

# An Evaluation of Industry Requirements for the Marketing Graduates at Thai Universities

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## Abstract

Marketing is one of the most prevalent graduate careers that opens up exciting opportunities for the University students. Marketing graduates require diverse skills and knowledge in today's dynamic environment. There is often a criticism from the industry professionals that the marketing graduates lack the necessary wherewithal and skills to qualify as job ready professionals. University curricula is often a mismatch for industry requirements. The marketing courses taught at Universities in Thailand should be not only knowledge and skills based, but also in line with the requirements of the industry. The programs should be structured to impart correct attitude for students' success in their work life. This paper addresses these issues and explores the requirements from the industry for Thai marketing graduates. This paper also examines the existence of skills gap and possibility to reduce this gap and eventually eliminate it. It delves into the marketing education that should be imparted to the graduate students at Universities to transform them into job ready candidates who can be suitably employed.

**Keywords:** Marketing programs, Industry requirements, knowledge and skills gap, job ready Thai professionals, marketing education, change in trends

## Introduction

### Background of the problem

It is mandatory for all universities to modernize their curriculum every few years. However, some of the updates in the marketing curriculum do not match the requirements of marketing departments in organizations, where most of the students would ultimately look for employment. To update the curricula the university has principally involved academic professionals and abided by the rules and regulations, but the industry experts were never officially involved. Job readiness and graduate outcomes have developed their importance based on international accreditations and changes in the job environment. It was required to appraise the current structure of the curriculum to make the marketing program more effective for students who aim to graduate and work in the marketing industry.

This obligated a research of the sentiments of the industry to comprehend their perspective on getting involved in education and supporting the universities. It was also imperative to understand the actual industry needs from academics and students to help create successful recruits.

### **Research questions**

The Literature available focuses on the general employability gap of graduates in Thailand but not specifically on the marketing graduates' requirements with respect to their job readiness for the industry. This leads us to the two pertinent Research questions.

**RQ1:** Are the marketing programs in Thai Universities in line with the needs of the industry in Thailand?

**RQ2:** What kind of skills should be imparted to marketing graduates to make them job ready for companies in Thailand?

### **Purpose**

The main purpose of the research is to create dialogue with the industry specialists to understand their opinion of university education and ways to involve them to participate in the education process. The area of interest for this research in the marketing departments of organizations to make effective changes in the marketing faculty of the university.

### **Hypothesis**

Our Hypothesis is:

**H1:** There is a gap between knowledge and skill needs for marketing graduates and education provided by universities in Thailand.

**H2:** Universities and industry are not working together to create marketing programs for success of graduates.

### **Literature review**

#### **Industry ready Marketing graduate requirement**

The needs of the marketing discipline in industries are evolving fast. The courses taught at Universities should not only be theory based but also up-to-date in accordance with the knowledge and skill requirements of the industry. The students studying in the marketing program are the potential employees of the industry. Their education should match the needs of the industry and that is always changing. Widely held evidence from industry shows that most marketing graduates are not job ready and hence must go through on-the-job and off-the-job training. Business students around the world have marketing as a compulsory core course and they choose marketing jobs upon graduation. It is also a popular discipline among the students both at the undergraduate and graduate level.

The perception of industry in Australia suggests that marketing educators need to place more emphasis on the problem solving, communication and the teamwork skills of marketing graduates. Improvement is required in these areas (Rundle-Theile *et al.*, 2005). Rundle-Theile *et al.* (2005) further suggests that the marketing program in universities should place more importance on clearly stated learning objectives. Outcomes of the courses in the program should be designed with a view of the students' learning needs to match future job requirements and not the teacher's activities. This is right because clearly defined learning objectives will help in enhancing the knowledge and skills of the students.

An industry ready graduate not only finds a suitable employment but also contributes to the economic development of his/her country. Some of the industry experts and scholars are concerned that the lack of industry ready graduates are likely to contribute more towards the unemployment than the global recession did. Marketing educators should include such subjects that cover various topics, such as personal and professional development, managing personal finances, general writing skills, communication skills, and personal and professional etiquette. This will help in enhancing employability of graduates (Jordaan *et al.*, 2014). Weligamage (2009) suggested that many corporates want the educators to review and redesign their curriculum and change the delivery methodology.

