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Can we make higher education relevant to the needs of the Search & Social Media Marketing industry?

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are often criticised for their lack of relevant educational courses that will equip students with the skills to meet specific industry needs. The issue of relevant education has been of particular significance to highly dynamic business information technology related subjects. This paper presents a discussion that outlines the benefits and advantages of including “Search & Social Media Marketing” as a taught subject within higher education.

The key argument presented here is that search and social media marketing not only provides relevance to an emerging commercial industry, but also represents an opportunity for delivering cutting-edge education that crosses a range of disciplinary boundaries by having the topic itself provide context and content. Search and social media marketing is a topic largely defined by the emerging need of marketing professionals to engage and apply their pre-existing knowledge and strategies to the context of search engines and social media.

The data gathered in this case study is based on four action research cycles conducted during the academic years 2008/09 and 2010/11. Additionally, data was collected using an industry survey of 112 respondents who attended the Search Analytics and Social Conference (SASCon 2010), search & social media marketing (www.searchmarketing.salford.ac.uk) short course participants and UK-based marketing agencies.

The key findings of this study are that a) the Search & Social Media Marketing industry is growing, but is still in its infancy and offers a great opportunity for collaboration between the industry and higher education but b) despite the healthy and growing career opportunities within the discipline, there is a lack of higher education provision to support students interested in the industry, demonstrating the need for academics to engage in this subject area.

1. Introduction

Last year, a historic milestone for online advertising was reached in the United Kingdom (UK) – online advertising spending surpassed that of advertising on Television (TV). UK Internet advertising spending is leading this trend internationally. This phenomenon is largely explained by the fact that UK television programmes are dominated by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (circa 30% market share) and not the commercial channels, which leaves little choice to those interested in reaching UK prospects but to go on-line. The relatively high level of Internet penetration in the UK further justifies this move to on-line channels. This has now reached over 70% of households and 90% of these already had broadband access in 2010. Once online, the five most popular activities for Internet users include using search engines, sending emails and more recently the use of Social Media such as social networking websites (see Figure 1). These conditions have produced a high degree of innovation within UK online marketing – particularly in cross-channel and viral marketing – but they have also placed pressure on the industry sector itself to develop, foster and train individuals who are better qualified and knowledgeable in the specific realm of search and social media marketing.

