PREPARING UNIVERSITY GRADUATES FOR A CAREER IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS: EXAMINING THE ROLES OF UNIVERSITIES AND PRACTICE.

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Abstract

Current literature indicates that, over the last ten years, higher education in Australia has generally placed increased emphasis on graduate employability, and the need to address generic skills in undergraduate courses. Whether generic skills and graduate employability have been given a greater focus specifically in university in courses teaching marketing communications (also referred to as ‘marcoms’) has not been widely investigated. Research conclusions differ regarding the roles of universities, employers and industry in developing work-ready, marcoms practitioners.

This study examined the roles of universities and practitioners in preparing university graduates for a career in marketing communications and sought to identify at what stage the education and knowledge building responsibilities of universities end and those of employers or professional practice in marcoms begin? The focal research question was: Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior representatives of ten employer groups, four of the key industry bodies, and graduates of marketing communications courses who were employed in the industry. The results suggest that marcoms graduates benefit from learning theory, discipline skills and soft skills during their university degree and, when this is supplemented by essential additional training and up-skilling through engagement with practice, they achieve a much higher level of employability and work-readiness. Increasing students’ exposure to industry input during their undergraduate university degree would benefit both the academy and the industry through cross-fertilisation of knowledge and ideas. It would also help to set more realistic expectations for graduates of their roles and responsibilities in the workplace.

The findings from this study inform both the academy and the marketing communications industry of possible areas for future development in improving the employability of graduates. The recommendations include creating a University Sector Body to liaise with industry in order to develop more partnership and collaborative opportunities. This would increase and embellish industry experience and would improve graduates’ preparation for optimum employability.
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Terminology

Course or Program
The terms refer to the structured delivery of individual subjects and subject content that make up the university degree specialisation, e.g. Bachelor of Communication (Advertising). Some universities refer to these degree structures as ‘courses’. At University of the Sunshine Coast they are referred to as ‘programs’.

Industry
Used when referring to the marketing communications industry as a whole.

Integrated marketing communications
“Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is the well-formed and well-thought-out strategic alignment of all of the media and channels used throughout a campaign, which are combined to create a holistic and coherent brand message.” (Moriaty et al., 2015, p. 9).

Marcoms
Marketing communications is also known as marcoms. WhatIs.com publishes the following definition: “Marcom (sometimes spelled ‘marcomm’) is an abbreviation for ‘marketing communications’. Marcom is targeted interaction with customers and prospects using one or more media, such as direct mail, newspapers and magazines, television, radio, billboards, telemarketing, and the Internet. A marketing communications campaign may use a single approach, but more frequently combines several.” (WhatIs.com, 2014). This definition was used for the purpose of this project.

Owned, earned, shared and paid media
Owned media is controlled content of an advertiser on a closed space, e.g. website, blog, content; earned media is PR, created editorial or reportage; shared media is for example social media, word of mouth, where anyone can contribute; and paid media is time or space bought, or paid advertising. A combination of these is selected to suit the particular goals of a brand in IMC campaigns (Stir Advertising, 2013).
Work-integrated learning (WIL)

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is the term given to describe academic learning achieved by integrating student learning activities within the workplace. WIL programs enable students to apply the learning from their classroom studies with work in their specific discipline area in a community or industry setting (Goulter & Patrick, 2010).
Statement of original authorship

- The thesis is my own account of research undertaken by me and has been wholly completed during candidature, except where the Research Degrees Committee has approved a transfer of enrolment from another higher degree by research.
- Where work has been done conjointly with other persons, my contribution is clearly stated and the contribution of other persons is clearly acknowledged and recognised.
- The thesis does not contain as its main content any work or material which is embodied in a thesis or dissertation previously submitted by me or any other person for a University degree or other similar qualification at this or other higher education institution, except where approval has previously been granted by the Committee.
- I have complied with all limitations imposed by copyright holders of any works I have included in my thesis, including those I have authored.
- I acknowledge the support I have received for this work through the Australian Government’s Research Training Program Scholarship.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background

In a dynamic, globally connected world, the skills and attributes required in graduates by business and industry is changing. Industry requirements are constantly shifting due to advances in technologies, changing workplace practices, strategies and structures and this has had a definite influence on creating educational processes associated with developing graduates for workplace practice (Billett, 2010). There are three key stakeholder groups involved in preparing university graduates for future employment: universities, practising businesses and industry.

Higher education across the majority of advanced industrial economies is increasingly incorporating learning outcomes in courses to develop practice-focused employability skills (Billett, 2010). In the UK, for example, there has been a focus on the development of generic skills for graduates in addition to their discipline-specific skills for more than 20 years (Washer, 2007).

The traditional role of universities has been to impart and create new knowledge and to conduct research. However, this role is changing (Higgs, Loftus, & Trede, 2010) as higher education institutions come under increasing pressure to not only educate but also to develop attributes that enable graduates to be industry-ready.

Following the 2008 Australian Government review of higher education, referred to as The Bradley Review (Goulter & van Rooijen, 2010), universities overtly began to offer a broader range of professions, and occupational qualifications. Accrediting bodies (for example in engineering, nursing, teaching) have long required the inclusion of professional exposure, such as practical placements, prior to graduation (Goulter & Patrick, 2010). This approach requires the development of practical aspects of occupational skills and knowledge in graduates. Practical skills were initially acquired through the integration of work placements within the curricula, however, this has since evolved to include a range of work-integrated learning (WIL) approaches (Goulter & van Rooijen, 2010). Beyond simply locating students in an industry environment, WIL facilitates the application and further development
of discipline-specific skills and competencies, as well as an appreciation of how to think and act in a professional manner (Loftus & Simpson, 2010).

1.2. Disciplines, skills and academia

Much has been written about graduate employability and the skills and attributes students need, whether these be discipline-specific or more generic ‘soft skills’ (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Barrie, 2011; Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Bridgstock, 2009; Cranmer, 2006; Holmes, 2001; Litchfield, Frawley, & Nettleton, 2010; Lowden, Hall, Elliott, & Lewin, 2011; Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009; Oliver, Tucker, Jones, & Ferns, 2007; Rae, 2007). Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competencies learned from within their university degrees. However it is increasingly expected that graduates will demonstrate a range of broader ‘soft skills’. These include the ability to work in teams, display good interpersonal and communication skills, literacy and numeracy, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and some managerial abilities (Lowden et al., 2011). Specifically within the marcoms industry, it is clear that employers require graduates to possess generic skills in addition to their academic qualifications (Blight, 2013).

The importance of generic skills over discipline skills in graduate employability is highlighted by Harvey (1999) who states that a graduate’s success in employment is perceived to be more influenced by his/her generic skills than their discipline-specific skills. This is further expounded by Frawley and Litchfield (2009), who suggest that employers make recruitment decisions based on generic rather than purely industry-specific professional skills. Their study found employers could teach professional, job specific skills, however determined it too difficult and/or they were reluctant to teach generic skills (Frawley & Litchfield, 2009).

Graduates with higher level generic skills may have better employment prospects (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011) since employers typically sought graduates who possess the generic skills to make productive contributions to company objectives soon after entering the workforce (Mason et al., 2009). Andrews and Higson (2008) similarly note that employers identified business acumen and interpersonal competencies along with business-related skills such as written communication, presentation skills and ability to work in teams as being critical attributes in graduate employability.
In examining the changing relationship between universities, students and employers, Boden and Nedeva (2010) reinforce the notion that employers are seeking to employ work-ready graduates due to potential cost savings and greater work efficiencies. However, this raises the question of the role of universities. Boden and Nedeva (2010) also highlighted the fact that a shift to employability focused tertiary education may adversely affect pedagogies, with universities restructuring “curricula along more vocational lines, educating narrow specialists for specific jobs” (Boden & Nedeva, 2010, p. 47) thus endangering the ‘knowledge society’. Further, some universities may seek to attract new students by giving assurances that their programs will develop employability skills. This approach potentially reduces education to the acquisition of narrow, vocational focused, technical skills and limited factual knowledge rather than the development of broader academic skills and attributes, inquiring minds and the ability to apply critical thinking, analysis and problem solving (Boden & Nedeva, 2010).

From this point the roles of tertiary and vocational education in delivering discipline knowledge or relevant skills and work-ready attributes is debated (Muller & Young, 2014). Giving priority to practice-based skills training over discipline-specific knowledge may blur the distinction between higher education and vocational training, particularly if it emphasises generic skills at the cost of specialist content. Muller and Young (2014) reinforce the importance of maintaining the traditional differentiation and specialisation of universities suggesting that shifting of focus from the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge to skills training is detrimental to graduate outcomes.

The major public providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia have been the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions. Since their inception in 1974, the role of TAFE and other VET providers, including private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), has been to provide practical training to students in various occupations (Noonan, 2014). Whilst opportunities are offered to TAFE students in some courses as an articulation pathway into university degrees, students who transitioned with a diploma from a TAFE or RTO into second year university degrees struggled when compared with second year university students, since they did not have the academic grounding and foundations of learning provided in first year university (Hadley & Andrews, 2014). Vocational students were challenged by the differing academic standards, pedagogical differences and dissimilar learning and teaching structures they encountered within universities.
(Hosken, Land, Goldingay, Barnes, & Murphy, 2013). In addition, these students found varied expectations when undertaking professional placement at university level, since the outcomes from vocational courses continue to be more skills-oriented than the traditionally academically focused higher education degrees, with the specific aim of meeting Australia’s workforce skills needs (Noonan, 2014). Nevertheless, there are potential advantages for students, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, in following a pathway from TAFE to university. TAFE provides assistance in learning skill development, learner confidence, and discipline-foundational knowledge, before they transition to university (Hosken et al., 2013).

1.3. Marketing communications industry

While national employment figures are showing some positive growth today (Hockey, 2015), the marketing communications (marcoms) industry continues to face a talent shortage, resulting in the need for overseas recruitment (Campaign Brief, 2011; Corlette, 2010; Hays, 2013; Ma, 2012). A 2011 member survey conducted by The Communications Council, the peak body in Australia representing agencies in the marcoms industry, found 80% of respondents indicated chronic talent shortages in their companies. Ninety-two per cent reported that, at any one time, there were up to 10% of positions vacant due to the difficulty of finding experienced staff (Hendy, 2011). In addition, a reported difference in numbers between entry level and mid-level executives suggested agencies were not retaining staff in the long term (Campaign Brief, 2011).

Reporting in the leading marcoms industry publication AdNews, Ma (2012) suggested this talent shortage was a result of Australian universities not adequately preparing graduates to be industry-ready, and questioned whether practical experience was sufficiently addressed in university degrees. Blight (2013) reinforced this after examining the skills gap between education and practice, particularly in the field of digital media. Blight concluded that tertiary graduates are not educated to be work-ready and thus are unable to make a meaningful contribution to their employers’ businesses for up to 12 months after entering the workforce.
According to Dave Sayer, Head of Talent Management and Performance at leading advertising agency Ogilvy Australia (cited in Ma, 2012), most graduates appeared to have little knowledge of various specific functions within a marcoms agency and were unsure about their career path. John Butterworth, Chief Executive of the Australian Interactive Media Industry Association (cited in Blight, 2013) expressed concern that some university courses were slow to incorporate new industry learning outcomes into their curricula, with many professional skills not addressed at all.

Commenting on findings from The Communications Council 2011 Member Agency Survey, CEO Daniel Leesong, stated that survey respondents were largely satisfied with entry level graduates (Campaign Brief, 2011). Leesong partly attributed this to The Communications Council’s Graduate Training Program and other similar programs. In 2015 The Communications Council reviewed its highly successful Graduate Training Program to give participants a broader, more varied and more industry relevant orientation. The industry acknowledges that many successful entry level graduates have benefitted from this important industry program (The Communications Council, 2014a). The industry also acknowledged the need to introduce new skillsets in response to advancing technology and the changing needs of clients (The Communications Council, 2014a). To better meet these needs, new job titles and roles are being introduced by agencies to meet these needs, particularly in the areas of digital and data analysis – as clients increasingly look to their agencies to deliver real business solutions, not just marketing communications campaigns (The Communications Council, 2014a).

1.4. Internship and training programs

Some industry bodies and marcoms agencies offer training to graduates and undergraduates to address the perceived skills gap. The Communications Council’s Graduate Training Program is offered to university graduates in the fields of advertising and public relations, as well as law, accounting, architecture, philosophy and psychology (The Communications Council, 2014b). The program’s aim is to attract and engage new talent into the Council’s 190 member agencies across a diverse range of agency and discipline types, including integrated communication agencies, healthcare advertising, public relations, digital, experiential and brand activation agencies. The development of the attributes and skill sets of this broad
range of graduates is seen to be of value to the communications industry. The program also provides mentoring by some 40 senior professionals from the member agencies. Other professional development programs offered by The Communications Council include AdSchool, a training program for advertising and marketing communications employees, taught by senior industry practitioners, and Award School which teaches the creative skills of copywriting and art direction (The Communications Council, 2014b).

The Media Federation of Australia (MFA), the peak industry body representing media communication companies, offers a four week internship placement within its member agencies for graduates and undergraduates who have completed/ are completing an MFA accredited university course. This program gives students 'hands-on' industry work experience to improve their professional skill development. Some program participants may be offered full time employment upon graduation (Media Federation of Australia, 2014).

Several of the major marcoms agencies acknowledge the need for additional industry training following university graduation to ensure graduates are work-ready and offer graduate programs. Examples are the Clemenger Group Graduate Program (Clemenger Group, 2014) and the DDB Grad Program (DDB Sydney, 2014). Entry into these programs is highly sought after by graduates and a limited number of participants is selected from the numerous competitive applications. Applicants for the Clemenger Group Graduate Program are drawn from university graduates in disciplines such as advertising and public relations, business, marketing, psychology and even law. According to the People Development Director of the Clemenger Group, “We are looking for people who think differently so graduates from any discipline can apply. They do need to need to demonstrate that they have the skills we require [which are outlined in the application] and an aptitude for the industry” (Muddell, 2014). This notion of graduates needing a breadth of discipline skills – rather than a singular, specific industry skill set – was further investigated in this research project.
1.5. The University perspective

In considering the literature and the perspectives of industry and academic commentators, it is apparent there is a gap in understanding or identifying the roles universities and industry play in preparing graduates for employment. There appears to be a significant and concerning difference of opinion as to who should be responsible for identifying and teaching the relevant skills sets to best prepare graduates for optimum employability. While universities are increasingly aiming to meet industry needs by addressing professional practice requirements through embedded practices such as work-integrated learning (WIL), industry and specifically employers are not convinced these are appropriate to meet actual workplace needs.

In Australia, several universities have developed sound reputations for education in the marketing communications area and have received formal industry accreditation for their courses and programs. Through close and continuous consultation with industry partners, these institutions incorporate contemporary trends and knowledge into their degree programs, through WIL based strategies, including internships, engagement with the marcoms industry in partnered projects, and authentic learning and practice-based education aimed at producing work-ready graduates.

1.6. Research question and objectives

Given the debate and the widely differing opinions evident amongst key stakeholders outlined here, this study sought to identify where the responsibility for the preparation of university graduates for employment lies. It was important to examine the roles of both universities and professional practice in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications. Therefore, the research question (RQ) to be addressed was: Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?

Key research objectives (RO) were:

- To identify key skills gaps in marcoms graduates between graduation and employability, as perceived by:
- marcoms industry employers;
- key marcoms industry professional bodies; and
- graduates.

To identify the role key stakeholder groups (including universities, employers and key marcoms industry bodies) do take, or should take, in addressing identified employability skills gaps between university and professional practice.

The investigation sought to contribute to the debate surrounding graduate outcomes and provide new knowledge as to who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability. In the first part of the study, a review of the literature relating to the required attributes and the respective roles of universities and professional practice in developing work-ready marcoms graduates was undertaken to evaluate current thinking and knowledge and to provide a basis to determine the nature of the subsequent research. Based on this primary research, further research was then undertaken and data collected and disseminated to investigate employers’, industry bodies’ and graduates’ perceptions of roles and responsibilities in the education and preparation of marcoms graduates. Finally, recommendations are made as to how these outcomes could be incorporated into future tertiary education curricula and the development of stronger and mutually beneficial partnerships between the academy and industry.

Specifically, this research examined the attributes and any wider skills considered by all stakeholders to be important for graduate employability in the professional field of marketing communications. Respondents were asked whether they consider higher education can or should develop teaching and learning strategies to equip today’s marcoms students with the requisite and desirable job skills and professional characteristics they will need to be work-ready upon entering the industry after graduation, who should be responsible for what and to what extent.

The research surveyed marcoms industry practitioners, including high level agency management executives who are employers or supervisors of marketing communications graduates, entry-level graduate employees and graduates who have worked in the industry for more than two years. The researcher also surveyed key industry bodies including the International Advertising Association (IAA), The
Communications Council, the Media Federation of Australia (MFA) and the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). The study sought to determine expectations of all groups regarding the employability of graduates and the role of all stakeholders in developing entry-level job skills and competencies. The outcomes of this study seek to determine the expectations of all stakeholder groups in the employability of graduates and the role of all of those involved in developing entry-level job skills and competencies. This study also attempts to identify any gaps between theory and practice and the role that employers, educators and students might take in bridging these gaps to achieve optimum employability. The relevance of multidisciplinary study, work-integrated learning and wider learning outcomes outside traditional marcoms courses was also investigated.

Addressing the research question and research objectives will assist in resolving some of the current debate surrounding graduate readiness and identify areas requiring future development in producing work-ready graduates in the marketing communications industry. Both theoretical and practical contributions will be made by highlighting stakeholder roles that will help achieve both institutional and industry strategic goals and influence academic course development, in order to effectively address employability in graduates.

Although Marketing Communications-focused, this study offers potentially broader application across a range of professional, industry related, university programs.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter examines the literature relating to the roles of universities and practice in developing work-ready graduates – specifically, in relation to the marketing communications (marcoms) industry. It identifies key concepts relevant to studies conducted within the academic field relating to marketing communications academic field and, in the process, evaluates the work and perspectives that represent current knowledge, thereby providing a platform for further investigation.

The theoretical framework of work-applied learning (WAL) helped guide the literature review. WAL learning compliments the formal education system through industry experience (Zuber-Skerritt & Abraham, 2017). It incorporates work-based learning (WBL) – learning undertaken in the workplace to enhance and apply knowledge (Zuber-Skerritt & Abraham, 2017) – also considered relevant when investigating graduates’ optimal employability attributes and competencies.

The literature review has been segmented it into nine specific areas to provide both a breadth and depth of investigation of the literature, to identify the gaps in the knowledge and to inform the study. Each section has a specific relevance to the foundations of current knowledge in this area.

Initially, literature published about the role of universities in developing work-ready graduates in various fields is discussed (Section 2.1.). This is followed by an investigation of the generic or soft skills required of graduates (Sections 2.2.). The relationship between generic skills and work-readiness is explored in Section 2.3., followed by the role of work-integrated learning in graduate education is addressed (Section 2.4.). The review then narrows to focus on a marcoms industry-specific perspective by examining higher education through the lenses of marketing communications (Section 2.5.), the changing marcoms industry (Section 2.6.), employability attributes in marcoms graduates (Section 2.7.), collaboration between academia and industry (Section 2.8.) and finally the importance and influence of globalisation (Section 2.9.).
2.1. The role of Universities in developing work-ready graduates

The literature suggests that the acknowledged role of universities in the post-war decades was to provide a higher level of education to professionals and conduct basic research for the benefit of both science and society (Hasselberg, Rider, & Waluszewski, 2013). Universities have traditionally been the facilitators of knowledge. In the post war era, it was acknowledged that there needed to be a deep and thorough understanding of what constituted higher research and education in universities and what this represented, before any changes could be made that could have short and long term consequences not only to the academy but also to society in general (Hasselberg et al., 2013).

The concept of a liberal education, which evolved in Britain and Europe in the 19th century, was seen as a requirement for any élite career in government or administration (Washer, 2007). However this so-called ‘grammar school’ model did not fit well with the outcomes of vocational education and consequent employment choices. Consequently, there developed some prejudice against vocational and technical education within academia. These prejudices still exist, particularly with some academics within the tertiary education system (Washer, 2007) as the idea of teaching work-place skills was not seen by some as a useful or relevant part of a university education, nor did they see it as the role of universities to provide employment skills. Some argued that the skills agenda itself devalued the traditional concept of an undergraduate degree (Washer, 2007), believing this would result in the unacceptable notion that a university education could be used to prepare graduates to fulfil the roles of workers in a capitalist economy (Washer, 2007).

It has long been argued that bringing what were previously considered ‘non-academic’ occupational training programs into the academy would increase both the quality and status of that training in line with the growth in popularity of ‘professional’ programs. Gustavsson (2013) found some universities have adapted traditional academic disciplines to professional and vocational training and this has raised questions about the very nature of university education and scholarship and its desired outcomes. However, Gustavsson suggests that it is considering the
needs of stakeholders – including students and prospective employers – that has contributed to this shift.

In a 2013 study conducted by Hasselberg et al. into the importance of developing relevant graduate competencies within the university environment, it was identified that today’s universities are now more flexible with adaptable and manageable approaches to the development of employability skills. With the integration of new sciences, academic disciplines and the introduction of some vocational training programs into universities, the blending of academic organisation and academic practice, combined with the quality of courses, is linked to outcomes such as employability, as well as scholarly degree qualifications, the aim of higher education in the modern research university being to encourage graduates to develop sound judgment/ critical thinking (Hasselberg et al., 2013). However, to move away from discipline-specific education and to focus solely on the achievement of skills and competencies as desired outcomes may undermine the goals of liberal education by not teaching students the capacity to exercise sound, independent judgment and discernment (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, & Harding, 2012; Hasselberg et al., 2013). Further, Flores et al. argued that teaching critical thinking in higher education is fundamental to the development of good leaders in the workforce; leaders who are competitive in the global marketplace. Hence, these attributes should not be limited to specific programs but embedded in all curricula (Flores et al., 2012).

In considering the curricula, researchers Muller and Young (2014) suggest that to prioritise generic skills-based outcomes over discipline outcomes in university degrees may diminish the importance of acquiring knowledge in the curriculum. It may also de-emphasise the distinction between higher education and vocational education, and the particular role and desired outcomes required from each (Muller & Young, 2014). These scholars contend that by combining skills and knowledge, there is a danger of blurring the lines between conceptual knowledge and practical skills and changing the proportion each delivers in qualifications that are vocationally or academically inclined. Muller and Young suggest that this may also serve to ‘de-specialise’ higher education if and when it emphasises generic skills over discipline and specialist learning. Making a distinction between everyday skills, and discipline-specific, specialised academic knowledge, does not imply a position against acquiring both work place skills and discipline knowledge, rather it emphasises the fundamental role of the university as an institution in today’s
society. It also maintains a desirable, differentiated future for universities (Muller & Young, 2014).

In support of this concept, Jackson and Hancock found in their 2010 study of undergraduate degrees in business that the development of non-technical skills may be seen to detract from the essential and distinctive purpose of a university undergraduate degree, lessening its value and making it similar to that of a vocational education program (Jackson & Hancock, 2010).

The focus on developing generic skills in graduates has been prompted by requests from employers looking to higher education institutions to provide appropriately qualified and skilled workers, in line with the need for higher education to become more relevant to commercial business needs (Washer, 2007). Washer (2007) contends that helping students develop the skills necessary to be successful in the workplace in their chosen discipline should be seen as integral to the graduate employability agenda. Washer (2007) identified that this approach may also serve to offer broader demographic access to higher education and encourage wider student involvement in tertiary education.

In the main, students around the world undertake university study with the primary objective of improving their employment prospects and the success of their future careers (Qenani, MacDougall, & Sexton, 2014; Washer, 2007). Washer (2007) argues that developing key skills can serve to enhance content learning through innovation in the development of undergraduate courses, rather than threaten the very idea of tertiary education. Many universities have developed and embedded professionally-focused practices in their courses in order to provide students with the job-related skills they will need to transition easily into the workforce. Many undergraduate courses now encourage active participation from students in the learning process, rather than passive learning (Qenani et al., 2014; Washer, 2007). Washer (2007) concludes that integrating skills outcomes into existing university courses could actually improve the quality of discipline-specific learning by incorporating experiential and active learning approaches. These can include work-integrated learning activities, problem-based learning, practice-based education, project work, workplace simulations and dealing with ‘real’ clients. The approach to achieving purely discipline-specific outcomes from learning and teaching in universities is diminishing.
In a study supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council in 2009, a review of Australian universities suggested that many have identified specific graduate attributes and competencies aimed at improving employability. These included students’ core capabilities and the learning outcomes achieved as a result of completing their university degrees (Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009). Oliver (2011) finds graduate attributes are linked with industry and professional outcomes and that applying knowledge in the profession is common to most university graduate attribute statements. It is contended that a mixed model of teaching that combines discipline-specific outcomes and generic, transferable skills may be the most appropriate way to equip students with the attributes they need to be work-ready (Furnell & Scott, 2015).

With the ongoing pressure on universities to develop employability skills in graduates, many are directing considerable time and effort to dealing with this issue. In a 2013 study, Tymon found that whilst many graduates have satisfactory discipline-specific skills, they may still lack the soft skills industry is seeking to enable them to be industry ready when they commence employment. Tymon’s study did not indicate whether it is the role of higher education institutions to develop these skills, and whether they can is a matter for conjecture.

Employers and employer organisations are best placed to provide workplace training and hands-on experience (Tymon, 2013) but this may need to be reconsidered. There is reluctance from industry to fulfil the role of developing transferrable skills due to economic pressures and a perceived lack of commitment amongst ‘Generation Y’. Consequently, the pressure is placed on higher education institutions to provide graduates with work-ready skills, but there is evidence to suggest that this is not necessarily the best solution. Tymon (2013) questions whether higher education institutions should develop employability skills. This may result in a narrowing of graduates’ attributes and the acquisition of skills which may not be readily transferrable if they are too closely aligned with particular workplaces (Moore & Morton, 2015).

Due to the increasingly complex demands of business and the growing importance of technology, the right balance between graduates’ knowledge and their generic skills is even more significant (Davis, Misra, & van Auken, 2002). In their study, the researchers found marketing graduates perceived they were underprepared in skills and over prepared in designated knowledge areas. As a result, adjustments were
made to university courses to concentrate more on either skills or knowledge to achieve a better graduate outcomes for future employability.

