

Digital Skills Demand and Supply: The Case of Three EU Neighbouring Countries Bulgaria, Greece and Romania

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Summary:

The article explores the opportunities for university Digital Marketing Master's Degree in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. The methodology entails desk and primary research on companies and students' needs. It is based on the JEMSS¹ project implemented under the EU Erasmus programme² for Bulgaria and Greece and outside it for Romania.

The findings are that at present the digital knowledge and skills are acquired mainly outside the formal education. There is an unexplored opportunity for universities as suppliers and they have to develop master's programmes that correspond to the business needs. They should consider also the option for validation of skills and the issuing of certificates. This is particularly important for people that already have a master's degree

or extensive work experience and want to keep their knowledge current.

Key words: digital marketing, master's programme, validation of knowledge and skills

JEL Classification: M 110

1. Introduction

Why such research is needed

Technology has revolutionized marketing decisions. It created "always on" consumers (Solomon, 2015) communicating with companies and peers in a new way. Digital marketing is based on the use of digital technologies for performing marketing activities. Successful marketing decisions today combine online and offline tools for the implementation of the marketing strategies. The fast developments of mobile search, internet of things, and constant consumer engagement are major challenges for marketers that require new skills of marketing experts. Marketers have to find

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¹ JEMSS is a European Union founded project part of the Erasmus Lifelong Learning programme. The project is aligned with the European agenda 2020 which recognises the need for digital literacy skills and aims to develop a joint European Masters in Digital and Social Media Marketing. The JEMMS project is managed by an international consortium of leading EU universities- The University of Salford (UK), University of National and World Economy (UNWE) (Bulgaria), University of Sheffield, international faculty CITY College (Greece), Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania), University of Lodz (Poland) and expert digital marketing recruitment agency - Candidate Ltd (UK). For more information visit <http://mastersindigitalmarketing.org/> or Join JEMSS on Facebook and Twitter to become involved in the #passion4digital community

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new ways to customize their products, add value to the physical product or the core of a service, provide the right benefits to the right consumer segments, and position their products (Schiffman, 2015).

Digital marketing in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, is developing fast and the SMEs will need more skilled employees. The three countries have a positive growth in online advertising for 2014. Bulgarian and Greek growth was double digit. Improvement of data literacy is considered as one of the major growth drivers together with social media, video, mobile penetration and improvement of measuring for different digital channels.

The European Commission (2012) presents that by 2015 at least 90% of jobs will require professionals to have digital skills. While the vast majority of young people are quite knowledgeable about the digital world since they grow up in a world where technology and the internet surround them, they do not have the necessary knowledge to work in the digital business environment.

The EU Commission staff working document on the digital single market strategy (2015) draws the conclusion that the digital skills are acquired outside formal education, „*through personal internet and computer use, in the workplace, in experiential learning or in other informal settings*“. The demand for digital skills by the companies is a chance for the universities to bridge the gap and offer degree or a combination of a degree or/and a certificate that validate the digital skills. The development of Master's degrees in digital marketing requires good knowledge on the business needs. Thus students are likely to be better matched to the potential jobs.

2. Description of the research methodology

The methodology entailed desk and primary research on companies and students' needs in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. It is based on the JEMSS project approach implemented under the EU

Erasmus programme and is applied within the project for the research in Bulgaria and Greece and outside the project for Romania.

The desk research goal was to establish existing supply of digital skills and knowledge in the three countries. It studied the content, cost, level and frequency of delivery of the existing educational programmes at the universities and the training courses provided by the companies. To understand the market's requirements, job adverts requiring digital marketing professionals (or equivalent) were also analyzed.

The primary research on SMEs further explored their needs on qualified employees. The research technique used was an in-depth semi structured interviews lasting 60 minutes. The research focused on SMEs using digital marketing in house or agencies providing digital marketing services.

The students' opinions were studied by designing an online survey. It allowed to reach a greater audience of potential respondents. Its goal was to deepen the understanding of students' interest, needs and expectations regarding a Master's Degree in Digital Marketing. The number of students surveyed is 110 in Bulgaria, 110 in Greece and 80 in Romania. A convenience sample was used which allows to 29 SMEs from Bulgaria (10), Greece (10) and Romania (9) responded. The quantitative data was analyzed by constructing frequency and percent distributions per country and cross-country comparisons. The different perspectives from students and industry aided to identify the correspondence of the skills required by the companies and the opinions of students on what should be thought in digital marketing degree programme and their expectations for a future job. The major part of the students that took part in the research has a bachelor degree in business, economics and public administration and 14% in computers and engineering.

