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# On carrot cake and marketing education: A perspective on balancing skills for employability

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## ABSTRACT

The current climate for marketing education demands a complex set of skills for our graduates: critical and creative thinking, good communication skills, marketing knowledge, and specific technical skills. In addition, knowledge is far more readily available outside the formal university institution. In response, marketing educators need to address these demands. Based on existing literature, this paper proposes four categories of skills: thinking and learning skills, personal soft skills, marketing knowledge and technical skills. A metaphor is presented as a means through which the co-existence of these skills may be conceptualised. With this view, thinking and learning and personal soft skills are at the core, into which marketing knowledge is learned and applied. Technical skills are added but with caution, ensuring that they are placed in the context of marketing knowledge, and help to develop thinking and learning, and personal soft skills. Implications and suggestions are provided for educators as we plan programmes, courses and lectures. A challenge is also presented to the wider Academy to create a standardised designation which acknowledges these skills.

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## 1. Introduction

In response to the call for papers in this special issue, this paper offers a perspective, proposed to help negotiate our changing world of higher education marketing, to create graduates with a balance of hard and soft skills, skills which are informed by marketing and our digital environment, as well as transferable to our ever-changing world, skills which will serve them in their initial job search as well as into the future.

The constant changes in our digital environment and especially change in digital marketing, has seen industry seeking out very specific technical skills in employees, such as web analytics and search engine management (Brooks, 2016; Callahan, 2015; Doyle, 2018; Shah, 2016; Zantal-Wiener, 2017). While there is change, Universities continue to seek to both educate students in specific subjects, and to develop “educated minds” with broad based abilities such as critical and creative thinking, and good communication skills (Australian Business Deans Council, 2017). Research suggests that employers similarly want this, with the call for more emphasis on “soft skills” prioritised over the specific discipline knowledge (Australian Government Department for Education and Training, 2018; CBI and Pearson, 2016, 2017; Finch et al., 2016). Thus there appears an almost conflicting demand for specific technical skills, along with broad based soft skills. This may put educators in

a difficult position, as we seek to juggle the development of these skills, for the future success of our students, within the edict of our institution’s vision, as well as our content, learning objectives, lectures and assessments.

The perspective offered in this paper is one which acknowledges the strength of university education in developing critical thinkers and autonomous learners, as well as the current demand for specific tools and techniques especially in the digital marketing environment. This paper progresses by first acknowledging the context, then detailing four categories of skills in demand. A metaphor is then presented and examined as a perspective which helps to integrate and balance these skills. The paper concludes with specific directions for marketing academics, and the marketing academy.

## 2. But first, the context

The current climate in undergraduate marketing education, is one of change and challenge, to which marketing educators must adapt. Universities face increased competition for students, new demands for partnerships with industry, an environment where knowledge is easily accessed outside of institutions, and expectations to make continued improvements to pedagogy (AI Group and Australian Industry Group, 2016; British Council, 2012; Ernst and Young, 2016). There is also evidence of an uneasy balance between the need for soft, transferable skills in graduates (such as

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communications, teamwork, literacy and numeracy), and more technical skills in a specific area (e.g. web analytics and search engine optimisation). A UK survey notes employers are generally satisfied, and the university degree appears well-valued. However suggestions are still made for improvements in skills such as literacy, numeracy and teamwork (CBI and Pearson, 2017). While the Australian 2017 Employee Skills Survey similarly emphasised employer demand for skills such as literacy, numeracy, teamwork and communications, the study also revealed that “graduates from vocationally oriented courses achieve higher employment outcomes and higher employer satisfaction” (Australian Government Department for Education and Training, 2018, p. 4), suggesting that the more specific technical skills are highly valued.

The higher education sector is also now witness to, and some participate in, the trend towards micro-credentials and “digital badges” (Ifenthaler et al., 2016). Micro-credentialing and associated digital badges are means by which individuals may study and receive recognition for smaller “bites” of subjects (Hurst, 2015). While micro-credentials may be achieved within a higher education institution, others are provided outside of such institutions. This trend is democratising knowledge and the certification or evidence of knowledge. On the one hand, authors suggest that this is an opportunity for universities, who are well poised to both create and curate learning content which could be organised into a series of micro-credentials leading towards a programme (Wolfe and Andrews, 2014). Other institutions and organisations are moving towards this now, creating open knowledge gateways inviting multitudes to engage with knowledge. For example consider the growth of MOOCs, the Kahn Academy, EdEx, MITx, and Google Analytics (Google, 2017). This increased availability of knowledge is positive. However, it may be an issue for universities as it legitimates formal learning, outside of the higher education system (Ellis et al., 2016).