Whether tertiary institutions should seek to bridge the gap between universities and the workplaces is debated by Moore and Morton (2015). Their investigations suggest that consideration needs to be given to the specific types of workplaces and the workplace roles graduates fill, as some skills need to be learnt on-the-job and many of these are employer specific. Whilst collaboration is increasing between universities and industry to develop more work-ready skills in graduates, caution should be taken to avoid too great a focus on vocational outcomes in university courses (Moore & Morton, 2015).

Work-readiness also appears to be seen as an increasingly desirable and important attribute and terms like ‘work-integrated learning’ now appear in several universities’ attributes statements (Oliver, 2011). However the importance of knowledge focussed learning outcomes, which is still the traditional domain of higher education, should not be understated. Desirable graduate outcomes, as presented by most universities, include knowledge outcomes as well as generic outcomes. These outcomes are very closely aligned, as generic outcomes are clearly integrated with discipline knowledge and professional practice (Oliver, 2011).

This focus on graduate attributes and outcomes is taking on a global perspective. In Ghana, where there is an increasing graduate unemployment rate, national policies to produce work-ready business graduates have not been effective (Owusu, Marfo-Yiadom, & Owusu, 2014). In assessing undergraduate employability competencies, the need for revisions to curriculum planning and improved alignment with industry needs was identified (Owusu et al., 2014). In order to give graduates the requisite knowledge to find employment, the introduction of industry internship placements or work experience was deemed to be beneficial (Owusu et al., 2014).

In India, the government’s five year plan has been to highlight the need to improve the youth skill base to ensure the country’s economic development (Kohli, Bandhopadhyay, & Kohli, 2015). India’s population currently stands at 1.4 billion and by 2020, 64% will be in the working age group. Job vacancies for suitably skilled workers stand at 48% and the need to develop a new generation that is both
educated and skilled is seen as crucial to India’s future global competitiveness and to its economic growth (Kohli et al., 2015).

In Australia there is ongoing pressure on tertiary institutions to place more focus on developing generic skills in graduates as “employers have been so dissatisfied with the skills and competencies of graduates that the Australian government considered for a time linking graduate skills testing with federal funding” (Treleaven & Voola, 2008, p. 161). It is apparent that universities need to be concerned about claims of generic skills deficits in graduates and need to address these issues, however there is still a clear difference of opinion amongst academics about the integration of these skills into the curriculum. These concerns arise from the pedagogical argument surrounding higher educations’ historic purpose versus the vocational view of developing employability skills (Treleaven & Voola, 2008).

It is important to acknowledge the roles the multiple stakeholder groups, including academics, university policy makers, employers, industry bodies and, importantly, students have in the process of developing graduate attributes (Barrie et al., 2009; Furnell & Scott, 2015). It is also critical to recognise that each group has an individual agenda. According to Barrie et al. (2009) the National Graduate Attributes Project (National GAP) identified a framework of eight interacting elements for curriculum renewal to achieve graduate outcomes. One of these elements, the student-centred outcome, highlights the perceptions of students regarding active engagement to attain attributes that they consider to be worthwhile. However, Furnell and Scott (2015) suggest that opinions of current students and graduates vary as to the importance of graduate employability attributes. Graduates employed in industry recognised in hindsight the importance of some generic skills, such as punctuality, working in a team, planning/organisation, working without supervision and oral communication. However, students, employed graduates and teachers viewed the key generic skills proposed by the researchers as having differing degrees of importance to employment, with the ranking of skills changing as they began to apply them in their careers or job roles. (Furnell & Scott, 2015).
2.2. Defining generic skills

Generic skills are referred to by various terms: graduate or professional skills; transferable skills; work-ready or employability skills (Freudenberg et al., 2011); key competencies or graduate attributes (Treleaven & Voola, 2008) or soft skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008). These terms are acknowledged as being essentially synonymous (Rigby et al., 2009). This research study referred to generic skills as outlined in Table 1, which compares six frameworks for generic skills from various sources.

The first framework is from Andrews and Higson (2008). It was developed from multiple sources, with data collected from both employers and graduates in four European countries. The most commonly cited attributes are compared with the generic skills Freudenberg et al. (2011) have selected. These were embedded in a professional development program in an industry-aligned university business degree at Griffith University. Generic skills sought by employers are listed, showing key similarities (Lowden et al., 2011; Pool & Sewell, 2007). The top ten competencies identified from both a business perspective and that of university business schools in the United States (Abraham & Karns, 2009) again highlights key comparisons. The list is by no means exhaustive but gives some examples of the range of skills that are considered generic. It also highlights the most commonly cited terms and some often cited terms.

The attributes most cited are oral and written communication skills, team work and interpersonal skills. Others less often cited but common to more than one are problem solving, information and communication technology skills, leadership, self-management skills, flexibility, adaptability, reliability, creativity, dependability, willingness to learn, and time management.

The key generic skills identified by this comparative analysis were investigated in the course of this study to determine their relevance in developing optimum employability in marketing communications graduates.
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<td>a. The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking; Good written and verbal communication skills; The ability to work under pressure; Information and communication technology skills; Good self-management &amp; time-management skills; Willingness to learn and accept responsibility; Reliability; Creativity</td>
<td>o Team; o Oral communication; o Written communication; o Interpersonal; o Problem-solving; o Information literacy; o Self-management; o Learning &amp; adaptability;</td>
<td>o Team working; o Good interpersonal and communication skills; o Literacy and numeracy (relevant to the post); o Problem solving; o ICT knowledge; o Leadership skills where necessary; o Self-management</td>
<td>o Working in a team; o Good oral communication; o Communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences; o Ability to use new technologies; o Ability to manage others; o Ability to work under pressure; o Numeracy; o Independent working/autonomy; o Time management; o Willingness to learn; o Adaptability/flexibility; o Imagination/creativity;</td>
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2.3. Generic skills and work-readiness

Generic skills are those skills that are often taught in addition to the discipline-specific skills and competencies taught within university courses. Generic skills that employers are seeking in work-ready graduates and those that allow graduates to contribute meaningfully to the industry at entry-level, have been extensively examined (Table 1) by a number of authors. Oliver et al. (2007) noted that most universities that list graduate attributes that are work-related, often described the skills as employability skills. ‘Work-readiness’ or ‘employability’, is defined as “possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives soon after commencing employment” (Mason et al., 2009, p. 1).

Nettleton, Litchfield, and Taylor (2008) similarly define ‘work-ready’ as having the skills required to not only gain employment and make effective contributions to the company’s strategic directions, but also to advance within the organisation. To this end, a range of approaches has been implemented by tertiary institutions to improve graduate work-readiness and many of these institutions have developed specific employability strategies.

In examining desirable graduate attributes for advertising agency employment in the United States of America in the 1980s, Deckinger, Brink, Katsenstein, and Primavera (1989) highlighted the need to consider curriculum modifications to improve graduate employability outcomes. More pedagogical weighting was needed in academic foundations of humanities and the arts, and specific advertising discipline theory, rather than on-the-job mechanics and generic attributes taught then in universities.

Now, in the twenty first century, companies that recruit large numbers of university graduates into the workforce have repeatedly voiced their concern that graduates straight out of university do not have the skills required to ‘hit the ground running’ (Washer, 2007). Today, training programs are no longer the norm for employers who are looking to maximise their businesses’ return on investment. Rather, employers want graduates who can be productive and contribute from day one by introducing new skills, fulfilling job roles and working productively as part of a team (Washer, 2007).
In assessing the impact of employability skills initiatives across United Kingdom higher education, three different methods were investigated:

(i) embedding teaching and assessment of skills in degree courses;
(ii) employer involvement in design and delivery of courses;
(iii) student work experience (Mason et al., 2009).

Work experience was found to be positive for developing work-ready skills and improving employment prospects, indicating that many employability skills may best be learnt in the workplace rather than in the classroom (Cranmer, 2006). Similarly, employer involvement in course design and delivery had a very positive impact on work-readiness (Mason et al., 2009). In contrast, the teaching of employability skills in class was not seen to achieve such a positive outcome (Lowden et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2009). Further investigation was deemed necessary to ascertain specific perceived gaps in work-readiness of entry-level graduates and what responsibility employers should take in training to fill such skills gaps (Mason et al., 2009) as well as the feasibility of universities endeavouring to develop graduate skills that can only be acquired in the workforce (Mason et al., 2009).

Placements, internships, experiential learning and work-based learning were all important in preparing graduates to be work-ready. Employers valued the experience gained in field internships by potential employees. Interns were seen as better prepared to enter the workplace, their experiential education enhancing employability in entry level graduates (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; Litchfield et al., 2010; Pool & Sewell, 2007). The findings from these studies indicate that the real benefit of work-related and real world-experience, either as part of a course or through part time work, cannot be duplicated in class.

In an investigation into graduate employment characteristics, Andrews and Higson (2008) examined graduate employability requirements across four European countries, including both employers’ and graduates’ perspectives. Their findings suggest that work-ready graduates were also required to have both solid business skills and ‘soft’ generic skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bridgstock, 2009; Waller & Hingorani, 2009). Additionally, as identified in Table 1, graduate skills and attributes valued by employers included good interpersonal and communication skills, team working, problem solving, literacy and leadership skills.
Graduates are increasingly realising the importance of starting a career and gaining employment, not just acquiring a university degree and that they need the skills to manage and build their own career path once they enter the workforce. Rae (2007) supports the notion that employability-related activity should be seen as a ‘core’ academic competency. According to Bridgstock (2009) the ability to incorporate the personal, career building skills necessary to manage and advance a career path in a commercial environment, plus self-management skills, may be required to determine how, where and when the discipline-specific skills and generic skills are used and managed. Where an employability focus was introduced as part of an integrated strategy, the benefits of including employer partnerships, work-based learning and work placements resulted in improved graduate employability (Rae, 2007). Hence, it may be seen that there are definite benefits to teaching generic skills as assessable outcomes within the university degree. Rae (2007) contends that embedding employability within course and module design not only ‘adds value’ to the student learning experience, it also connects enterprise and employability which will enhance the career paths of graduates.

2.4. Work-integrated learning (WIL)

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is the term given to describe academic learning achieved by integrating student learning activities within the workplace. WIL programs enable students to apply the learning from their classroom studies to work in their specific discipline area in a community or industry setting (Goulter & Patrick, 2010; RMIT University, 2014). The benefits of WIL strategies in courses to improve graduate employability have been well documented in the learning and teaching literature.

In response to demand from employers, many university programs are now incorporating experiential and WIL within the curriculum to prepare graduates to be industry-ready. Such partnerships between universities and employers is providing students with the opportunity to improve graduate employability attributes and help them transition from university to industry (McCulloch, 2009).

The benefits of experiential education in developing professionalism in graduates are also highlighted by Motley and Sturgill (2013). A professional development program introduced by Griffith University in their business degree program, aimed
specifically at developing students’ employment and generic skills as a supplement to their theoretical studies. The program includes significant engagement with industry and incorporates WIL strategies. The results indicate significant gains in generic skills for participating students (Freudenberg et al., 2011).

Employers are seeking graduates who have acquired work competencies and professional skills and emphasise the benefit of more work-related experience (Barrie, 2011; Oliver et al., 2007). The literature identifies numerous examples outlining the successful incorporation of work-integrated learning strategies across higher education. When introduced as a component in the final year experience in undergraduate law programs, WIL was seen to assist graduates in the transition to the workplace (McNamara et al., 2010). Collaboration with industry and active learning strategies incorporated into the redesigned university course for fashion majors gave students the opportunity to encounter real work environments to prepare them adequately for employment (Gibson, Kincade, & Frasier, 2013).

Experiential learning is identified in the literature an important element of the final year experience and there is evidence that WIL is beneficial in improving graduate employability. Students also recognise the importance of experiential learning in the development of generic skills, both as students and, ultimately, as practitioners. Hence, graduates are now seeking more practical experiences, expecting more real life opportunities and more work experience to be included in their courses (Oliver et al., 2007).

For this reason, the development of generic skills needs to be carefully scaffolded into university courses to enable students to demonstrate the skills and attributes prior to graduation (Barrie, 2011; Freudenberg et al., 2011).

2.5. Higher education in marketing communications

During the past decade, there has been a deliberate move by Australian higher education to place more emphasis on industry needs and graduate employability in university undergraduate courses. This is reflected in the growth and implementation of learning and teaching strategies such as WIL and by the focus of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) on employability outcomes as reflected in graduate attributes and competencies (Australian Qualifications
Framework Council, 2013). Many scholars now highlight this greater focus on employability in university education and the need to address generic skills as part of graduates’ outcomes (Barrie et al., 2009; Billett, 2010; Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, & Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013; Frawley & Litchfield, 2009; Freudenberg et al., 2011; Goulter & Patrick, 2010; Higgs et al., 2010; G. Kerr, Waller, & Patti, 2009; Litchfield et al., 2010; Llewellynn & Clarke, 2013; T. Moore & Morton, 2015). Whilst concerns about employability attributes being associated with vocationalisation are noted (Gustavsson, 2013), the degree to which this applies in the specific area of education in marketing communications has not been as widely investigated.

Communication Studies as a discipline area in tertiary study originated in Australia in the undergraduate curricula of higher education institutes in the 1970s. Programs were predominantly offered in the newer universities founded during the expansion of the higher education system in that era, as well as Institutes of Technology and Colleges of Advanced Education (Maras & Irwin, 2006). The earliest undergraduate courses were offered by Victoria University of Technology (1970), Charles Sturt University (1971), La Trobe University (1971), Deakin University (1972), University College of Southern Queensland (1973), Macquarie University (1974), Queensland University of Technology (1974), Murdoch University (1975), University of Technology, Sydney (1975), and University College of Central Queensland (1976) (“Programs in communication in Australian tertiary institutions,” 1990). The older, more established universities did not introduce communications courses until much later and it was not until 1990 that 'communication' was incorporated as a formal field of study and as a research category in the Australian Research Standards Classification (Maras & Irwin, 2006).

During the 1980s, communication and media were seen to be contemporary areas of study in the higher education system. As a result of this, they were seen to have a more vocational approach and a more flexible attitude to pedagogy (Maras & Irwin, 2006). Communication Studies, also referred to as Media Studies, includes mass communication, communication, communication sciences and communication studies and, under a variety of names is now taught in most Australian higher education institutions.
In most of these degrees, a ‘capstone’ unit or course is considered to be an essential element of final year studies. A useful definition of capstone courses is offered by the University of Sydney: "A capstone unit provides students with an opportunity to consolidate, integrate and apply the knowledge and skills learned throughout their degree". The capstone subject is at the end of a degree and usually involves assessments that emulate professional practice by combining disciplinary knowledge and generic skills (The University of Sydney, 2014).

The objective of the capstone experience is to link learning outcomes to employability and effectiveness in the workplace (Feldgen & Clua, 2010; Holdsworth, Watty, & Davies, 2009; Learning & Teaching Centre, 2008; R. Moore, 2005; Willey, Jarman, & Gardner, 2008). There is also the need for constructive alignment within university courses/ programs to achieve this objective (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

A growing number of Australian universities now incorporate WIL and practice-based learning strategies into their marcoms courses, particularly in the capstone subject (Llewellynn & Clarke, 2013). Charles Sturt University (CSU) integrates the authentic work-place simulation context of its on-campus student marcoms agency, Kajulu Communications, to develop professional skills in their Bachelor of Communication (Advertising) graduates (Llewellynn & Clarke, 2013). With a focus on successfully preparing graduates to make a meaningful initial workplace contribution, CSU has adopted strategies that aim to close the gap between academia and the workplace (Charles Sturt University, 2014). Llewellynn and Clarke’s study examines the student perspective in terms of being industry-ready. The results indicate that students felt they had gained the skills and attributes they perceived were needed to demonstrate to employers that they were industry-ready practitioners and had acquired the necessary employability skills to value-add to their employer organisations from day one. The benefits of experiencing real industry work in an integrated and controlled learning environment, plus their four week industry internship were highlighted (Llewellynn & Clarke, 2013).

In 2015, Swinburne University introduced a WIL strategy into their advertising capstone course to prepare students to be industry-ready (Reid, 2015). Students work from real, live client briefs and Swinburne have also developed a simulated student agency to give students further opportunities in WIL (Reid, 2015).
A review of Australian universities highlights that various approaches to practice-based learning, including engagement with industry through internships and partnered projects that are also employed by other universities. For example, University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) offers students in the Bachelor of Communication degree industry experience through internships, international study tours and working with real clients through their in-house advertising agency, Digitall, as well as mentored projects with industry partners.

The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) promotes its practice-based approach to learning in their communication courses where they combine theory and practice with real-world case studies and hands-on experience with industry partnerships. University of Canberra (UC) Bachelor of Communication Advertising program also offers students practical experience through internships and WIL experience, as does the University of Western Sydney (UWS) in its Bachelor of Communication – Advertising degree. Victoria University (VU) has a strong focus on producing work-ready graduates, providing students with industry connections, practical experience and learning outside the classroom.

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) offers practical experience in its Bachelor of Media in Public Relations (PR) and Advertising programs with third year portfolio projects or media internships available to students. Likewise, Edith Cowan University’s (ECU) Bachelor of Communications courses gives students hands-on experiences and industry placements. Curtin University (CU) students have real clients and contact with advertising agencies in the advertising major in the Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Arts degrees. Agency engagement and industry mentoring are embedded in the Communication Design degree at the Academy of Design Australia (AAD).

As part of its commitment to professional development and education in marketing communications, the International Advertising Association provides marcoms students with the opportunity to respond to a not-for-profit client brief each year in its ‘Big Idea’ national student marketing communications competition. This gives students hands-on industry experience working in an authentic agency team on a real client brief. Sally Webster, Senior Lecturer Public Relations & Organisational Communications, Victoria University, notes that “The IAA ‘Big Idea’...not only replicates professional practice approaches, it delivers on them. This creates the challenges that students need to learn and be accomplished in to be early career
professionals when they graduate" (International Advertising Association, 2014, p. 2).

2.6. The changing marcoms industry

Perhaps the biggest influence on marcoms education is the evolving nature of the industry itself. According to Cooper and Tang (2010), in examining the graduate attributes, skills and competencies needed for success in the future marketing communications industry the changes in the industry and the changing roles and responsibilities of its employees need to be taken into account.

The industry is addressing rapid, continuing and significant changes in the roles of marketing communications organisations. McIntyre (2014) finds agencies are examining the different services they now need to deliver to satisfy their clients’ needs but recognise that the graduates of tomorrow would appear to need very different skills sets to those needed today.

It is difficult to delineate between PR and advertising in today’s climate, especially with the growing focus on delivering owned, earned, shared and paid media for marketing communications clients (Bailey, 2014; i-SCOOP, 2014). AdNews journalist Paul McIntyre reports that the lines between a traditional creative advertising agency, a digital agency, a media agency, an experiential agency and a PR agency are becoming increasingly blurred. PR agencies are now competing alongside creative and digital agencies in marcoms pitches; they operate across social media and are increasingly involved in strategic planning – once the exclusive domain of creative agencies. Cooper and Tang (2010) suggest that as the industry becomes more blended, organisations need to develop new types of core skills in employees.

Traditional paid media is still a critical part of the mix but earned media is crucial. There is conflict in the industry as to the roles of creative, media and PR agencies in clients’ social media activities, as McIntyre notes: “Every part of the communications services sector is re-evaluating business models...” (McIntyre, 2014, p. 10). According to Richard Edelman, CEO of Edelman, the world’s largest PR firm, agencies are reassessing the services they need to supply to their clients resulting in the demand for different skill sets in employees (McIntyre, 2014).
The need for integration and collaboration has never been more apparent (Clark, 2013). Future graduates will need a much broader set of skills to make significant contributions to clients’ marketing communications. Terri-Helen Gaynor, president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), as cited in Clark (2013), said “It is now vital that PR works closer with media, creative, advertising, marketing and digital [agencies]. As the platforms change, so do the requirements”. Mark Buckman, Chief Marketing Officer of Telstra, believes we need a new agency model with a new structure to manage the forthcoming marketing communications era (Buckman, 2013). To this end, marcoms agencies in all disciplines need to understand how to work together in a seamless way to maximise effective and cost efficient engagement with clients’ target markets (Buckman, 2013). John Broome, Marketing Director of Kellogg Australia & New Zealand, believes agency partners will be appreciated not only for their own great ideas but for collaborating with other partners (Broome, 2013). Some marketers and agencies, seeking different skill sets, are hiring journalists and writers to produce content for earned media (Coyne, 2014).

Royle and Laing (2014) find that the digital age also now requires skills and knowledge from digital technologists as an essential part of agency organisation. Business, scientific planning and creative skills are no longer sufficient. The communication and creative industries are facing difficulty in finding employees not only with digital marketing skills but also strategic business knowledge and the ability to integrate the two within traditional marcoms approaches. These skills are now considered integral to successful marketing communications and there may need to be a stronger focus on these outcomes in graduates’ education (Royle & Laing, 2014).

Whether all these skills can or should be learnt at university, or whether industry should up-skill graduates once they enter employment, is a matter for conjecture and is addressed later in this study.

2.7. Employability attributes in marcoms graduates

According to Todd (2009) public relations practitioners believe educators are not giving students the skills they need to succeed in the communications industry.
Although Faculty advisors are being encouraged to develop curricula that place greater emphasis on practical experience, internships and hands-on experience to better prepare graduates to be work-ready, Todd argues that the academy should also consider involving PR professionals in assessing work, including capstone projects. In addition, a greater exchange of ideas through workshops and seminars should be encouraged and an improvement in students’ internship experiences could be sought through a two-way dialogue. When examining a more innovative pedagogical approach to improving the graduate outcomes of entry-level practitioners, Todd proposes a broader discussion, in fact a four-way dialogue between educators, employers, undergraduates and millennia employees, particularly as Millennials (the generation born between approximately 1982 and 2002) are starting to enter the workforce (Todd, 2014). This concept could be further investigated by examining the potential roles the academy and industry could play in preparing university graduates for a career in marketing communications.

The advertising industry solves complex client problems with equally complex communications campaign solutions. Roles in agencies are many and varied and the skills required are broad. Windels, Mallia, and Broyles (2013) find that for entry-level advertising graduates to succeed in the industry, it is as important for them to possess soft skills including critical thinking, persuasion, interpersonal communication and presentation, as it is to have discipline-specific skills. Knowledge of the industry-specific hard skills is, of course, essential, however, the advertising industry is very much a people industry and the soft skills – the interpersonal, behavioural and people skills – are crucial to a successful career in advertising. Whilst Windels, Mallia and Broyles identify the importance of soft skills and nominate the key skills required in advertising agencies, they do not clearly identify where entry-level marcoms graduates should learn these skills – at university or in the workplace. However, they do identify some steps agencies themselves could take to increase employee soft skills and suggests possible changes to curricula and coursework at universities (Windels et al., 2013).

The similarities and differences in employer-ranked graduate attributes in recruitment of advertising and public relations students have been examined by G Kerr and Proud (2005). The prioritising of generic skills was identified as being similar for both groups, with some differences in specific discipline skills. PR employers placed more importance on hands-on experience such as fieldwork and
internships, whereas advertising practitioners focused more on discipline knowledge than on experience (G Kerr & Proud, 2005).

A further study undertaken in 2005 by Larsen and Len-Rios, which explored the status of educators’ perceptions of curriculum integration, found there were similarities and some overlaps in the requirements of students’ skill sets required in both advertising and public relations in the marcoms area (Larsen & Len-Rios, 2006). The study noted that lines between these two disciplines were often blurred and, given the changes in the marcoms industry, they argued that varied university courses may be needed to serve the diversity of positions in the work force.

Capozzi and Zipfel (2012) also found that a new trend was developing as a result of converging communication platforms. This was leading to organisational transformation and was creating different challenges for communication professionals. In recent years, several of the world’s largest organisations have restructured their communications and marketing functions bringing public relations and advertising under the direction of one chief communications officer. Michael Bush, writing in Advertising Age (September 21, 2009), as cited in Capozzi and Zipfel (2012), said: “In some organizations, chief communications officers (CCOs) and their teams are playing a strategic role more closely aligned with the marketing function. Some companies think the two – advertising and communications – are so closely linked that their CMO [chief marketing officer] and CCO are one and the same.” Capozzi and Zipfel argue that public relations practitioners could well take the lead role in developing strategically aligned marketing communications platforms for client companies. Mazzei (2014) also finds there is an apparent convergence among the four business-related communications disciplines of marketing, specifically integrated marketing communication and totally integrated communication, organisational communication, public relations and corporate communication.

This shift could soon start to affect the attributes marcoms graduates require and highlights the benefit of multidisciplinary cross-fertilisation. Industry also appears keen to employ students who have been exposed to real-world problems solved through a broader multi-discipline collaboration. Spradling, Toomey, Shadinger, Chappell, and Graves (2014) examined a three year, multidisciplinary initiative at Northwest Missouri State University that combined undergraduate students from up to six disciplines, including marketing, mass communications and public relations,
in teams to produce integrated digital marketing communication campaigns for clients. This initiative replicates the real-world procedures increasingly being followed by digital marketing and advertising agencies. Students were able to were able to draw on knowledge from several disciplines to give them a broader understanding and solution to problems (Spradling et al., 2014). This approach to learning suggests students who participated in the course would have been able to produce work that would have been difficult to achieve solely through application of their own specific discipline skills and is a reflection of emerging industry practice.

Advertising agencies and advertisers are including use of data to target consumers through social and mobile media. In developing an interdisciplinary curriculum approach to integrate information technology skills into a marketing program at Pace University, New York, Dwyer and Priluck (2012) identified the importance of data mining to more accurately target the right consumer with the right message at the right time. Data mining techniques are increasingly used to identify consumer behaviour, to define market segmentation and to develop marketing and communication strategies. As noted by Gupta and Aggarwal (2012), businesses and their marketing communications agencies are recognising the importance of establishing long term relationships with their customers and data mining is an essential element in achieving better Customer Relationship Management (CRM), (Gupta & Aggarwal, 2012).

The focus today is on customer retention rather than customer acquisition. According to Dwyer and Priluck (2012) advertisers and their agencies now set out to develop close relationships with consumers through data mining and analytics that allow for the measurement of personalised messages delivered across multiple communication touch points. The need for marcoms professionals to have a solid base of IT fundamentals is becoming a prerequisite to success in this rapidly altering business area. Many successful marketers have acquired self-taught IT skills but this is far from ideal (Dwyer & Priluck, 2012). However, they do not address how acquiring these skills could be incorporated into graduates’ skills sets, or whether it is the role of industry or academia to develop these important competencies.