According to the scholar, this will inculcate and support development of communication, teamwork, problem solving and other important skills in the University students. The current trend requires more specialized or at the minimum basic digital marketing skills in new marketing recruits. This trend is on the rise due to the growth of business and business activities through electronic media. The significance of digital literacy for marketing graduates cannot be overemphasized. Manowalulou (2008) has stated that the faculty members in Thailand agree that computer competency and information literacy skills are required for marketing graduates to become successful at the workplace. Marketing graduates in Thailand have some of these computer skills but they need to mature skills in database and spreadsheet software.

According to McArthur *et al.* (2017), the employers in Australia preferred to have marketing graduates who are motivated, adept at managing their time, good at communication, and possess digital marketing experience. This raises the imperative question to determine if the delivered education and the composition of the marketing curricula are adequate for the purpose. Are universities capable of producing graduates proficient in the new trends of marketing and Industries, who are also mindful of all organizational essentials and can initiate work with minutest intervention? Some of the organizations around the world who employ marketing graduates also suggest the need for good writing skills among other communication and presentation skills, but due to the online revolution writing skills are not given the importance they require.

A well-designed marketing curriculum should have an important objective of improving student writing. A new way suggested is the One-page papers (1PP) which facilitate this process. (Wright & Larsen, 2016). IPP helps in merging effective marketing teaching with writing instructions in an efficient manner. However, it needs to be assessed whether it is also a requirement in Thailand. Internships or industrial training is of paramount significance. The marketing students may need to undertake internships to graduate successfully from university.

The tenure of these internship with the industry should be a minimum of 480 hours. The internships offer practical exposure on-the job to the students, which they cannot learn in the classrooms. There is also an added advantage of getting pre-placement offers (PPOs) with the companies for some of the diligent students, who prove their worth during the course of the internship. This will eliminate the need to look for placement for some students, which is a motivation for them to work harder during the education phase too. This is a win-win situation for the employers, graduates and the Universities. Collins (2001) has suggested that internship is an opportunity for students to experiment their career choices, gain skills and interests as well as obtain an edge over their inexperienced counterparts.

### **Marketing graduate requirements and skills gap in Thailand**

According to Pholphirul (2017), both the vertical and horizontal mismatches exist in the labor market, which resulted in lower incomes for the graduates in Thailand. However, that did not impact the employability of the candidates. Pholphirul (2017) further suggests that these mismatches can be reduced by strong collaboration between the employers and the Universities/Colleges. There are only a few degree programs in Thailand that require students to complete internship. The Universities should encourage students to work in real workplace settings and award credits from the internships. Thais perceive a demand of administrators and marketing educators. Rangel, R. *et al.* (2009) suggest that the University graduates in Thailand should have acquired analytical skills, problem solving abilities and foreign language & communication skills during their studies which they did not.

This finding by Rangel, R. *et al.* (2009) was based on questionnaire administered by them to the academicians, business executives and government officials in Thailand. They further found that it takes time for Thai graduates to be incorporated smoothly into the labor market immediately after graduation. According to Rangel, R. *et al.* (2009), on a scale of “excellent”, “good”, “regular” and “bad”, the majority of the respondents chose “regular”, with respect to this time span of smooth transition to the corporate environment.

The establishment of ASEAN Economic Council (AEC) in 2015 will ensure that the ASEAN countries are economically integrated. Tan & French-Arnold (2012) in the UNESCO, Bangkok report on Graduate Employability in Asia have stated that the establishment of AEC will help in easing the unemployment situation in Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. This will bring opportunities for Thailand and its workforce also.

However, the graduates in Thailand including those from the marketing stream should develop employability skills to be able to compete with the rest. AEC brings both opportunities and challenges for the Thai graduates and employees. Lathapipat and Chucherd (2013) address the problem of labor market efficiency in Thailand. They suggest that there is a lack of both quantity and quality of labor supply. The University level education in line with the employer aspirations can address this issue to some extent by producing the graduates with required competency and skills. Literature available on the industry-ready marketing graduate requirements in Thailand is quite scarce which was one of the reasons to pursue this research.