3. Digital competences literature review

The OECD skills outlook (2015) draws the conclusion that digital skills in combination with other cognitive skills is „positively and significantly correlated with labour market outcomes such as employment and wages“. However, there is a shortage of a skilled workforce despite the overwhelming exposure of people to the digital world and they have to acquire the necessary skills by being provided with opportunities to do so. (European Commission Communication, 2010)

Research in specific areas such as marketing, according to a study conducted by the Online Marketing Institute (2013), revealed a gap in digital marketing talent. 70% of executives believe that while their digital marketing team is strong in some areas such as digital advertising and SEO, they are mediocre or even weak in other areas like Analytics, Social Media and Content Marketing. This again reinforces the fact that there is a need for people to obtain the required skills. Moreover, they show that there is a trend for companies to be looking to hire specialists in these areas as opposed to generalists who know a little bit about everything. Directly correlated to this is the fact that there are not yet explicit expectations from employers to have particular degrees because companies tend to prefer people with industry related experience and not just theoretical knowledge. This seems aligned with the emergent, applied and relatively new nature of Digital and Social Media Marketing.

The Online Marketing Institute (2013) study also shows that another reason that companies cannot locate the appropriate talent is that they do not know how to assess a person's skills to be able to know if they are the right person for the job. The study emphasizes the need of a formal digital education that will focus on teaching specific areas to people and give them

some kind of professional experience at the same time in order for them to be able to integrate successfully in the industry in the future. The most important skills for digital marketing specialists that are still rare nowadays according to this study are Analytics, Content Marketing, Social Media and Email marketing. While SEO and Digital advertising are also important, according to the study there is less of a need for more specialists in these two areas. According to an Econsultancy research (2013), another important skill is web design and build. While this may seem not very relevant to marketing, it is slowly becoming a basic skill that marketers should at the very least have a basic understanding of some of these technical aspects. Related to that, having some programming knowledge can also be useful for SEO (SocialMediaHQ, 2012; Berman & Katona, 2013) as well as being able to easily create mockup landing pages and other small projects.

According to (Michaelidou, et al., 2011; E-Marketer, 2010), companies use social media to build direct relationships with their customers, create communities, receive feedback by their customers through a two-way communication system, increase traffic to their website as well as identify potential opportunities to exploit in the future. This shows that there is a need for people who wish to work with social media to have good writing skills in order to clearly communicate with customers without ambiguities and present information in an appealing way. Berman & Katona (2013) as well as IAB (2008) highlight the importance of the content quality of a website for the organic results of the search engine which further supports that need of good writing skills. Moreover, web Analytics is another important skill in order to be able to analyze the effectiveness of visitors on websites (Plaza, 2011; Kohavi, et al., 2002) as well as social media analytics (IAB, 2008) such as Facebook insights.

Community management is another crucial skill if companies want to properly manage the communities they create and fully use all the information available (SocialMediaHQ, 2012). People in charge of communities have a lot of power to influence positively or negatively customers that participate in those by the way they interact and manage the entire network (SocialMediaHQ, 2012). Also, digital marketers must be comfortable with emerging trends and technology since a lot of new ideas and concepts are created very frequently in the online world. They must be able to see arising opportunities and adapt their plan of action accordingly. As an example, Google+ will slowly become more and more important and useful in social media marketing (Mashable, 2014). Therefore, it seems to indicate that digital marketers will have to quickly learn all the features that Google+ offers both to customers and to companies and produce a plan of action based on that.

According to Mashable (2014), posts on Facebook with photos and pictures have more engagement results. More specifically, photo posts get 53% more likes, 104% more comments and 84% more click-through than simple text posts. This seems to suggest that marketers will have to acquire some skills on graphic creation and use of graphic tools such as Photoshop or Illustrator to be able to use more pictures and increase customer engagement. However, it can be argued that it is important to have clarity on the role of the digital marketing professional and in what areas he/she will be adding more value.

Due to the capability of nurturing relationships with customers that digital marketing offers, people will more and more turn towards companies to obtain extra value not directly related to sales of products/ services. Interesting articles, entertainment, help and engagement will become even more popular ways of using social media and companies have to react to that and keep

on investing in those areas. Another trend is that content has to become of better quality and engagement. This seems critical order to engage customers on a deeper level and marketers are required to become more creative and provide quality content. Simple FAQs and generic statements and facts will not be enough. Marketers will have to get the necessary skills to respond to this challenge.