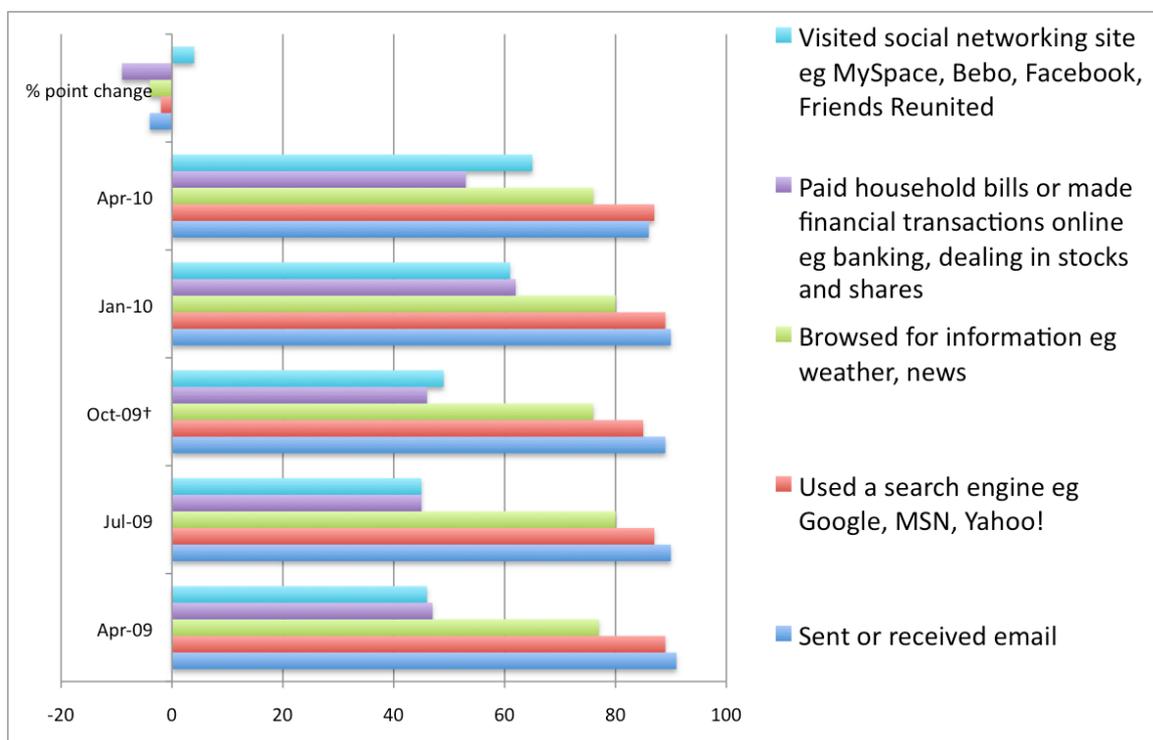


Figure 1: Trends of Internet use expressed in percentage terms: Ipsos MORI/Mintel 2010

This data highlights a major market for organisations that want to reach out to UK prospects using search engines or social media communication channels. Although the national perspective is positive in the UK, the global e-readiness survey, which measures how prepared a country is for e-business, showed that the UK was lagging behind other countries achieving a ranking of only 8th out of 70 in 2008, 13th in 2009 and dropping to 14th place in

2010 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009, 2010). The e-readiness survey highlights several high performing countries such as the United States, Australia, and Scandinavian countries such as Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. It is also notable that major emerging BRICs economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China) fall into the bottom half of the list of 70 countries analysed. This clustering reveals the close correlation between overall economic development and e-readiness, which in turn has an impact on the immediate relevance and appropriateness of search and social media marketing education outside of the most developed economies.

Nonetheless, rapid economic growth will also produce an imminent need for social media and search marketing training and education. Organisations and business schools can equally recognise a wide range of opportunities related to these local and global technological developments. Importantly, for this second group, the rise in the use of social media and search engines challenges many of the approaches and assumptions that have previously delineated courses, research and engagement into subject areas held distinct from one another with perhaps only holistic and integrated Masters of Business Administrations (MBAs) bucking this trend. Whilst these opportunities are multi-faceted, the particular development examined in the current paper focuses on the direct needs of the marketing industry to utilise online channels and to make use of the emerging technologies to convert more prospects into focused customers or consumers. With the rising importance of social media, the nature of the consumers with whom brands desire to engage has itself changed. Brands now want vocal and passionate customers who do not simply return but who 'work' for the organisation to encourage their own social network to also become brand customers and to give feedback on products, potential products or trends. The changes in consumption that social media engenders itself changes the meaning of the term 'customer' applied within traditional marketing literature. The relationship of brand to consumer is made problematic by becoming significantly more complex, interactive and, for the brand owner, more demanding. The aim of this paper – in the light of this new complexity that encapsulates concerns traditionally covered within disciplines including sociology, marketing, computer sciences, communications studies and others - is to explore the benefits of Higher Education Institutions offering search and social media marketing as part of their teaching portfolio. The specific example of search and social media marketing also brings a contemporary context to the ongoing debate – and with it a tension – in the differences between formal education and industrial training. But similar to the significance of the changes that social media brings to consumerism and marketing, so too its response in terms of education also highlights some potential form of resolution to this educational debate.

This paper reviews the existing literature in the area of higher education and highlights some of the main challenges currently facing business education within higher education. It then examines the constantly evolving role information technology plays in developing competitive advantage in organisations and how marketing and sales departments operationalise this knowledge and these technologies. The literature review section is followed by a description of the action research case study, data description and discussion of the data in the light of the literature. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are presented.