## Methodology

### Sample

The main objective of this study was to understand if the marketing programs offered to students were creating job ready graduates in accordance with the industry requirements. The secondary objective was to find the gap between marketing education provided by universities and the knowledge and skill requirements of the industry.

The evidence needed to support the study needed to be collected from industry specialists who deal with regular recruitment of newly graduated marketing executives. Turner (2010) has described the process of interviews to provide in-depth information relating to the contributors' expertise and perspectives of a specific subject. The obligation was to gather comprehensive facts. The significance was disposed to the direction of data quality established on experience of the participants, which was the focus of the study as opposed to the number of people interviewed.

The other possibility could have been the survey research approach, which is primarily used to collect evidence about the frequency, dissemination, and the associations that occur amongst variables in a fixed target population according to Coughlan, M (2009). The main limitation of the survey method would have been adaption of close-ended questions from previous similar studies rather than create them to match the scope of this particular study. This would diminish the prospect of learning novel facts, which is the effort of this exploratory study. In Thailand, several multinational as well as local companies hire graduates fresh out of university for their marketing department.

Some of these organizations have a marketing team supporting numerous marketing activities while other organizations are committed to providing various marketing functions to organizations who lack departments with specialized marketing skills like advertising, digital marketing or even research. To collect relevant information, interviews were done with chief executive officers, human resource directors and marketing heads of six multinational and two local organizations. Coverage of all kinds of marketing needs in various organizations to get a better understanding of needs and gaps was ensured.

### Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 (below) highlights the relationship between different variables with the ultimate goal of preparing industry ready marketing graduates, so that they can be easily recruited by the corporates in Thailand. There is an immediate need to develop marketing curriculum of Universities in line with the requirements of the industry and the fast evolving trends. Industry can be made a partner in developing the curricula also. The focus of marketing courses should be to impart knowledge and innovative skills like developing the digital skills of the students through more use of technology, content management, data driven decision making etc. The study of the students at University should be supplemented by internships and industry projects. This will enhance the students real world experience. Industry projects can be undertaken as a team which will instill teamwork in the students and enhance their communication skills. There are other benefits of internships and industry projects too.

Some of the students get a Pre-placement offer after completing their internship with a company, which boosts their morale and confidence. Advantages of internship include increased monetary compensation and greater overall job satisfaction (Gault *et al.*, 2000). The above conceptual model will benefit the University in reducing and eventually eradicating the skills gap and thereby developing industry ready marketing graduates. Internships & industry projects represent the **moderator** in this conceptual model.

