

Equipping Graduates for the Digital Age: Evaluating Social Media Marketing Education in the Australian Context

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Abstract

This exploratory study aims to assess the perceived industry readiness of graduates with a diploma in social media marketing in Australia, with a focus on identifying factors that may contribute to the success or failure of some graduates, despite all having the same academic qualifications. The study employs a mixed-method approach for data collection, and findings indicate that although the curriculum helps students acquire essential skills, graduates will benefit from hands-on, practical experiences and course updates. It also affirms a strong link between students' self-assessed skills and their perceived career prospects, offering timely insights into curriculum design and the effectiveness of vocational training in an evolving digital marketing landscape.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Employability, Practical learning, Curriculum Development, Higher education, Vocational education and training, Internships, Digital marketing industry, Australia

Introduction

This exploratory study aims to investigate how well graduates with a diploma in social media marketing are prepared for the ever-evolving social media marketing industry and how they perceive their employability, with a particular focus on the influence of practical learning experiences.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative surveys administered to 102 graduates and qualitative interviews with eight graduates who had successfully launched careers in the digital marketing industry. This study specifically focused on international students enrolled in registered training organisations (RTOs) due to their unique employability challenges in the Australian labour market, including visa restrictions, limited local experience, and additional cultural barriers (Crittenden et al., 2020). These students also account for a significant portion of enrolments in social media marketing diplomas, making their career transitions particularly relevant for vocational education assessment.

The survey evaluated attitudes toward employability, confidence in obtaining employment, and the applicability of gained skills. The interviews included questions about factors contributing to the participants' professional success. Findings show that participants who gained practical experience during their education reported higher confidence and better career transitions than others.

The results help clarify the discrepancy between academic credentials and career success in social media marketing. They emphasise how helpful embodied learning opportunities—like internships and real-world projects—are in improving employability. The study investigates graduates' self-perceived employability, how they evaluate their own readiness and career prospects, rather than measuring direct employer feedback. This approach enables a better understanding of graduates' confidence and perceived gaps in preparation. The researchers recommend curricular improvement by incorporating online marketing tools, such as analytics platforms, content management systems, and customer relationship management platforms, which are commonly used in industry practices. Additionally, fostering a culture of lifelong learning by encouraging continuous skill development through workshops and practical projects will better prepare graduates to meet evolving demands within the digital marketing sector.

Literature Review

The fast-changing landscape of social media marketing presents both opportunities and challenges for recent graduates entering the workforce (Sutherland & Ho, 2017). As companies increasingly engage with consumers through digital and social channels (Rajarithiam, 2021), the demand for qualified professionals who can navigate this evolving environment has grown significantly. In response, educational institutions have introduced diploma-level programmes in social media marketing designed to provide students with the strategic, creative, and technical skills necessary to plan, execute, and manage campaigns. Still, are these programmes sufficiently preparing graduates for success in the professional arena, particularly in the Australian context? As Crittenden (2024) argues, the future of marketing education is in a state of transition, with artificial intelligence, platform innovation, and global shifts in pedagogy challenging institutions to rethink both curriculum and delivery. In this context, exploratory studies that examine graduate readiness in emerging disciplines are especially timely. Over the past decade, a growing body of research has advocated for more practice-led approaches in marketing education. To begin, Crittenden and Crittenden (2015) highlighted the gap between marketing curricula and real-world practice, urging educators to embed digital marketing, content creation, and social media strategy more directly into business courses. More recently, Beachum and Krallman (2024) found that employers consistently seek graduates with practical experience in analytics, targeting, scheduling tools, and project management skills, which are often missing from theory-heavy courses. Their review of one hundred social media job descriptions revealed that meta-skills such as professional writing, collaboration, and adaptability were just as important as technical capabilities. These insights suggest that employability is shaped not only by what students learn but also by how they learn it, emphasising the importance of real-world projects and industry alignment. Recent studies have also highlighted the significant impact of practical experience on employability. Bennett and Ananthram (2021), building on Rothwell's (2008) foundational work, demonstrated that self-perceived employability is enhanced when students are engaged in applied learning activities that increase both competence and confidence. These findings echo earlier conclusions from Zbierania et al. (2021), who advocated for instructional designs that go beyond theoretical content to foster transferable skills. Brosnan et al. (2023) further confirmed this by showing that graduates who engaged in paid work or internships were more likely to demonstrate career clarity and alignment between academic learning and job roles.