As far as videos are concerned, according to a Pew Research (2010), 78% of adult internet users of all ages watch or download online videos. Moreover, the percentage of people who share videos online with their friends is growing. This seems to suggest that another skill that will be required by digital marketers to have is some video editing and as previously mentioned creative skills. This can be linked with viral marketing where its success is essentially based on the person-to-person propagation of content which nowadays often happens on social media networks (Leskovec, et al., 2007 & Ferguson, 2008). Econsultancy (2014), mentions another important trend that is related to both digital and traditional marketing but is crucial for the future. This trend is integrated marketing or multichannel marketing. The cross-channel homogenization is a major tendency and digital marketers must be aware of it when creating digital marketing plans. This can mostly be achieved by a combination of both theoretical and technical knowledge to be able to identify and plan how certain elements that appear offline can be integrated online. Directly related to this harmonization of marketing elements is the fact that many new social networks become more and more popular (Clickz, 2013).

3. Description of the results

Supply of digital marketing education and training in the three countries

According to expert opinions there are many companies in Bulgaria, Greece and

Romania that do not have online presence and do not promote digitally at all their products and services. However, the awareness is raising and SMEs that have creative decisions in the three markets is growing. For example some of the leading digital agencies in Bulgaria started to operate in Romania and Serbia. The companies 'representatives interviewed in Romania believe that the digital marketing market will double in the country in the next four years and the need of employees with skills for digital marketing will increase. Therefore some of them have internship programmes and provide students with mentorship and a chance to start a digital marketing career. Despite the harsh economic conditions companies interviewed in Greece were keen to provide internships for students pursuing studies in the field and eager to get hands on practical experience.

In Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania digital marketing education is offered mainly by companies and experts. The universities have started recently to offer digital marketing programmes. Agencies consulting on digital marketing often position their courses as training that universities do not yet deliver.

Digital marketing training is performed by many consulting companies and experts in particular fields like SEO, Google Analytics, Website development, etc. Course topics are often changed depending on the updates of Google search engine or the innovations in the social media. The courses are either on one digital marketing tool as SEO, Google AdWords Essentials and Google AdWords Advanced or on digital marketing in general. Such courses are often named as Zero Budget Marketing focusing on the less resources needed.

In Bulgaria most of the courses are one or two day long. Others are offered in teaching hours like 22, 100 and participants take 4-6 teaching hours (45-60 min) in a day. The course duration is few weeks or a month. The courses are delivered face-to-face and the materials are provided as

shared slides, case studies, best practice examples, online lectures combined with homework exercises (for longer than 1-2 days course), project development and presentations. Recently companies started to offer digital marketing courses online. The tuition fees vary between 65 to 125 euros with a discount usually of 20% for an early registration.

In Greece there are a number of ad hock trainings, workshops and conferences that are organized for a specific target group usually practitioners. At the moment there are no regular commercial courses in the area of digital marketing. Workshops and conferences usually last one day and delivered face-to-face with the participation of both academics and industry professionals from Greece and abroad. Since some of the skills required by the industry can be obtained online, it seems that in Greece people interested in the field are turning to industry acknowledged service providers, such as Google, Facebook, Hub spot, etc. for online training. For example, SEO appears to be one of the digital marketing tools growing in its importance. The SEOcertification.org represents an organization that provides education and certification to its members. In 2013 for example there were only six professionals from Greece that were members of this organization compared to 18 in 2015. The education and certification process is done online and the cost represents a membership fee on annual basis. Upon completion, members get the title of Search Engine Optimization Certified Professional. Online certification and training such as the ones provided by Google and other providers are not to be overlooked as more people seem to be turning into online courses and certifications.

In Romania most of the courses outside universities are stressing more on skills needed to develop in order to be efficient in the field. The topics covered are related to planning and implementation of marketing

campaigns using digital marketing tools, understanding the strengths of the key digital marketing platforms, channels and tools and techniques, analysing, tracking and measuring digital marketing campaign response. Integrating online and offline marketing activities, maximizing customer insight through analysis, targeting, profiling and segmentation are also important topics. Usually the courses are 1 to 3 days, and some of the agencies and educational centers offer courses that can be done online. Respectively, the prices are higher, the most popular digital marketing courses (usually certified) are priced around 850 – 900 euro. The lecturers on these courses are mainly practitioners, representatives of companies and more often – digital agencies, with over 7-10 years of experience.

At the moment in the three countries most of the universities are entering the digital marketing area of study by offering a digital business or digital marketing module in management, business, communication or IT studies. In Bulgaria there are two universities that developed masters programmed in digital marketing. In other master programmes taught by business schools digital marketing is included as one or several courses. University of National and World Economy offers the programme International Business and Internet which combines ICT and digital marketing courses. The International Business School has one year master's degree course in Digital Marketing. The courses in the programme provide in-depth study of methodologies specific to internet marketing, internet law, interactive principles, advertising design, and training on the best ways to use social media networks and search engine optimisation technologies. In New Bulgarian University similar programme is PR in social media and social networks. The students learn how to manage and analyze a campaign in the social media and networks. Other Bulgarian universities provide modules on digital marketing tools or analytics.

