges to equip students with every possible skill needed to be employable (Kelley & Bridges, 2005). This leads to a constant search for the best blend of skills and competencies that prepare marketing graduates for their professional careers.

Professional competence has also been the focus of research attention across the spectrum of vocational disciplines for

some time (Daley, 1999), and discussions about continuing professional education have noted the different learning needs of novice professionals compared with experts (Daley, 1999; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985; Epstein & Hundert, 2002). Tertiary institutions seek the optimal balance between generic and marketing-specific skills when designing the curriculum. This requires the identification of the theoretical knowledge and generic professional skills to be taught at the undergraduate level. It is unclear what subsequent personal development and work experiences are needed after graduation to develop novices into competent marketing professionals. Information of this kind would be beneficial in two ways: first, to better inform undergraduate teaching processes and second, to suggest the kinds of professional development that could be offered. Although some of these questions were raised in the literature, none of the studies looks at graduates and their employers simultaneously and during the early years of transition from recent graduate to marketing professional, or the implications for the development of marketing skills and competencies. Our research addresses this gap by contrasting the views of graduates and their employers, thus identifying

both perspectives about the required and desired skills and competencies.

This research utilizes in-depth interviews with graduates who have had at least 4 years' work experience post graduation and their employers. It examines skill and knowledge requirements at entry level in comparison with those after 4 years' experience.

The Stages From Novice to Expert

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1985) provide a model identifying five stages of professional career development from beginner to expert: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. The novice, who is in his or her first year of employment, relies heavily on rules and theory. As professionals acquire experience in their role, they move toward a more holistic perspective and the ability to draw on diverse, ambiguous situations to problem-solve effectively. At about 3 to 5 years, under the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model, a professional can be described as competent, which means that he or she can organize, plan, and deal with some unpredictable situations (Daley, 1999, p. 134). The dimensionality of professional competence was raised by Schon (1987) in his discussions of *artistry* and by Polanyi (1967) in his deliberations about the concepts of tacit and implicit knowing. The significant point is that although skills, attitudes, and knowledge are more easily separated and identifiable in novice professionals, as professionals become more proficient and develop expertise, their various knowledge sources (practical, theoretical, and experiential) begin to merge in their problem-solving processes.

To provide a research framework to investigate the gap surrounding the current understanding of the transition from novice marketing graduate to becoming competent, the stages of professional development (Daley, 1999; Dreyfus, 2007; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985) were matched to the typical roles undertaken by graduates as they progressed in their employment (Shuptrine & Willenborg, 1998; see Table 1).

Skills and Competencies

Several studies have developed frameworks of professional marketing skills, including generic employability skills (O'Brien & Deans, 1995), generic skills and marketing knowledge (Gray, Whiten, & Knightbridge, 2002), or single subject attributes, such as marketing planning (Hill et al., 1998), understanding market diversity (Holzmuller & Stottinger, 2001), and employer perceptions of marketing skills (Parker, Pettijohn, & Luke, 1996). One Australian study surveyed 14 Australian universities using 59 course outlines and discovered that problem solving, communication, planning, and organizing were key skills (Bennett

& Rundle-Thiele, 2003). A wide range of desirable generic skills has been identified by Australian businesses, including communication; teamwork; problem identification; solution and strategy development; adaptability; creativity; literacy; numeracy; time management; resource management; collection, analysis, and organization of information; being open to new ideas; management of personal learning; and information technology (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998; Field, 2001). However, as research on graduating accountants points out, in addition to generic and personal skills, graduates require functional competencies unique to their chosen profession (Ahadiat, 2002; Foster & Bolt-Lee, 2002).

Other research draws out the differences in stakeholder perceptions. For example, investigation of student understanding of marketing and the marketing role highlighted the differences between employers and students (Gray et al., 2007; Kelly & Gaedeke, 1990; O'Brien & Deans, 1995). Students' knowledge of the roles covered by the marketing profession was not aligned with the variety of roles available or employer expectations (O'Brien & Deans, 1995). Advertising, consumer behavior, and brand management were all recognized by students as career options, whereas event management and direct marketing and sales techniques were little understood by students or not acknowledged as components of the marketing profession (Gray et al., 2002; O'Brien & Deans, 1995).