Despite this momentum, the literature reveals gaps in the effectiveness of social media marketing education in vocational settings, particularly in Australia. Most existing research focuses on university-level programmes in North America or Europe (Parker & James, 2023), with little attention paid to the Australian Registered Training Organisation (RTO) sector. Unlike universities, RTOs provide competency-based qualifications that are designed to align directly with industry needs. Graduates of an Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) Level 5 Diploma must demonstrate specialised knowledge and skills, allowing them to apply integrated technical and theoretical concepts across various contexts to undertake skilled work or pursue further studies (Australian Qualification Framework, 2025). However, as Tran and Context (2022) observed, many programmes in fast-evolving fields still struggle with curriculum reform, inconsistent industry alignment, and limited support for employability skill development. Cavanagh et al. (2015) and Coetzee (2014) also noted student dissatisfaction when education fails to nurture critical thinking, problem-solving, and real-world adaptability.

In response to this gap, this study evaluated the diploma of social media marketing in Australia, focusing on the career outcomes and perceptions of international graduates. The decision to focus on international students reflects their distinct challenges in navigating the Australian job market, including work restrictions, cultural adjustment, and employer bias, all of which can impact their perceived employability (Crittenden et al., 2020). Furthermore, international students comprise a significant proportion of enrolments in RTOs, yet their employment experiences remain under-researched.

To understand the extent to which the diploma prepares students for industry, the researchers applied a mixed-methods design informed by employability theory and recent calls for practice-integrated curricula (Grewal et al., 2024). The quantitative component employed a 5-point Likert scale survey completed by 102 graduates, utilising validated questions from the Graduate Capital Scale (Gamboa et al., 2022) to measure self-perceived employability, job confidence, and skill relevance. The qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with eight graduates who had successfully transitioned into social media and digital marketing roles. These interviews provided rich narratives around the value of experiential learning, perceived curriculum gaps, and the role of confidence and adaptability in job search success (Gurung et al., 2023). While the study focuses on perceptions rather than employer feedback, it contributes to ongoing discussions about how education providers can better support graduate transitions into work. By placing this research within the wider discussion on curriculum innovation, skills alignment, and industry readiness, the study aims to highlight the specific enablers and barriers faced by graduates of vocational social media marketing programmes in Australia.

Methodology

Quantitative Research

Between 1 February and 30 March 2024, a total of 120 international students who had successfully graduated from registered training organisations (RTOs) in the Central Business District (CBD), Sydney, New South Wales, Australia (see Table I), were invited to participate in the researchers' quantitative exploratory study, with 102 completing the survey. The institutions selected offered the Diploma of Social Media Marketing, which is accredited by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for

Overseas Students (CRICOS). This accreditation enables them to provide courses to both domestic and international students (Kiss et al., 2019). During the survey period, those students completed the curriculum after a year of study in the researchers' class, enabling them to track their progress and stay connected with them after graduation. A total of 120 students were invited to participate, with 102 completing the survey. This sample size reflects the full graduating cohort available during the study period across selected RTOs in Sydney CBD. It was considered sufficient for an exploratory, small-scale study and aligned to identify patterns in self-perceived employability. Furthermore, data saturation was reached during the qualitative phase, supporting the adequacy of the sample size for this initial phase.

Table I*Survey Population*

Category	Count	Percentage
Age		
18-25	61	60%
26-35	40	39%
36-45	1	1%
Gender		
Male	48	47%
Female	54	53%
Nationality		
Asian	40	39%
South American	32	32%
European	30	29%
Previous Experience		
None	65	64%
1-3 years	32	31%
4-6 years	5	32%
Course Completion		
Completed Face-to face	102	100%
Graduation		
Graduated	102	100%

The survey was primarily intended to enable us to assess graduates' self-perceived employability after earning a Diploma of Social Media Marketing. In this context, employability refers to the graduates' perception of their ability to gain and maintain employment in social media marketing (Asiedu et al., 2023). The survey employed a 5-point Likert scale, a widely recognised tool in quantitative research for measuring attitudes, opinions, and perceptions (Louangrath, 2018).

Using a Likert scale facilitates quantifying subjective data, allowing for the statistical analysis of participant responses.