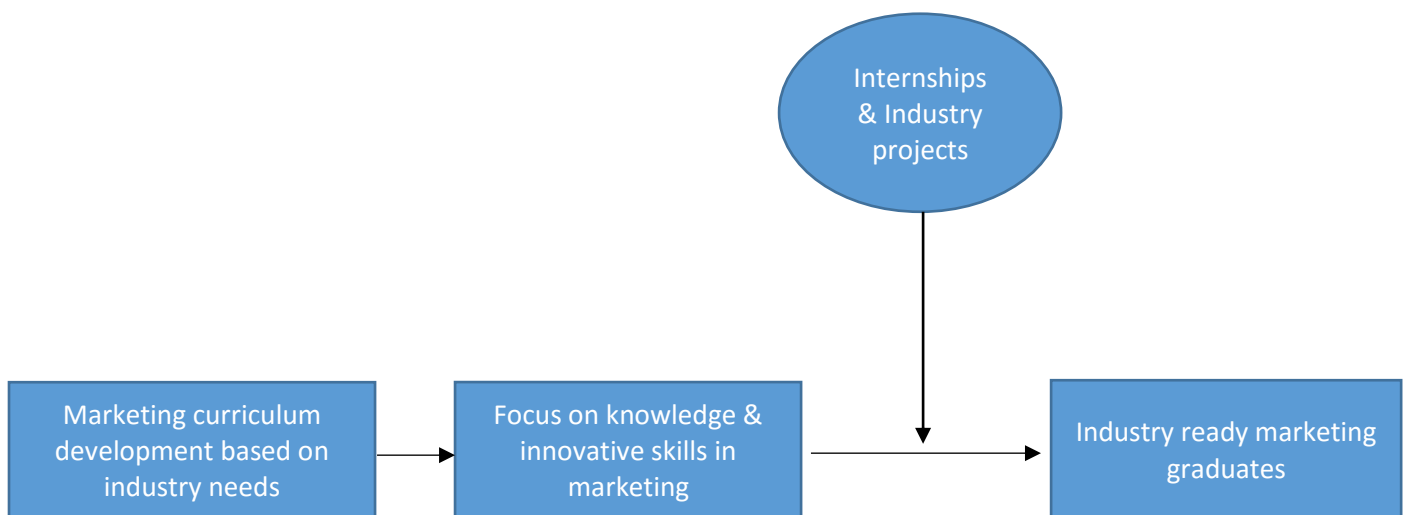


Figure 1. Conceptual model of preparing industry ready marketing graduates

## Data Analysis

Template analysis was selected as the method of data analysis for this study. This method can help in revealing the perspectives of the expert participants. The highlight is on the distinctive features of the discrepancies in the knowledge of the recruits based on the needs of the industry. The method allows flexibility in analyzing possible limitations in the scope of the study or data gathering. Qualitative research generates immense volume of intricate textual data, which is a challenge to scrutinize without set variables. King (1998) discusses how researchers traverse through the extensive material to construct understanding of the experiences captured in the interview text. One of the author adopted the role of interviewer.

It was decided that it is better to have the author interview instead of a research assistant, as it is important to understand their attitudes here instead of just the spoken words. The intention was to acquire adequate consistency grounded on their knowledge of marketing, academics and expertise of the template coding structures. The participants were asked several questions regarding the three capacities that developed during the course study. The areas that emerged after data analysis using template analysis method were 'the need for job readiness of the marketing graduates', 'skills required in marketing recruits' and 'appropriate teaching methods to develop job ready students at the university'.



### **Need for job readiness of graduates**

The participants had to discuss and decide whether there was a need to make the marketing graduates more suitable for recruitment. They had to analyze based on their own experiences if they would prefer graduates to be more equipped so that they are more ready to assume responsibilities and require less training on and off the job. The themes that emerged in this context were in two major areas.

The first one was 'Gap between academics and industry trends' where the main concerns from the participants were regarding 'students are clueless about the difference in work life', 'marketing needs and trends not updated regularly in universities' and 'practical exposure for students are too little and too late'.

The second emerging area of discourse was that 'businesses want competent and agile graduates', where the main concerns from the participants were regarding 'skills and attitude mismatch among new recruits', 'need for confidence', 'understanding the environment and needs', 'cross diversification' and 'relevant practical work experience before graduating'.

### **Skills required in marketing recruits**

The second context that the participants had to discuss was regarding the knowledge and skills required in all their marketing employees based on jobs they confer upon interns and new recruits. They had to establish their decision on marketing activities in their organization. Some of the themes that emerged during the discourse were divided between 'General Marketing skills' like planning, strategizing, presentation, innovation, creativity, ethics, cross-cultural management and teamwork while the other emergent theme was 'Specialized marketing skills' like branding, research, negotiation, digital marketing, big data, data driven marketing, decision-making etc.

### **Appropriate teaching method and preparing job ready graduates at the university**

The third context that the participants had to discuss was about teaching and preparation of job ready students. They had to establish their decision of the curriculum, courses and activities that marketing students need to follow to emerge as successful job ready graduates. Two major themes emerged during the discourse, 'Industry and University share obligation' and 'Updated Curriculum based on change in the industry'.

Under 'Industry and University share obligation' the main ideas were 'understanding trends in market research', 'internships and focus on industry projects' and use of updated technology.

Under 'Updated Curriculum based on change in the industry' the main ideas were 'update should be after discussions with relevant industry specialists', 'provide activities and workshops to increase interaction with industry', and 'involve industry experts as guest lecturers'.