Another skills gap apparent in the digital marketing industry has been identified by Royle and Laing (2014) – specifically a lack of digital technical skills combined with traditional business and marketing knowledge. The recent evolution of digital
marketing, the lack of an integrated strategic approach and the lack of best practice guidelines, have led to an experimental trial and error approach in the industry. There is a shortage of trained graduates with the skills required to integrate strategic digital marketing knowledge into the traditional marketing communications area and the industry is seeking to rectify this situation. The authors have developed a Digital Marketer Model that may address some of the problems and plan to test this model with higher education lecturers in the field of marketing. Most of the professionals interviewed by Royle and Laing identified that they need better methods to help them anticipate and deal professionally with ongoing developments in technology. They also suggested that future employees needed the digital skills to integrate new knowledge into their businesses (Royle & Laing, 2014).

2.8. Collaboration between academia and industry

In examining employer perceptions of graduate employability skills, Lowden et al. (2011) reinforce the importance of work-based learning such as industry placements and internships in improving employability. However, employer partnerships with Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) need to be encouraged since HEIs seem slow to incorporate industry feedback. Lowden et al. (2011) also identify ongoing major issues regarding expectations between employers, other stakeholders and academia, as to who should be responsible for developing the skills of graduates. Reibstein, Day & Wind (2009), as cited in Royle and Laing (2014), also identify the need for further collaboration between industry and academia to close the gap between the two noting that collaboration between scholars and practitioners has developed some very beneficial directions and useful work.

When examining the respective roles and responsibilities of universities and practice in relation to educating professional accountants, Howieson et al. (2014) found that universities cannot be ‘all things to all people’, yet some accounting firms and industry bodies felt universities did have the major responsibility for the development of work-ready graduates. Howieson et al. (2014) contend that both industry and the academy need to be realistic about just what can be achieved in an undergraduate degree within the limitations of both time and resources. Both need to identify who will benefit from graduates’ education in different areas.
universities apply more time to teaching generic skills, providing graduates with the required substantive knowledge to perform as entry level practitioners may suffer.

Howieson et al. (2014) concluded both academics and practitioners need to develop a more complementary and more structured approach to improving graduates’ workplace skills, suggesting that a more integrated strategy could be adopted in the development of these skills in accounting graduates. Employers, universities and professional accounting bodies should consider comparative advantages to each in order to determine who should contribute to the education of various aspects of graduates’ skills (Howieson et al., 2014). One might argue that this could equally apply to the marcoms industry which, like accounting, is a service based industry, and in which there is similar awareness of the need to develop both hard and soft skills in order for graduates to be industry-ready.

Windels et al. (2013) suggest some of the generic skills needed in the advertising industry, particularly critical thinking, interpersonal communication, presentation skills and persuasion, could be strengthened in entry level graduates by agencies taking a more proactive role in developing them. Having entry-level staff observe or participate in presentations and important meetings, and lead small projects, would enhance problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Identifying these skills in graduates during the recruitment process would also place more emphasis on their importance. Windels et al. (2013) recommend changes to curriculum to focus on some of these generic skills, as well as encouraging participation by students through WIL initiatives such as internships and student advertising agencies. Acquiring these generic skills is important to the success of employees in advertising agencies, not only in entry level graduates, but also in middle and senior management.

However, there is debate as to whether higher education institutes should develop specific employability skills at all. Tymon (2013) notes some academics feel job training is not the role of universities, but that of employers once graduates enter the industry. From the graduates’ perspective a degree, once seen as the advantageous differentiator, is now considered a prerequisite for a job and additional skills and attributes need to be acquired for success in practice. Students see the need to add value to their degree to gain a competitive advantage in the workplace. Tymon argues that regardless of whether developing employability skills
and attributes should be the responsibility of universities or industry, there are alternative options which should be investigated (Tyrom, 2013).

It is also important to obtain the opinions of supervisors, as well as those working alongside recent graduates, regarding the competencies and capabilities that would maximise their performance in the workplace (Jackson, 2009). Although employers have the potential to provide on-the-job training to develop expertise, this is not necessarily being delivered. In some cases, there is insufficient time in the workplace for graduates to meaningfully reflect on the lessons implicit in their workplace experience, so the influence of contextual factors related to the specific workplace on the successful transfer of learning need to be considered.

Jackson also notes it is important to understand and allow for the different environments within which graduates operate, as this could significantly influence their ability to transfer competencies acquired at university. Given only a small portion of employability skills developed in a higher education environment might be applied successfully in the workplace. Ideally, university developed knowledge and skills are generic (and thus transferable from university to the workplace) and the workplace environment should allow graduates the opportunity to apply these developed abilities. The onus of effectively addressing the skills gap therefore falls on both educators and employers, although there needs to be an identified balance between disciplinary knowledge and generic skills (Jackson, 2009).

In the case of engineering students, the literature indicates industry involvement in the design of multidisciplinary capstone courses is beneficial, with several roles for industry representatives being identified (Goldberg, Cariapa, Corliss, & Kaiser, 2014). Contribution to actual capstone course design is ascertained to be a key area of engagement, whilst the involvement of industry professionals as guest lecturers, curriculum advisors and mentors providing a real-world perspective for students, was also seen to be of value. In the study, students were given the opportunity to work on real-world projects, which was seen to be of significant benefit in enhancing employability – a point already raised by researchers in other discipline fields.

Current and topical input from industry professionals was seen to be an advantage to these students in their final capstone experience, whilst industry sponsorship of projects allowed students to ‘work’ in outside organisations on real projects and to
receive input and mentoring from professional executives. Students reported that these projects gave them the added benefit of experiencing working with real customers and suppliers and the opportunity to solve a meaningful, real-world problem. The organisations involved saw tangible benefit to themselves with fresh input from young students and additional resources to solve technical problems. Exposure to these capstone projects also often results in job opportunities with the sponsoring organisation for graduates. Employers use projects to evaluate potential employees and to identify the best talent in the graduating class (Goldberg et al., 2014).

The benefit of working on real-world projects to develop optimum employability in marcoms graduates has not yet been widely investigated.

2.9. The importance of globalisation

The impact of increasing globalisation and internationalisation has heightened the requirement for graduates to be able to work in culturally varied settings (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Many universities, including those in Australia, have focused on exchange programs to give students international, multi-cultural experiences. Crossman and Clarke (2010) have examined the possible benefits of the international experience in developing employability skills in graduates. Since the middle of the 20th century, the push towards the internationalisation of universities has intensified significantly as they have sought to respond to global economic and cultural forces. In the same way, business organisations around the world are now more likely to have international suppliers or customers and many large organisations often require employees to travel extensively, to work across various cultures or in different parts of the world or, frequently, to address shared objectives in international teams (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

This internationalisation of industry, education and trade includes marketing communications organisations, who are increasingly likely to handle their clients’ accounts internationally, or to adopt a global advertising strategy. For example, Coca-Cola’s ‘Share a Coke’ campaign, which was developed and launched in Australia in 2011, had spread to more than 70 countries, including the USA by 2014 (McQuilken, 2014).
Crossman and Clarke (2010) note that, particularly since the 1990s, initiatives by Australian universities to encourage international mobility amongst students have attracted bipartisan governmental support. Student mobility and international experience have continued to be promoted as a means of developing key graduate employability skills required by 21st century organisations. These have been linked to international work-related or experiential learning. The advantage of international experience appears to be beneficial for graduates and appealing to employers in that it improves learning and the acquisition of overall employability skills (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

Whilst the literature addresses the benefits of international experience, there is little to suggest how this might optimise employability in marcoms graduates.

2.10. Conclusion

The literature indicates that over the last ten years higher education in Australia has generally placed a greater emphasis on graduate employability, as well as the need to address generic skills in undergraduate courses. This connection has not been widely investigated in the specific area of education in marketing communications and the literature reviewed gives differing opinions about the roles of university, employers and industry in developing work-ready, marcoms practitioners.

There are many academics who would argue that universities should maintain their traditional role and provide graduates with new, discipline-specific knowledge. The question of the role of tertiary education in delivering discipline knowledge as well as developing work-ready attributes in graduates raises the debate about the purpose of universities and the role of vocational education (Muller & Young, 2014). Some scholars object to what they perceive as substitution of improving and developing personal intellect, traditionally associated with higher education, with skills development, traditionally addressed by vocational education and workplace training. Strong concern about employability attributes being associated with vocationalisation are evident.

Much has been published about the role of industry in contributing to the education of graduates to prepare them for practice in many different fields. The benefit of
industry in contributing to the development of graduates’ employability skills is supported by some scholars and debated by others. The benefits of WIL, internships and work experience, authentic learning projects involving ‘real’ clients and other real-world learning opportunities, including international experiences, have been investigated and, in the main, endorsed to a greater or lesser degree as beneficial in preparing graduates for employability. Although organisations (including universities) do have a role to play in supporting employability, some employers, as well as some employees themselves, consider that the main responsibility for employability rests with the individual (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

There is the opportunity and a need to more thoroughly investigate these areas in relation to marcoms graduates.

There is no clear consensus from studies conducted to date as to what role industry and practice should play; whether universities should incorporate development of more generic skills into marcoms courses or if these skills should be taught by industry or others. Todd (2014) proposes a four-way dialogue between educators, employers, undergraduates and millennial employees to develop a more innovative solution to the problem. This study seeks to add new knowledge by more clearly defining the possible roles of academia and industry. To do so, this study has gathered the views of practitioners, professional bodies and marketing communications graduates, to determine what they see as the appropriate roles of universities and employers to prepare marcoms graduates for optimum employability. How this has been done is the subject of the next Chapter.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the research aims and question, and discusses the overall design and structure of the study. It presents an overview of the research methodologies, data gathering and analysis employed in this study.

The literature review has highlighted the need for university graduates to have both discipline-specific skills and generic skills to be work-ready on entering industry. There is no agreement as to whether or not these skills, especially for marcoms graduates, can be gained exclusively through a university degree or whether part of the education process requires input from other stakeholders such as employers or industry bodies. Several scholars have identified successful employer initiatives that have helped to develop employability skills in graduates, whilst others have questioned whether it is the role of universities to teach these skills or that of the conventional vocational teaching organisations such as TAFE and RTOs.

As outlined in Chapter 1, a limited number of marcoms employers and industry bodies do offer graduate training programs to help bridge the gap between academia and practice. It is hypothesised that the identification of a graduate’s employability attributes must therefore take into account the opinions of all stakeholders, including universities, employers, industry bodies and the graduates themselves.

The literature has identified many of the generic skills employers are seeking in industry-ready graduates; however research into the employability skills gaps in marcoms graduates specifically appears to be limited and the question of who should teach graduates the generic skills, what exactly they are and who should teach the discipline-specific skills is relatively unexplored. A qualitative approach that seeks to uncover the views and the opinions of various stakeholders is employed in this research. This approach allows for the interpretation of these opinions and allows for an analysis that can lead to discovery of relevant insights and directions (Burns, 2000).
3.2. The Research Question

The research question (RQ) addressed in this study is:

*Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?*

3.3. Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the perceived gaps in employability skills when graduates enter the marcoms industry and whether university degrees adequately prepare graduates to be work-ready when they enter the workplace.

To achieve this aim, the study considered the roles of four key stakeholder groups – universities, employers, industry bodies and the graduates themselves – in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications. The attributes and wider skills deemed important for graduate employability by these stakeholders were assessed and respondents were asked to what extent higher education can or should develop teaching and learning strategies to equip today’s marcoms students with the requisite and desirable job skills and professional characteristics needed to be work-ready upon entering the industry after graduation.

The study further sought to determine the expectations of these groups in respect of the employability of graduates and the role of all the stakeholders in developing entry-level job skills and competencies. It also sought to identify any gaps existing between theory and practice and the role each stakeholder might take to bridge these gaps in order to achieve optimum employability. The relevance of multidisciplinary study, work-integrated learning and wider learning outcomes outside traditional marcoms courses was also investigated.

More broadly, the aims and objectives were:

- To identify key skills gaps in marcoms graduates between graduation and employability, as perceived by:
  - marcoms industry employers;
  - key marcoms industry professional bodies; and
  - graduates.
• To identify the role key stakeholder groups (including universities, employers and key marcoms industry bodies) do take, or should take, in addressing identified employability skills gaps between university and professional practice.

This study will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding university education outcomes and graduate employability in the marketing communications field. It is hoped that the findings will help identify the appropriate roles for academia and industry in the education process and suggest a different type of collaboration between academia, industry and industry bodies in the future. Both theoretical and practical contributions will be made, by highlighting the stakeholder roles best suited to achieving institutional and industry related strategic goals, thereby providing a basis from which to influence academic course development. The study might also identify other strategies for future improvement to produce work-ready graduates in the marketing communications industry.

The study has the limitation that the findings may not be more broadly generalizable, given the highly focussed field of investigation within the higher education sector. The findings may inform areas of consideration for other business and communication fields.

A further limitation is the relatively small sample size. By selecting interviewees across a range of relevant practitioner, industry bodies and graduate stakeholders, the study sought to make the sample as representative as possible. Methodology employing use of qualitative, in-depth interviews, where respondents were able to qualify their opinions, helped mitigate this.

Given the difficulty of tracking down recent graduates, the voices of the two graduate groups interviewed are less representative than those of industry and this was considered when analysing findings. Research design limitations are addressed in Section 3.7.
3.4. Justification for the paradigm and methodology

This section introduces the philosophical worldview that was proposed for the study and the philosophical assumptions and the research strategies applied. The design of the study was based on social constructivism, relevant to qualitative data collection featuring semi-structured in-depth interviews with various relevant stakeholders (Table 2).

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3.4.1. Ontology: Social constructionism

Social constructivists seek subjective understandings of the world in which they exist, both in terms of lifestyle and employment (Creswell, 2009). These understandings are broad and complex. This leads the constructivist researcher to seek a wide view rather than restricting it to narrow interpretation. Although the constructivist researcher focuses on peoples’ specific environments and circumstances, including those in which they work, “The researcher’s intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Social constructivism is often seen as an approach to qualitative data collection methods and analysis (Creswell, 2009). A social constructionist worldview was identified as the paradigm for this study in order to deal with the knowledge derived from individual responses and opinions, as results derived from the data are based on individual perceptions. Adopting a social constructivist perspective allowed the opinions of diverse respondents to be analysed in relation to the world in which they work.
3.4.2. Epistemology: Interpretivism

Social constructivism is often combined with interpretivism (Creswell, 2009). An interpretivist philosophy is commonly used to inform data analysis (which is qualitative in nature) in order to obtain information through more refined interpretation and analysis of the responses (Weerakkody, 2009). Interpretivists express a belief in the existence of multiple realities and truths, all of which are open to change (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). An interpretivist researcher does not believe in a single conclusion, since various interpretations can be formulated by different people experiencing the same occurrence or issue, so these interpretations are simply viewed as being different, rather than right or wrong (Weerakkody, 2009). It is the goal of the constructivist researcher to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the phenomena studied within a specific context (Creswell, 2009). An interpretivist model therefore allowed this study to examine the views of the respondents and to understand the practices, constraints and rules that apply within their particular environment.

3.4.3. Methodology: Qualitative; Grounded Theory

Qualitative forms of investigation tend to be based on the subjective opinions of real-world, life experiences of respondents and interpretations of these realities give multiple forms of understanding through analysis (Burns, 2000). Thus qualitative methodologies provide a means of discovering deeper levels of meaning and help to understand occurrences from the participant’s point of view (Burns, 2000).

The use of qualitative methodology allows some degree of flexibility and acknowledges that whilst research is a collaborative process, it is also a creative one (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In this case, qualitative research allowed for the exploration of different responses that emerged as respondents explained their diverse opinions and philosophies regarding the topic. It also provided the flexibility to evolve additional research questions as results took unexpected or surprising directions (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

Qualitative researchers collect multiple forms of data through secondary research, desk research, observing behaviour or interviewing participants (Creswell, 2009).
Analysis of these data is built on patterns or themes from the bottom up, always keeping a focus on interpretation of the participants’ responses rather than any personal preconceived ideas or those expressed by writers of previous literature. This allows the analytical process to be essentially emergent in nature (Creswell, 2009).

The qualitative approach taken in this study allows the researcher to develop each of the four sections of the study by utilising data progressively collected within – and informing each stage – thereby allowing each section described in the initial research plan to continually evolve as data was collected.

Interviews have been shown to provide an effective way to collect qualitative data (Burns, 2000) and in order to answer the research question and to achieve the aims of this research, a qualitative approach to interviewing was undertaken throughout the study.

In doing so, the study employed a grounded theory style approach proposed by Daymon and Holloway (2011). In developing grounded theory research, the originators, Glaser and Strauss (1967), were concerned that the researcher should be allowed the flexibility of not relying on prior assumptions or hypotheses, and should not be forced into a particular direction. In this study, the theory was developed and modified from the data collected, rather than structured from any pre-existing framework.

Grounded theory methodology allows the researcher, rather than starting with a theory and attempting to verify it, to commence with an area of study and from that to develop emergent theoretical constructs (Parker & Roffey, 1997). Theory and the data in which that theory is grounded are fundamentally interrelated. Through analysis of the data and development of core concepts, grounded theory research allows the researcher to make sense of the data collected and to give it structure by identifying the relevance and importance (Parker & Roffey, 1997).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) also suggest that, by employing grounded theory methodology, a researcher can examine a situation from widely different views using interviews (structured and unstructured) to evolve core conceptions. This allows the researcher to analyse the data with an objective and unbiased eye. Corbin and Strauss point out “the primary purpose of doing qualitative research is
discovery, not hypothesis testing” (p. 317), “not trying to control variables, but to discover them” (p. 318). This enables proper reporting of the results (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

According to Daymon and Holloway, theoretical sampling informs decisions about the data collected and the concepts which emerge as the research progresses through the stages of the research (in this case, three stages). The data was analysed and theory developed in tandem and interactively through a method of constant comparison of each stage. In parallel with the analysis of data collected, the study continued to draw on literature to inform its development. Grounded theory is also flexible, in that it is developmental (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In this study, data was collected and analysed in stages to allow shifts of emphasis early in the research as working hypotheses were developed and refined.

In a rigorous application of grounded theory methodology, ‘theoretical sampling’ is used, continually guided by the emerging theory. In this study, the sample has been purposive and was selected in advance of the data collection.

A purposive sample is a non-random sample which is selected to ensure that particular characteristics of a group are represented in the final sample (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling was selected by the researcher based on her prior theoretical understanding of the topic being studied and relying on her judgment when choosing respondents to participate in the study. Robinson (2014) finds a purposive sample can give contextual richness by locating it clearly within a particular culture or subculture. Individuals for this study were selected as they had unique, different and important perspectives on the topic in question and their inclusion in the sample was warranted (Robinson, 2014).

Even though the research has developed theoretical concepts which are grounded in data, it has used what is described as a grounded theory style. As such, the research still holds value for knowledge, but has followed a simplified version of grounded theory principles and procedures (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).
3.5. Research procedures

In order to obtain opinions and perspectives from key stakeholders, the study was conducted with three different sample groups. The study utilised purposive sampling, in that the sample groups were pre-identified and were selected from people with relevant characteristics in advance of the data collection. Each sample group was analysed on completion of interviews in order to make constant comparisons to uncover any important, emerging concepts (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Each section of the study then addressed the research question: *Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?*

3.5.1. Group one – the marketing communications industry

The first section of the research sought to identify the employability attributes desired by employers in the marketing communications industry for entry level graduates to be deemed work-ready, and whether in fact they believe present graduates are, in fact, work-ready. This section of the study collected information from marcoms agencies, including creative, media, digital, experiential and public relations organisations.

3.5.2. Group two – professional marcoms industry bodies

The second part of the research sought the opinions of the marketing communications professional industry bodies. It investigated the opinions of these professional bodies regarding requisite employability attributes in graduates and what contribution, if any, they feel their member organisations or the professional bodies themselves might contribute to the education process. This part of the study incorporated any concepts that emerged from interviews with the first group. Emerging ideas or concepts were used progressively to develop interview guidelines for each ensuing sample (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

3.5.3. Group three – recent university graduates

Graduates from a representative sample of universities who have been working in the industry for two or fewer years were interviewed with a view to identifying any
perceived gap in employability attributes between graduation and their current employment. Concepts or theories that emerged from groups one and two were incorporated into this section.

3.5.4. Group four – university graduates with industry experience

The fourth stage of the study involved interviewing graduates from a representative sample of universities who have been working in the industry for more than two years. Emergent concepts from sample groups one, two and three were taken into account in structuring this final phase.

3.5.5. Methods of data collection

This study employed data collection through a series of semi-structured in-depth 45 minute interviews with participants. Approximately 11 questions were asked of each respondent. It is common practice in grounded theory methodology to include interviews; this method is justified on the basis that implicit information is gained from spontaneous responses from relevant participants (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Since this study was limited to specific topic areas, semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate (Weerakkody, 2009).

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide prepared by the interviewer in order to give direction to the interview so that the content focused on the crucial issues of the study, as outlined by Burns (2000). The benefit of this methodology was the flexibility and freedom it allowed the researcher to add further questions (in addition to those included on the interview guide) to better explore any new directions or interesting points raised by the respondents, and to seek more detailed explanations for particular experiences or opinions identified in the interview process (Weerakkody, 2009).

Email invitations informed prospective participants of what would be required of them. The invitations were accompanied by a Research Project Information Sheet (RPIS) and a Consent Form. The RPIS detailed the nature and procedures of the research and invited prospective participants to either email or telephone the researcher if they had questions regarding the research or their involvement in it. The Consent Form was signed by respondents who agreed to participate in the
study and returned via email to the researcher. The one-on-one phone interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

3.5.6. Sample frame and size

The first section of the study interviewed a purposive sample of ten (10) executives currently employed by marcoms agencies, all of whom have significant experience in people development roles in marcoms agencies. Of all qualitative methodologies, grounded theory puts most emphasis on being flexible about sample size as a project progresses (Robinson, 2014). Using grounded theory methodology for this study, analysis proceeded at the same time as data was collected. This allowed the researcher to make decisions about when new data was unlikely to uncover new insights or when no new themes or categories were emerging (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Based on Corbin and Strauss’ findings, the sample size might have been increased had ongoing data analysis indicated further evidence was required to validate findings or theory. In this study, the researcher judged that findings from the ten interviews with marcoms agency executives were sufficient to develop valid themes, categories and theory. Sample size may have been increased had ongoing data analysis led the researcher to realise that she had omitted an important agency group or type of person from the original sample and this was not the case. A suitable mix of representative marcoms agencies was selected to include creative, media, experiential, customer relationship management and public relations agencies.

The second section of the study sought to interview one senior executive from each of the five key marcoms professional industry groups in Australia:

- Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA)
- Media Federation of Australia (MFA)
- The Communications Council
- Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA)
- IAA Australia Chapter, International Advertising Association (IAA)

Only four of these industry groups agreed to participate in the study.
The third and fourth sections each set out to interview a purposive sample of ten (10) graduates from a representative sample of universities, currently employed in the marcoms industry. The first group was to be graduates with less than two years’ employment in the industry – the second was to be graduates with more than two years’ industry experience. Ultimately, the response rate from graduates was low, with only nine agreeing to participate in the study. As a result, the two groups were combined for interview purposes.

3.5.7. Interview guide outline

The interview guide outline is appended (Appendix 1).

3.5.8. Methods of data analysis

The data was analysed after interviews with each sample group had been completed to allow constant comparison. Data was analysed using inter- and intra-textual thematic analysis (Maykurt & Morehouse, 1994). Once the audio files from the interviews were transcribed, the text was examined for themes and relevant quotes to inform the coding. It was then analysed for key phrases and common opinions between individuals. The purpose of the coding was to identify and constantly compare commonalities and differences in the material collected in order to formulate categories (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). The data was coded into categories using three steps:

- **Open coding (dissecting the data into discrete fragments);**
- **Axial coding (making links between codes and grouping conceptually similar data to form categories);**
- **Selective coding (selecting a core category and relating it to other categories).**

(Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 137)

Open coding allowed the data to be progressively divided into sub-segments then examined for common themes. Once categorised, specific properties, subcategories and attributes typifying each category were identified (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).
Axial coding allowed the researcher to find interconnections between categories and subcategories. Analysis here focused on identifying more about each category, particularly in relation to what gives rise to it, its context, strategies people use to apply it and the resultant consequences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

A fourth step, *development of a theory*, was then undertaken (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). According to Leedy and Ormrod, this may be in the form of a verbal statement or series of hypotheses to explain the phenomenon being considered. The theory describes the developing outcome of the phenomenon and its evolution, the interactions and sequences of events that lead to its conclusions. The most significant point with this type of methodology is that no matter what the resulting theory, it is based entirely on the data collected – a data analysis methodology well suited to a grounded theory style of study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

These four steps provide a structured and methodical way of dealing with the large and diverse body of data such as that collected for this study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). It enabled a systematic way of coding the data into categories, leading to the identification of complex interrelationships, an important aspect of this study. This approach also allowed a continual merging of data collection and data analysis and an ultimate construction of a theory from the categories and identified interrelationships. This provided a concise theoretical framework that illustrated and explained an identified phenomenon with rigor and objectivity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

### 3.6. Ethical considerations

An application for approval for this study was submitted to, and approved by, the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Sunshine Coast. A copy of the approved application (approval number S/15/727 – 27 March 2015), together with all relevant supporting documentation, is available as Appendix 2.

### 3.7. Research design limitations

The study was limited by the range restrictions of the sample. The scale of the study is arguably a limitation, with only ten employers interviewed and only four of the five nominated industry body groups finally agreeing to be interviewed.
Additionally, phases three and four of the study proposed to interview 20 graduates from a representative group of universities, currently employed in the marcoms industry. The initial contact and recruitment method for the latter two groups resulted in a total of only nine graduates agreeing to an interview, four with less than two years’ work experience and five with more than two years’ experience. Whilst this is a limitation (less than half of those identified as potential respondents), the opinions of the industry group bodies and the employers’ perspectives are considered to carry more weight than that of the graduates. Findings varied widely with the graduates’ groups, depending on the university degree and the position of the graduate in the industry.