Qualitative Research

The qualitative component of this study involved in-depth interviews with eight graduates with a Diploma of Social Media Marketing who successfully established careers in social media and digital marketing roles. The aim was to explore their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding the programme's effectiveness in preparing them for the industry (Deep et al., 2020). The interviews provided rich, detailed data that illuminated several critical themes related to the practical relevance of assessments, the customer-centric approach emphasised in the curriculum, the teaching methods and course materials, the importance of internships and mentorship, curriculum gaps, and the necessity for continuous learning. Although employer input is essential for understanding market alignment, this study did not involve employer interviews, as the scope of this phase was intentionally limited to exploring graduate perspectives. This decision was consistent with the exploratory and inductive nature of the research, with future phases planned to include more stakeholder feedback.

Survey Design, Sample, and Data Collection

This research employed an inductive approach, gathering data through surveys and interviews before finalising a conceptual framework. Instead of testing predetermined hypotheses, the study aimed to identify themes that naturally arose from participant responses. The goal was to build understanding from the ground up, consistent with the exploratory nature of the research. The survey assessed graduates' self-perceived employability on a 5-point Likert scale with 10 validated questions from the GCS (Coetzee, 2014; Ramisetty et al., 2017; Rothwell et al., 2008). The researchers informed the participants about the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of their participation and provided assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. The survey was administered online using the secure SurveyMonkey platform to facilitate ease of access and completion. The online format enabled participants to complete the study at their convenience within the specified data collection period.

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questions covered various dimensions of their perceptions and attitudes about their education and career readiness. Firstly, the survey assessed the graduates' confidence that the diploma would improve their career prospects, reflecting their belief in the value of their qualifications. They also covered the participants' perception of employers' eagerness to hire graduates from their programme, indicating how they felt their institution was regarded in the job market. The participants' commitment to academic work was evaluated to understand the priority they placed on their studies while studying the programme. Another key area of focus was aligning their personal skills and abilities with what employers seek, highlighting their self-assessment of skill relevance. Additionally, the researchers analysed participants' awareness of the job market in their chosen field, assessing how well-informed they felt about employment opportunities and industry demands.

Their confidence in presenting themselves professionally in job applications and interviews was measured to gauge their preparedness for the job search process. Through the surveys,

researchers also explored participants' understanding of cultural and ethical aspects within their field, which is crucial for navigating the global and diverse nature of the social media marketing industry (Tran et al., 2022). Furthermore, recognising the importance of professional networking in career advancement, the researchers assessed the participants' confidence in their ability to build a network of career contacts. The researchers examined their confidence in their ability to secure relevant jobs and whether they found their skills and experience to be suitable, to understand their optimism and self-efficacy regarding their employment prospects.

Lastly, the survey responses were used to evaluate participants' ability to assess their progress and identify their learning, reflecting on their self-awareness and commitment to continuous personal and professional development. The questions in Table II provide a comprehensive overview of the graduates' self-perceived employability and readiness to enter the social media marketing industry.

Analysis and Findings: Quantitative data

Data Analysis, Instrument Consistency and Reliability

The data were analysed using Microsoft Excel for descriptive statistics for each survey item (Table II, Table III) and Python for Spearman's Correlation (Table IV) and Ordinal Logistics Regression analysis (Table V).

The internal consistency and reliability of the survey instrument were assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The resulting value was approximately 0.922, signifying high internal consistency among the survey items (Gliem and Gliem, n.d.). This indicates that the survey items consistently assess the construct of self-perceived employability.

Table II

Survey Questions and Central Location Scores

<i>Survey Questions and Scores</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Q1-I believe my degree will improve my career prospects.	4.09	4.02	5.00
Q2-Employers are eager to employ graduates from my college.	3.20	3.32	5.00
Q3-I regard my academic work as a top priority.	3.81	3.802	5.00
Q4-The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for.	3.91	4.00	5.00
Q5-I have a good understanding of the job market in my chosen field.	3.72	3.77	5.00
Q6-I am confident in my ability to present myself professionally in job applications and interviews.	3.75	4.00	5.00
Q7-I have a good understanding of the cultural aspects of the job market in my chosen field.	3.54	3.75	5.00
Q8-I am confident in my ability to build a network of career contacts.	3.63	3.72	5.00
Q9-I am confident; I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant	3.89	4.00	5.00

Q10-I am confident in my ability to assess my progress and identify my learning.	3.93	4.00	5.00
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Note. Scores are based on the 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Central Location analysis

The survey results indicated (Table II) that graduates feel confident in their value degrees and abilities to succeed in the job market. With a high mean score (4.09) for “I believe my degree will improve my career prospects”, the participants were found to be highly confident in their qualifications. However, the moderate perception of employer eagerness (3.20) suggests a potential disconnect between graduates’ self-perception and employer expectations. The scores in cultural and ethical understanding (3.54) and network-building confidence (3.63) indicate that although the participants feel prepared for related careers concerning their technical skills (3.91) and knowledge (3.72), they may benefit from additional support in developing soft skills and cultural competencies essential for professional success in a globalised industry (Ngo, 2024).