Digital marketing masters programs

are rare in Greece. At the moment only 2 masters programs are purely focused on digital marketing and social media while 8 other masters programs have at least one or two classes related to digital marketing. The faculty of Communication and Media Studies of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens offers an MA in Digital Media and Interactive Environments. The program is addressed to graduate students operating or wishing to operate in the design, development and evaluating of digital communication services and virtual reality environment.

The University of Sheffield, international faculty CITY College, located in Thessaloniki (Greece) offers one of the first masters in Digital and Social Media Marketing in the region. Launched in 2013, the programme aims at equipping students with powerful skills related to Social Media, Internet Marketing and Search Marketing providing students with the critical ability to review, adapt, and transform current marketing practices. The program is offered on three forms: 1) Full time Study (2 semesters: 9 months + 3 months the research part) 2) Part-time Study (4 semesters: 2 years period) 3) Weekend more (4 semesters: 1 weekend per month). The master covers strategic marketing, online consumer behavior, advertising and sales promotion management, public relations strategies, e-business and internet marketing, building effective web presence, emergent new and online media, research methods for business and the dissertation which is research based. The students take a UK degree. In Bulgaria the same Masters is delivered as a joint program in collaboration with the VUZF University and the students take a UK and Bulgarian degree.

The University of Athens offers a master's program in Information Technologies and Communication for Education. Other universities and colleges in Greece offer digital marketing courses within the business, ICT or communication studies. For example

AIT offers a master's degree in Management of Business and telecommunication technologies. The program addresses an increasingly demanding requirement by the Information and Communications Technologies industry for technical expertise combined with business skills.

In Romania the topics and subjects related to the digital marketing and social media are taught predominantly in the marketing and communications master programmes. The School of Management and Marketing of Romanian-American University offers Master in Strategic Marketing – two-year programme with total of 4 semesters. The digital topics included in the curriculum aim to stimulate knowledge about the ways of development, testing, implementation and evaluation of integrated digital marketing strategies and tactics. The National School of Political Science and Public Administration (SNSPA) recently launched new master's programme "Management and corporate branding" designed to cover two main dimensions: develop the set of skills needed to build, measure and manage portfolio of products and brands within organizations, and stimulate strategic thinking. The Bucharest University of Economic Studies also offers a master degree with an intention also to cover online marketing. There is no special university program, which is dedicated to the social media, and this can be considered as a gap.

The research on the master's digital marketing programme in the three neighboring countries illustrates that there is still a gap that seems to suggest opportunities for new digital marketing programmes both national and joint.

4. Companies demand for digital marketing experts

There are no official regulatory bodies in the three countries that set qualification standards for digital marketing specialists. Professional in digital marketing and social media communications are already established in Bulgaria but still do not have

a common standard for digital marketing experts. There are no written or published common standards for the profession of the digital marketer in Bulgaria. Specialized associations are also rare and of recent origin in Greece. Some organizations, like GRECA (association of companies that operate in the e-commerce segment), IAB (Interactive Advertising Bureau), do not have any regulatory power at the State level, but they are the ones suggesting guidelines and standards of the entire profession. In Romania the situation is similar – there is Interactive Advertising Bureau representatives in the country like in Bulgaria and Greece. The Romanian Association for Digital Communications is active in the market as well, however more directed to broadcasting, than to digital marketing.

Job advertisements provide information on the requirements and the companies' expectations of the employees' skills that are needed by the companies. In Bulgaria the requirements are mostly for at least 2 years professional experience on a similar position; knowledge of new digital advertising technologies and techniques; experience across social media platforms such as microblogging (Twitter) and mobile location-based services (FourSquare) along with content sharing sites like Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Google+ and resources like Quora and other online platforms; basic technical knowledge; excellent English, both written and spoken; strategic thinking; communication skills both oral and written; organizational skills, able to set priorities; negotiating skills; presentation skills.

In Greece and Romania digital and social media marketing is experiencing expansion however specialized job offers are not so frequent yet. Rather, the job offers for the marketing positions also involve usage of digital and social media channels as a part of an integrated communications approach. In terms of the educational background, it appears that employers interested in digital marketing professionals are fairly flexible. Very rarely employer requires education

from one specific area. In majority of the cases, candidates are expected to have Bachelor or Master's Degree in areas such as marketing, communication media, economics, mathematics, statistics or computer science.

The most commonly used keywords that correspond to the positions for digital and social media marketing are online, content, social media, e-shop, digital. In addition, candidates are, to high extend, expected to produce the online content, which implies the necessity for the understanding of the nature of social media communication.

There is a demand for experts with work experience, although a formal certification or specific degree is not always required. Nevertheless the growth of the digital marketing industry will require either a validation of the skills or a formal certification.