Daymon and Holloway (2011) note there is sometimes a reluctance for respondents to share their experiences. “The position of some may be jeopardized by uncovering their own practices and ideologies, or the information may be highly sensitive.” (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 213). The phrase ‘survey fatigue’ is used to describe a key factor in explaining low response rates with respondents in research data collection. This is a phenomenon that occurs over time where respondents eventually tend to get tired of responding to so many research studies (including questionnaires, interviews, surveys and others) targeted at them. This tends to deteriorate the response rate for future studies (Sappleton, 2013).

The validity of the voice of graduate groups was also raised by Dr Johanna Fawkes (2015) in her Peer Review Checklist for the University of the Sunshine Coast Low Risk Ethics Application Form (LREAF): “Limitations regarding the selection and validity of graduate groups (2 x 10) will need to be expressed, as these voices will be less representative than the other interviewees.” (Fawkes, 2015, p. 1). For this reason, the researcher has combined the findings from the two groups of graduates.

There is the opportunity for a further research study focusing on the graduates’ groups to be undertaken as a follow up to this study. A research design that collects both quantitative and qualitative data may be helpful, particularly if investigating other independent variables.
3.8. Conclusion

The research question and aims were the motivating factors in determining an appropriate methodology to support the theoretical framework for this research. The design of the study is based on social constructivism relevant to qualitative data collection featuring semi-structured in-depth interviews with various relevant stakeholders. An interpretivist philosophy informed how the study was approached and how the research participants’ responses were analysed and interpreted. The study employs a grounded theory style approach which is flexible in that it is developmental. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to develop each of the three phases of the study by utilising data progressively, allowing sections to evolve as data was collected. Data was analysed after each phase to allow comparison so emerging concepts from each section could inform the next. In parallel, reference and reflection on the literature added to inform development of the study.

The next Chapter, Chapter Four, presents the findings and an analysis of the findings that emerged from this phase of the study.
Chapter 4: Research data analysis and findings

4.1. Introduction

This research study critically examined the various roles played by universities and industry in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications (marcoms). The research question [Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?] sought to explore what skills and knowledge are best delivered by the university and what should the contribution and role of industry be according to key stakeholders. Within the data, several meta-themes arose highlighting key emergent concepts. These are discussed in the findings in turn for each group (Sections 4.2., 4.3., 4.4.) then summarised and discussed as a whole (Sections 4.5., 4.6.).

To clarify the terms used in the interviews, respondents were informed that a literature review was undertaken to identify the generic skills employers seek in graduates if they are to be considered work-ready at entry level. These generic skills are in addition to the discipline-specific competencies students attain from their university coursework. Graduate attributes that are work-related are described as employability skills. Work-readiness, or employability, is defined by Mason et al. (2009, p. 1) as “possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives soon after commencing employment”. A student possessing a combination of these attributes is often described as being ‘ready to hit the ground running’. This explanation and definition was read to each respondent.

Three groups were interviewed, marketing communications industry practitioners (employers), the key marketing communications industry bodies, and a group of graduates now employed in the industry.

4.2. Group one – the marketing communications industry

This section of the study interviewed senior executives from ten marcoms agencies.
Interviewees comprised five female and five male participants from a diverse group of agencies:

- Creative Agency (Group Account Director);
- Creative and Media Agency Group (Human Resources Director);
- Creative Agency (Talent Manager);
- Customer Engagement Agency (Managing Director);
- Consumer Connection Agency (Strategy Director);
- Media Agency (Strategy Director);
- Media Agency Group (Director of People);
- Media Agency Group (Chief HR & Talent Officer, Australia);
- Experiential Agency (Managing Director);
- Public Relations Agency (Chief Operating Officer).

Interviewees have been de-identified and referred to as A1 – A10.

4.2.1. Entry level graduate employability attributes

The first meta-theme arising from the data obtained relates to the attributes employers are seeking in entry level graduates that help prepare them for optimum employability.

Expectations of employers

The expectations of employers in relation to graduates’ work-readiness was consistent. On the whole, employers do not expect entry level graduates to be work-ready, as defined by Mason et al. (2009). However the interpretation of work-ready was very broad. Employers felt that universities equipped graduates with the requisite skills required to be ready to start work, but they stated there was still a long learning curve ahead. Employers recognised a transition period was needed between university graduation and graduates being work-ready, acknowledging industry’s responsibility to continued post-graduation education in the workplace.

The majority of agency employers interviewed did not believe universities could provide graduates with all the necessary skills to be work-ready at entry level. Agency employers considered graduates entered industry with a theoretical understanding of concepts of how to implement a client’s campaign rather than a comprehensive understanding of the process.
A7: How everything should link to each other in a fluid and dynamic manner and how every touch point should lead to another.

In general, new graduates did not understand how to maximise a client's owned, earned and shared assets along with the paid communications to actually develop a fully integrated idea. However, it was not an expectation that graduate level employees would enter the workplace with that sort of knowledge.

In marcoms agencies, there are various entry level positions where graduates can commence employment. Some aspire to work in creative agencies or media agencies, some in digital or customer relationship agencies, some have account management ambitions, and others lean towards strategic planning or any number of other specialist areas. All these career options require different nuances and skills.

Responses by employers highlighted the impracticality of a university course to endeavour to teach all the skills and responsibilities for the variety of roles for a graduate to enter a particular marcoms agency work-ready, whilst at the same time covering all other aspects of the degree outcomes. To some extent, the university degree outcomes must remain sufficiently broad to allow graduates to have a wide understanding of all facets of the industry, and in order to select a specific career path. There is even variance in methodology and procedures within the same types of marcoms agencies.

A4: And of course you know the media industry, media agencies do similar functions. If we’re being honest [our agency] would be different to [a second media agency] which would be different to [a third]. So obviously we can’t expect you to teach [our agency] way. Let alone the industry way.

A8: You know, every agency is different in terms of their processes and their abilities...

Employers supported the highly relevant education delivered by universities in marcoms courses, and positive recognition of the attributes graduates bring to industry. Employers had clear expectations of the preferred graduate qualifications. Industry is looking to universities to produce graduates with theoretical foundation,
scholarly degree qualifications and some discipline-specific skills. Employers expect universities to educate graduates to develop critical thinking, sound judgement and problem solving abilities and other soft skills such as the ability to work in teams, oral and written communication skills, the ability to interact with others and the ability to work under pressure. The university’s role was seen to give students the opportunity to learn, to develop an understanding of the marketing communications industry and to apply these skills on entering industry.

When graduates enter the industry they still need to be treated like ‘beginners’, because entry level employees simply do not yet have the full skill sets to operate as industry professionals.

A2: I think if universities can set them up to be smart, and to have a basic understanding of the work we’re doing [in an agency], and an ability to think laterally and overcome problems, then they’re ‘work-ready’, they’re ready to start training in a work environment. I don’t think universities can, nor should we [employers] expect them to, train people to work in an agency environment. That’s not what universities should or could do.

A8: They all have come through this idea of understanding what the problem is, understanding what they need to actually solve a problem. We find that is, across the board, quite a strong strength in all university students... things like learning the ins and outs of an agency. It’s not hard for them to learn.

Employers felt to be work-ready, graduates required real experience in paid employment, not just internships and work experience undertaken during their university courses. Without having had the hands-on experience in the workplace, in a paid, responsible position, with real interactions with clients and agency colleagues, employers felt graduates were not sufficiently experienced to make productive contributions to their organisations. The industry is not looking for this level of skill at entry level.

A3: I think work-ready is ambitious. I think [universities] provide a baseline that is complemented by actual experience. I think to say outright that the graduates are work-ready would be an overstatement.
It was felt that the statements made by the industry media that university graduates were not work-ready were broad and somewhat exaggerated. Specific instances that have been investigated and raised by publications such as AdNews (Blight, 2013; Corlette, 2010; Da Silva, 2010; Ma, 2012) were felt to be an inaccurate reflection of the employer attitudes industry-wide.

A7: *I think a lot of the statements that get thrown around in environments like AdNews and Mumbrella... are generally spread by people that just like to negatively comment anyway. A lot of it is based on a specific example...but it’s a person by person basis rather than a collective if you will.*

The employer group’s view was supportive rather than critical of graduates.

A2: *Let’s celebrate how smart they are. The students I get from universities all over our country are really, really brilliant, smart, talented, and really hardworking, people and I think that there is far too often too much whinging by the industry about the quality of graduates.*

The degree of work-readiness, in the opinion of the employers, did vary depending on the university and the course the graduate had undertaken. It was acknowledged that it would not be possible, due to the rapid changes in the industry, for universities to update curricula and to keep university undergraduates abreast of all the changes. Some universities were seen to be more proactive in staying abreast of industry trends and some courses had better learning outcomes than others. Some taught use of industry specific tools and industry programs. Graduates with knowledge of agency procedures, and skills in basic industry tools and programs, were seen to offer a significant benefit and better value to employers.

A7: *We have to train them less and therefore we get greater value from them more immediately so naturally we would appreciate any effort that is undertaken to up-skill them before they get to us.*

However, the agencies did express the opinion that they should play a role in developing many of these skills; be that through graduate programs, continuous professional development including in-house training, or through engagement with students whilst they were still attending university. There was a concern that this
may be considered a luxury in some agencies, with the pressure in agencies to prune overheads. The cost to educate on-the-job is significant; staff in junior roles are not seen as great contributors to agency income, and are more a cost to the company.

   A8: I do think that, a lot of the time, the reason why others in the industry are not doing this is because it is such an investment in time and money that it’s an impossibility.

Some agencies do have formal in-house training programs for entry level employees. Others encourage proactivity from junior employees to seek support for specific areas of further education. Industry does accept responsibility for, and is prepared to implement, some post graduate training in the workplace. The industry is moving so quickly, ongoing professional development is essential, especially for those just starting out. Employer opinion was that agencies should be prepared, on an ongoing basis, to invest in the education of the next generation of industry professionals.

   A7: I think there is more that we could be doing from an industry point of view to actually up-skill university students and get them across the line.

It was also raised that industry leaders should be prepared to impart some of their knowledge; agencies should look at it as ‘giving back’ to the industry.

   A6: It’s more of a handing down knowledge.

Proactive involvement by some universities and academics with the industry was very much applauded and encouraged by employers. Whilst changes to curricula could not be implemented quickly, employers felt that by having academics attend industry events and functions, and through engagement with industry and partnerships with employer groups, universities were able to keep abreast of a number of the most significant changes and challenges being experienced by the industry. The ability to pass this content on to students was seen as an important benefit for universities to contribute to students’ work-readiness. The more universities, and therefore their students, keep abreast with the industry, the easier the transition is into the workplace for graduates. Employers did highlight that not all universities engaged in these activities, possibly due to university policies or, in
some instances, due to the cost involved – attendance fees for some industry events can be quite significant.

A9: And I guess not all universities may be interested in doing that or have the resources to do that, and I guess that will impact on how well the students are abreast with our industry and what’s available.

A7: To be brutally honest I think it’s a university by university factor so some universities are far more developed in terms of the quality of student output that they actually deliver. There’s some that we would hire from and the level of understanding just isn’t there. The key thing that we actually look for, ultimately, is purely just this understanding of research aptitude and developing an idea, and the rigour behind it and all of that sort of stuff.

Alignment with industry is important and relevant discipline-specific skills need to be addressed in university course work to prepare graduates for the lifelong learning they will require in order to succeed in professional practice. Whilst universities might embed some soft skills in marcoms courses, industry does not expect them to play a vocational training role. This appears to reinforce the theory that many employability skills are best learnt in the workplace rather than the classroom (Cranmer, 2006).

The consensus among employers was that universities are, as far as possible, empowering marcoms graduates with the basic skills to work in the industry, but employers should both accept their role in the education process and also actively seek to expand it. Whilst it was acknowledged that there is cost involved in this, it was felt that the businesses involved should take on more of the industry-specific training to expedite graduates’ contribution to agency income. Whilst ROI may be long term, it was felt this would expand the pool of young talent available and bring graduates up to speed more quickly.

A8: I think that universities are trying the very best they can, but I think we need to take bigger risks ... to unearth much more natural talent ... And I don't think a university can necessarily do that ... the onus should lie on the industry, not necessarily on their education.

**Attitudes and expectations of graduates**
The attitude and expectations of graduates in relation to their work-readiness, from the employers’ perspective, is indicative of their work-readiness. Many graduates have unrealistic expectations of their entry level roles and the responsibilities they will be given. At entry level they are not ready to make a significant contribution to agency work or income; this degree of work-readiness takes time in the workplace to learn the required hands-on skills and to gain the experience to make relevant decisions.

As well as a good understanding and point of view about the industry at large, the attitude of the graduate, as well as personality traits, are considered relevant in terms of work-readiness and employability. This is not a 9.00 to 5.00 industry. Employers are seeking a sense of eagerness, passion and a drive to succeed: they are looking for graduates who appear really willing to learn and who have an inherent curiosity. This does vary from university to university.

A7: We find graduates from UTS [University of Technology Sydney], CSU [Charles Sturt University] and University of Canberra [UC] ... have a sense of humility whereas other students from other universities tend to come with a sense of over-confidence to try to cover their lack of understanding if you will.

Employers are looking for employees who will fit the culture of the agency, with the personal characteristics and interpersonal and linguistic skills to be able to engage properly, with both co-workers and clients. Confidence, but not over-confidence or arrogance, is important. Students who have an awareness of their strong skills sets, with a clear career path in mind, are usually more able to fit in and contribute to agency work in the early stages of their employment. Graduates who understand their place in the agency hierarchy and accept their junior position, and who come in with a modest attitude ready to continue their learning, are found to require less time in training. From a business standpoint, this is an advantage for employers and makes these young people more employable. Employers acknowledge that graduates are going to make mistakes.

A7: If you come with a high level of professionalism, yes, you’re going to make mistakes, every grad is going to make mistakes but grads from [UTS, CSU & UC] universities, we’ve found, learn from those mistakes very quickly, and never make them again.
Graduates who have an appreciation of the difference between university and the real world of work are more work-ready. Entry level employees need to understand that they are still on a learning curve; they need to listen and absorb. Their opinions are not yet based on real world experiences. The industry employers were reasonable in their expectations of what an entry level role is and what contributions should be made at that level. Recognising that learning the basics is the first step was emphasised by respondents. The ability to contribute is important, but awareness of workplace realities and expectations is an attribute in graduates’ work-readiness, over confidence is not.

Employers noted that realistic expectations must be set for entry level staff for them to perform adequately in the job although there was no clear view as to whether this is the role of the agencies or universities. This is an important issue and was raised by several respondents. There appeared to a lack of understanding by graduates of what their true levels of authority and autonomy will be on entering industry. Graduates’ own perceptions of their work-readiness are somewhat unrealistic and inflated. Many seem to expect that they will be able to move quickly through the levels of seniority in an agency. They believe their skills at entry level are developed to the point of being able to take on tasks considered by employers to be inappropriate for their level of competence.

Employers felt the reality of working with a real client’s brand and influencing its direction and how consumers engaged with it cannot be truly experienced until it is in a real world situation. The responsibility for decisions regarding clients’ work, which will influence marcoms outcomes, cannot be given to inexperienced junior executives. They are not ready or sufficiently experienced for this level of autonomy. They need time to learn within the agency environment and culture before they can have any significant input to agency output or income.

A1: There are some students who are coming out from some degrees in particular with no practical experience, and their expectations are that they’re going to walk in with this glorified position and that they’re, all of a sudden, experts in industries that they’re really not.

Whether this over-confidence was as a result of a false sense of authority and accomplishment created during their university programs, or through their limited industry experience in internships, was not clear. Employers acknowledged that a
lot of graduates had performed at a very responsible ‘professional’ level during their degree programs, often in simulated agency environments working on client campaigns, working in teams in industry-partnered projects or in other WIL scenarios. Equally, some were involved with the whole spectrum of client campaign development – from client brief through to production and implementation – during their internships. This appears to create some degree of confusion and unrealistic anticipation in graduates of their roles and responsibilities at entry level.

\[A10: \text{I just think that’s some of the reasons why some students may not make it through their probation period because they’re just not doing the job that they’ve been hired for, and try to be the managers of the company.}\]

Several agencies raised another point – that the graduate’s attitude and personality traits, demonstrated during the job interview, were stronger influencing factors for offers of employment than the degree qualification they held, or the university they attended. The interview process, and the graduates’ abilities to handle this appropriately, were considered to be indicative of their work-readiness.

\[A1: \text{If you have a look at the graduates who we have employed, to be really honest with you, I think, regardless, people would’ve employed them because of their personality and because of their drive, over what course they’ve gone and studied.}\]

On the other hand, there was some criticism of graduates’ preparedness for the important step from university to employment, in particular the job application and the interview, and their attitude to the process.

\[A5: \text{The lack of preparation for interviews is extraordinary ... they haven’t actually done the research.}\]

It was felt that graduates should be taught during their university degree how to handle the job interview, the importance of the research to be undertaken before the interview, how to present for an interview, the right questions to ask, and particularly the right attitude.

**Discipline and multi-discipline skills**
Employers expect university marcoms discipline programs to remain sufficiently broad in their outcomes for graduates to have an adequate understanding of the many aspects of this diverse and complex industry. The employer group did identify that the evolution of the marcoms industry has resulted in a growing need for graduates to have multi-discipline skills to be successful. Discipline-specific skills were seen to be more beneficial in specialised media roles, e.g. knowledge of Excel, data analysis and specific media buying programs. Clients are increasingly seeking through the line, integrated marketing communications plans.

_A1:_ Clients are looking for a one stop shop. Gone are the traditional days of when you walk into a meeting and there are eight different agencies in a room. Clients are ultimately wanting a one stop solution, and if you’ve got staff who can think across broader disciplines, then it’s a pretty powerful solution.

The traditional advertising, public relations, digital, data mining and analytics, creative and media agencies are becoming more blended in the services they offer their clients. Marketing communications still includes traditional TV and radio advertising but also use of other campaign activations including digital executions, engaging with consumers in experiential formats and PR campaigns generating earned media and social media.

Employers felt the blend of skills necessary to deliver the range of services clients now required cannot be taught at university within a marcoms degree. The scope of consumer touchpoints and connection strategies appears unlimited and the importance of data mining cannot be understated. Employers acknowledged that, whilst university courses do encompass a wide range of marcoms topics, they cannot be sufficiently specialised to focus on all the skills and knowledge required in the agencies of today. Hence, employers are looking for employees with a blend of skills who can think outside the box and solve problems. They want good communicators who are curious, creative thinkers and creative problem solvers. If universities are able to give graduates a holistic view of all their options, employers are happy to train them on-the-job for specific roles: there needs to be up-skilling in a lot of these areas post-graduation.
A10: Having marketing and advertising as a degree is a definite bonus, and we do look at them first, but we don’t turn away people who have potentially a psychology degree or an economics degree.

Students should be given a good understanding from their university degree of the basics of marketing communications and how it works, and they need to be across the dimensions of the industry they are entering. However agencies are looking for a different way of thinking and this could come from any number of university graduates.

A2. Very rarely are [employment] decisions made on whether they’ve even got a PR degree or not. It’s not as important is, what is PR anymore? What is advertising? What is journalism? What is any of this nonsense that we do? It's a blend of all of these traditional things that we used to do...That's why I like to have a little bit of a lot of different degrees and different kinds of skilled people in the business to deliver that.

Employers felt that industry is also consciously looking in the future to employ people with the skills to manage the continually changing marcoms landscape. Automation is taking on a lot of the more mundane processes, which for employers raises the question of what are the key skills marcoms executives will need to add value to their clients’ businesses in the future.

A4. It will always be about coming up with new thoughts and ideas, creative thoughts for our clients.

Agencies acknowledged there was the need for continuous personal development in all levels of staff; there was very little criticism of universities in teaching the most relevant generic skills.

**Generic skills**

The literature review identified the key generic skills relevant to graduates’ work-readiness. The question was raised with employers as to whether these generic skills were important in graduates’ work-readiness, and whether they should be learned during university programs or developed post-graduation on-the-job. The key skills (identified in Table 1) discussed were:

- the ability to work in a team;
• oral and written communication skills;
• interpersonal skills;
• the ability to interact with others;
• problem solving;
• leadership skills;
• self-management;
• ability to work under pressure;
• information and communication technology skills;
• literacy and numeracy.

As previously stated, employers were realistic in their expectations of graduates in terms of discipline-specific skills. However, they expect graduates to be competent in the key generic skills (most often referred to by the employer group as the ‘soft skills’) above. Employers feel these generic skills should be, and in some cases are, developed in students during their university programs, some skills to a greater extent than others. Each of these skills is examined below.

• Ability to work in a team

Employers considered this a prerequisite in the marcoms industry: it is a team industry, where working collaboratively was essential. The ability to present a united team front to a client is critical in maintaining good client/agency relationships and selling agency work to clients. Equally, working collaboratively across multiple agencies on a client account is vital. Graduates need to fit into teams from day one and the hands-on experience in team environments in universities is seen by employers as beneficial in developing this skill.

    A7: Clients are putting pressure on us today to be collaborative, not only within our own agencies but also in how we work with other agencies as well.

• Oral and written communication skills

These soft skills are sought after by employers and the industry looks to universities to develop them. Employers considered oral skills and the ability to communicate with a client, combined with basic good manners, marginally more important than written communication skills.
Oral communication skills are sometimes lacking in graduates but more so the written skills, which are not always a strong trait. Employers accepted that they needed to up-skill entry level employees in those skills, particularly in writing basic business documents including emails and contact reports (minutes of client meetings). Employers felt that teaching entry level employees to write more complex client documents, such as recommendations and presentations, is an on-the-job task.

A4: [Oral] communication skills [are important] because these guys, from very early on, will be talking to clients; they’ll certainly be talking to media owners. And some of them haven’t quite got that.

- Interpersonal skills

Employers linked interpersonal skills to oral communication skills and consider them essential in the industry, given that it is such a relationship-based industry. Employers expect graduates to learn these soft skills and to understand their importance by the time they graduate.

A2: I think it just comes down to being polite and it’s really not that complex. But I think it is important, and I would argue that interpersonal skills are more important than the written skills in some regards.

Employers consider one of the most important skills an agency executive needs to have is the ability to deal with clients in a proper manner and then relate client instructions to various people and teams within the agency. Interpersonal skills, sometimes referred to as people skills, are considered essential to manage workflow, deadlines and morale, in this high pressure industry.

A3: Interpersonal skills ... are critical either from a client engagement perspective or from an internal perspective.

- Ability to interact with others

Employers considered this a mandatory skill, closely aligned with that of interpersonal skills that should be developed before graduation. Interacting with
others is seen as essential in building a rapport with clients. Employers do not expect to teach this.

A4. [They need to know] how you would talk internally and how you would behave and conduct yourself, they’re all sort of things that the parents should be teaching really.

• Problem solving

The marcoms industry is in the business of solving problems for its clients. However, employers had realistic expectations as to what level of understanding graduates should have. They are not looking to graduates to solve real-time problems at entry level, rather for them to come from university with the right way of thinking about problem solving.

A7: Because to solve problems, you need to understand all of the available possible solutions at your disposal, and we know that they’re just not going to have that experience unless they’ve been in the industry for a couple of years... I wouldn’t phrase it as problem-solving, I’d phrase it as just a curious way of thinking.

The industry does not expect graduates to take the lead position within a team to solve clients’ brand problems. They need to learn the problem solving process within a working environment, and this is best done on-the-job.

• Leadership skills

The ability to become a leader is a desirable trait in graduates but leadership skills come with experience and employers considered expecting developed leadership skills too ambitious for entry level graduates. It was believed that premature leadership may lead to arrogance. Employers endorsed group work at university as a means for developing leadership traits.

Good interpersonal skills and the desire to lead are considered to be important: confidence, conviction, and achieving the best possible outcomes with projects are seen as desirable leadership-building characteristics. Responding positively to good
leadership and fitting in with a team, plus the willingness to take ownership of something, are considered integral to moving up into leadership roles.

A5: We want to breed leaders, but you know, I think there are a few natural leaders. To a large extent [graduates] almost have to suppress natural leadership in the initial stages because there’s so much to learn. Don’t worry about leading until you’ve got the chops to do it, and you’ve got the credibility to do it.

The reality of managing paid employees, and the responsibility for delivering work on a client brief to an industry standard, are seen by employers as somewhat different to the outcomes of a university assignment. If a graduate has some leadership traits and has demonstrated the potential to lead, agencies are happy to develop this person progressively into a leadership role.

A6: I think it would be something, more probably, that we would develop as time goes on.

- Self-management

Self-management is considered a desirable generic skill and seen as one of the biggest weaknesses in graduates. It is a trait most often found only in the more aspirational entry level employee. Industry employers considered this could be better addressed at university.

Even in junior roles, graduates need to be able to prioritise their work responsibilities. Employers do not want to teach this skill. They feel that the culture at university offers some flexibility regarding standards, attendance and deadlines, and could encourage lazy self-management. There is not the penalty or line of reporting as there is in industry. Employers found that graduates who had not adequately managed their university workload for three to four years struggled to get on top of their self-management in industry.

Agencies want employees who are well organised, with initiative, a can-do attitude and who are self-starters. They need to understand the need to impress when they are at the bottom of the rung and reporting upwards, and this includes being well-
organised and making the most of their time. These traits are considered synonymous with self-management.

A6: I would say self-management [is like] time management and the ability to prioritise, particularly in those more junior roles. They get so much work, and when you are the AE [Account Executive], there is no one else you can pass the work on to, I guess. Being able to prioritise on what can wait and what needs to be done today, and what can be done tomorrow, so I suppose time management.

Industry would prefer better self-management skills across the board at entry level, but is tolerant of these short comings.

- Ability to work under pressure

The marcoms industry is a deadline driven industry and working under pressure is an essential requirement, from day one. Junior employees often manage the back end of campaigns ‘going live’. Tasks can include final despatch of material for media placement, delivery of printed material and ensuring point-of-sale is in place on time: time sensitive tasks bring responsibility and pressure.

A7: They do the grunt work that is needed to actually have the campaigns go live. For example, if there’s an issue on a Friday afternoon and a campaign’s due to go live over the weekend. They’re the ones that are having to stay back to make sure that they fix it and are ultimately going to be raked over the coals if something goes wrong. So there’s a lot of pressure.