2. Literature review

2.1 Can higher education ever be cutting edge?

Considering the history of education, there is a recurring theme that questions the “What?” and “How?” of teaching and learning. In the UK the recorded history of education can be traced back to Church scholars of the 5th century A.D. (Beck, 1965; Butts, 1971). From this moment – clearly inspired by specific religious motivations and agendas - education processes and subjects have evolved. For example, one of the main reasons for the reduced use of Latin as a language of instruction and the introduction of vernacular languages in education was the development of commerce. Traders needed competent individuals who could facilitate trade and communicate with others in business on a day-to-day basis and not a language that was primarily associated with the historic study of religion. Similarly, the legislation that made education compulsory and a mechanism of the State was the response of the UK government to the more radical mode of education being conducted through Working Men’s and Mechanics’ Institutes in the 19th Century. The desire was to produce a ‘sufficiently’ educated working class capable of being factory operatives without becoming radicalised against the prevailing capitalist status quo. UK universities – many of which developed out of regional Mechanics’ and Working Men’s institutions in the UK - are now one of the main conduits in organising and structuring science and technology to meet the economic requirements of society.

In recent decades, the publication of several reports has called for significant change in higher education –calling upon Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to conduct their business of teaching and learning in different and potentially innovative ways in order to meet the skills requirements outlined in the Leitch report (Wedgwood, 2008). Having benefitted from a claimed doubling of investment since 1997 (Mandelson, 2009), UK HEIs are now entering a time of severe austerity that approaches a form of tacit but complex privatisation. The reduction of the government's teaching grant funding by 80% (www.parliament.uk 2011) will make the UK one of the most expensive education systems in the world. Graduates in 2011/12 academic year will have to justify their investment in their own personal education, balancing the commercial and career enhancing viability of attending HEIs with the consequent need to re-pay their fees through an additional tax contribution of potentially up to £40k. The likelihood is that university applicants will consider more carefully the specific employment outcomes of individual courses to a much finer level of granularity than Universities or careers counsellors are currently capable of giving advice on. Evidence even suggests that graduates of some disciplines may end up with a lower net earning potential as a result of undertaking a university degree (Hill 2005).

Within the realm of business education – where the return on investment of a business degree shows an rise in earnings potential – demand will necessarily evolve in what is already a competitive market with an increasingly critical and informed ‘consumer’. However, at the undergraduate level, the focus will continue to be on building a broad understanding of core subject areas although more importantly, this focus will be within the context of developing an essential base of key skills. Programmes that incorporate opportunities for teamwork with external clients, international experience and paid work placements will almost certainly be expected by new students as the norm rather than the exception. At postgraduate and executive education levels of delivery, similar critical examinations of a university's offering will be made. With potentially both corporate and public sector organisations being equally

squeezed by the economic situation in the UK, their potential sponsorship of students' course fees will require greater justification and programmes will need to deliver clear outcomes that develop capacity and skills in ways that are measurable within a definable and short time frame. Even with these constraints, in terms of programme design, delivering professional courses within the critical education environment of a university has a range of benefits.

3. The study description

The current study follows in the footsteps of the reflective practitioner paradigm (Biggs, 1999) and is based on the interpretive action research framework, which offers an iterative process of continuous improvement (Mumford, 2001). The initial development of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) training was as the result of consultancy work which was requested from the University of Salford by a local small to medium sized (SME) organisation who were interested in upgrading their website and increasing their online visibility in search engines. The company's managing director was pleased with the consultancy results and was interested in employing graduates with the skills to maintain the SEO level of the website to make sure that the search rankings were kept high.

As a consequence of this and the fact that an e-Marketing module was being phased out, a new module was introduced for second year undergraduate students delivering the theory and practice of SEO. This module was one semester long and was assessed by examination with practical work included in its teaching together with theory such as the original Page Rank (Brin and Page, 1998) algorithm, on-page optimisation and off-page optimisation techniques (Grappone and Couzin, 2008; Jones, 2008; Kent, 2008; Vaughan and Zhan, 2007) and strategies. The practical work comprised a report justifying the SEO strategies and the practical implementation of these practices on a test web page. The module was enthusiastically received by the students who appreciated the mix of practical and theoretical elements of the course. The final assessment demonstrations were always attended by external organisations who were interested in employing students and as a consequence a number of these students were offered jobs in the SEO field. The 29 undergraduate students taking the SEO module shared their views of their experience through the standard module evaluation questionnaire, which asked them about the points they liked, and points they didn't enjoy. Overall students' feedback was positive, highlighting the fact that they were able to apply and learn SEO skills and techniques and to apply them in practice. One of the main criticisms of the module was that students felt that 10 weeks was not sufficiently long enough to be able to test and practice all the skills and techniques that they had learned during the module.