Additionally, the analysis reveals a high median score across survey questions. Confidence in the obtained degree, efficiency of skills and abilities, ability to successfully and professionally present self in job interviews, finding job opportunities, and assessing self-progression and learning all get a median score of 4.00 or higher. Also, the overall mean score (3.75) and the median (3.75) indicate that at least 50% of participants have shown relatively high to very high scores for all the survey questions overall. This is also reflected in Table III's frequency and relative frequency values. Across almost all survey questions, the highest frequency and relative frequency values correspond to participants who chose 4 to 5 as their option.

Table III

Frequency and relative frequency of responses on Likert-Scale basis

	Class	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Q1: Degree to improve career	1-2	3	0.03
	2-3	11	0.11
	3-4	37	0.36
	4-5	51	0.50
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q2: Employers to employ	1-2	16	0.16
	2-3	28	0.27
	3-4	33	0.32
	4-5	25	0.25
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q3: Academic work as top priority	1-2	10	0.10
	2-3	14	0.14
	3-4	33	0.32
	4-5	45	0.44
	TOTAL	102	1.00

Q4: Skills match	1-2	8	0.08
	2-3	9	0.09
	3-4	35	0.34
	4-5	50	0.49
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q5: Understanding Job Market	1-2	11	0.11
	2-3	11	0.11
	3-4	42	0.41
	4-5	38	0.37
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q6: Ability to present self professionally	1-2	10	0.10
	2-3	14	0.14
	3-4	34	0.33
	4-5	44	0.43
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q7: Understanding cultural aspects of the job	1-2	12	0.12
	2-3	16	0.16
	3-4	41	0.40
	4-5	33	0.32
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q8: Ability to build a network of career contacts	1-2	12	0.12
	2-3	16	0.16
	3-4	40	0.39
	4-5	34	0.33
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q9: Job finding so long as skills and experience are relevant	1-2	7	0.07
	2-3	14	0.14
	3-4	35	0.34
	4-5	46	0.45
	TOTAL	102	1.00
Q10: Confidence in progress assessment	1-2	7	0.07
	2-3	14	0.14
	3-4	32	0.31
	4-5	49	0.48
	TOTAL	102	1.00

Spearman's Correlation analysis

The study aims to assess how well graduates with a diploma in social media marketing are prepared for the ever-evolving social media marketing industry by conducting a self-assessment. In other words, this tries to understand why certain graduates succeed while others face challenges despite having the same academic qualifications. Since all the survey questions are ordinaly ranked, Spearman's Correlation analysis was conducted to explore this. The results

could help to clarify the discrepancy between academic credentials and career success in social media marketing. Correlation analysis was conducted to explore the correlation between skills and abilities possessed from employers' perspective, confidence in finding a job given the skills and abilities, and how the degree could help improve career prospects. (Questions 1,4,9 in the survey). Analysis indicates a relatively high degree of correlation (0.65) between possessed skills and abilities and confidence in finding jobs. It also indicates a moderate (0.44) correlation between possessed skills and abilities from employers' perspective and the obtained degree in marketing. There is also a relatively small degree of correlation (0.28) between confidence in finding a job given the skills and abilities and the obtained degree in marketing.

Table IV

Spearman's Correlation:

	<i>Q1-Degree</i>	<i>Q4-SkillMatch</i>	<i>Q9-JobHunt</i>
<i>Q1-Degree</i>	1.000000		
<i>Q4-SkillMatch</i>	0.448633	1.000000	
<i>Q9-JobHunt</i>	0.286885	0.651851	1.000000

Ordinal Logistic regression analysis

Given the nature of the ordinal survey questions, the Ordinal Logistic regression analysis was conducted using Python. For this purpose, the data was split into a training set (~ 70%) and a test set (~30%).