A study conducted in New Zealand (Gray et al., 2007) surveyed the importance of skills across three stakeholder groups—marketing managers, students, and academics. Every group noted willingness to learn among the three most important skills, followed by problem solving nominated by marketing managers and students. In addition, marketing managers valued three areas of specialized knowledge, specifically marketing communication, marketing research, and consumer behavior. This finding matched that of O'Brien and Deans (1995), who found that employers value problem identification and research and analytical skills. Students focus more on the knowledge areas of consumer behavior, product and brand management, and the content of marketing communications rather than the research, analytical, and applied aspects of the marketing discipline (Gray et al., 2007; O'Brien & Deans, 1995). Although views on the importance of different skills vary among various stakeholders, there is some agreement that marketing graduates have to be well versed in marketing knowledge and possess a range of analytical and soft skills that are essential for their career development (Kelley & Bridges, 2005).

Thus, this research takes a unique standpoint by focusing on dyads and examines commonalities and discrepancies in perspectives about the skills and competencies required during the transition from novice to marketing professional. The research aimed to provide a more refined view about

Table 1
Stages of Professional Development for the Marketing Professional—Results

| Stages of Professional Development | Skill Acquisition | Marketing Competencies | Marketing Skills | Employer Expectations | Time to Proficiency |
|------------------------------------|---|---|--|--|---------------------|
| Novice | Rule-oriented behavior Little experience of real situations and so must rely on rules (or theory only) Cannot distinguish what is important and so can become overwhelmed | Student learner and 1st year(s) of employment, often in a sales or sales support role | Understands marketing theory Has familiarity with the language and concepts of marketing and consumer behavior Demonstrates knowledge of discrete areas of marketing. Can use theory and guidelines for discrete projects. | Develop workplace knowledge Learn internal communication methods | 12-24 months |
| Advanced beginner | 1 to 2 years' practice Experience from enough real situations to note recurrent meaningful situational components. Can differentiate situations but still has difficulty distinguishing important from unimportant elements | Marketing officer or account responsibility | Applies marketing knowledge to achieve organizational targets Understands and applies marketing communications knowledge for external and internal markets Applies knowledge of specific areas of marketing to relevant projects and tasks | Achieves required tasks autonomously | 12-18 months |
| Competent | 3 to 5 years' practice Can organize and plan activities to avoid overload and, by being able to distinguish important from unimportant elements, can make decisions more easily. Consciously aware of the plan and ability to cope with some unpredictable situations. Increased level of involvement with the process | Marketing manager | Integrates marketing knowledge from different areas and work experience Applies integrated knowledge to the creation, planning, and implementation of marketing activities. Acts as a focal point for marketing communications and knowledge | Does not require day-to-day supervision Self-manages Designs and manages marketing-driven projects | 24-36 months |

Adapted from the Stages of Professional Development based on Daley, 1999; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985; Shuptrine & Willenborg, 1998; Dreyfus, 2007.

what skills are needed for entry-level marketing positions and what skills are needed as a graduate becomes a competent marketing professional. This study identified an inventory of marketing and generic skills, taught in an undergraduate marketing degree and, using the inventory, explored the needs of graduates, with at least 4 years' experience, who were in marketing management positions. Employers' needs were also examined. In other words, both the graduates and their employers were asked to discuss the marketing role and to assess the specific skills required for this role.