## Discussion

The analysis of the interviews evidently established the empirical study. Based on outcomes it is essential for universities to adjust their marketing program structures and techniques of teaching, away from giving evidence of acquired knowledge, to an acquisition of skills (Rundle-Theile *et al.*, 2005). A similar sentiment is mirrored from the interviews where the pace of the industry is far progressive than the pace of alteration in education. This is not just a concern among marketing students and marketing departments of companies only. According to discussions by both Jenvey (2012) and Jordaan (2009), there is an inconsistency between the skills that are compulsory in economies and the effectiveness of skills possessed by graduates from Universities. Participants have discoursed comprehensively about various topics of importance. They sketched out the work done by their organization and the necessities and limitations when it comes to marketing.

Each of these organizations recruit or have recruited new graduates. One of the primary theme was about the job readiness of marketing graduates in their organization or from their experience. The discussions included specifics concerning skill requirements among marketing recruits to be job ready and to be effective in their work. Different marketing jobs necessitate different set of skills and expertise in every level, which changes as per the strategy and progress of the individual. The market is exceptionally competitive and yet there is an insufficiency of proficient individuals for the various positions.

To be successful, marketing graduates should possess some rudimentary and some specialized knowledge and skills that are developing in their line of work. There is a need in the universities to begin early intervention in the curricula and teaching plans to include rigorous practical work to students along with the theory. The focus should be on teaching and creating job ready marketing graduates who would possess all qualities of prospective recruits. This aspect would help in reducing the training cost of companies, especially the SME's. The company marketing executives were asked if they would find it more lucrative to recruit graduates who come equipped with the knowledge that you have to train others to. If this is an interesting prospect, what are their ideas on how to impart some of the most required marketing skills to prospective graduates to create a ready to recruit marketing graduates' pool? Being open to internships and offering industry projects to students.

## Findings and Results

Based on the in-depth conversation with the participants, it was established that organizations are all exceedingly concerned in the outcomes of the students. They are keen to support the needs of the students in terms of education and skills development, as finally, they would be a part of the industry. The organization members are in wonderment of the new trends in learning that students possess today. They also feel students are much advanced and aware. However, they also feel that new marketing recruits fail to assess the difference between student life and work life. They fail to understand essentials of a business or the workings of business. They take it more lightly than many organizations would recommend. Marketing students need to be adept at business trends and stay updated regarding all current affairs trying to predict how that could affect the future of business.



Marketing recruits definitely need all the general skills that people possess these days like planning, strategy and branding or being creative and being a team player. Apart from that, new marketing recruits also need to possess specialized skills along with basic knowledge of marketing. These days' recruiters want marketing employees to be good storytellers, presenters, people who can isolate crucial concerns, who are persuasive and excellent negotiators. These skills are alongside being good researchers, digital marketers, data analysts and decision makers.

Organizations are concerned, students are imparted various theories and principles but their application skills are not so adept or they struggle to communicate and present their concepts and conclusions. Teaching such skills after employment is very difficult. In conjunction with learning research skills and using tools professionally for data-analysis, they should be also be taught interpretation and decision making skills to make them more competitive. Students also need to pay attention to new trends like the concept of big data, content management, tech monitoring and optimization and should comprehend the diverse channels and media.

Eventually they will be supporting new product development, concept testing, market penetration, branding, image personality, customer satisfaction, pre-launch, post-launch, segmentation and much more. Most students start their career with general marketing or administrative jobs. They need training before they are given the more demanding marketing activities. Once trained, they also help with strategy making, creatives, designing, programming, social media marketing, content management and many other challenging activities.

However, this is a slow learning process. Students are not expected to start their career in marketing with all this knowledge right after university. However, they need to have the mentality to want to apprehend the diverse needs of the organization they are joining. Different organizations have different environment and students must be willing to show good work under pressure, which happens quite often. Some good recruits are unable to bear the challenges and pressure even with the support of mentors, workshops and in-house coaching and training. Attitude and confidence cannot be taught to any student; however, it can be instilled early in them, along with the education.