Table V

Ordinal Logistic regression analysis

<i>Train set results: around 96% of the output value on the training data are accurate.</i>
<i>Test set results: around 97% of the output value on the test data are accurate.</i>

For the logistic regression analysis, a model was created as below:

Dependent variable:

Q4: possessed skills and abilities

Note: I converted Q4 (Dependent variable) into two categories: values 1-2.4 converted into 1, and values of 2.5 to 5 converted into 2, to make it a categorical binary variable to run logistic regression. (1=No, 2=yes).

Independent variables:

Q1: Degree to improve career

Q6: Ability to present oneself professionally

Q7: Understanding cultural aspects of the job

Q8: Ability to build a network of career contacts

Q9: Job finding as long as skills and experience are relevant

Q10: Confidence in progress assessment

Analysis indicates that around 96% of the output values on the training data are accurate. Also, around 97% of the output values on the test data are correct. This indicates that, with approximately 97% accuracy, the model can predict the dependent variable. In other words,

independent variables in combination show that the skills and abilities possessed by the graduates are what employers are looking for.

Analysis and Findings: Qualitative data

Effectiveness of Assessments

Participants unanimously highlighted the practical relevance of the assessments, which enabled them to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life scenarios. This experiential learning bridged the gap between theory and practice, enhancing their skill development and confidence (Daniel et al., 2022). One participant noted, “The assessments were very real. They are about things we do on our day-to-day social media” (Participant A). This sentiment underscores the value of assessments that mirror industry tasks, enabling students to develop practical tools usage, organisation, and content creation skills (Areekkuzhiyil, 2019; Benvenuti, 2010; Boyd, 2020). Participant B emphasised the role of the assessments in personal branding and career readiness: “I learned how to sell myself, prepare my resume, cover letter, portfolio, and for the interviews”. This highlights the programme’s effectiveness in equipping students with essential skills for job applications and professional presentations (Bryan, 2006; Carbajal, 2019; Mahboob, 2008). The practical assessments enhanced technical competencies and fostered confidence and self-efficacy among graduates (Wilson et al., 2021).

Customer-Centric Approach

Based on the researchers’ analysis of the interview data, a significant theme that emerged was the curriculum’s emphasis on a customer-centric marketing approach (Sun and Ravi, 2016). Participants acknowledged that the programme focused on understanding and meeting customer needs, a critical aspect of contemporary marketing strategies (Riyanto, 2022). This approach enabled them to develop effective marketing strategies tailored to target audiences. As Participant D articulated, “The biggest lesson I got from the course was learning what the customer needs and how to meet those needs effectively”. This focus on customer needs reflects the industry’s shift toward personalisation and engagement (Gowri, 2024). By prioritising customer-centric strategies, the programme prepared graduates to create value-driven marketing campaigns, enhancing their employability and effectiveness in their professional roles (Daniel et al., 2022; Donald, 2017).

Teaching Methods and Course Materials

The teaching methods and course materials received positive feedback from the participants. The participants appreciated the inclusion of current industry practices and tools, which made the learning experience relevant and practical (Huynh and Tran, 2023). The balance between theoretical knowledge and practical application provided a robust foundation for their careers. One Participant C mentioned, “The teaching method was very adequate from the perspective of getting in touch with the things being done now”. However, some participants highlighted the need for the curriculum to keep pace with the rapid changes in the social media marketing industry. They suggested continuous course content updates are necessary to incorporate advanced tools and emerging technologies (Li et al., 2023). This would ensure that graduates remain competitive and are well-prepared to navigate the evolving digital landscape.

Importance of Internships and Mentorship

Internships emerged as a critical component of the participants' professional development. Participants who had the opportunity to undertake internships found them invaluable for gaining real-world experience and applying their knowledge in professional contexts (Kapareliotis et al., 2019; St. John et al., 2023). However, the internship was not the only relevant factor; it had to be combined with mentorship to be effective. Internships provided the students with practical experience, enabling them to develop industry-relevant skills and build confidence. Participant G shared, "Having a patient and supportive mentor was crucial", emphasising the role of mentorship in navigating new roles and building professional networks (Jackson and Dean, 2022). The structure and quality of internships varied among participants, suggesting a need for standardised internship programmes that provide meaningful experiences and effective mentorship. Such programmes could enhance the transition from academic learning to professional practice for students, maximising the benefits of internships for students (Douglas et al., 2021).