Method

To be able to examine a single organizational role from two perspectives—that of the marketing graduate and his

or her employer—and have them intersected with the learning intentions of a marketing degree was complex and meant that qualitative methods would be the most appropriate to draw out the richness of experiences and interpretations. An initial framework was developed through an analysis of the learning objectives of all subjects offered in the undergraduate marketing degree program. Following a review of research examining Australian marketing education (Polonsky, Fry, Mankelov, Morgan, & Tugimbana, 1999), it was confirmed that the course in question offered all the core marketing subjects along with a wide variety of electives. A content analysis of the learning objectives from the marketing degree was undertaken, covering 14 units of study. This process is a respected and widely used approach to organize the content of documents into predetermined categories in a systematic and replicable manner (Ackerman, Gross, & Perner, 2003; Graeff, 1998; Polonsky

Table 2
Marketing Competencies Inventory

| | |
|---|---|
| Marketing skills | Interpersonal skills |
| Analyze the behavior of stakeholders | Conflict resolution |
| Segment markets | Networking |
| Identify and analyze organizational marketing problems | Building relationships |
| Develop measurable and appropriate research questions and methods | Listening, understanding, and empathizing |
| Design and evaluate questionnaires and surveys | Initiative |
| Evaluate and analyze market research data | Team-working skills |
| Use a range of modeling techniques to analyze marketing information | Working cooperatively within a group |
| Construct a marketing communication strategy | Team building |
| Construct measurable objectives for marketing communication | Problem-solving skills |
| Identify the marketing channel members linked to the organization | Problem identification |
| Monitor, measure, and evaluate customer satisfaction | Creative and critical thinking |
| Analyze the organization's marketing environment | Comprehension of business processes |
| Identify opportunities, threats, and sales issues | Management |
| Construct a strategic marketing plan | Accounting and finance |
| Evaluate the performance of an implemented marketing plan or strategy. | Legal and regulatory |
| Analyze the organizational environment to identify sales issues and opportunities | Business ethics |
| Manage marketing programs | Personal skills |
| Manage marketing's role within the organization | Entrepreneurial skills |
| Numeracy | Leadership skills |
| Basic mathematics and statistics | Self-development |
| Computer skills | Work experience |
| Software applications for text, numbers, spreadsheets, presentations | Political skills |
| Written communication skills | Career involvement |
| Literacy: spelling, syntax, and grammar | Independence |
| Business language and expression | Commitment |
| Organization and logical structure | Personal presentation |
| Oral communication skills | Positive self-esteem |
| Presentation skills | Balance in work and home life |
| Business language and expression | Ability to deal with pressure |
| Negotiating | Motivation |
| Informal work-related discussions | Stress management |
| Giving feedback | Time management |
| Committee and meeting skills | Change management |

& Waller, 2005) and is not reliant on perception or respondent bias. Learning objectives from all the units were analyzed by six researchers, and an interrater reliability score greater than 85% was achieved. The objectives were consolidated into a list of skills, knowledge, and attributes that the course sought to develop in students, hereafter named the Marketing Competencies Inventory (MCI; see Table 2).

The third level of the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition, labeled *competent*, is relevant to this project. At this level, one would expect to find a graduate who had progressed through the novice learning stage to become the competent marketing professional exhibiting a more integrated development of knowledge and skills as a result of experience

but who had not yet gained the status of an expert, when tacit and explicit knowledge seamlessly combine. The content identified in the MCI was linked to the marketing role, and therefore a sample of graduates who had completed their degree at least 5 years prior were contacted and invited to take part in the study.

Three data sources were used:

1. graduates working in marketing roles having completed an undergraduate marketing degree,
2. their employers with expectations of the requirements to be addressed by the marketing role, and
3. an inventory of the skills, knowledge, and training required to be a marketer (the MCI).