Multi-tasking is also something entry level employees have to be able to do, and this equates to pressure. Employers are willing to make some allowances but look to universities to not only teach these generic skills, but to explain their relevance in the industry.

A4: I’ve got 12 tasks coming at me what do I do, is that too many, how do I prioritise, when do I go and speak to my manager...and ask advice, how much am I allowed to ask advice, do I ask questions, do I not, and how
many are too many? ... So that’s just all the emotional intelligence and maturity, and that varies between them.

Employers recognise that the learning curve at entry level is very steep, which also creates a lot of pressure on new employees. Learning correct lines of communication, areas of responsibility and the use of new industry tools all put immense pressure on them. Employers feel that universities should make students aware of what to expect once they commenced employment and teach them how to manage this pressure.

- Information and communication technology skills

These skills are also expected and considered necessary in the industry. Graduates nowadays live in a technological world and it was perceived by employers that these skills are second nature; probably more so to entry level graduates than to their more senior employers, who have had to learn them in the evolving digital world.

A2: I think that kids today come in with everything they need and more. We use computers all day but they have been using computers every single day of their lives. Never have I heard us recently go, "Oh, my God. These guys are coming in and they don’t even know how to use..." you know what I mean.

The industry expects that graduates will achieve these basic competencies at school, and develop the use of more specific applications at university. Employers do not expect to teach these skills.

A5: A given these days.

A6: Yes, absolutely a given. Yeah, you’d hope so.

- Literacy and numeracy

Employers also expect these skills to be taught at school and developed at university. Employers expect basic literacy and numeracy skills as a minimum,
including their application in programs such as Microsoft Office skills, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook.

A4: You know we are numbers based, as most industry is now, we’re all about data more and more, people who are basically comfortable with just basic level of maths or a level you would expect from university graduates anyway.

These are considered very basic skills and not ones employers would consider teaching on-the-job.

- Other soft skills.

Two other soft skills were identified by employers as being particularly beneficial in graduates: presentation skills and creative thinking.

Presentation skills are important to the marcoms industry and employers considered they were usually very good in graduates. These skills appear to employers to be well taught by universities across most marcoms degrees. While an improved degree of proficiency comes with industry experience, this was not seen as a short coming of university education.

Employers do not expect universities to teach some presentation skills that can only be obtained through industry experience: among those cited are the ability to ‘think on your feet’, negotiation skills, and being able to formulate an argument and present it in a constructive way.

A6: Because there is so much stuff that is not taught to you or you can’t learn at university.

Presenting and defending an agency’s work is a delicate area and one that required particular skill. Entry level graduates are not expected to have this level of expertise. The nuances for each situation can only be learned with experience, through exposure to client situations and development of agency work. Employers consider this to be high level, on-the-spot training that cannot be replicated, with its real implications, during a university course.
A3: Understanding that there is always a compromise in discussions, particularly around creative or strategic recommendations. It's understanding how to manage those conversations within a range of compromise and come to a conclusion that is mutually beneficial.

Also cited by employers as important to the marcoms industry was creativity in terms of strategic thinking and developing a point of view. Graduates do develop this type of thinking during their university courses and this is a trait sought after by employers.

A4: You know creative strategic thinking, how do you get people to think outside of the box, to use an old fashioned phrase nowadays.

Graduates brought fresh thinking and untarnished passion to the industry and this is seen as a real benefit to employers. Whilst it does not necessarily enhance their work-readiness, this fresh thinking was considered a valuable attribute in graduates. They are not yet conditioned to delivering a predictable or obvious solution to a problem. This can often lead to breakthrough work and was commended by employers. This trait is seen by employers as being developed in students during their university degree and is not something employers would endeavour to teach as such.

4.2.2. The roles of universities

The second meta-theme arising from the data collected from the marcoms industry employer group relates to the roles of universities in developing optimum employability in entry level graduates.

University course/program design strengths

Universities were generally commended by the employer group for equipping graduates with the relevant generic skills and discipline knowledge, within a holistic view of marcoms industry roles and career path options. Graduates enter the industry ready to start work and to continue their education in a specialised area of the marcoms industry.

University course design, in particular work-integrated learning (WIL) strategies employed by some universities, were seen by employers to be extremely beneficial
in developing graduates’ work-readiness. Many Australian universities incorporate work-integrated and situated learning strategies into their communication degrees to better prepare graduates to be industry-ready. This reflects “increasing demands for the tertiary education sector to provide graduates with improved employability skills through an industry relevant curriculum” (Patrick et al., 2014, p. 10).

The benefits of industry partnered projects, such as live briefs from industry marcoms agencies, and the authentic experience of working on live briefs from real clients in university students’ marcoms agencies were recognised. The advantage of having the real, hands-on experience was evident in graduates who have had these opportunities; it put them ahead in terms of being work-ready. They had a better understanding of the important client perspective and other real world aspects of the marcoms industry. Graduates who had been involved in WIL, particularly in simulated marcoms agencies, were seen to be better prepared for industry, with a more professional attitude, as a result of their authentic experience.

_A6: I think the program that [one university] runs in terms of having its own agency within the university is fantastic._

Employers noted that the universities that have WIL and practice-based programs in place, where students are educated in the important soft skills, as well as in specific industry skills, produced far better quality graduates in terms of work-readiness. Where practical skills were addressed in the university courses, employers noted those graduates progressed through the agencies far more quickly. They required less training and were more likely to have the skills required to excel in the short term, rather than having to learn the proficiencies they needed to have to move to more senior positions in the agency.

_A3: I think, from our perspective, working in a sort of agency model in the last year has definitely represented stronger talent for us, for that reason. They understand more those environments._

Employers acknowledge they must be proactive in continuing graduate education and professional development in the industry. There needs to be a balance between how much a university can be expected to do in educating students on the specific role skills and how much of this education industry must contribute. Whilst employers would like university courses to reflect industry needs, they realise it is
not feasible for them to be modified to cater to the rapidly changing industry demands and different skills sets.

* A2: *I think if the university sets the student up to be enthusiastic about the industry ... to realise that leaving university is the first step of their education then they're doing well. So if we get students that are eager to learn more, ... that are enthusiastic, ... that have the right attitude around what they know and what they don't know, then I think the university's done a good job.*

Because the industry itself is challenged by the rapid rate at which it is evolving employers feel that graduates need to learn a lot of these skill sets on-the-job.

* A4: *And if I have trouble to keep up with the social and the programmatic and all the areas, so that is huge change. And I sit in a media agency... I think there’s only so much we can expect you guys to do.*

The importance of the university degree is acknowledged but there is a gap between university experiences, no matter how authentic some of these are, and the real work environment. The demands are different, the pressure is different and the consequences are different. The transition from tertiary education to full-time employment is not necessarily going to be an entirely smooth one and employers accepted that graduates, new to the industry, should be allowed some ‘short comings’. More important to employers was the right attitude and the realisation that university was just the beginning, the basic grounding.

* A6: *There's so much on-the-job learning, I think. Students don't necessarily get it until they are immersed in the agency and are working with clients.*

* A2: *Let's set our expectations about what's realistic around what students should come into the industry with, and how much of a change that is, and the work environment is. It's just something that's dramatically different from what they've probably experienced before, and let's give them a break on that.*
Employers feel graduates come to industry with a fresh, open mind. Creativity, passion, the desire to learn and commitment are some of the desirable traits employers seek in graduates.

A6: *I think if they’ve got the university background...the nice thing about getting grads is that they are really fresh. They’ve got no prior knowledge or learning. You have that ability to kind of train them up as you wish.*

Employers see the advantage of on-the-job training is that it is within the organisation’s unique method of operation and its own distinctive culture. Culture and fit in an organisation are important to the marcoms industry.

**Practitioner input to university courses**

University lecturers who have had industry experience are considered by employers to be invaluable as they are able to deliver relevant and up-to-date information on practical aspects of the marcoms industry to students. Whilst the theory side of marketing communications was considered important, the practical side of how to handle clients, how an agency works, and agency culture is seen to be best taught by people who have gained these insights through hands-on experience. These skills add to graduates’ work-readiness and lessen the training required on-the-job in these fundamentals.

A4: *I would probably like to make sure that across the board there are more [people with recent hands-on industry experience]. I’d like to know that there is someone at a university who’s been in the industry within the last five years.*

Whether universities and employers could develop a closer relationship to maintain currency and relevance of subject material was raised by employers. It was suggested that academics could attend agency training sessions to help them keep subject content up-to-date.

The willingness of the employer group to become involved with universities in terms of sharing knowledge was overwhelming. When the question of direct industry input by way of guest lectures was raised with respondents, all agreed this was of enormous benefit to students in preparing them to be work-ready and the majority of respondents were willing to participate if invited. Several commented that
universities were not proactive in reaching out to employers to engage with students.

A1: I haven’t got universities banging on my door saying, "Can you come and share your experience with our students?"

The benefit of authentic input from practitioners – the passing on of practical knowledge and experience – was considered important to reinforce the theory taught in universities. Communicating evolving industry trends ‘in the moment’ rather than after the event is seen as allowing graduates to enter industry with current knowledge.

A3: And it's a Catch-22 because clearly ... to obtain that currency you have got to have people who are active within the industry in that moment ... the challenge for the university is to bring in that talent that is working in the moment to share not only the here and now but the future as well.

Respondents felt that the more exposure students could have directly to industry, by way of guest lectures, industry engagement, internships and other practice-based learning, the more work-ready they would be on graduating. Respondents also felt that students’ education in the practical aspects of graduate skills should take place as much as possible during their time at university, as opposed to when they were employed in the industry, in order to optimise graduates’ work-readiness.

4.2.3. The roles of practice

The third meta-theme arising from the data collected relates to the roles of practice in developing optimum employability in entry level graduates, as seen by the marcoms industry employer group.

Benefit of practical experience/internships

The benefit of practical, hands-on work experience in the industry, particularly through internships, to improve graduates’ work-readiness, was endorsed unanimously by the employer group. Employers were aware of the importance of the calibre of the internship experience to develop students’ work-readiness. Many have very structured internship programs with assessable outcomes for students.
Employers see internships as an educational phase for students and that providing them is an essential role of the industry. They are happy to teach students skills specific to their agencies and, significantly, they see interns as potential future employees. Respondents felt this ‘two-way street’ has encouraged a more professional approach to intern programs by most employers.

A7: We do it as well as a carrot to the smart people of tomorrow, you know, giving them something which gives them a genuine advantage going back into uni and also when they’re looking for a job ultimately. Therefore they’re going to see us more favourably and they’re probably going to choose us over our competitors, and we’re going to have better employees, and we’re going to be better set up for the future.

Employers feel the better the intern experience – the better the knowledge gained by the student – the better the graduate and the employee of tomorrow will be. Employers are more than willing to be part of the education process if some early training can be achieved during internship and then applied to university theory before graduation. They feel this would give students valuable insights into employers’ real world expectations, better familiarity with agency procedures and systems and could provide employers with better qualified, more work-ready graduates who would require less on-the-job training from day one. Such was the benefit of this hands-on experience that some employers felt it should be mandatory.

A6: The way that our internship program is run, they are kind of on a rotational schedule where they’re spending time with each of our different departments, so they get the full 360 of how the agency works and how all the different moving parts come together. It is formal in the sense that they will get pretty much an overview of everything.

Employers are prepared to invest in their internship programs because many see internships as a way of identifying new, fresh, young talent. Respondents find their programs are competitively sought by students. There appears to an awareness by students of the most beneficial programs as well as those with the greatest job prospects. Internship applications are evaluated by host agencies, and students usually go through an interview process to acquire an internship. Employers use this process to hand pick the best potential talent for their agency. They then try to
give the undergraduates both an educational experience and a taste of the culture of the agency. Employers feel this creates a positive response from interns if the agencies offer jobs to them after graduation.

A10: *We put a lot of investment into [our internship program] because we want to attract the best students.*

A1: *Our philosophy is always to get the unfair share of the country’s greatest talent.*

Respondents felt improvements could be made across the industry to the internship experience and the educational benefits it provides for students. A better defined, more formal and even a more unified approach to internships structure could be considered. Several agencies have successfully sought ways to achieve this but outcomes vary widely. Employers acknowledged that current legislature governing internship requirements has raised the standards for internship programs; gone were the days of the ‘free labour’ mentality. This had resulted in a far more professional approach by employers to internship structure and management. The introduction of assessable outcomes of the internship experience by both students and their host agencies is improving students’ learnings. Respondents stated that industry recognises the long-term benefit of formal internship training versus unstructured programs, where students are simply required to do menial tasks at their supervisor’s whim.

A1: *I genuinely believe that [by] applying ... theory in practice at the same time, I think is a great way to really make yourself a powerful person in the marketplace.*

Employers also felt that an internship gives students the opportunity to identify a specific career path.

A10: *You can identify through those programs where your skill set lies and what you want your five year goal to be. What do you want to get into?*

The importance of graduates entering the industry with a clear career path and knowing their skill sets strengths was highlighted by respondents. They feel this awareness strengthens graduates’ appeal to potential employers and lessens the
on-the-job training. Importantly, graduates with internship experience are seen by employers as entering the workforce with more realistic expectations in respect of their entry-level roles, their abilities and their worth than those who have not had this experience.

Employers believe the key benefits of internships for students are gaining an understanding of in workplace functions and the effects of having real responsibilities with accountable outcomes, as opposed to theory-based learning and workplace simulations at university. They feel graduates’ work-readiness is enhanced by gaining knowledge about the demands and expectations of working in real life situations, recognising and respecting other roles and individuals’ capabilities in real teams, and gaining an understanding of where they fit in the system.

Employers consider the learning gained by students from an internship is invaluable in developing work-ready skills because it takes place in an authentic industry environment but is virtually free of any responsibility.

A8: *An internship in its very nature is an opportunity to experience an industry where you're actually not responsible for any sort of output.*

The only obligation on the student is to meet performance objectives set at the beginning of the experience: there are no consequential decisions or tasks.

**Continuous professional development/graduate programs**

Graduate programs, which are run by some agency groups and industry bodies, were considered by employers to be extremely valuable in furthering the education of entry level employees. As already stated, it was acknowledged that there is a gap between university degrees and graduates being totally hands-on and industry ready. Whilst the gap is not considered by employers to be huge, those who run these programs believe it is worth the investment to develop and mould their long term employees. In the main, graduate programs take a selected number of applicants and place them in mentored positions in a formal training program, usually for a period of twelve months.

Employers see these programs as enabling the industry to further the education gained by graduates from their university degrees within the specific and managed
framework of an employer organisation. They give newly-graduated employees up to a further year of education with a very practical focus in a real-world work environment: something which cannot be obtained at university. The structure of some of these programs also further develops some of the soft skills graduates already have like time management, presenting with confidence and performance management.

Where graduate programs are in place, the benefit to both employees and employers was unquestioned by employer respondents in this study. The cost to run the programs is significant, and return on investment (ROI) is long term, but a key value to the agencies is seen in their ability to instil their own culture in what they see as their employees of the future.

A8: They’re an overhead at this stage, they’re not actually a paid for resource on the business … So for us, we see if we can train them into our way … our culture is very important to us.

Employers consider that workplace-based graduate programs offer both convenors and graduates a significant advantage in developing employability skills, but they also acknowledge that the number of placements offered in these programs is limited. Competition by graduates for placement is intense: in 2015 one major agency group had 200 applicants for the eight positions available in its Sydney-office program (A1).

Some of the larger agencies have less formal in-house training programs that include a probation period for entry level employees. During the probation time, trainees are up-skilled in the specific areas required to progress through the agency to levels of greater responsibility. Employer respondents considered that these training programs were often looked upon as unofficial graduate programs. Whilst they felt that the ideal is for more agencies to set up graduate programs, or training programs, to improve graduate employability skills, cost is seen as a prohibiting factor for smaller agencies, with many of them not having the financial capacity to develop such programs.

A9: I can understand small independent agencies are not necessarily going to have the resources to be able to put something like that together but a
big multinational, big company like us, we should be leading the way with having something like that and if people follow suit, well, that’s great.

The role of industry bodies

In the main, employers felt the five key industry bodies, the Media Federation of Australia (MFA), the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA), the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), The Communications Council and the International Advertising Association (IAA) do have a role to play in developing employability attributes in graduates, to a greater or lesser extent.

The MFA is seen by employers to be more proactive in its involvement in marcoms education at university level than the other industry bodies.

The MFA conducts an annual face-to-face seminar for marcoms academics from all MFA-registered universities. This involves presentations by media industry executives from both media vendor organisations and MFA member agencies. This seminar was seen by the employer group as contributing to content and currency of universities’ coursework. The MFA also runs a formal education program for entry level employees in media agencies which exposes them to industry speakers on topics such as strategy, investment and client services. It also arranges internship placements for undergraduates and, through its affiliations with universities, arranges guest lecturers from media agencies to participate in undergraduate programs. Employees see this involvement as extremely beneficial in developing work-readiness in undergraduates and improving the industry skills of entry level graduates.

The Communications Council conducts a Graduate Program for which member agencies pay for their employees’ participation. This program incorporates on-the-job training and professional development. It is available to university and TAFE graduates and is run in conjunction with the internationally recognised United Kingdom Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). Employer respondents saw the benefits of this program as very good but noted that enrolment was limited to graduates whose agencies were prepared to pay the course fees. Employer respondents in this study did not show strong awareness or a clear understanding of what The Communications Council currently offers in the way of training programs.
A8: The Comms Council isn’t, kind of, offering the richness that it once was.

The cost of implementing educational programs was raised by employer respondents as a barrier to industry bodies expanding them and making them more relevant and beneficial. However they did not feel that industry bodies other than the MFA were sufficiently proactive in the area of post-graduate education and development.

A2: I think the PRIA is woefully lacking and behind the times.

It was felt by employers that industry bodies could be doing more to optimise graduate employability. The suggestion was made for the key industry bodies to mount a joint program to further students’ education. This could reflect the big picture changes in the marcoms industry. The consumer now experiences the fullness of a brand across all channels seamlessly and it was felt this type of integration could be taught through a unified program delivered by the industry bodies. Universities could also set up a one or two week formal workshop with all the relevant industry bodies in their undergraduates’ final year of study. Delivered by a forum of industry professionals, such a workshop could give undergraduates top line exposure to the tools and systems used in the industry, along with realistic views of what to expect when first employed in the industry and understanding of what the industry will expect of them.

A7: So that when they come in they don’t just get so overwhelmed...one of the toughest things that we have to deal with from a graduate level position is churn because once you hit the industry the learning curve is so steep for the first year and a half because you’re leaning every single facet of the business... So I think anything that the industry bodies can do to mitigate that.

The data collected in this study from the industry bodies is analysed in the following section.

4.3. Group two – professional marcoms industry bodies

The second part of the research study sought the opinions of the five key marketing communications professional industry bodies in Australia. These are:
• Media Federation of Australia (MFA)
• The Communications Council
• Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA)
• International Advertising Association (IAA)
• Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA).

One organisation declined the interview request but the researcher believes the four that did respond sufficiently represent the marcoms industry.

The study investigated opinions of these professional bodies regarding requisite employability attributes in graduates and what contribution, if any, they felt their member organisations or the professional bodies themselves contributed or might contribute to the education process. This part of the study incorporated concepts which emerged from interviews with the first group (industry employers). Interviewees have been de-identified and referred to as IGB1 – IGB4.

4.3.1. Entry level graduate employability attributes

The first meta-theme arising from the data from marcoms industry bodies relates to the attributes they consider will help to prepare entry level graduates for optimum employability.

Expectations of industry group bodies

The opinion of the employer group was reflected by the industry bodies group in that they feel graduates understand the industry and the principles of marketing communications when they enter the industry but they are not work-ready as such. Academic university study, both theoretical and practical, does prepare graduates to be ready to enter the workforce, giving them a basic understanding of the industry structure and practices, but it does not make them sufficiently skilled or experienced to make productive contributions to employers’ businesses soon after commencing employment (Mason et al., 2009).

IGB2: I think to a certain degree [universities prepare graduates to be work-ready] absolutely in terms of the academic side... [But] it’s six to nine months before they’re productive.
Marcoms industry bodies perceive a gap between university graduation and preparing someone for a lifetime vocation in marketing communications. Industry body respondents feel that universities can give students sufficient discipline knowledge and theory to prepare them to enter industry as graduates and consider that, on the whole, universities are aligning well with some of the applied subjects in order to teach students relevant industry skills. They see a focus in university courses on teaching strategic skills along with the immediate hands-on skills graduates will employ when they first commence work, but they do not feel that graduates leave university with sufficiently developed hands-on skills to take on a real life role in an agency.

*IGB1: And the balance between those two sides varies ... between the universities and programs. But [graduates] are not very thoroughly versed in actually doing the work.*

*IGB2: So I think universities do quite a good job of getting them ready.*

Industry body respondents felt on-the-job training was the duty of the employer, not the university or an industry body. It was considered impractical for the industry to expect universities to teach specific job skills, such as proprietary media programs or individual agency systems and procedures. The view was expressed that there were some unrealistic expectations from employers on learning outcomes from university courses. The speed with which the industry was changing could not be reflected in the content in university programs.

*IGB3: [Universities] cannot be possibly expected to have every answer for every independent way of employer process, basically. So there is no such thing as teaching students a generic ‘job bag’.*

Industry body respondents noted that in the real world employees are accountable for their actions, decisions and recommendations. They are paid to manage and respond to unpredictable situations, unlike students whose experience is in controlled university scenarios and case studies. Recent graduates were perceived as not having the understanding to respond to external influences and pressures. From a practical perspective, agencies’ clients would not want to be given professional advice or solutions from someone who had just entered the industry.
Clients seek expert advice and this comes only with real industry experience and dealing with a variety of authentic client challenges.

*IGB4: Because you have to get the experience and experience means that you have to get it on-the-job. No, you can’t [leave university and represent the agency to a client]. And nobody would put anyone forward, our clients would never forgive us.*

The marcoms industry bodies also raised the difficulty of maintaining current content within university courses. They acknowledged that the very fluid nature of the industry and the speed with which it is changing make it extremely difficult for universities to stay ahead of industry trends.

*IGB2: That’s just not possible because, as we know, to update any changes of a course, or content of a course, it’s got to go through quite a rigorous process through an academic board to be approved. And by the time that’s approved, you know, we’ve already moved on.*

The industry bodies felt some employers’ expectations of graduates’ work-readiness are unrealistic and criticism from industry commentators such as AdNews (Blight, 2013; Corlette, 2010; Da Silva, 2010; Ma, 2012) is unfair. They did not believe graduates could be work-ready to the point that they could make productive contributions to an employer’s business soon after commencing work (Mason et al., 2009).

*IGB4: I think the benefit we get from you guys is that they’re getting a really great understanding of what happens in our industry and the sorts of work that we do. But they never get, they’d never do, enough of it to know how to just start in the industry and get going.*

There was also a view that industry had lost sight of what a university should deliver. Respondents felt that the lines between what a university is and what a vocational institute, such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) College, is now blurred. Respondents felt that whereas TAFE provides more practical training to students in various occupations, universities are actually bound by academic theory and standards that needed to be applied in their teaching.
Attitudes and expectations of graduates

This was not a theme arising out of the interviews with industry bodies for the obvious reasons that direct dealings with graduating students was not as significant a role for them as it was for the employer group. However, respondents made a number of comments about industry attitudes to and expectations of graduates that substantiated the opinions of the employer group. Students with a clear career path in mind, who were proactive and who took initiatives, were considered more employable and more likely to be employed and those who sought hands-on experience to supplement their university learning were more work-ready on graduating than those who did not.

University courses that included WIL, engagement with industry-partnered projects and working on live client briefs, did contribute to graduates’ work-readiness. The hands-on experience benefitted learning outcomes. Concern was raised, however, that this could create unrealistic expectations of their skills, their roles and their responsibilities in their first job.

IGB3: It also gives them a false expectation of how good they are when they’re actually about to get their first job. It still comes down to the fact they’re going to be doing tear sheets and data entry and being account coordinators when they start.

This concern was also raised by the employer group. Employer group respondents felt graduates who understood their role and their place in the agency hierarchy, and those with an attitude to continue their learning, were able to make a meaningful contribution to agency operations sooner than those with inflated or unrealistic expectations of their entry level positions.

Discipline and multi-discipline skills

Industry body respondents reiterated the response of employer group respondents by stating that they feel universities adequately educated graduates in specific discipline skills within their courses. Both groups identified an increasing need for multi-discipline skills in graduate roles in various agencies, with digital skills being seen as increasingly important but as an integrated element.

IGB2: So the whole concept, for example, of digital agencies is virtually non-existent anymore because there isn’t an agency that doesn’t have digital
skills. And any digital agency has got to have broader skills than digital to survive.

The marcoms industry employs graduates with degrees in many disciplines, including journalism, marketing, internet technology and commerce. Graduates are not necessarily seen to need specific marcoms training, rather, the industry is seeking a broad range of qualifications and thinking in all employees.

IGB2: We find certainly in this particular industry, diversification is a very attractive trait to have so it's not just looking for people who may have studied marketing or communications. They also look far afield for other degrees as well because they can bring different things to the table. Do you have anything to add?

Industry bodies see an overlapping and melding of traditional advertising, marketing, PR, IT and digital coding skills, which are now requisite skills to enable graduates to be work-ready. Current job opportunities do not necessarily fit within the traditional demarcation lines.

IGB1: So there's a tendency outside of what we might like, a tendency in universities to reflect the realities of employment opportunities and to offer increasingly generic communications degrees in which an individual student can pick a PR major or a marketing major or advertising or journalism major and maybe do a couple of those majors along the way.

Respondents felt that the marcoms degrees being offered were becoming more blended, as was the industry, particularly in the advertising and PR areas. The need to manage and integrate clients’ marketing communications into single solutions is resulting in the need for graduates to have multi-disciplinary skills to ensure their work-readiness. There is still the requirement for the core vertical disciplines of expertise, but the clearly defined silos of a few years ago are diminishing in the continual evolution of the marcoms industry.

IGB2: I think people are going to continue to struggle if they just offer one vertical service, I think that's going to be hard. What I think has happened is that clients are finding it harder and harder to manage up to 10 separate
silied organisations. They spend all their time trying to integrate them and get them to work together rather than concentrate on the product.