At the same time, Marketing as a field is changing. An AMA article reads “The marketing landscape has changed so rapidly and extensively that many of the traditional guideposts for the future simply don’t exist” (Wyner, 2017). Especially with the rapid rise of digital technology, the array of marketing tools and techniques is vast, and employers are interested in hiring individuals with related, current experience, including specific technical skills (Zantal-Wiener, 2017). Knowledge of some of these techniques in fact may be accessed via micro-credentialing.

So where does this leave the marketing educator, hired at a university to encourage and develop students in learning marketing? Literature offers guidance, referring to the “work-ready” graduate, who needs both “hard skills” (knowledge, such as that of marketing) and “soft skills” (transferable skills such as communications) (Finch et al., 2016; McArthur et al., 2017; Schlee and Karns, 2017). Broad skills such as critical thinking, are emphasised along with communication and leadership skills. However discipline-specific skills (i.e. in Marketing) are also an obvious part of what makes up a university degree. In addition, and especially in Marketing, job postings suggest technical skills are also needed (Schlee and Karns, 2017), some of which could be gained via open knowledge gateways and digital badges outside of the university context.

There appears to be a need to step back from each individual demand, and consider how marketing educators might manage these demands, to remain competitive and to deliver valued, relevant knowledge in a way that encourages learning and sets the student on their way to a successful career. The following section elaborates on a categorisation of four skill sets in demand, prior to suggesting a way to integrate these in an undergraduate marketing degree.

### 3. Unskilled applicants need not apply

While a University education is associated with higher learning goals, such as critical thinking, and leadership, the fact remains that our students seek to learn *subjects*, and our graduates seek jobs. Thus, marketing academics have to manage the array of skills. A categorisation of skills is therefore suggested here, in four groups: (1) thinking and learning skills, (2) personal skills, (3) marketing knowledge and (4) task-specific skills. These categories and associated terminologies are summarised in Table 1, with elaboration to follow. While the discussion will treat each category separately, it is acknowledged that there is much overlap, which will be addressed in the sections which follow.

#### 3.1. Thinking and learning skills

This first category, referred to as *Thinking and Learning Skills* refers to broad, soft skills, often associated with University education: critical and creative thinking, reflective thinking, problem solving, autonomous learning. These skills are often categorised under “soft skills” being transferable, and not discipline specific. Thinking and learning skills relate to and rely on cognition. They align with skills used at the higher end of reflective thinking: i.e. critical or intensive reflection, and reflection. Here, the student has moved away from simply understanding and rote learning, to being able to integrate knowledge and their own experience to solve problems, and make decisions (Kember and Leung, 2009; Peltier et al., 2006). Autonomous learning is part of this skill set, being the ability to think and learn for oneself. This particular ability is suggested by Mezirow (1997) to be the “cardinal goal of adult education” (p. 7). Taken together, this set of complementary abilities is, irrespective of the discipline, what higher education institutions seek to develop in their students. These skills are transferable to multiple disciplines, new problems and various contexts – perhaps even those yet unknown.

These skills, not surprisingly, are sought out by employers (Schlee and Harich, 2010). Hopkins et al. (2011) specifically note *critical thinking, objective assessment, individualised learning and problem-solving* as skills sought by employers of marketing graduates. Finch et al. (2013) refer to these skills in the category of “meta-skills” involving complex and cognitive thought, and including *problem-solving, reasoning and decision-making*. In examining skills as capabilities which may provide competitive advantage for graduates, Finch et al. (2016) refer to these as *intellectual resources*. More recently in Australia, MacArthur et al. (2017) find that skills such as *analytical problem solving and creative and critical thinking* are frequently listed in marketing job advertisements. Similarly, in the USA, Schlee and Karns’ (2017) analysis of job postings emphasise the “ability to work independently and being a lifelong learner” (p. 78), the later characteristic resonating with autonomous learning. Skills within this *thinking and learning* category are essential to success during a marketing career, as evidenced by Windels et al. (2013) research into success in advertising and the importance of critical thinking.

#### 3.2. Personal skills

*Personal skills* denotes skills which are also transferable but are not necessarily associated with higher levels of thinking. This includes written and oral communications, interpersonal communications, the ability to deliver presentations, and the ability to work on teams (Hopkins et al., 2011; Schlee and Harich, 2010; Windels et al., 2013). Finch et al. (2013) refer to these as soft skills, and highlight oral and written communication, ability to

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