Table 3
Characteristics of Informants

| | Informant's Industry | Position of Employee | Gender | |
|----|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| | | | Employee | Employer |
| 1 | Importing | Sales and marketing manager | Male | Male |
| 2 | Publishing | Account manager | Female | Female |
| 3 | Automotive | Marketing and communications manager | Male | Male |
| 4 | Finance and insurance | Product manager | Male | Female |
| 5 | Pharmaceuticals | Senior account manager | Male | Female |
| 6 | Media | Account director | Female | Female |
| 7 | Building | Business strategy coordinator | Male | Male |
| 8 | Finance and insurance | Advertising | Female | Male |
| 9 | Market research | Research analyst | Female | Female |
| 10 | Finance and insurance | Project manager | Male | Male |
| 11 | Telecommunications | Product manager | Female | Male |
| 12 | FMCG | Product manager | Male | Female |
| 13 | Automotive | Area sales manager | Male | Male |
| 14 | Franchising | Product manager | Female | Female |

Further depth to this triangulation of data was achieved by building a history of the graduate's experience together with the needs of the role from the employer's perspective. The graduate's resume and the job description were requested and the MCI was presented as a self-report skills survey. In this way the content analysis was member-checked and the expertise of the graduate was verified through objective data. Finally, separate interviews with the graduate and his or her employer sought to understand in detail their experiences, which offered an opportunity to extend the MCI. Coding was initially developed from the framework suggested by the skill acquisition model and the MCI. Further thematic analysis actively challenged the interpretation, and all members of the research team independently reviewed the categories and findings.

The sample was composed of 14 pairs of graduates and their employers. Former students who majored in Marketing and were in their 4th to 5th year of full-time work following graduation were identified using an alumni database. Nineteen graduates were approached to take part in this study and of these, 14 agreed to participate. They represented a variety of industries and business sizes. Their characteristics are provided in Table 3.

Findings

This research is focused on identifying the skill set required to competently fulfill a marketing role rather than the skills required on graduation. With this in mind, the two clear areas of investigation were

- "time to reach proficiency" as a competent marketer using the Dreyfus and Dreyfus definition (1985) and

- a comparison of the skills required to do the job once proficiency was attained with the skills expected on initial employment. (Previous work [Daley, 1999; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985; Epstein & Hundert, 2002] led us to expect that the skill sets will change as competence levels change.)

After coding interviews to identify themes using NVivo and pattern matching between the graduate and employer responses, a number of key areas were identified that have not previously emerged from marketing education research. These are (a) relevance of the marketing qualification, (b) time to proficiency in the first marketing role, (c) interaction between university learning and learning on the job, and (d) essential skills and knowledge areas, specifically communication, sales, customer relations and consumer behavior, analytical skills, and problem-solving skills.

Relevance of the Marketing Qualification

Relevance of a marketing qualification varies from the view that a marketing degree is less useful and personal attributes are more important, to the alternative that a degree is mandatory. For example, those who believe that personal attributes are more important identify the following aspects.

Education-wise, yes, it's preferable that he has a university degree but it's not all important. If the person has got the presentation, he can converse properly with people, and he has got the right amount of intelligence, we will employ him. (Employer 1)

The employer has clear preferences toward hiring a graduate with broader generic rather than specific discipline

knowledge. This view can be regarded rather as the exception than the norm. In contrast, others view a degree as mandatory as they are seeking marketing graduates with specific knowledge.

When we are looking at recruits we look for the best of the best within the field, so we need to have very strong academic records. . . . At a graduate level, anybody that had done special project interest or has specific direct marketing, Internet marketing, anything like that, would be considered more favorably than someone with a very generic background. (Employer 3)

Some employers recognize the scarcity of internal training they provide and prefer graduates with a solid knowledge base in marketing.

Ten years ago we had time to actually help people and train people, but now we won't hire anyone without a degree. That's mandatory now. And we prefer them 2, 3 years out so they've actually had some training. (Employer 4)

This view is supported by a graduate's statement that their current position requires sound knowledge in the marketing discipline.

A really strong marketing foundation, like a theoretical knowledge, the ability to apply theoretical knowledge to a practical situation, and understand what is applicable and what's not. (Graduate 4)

Consistent across both graduate and employer perspectives is the need to understand and apply marketing theory. This varies across industries and individual organizations. However, some note the lack of time available to train staff, so the expectation is that graduates come into their positions ready to learn how to apply their knowledge. For others, the demand is for a detailed grounding in a range of marketing areas and familiarity with the language of marketing.