Industry group respondents felt that graduates with a knowledge of more than one discipline would be more employable and work-ready than those who are highly specialised.

**Generic skills**

The literature review identified the key generic skills (identified in Table 1) which might be relevant to graduates’ work-readiness. As with the employers group, the question was raised with the industry bodies as to the importance of these generic skills in graduates’ work-readiness, and whether they should be learned during university programs or developed post-graduation on-the-job.

There was general agreement that generic skills were all the essential skills necessary to enter the industry as work-ready. The industry bodies felt these generic skills were developed in students during their university programs, some to a greater extent than others. As with the employer group, the industry body respondents considered leadership skills could not be developed at university.

The industry bodies had the view that most generic (soft) skills could be learnt at university, or could be addressed at university, but practical, hands-on experience is needed in the industry before they can be effectively developed. Graduates do not enter industry with experience in interacting with clients in the real world.

> **IGB1:** They live on their phones, but they don’t have any experience with running a business conversation over a phone; they’re experienced in social media, but not in tailoring that to a business strategy.

Respondents felt that the soft skills addressed at university are inevitably theoretical and part of a program or a group learning assignment.

Appropriate professionalism in speaking with clients and how to dress appropriately were identified by industry group respondents as often lacking in graduates.

> **IGB4:** Just knowing how to be professional? Knowing when to say ‘hi’ and when to say ‘hey’, knowing how to write a business letter. I mean we’re a
very casual industry from the way some people dress and stuff, and we’re pretty easy about a lot of that stuff, but sometimes there’s a lack of professionalism.

These skills are important in dealing with clients but are not seen by industry bodies as being taught at university; some of these skills must, by necessity, be learned on-the-job.

4.3.2. The roles of universities

The second meta-theme arising from the data collected from the professional marcoms industry bodies group relates to the roles of universities in developing optimum employability in entry level graduates.

University course/program design strengths

A further topic arising from the study with industry bodies related to university course design, and in particular to work-integrated learning (WIL) activities incorporated into some university degrees. It was noted by the employer group that there were definite benefits from these strategies in developing graduate work-readiness. The industry bodies group considered WIL a necessary part of accredited marcoms degrees. The benefit of WIL to student engagement with real client briefs through university ‘in-house consultancies’ or student marcoms agencies was recognised. Hands-on experience contributed significantly to learning outcomes and to students’ work-readiness.

*IGB1: I’m not saying that always satisfies employers. As you know, there's quite a chasm between the world of academia and research and the world of practice, they never seem to meet.*

Current university courses were seen as, by necessity, more theoretical than practical, and the importance of university courses delivering discipline knowledge was not questioned. One respondent felt that it might be detrimental to the learning outcomes from university to try to incorporate even more teaching of some of the industry specific hands-on skills.

*IGB1: The most successful programs seem to be those that retain a strong theoretical base but put it into action.*
Respondents considered that this type of practical training would be better introduced post-graduation, with entry level employees. Current WIL strategies incorporated in university courses, in particular the live client briefs, were noted as a very beneficial element to give students a taste of the real world, and to set them up for further on-the-job learning.

*IGB1. The students' ideas are quite often taken up by those organisations, and they report very favourably on having had, you know, real world contact with an organisation, understanding their business, and feel very pleased with being able to contribute to it.*

Another respondent endorsed the inclusion of more WIL strategies to improve the soft skills.

*IGB2: So the courses being more academic based don’t necessarily develop refined people to people skills, leadership skills, decision making skills, live brief skills, collaboration skills, working in teams, risk taking and mistake taking, all of that type of stuff, and they’re the things that happen in the real world, obviously. I think the more [WIL strategies] that you can do to integrate them into the workplace is better.*

Respondents felt that experiencing a real world, current client brief, rather than an historic case study, allowed students to experience real time shifts in markets and live social media impacts, so they actually learn in a real time situation. It was felt this better developed their work-readiness. Some universities were considered to have a good balance of theory and practice, incorporating WIL in their course, but this varied greatly.

*IGB3: I think some universities in Australia do it extremely well. I think some are still locked into epics by Aristotle and the applicability of that in the workplace in the 21st century. So I think it’s really a mixed bag, and that certainly is the view that we get from many of the employers that we deal with in Australia and internationally as well.*

**Practitioner input to university courses**
The importance of input by industry practitioners to marcoms courses, which was noted by the employer group, was also endorsed by the industry bodies group. This group considered academics with industry experience invaluable as they had a better understanding of the marcoms industry and a more realistic view about requisite employee skills. Practitioner input to university courses was considered equally important.

*IGB3:* I think it’s very important [that academics have practical experience]. It’s crucial. Particularly in an industry like ours. Advertising has not traditionally been an industry that comes with a PhD attached to it.

Lecturers with a purely academic background were not considered to be sufficiently conversant with industry needs. A practitioner perspective on subject development and delivery of course content was felt to improve graduates’ work-readiness.

*IGB3:* [Academics with practitioner background] have a much better grip on what the market wants and needs and how to actually prepare students not just to be great employees, but also to be keen thinkers too.

Respondents believe there is benefit in having guest lectures, from both industry leaders and relatively recent graduates, to give feedback about their real-world experiences. Delivering industry knowledge first-hand to current students is considered important to help develop work-ready graduates. It was felt by industry group respondents that industry information given strictly from a practitioner point-of-view assists students to gain a real perspective of the marcoms industry.

*IGB1:* And I’ve seen feedback that a guest lecturer has made all the difference to somebody’s studies because they have never really perceived the work, public relations, as so vibrant until they saw somebody step into the room and talk from strictly a practice point of view.

Respondents reported that graduates reinforced this opinion. Their feedback indicated that, as students, they gained a better understanding of the day to day workings in an agency from industry speakers, who painted real pictures of their professional experience, and who were extremely motivational and inspirational. There appeared to be a willingness with the industry bodies group, as there was with the employer group, to support this face-to-face interaction within universities;
they saw benefit on both sides. The benefit to the industry was the opportunity to
gauge the calibre of future entry level employees and to establish a connection with
them.

*IGB4: I often hear people who have started in our industry say "I was at a
guest lecture when somebody from an agency spoke and it gave me a really
good understanding about what we did in the industry and it inspired me to
want to work in the industry".*

The industry bodies group also highlighted the benefits to students of visits to
industry where they could experience the day-to-day realities authentically
presented by practitioners.

### 4.3.3. The roles of practice

The third meta-theme arising from the data collected relates to the roles of practice
in developing optimum employability in entry level graduates, as seen by the
industry bodies group.

**Benefit of practical experience/internships**

The industry bodies identified the benefit of practical experience in the industry,
particularly through internships, to improve graduates’ work-readiness. This was
thoroughly endorsed and encouraged by respondents, as it was with the employer
group. Internships offer students the ability to both apply their theoretical
knowledge in practice and to learn practical skills not addressed in university
coursework. They are able to better contextualise their learning in hands-on
situations, which improves their work-readiness. There was the view among
respondents that this would be improved even more if internships were longer and
if more internship opportunities were available: although every year more agencies
are taking more interns.

Internships were seen by industry group respondents as increasingly becoming an
integral part of many universities’ marcoms courses.

*IGB3. In many parts of the world, the US for example, if you haven’t had an
internship in a particular industry, there’s no hope for you.*
The importance of properly structured internships, where students went into an organisation and were actively involved in the work in order to get the maximum benefit, was raised. It was felt agencies, on the whole, are involving interns in day-to-day work, meetings and presentations, to gain an authentic experience.

IGB1: To have an intern coming in and just greeting people and making the coffee is obviously unacceptable.

Internships are also seen by industry group respondents as an opportunity for students to see if they enjoy working in a particular specialist area of the marcoms industry, and to help them to clarify their career paths. The benefit to the employers was also noted. Where internships are well structured and students were able to demonstrate their skills and achieve some on-the-job training, employment offers often follow. This point was also raised by the employer group who saw the internship as an opportunity to identify new talent before graduation.

IGB4: And it’s just a great way for them to see whether they like our industry and to see whether we think we like them. And that they’ve got the right sort of attitude to work in our industry. I think the agencies are all becoming a lot better at dealing with the interns because they all know that we’ve got to give the students a really great experience. We can’t just expect them to come in and not get a good understanding of the industry. We can’t expect them just to be doing so grunt work.

The industry bodies do see the intern programs – the practical involvement and application of skills in the real work environment – as an important part of the education process and one which contributes significantly to developing work-readiness and improving employability in graduates.

IGB1: I’ve come across people on the other end of the scale who have done all the study and they can’t find employment because, I don’t know, they’re perfectly qualified, but they maybe don’t have sufficient practical experience. I think having more runs on the board, there would be an advantage to employers and to the graduates.
Industry body group respondents considered that without any work experience graduates’ learning was somewhat theoretical, more so from some university courses than others. This opinion was reinforced by the employer group.

**Continuous professional development/graduate programs**

The industry bodies group endorsed the role and benefit of graduate programs, particularly those run by employers, in developing entry level graduates’ skills. There are a limited number of graduate programs run by the marcoms industry bodies themselves, but there was no real consensus amongst respondents on the benefit of these. Where industry practitioners were involved, clear benefits were identified.

*IGB2: They want to actually give back, go to universities, talk to the new students coming through; the younger generation. So I think it breeds good values in the industry and makes it more professional on both sides.*

Structured graduate programs organised by agencies were seen to be extremely beneficial in developing work place skills post-graduation. This was particularly so where programs implemented the rotation of graduates through different roles in various specialty marcoms agencies within the parent group – a point also highlighted by the employer group. There was no suggestion that outcomes from graduate programs could be addressed in university courses. This additional hands-on phase of the education process was seen to be an essential industry role.

*IGB3: The graduate trainee programs that are done by the established agencies, I think they’re very, very good and they really do look for the future leaders which is brilliant. And that’s exactly what they should be doing, looking for their future leaders and developing them.*

The subject of continuous professional development (CPD) was raised. It was felt this needed to be considered when discussing ongoing development of graduates’ work-readiness and employability; employers all have a responsibility to continue to educate and up-skill. The industry body group found that this was lacking...

*IGB2: As an industry we tend not to be very good at it.*

A lot of work had been done by one industry group to demonstrate the commercial benefits of CPD, and whilst it is acknowledged generally by agencies as being
beneficial, there appeared to be an apathy in the industry in moving forward with any formal schemes. CPD is an ongoing challenge in the industry due to its rapid evolution. Any change in attitude to the lack of ongoing training is seen to be long term. Inevitably a few of the more progressive organisations will lead change in this area. Whilst this is not directly related to graduate work-readiness, it does reflect the attitude of some parts of the industry to ongoing staff development. Some employers were criticised for their lack of involvement in some formal education programs and giving back to the industry.

*IGB3: I think industry has to take some responsibility for teaching their own upcoming young talent. Some do it very well, and some just don’t bother and expect somebody else to do it for them.*

The suggestion was made that employees could be encouraged to address CPD through post-graduate degrees. This was something universities might encourage through the lifelong learning philosophy embedded in the outcome of undergraduate degrees. The importance of ‘giving back’ to the industry (sitting on committees or boards, voluntary educational roles such as guest lectures in post-graduate studies) to further employees’ CPD was also raised.

**The roles of industry bodies**

The benefit of formal industry input by industry group bodies into the education process in university courses was endorsed, but to varying degrees. The industry bodies’ main contribution to developing work-readiness was with programs for early career graduates rather than students during their university courses.

Positive reference was made to the Media Federation of Australia’s (MFA’s) proactivity in providing industry input to universities. At its annual event for tertiary educators, it arranged for key media industry personnel to present an overview of the current media scene, trends and changes, with a view to keeping lecturers up-to-date and content in university courses current. It was generally acknowledged that this type of input was important to develop relevant, current subject content and to contribute to graduates’ learning outcomes. This program was equally supported by employers who saw it as fulfilling a very definite need. The MFA acknowledged the support it receives from its member organisations to provide this material. Agencies were more than willing to contribute as they recognised the importance of the MFA’s role in developing industry-ready graduates.
IGB3: What we do want to see is that what you’re teaching them is right for what we need now.

IGB4: We’ve got the most collaborative industry. Everybody wants to help out...every person in our industry thinks it’s really important that we keep you guys up to date, because we know that it’s really hard for you to be kept up to date when it’s moving so fast.

The MFA also runs a program for entry level graduates employed by member agencies, the NGen program, which offers workshops in many industry-relevant soft skills and well as training in specific media programs/skills. These workshops are paid for by agencies’ memberships and are free to participants.

The other industry bodies were seen by respondents as not being as proactive as the MFA in contributing to establishing work-readiness skills in graduates. The supplementary education program of The Communications Council, the industry body for the creative agencies, was also referred to by respondents. This body offered enrolment to the United Kingdom Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) certificate course to fee paying students and graduates. Whilst this is a highly regarded certificate internationally, the point was made that this type of additional education program does duplicate others and some university programs.

IGB3: Well, the big problem with it is, that [if other industry bodies provided supplementary education programs] we would all be repeating the same thing. So it becomes another piece of paper, and which piece of paper becomes more important.

The Communications Council also runs a Graduate Program with teaching in workshops from key industry personnel, however, member agencies must pay for employees’ participation and enrolments are limited.

The IAA stated it has the objective of connecting academia with industry. It is a global organisation and offers universities an accreditation process. It aims to ensure students are taught relevant information to enter the marcoms industry and that university courses are up to date. It does not offer specific training rather, once the universities meet the IAA accreditation requirements, their graduating
students are awarded the IAA internationally recognised Diploma in Marketing Communications.

The PRIA stated it had identified the need for its input to post-graduate education and for continuous professional development programs. At the time of interview the PRIA respondent stated that it was in the process of developing post-graduate training programs for the future but as yet had nothing formalised. A PR diploma and other post-graduate qualifications at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) 5 level were being examined as an adjunct to university education.

There was no uniform opinion amongst respondents as to whether the industry bodies could or should offer more opportunities to improve graduates’ work-readiness; the MFA appeared to be taking the lead in this area.

4.4. Groups three and four – university graduates

The third component of the research study sought the opinions of graduates who are currently employed in the marcoms industry. The combined group comprised four graduates who had been working for less than two years and five who had been employed in the industry for more than two years. Respondents came from six different universities (University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Wollongong, University of Technology Sydney, University of Sydney, University of New South Wales, and Charles Sturt University).

The study investigated the opinions of these graduates as to whether or not they believed that they were work-ready as entry level employees immediately after graduating, and whether they perceived any gaps in employability attributes between graduation and employment. Interviewees have been de-identified and referred to as G-2:1 – G-2:4 for graduates with less than two years’ work experience and G+2:1 – G+2:5 for those with more than two years in the industry. Emergent concepts from sample groups one (employers) and two (industry bodies) were taken into account in structuring this final interview phase.

4.4.1. Entry level graduate employability attributes
The first meta-theme arising from the data from graduates relates to the attributes they considered would help prepare them for optimum employability.

**Attitudes and expectations of graduates**

This section examines the attitudes and expectations of the graduates themselves. The definition of work-readiness, or employability, as defined by Mason et al. (2009, p. 1) is “possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives soon after commencing employment”. This definition was read to each respondent. On the whole, based on this definition, graduates did feel their university degrees gave them the knowledge and skills they needed to be ready to start work at entry level, rather than to be work-ready.

Respondents felt they had a good grounding in the industry, strong theoretical understanding, analytical minds and the ability to learn new skills on-the-job to contribute to the business. They felt the specialist nature of roles in the industry made it difficult for universities to provide graduates with all the skills they would require to be work-ready as defined above.

*G+2.4: If I had to say the actual skills [to be work-ready when I graduated from university] I would say no, and fully prepared, no. But I also feel like it gave me a grounding. It made me progress and move quicker through the organisation much more than anyone else.*

Graduate respondents felt university courses need to develop a well-rounded, broad understanding and base knowledge of marcoms, rather than skills to fulfil a specific role. They felt the diversity of the industry is such that specialist skills could not be addressed in sufficient depth in marcoms courses to give graduates well developed work-ready outcomes. University courses should prepare graduates to be able to apply the knowledge and skills they have gained and enable them to continue their learning on-the-job. Respondents felt that often students did not identify a clear career path until after they had completed their degrees.

*G+2.4: I think you don’t really know what your strengths are when you’re studying... because if you get graduates to specialise in a certain thing and then they graduate and they’re work ready when they come in the industry, then they themselves haven’t been given the opportunity to assess all the opportunities.*
There was some apprehension about joining the workforce for the first time, and expectations ranged from a firm belief that their university grounding had fully prepared them for the job to being overwhelmed by the realities and responsibilities they faced.

\[G+2.1:\text{ When I left [university] I guess I was quite nervous around joining the workforce purely because I'd never had that sort of full-time job before.}\]

\[G-2.4:\text{ Yes, I think I was [confident when I started] just because I had that benefit of obviously [interning] with the agency. I wouldn't say overly confident. I mean it's a big thing going from university into employment.}\]

Some graduates expressed the view that they had overly high expectations of their roles and responsibilities on entry to the industry. This somewhat reflects the views of both the marcoms employer group and the industry bodies group. Graduates reflected that they were taught key industry skills such as working with clients, developing insights, brainstorming and presenting to clients, but typically these skills were not used during their very early years of employment. It was felt that some universities could give a more realistic view of what to expect at entry level.

\[G+2.1:\text{ The other elements that you have to do, the more mundane, I guess, the more, you know, booking things in, being more of a support; [these] will all help you get there but it won't be what you're doing straight away. I think that sort of more realistic view of what your role is in the industry would actually be really helpful.}\]

\[G+2.5:\text{ To be honest, I think my experience at uni exceeded my expectations [of working in the industry].}\]

These views were not consistent and depended on the university, the course and the position held by the respondent.

\[G-2.3:\text{ It was stated to us that when you start out in an advertising agency you're going to be starting in a graduate position, you know it's going to be really tough at times, but we were basically told ... that we going to have to}\]
work our way up, which is really good because I knew what I was getting myself into.

G+2.2: [My university course] delivered on my expectations in terms of the feel of the industry.

Other graduates, whilst acknowledging their expectations were somewhat idealistic, did feel they were work-ready on graduation and their expectations of roles and responsibilities in the workplace were realistic.

G+2.3: [Industry level responsibilities] were probably about the same [as I expected]. I definitely got a lot of responsibility within the first couple of months because I could prove I could do things, which was great. So probably that exceeded my expectations a little bit. I went in knowing what it was all about and the level of commitment I needed to have for the job.

A lot of the confidence in their ability came from the university course they had completed and this varied from university to university. However, respondents raised the issue of confidence versus over-confidence in terms of being work-ready.

G+2.2: There’s a very fine line between confidence and over-confidence, and understanding that everyone wants to support you and they will back you up when you say, “I’m ready to go at this alone”. But if you come in and say, “Oh, I’ve done a Marketing degree so I know everything, and I’m just going to run all this,” and then something goes wrong, it’s not going to end very well.

This was also raised by the marcoms employer group: the attitude of graduates was a key indicator of their work-readiness. Similarly, a ‘can-do’ attitude, raised by the employer group, was seen by graduate respondents as being important at entry level.

**Discipline and multi-discipline skills**

The breadth of discipline skills required in the marcoms industry is increasing. This was identified by both the employers and the industry bodies and reinforced by the graduate group. Whilst discipline-specific skills are important, clients are looking for blended solutions, including all aspects of marcoms, to answer their briefs.
The benefit of a wider set of skills in a graduate, or a clear understanding of use of owned, earned and shared media, as well as the more traditional paid media executions, is extremely advantageous to an employer. Graduate respondents felt multi-discipline skills contributed to graduates’ work-readiness but they were still not clear on whether they felt these skills could be achieved during university studies. Respondents felt that an area of specialisation in employment was sometimes not clear until graduates entered the workforce. Some respondents felt that a broad knowledge, in these cases, was beneficial to work-readiness but there was no real consensus within the study group on this.

G+2.1: Look, to be very honest with you, I did Coms at uni and I left still not knowing how I wanted to specialise, be it, I knew I didn’t want to do advertising, I knew that I didn’t want to do PR, but within media I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I think you only really realise what you can do once you leave because you start talking to people you realise how everyone’s connected.

It was felt there was a need to understand the holistic view of marcoms and the essential inter-relationship between the various specialist agencies, and how they needed to work together to achieve the required integrated marketing communications results for clients. Respondents felt that multidisciplinarity helped with this understanding and with managing input from multiple sources.

G+2.2: I don’t think some skills [e.g. PR, advertising, digital, data mining] are more important than others, but I think it’s just, even if you don’t know how to write a press release or something like that, I think it’s about knowing when to get other people involved and understanding what other people do just so that you can give people proper lead times and have a greater respect for what they do.

Respondents were divided on whether entry level graduates required a marcoms degree, but felt it gave them an advantage in being more work-ready and able to contribute immediately.
G+2.3: I think some people who hadn’t done a marcoms degree might struggle a little bit conceptually with how it all works and what different departments are and stuff like that.

The extent of multidisciplinarity within a university degree was seen as being limited but respondents varied in their opinions of which skills potentially needed greater weighting to improve graduates’ work-readiness. Due to the rapidly evolving digital spaces in marcoms, some respondents felt that a greater understanding of digital technical elements was important. They see there is now a need to integrate digital, and social media, strategies into all clients’ marcoms campaigns: they are no longer ‘add-ons’. At the same time, they felt that this and other specialist skills and understanding should be learned on-the-job or through post-graduate further education programs. All respondents accepted that continuous professional development is essential in the marcoms industry.

G+2.3: So I’m learning about how coding HTML5 works, just because I need to be able to communicate that to a client, not because I have to do it... So things like that I think are really important to get a basic knowledge of how that works, to be able to talk about it in the industry.

Graduates indicated that, as the learning outcomes varied depending on the structure of each university’s course, so too did the entry level skills of graduates and equally, the positions for which they felt they were suited. Respondents considered more generalised courses which covered both creative production and media theory gave graduates broader opportunities to enter either the creative side of the industry or the media side. It was felt best to gain an exposure to as many facets of marcoms as possible because they were seen to be so interconnected.

G+2.4: Like in the media agencies we do PR, we do everything, social media, across all fields, and to be able to understand how each discipline, or each connection point, works to develop an entire communications ecosystem I think is really important.

**Generic skills**

The literature review identified the key generic skills (identified in Table 1) which might be relevant to graduates’ employability or work-readiness. The question was raised with graduates as to the importance of these generic skills in developing
their work-readiness, and whether they should be learned during university programs or developed post-graduation on-the-job.

There was general agreement among graduate respondents that most of the key generic (soft) skills are a ‘given’ requirement in agencies and are adequately addressed during university courses, some to a greater or lesser extent. The importance of some areas was highlighted.

- Ability to work in a team

Team work, including collaboration with other people and various departments, managing different opinions and expectations, was seen by respondents as mandatory in the marcoms industry. Respondents felt most university programs addressed this outcome with realistic group assignments. Hands-on experience in team projects, like the IAA ‘Big Idea’, gave graduates valuable work-ready skills.

\[
G+2.1: \text{So I think you’re sort of forced into these scenarios where you have to work with people that you know and don’t know and you have to make it work.}
\]

\[
G-2.1: \text{I think the amount of teamwork that we did at uni really set you up for that.}
\]

Graduates appreciated where the team work was integrated into their courses. These hands-on experiences benefitted their work-readiness at entry level.

- Oral and written communication skills

Oral and written communications skills are essential in marcoms roles and industry respondents generally considered that they are not sufficiently well-developed in graduates to make them work-ready. Graduate respondents felt these skills could be better developed at some universities. They recognised the need to sell ideas, both internally and to clients, and felt this required a level of communication skill not necessarily acquired before graduation.

\[
G+2.4: \text{You’re communicating with clients all the time, or with team members. Writing things well is so important. Because a lot of things that}
\]
we do...is how you go about communicating, whether it be on an email or a presentation.

Developing specific business writing skills, like emails, or how to write a brief, can be, and often are, learned on-the-job.

G-2.1: Like if you give a brief and then people come back with a thousand questions you’ll soon learn, once I answer those questions on the brief, they’re not going to have to ask them.

Team work and authentic learning situations, including selling ideas and presenting to clients, were seen as extremely beneficial in developing confidence and communications skills to an industry standard.

- Interpersonal skills
- Ability to interact with others

In the marcoms industry people skills – the ability to interact with others and maintain good relationships with colleagues and clients – are essential. Graduate respondents felt that where this experience was offered during university courses in simulated, authentic learning projects it was beneficial to graduates’ outcomes.

- Problem solving

The problem solving skills expected in entry level graduates were seen by graduate respondents as being relative to their level of seniority in the agency. They would not be expected to possess the level of problem solving to answer a client brief, however the ability to critically evaluate and analyse day to day problems was expected to be learned at university.

G+2.2: No one expects you to come in as a trainee or a graduate and solve all the business problems. If you’re doing something and you can see a better way to do that and then actually taking that initiative and putting that process in place, that’s really valuable.
Graduate respondents stated that working in simulated agency teams on client briefs with authentic, pitch-style responses helped graduates develop problem solving skills applicable to industry situations.

- Leadership skills

Graduate respondents noted that they were rarely able to demonstrate learned leadership skills at entry level in the marcoms industry. They entered the industry at a junior level and were not able to take a leadership role until their career progressed. They did feel that they had learned and experienced leadership roles, including learning to delegate, in teams at university, which had stood them in good stead when the opportunities presented themselves as they moved into more senior positions and were given more responsibility.

*G+2.5: As a graduate, you take the roles or the tasks that are given to you. You can work your way up to be a leader and build on those leadership skills. I definitely think that my degree exposed us to leadership skills. But you don't walk into a job and become a leader. You're working your way from the ground up.*

- Self-management

Graduate respondents felt that self-management was not always an outcome from a university course and was more often a skill developed in the workplace. Respondents expected to be given increasing levels of responsibility as they progressed from entry level and felt this helped to develop self-management skills. The ability to meet deadlines, an essential part of the marcoms industry, and autonomous management of one’s own workload start from day one and this level of self-management is expected of entry level graduates. Respondents felt that universities’ focus on meeting deadlines did instil this aptitude in graduates.