The undergraduate course ran for two subsequent years and was phased out due to rationalisation of programmes at Salford Business School. However, the majority of the content was integrated into a new 'year long' module – e-Commerce – which began in 2010/2011 and has 20 weeks of timetabled sessions comprising one hour per week of lectures and one hour of practical work. This module is a core one for final year students, which means that if any of them are interested in jobs in this area, they would be able to start work at the end of the module while the material is fresh and current.

In addition to undergraduate teaching, Salford Business School explored the opportunity of offering training courses as part of its Open Programmes and a two day session was devised

and offered to learners who were interested in learning the skills but without gaining an academic qualification (Heinze and Wells, 2009). This course was successful in recruiting four cohorts of learners, including marketing-related employees and managing directors of SMEs from the region. One of the key benefits of this programme was the learners' instant access to information and tools that allowed them to see individual website ranking in real time. This course attracted attention from local Search Marketing companies including SMEs and major regional players who were keen to increase the pool of talent in the growing area of search marketing and to help establish the legitimacy of the industry in the region.

As a consequence of local external clients' interest, and as a result of collaborative work with commercial partner organisations including PushON, Latitude Group, MEC:Manchester and most significantly the global leader in search marketing training the US-based SEMPO Institute, a new course that combines the strengths of all three stakeholders was born.

Summary of action research activities				
	<i>Cycle 1</i>	<i>Cycle 2</i>	<i>Cycle 3</i>	<i>Cycle 4</i>
Academic year and semester	2008/2009, Semester 1, cohort 1	2009/2010, Semester 1, cohort 2	2009/2010, Short Course 1	2010/2011, Short course 2
Module /course names	Search Engine Optimisation	Search Engine Optimisation	Search Engine Marketing Management	Search & Social Media Marketing
Learners	30 undergraduate students on BSc Business Information Systems Ten weeks two hour sessions – one lecture and one practical	22 undergraduate students on BSc Business Information Systems Ten weeks two hour sessions – one lecture and one practical	Four groups of up to 8 people taking a 2 full day course which takes place on two subsequent Wednesdays. The sessions have computers available at all times to facilitate practical exercises	Two cohorts of up to 12 learners taking - Foundation (4 hours for 4 weeks) and subsequently Professional (4 hours for 6 weeks) in addition to SEMPO institute online training.

Table 1: Summary of action research activities

During the development stage of the Search and Social Media Marketing programme, a professional training needs survey was conducted at the Manchester based Search – Analytics – Social Media Conference (SASCon) 2010. The survey was distributed both on and offline. As an incentive for completing the survey, one of the randomly selected entrants was given the prize of an iPod Nano. Overall, the electronic survey attracted 54 respondents and 58 responses were completed offline, resulting in a total sample of 112 respondents. It is difficult to estimate the response rate since this survey was widely shared on the internet via Twitter and emails. It is estimated that over 1000 people were reached based on the 250 attendees of

the conference, on average 1000 tweeter followers of those who re-tweeted the link to the survey using the hash tag of the SAScon conference.

4. Data analysis and discussion

The survey broadly asked questions about a) the method and b) the content of the training process expected by those who might be willing to undertake the training. The following four main themes emerged from the qualitative data, which was analysed using an inductive approach:

4.1 Need for training and the training process

The data from the survey highlighted a number of issues facing search-marketing professionals, who felt that training in the area of search and social media marketing was needed - as illustrated by the quote below:

“Running a successful internet marketing business and hearing some dreadful stories and scams about previous suppliers, it would be good to have recognition especially as the internet becomes a major tool in a company's marketing”

The same view was echoed by others, who felt that the idea of such training offered to professionals is a good idea:

“Seems like an excellent idea, long overdue....”