For what kind of services the companies need digital marketing experts?

The research on digital marketing skills demand reveals that the companies in the three countries share the understanding that knowledge of digital marketing tools is very important but the ability to integrate them in the overall marketing strategy of the company is crucial.

Major challenges for the companies in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania are the following:

- Working with young people and students who think that they know social media because they know Facebook. It is very difficult to teach them to start from scratch and realize what the professional way of building digital strategy is. They need to understand the entire process and the right tools to be used for every target and client's needs.
- Recruiting passionate professionals and motivating them. A key finding is the difficulty faced by SMEs in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania to hire people with

the right experience and knowledge. A representative of a Romanian company states that *"...the most important challenge is to find a motivated person for the job and secondly, from the employer side, to keep this motivation at a high level."*

The opinions of the companies which skills are more important vary. According to an advertising agency in Greece *"...social media marketing, is most about techniques, and less about marketing. So, you need to have people that have two main perspectives. One is the marketing perspective, and the other one is the internet perspective. The problem with recruiting people for the job is the internet perspective and not the marketing perspective. You can find as many marketing people as you want, but you will not easily find people that have deep knowledge of the internet..."* Romanian owner of a small agency answers that employees with *"skills for better optimizing search and social campaigns in order to get higher conversion rates"* are needed.

For companies with more technical background the problem is just opposite. A Romanian company states that *"There are a lot of agencies out there who will offer to help you design and implement a full-fledged SMM campaign – but we're proud of being recognized as one of the few with staff that actually becomes a strategic partner with our clients."* A touristic agency from Greece also put the stress more on the marketing skills: *"A large" amount of people come from IT (like developers) who know code but .miss the main objectives to achieve strategic goals."*

In many cases the companies have to create what is called a "hybrid" candidate, either a technical person that is trained in marketing or a marketing person trained in technical aspects. The former is usually preferred but is more difficult to find.

- Staff development and cultivation of the ability to take constructive criticism. Dynamics of the digital field and time

constraints put a lot of pressure on digital marketing experts for constant improvement.

- From clients' perspective a challenge is to use professional service. One of the company representatives in Bulgaria expressed the opinion that though companies believe in the power of social media they often don't understand the need of qualified work. *"Digital and social media marketing is underestimated as payment – hence it's hard to provide full time professional support while competing with low-cost social media 'experts'.*

According to the interviewed consulting SMEs in Greece, measuring the effects of digital marketing campaigns, pay per click and copyrighting are very important skills for a digital marketing professional (Fig.3). This seems highly aligned with their current needs and the nature of the industry where metrics and quality of content are critical.

Digital marketing seems a new and promising industry and SMEs in the sector require professionals that are better qualified for the current and future challenges in the industry. The companies consider self-learning as an important way for improving digital knowledge and skills. If

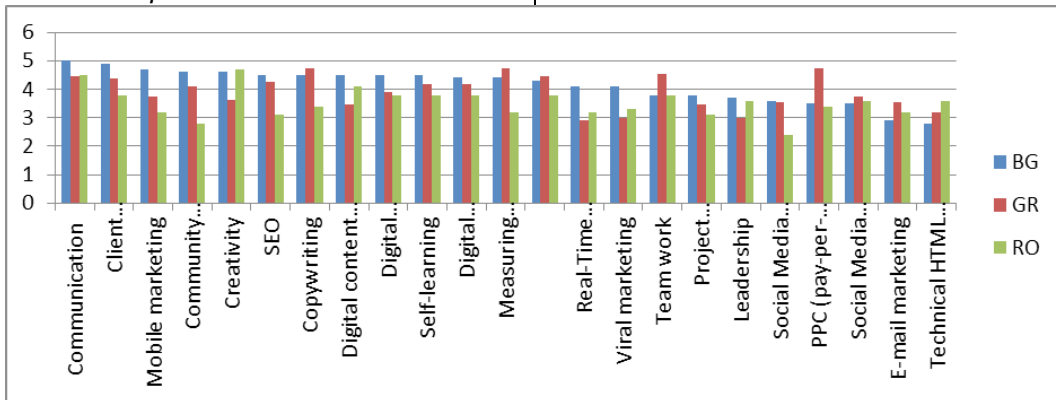


Fig.1.Digital Marketing Skills Required by Companies in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania (on a scale from 1 to5)

The agencies and SMEs in the three neighboring countries differ slightly in their prioritization of digital marketing skills. The interviewed companies in Romania consider as important the soft skills like creativity, communication skills, the ability to create digital content and to develop employees' skills by self-learning and in team-work. The Bulgarian companies rank also in the first five places "soft skills" like communication, creativity, digital marketing strategy and campaign planning. (Fig.1 and Fig.2) Mobile marketing is considered more important by the respondents from the Bulgarian companies while Romanian companies rank higher technical HTML understanding.

the employees pursue a master's degree, many companies are ready to divide the tuition fees with the employed.