*G+2.3: You kind of are the one responsible for giving your work to your superiors or to getting it managed ... So you need to be on your own list and being able to manage your own time pretty efficiently.*

Work place training and experience were seen by respondents to strengthen self-management skills.
• Ability to work under pressure

In an industry where tight deadlines are the norm, respondents agreed the ability to work under pressure was a necessity to be work-ready. This was addressed to some extent during university courses. Where students experienced working on authentic client briefs with real deadlines for presentations, and in particular working on the IAA ‘Big Idea’ brief, where the pressure to submit in a very tight deadline was intense, and working 12 hour days was involved, they felt they had developed work-ready skills in this area.

_G-2.1: So I think, I think everyone who put themselves forward for that experience would definitely come into the industry knowing that there’s going to be days where you just, you know you don’t leave work because you need to … [working under pressure is] 100 per cent a skill required in the industry._

_G-2.3: I was lucky that I had experienced that at uni through different projects, of course, and my ability to be able to work under pressure but also still manage my time are definitely two skills I learnt at university._

Some respondents felt self-management and working under pressure were strongly linked, as were working under pressure and problem solving. They felt industry-relevant university assignments that replicated real world pressure, with deadlines and required solutions to clients’ problems, helped to develop these skills in students before graduation.

• Information and communication technology skills
• Literacy and numeracy

All graduate respondents felt these skills were evident in all graduates and a ‘given’ in the industry.

4.4.2. The roles of universities
The second meta-theme arising from the data collected from graduates relates to the roles of universities in developing optimum employability in entry level graduates, as seen by the graduates themselves.

**University course/program design strengths**

Design of the courses incorporating marketing communications outcomes at the universities attended by the graduate respondents varied and this impacted on whether graduates considered they were more or less work-ready at entry level. The effect of WIL strategies, authentic learning and practice-based education, employed by some universities, was seen by both employer and industry body groups to be extremely beneficial in developing graduates’ work-readiness. This opinion was reinforced by graduates.

Courses where there was a focus on WIL, authentic learning and practice-based education, provided graduates with better developed work-ready skills. To experience the realism of a live client brief introduced industry-like pressure and passion, as well as process. A theoretical case study did not create the same real world scenario with the same industry-like passion and commitment.

> G+2.3: I think what real clients does for you, is put a bit of perspective, but also like realistic, and almost a bit of pressure on as well. “This isn’t just an assignment that I can blow off”, you actually have people invested in what you’re talking about, what you’re trying to do for them, and it puts a bit of incentive behind it and real-life experience, so I think it’s very beneficial... you have such more passion and drive to actually achieve that for that client. And I think this improves your employability skills.

Graduate respondents felt that when they were students their engagement in assignments involving client interaction was heightened. They valued the face-to-face experience and the industry hype that surrounded this type of learning. It developed a keenness to be involved in the project and was seen as an exciting way to learn and to supplement course work theory with practice.

> G+2.5: What actually drew my employer to me was some of the experiences that I had through uni.
G+2.1: We did something called the Big Idea [International Advertising Association (IAA) inter-university marketing communications competition] at [university name]. It’s a live brief and it’s still for a live client. I actually thought that was a really good sort of example of what you would have to do.

This type of exposure, whether through the IAA competition or responding to other live client briefs, was seen to be valuable in developing work-readiness. Interacting in an agency team, with different departments, developing an insight and a big idea, and then campaign executions, was seen to deliver the real world experience of working in a marcoms agency. These practical applications of theory were considered by respondents to give graduates practice-based understanding and to improve their work-readiness and their ability to contribute to their employer at entry level.

G+2.3: We actually functioned as agencies and did practical things in the final year; things like the ‘Big Idea’. That meant you can actually interact with industry people but also real clients. I know that other degrees can be a little bit more theoretical and therefore when you actually hit the industry it’s wildly different.

The IAA ‘Big Idea’ was cited by several respondents as being extremely valuable in achieving industry skills and work-readiness.

G+2.5: With the Big Idea competition we represented our own little agency at the uni. We felt like it replicated what would actually happen within marketing agencies or advertising agencies, we really felt like we were getting a real experience.

Respondents noted the widely differing university courses and graduate outcomes they had experienced through interaction with other entry level graduate colleagues in the workplace.

G-2.3: I’ve known other graduates who’ve come from different universities. I know a lot of them go more into the history of advertising instead of actually being taught how to do a strategic recommendation or how to
answer a brief, or how an agency actually works; it actually seems a bit more prehistoric.

Respondents also noted that being able to include ‘real agency experience’ on their CVs improved their employability prospects. They saw this as an advantage and it helped them stand out from the crowd.

G-2.3: So being able to work on the live brief with clients, it looks fantastic on a resume... and people look at that and they are impressed. The fact that my university offered such an important opportunity like that is fantastic.

Where respondents did not have the opportunity to take part in WIL or working on a live client brief, they expressed the view that the experience would have been very beneficial to increasing their work-readiness.

G+2.4: It probably would have given me even more grounding. I mean I would have propelled probably a little bit quicker if I think about it.

Respondents felt there were still a lot of specific skills that need to be learned in the industry. Understanding individual agency processes and systems required on-the-job learning and hands-on experience: these skills could not be taught at university.

Practitioner input to university courses

Respondents felt it was beneficial to have lecturers who had practitioner experience to improve learning outcomes. Industry professionals were able to help bridge the gap between theory and practice to improve graduates’ work-readiness by introducing authentic examples of current practice.

G+2.5: Our lecturers were definitely industry professionals themselves. I think that it is important … they’re able to give valuable insight, and really teach you from the ground up what it’s actually like with their experiences.

Supplementing theory with guest lectures from current industry practitioners was also seen as important to give a further real world perspective and to improve work-readiness. Graduates felt this gave them an advantage to enter industry with current knowledge and an awareness of evolving industry trends. Industry
professionals were also able to present a more holistic understanding of the industry.

G+2.5: Because they’re bringing the trends that are happening right now. They’re bringing experiences that are happening then and there.

This respondent group also felt it was valuable for recent graduates to return to their university to talk to final year students about the transition process to the workforce. They felt hearing authentic ‘peer to peer’ feedback from a recent graduate would be inspirational and motivational, and more helpful than coming from an academic. Not only did they feel this would improve graduates’ understanding of the industry and their work-readiness but also that it would help develop more realistic expectations of the entry level roles new graduates would be assigned. This opinion was reiterated by several respondents.

G-2.1: The thing that I would have really valued is having someone come back and go “here’s what it’s actually like”

4.4.3. The roles of practice

The third meta-theme arising from the data collected relates to the roles of practice as seen by the graduates themselves in developing their optimum employability at entry.

Benefit of practical experience/internships

Hands-on, practical industry experience, was an advantage seen by graduate respondents as significantly enhancing their work-readiness. This concept was also supported by the employer and the industry bodies groups. The internship, in particular, was seen as one of the key learning practices to close the gap between graduation and employment by improving graduates’ employability skills. Several universities require completion of a four-week industry internship as part of their course. Respondents felt that a professionally-structured internship program allowed students to experience several different areas of an agency, often as part of a team, allowing them to more fully comprehend and unpack their theoretical underpinnings in true practice.
G+2.1: So we have, I guess, a pretty well rounded graduate that will come out the back of it obviously not knowing everything but understanding, I guess, again, where they sort of fit and how big the industry is.

G+2.2: I think there’s a big difference between graduates who have done internships and graduates who haven’t, and I think that that is something that’s really valuable that the universities can leverage through their alumni.

It is not felt these skills and an understanding gained during an internship could be acquired at university. The internship was seen by respondents to be one of the most significant learning experiences to develop work-readiness. It was seen as a first step into industry and often could lead to a full time job offer.

G+2.4: A lot of the times when we do interns if they’re really, really good and we can see the potential in them to progress further in that specific role, then we sometimes actually give them a full-time job, we hire them as a junior.

Respondents recognised that the structure and professionalism of the internship varied from agency to agency, due to time constraints, however the value of being exposed to agency processes and procedures was seen to be immeasurable.

G+2.3: I do think it is beneficial to actually be in an agency to literally just see everything happening, how people interact, how things get done. Respondents felt that the experiences of a minority of students in internships did create false expectations of entry level roles, particularly where students were involved in major projects. In the main, respondents felt the internship experience helped to clarify the entry level roles and responsibilities.

G-2.3: I was able to see what graduates were doing in their job...I [could] see where they’re starting out from and where you can grow from here. I didn’t have grandiose expectations.

G-2.4: I knew [what to expect] and wasn’t disappointed...I think my expectations were met in terms of interning and then going into a grad level position.
No matter what the program, the opportunity to up-skill in practice was significant and respondents unanimously endorsed internships as essential to developing work-readiness in graduates. It was felt that more formal relationships could be developed between universities and agencies with a view to increasing internship opportunities.

**Continuous professional development/graduate programs**

It was acknowledged by some respondents that there was a gap between intern programs, graduation and work-readiness, and that properly structured graduate programs did bridge that gap, however they were not considered to be essential.

These programs are designed to address possible shortcomings in graduates and to develop their skills to bring them up to industry standard. The benefit of any graduate program was seen by respondents to vary with the provider. Some were highly commended as being well structured and professionally run, others were not. Where graduates were not clear on their career path, or were under confident, graduate programs were very appealing to improve employability skills.

*G+2.3: I went into a grad program which was a little bit more comforting to know that they’re also there to train you in this role, so it’s not an immediate understanding that you have to know everything, so that kind of was a little bit of a buffer zone. But yes, it was very daunting going into it.*

The breadth of training in the graduate programs, with rotation through various agency departments, different agencies within a group, or with input from various disciplines (e.g. in the MFA and The Communications Council programs), was appealing to some graduates. These programs are seen to combine practice with university theory and to embellish it with job/role-specific training which cannot be achieved at university.

Respondents consider that graduate programs are equally beneficial for employers. They allow them to assess entry level employees for several months before offering them a full-time contract.

*G+2.4: Actually a lot of agencies do [graduate programs] because they see it as an opportunity to get smart graduates...*
Respondents felt it would be advantageous to both graduates and employers to increase the number of graduate programs.

Continuing the professional development of entry level employees was seen by respondents to be the responsibility of employers. Recognising the increasing velocity of change within the industry and the need for emerging specialist hands-on skills, respondents felt employers need to take the responsibility for up-skilling graduates to enable them to make a more significant contribution to agency work and income. Respondents recognised that day-to-day work pressures place limitations on mentoring and training of entry level employees, but many skills need to be learned on-the-job and they feel employers need to implement structured entry level training programs to help bridge the gap between graduation and new employee productivity in the industry.

G+2.1: *Do we have the time and resource to put into to sort of build up those skills? Not all the time. Which is a shame and it does sound like a bit of a copout as well.*

Due to the additional training required, it was felt there were still insufficient employers willing to take on entry level graduates regardless of their university qualifications. However, while they felt agencies recognised that all new employees require up-skilling and some degree of mentoring, every agency was seen to have its own way of meeting this challenge.

G+2.4: *I’ve worked at several agencies over the years. And all of them teach you some new skills based on the company philosophy.*

**The roles of industry bodies**

Graduates were also asked if they felt the five key industry bodies should be contributing to developing their work-ready skills. Respondents did feel that the industry bodies should play a role in developing employability skills in graduates but stated that they had received very little exposure to most of these organisations.

The MFA NGen program, a training program offered to all entry level employees in MFA member agencies, was endorsed by respondents as extremely helpful in developing some industry-specific skills.
G+2.1: I think [MFA] NGen tries to do a really good job once [graduates] are in the industry.

G-2.3: So I think the MFA should keep up what they’re doing in terms of NGen [training] sessions because they’re really, really important for personal growth.

Industry programs were seen to be more effective post-graduation undertaken within a real world context. The Communications Council graduate program was seen as useful in improving work-readiness. The IAA ‘Big Idea’ was mentioned again as valuable in giving students authentic experience, working on a live, client brief with industry-like deadlines.

There was little awareness for other programs. Respondents felt the industry bodies should play a more significant role in developing work-readiness in graduates. They felt it would be worthwhile for both students and graduates to have more exposure to the industry bodies and to be encouraged to attend their events.

4.5. Patterns of data for research question

The key findings from the study dealing with the question: **Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?** are summarised in Table 2 (below).

The data was initially broken down and dissected into discrete fragments using open coding which reflected the perspectives of participants. Open coding was undertaken sentence by sentence from transcripts of recorded interviews, until a pattern emerged and allowed preliminary groupings of responses.

These initial codes were provisional and were followed by a second step – axial coding. Axial coding enabled identifying and making links between the preliminary groupings. Segments and common themes were identified and categorised to create conceptually similar data to form categories.
Finally, selective coding enabled identification of core categories which were then related to other categories. The selective coding enabled relating of all categories to integrate the elements into an emergent theory.

These three steps in the coding process allowed the researcher to find interconnections between categories and subcategories. These are presented as three meta-themes, developed from sub themes common to all three groups:

- The academy – the foundation stones to entry level employment;
- Entry level graduate employability attributes;
- Practice – the final bridge to work-ready employment.

These patterns of data will be used to develop a model proposing the roles of university and practice to answer the research question. The model will examine the transition from university graduation to optimum employability.
Table 2. Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta-themes</th>
<th>Sub themes (common to all three groups)</th>
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| **The academy – the foundation stones to entry level employment** | Universities’ marcoms course/program designs contribute to work-readiness  
Discipline knowledge, theory and generic skills are key outcomes  
Create a holistic view of marcoms industry roles and career path options  
Work-integrated learning, authentic learning, practice-based education contribute significantly to work-readiness  
Practitioner input (lecturers with experience, industry guest lectures) improves graduate work-readiness  
Internships embedded in courses contribute considerably to graduate work-readiness |
| **Entry level graduate employability attributes** | University graduates are ready to start work, not work-ready by the stated definition  
University degrees not criticised for shortcomings; support for relevant degree outcomes  
Graduates enter industry ready to apply these skills and continue specialised learning on-the-job  
Attitudes and expectations of graduates are indicative of their work-readiness  
Many graduates have unrealistic, inflated expectations of entry level roles and responsibilities  
Confidence is important as opposed to over-confidence or arrogance  
Graduates need discipline-specific skills and soft skills to actively apply these at entry level  
University degree outcomes need to be broad to allow selection and learning of specialisation on-the-job  
Overlapping and melding of silos of traditional marcoms client services, need for multi-discipline skills  
Generic skills (Table 1) all requisites for employability, learnt at university and developed on-the-job |
| **Practice – the final bridge to work-ready employment** | Employers up-skill and educate on-the-job to a level of work-readiness by the stated definition  
Learning curve and transition to achieve real work-readiness  
Internships and practical experience extremely beneficial in developing work-readiness  
Hands-on industry exposure clarifies career paths; more realistic expectations of roles and responsibilities  
Structure/calibre of internship programs important  
Internships bridge gap between theory and practice, plus exposure to current content  
Practitioner input via guest lectures/master classes unanimously endorsed; industry ‘giving back’  
Continuous professional development essential in marcoms industry and responsibility of employers  
Graduate programs fill the gap between graduation and work-readiness  
Industry bodies do play a role in developing work-readiness, some are more proactive than others  
Industry bodies’ programs focus on developing skills in early career graduates  
MFA highly praised; more proactive than others, active in contributing to course content and graduate education  
The Communications Council offers Graduate Program affiliated with UK IPA (cost to participants)  
IAA standards driven accreditation for universities; authentic experience ‘Big Idea’ national student competition |
4.6. Conclusion

The key concepts which emerged from the study are grouped under the three meta-themes. Firstly, they identify the academy’s role is in laying the foundation stones to entry level employment. Secondly, they identify expected entry level graduate employability competencies and attributes. Finally, they determine that practice is, in fact, the final bridge needed to bring graduates up to a level of optimum employability.

Entry level graduate employability attributes were clearly identified by all three groups. University graduates are ready to start work in entry level positions in the industry, they are not work-ready as such. Graduates enter industry ready to apply the skills they have acquired at university and to continue the education process to achieve optimum employability. At the end of their university course, many have unrealistic, inflated expectations of entry level roles and responsibilities.

University marcoms degrees qualify graduates with theory, discipline knowledge and the generic competencies, ready to enter the workforce with some current and emerging skills, prepared for the lifelong learning required to succeed in professional practice. These degrees create a holistic view of the marcoms industry, and of the various career path options available. The benefit of industry partnerships to facilitate incorporation of work-integrated learning, authentic learning and practice-based education into university programs is emphasised. Industry internships also enhance graduates’ work-readiness and help bridge the gap between theory and practice. Universities are not criticised for outcomes from their degrees; employers supported the high level of relevant education and graduates valued the competencies and attributes gained and the ability to continue life-long learning throughout their careers. The industry is realistic about what it expects from graduates at entry level. Degree outcomes must remain fairly broad to enable graduates to identify and select their particular area of specialisation once they enter industry.

In order to achieve optimum employability, graduates need to experience the real world of practice. It is only in practice, where they have real responsibilities and are accountable, and where there are commercial consequences for their decisions and actions, can they truly begin to develop more realistic expectations and
understanding of their roles and responsibilities. It is here that they must continue the learning curve to enrich the generic skills and develop the specialist skills necessary to be able to contribute to their employers’ businesses. Exposure to some of the industry bodies’ programs enhances this further education; marcoms employers’ graduate programs are also useful.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Introduction

This study examined the roles of universities and practitioners in preparing university graduates for a career in marketing communications and sought to identify at what stage the education and knowledge building responsibilities of universities end and those of employers or professional practice in marcoms begin? Or, to put it a different way, with whom does the responsibility lie for the provision of all the aspects of the knowledge, skills and training expected, when it comes to preparing university graduates considered to be optimally employable? To answer this question, it was important to examine and understand the roles of universities and professional practice in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications. The focal research question was: Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?

The benefits of attaining a university degree in marcoms were taken into account, as were the existing roles of the academy and industry in developing the necessary skills and attributes in graduates. The study considered the competencies presently expected in entry level graduates within the variables created by a globally influenced, dynamic marcoms industry which is in a continual state of ongoing, rapid evolution.

The literature review indicated higher education in Australia has placed a greater emphasis on graduate employability and the need to address generic skills in undergraduate courses. Much has been published about the role of industry in contributing to the education of graduates in order to prepare them for practice in many different fields, although the benefit of industry contributing to the development of graduate employability skills is supported by some scholars and debated by others. The value of work-integrated learning, internships and work experience, along with authentic learning projects involving ‘real’ clients and other real-world learning opportunities, have been investigated and, in the main, endorsed as beneficial in preparing employable graduates. This highlighted the opportunity to more thoroughly investigate these areas in relation to marcoms graduates. However, there was no clear consensus from studies conducted to date as to what role industry and practice should play or whether universities should, or
do, incorporate generic skills development sufficiently into marcoms courses, or if these skills should be taught by industry or others.

5.2. Conclusions deriving from the research question

Career development does not end at graduation; it is clear that the education process is ongoing. Most marcoms professionals start with a university degree. Participants in this study tended to agree that universities should teach the theoretical foundations, some discipline-specific skills, and the required soft skills and competencies to enter industry. Marcoms degrees should give students the opportunity to learn and to develop sufficient understanding of the industry to apply these skills in the workplace. Professional practice must provide graduates with the ongoing opportunities to develop the full skill sets required to operate as industry professionals. Employers see it as their role to teach the practical and specialist industry skills, along with the competencies in the marcoms process, to develop professional attitudes and to clarify roles and responsibilities.

The roles of universities

The findings indicate it is the role of universities to prepare marcoms degrees graduates to enter the workforce ready to start work, not work-ready. Work-ready means graduates are able to make productive contributions to their employers' organisational objectives soon after their employment (Mason et al., 2009).

University degrees give entry level graduates the discipline knowledge, theory and generic skills, as well as sufficient knowledge of the marcoms industry, to perform entry level tasks under supervision. These are the base-level competencies required for the marcoms industry, but they need to be further cultivated in the real world.

Although some scholars raise concerns about employability attributes being associated with vocationalisation, Australian universities offering marcoms courses are actively embedding industry-required generic or soft skills into the curriculum. The study found employers expect universities to teach these skills. The most important skills identified were:

- the ability to work in a team;
- oral and written communication skills;
• interpersonal skills;
• the ability to interact with others;
• problem solving;
• leadership skills;
• self-management;
• ability to work under pressure;
• information and communication technology skills; and
• literacy and numeracy.

These skills, particularly leadership, need to be further developed on-the-job before being truly beneficial to employers. Employers do not expect to teach generic skills. The more developed these ‘soft’ skills are, the more valuable and the more prepared graduates are for employment.

Marcoms degrees do and should give a holistic view of the industry and of the various career paths available. Degree outcomes need to remain relatively broad in order to enable graduates to select, and then to learn more about, their area of specialisation in practice. Broader degrees also provide graduates flexibility in terms of initial employment, as well as the opportunity to broaden their skills-base as they develop in their careers.

University partnerships with industry play a significant role in developing graduate work-ready competencies. The benefit of internship programs, when embedded in university courses, is clearly invaluable in giving graduates hands-on experience to help bridge the gap between theory and practice. University courses that include work-integrated learning (WIL), authentic learning and practice-based education, and which are facilitated by such partnerships, are seen by both graduates and employers to be important in developing employability skills. Employers noted that graduates who had been taught the discipline skills, as well as the practical industry skills, in university programs that offered WIL components invariably progressed far more quickly in their careers, required less training and were more likely to excel in the short term. Working in simulated on-campus agencies in industry team roles, responding to real client briefs and other hands-on practice-driven activities, clearly enhanced graduate employability. The benefit to graduates of these industry partnerships was the opportunity to experience professional practice without the real life accountability, responsibilities and consequences which, in turn, helped them better understand and develop the theoretical underpinnings already learnt.
Academics with a background in practice, who could connect theory to authentic, workplace examples, were considered to be particularly valuable to the educational process, in that their industry involvement allowed them to demonstrate or illustrate practical application of theoretical concepts in real world cases and to provide unique perspective and skills, (Levine, 2015). They can apply a different logic in delivering subject content to that of an academic without practitioner experience and, as Bartunek and Rynes (2014) identified, employ different communication styles.

Additionally, employers were thoroughly supportive of offering guest lectures: they give students first-hand and absolutely current knowledge and feedback from industry professionals. This was seen to not only improve graduate work readiness but also to create more realistic expectations about the industry. Universities were not expected to be able to maintain absolute currency in their courses in this rapidly evolving industry, though input from current practitioners helped to bridge this gap. This was evidenced in the findings of the International Advertising Association’s 2016 Industry Talent Survey (International Advertising Association, 2016).

**The roles of practice**

It is apparent that employers have realistic expectations of the skills and competencies of graduates at entry level. The industry media reports that criticised the lack of work-readiness amongst graduates (Blight, 2013; Corlette, 2010; Da Silva, 2010; Ma, 2012) were not supported by the survey responses of industry itself. Employers’ responses indicated the graduates they had engaged with were ready to enter industry and were in a position to learn the hands-on skills they could not learn, or were not expected to be taught at university. Respondents saw it as their role to further the education of graduates in practice, readily acknowledging the transition and the learning curve required to achieve work-readiness.

Employers saw their role of up-skilling new employees through on-the-job training to be an essential part of developing the specialist skills required for graduates to contribute to their organisation’s unique objectives – as well as helping graduates clarify their own personal career paths. They felt that, at entry level, new employees still needed hands-on industry experience to bridge the gap between
Practitioners felt that those students who had experienced WIL, authentic learning or practice-based education – particularly with projects that involved working in simulated on-campus agency environments addressing real client briefs – were more work-ready than some of their peers who had not had these opportunities. As a consequence, employers endorsed partnerships with universities that enabled these authentic experiences. They acknowledged that these graduates with these experiences were more employable, since they possessed an increased awareness of, and some experience in, real-world processes. However, employers reiterated that simulated university experiences could never fully prepare graduates for the consequences of paid responsibilities. These could only be learned ‘on-the-job’.

Overall, the industry endorsed the notion of internship programs as an integral component of a practice-based and professional university degree program. However, as the research identified, the structure and quality of internship programs varied from agency to agency. In the main, the large agencies and agency groups recognised the value of the internship program to both the student and to themselves as prospective employers and were prepared to invest time and resources in ensuring that the programs were professionally constructed and delivered. On the other hand, smaller agencies were less organised and some saw internships more as an expense or, in some cases, an opportunity to leverage ‘cheap labour’.

The research also found that many graduates entering the workforce from university had unrealistic, if not inflated expectations of entry level roles and responsibilities. This is frustrating for employers, since they need to immediately address these expectations in a positive way, without deflating the enthusiasm and passion of their new employees. Realistic, if simulated, work environments at a university level go some way to addressing this. To further address this issue, greater interactions between universities and the industry through internships, practicums and even ‘exit’ lectures by industry practitioners – given before the students graduate – are all strategies that could be employed to ensure students have more positive and realistic attitudes towards their future profession.

On the whole, it is apparent that the majority of the marcoms industry is actively engaged in continuous professional development (CPD). Graduate programs offered to employees immediately after leaving university by some industry and agency
employer groups were endorsed for developing optimum employability in participants. The Media Federation of Australia was seen to be particularly proactive in the dissemination of current industry knowledge to the tertiary sector. It was also highly regarded for its role in the development of practical and professional employability skills and was praised for its contribution to graduate education, university course content and experiential learning via opportunities such as formalised industry internships. The Communications Council Graduate Program, although restricted to fee-paying participants, was also identified as being beneficial in developing work-ready skills.

Individual agency groups such as Clemenger BBDO and George Patterson Y&R also offered excellent graduate training programs, with students offered between three and 12 months fully paid employment. One advantage of these programs is that graduates have the opportunity to experience work in a number of different areas of the agency group – client service, media, creative, digital.

The International Advertising Association (IAA), as the one global industry representative organisation, also offers university students and graduates the opportunity to experience the real world of the industry. In Australia, the IAA’s ‘Big Idea’ inter-university marketing communications competition attracts entries from student teams across Australia and was seen by industry as valuable for its authentic experience for students, thus contributing to their work-readiness.

**Optimum employability**

No one group could define exact boundaries in the ‘who should teach what’ debate, and so these boundaries remain blurred. Industry interviewees acknowledged that universities are doing a good job in developing the necessary ‘ready-to-work’ skills and competencies required at entry level by graduates, contrary to the opinions expressed in the industry media. The findings of this study do, however, clarify the roles of academia and professional practice in preparing graduates for optimum employability.