As graduates develop in their initial role, the knowledge and skills acquired through the degree become more relevant, and the need for marketing knowledge as a function of academic learning and on-the-job experience becomes more noticeable but more difficult to identify. For example, we noted that all graduates had roles with a range of functions, each using different types of knowledge in an integrated manner. When they move on from their entry position, the expectations change and they are expected to apply knowledge gained in the degree.

I do things like market analysis. . . . And my role is very much one of coaching the sales team and the regional managers. I look after stock in a lot of instances, and staff development. Certainly I do a lot of marketing strategy planning. A lot of advertising, more specifically, so there's a lot of consultation and working out the infiltration of an advertising plan. (Graduate 8)

Time to Proficiency

On average, both employers and graduates indicate that it takes up to 2 years to develop proficiency in their first marketing role and be ready to move to a more autonomous role.

I would say it would take at least 12 months, and that a good person should be promoted within 2 years. (Employer 4)

In my 1st year I was an assistant in the marketing team. . . . It was not what I expected. I spent a lot of time helping sales and just learning about the products. (Graduate 4)

Typically, employers commented that the first 6 to 12 months were spent learning about the organization, particularly its culture. In addition, employers noted that graduates needed to develop time management skills and adjust to the pace of work life and workplace interactions. The Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1985) model notes that novices can become overwhelmed in dealing with new situations, and employers reported the need for new graduates to learn about the company, to learn the norms of the business, and to learn to prioritize.

I think with our graduates they do come in and they are very bold and very confident and they are out to rule the world and I think that they get quite a shock when they realize that the real world actually works differently to University. (Employer 11)

They need to learn (on the job) the political environment within which they work and how to integrate with that so that they don't step out of line, get themselves into any kind of difficulty. (Employer 4)

A number of graduates recognized the types of expertise they needed to develop in the first 12 to 24 months. They expressed the need for a stronger grounding in theory or the rules of applying theory.

I think undergraduates need a contact or intern year. It would help graduates to adapt quicker to the office

environment, work culture, expectations, and communications. Management area expertise would be very valuable, for example, 1 to 2 days per week in final year. (Graduate 8)

All of the graduates participating in this research had completed their undergraduate degrees at least 4 years previously and had moved into semiautonomous marketing roles. Typical roles immediately after graduation were marketing assistant, marketing coordinator, or sales, whereas 4 years post graduation the roles included account or regional managers; product, service, or brand managers; and product or service development roles.

University didn't seem as relevant when I started as a trainee, doing smaller jobs and a lot of it was assisting at events and dealing with the materials. . . . I guess now it is seeming more relevant. (Graduate 4)

As the graduates developed competence, their roles changed and the tasks they undertook demonstrated a greater need for applied knowledge. The relevance of the degree increased as the graduates took on more autonomous roles with greater and wider responsibilities.

The Interaction Between University Education and On-the-Job Learning

Employers are very clear about what graduates need to learn on the job and the type of training that is provided to them in the first 2 years, during the novice stage. The knowledge developed falls into three areas: general business skills, job- or industry-specific skills, and the application of marketing theory and knowledge. For the general business skills, employers recognize that graduates develop essay- and report-writing and presentation skills but note that structuring different types of communication for different purposes often has to be taught or supervised, for example:

We have had some instances where employees come in and they have structured an e-mail probably inappropriately, not realizing how offensive it could be to somebody who's a senior manager and I think that's probably an additional skill we can teach them. (Employer 6)

There is a very strong adherence to corporate identity, internally and externally . . . , so a lot of uni students come in and say, "Oh I will write a fax or I will write my boss a quick email" and it could be just a very quick email, but the boss, even though the content

might be correct, quite often will critique it and send it back. . . . So the learning style for them takes some time, particularly after a number of years at university where they learn the format of an essay or a group report. (Employer 3)

Graduates recognize their need to learn business skills such as negotiation, interpersonal communication skills, and managing the flow of information and tasks.