Respondents in the three countries have different opinion on the need and effectiveness of a digital marketing university programme. The growing need of employees with such skills is considered in general as a good reason for it. For example a Romanian industry representative states that *"The potential of the university programme is very big because of the small number of Romanian companies that choose to promote in online environment. There are still a lot of companies (from family ones to big*

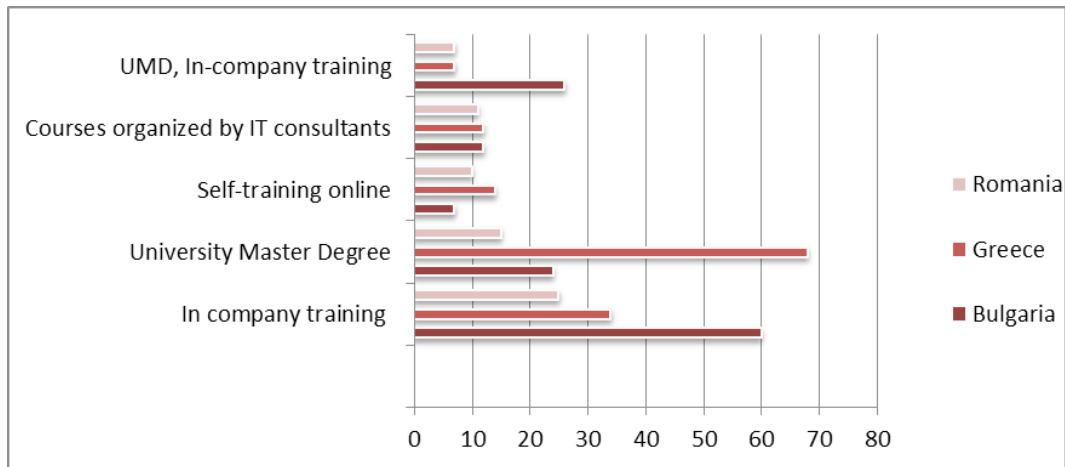


Fig.2 Students' Preference to Acquire Digital Marketing Skills

factories and retailers) that do not have an online presence let alone promoting online". Other companies support university programmes and consider that "dynamics of the field leads to a vast amount of knowledge already accumulated and it needs be digested, analysed and shared; and even though many of the specialists currently working in the field are self-made, this is not a norm by any means and, what is more, formal education always gives a fresh perspective."

Others companies express doubts that the university education will cope with the fast moving sector. One of the respondents from a leading Greek ad agency commented "...universities have to go a long way before they become able to produce quality specialists with the right balance of practical skills and theoretical knowledge."

The interviews revealed also the "Entrepreneurial Spirit" as a key skill. Many of the respondents actually started companies. Hence it can be argued that besides the digital and marketing knowledge students in the Masters should understand and where possible develop an entrepreneurial attitude. This can enhance

their employability further as they can be more competitive to find a job or to setup their own company

Communication and creativity are considered by the Bulgarian and Romanian companies as the most important skills. The Greek companies rank higher pay-per-click and measuring the effects of the digital campaigns. The conclusion from the comparative table is that knowledge and skills rating per country include both technical and soft skills. A contemporary degree programme in digital marketing has to incorporate in the curriculum both technical skills for digital marketing as well as subjects or methods of education leading to good communication with various audiences, time management, creativity and understanding of the need for constant self-education.

Students' expectations

Students have an interest to develop knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. While in Greece the students have clearly preference to university degree studies, in Bulgaria and Romania the in-company training or a combination of university master's degree and in-company training are considered as a better option by many

respondents (Fig.2). The findings support the assumption for the need of a very clear practical orientation of the master's programmes in digital marketing.

The reasons to study digital marketing at the university are very similar in the three countries. The major reason in Bulgaria and Greece is the higher salary compared to other sectors of the economy followed by more job opportunities. Romanian students rank on the first place the opportunity to have different job options followed by the higher than average salary. Work from home is considered less important. More than 50% of the Romanian students would like to work as social media managers after graduating the studies. Social media manager or marketing manager is the expected job by many Bulgarian and Greek students. Only one percent of all the respondents connected their future job with creative work which is logical since most of the respondents have a business or economics background.

A large number of the students in the three countries (56% of the Bulgarian students, 53% of the Romanian students and 77% of the Greek respondents) have a preference to study a master's programme in digital and social media marketing in English. Readiness of the students to study in English is a good background for the development of joint programmes in English language or for the implementation

of students' exchange among similar programmes in case the curriculum includes courses thought in English.