Curriculum Gaps and Suggestions for Improvement

Although the overall curriculum was well-received, participants identified areas where the programme could align with industry demands. They desired additional training on advanced tools and specific industry software, such as those used for analytics, customer relationship management, and content management. Additionally, they highlighted the need for content on emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, new social media platforms, and advanced analytics (Gowri, 2024). Participants also recommended incorporating additional practical workshops and hands-on sessions to enhance student learning (Zhang et al., 2023). Adding practical experiences to their curricula enables students to apply theoretical concepts in real-world scenarios, further bridging the gap between education and industry practices (Potgieter et al., 2023; Sutherland and Ho, 2017).

The Need for Continuous Learning

Given the fast-changing nature of social media marketing, ongoing learning and staying updated with the latest trends and tools are essential (Beachum and Krallman, 2024). Participants emphasised the need for the curriculum to keep pace with industry advancement and stressed the importance of fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development. Participant E remarked, "It is important to keep learning and adapting. The industry is always evolving". The course provided a solid foundation, but graduates must continue learning and improving their skills. Therefore, encouraging lifelong learning is essential in this field (Sutherland and Ho, 2017). 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 (Deep et al., 2020). The dynamic nature of social media marketing requires professionals to be adaptable and committed to continuous improvement (Crittenden, 2024).

Differences and Unique Insights

The participants' diverse backgrounds and experiences influenced their learning experiences and application of the programme content. Some of them had experience in related fields, while others were new to social media marketing. These differences affected how they perceived the curriculum and applied their learning in professional settings (Bennett et al., 2023; El Messaoudi, 2021). Their varied career aspirations and goals also shaped their engagement with the programme. Participants aiming for specialised roles sought profound knowledge in specific areas.

In contrast, those pursuing broad roles valued the comprehensive nature of the curriculum and the programme's adaptability to accommodate different career paths as a strength. In applying their learning, participants adapted the knowledge and skills acquired to suit their specific job roles and responsibilities. This flexibility highlights the importance of transferable skills and the ability to tailor one's approach to diverse professional contexts (Wiggins, 2022).

Discussion

As an exploratory investigation, this study offers preliminary insights into the perceived employability of graduates and highlights areas for further empirical research.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed to improve Diploma of Social Media Marketing programmes. First, the results of this research study highlight the significance of a pragmatic, experiential approach to social media marketing education. Improvements are necessary, especially regarding curriculum updates and integrating advanced marketing tools and techniques into the curricula. Second, the in-depth interview results revealed significant insights and enabled us to perform a comprehensive educational programme assessment. When integrated with quantitative research, this qualitative method provides a robust framework for comprehending and improving the efficacy of educational initiatives. It is important to emphasise that the findings reflect students' self-perceptions rather than empirical employer feedback. While employer perspectives are vital, this phase of the research centres on graduate reflections as a foundational step in examining curriculum impact and perceived work readiness.

The variations observed in the survey results suggest a critical need for academic programmes in social media marketing and related disciplines to adopt more comprehensive teaching approaches. These approaches should cover technical and strategic marketing skills and emphasise the development of soft skills, cultural competence, and ethical reasoning. Such a balanced curriculum would better equip graduates to meet diverse industry demands. Incorporating real-world case studies and industry partnerships can enrich student learning experiences 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 (Agarwal and Puppala, 2024).

Furthermore, integrating mentorships and internships into the curriculum can provide students with guidance and networking opportunities that are crucial for career advancement in social media marketing. Graduates who have received this type of education are better positioned to thrive in today's digital world compared to those whose programs lack practical, real-world learning experiences (Bee Sian and Soon, 2023; Kapareliotis et al., 2019). The curriculum must

be routinely revised to incorporate contemporary tools and techniques in social media marketing, ensuring alignment with industry advancements (Li et al., 2023). Promoting ongoing education through professional development opportunities, including workshops, conferences, and online classes, will help graduates stay informed about industry trends and maintain their relevance in the field (Jackson and Dean, 2022). Creating an environment where continuous education and skill development are prioritised will help academic institutions prepare graduates to navigate the evolving landscape of social media marketing. This will ultimately lead to tremendous success in their careers and help them maintain a competitive advantage. Graduates who consistently enhance their skills and knowledge will be more appealing to employers and enjoy greater job security than their peers who do not pursue continuous learning in the rapidly evolving field of social media marketing (Mainga et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This research supports a key point commonly highlighted in vocational education and training and higher education literature: learning is most effective when practised. The concept of “learning by doing” is not just a pedagogical philosophy but a crucial mechanism through which students internalise and apply the knowledge they gain (Van den Broeck et al., 2023). This study's results align with existing literature that emphasises the importance of experiential learning, whereby students actively engage with information in meaningful contexts rather than passively absorbing it (Asad et al., 2021).