I had to further develop my negotiation skills, the way I deal with people. . . . I needed to develop more confidence; and I am always learning from my boss. (Graduate 1)

I guess one of the most important things I learnt is if something comes across my desk now I will usually stop and look at it twice before assuming how to handle it. It is just experience, just caution and awareness. I don't think you can teach someone how to relate well to other people in business, and that has more to do with relating to your own environment and personal development or issues such as it. (Graduate 4)

In terms of job- or industry-specific skills, all of the employers and graduates interviewed identified specific learning to do with their industry, or the need for training courses to develop or enhance skills in specific areas:

Okay, we sent our new graduate to a presentation course, just to give him the confidence of how to get his view across, how to make him interactive and how he has the power to motivate people because that's really important because that's what our job is as an agency. (Employer 6)

The experience of applying the theory learnt at university was the most difficult for employers and graduates to articulate, suggesting that although the generic skills required at the commencement of working life are readily identified, the process of transforming the theory and information into applied knowledge was less explicit.

What else are they going to learn on the job? They're going to be able to take their theory and put it into practice and utilize their creative concepts, their approach to developing creative concepts to actually deliver on something and deliver a final product. (Employer 4)

The graduates hold a similar perspective that application of knowledge learnt at university becomes an imperative as part of the successful progression of their career.

Applying the tools that were acquired in the degree, seeing how and where they work and how to integrate them. (Graduate 6)

Once the adaptation stage is passed, both employers and graduates do realize that acquired marketing knowledge should become explicit rather than tacit. Specifically, it is not so much knowledge but the ability to apply and use it in various business situations.

Essential Skills and Areas of Knowledge

The frequency of themes within interviews and across interviews was determined to differentiate skills that were relevant for all roles with those that were job specific. The marketing skills and knowledge areas most frequently identified were communication skills, sales knowledge, and marketing analytical skills.

Communication Skills

Previous research has identified that communication skills are an important skill sought by recruiters. However, the focus is on generic skills such as presentations and writing and speaking skills (Barr & McNeilly, 2002; Duke, 2002; Smart, Kelley, & Conant, 1999), with very little on communication skills, such as the ability to explain technical concepts or exchange information, or how to manage communication flows (Duke, 2002). Analysis revealed that the communication skills required to competently fulfill a marketing role fell into two categories:

- Generic communication skills needed to perform in the workplace and interact with peers, senior managers, and work colleagues across functions, including writing e-mails, communicating with peers, and interpersonal communications. Presentation skills, including the use of relevant software and speaking in front of an audience were often noted as part of the recruitment criteria.
- Communication skills specific to the marketing role, such as communicating through advertising to customers, presenting marketing ideas and projects to internal and branch staff to get “buy-in,” presenting projects or ideas to customers, and communication skills to build relationships.

Presentations are going to be big for me this year and I have never been that great at them. In my final year at Uni we were doing a lot of them, so I don't really see that they could do any more, but maybe there could be course on presentations because we need to know how to sell something [sell ideas and projects] through using presentations. (Graduate 6)

Thinking has to be beyond the advertising stream. We're communicators now. Advertising is the medium, not the thought [that we are communicating]. (Employer 5)

The clear division between the types of communication skills expected at recruitment and those expected to be shown by a competent marketing manager suggested that marketing educators need to have a clear understanding of the changing needs as proficiency develops.

Sales Knowledge

Although not all companies require their graduates to have sales experience, knowledge about the sales function or the interface between sales and marketing was noted across a range of industries. Sales not only referred to the business-to-customer transaction but also included the need to be able to sell ideas internally. One employer characterized this interaction as follows, noting also the need for customer service and understanding the customers' needs.

I am here to see you and I am here to help you and I am here to take your business. (Employer 5)

For both employers and graduates, the main emphasis was on having the theoretical knowledge about the sales process and applying it, or being aware that many marketing roles act as the interface between the marketing and sales functions.