Preferred duration of study is similar in the three countries. One third of the students prefer two semester studies. Almost similar is the number of students who would choose the four semester study in case they can spend one semester abroad.

The standard of living in the three countries influences the answers for the tuition fee levels in the three countries. Only one fifth of the Greek students expect to pay less than 1000 euro per semester in case the programme is organized by more than one European university. Most of the Greek students (65%) expect tuition fee for such studies to be between 1000 and 5000 euros. The students in Romania and Bulgaria have different expectations. 61% of the Bulgarians and 64% of the Romanian bachelor students are ready to pay less than 1000 euro per semester for a joint degree programme and respectively 36% and 29% between 1000 and 5000 euros.

5. Skills that students consider important

The comparison of skills needs assessment by students and companies identifies differences. While students in Bulgaria rank higher soft skills, the

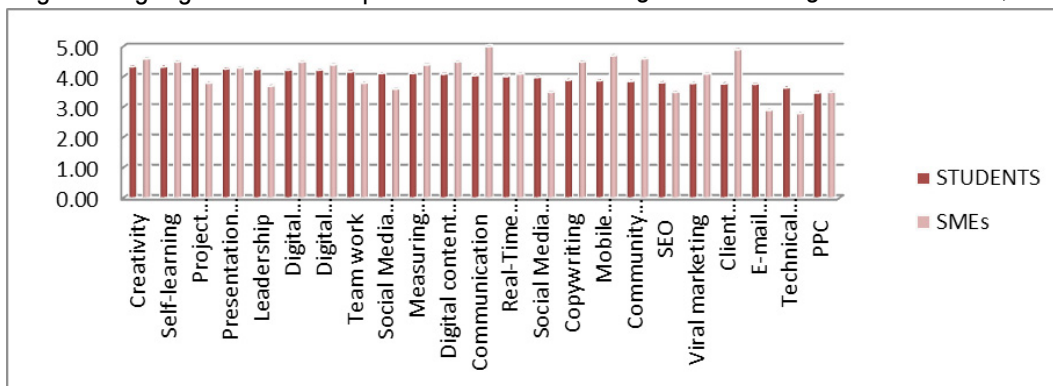


Fig.3 . Comparison of Bulgarian SMEs and students' understanding of the digital skills needed

companies demand skills for client and community management, mobile marketing, copywriting, digital content production and measurement of the results. The two groups of respondents have similar understanding of the importance of presentation skills, real-time marketing and search engine optimization (Fig.3).

In Greece companies and students have comparable judgment on the soft skills that digital marketing employees need and on the skills to create digital content and to monitor and optimize social media. Companies have also a high demand on knowledge and practical proficiency on the

major digital marketing tools and tasks like pay-per-click, measuring effectiveness, copywriting, SEO, community and client management which the students have ranked much lower.

In Romania companies and students rankings of the digital skills needed are quite similar. Creativity and social media monitoring are the skills to which the two groups of respondents attach different importance (Fig.5)

The research in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania reveals that the perceptions of students do not align entirely with the needs of the industry. The development of the master's curriculum in digital

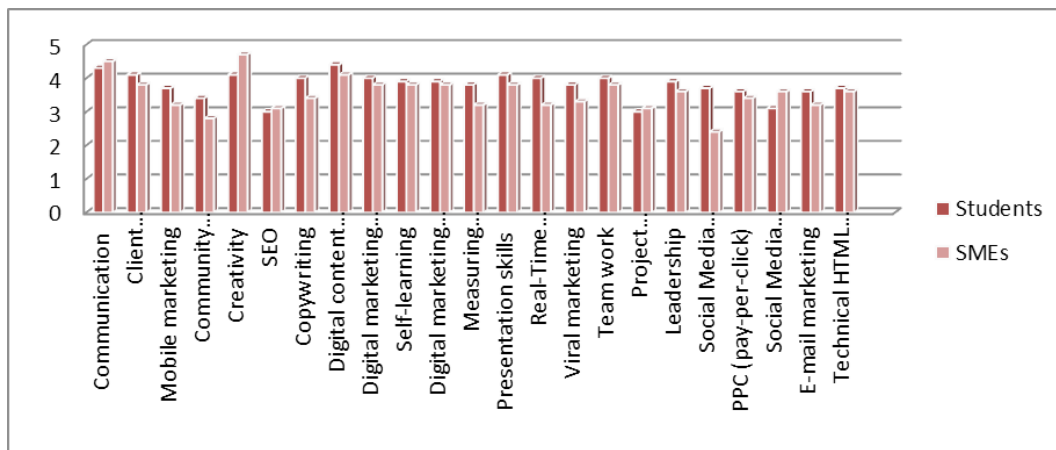


Fig. 4. Comparison of Greek SMEs and students' understanding of the digital skills needed