Moreover, the following respondent felt that there was a need to take the training further to establish ethical behaviour policies for professionals in order to facilitate a positive reputation-building process for what is, at times, perceived as an emerging industry:

“This is something I've been thinking about for while, so I hope it is a go-er! An extension I would love to see sometime in the future is an accreditation based on good practice and evidence of ethical behaviour (with evidence), such as used in the information security industry with CREST (the Council of Registered Ethical Security Testers).”

This observation is insightful as it reveals an additional reason for delivering this training within the reputation rich environment of a university. Due to the novelty and relative newness of the area, there are a number of individuals who – perhaps unintentionally – have brought Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Search Marketing as a discipline into disrepute. As a consequence, the industry has suffered and still continues to suffer from a general lack of credibility.

The collaboration between university and commercial organisations directly addresses a range of needs identified in the survey (Figure 2), whose respondents clearly want to see a university endorsed qualification with industry based guest speakers who would provide insight into the day-to-day running of their agencies.

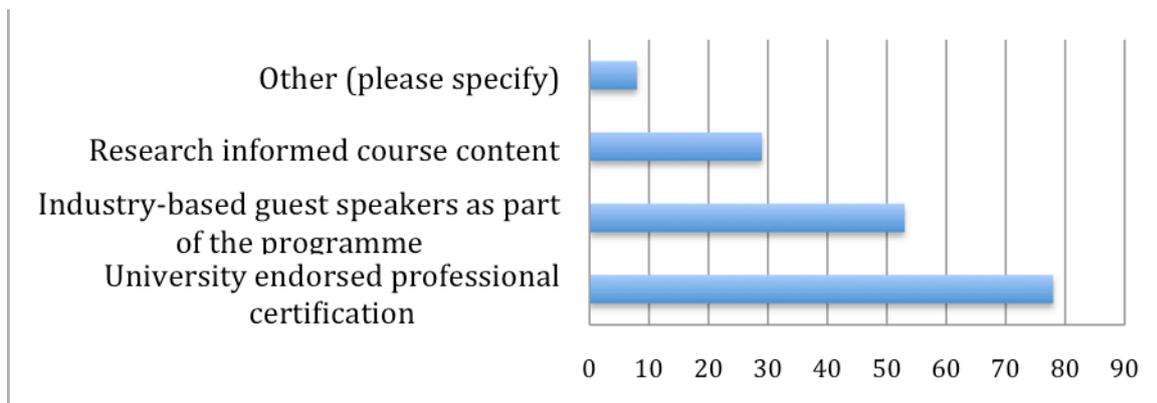


Figure 2: Identification of Unique Selling Features for a course (responses in numbers)

This has the dual effect of attracting large organisational sponsors - who potentially are the greatest beneficiaries from having capable staff in this field; and of benefiting those who have become victims of poor quality education. Developing a programme jointly with input from both reputable industrial partners and a university allows these issues to be addressed.

4.2 The challenges presented with the material in the area

The second area of questions (figure 3) focussed on the content that course participants should engage with and learn as part of the course. Perhaps not surprisingly, the search engine optimisation element received the highest number of votes. However, the surprising finding was the importance of social media marketing. As can be seen from the existing teaching of related courses – Search Engine Optimisation and Search Engine Marketing Management, social media was mentioned as a strategy to increase link popularity, however, the role that social media now played in the data was not expected at the outset of the survey.