They should learn to work independently, be able to defend their ideas in the right way and yet be open to other opinions. Innovation, creativity, openness to change and usage of more technology should be together with their competitive marketing skills and knowledge. Most of the companies support both local and international organizations and require data of Thai consumers as well as international consumers. Adaptation to culture, ethical behavior and acceptance are extremely important traits for successful employees. In almost all organizations, interns and new recruits all do real work. Along with the need for a specialization, multi-talented and cross-diversified employees are the need of the hour.

### **What does the finding mean for student, academics and the marketing industry?**

According to the outcomes of the research, industry experts agree there is a gap between industry requirements and the education provided at the universities. This influence is not just among the marketing graduates but in general majority of new recruits in all departments. Industry experts identify that change is fast to keep up with competition and to create competitive advantage.

This tendency will transform further and become more rapid instead of decelerating. However, this change is excessively rapid and challenging to be reflected in university education, which is bound, by regulations and laws. Consistent curricula appraises to keep up with altering trends would be a better possibility. Include the industry to recommend the essentials and alterations required. Keep the industry experts further involved in the program delivery could be a possibility when curriculum changes are not feasible.

Universities still have a way of offering updated information and skill training to students through extra-curricular offering in the form of seminars and workshops. This could also be done through the association of industry specialists to provide courses on the new trends. Organizations are often open to industry projects, job shadowing and internship opportunities. The industry is very willing to influence students and support university with the education to make students more work ready. They believe students should already get a flavor of working with organizations while at University. The industry would also be willing to work with faculty for consulting and research projects. This is an excellent method of involving the faculty in industry trend changes and keeping them updated.

Industry would always choose to recruit students who are more job ready and are enthusiastic to support universities in the form of projects or competitions, which creates many opportunities for the students while they are still at university. Apart from modernizing through specialized and generalized skills in graduates, it is particularly vital now to produce more graduates who are progressive, unprejudiced and have the correct attitude to acclimatize to situations of the organization. They can get many opportunities that will support them to gain the insights into the organizations through industry projects and workshops with the industry.

### **Limitation and Future Studies**

Lecturers in the university do not really know what is happening in the industry or how trends are changing. This is not just happening in the marketing faculty but is a common trend in most faculties. Johnston, S., & McCormack, C. (1996) said many of university lecturers seem to be the obstacles themselves due to some subjective reservations about moving on from exclusive dependence on old-style education tactics and moving towards incorporating different new drifts and methodologies into their teaching. Organizations are extremely concerned that some curricula changes happen after seven to ten years when the needs of the industry changes every six months. With the growth in technology that change has become more frequent and unpredictable due to the growing competition. Honomichl, J. (2000) stated, the evolution will only intensify its pace as the competitive economies of the world magnify. Research should validate the opinion of the universities in Thailand.

It is crucial to understand their viewpoint in regards to this problem and how motivated they are to take corrective action. Change in curricula and programs in the university is a long process and change is difficult. It is also thought provoking and we must take notice, regarding the extremely little significant research done in Thailand that deliberates these problems. This generates a need for additional research into the problem and also a need to evaluate if such changes are effective in future. Change in curricula takes place without the inclusion of the industry. Koh, K. (1995) shared his discontent at educators designing the curricula with absolutely no involvement of the industry which creates lack of relevance and standardization.

To conclude it was established that the gap in the job readiness of the marketing graduates in Thailand is real. Prominent industry professionals are expressing their apprehensions regarding the skill levels of the marketing graduates and their attitudes, which makes employment of fresh graduates without training and probation difficult. It is not cost effective as graduates may ultimately decide against continuing with the organization after extensive training and on boarding.

However, not familiarizing and training the recruit who have very little concept of work life also affects the industry negatively. Universities may want to discuss how students could be more aware of changes in work life. If students get practical exposure, they will learn what reality is. There is extensive need for university education to match up to the market trends and create curricula that supports the recruitment needs of the market. It is also extremely important to understand the views of the universities and expectations of the students too. However, due to time limitation we were unable to do the same. We also have no way to evaluate the difficulty level of such change for the university and also their effectiveness for either the graduates or the industry in the fast changing environment.

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