I think graduates need to understand the sales process, they need to enjoy it. . . . Whether it is sales or marketing, in this industry you will end up doing all of them. To do the marketing coordinators role, you need the same attributes as the sales role . . . it really is a mixed role. (Employer 2)

Analytical Skills

Duke (2002) developed a set of questions to look at analytical skills as part of his research into key learning outcomes, based on feedback from alumni 1, 2, and 5 years post graduation. Specific questions concerned the understanding of problem-solving techniques, application of business tools, comprehension of the accuracy and reliability of data, critical thinking, and being able to identify relationships between problems and solutions. This research confirmed the importance of analytical skills at recruitment and integration of these skills as graduates develop proficiency. This was characterized in the response from one employer.

So we are looking for someone with good analytical skills . . . [who] can think through a situation and really

communicate how they work through a situation.
(Employer 12)

However, rather than just understanding data, marketing professionals 4 to 5 years post graduation were expected to be able to direct market research, determine the usefulness of new analytical tools, and analyze problems in a way that drew on all relevant functions in an organization.

There seems to be in the marketing degrees a good ability to identify a problem but there's not a lot of focus on what the actual solution is and how to write the solution, and I find a lot of the time, they're not able to think through all of the problems; they're not very good at the analytical process. In our business, a problem might be caused in one area of the business but there are all of these other factors and they can't necessarily think through all the parts of the problem.
(Employer 7)

The expectations of employers and graduates were that analytical skills were taught to ensure a thorough understanding of theory with some application through interactive means. But graduates would take this knowledge, and through integration with work experience, develop proficiency by applying it in context-specific ways that met the needs of the organization.

Discussion

The motivation for undertaking this research was to better understand the perceptions of graduates and their employers about the skills, knowledge, and competencies that are essential to obtain and progress in a marketing position. Thus, the question is whether marketing graduates are educated to get an (entry-level) job, with the responsibility for transformation to marketing professional resting with employers, or are they sufficiently educated to undertake the marketing professional role? With much of the previous research focusing on generic skills and entry-level positions, it is no wonder that employers may doubt the relevance of current marketing degrees. There is a clear need to develop generic skills for the workforce. Opportunities to practice different writing skills or to discuss and present in front of an audience are required to develop a base level of proficiency. Once graduates move beyond that point they need to utilize a wider range of communication techniques. Although employers and graduates nominate generic communication skills as important, it emerged that to be competent in specific roles a more sophisticated set of communication skills was required.

Although these findings are in general aligned with previous research (Davis, Misra, & Auken, 2002), the significant

finding that has not been previously articulated is that graduates are ill prepared in terms of fitting the job. They lack skills that are peripheral rather than essential or complementary. In particular, the curriculum does not include elements such as how to design and write corporate e-mails. These skills are often the first predicament faced by recent graduates as they adapt to the entry-level position. Thus, marketing educators have to be aware that these basic but critical gaps should be addressed through a more orchestrated approach when designing the curriculum.

The second, noteworthy, finding that delineates our research from previous research is related to specific marketing knowledge. Although graduates are expected to demonstrate knowledge about marketing, once they have progressed beyond the entry-level stage, they are required to *demonstrate application* of their theoretical knowledge to business practice and specific situations. Essentially, knowledge per se is not the most sought after requirement but the ability, comprehension, and experience to be able to use that knowledge in the correct way for a specific business situation. This ability will provide graduates with an explicit competitive advantage in the job market. A key implication for marketing educators is the need to both *teach* theory and provide opportunities for students to *apply* theory in situations that mirror those in work. The development and use of innovative models of learning is becoming an imperative for academia to successfully meet the needs of business practitioners. This suggests that marketing educators need to teach the theory underlying marketing business tools, how to apply these tools, and to evaluate their relevance and usefulness in a range of different circumstances. In addition, although students are exposed to qualitative and quantitative research methods, marketers are expected to devise organization-specific market research, to analyze and interpret results on behalf of the organization, and present findings so as to achieve the understanding and commitment of other staff members. We therefore need to expand on the work undertaken by Duke (2002) and this current research to better understand graduate observations of the skills necessary at entry level as well as at 2 to 5 years post graduation. This will ensure we continue to develop a curriculum that has relevance at graduation and for marketing professionals as they move from novice to competent.