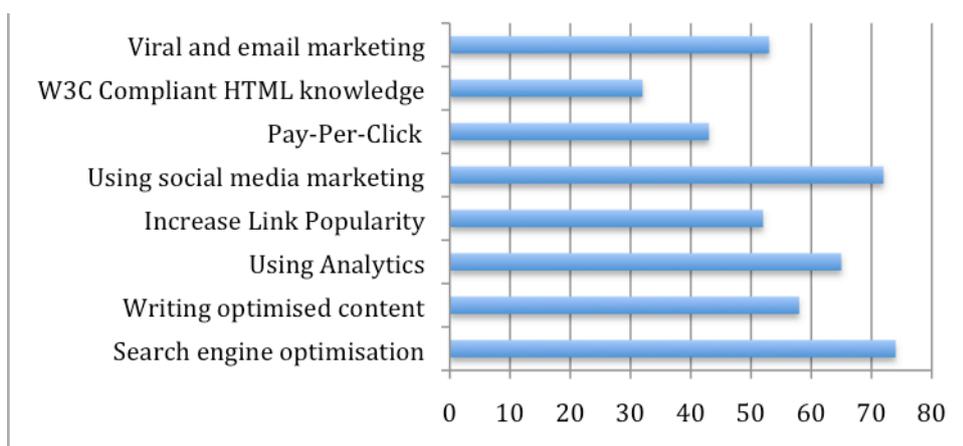


Figure 3: What are the key subject areas that you feel would help you most in your industry? (Responses in numbers)

Web 2.0 elements - which represent social media - were also raised in the comments sections with a number of individuals highlighting the need for integration of non-traditional methods such as highlighted by this participant:

“traffic generation using non-traditional methods - such as web 2.0 - key elements in future SEO and Search marketing”

The importance of search marketing is also highlighted by a number of industry reports, with several highlighting that social media was starting to play a part in the marketing departments of many organisations. For example, the Sage Pay report also highlighted a surprising side effect of social media, that it plays a part in creating trust in the business and increasing the likelihood of the website visitor actually committing to purchase and complete an e-business transaction (Sage Pay, 2010). Moreover, the social media marketing element was also introduced in the 2010 industry benchmark report (econsultancy, 2010).

Due to the dynamic nature of the topic, the one main criticism highlighted by many respondents was that the content needed to be updated very regularly, as illustrated by the following quotes:

“It might be challenging to keep it current, whilst also being a standard measure from year to year to be used by employers and HR people.”

Some expressed an even stronger view on the currency of the material:

“Bit of a Joke - need to completely overhaul the course every 2 - 3 years. Only way to get a professional course is to get Google to run it which would never happen. Otherwise just blogonmy kicks in”

Anyone who has taught any information technology related subject will be fully aware that the issue of currency is a standard and regular source of concern. Some recognised the issue of teaching and learning material currency and suggested combining the offerings with other bodies such as the non-profit Search Engine Marketing Professionals Organisation (SEMPO):

“Could you get other bodies like SEMPO etc involved in the certification.”

Others felt that the amount of information that needed to be digested as part of this training is something that was not possible even on a ten week course, a similar observation to that of our undergraduate students, who felt that they were not able to fully understand all the aspects fully in the given time:

“It seems unlikely that even the brightest and most engaged student could acquire a profound practical understanding of search marketing in 10 weeks without being fully immersed in it. Maybe a longer-term open learning option could be considered.”

However, this point can be addressed on commercial course offerings by the development of a community of students and offering the opportunity to continue to interact beyond the boundaries of the ten week course.

4.3 Industry collaboration with SEMPO Institute

While we argue for the presence and support of a university as being an essential element of the course development, it is equally significant that the course offering is produced through a collaboration with three main stakeholders: local practitioners, industry body and the university itself. This collaboration has produced a *de facto* process of peer review that compares current realities with best practice and a critical perspective. This peer review process brings together the latest thinking and practice in the area of search and social media marketing in a way that is unique within this discipline area:

- academia – contributes the theoretical research, critical framework of thinking and methodical evaluation
- local industry partners – training materials is effectively peer-reviewed by those who work in the industry and acts as a sense-checking and even sense-making activity that is articulated through individual guest speakers
- Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO) – the US-based Institute has a dedicated team of professionals who continuously develop their online self –study materials. This training focused material is also offered as part of the Search & Social Media Marketing course

The most significant factor for the respondents, “University endorsed professional certification”, is addressed through the relationship with SEMPO, but is also the reason why the programme has been initiated as a professional education programme rather than through the offering of a university award. This decision has provided greater flexibility for the development to evolve including cost flexibility and shorter development timeframes than those generally associated with formal university programme approval processes. While the programme is delivered as a professional 'executive' programme, evidence is being gathered to inform the case for the development of a formal programme including assessment of the appropriate level and mode of study, the level of demand and the specific outcomes required by the participants.