Graduates who participated in internships during their studies consistently reported higher confidence levels and smoother transitions into the workforce (Jackson and Dean, 2022; Kapareliotis et al., 2019). This finding aligns with the broader consensus that practical experience, whether gained through internships, work placements, or real-world projects, is a decisive factor in enhancing employability (Bennett et al., 2022; Brosnan et al., 2023). The results suggest that to remain practical and relevant, programmes that reward a Diploma of Social Media Marketing must emphasise practical learning opportunities and ensure students have access to industry mentorships and internships.

Reflecting on these findings, it is evident that academic qualifications alone do not guarantee career success in social media marketing without practical experience (McArthur et al., 2017). The key factor in student success lies in effectively translating theoretical knowledge into practice. Providing immersive learning opportunities that enable students to apply their skills in real-world situations could facilitate this translation (Haas and Besch, 2024). Educators and curriculum developers must prioritise embedding these experiences within academic programmes. This means focusing on what is taught as well as how it is taught and, crucially, how students are provided with opportunities to practice, fail, and learn within a supportive environment (Tran, 2011).

The ability to adapt to new industry trends, apply learned skills in diverse contexts, and pursue continuous learning drives long-term career success in a rapidly evolving field like social media marketing (Agarwal and Puppala, 2024). For educational institutions, this points to the need for curriculum designs that are both flexible and practice-oriented, ensuring that students are not just learning but actively engaging in the process of becoming skilled professionals (Bennett et al., 2023). In conclusion, although a Diploma of Social Media Marketing provides a critical

academic foundation, embodied learning ultimately shapes students' ability to succeed in their careers. The researchers' results highlight the importance of creating educational environments where students can genuinely experience what it means to be professionals in their industry, ultimately guiding them toward long-term success. Training institutions should prioritise the implementation of practical learning opportunities to achieve this goal. Building on these findings, the next phase of research will expand the scope by including both domestic and international graduates, additional geographic locations, and input from employers and industry representatives. This broader approach will enable a more comprehensive understanding of how vocational programmes in social media marketing can be improved to meet changing industry demands.

Limitations of the Research

Although this research contains valuable insights, it has limitations. The sample size for the qualitative portion of the study was relatively small, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. The qualitative data is rich and detailed, but the small sample size means that the findings are only representative of some graduates from the programme. Additionally, the data were self-reported, which may introduce bias, as respondents might provide socially acceptable answers. However, data saturation was achieved in this study, indicating that the sample size was sufficient to capture the main themes relevant to the research questions.

Furthermore, the study was geographically limited to RTOs in the Sydney metropolitan area, mainly in the Central Business District. As a result, the findings may not accurately reflect graduates from other regions or educational institutions across Australia. The research also focused exclusively on international students, which, although intentional due to their unique employability barriers, restricts broader generalisation. Finally, the study relied solely on student perceptions and did not include employer perspectives. These limitations reflect the exploratory nature of this research and underscore the need for future studies to involve multiple stakeholder viewpoints.

Future studies should include more extensive and diverse samples to validate these findings. Expanding the sample size and including graduates from different cohorts and backgrounds would provide a comprehensive understanding of the programme's effectiveness.

Implications for Educational Programmes

The findings have significant implications for educational programmes intended to prepare students for careers in social media marketing and related fields. Strengthening industry connections is essential to ensure that academic programs incorporate the relevant skills and knowledge that employers seek, such as proficiency in digital marketing tools, data analytics, and content strategy. Partnerships with industry stakeholders can facilitate curriculum updates, provide access to the latest tools and technologies, and offer students valuable opportunities for internships and networking. However, not all RTOs in Australia provide an assisted internship within their curricula. The results highlight the need for structured internship programmes with effective mentorship to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice. Educational institutions can improve employer perceptions and graduates' job prospects by including internships in their programmes (Kapareliotis et al., 2019). Moreover, enhancing

programme reputation, showcasing alumni success stories, and supporting students in professional development activities can positively influence employer attitudes about such programmes and increase employment opportunities for graduates (Zbierania et al., 2021).

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