These findings suggest that although marketing is an applied field, as are other business disciplines, the nature of the work at entry level and later on requires the application of marketing-specific skills later than in other disciplines such as accounting. Employers, and the graduates themselves, expect the graduates to move into their first autonomous marketing role after 2 years in an entry-level position. At this point, the graduates are expected to have knowledge of market research and analysis, sales, and

marketing communication along with being able to apply this knowledge in a context-relevant manner. Within this framework, students must learn customer relationship building and development skills, research and analysis skills, and the ability to evaluate analytical tools along with sales and selling techniques. The opportunity to learn and develop generic skills such as communication, information technology, teamwork, and leadership should be and are integral to the curriculum.

Competent marketers will handle multiple tasks and integrate knowledge from their tertiary degrees with minimal guidance. They are expected to be able to provide support and knowledge to other areas of the organization, and graduates at the competent stage recognized that they need to bring together knowledge from different components of their degree if they are to perform their roles successfully.

The third important finding of this study emerged from interviewing the dyads (graduates and their employers). Graduates have to be able to demonstrate agility in their transition from novices to competent professionals. Although employers emphasized the importance of soft skills, such as communication and analytical skills, at the initial stage of their career, graduates have to be prepared to show an appropriate blend of those soft skills and a sound knowledge of marketing to be successful. It is apparent that graduates are not aware that they have to embrace a dynamic pathway on this transition from graduates to professionals, to master their role as marketing professionals. This has implications for academia to design both content and application in the curriculum.

Conclusions and Limitations

This research unlocks two perspectives about the set of expected skills and knowledge required by marketing graduates in the initial stages of their career. The methodology used in this research has allowed us to address unresolved issues surrounding the ongoing debate regarding marketing curricula and how to prepare well-rounded graduates with versatile skills and knowledge. Our informants included graduates who have demonstrated their ability to successfully move along their career path. However, although they were somewhat unwilling to acknowledge the difficulties experienced at the entry level to do with their preparedness to fit the corporate environment, this lack of skills was widely noted by the majority of employers. This could be attributed to the fact that academia considers itself largely as an extension of previous (secondary) education rather than an entrance point into a business environment. Thus, stronger emphasis should be placed on promoting working practices relevant to the corporate world to better prepare graduates to embrace the challenges associated with their

transition from novice employees to competent marketing professionals.

There was acknowledgement by both cohorts of informants that such skills as the application of theoretical knowledge and its implementation in practice is of vital importance to academia. It poses questions about how to design a balanced and relevant curriculum. Given the turbulence of the business environment, employers often noted that they lack sufficient resources for training and thus demand graduates who have a knowledge base beyond the basic set of concepts. The direct implication for academia from this research is that theoretical content without application does not serve graduates adequately. As graduates have stated, it would be helpful to be exposed to real business practices during their studies. Although some degree programs include case study as an approach to deal with such deficiencies, or internships, more proactive means should be initiated to combat this deficiency in academic education. How this can be addressed will be university specific, but the salience of this approach is in developing close associations between business and universities. Students should be immersed in business particularly in designated organizations, to work on specific tasks that have relevance to business. Using such an approach can reduce the gap between expectations and performance by preparing graduates more effectively for the working environment and thereby narrowing any gap graduates may experience when they commence work.

This research has a few limitations. First, the pool of graduates was drawn from one Australian university. Future research will benefit from examining views in countries where graduates seek their first employment. Finally, in the modern era, academia increasingly serves multiple international markets; thus future research should be directed toward gaining insights on desired skills and knowledge from international employers that are pertinent to international markets.

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