4.4 Relevance to the MediaCity:UK development

The MediaCityUK development is still relatively unrecognised outside of Salford and Manchester. However, mention of Project North and the BBC's move to Salford produces a much broader and knowledgeable response. However, among professionals who work directly in Search Engine Optimisation and Social Media Marketing there is greater awareness of this development and its significance to their own work. Once the University of Salford's MediaCityUK campus is operational in late 2011 this programme will be delivered within the new unique digital learning, teaching and research space. The current programmes planned to be offered at MediaCityUK do not include any Search Marketing or Social Media Marketing material, let alone an entire programme. In the context of MediaCityUK and the claimed digital future for Greater Manchester, programmes of this type will be highly relevant

for the future of the local economy. Programmes such as the professional SSEM course will assist in developing the supply chain of talent for the digital sector in the North West.

However, MediaCityUK could be seen as simply a new venue for education within Salford and Greater Manchester. The significance of the location will be the opportunities for day-to-day and opportunistic networking that will come from a diverse mix of media organisations located in a geographically confined – and arguable gated – community. The University also has a role in overcoming the perception of exclusivity that could develop with a multi-million pound development positioned between some of the UK's more deprived communities. While the search and social media programme is not directly intended for local residents, it will bring participants from a range of SME and multi-national organisations including employees of the 160 businesses located on the immediate boundary of the current development.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

As a marketing oriented programme, Search & Social Media Marketing's early development was heavily focused on defining and establishing its unique selling points and the market proposition. In the increasingly competitive UK higher education market, including both public and private providers, all forms of programmes necessarily need to be justified against internal cost calculations and resource planning as well as for external positioning. In such a dynamic, cutting edge and ever-changing field as SSMM, keeping training materials up-to-date and relevant is a major concern. This is particularly important to develop confidence in training in general in this field as one of the criticisms of other institution's offerings has been the use of out-dated and inappropriate materials. Equally, confidence in this field of education needs to be raised by referencing an academic body of literature. There is an acknowledged absence of critical enquiry or any substantial body of empirical research data in the field of search engine optimisation and social media marketing. While this remains the case, the supportive research environment of a university is needed to act as a champion in developing this area of enquiry into a coherent body of legitimate research output.

The trend of increased industry investment in Search & Social Media Marketing is encouraging, however, despite its popularity in business, there are still few academic studies in this field (Heinze et al., 2010). To address this absence in established literature requires a number of actions within the academic environment. In addition to the current professional programme, Search & Social Media Marketing needs to be fostered at the doctoral research level.

The first key finding of our research is that “the Search & Social Media Marketing industry is growing, but is still in its infancy” and this offers great opportunities for both higher education institutions and organisations alike.

Further work is required to establish the academic credentials of this field. Workshops, conference presentations and informed public statements are all needed to develop the curriculum vitae of the field of study – rather than of the individuals contributing to this work. Over time, as the academic partner to this collaboration, the aim will be to develop the wider accoutrements of academic study including specialist conferences and a refereed journal. Ultimately, the biggest contribution that can be made to the development of Search

Engine and Social Media Marketing as a legitimate field of study and enquiry will be to pioneer university awards at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The opportunity to identify new programmes that are genuinely needed and academically rigorous is one of the biggest challenges for university departments. Particularly within business schools, there is often a prevailing attitude that there are no new niches to be found that will elicit sufficient viable and sustainable market interest. Identification of new potential programmes also reinvigorates internal debates about the distinction between training and education. This leads us to the second main finding **that despite the healthy career opportunities, there is a lack of higher education provision in the area of Search & Social Media Marketing.**

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