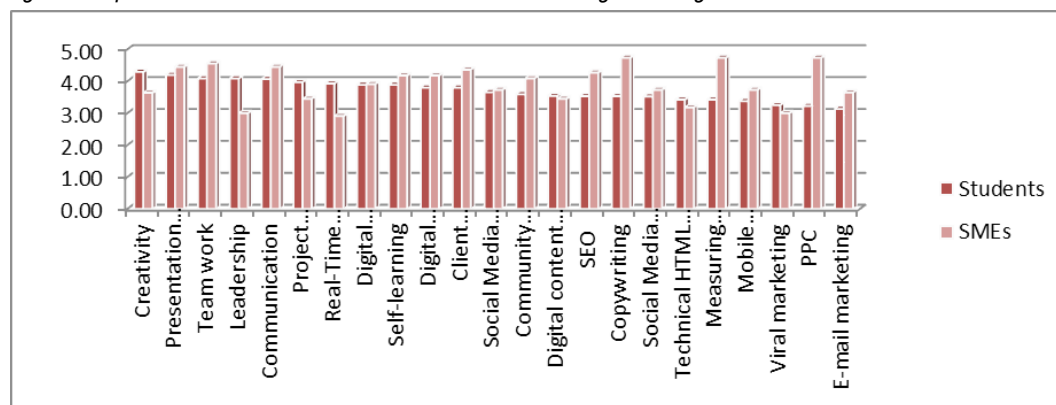


Fig.5. Comparison of Romanian SMEs and students' understanding of the digital skills

marketing has to take into consideration companies' demand. Thus the students will enhance their employability and the chances to deliver what the business needs and expects.

When exploring the learning outcomes a Master program in digital marketing should deliver, there is a wide array of responses from both the industry and students. These responses can be grouped into theory vs. practice, or even technical vs. strategic outcomes. In terms of more theoretical outcomes, the participants have outlined topics such as overall understanding of the online environment, social listening, strategic way of thinking, understanding of the industry, search engines and social media, strategy development, content creation and research. On the other hand, practical outcomes that have been mentioned by participants include understanding of the internet, measurement of the results, analysis, case studies, real projects (portfolio) and preparation for Google certificates. These outcomes refer to more technical skills.

As it has been pointed out throughout the research, the learning outcomes highly depend on the segment that is selected to be targeted by the master's programme. In case the target group consists of people that are already working in the industry and have significant experience with digital and social media marketing activities, the priority should be given to more practical learning outcomes; on the other hand, if the target group consists of fresh graduates, the emphasis should be given also to more strategic learning outcomes. In both cases a strong applied nature will provide the students with enhanced employability and competitiveness. As an experienced Greek marketing manager commented *"I don't need to study more marketing philosophy. I have marketing knowledge, I need practical..."*

Hence the matrix below makes a suggestion for Universities to consider. This relates to a different angle/approach according to the level of experience. With this in mind it would be worth considering a degree that is modular so the candidates can also choose a diploma/certificate level in the form of a CPD – continuous professional development- (for the more experienced and advanced) with the option of a dissertation for a master's degree.

Digital Marketing Master's degree Matrix	Practical knowledge	Theoretical knowledge
High experience	X	
Low experience	X	X

Fig.6. Learning Outcome Matrix

6. Conclusion

The research on digital marketing supply and demand in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania reveals that the industry is growing and the need for digital marketing knowledge and skills is increasing. At present the needs are satisfied mainly by short-term training courses delivered by agencies and experts in the field. There is a misbalance between the number and content of the university programs (much lower) and the courses and trainings that are offered from other companies and organizations. The courses usually give a certificate or diploma, not a degree. This can be considered as an unexplored opportunity that universities can develop.

The research on the perceptions of the bachelor students from different majors in the three countries on digital marketing master's studies indicates dissimilarities with the industry demand. The universities as suppliers of digital knowledge and skills have to develop master's programmes that correspond to

Articles

the business needs. Validation of skills acquired in practice or enhancement of marketing knowledge with the digital dimension is important both for marketers and technical experts. Universities should consider also the option to the availability of obtaining certificates. This is particularly important for people that already have a master's degree or have an extensive work experience and want to keep their knowledge current.

Key aspects for the success of digital marketing programmes include a hands-on approach, practical insight, industry speakers, real projects portfolio, case studies and a flexible learning approach e.g. executive delivery. SMEs are keen to provide internships which will be an important aspect to develop the practical application and links to a dynamic industry. University education in digital marketing has to take into consideration the dynamic nature of the field and to overcome the perception that the knowledge provided can be outdated and not necessarily applied and practical.

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