A three-tier model, proposing how the roles of universities and practice (industry and employers) could be envisioned and highlighting how learning commences at university and is further developed in practice, is shown in Table 3. This process is considered to be effective in achieving optimum employability in the marcoms industry. It does not necessarily result in graduates being work-ready by the Mason
et al. (2009) definition. However, this process assists graduates to become ready-to-work, assimilate into professional practice and actively apply skills and competencies whilst continuing to learn the necessary specialist and organisational specific skills, whilst enhancing soft skills. From this perspective, early career employees can then make productive contributions to organisational objectives.

5.3. Implications for the academy and practice

The findings from this study inform both the academy and the marketing communications industry of possible areas for future development in improving the employability of graduates. By highlighting the expectations and current roles of universities and practice, it could influence academic thinking and future course development, as well as potentially aligning academia and industry more closely.

Four key implications for the academy and practice have been identified. These are in the areas of:

1. Relationships and partnerships;
2. Internship programs;
3. Graduate expectations;
4. Industry expectations.
Table 3. – A Summary of the Roles of Universities and Practice

**The Roles of Universities**

- **Curriculum**
  - Discipline knowledge, theory and generic skills key outcomes
  - Holistic view of marcoms industry roles and career path options
- **Partnerships**
  - Work-integrated learning, authentic learning; practice-based education
- **Structures**
  - Marcoms course/program design
  - Internships embedded in courses
- **Staffing**
  - Academic qualifications
  - Practitioner input (lecturers with experience, industry guest lectures)

**The Roles of Practice**

- **Practical and specialist skills**
  - Learning curve and transition to achieve work-readiness
  - Employers up-skill and educate on-the-job, particularly in specialist skills and further development of generic skills
  - Hands-on industry exposure clarifies career paths
- **Realistic expectations and understanding**
  - Develop more realistic expectations of roles and responsibilities
  - Internships and work experience bridge gap between theory and practice
- **Professional attitudes**
  - Continuous professional development
  - Graduate programs
  - Industry bodies' input

**Optimum Employability**

- Combination of education from the academy and training in practice optimises employability
- Graduates enter industry ready-to-work, not work-ready by the definition
- Graduate skills (discipline and generic) need to be enhanced by practice
- Specialised industry skills are learnt on-the-job
- Early career employees can then make productive contributions to employers' organisational objectives
5.3.1. Relationships and partnerships

A key area that needs to be considered is further strengthening of the relationship between universities and employers, particularly at the graduate employment juncture, rather than just during the education phase over the three to four years of the university degree. The dynamic nature of the industry and the world in which it operates also need to be considered. Universities could consider integrating into their degree programs more formalised ways of ensuring graduates interact with the marcoms industry during the capstone periods of their degrees. Although some universities have strong industry connections, others could explore closer relationships with practitioner groups, with a view to setting up more partnerships to facilitate WIL and authentic, practice-driven projects for students – as well as more internships wherever possible. This is supported by the literature which reinforces the importance of work-based learning such as industry placements and internships in improving employability in several professions (Lowden et al., 2011; Royle & Laing, 2014) as well as the benefit of a more structured partnership approach to developing work-ready skills (Gibson et al., 2013; Howieson et al., 2014). Closer affiliations would also create more opportunities to approach industry guest lecturers.

5.3.2. Internship programs

Recommendations for improvements to the internship experience should be considered. Universities could adopt a uniform approach to including industry internships as a marcoms degree requirement rather than as an elective option. The marcoms industry sees internships as a significant and essential supplement to students’ education and recognises the long term benefit of formal internship training in contributing to graduates’ work-readiness. The literature found across many professional areas demonstrate that the benefit of hands-on ‘real-world’ experience cannot be duplicated in the classroom (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Gault et al., 2010; Litchfield et al., 2010; Pool & Sewell, 2007). The benefits of internships could be better marketed by the academy to employer groups, with a view to increasing not just the number but also the calibre of the placements available to students. Improved, assessable learning outcomes from internship programs would result in better prepared, more effective and more employable
graduates and would lessen the need for some of the on-the-job training currently being provided by employers.

5.3.3. Graduate expectations

It should be recognised by the academy that marcoms degrees can only take students to a certain point in preparing them for employability and that there needs to be clarification of graduates’ expectations regarding their roles, responsibilities, levels of autonomy and authority at entry level. Whilst students may participate in industry practitioner roles in authentic teams in practice-based learning projects, these inflated levels of responsibility are not reflected in industry at entry level. Graduates enter industry as ‘beginners’, not fully qualified professional practitioners. Clarification of this by the academy would minimise the unrealistic expectations some graduates have. This can also be achieved by increasing final year students’ exposure to experienced practitioners by way of guest lectures, in order for them to receive first-hand knowledge direct from the industry. The benefit of having recently graduated students, now engaged in the industry, returning to their universities to give a real-world perspective on the transition from university to employment, would also help produce more realistic expectations of on-the-job realities. The advantage of students receiving current and topical input from industry professionals during their capstone experience in order to moderate expectations is supported by the literature, including Goldberg et al. (2014).

The successful transition from the simulated university student agency and work-integrated learning projects to real world employment is a big step – and one which is not being addressed by universities in terms of setting realistic graduate expectations. This research study has indicated there is often a (sometimes considerable) gap between completion of the degree and start of employment. Universities need to offer educational opportunities in their programs that maximise every students’ potential for employment. Unrealistic expectations in employment result in dissatisfaction both on the part of the graduates and employers. There can be a considerable disconnect between the simulated experiences and outcomes at university and the realities of employment. Graduates need to be made aware that professional development is a lifelong learning journey and that they will undoubtedly need to learn specific industry skills and experience consequential
decision making and responsibilities for some time before they can make a real contribution to their employers’ businesses, or eventually to their own.

5.3.4. Industry expectations

The notion of ‘ready-to-work’ as opposed to ‘work-ready’ is pivotal in the understanding of the processes required to prepare graduates for effective employment. University degree programs must, by their nature, combine academic acumen with broad discipline knowledge. Students graduating from university should be aware of what the requirements of industry employment are through their WIL and other practical on-campus learning experiences and thus be ‘ready-to-work’. However, there is no substitute for hands-on workplace experience.

The literature suggests the onus of effectively addressing skills gaps between theory and practice falls not only on the academy but also on employers (Jackson, 2009; Tymon, 2013). This study found the marcoms industry does accept it has a role to play in providing the final step in the education process in the development of the graduate attributes and competencies for optimum employability – and this should be fully understood and acknowledged by both academia and practice. This would help to counter certain negative attitudes, particularly those expounded by the industry media, and help establish more realistic expectations of university degree outcomes.

Universities are instilling theory, critical thinking, discipline and generic skills but cannot – and should not be expected to – give graduates absolute work-ready skills suited to any particular marcoms employer. It is hoped that publication of findings from this study to the industry might clarify the differing roles of universities and professional practice and their combined responsibilities in the development of optimally-employable graduates.

5.4. Recommendations

This study clearly reinforces the benefits of practical experience and exposure to industry in the optimisation of graduate employability. Incorporating notions of WIL, authentic learning, and practice-based education into university courses was endorsed by all three stakeholder groups. This includes on-campus activities such
as working in student agency teams or in situated and simulated marcoms student agencies, responding to ‘live’ client briefs, as well as other industry partnered projects such as national and international competitions. Additionally, internship placements for students help to better prepare them for the transition from university to professional practice, as do exposure to professional practice and practitioners via agency visits, study tours and guest lectures by industry executives. It is critical that universities, the industry and industry members work more closely together in both the development of contemporary and relevant curricula and the dissemination of knowledge (and enthusiasm) to the next generation of marcoms professionals.

Recommendations in five key areas have been developed for consideration by both industry and universities:

1. Situated learning strategies;
2. Relationships and partnerships;
3. Internships and practicums;
4. Employment expectations of graduates and industry;
5. Expanding graduate outcomes.

5.4.1. Situated learning strategies

This study has identified that the models being employed by universities in their marcoms degrees, as a result of the research and curriculum development done in the past, are effective. Many universities already incorporate significant WIL, authentic learning and practice-based education strategies into their marketing communications university degree programs and it is recommended that they continue to do so. Several universities have also established on-campus WIL learning spaces to give students industry-like experience. This study and the literature show that students flourish in these environments and graduate with skills superior to marcoms students who do not receive these experiences. These strategies are, and will continue to be, applauded by the potential employers and it is recommended that they be implemented by universities where they have not already been adopted.
5.4.2. Relationships and partnerships

It is recommended that universities delivering marcoms courses come together to form a ‘Sector Body’ to negotiate collectively with peak bodies and groups from the industry to enable a more uniform approach across academia. Informed by the universities, the Sector Body would, in fact, be the voice of the universities to talk to industry and various publics. It would negotiate relationship and partnership opportunities. It would educate industry about what it is that universities actually do. It would be a Body that facilitates post-graduation learning and acts as a resource for new students.

The Sector Body would develop closer relationships and partnerships with the marcoms industry and specifically marcoms agencies. Whilst certain individual universities have already undertaken some of these and other initiatives through industry partnerships, many of these are random, or managed by individual university academics, thus long term programs are not necessarily guaranteed. All would benefit from negotiations by an official Sector Body to set up a formal program with specific outcomes, including but not limited to:

- Obtaining ‘live’ client briefs for the development of integrated marketing communication campaigns. These would include authentic 360 degree assessment practices for student projects that would see feedback from the university coordinator, the agency and possibly even the client organisation;
- Liaising with practitioners to deliver guest lectures and conduct specialist workshops;
- Developing innovative internship and practicum opportunities, such as national and international study tours, that see students increasingly involved with the industry before graduation;
- Setting up new internship models and opportunities with industry practitioners. Such an approach may enable some of the smaller agencies to more effectively participate and would be beneficial for both the industry and students in providing a wider range of placement opportunities;
- Creating opportunities for university/agency collaborations in the development of industry scholarships that have both a monetary value and placement component. This is also an effective way for agencies to recruit from the best of the university student cohort.
This formal Sector Body would host a website with various resources for postgraduate learning, such as information supplied by industry bodies and practitioners on current trends and technological advances. Although driven by universities, it would also become a source of industry knowledge and a resource for individual practitioners. It would be proactive in publishing information about what university education is actually contributing to the industry rather than being reactively driven by industry. It would actively promote the benefits of university education in marcoms in terms of new knowledge and the discipline education provided by academia, as well as the skills and competencies graduates bring to industry. This would help to pre-empt negative publicity from the industry media about marcoms university graduates’ attributes and would generate positive publicity which would reflect favourably on the outcomes and benefits of marcoms university programs.

The Body would not only provide education, it would also inform industry and the general population. It would be sufficiently broad to be a source to inform high school students who are considering moving into the marcoms industry. The website would post articles and papers about what is happening both in academia and industry in terms of education and career path opportunities.

5.4.3. Internships and practicums

The very tangible educational benefit of the internship experience should be better utilised by universities. It is recommended that more universities incorporate mandatory and fully assessable internship programs into their marcoms degree programs, with formal industry feedback as part of the assessment criteria.

_A1. I think some universities certainly do it better than others. I think the most employable graduates that do come out of universities are the ones that have had practical experience along the way, and I know there are some universities that mandate that students have to go and do work periods or work experience or what have you with organisations, and others don’t. To be honest with you, in I would say 99% of the cases where students have had practical experience, they seem to fit in with our organisation in particular a lot quicker, and their expectations are certainly not as high as those that come straight out of university without any practical experience._
These programs should be undertaken by students during their capstone year to round off the education process. Two models should be considered to take into account the availability of students, the diverse range of students and the resources of agencies. Both models should set the required internship period as being the equivalent of a minimum of 140 hours. This could be made up of four consecutive (35 hour) weeks, or over a longer period of (for example) one seven hour day per week, over a 20 week period or longer.

The first model, which is based on the most common type of internship currently operating with some universities through some of the larger agencies, would be made up of a four consecutive week program (140 hours). This is preferred by these agencies as it allows them to manage a specifically planned program over a given period of time with a limited number of interns. These professionally structured programs allow exposure by interns to agency programs and systems over the four-week period and the opportunity to follow a project through from start to finish, at the same time providing experience in many facets of agency operations. This model is offered by one particular agency to a restricted number of students from a number of universities including the University of Technology, Sydney, the University of New South Wales, Macquarie University, and Charles Sturt University (A7.)

A10. And I truly believe [the four-week program] is the best way for them to learn because they don’t just get one off projects and not understand where that fits in the big picture. They get a week with strategy team, a week with the experts within each channel, a week to develop a final project and really pull together everything they’ve learned across tools and areas of expertise, different channels, different methods of research, so they really see the bigger picture. Let’s make sure that the program gives back to those students whether they [are employed by us in the future] or not.

However, the disadvantage is that a four-week intern program, by necessity, must be undertaken by students outside the normal semester study period. Whilst this is suitable for some students, many have part time work or other commitments which prevent them from engaging with a four-week block. Also, intake numbers are restricted and there are only a limited number of agencies that offer this type of placement.
G-2.1: Not many agencies like structured internship programs.

In order to increase the internship opportunities, it is recommended that agencies be approached to set up a second model, a one day per week program over a 20 week period (or longer), still with the aim of completing 140 intern hours. This would allow more students to experience the undoubted benefit of hands-on work experience and would encourage more agencies to be involved with the program (in particular, smaller agencies). Where it is difficult for some small agencies to assign someone to mentor a student for four consecutive weeks, or to construct a special intern education program, a regular one day per week internship would be more feasible. Exposure to agency operations over a longer period of time would allow interns to experience the full campaign development, from brief through to implementation, rather than to ‘work’ on a particular project for just one month. It is envisaged that this would be a paid apprenticeship-type position and the student would be expected to contribute to work in the agency, albeit initially in a support role. The intern’s contribution would increase as the student became familiar with the work and would therefore become increasingly beneficial to both the agency and the student.

A3. There is the suggestion that the degree includes a six-month period of actually working [in agencies] or marketing departments. I think that we are required as an industry [to pay] a token salary. That’s probably more the way I see it, the same as with medical interns. They are on lowly salaries but that experience is vital.

The approach to industry to set up and formalise these programs would be the remit of the Sector Body, as outlined above.

5.4.4. Employability expectations of graduates and industry

This study has substantiated that a lot of the strategies universities are employing are effective and appreciated by the industry; university marcoms programs in the main are producing good quality graduates. However, the gap that is not being adequately addressed is the transition from university to employment and the expectations of entry level graduates; the transition from the last year of the degree to the first year of employment. Many graduates enter into industry
expecting to be making decisions of consequence and to have responsibilities beyond their knowledge and experience and so are subsequently disenchanted.

Pushed by technology, the marcoms industry is constantly evolving and there is continual change in terms of roles, responsibilities and skills sets. The literature found that converging communication platforms were leading to organisational transformation and creating different challenges for communication professionals (Capozzi & Zipfel, 2012; Mazzei, 2014; Spradling et al., 2014). University degree programs do not always have the flexibility to respond to these changes – in part because they are subject to them themselves. Therefore, there is and will continue to be, a slight disengage between the industry and the academy. Universities should develop a methodology whereby a much closer relationship with the industry is built into their programs. It has already been recommended that a formal or semi-formal program involving practitioner input be incorporated into the curriculum – however, this would be mutually beneficial, in that this exchange would see industry practitioners coming into universities on a regular basis to talk to students, where extant industry knowledge can be cross fertilised with the knowledge of a generation of the most savvy users of new media and technology. This point will be further discussed shortly.

The appropriate industry bodies, for example The Communications Council, the Media Federation of Australia and the Public Relations Institute of Australia, could be approached to give advice in the setting up of an integrated, unified education program. This could take the form of funded, formally scheduled touring visits by high profile industry practitioners to present guest lectures to students. Topics could include current industry trends, roles and responsibilities, job opportunities and industry expectations of entry level graduates. This would also help graduates clarify their own intended career paths which this study has indicated is something not always evident at the time of graduation.

Although this research has identified that there is a willingness by employers to make this input into degree programs, to ‘give back’, it must also be accepted that there would need to be suitable recognition and acknowledgement of their input.

A2. The more time that the students can spend with guest lectures from people in the industry and spend time in the industry, actively involved, I think the more job ready they will be when they leave their studies. I would love to give any guest lectures you would like me to.
A10: People around this office would be happy to come in and talk about workplace etiquette, and what happens when you’re a new employee, and would be very candid about it. I definitely think people within the industry if presented with the option would take it up.

A1: I think getting us involved in your program is without doubt [really valuable]. Reach out to the people who are actually running the companies and invite them to come and get more involved.

Such a program would also include scheduled presentations to current students by recently graduated employees. ‘Peer to peer’ communication, in a guest lecture or workshop, about the realities of the transition from university to the workplace, and the real roles and responsibilities at entry level, would significantly benefit final year students and would help to clarify their expectations.

G-2.1: If someone came back and said “Look it’s actually a tough change to go from uni to full time work, here’s something I did that helped me”. It confirms what the lecturer is saying is relevant and supports the stuff that you’re learning at uni is important for a reason. A peer to peer point-of-view would give you that little bit more realistic side as well, so you can maybe marry the two together.

This education initiative should be jointly developed, costed and funded. It would be in the interests of all parties – the academy, employers and their industry bodies – if graduates had more realistic expectations, clearer career path objectives and a more current view of industry trends as they enter employment.

5.4.5. Expanding graduate outcomes

Cited by employers as valuable attributes in graduates were the new thinking, creativity and enthusiastic passion they bring to the industry. New graduates enter industry with fresh, open minds, bring with them creativity in terms of strategic thinking and developing a point of view, as well as (in many cases) an understanding of, and familiarity with, new and innovative communications methods and technologies. They are not conditioned to delivering predictable,
obvious solutions to problems and these traits are highly commended by employers as they can sometimes lead to break-through work.

A7: Sometimes from the grads you want the crazy, out there idea that is just so big and so crazy that it ends up forming a campaign in and of itself... There’s plenty of industry stories and tales where massive global Cannes-winning campaigns came from the intern in the office. That is quite an invigorating thing from an agency because it gets everybody else excited around them because, as you know, passion is very much contagious.

Universities should aim to expand these attributes in graduates. Whilst the marcoms industry is moving and developing at a rapid rate, so too are the minds of the new generation of young talent. The literature identifies that the graduates of tomorrow will need very different skills sets to those they need to day (Clark, 2013; McIntyre, 2014). However, we must also consider that many emerging graduates are also engaged at the forefront of new technologies and new media. Their lives revolve around these every day.

It is recommended that, within the framework of the formal industry education program outlined above, interactive workshops with students and industry practitioners be scheduled. Facilitating an exchange of ideas between industry and students, before they graduate, would allow graduates an opportunity to ‘play and experiment’, to develop their thinking ‘outside the box’ and to formulate their as yet untarnished ideas. Interactive workshops with industry practitioners would guide student thinking without inhibiting their creativity.

However, this must not be one-way, it is important that a two-way flow between practitioners and undergraduate students be created. Current students have an uninhibited, fresh approach to the world. They have new learning and knowledge to apply to as yet unknown concepts and their free thinking must be encouraged. Students would be offered the opportunity to develop new ideas and to present these to the industry practitioners in these workshops. They would be encouraged to experiment with ‘blue-sky’ projects, projects that would give them the opportunity to apply their skills to unthought-of ideas, things that might not (as yet) have commercial application but certainly could in the future. This would allow universities to be proactive in developing and encouraging new thinking (particularly around new technologies), thus promoting a position of leadership with
industry. This is something that students can offer to industry that industry often overlooks. Industry has the expectation that graduates will come in and fit the mould, but it is what they bring that is ‘outside the box’, outside the mould, that they can showcase to industry through this model before they even graduate.

Universities must continue to develop the broad skills and competencies whilst not limiting students’ potential. By offering students the added stimuli from industry practitioners, it would allow them to respond to real world input whilst still under the ‘protection’ of their university student status. By offering students the opportunity to develop ‘blue-sky’ projects to showcase to industry, this would also encourage undergraduates to learn how to develop and put forward the breakthrough ideas that will differentiate them in the increasingly competitive workplace. This is not necessarily a change in how universities are teaching, rather it is broadening the role of practice to positively influence not only the academic development in graduates but their creative thinking capacity. It also highlights that undergraduate students can actually give a great deal to industry and promotes the benefits of their university learning and achievements in a very positive way.

5.5. Future research

As a result of this research study, it has become clear that there is a need to further investigate the attitudes of marcoms graduates now working in the industry. The views of both new and longer term graduates require further investigation as indicated in the Limitations of Research Design, in particular because it is this group who have the most immediate experience of the study to work transition. Unfortunately, in this study, they were also very difficult to engage and response rates were low. Even so, a study comprising both quantitative and qualitative data would help to clarify their attitudes in relation to achieving optimum employability and the roles universities and practice play in the transition.

Having investigated the opinions of marcoms industry practitioners and industry bodies, future research could build on this by exploring the opinions of national advertisers, the clients of the marcoms agencies. Their opinions would address any gap in expectations between client and agency and ensure that optimum graduate attributes and competencies reflect the view of all stakeholders. The influence of the client in the marcoms industry is paramount, the very future of agencies
depends on clients’ needs. Such a study would also allow investigation into potential collaboration between universities and national advertisers to provide learning opportunities to optimise employability from the client side, such as internships and other WIL strategies and possible practitioner input to programs.

5.6. Conclusion

The roles of university and practice in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications have been examined in this study. Sadly, there is no definitive answer to the focal question *who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?* However, based on the responses to this study, it is quite clear that marcoms graduates benefit from learning theory, discipline skills and soft skills during their university degree and, when this is supplemented by essential additional training and up-skilling through engagement with practice, they achieve a much higher level of employability and work-readiness.

Increasing students’ exposure to industry input during their undergraduate university degree will benefit both the academy and the industry through cross-fertilisation of knowledge and ideas. It will also help to set more realistic expectations of graduates’ roles and responsibilities in the workplace. Blending the boundaries between study and practice will not only further develop graduate employability attributes, particularly in the areas of creativity and fresh, new ‘outside the box’ thinking, but will provide additional benefit to industry in terms of access to new ways of thinking and earlier access to new forms of communication.

Creating a University Sector Body to liaise with industry and to develop more partnership and collaborative opportunities would increase and embellish industry experience possibilities for more students during study. This Body would also create a strong voice for the academy to promote the benefits of tertiary education in marcoms to the industry, the public and to government and business more generally, as well as acting as a host for post-graduate education information.

Marcoms is a vibrant and exciting industry attracting talented, creative people. Rapid change means everyone must be on their toes and this necessitates keeping up with new technology, new media and new forms of communication. Keeping
 abreast of the industry can be likened to Alice and the Queen, running and running through *The Garden of Live Flowers* and not getting anywhere in Lewis Carrol’s *Through the Looking Glass*. No matter how fast they run, they just stay in the same place. As the Queen said to Alice, “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!” (Carroll, 1871).

The marcoms industry is still growing and changing and becoming increasingly important in so many ways. Its influence today is enormous. Consider Donald Trump’s campaign – owned, earned, shared and paid media: paid advertising, PR, Twitter, other social media, point of sale, out of home, experiential and more. Probably the best planned and managed marcoms political campaign in recent history. What it achieved for Donald Trump cannot be doubted; without it he would probably never have become the President of the United States of America. Whether or not this was a good or bad thing remains to be seen. The graduates of tomorrow will be faced with even more challenges than they are now. Today, marcoms is the frontier to a whole new world.

Universities can teach marcoms graduates to run, but only engagement with practice can teach them to run twice as fast – which is what they must be able to do to succeed in the workplace. The industry of the future needs talented, smart, knowledgeable, creative people. Together, academia and practice can meet those challenging needs.
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Appendices

Appendix 1

PREPARING UNIVERSITY GRADUATES FOR A CAREER IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS:
EXAMINING THE ROLES OF UNIVERSITIES AND PRACTICE.

Interview Guide – Anne Llewellynn

1. Context of Interviewee

As you were advised in the Research Project Information Sheet and have agreed, I am recording this conversation; I am starting the recording now. For the purpose of transcription, could you please state if you are (read appropriate):

- An employer or supervisor of graduated university students and identify the type of agency (e.g. creative, media, experiential, digital, public relations); or

- A university graduate who has been working in the marketing communications industry for less than two years (please state the name of the university, your degree qualification, plus your current role and type of the agency you work for); or

- A university graduate who has been working in the marketing communications industry for more than two years (please state the name of the university, your degree qualification, plus your current role and type of the agency you work for); or

- A spokesperson for a professional industry body.

2. Purpose of the study
This research study is intended to critically examine the many roles played by universities and industry in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications (marcoms). The research question this study specifically addresses is: “Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?” In other words, what skills and knowledge are best delivered by the university and what should the contribution and role of industry be?

The overall aim of this study is to investigate potential gaps in the employability skills of graduates entering the marcoms industry and to determine whether existing university courses adequately prepare graduates. The study will gather the views of practitioners, professional bodies and marketing communications university graduates, in order to determine what they see as the appropriate roles of universities, employers and industry in preparing graduates for employment.

3. Understanding of the terms work-ready/ industry-ready and employability skills

To clarify the terms to be used in this interview, a literature review was undertaken to identify the generic skills that employers are seeking in graduates if they are to be considered work-ready at entry-level. These generic skills are in addition to the discipline-specific competencies students attain from their university coursework. Graduate attributes that are work-related are often described as employability skills. Work-readiness, or employability, is defined by Mason, Williams & Cranmer (2009, p. 1) as “possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives soon after commencing employment”. A student possessing a combination of these attributes is often described as being “ready to hit the ground running”.

QUESTIONS:

4. Do current university degrees prepare graduates to be work-ready/ industry-ready?
**Employers:**

(a) Do you feel the entry-level university graduates you have employed were work-ready when they started working for your organisation? Please explain your response or why/why not (as appropriate).

(b) If a graduate was not work-ready, what could or might have been done to address this outcome?

**Graduates:**

(a) Do you feel that your university degree gave you the knowledge and skills you needed to be work-ready? Please explain your response or why/why not (as appropriate).

(b) If you did not feel you were work-ready, what could or might have been done to address this outcome?

**Industry bodies:**

(a) Do you feel universities prepare graduates to be work-ready when they enter the industry? Please explain your response or why/why not (as appropriate).

(b) If you do not feel universities prepare graduates to be work-ready, what could or might have been done to address this outcome?

5. Brief summary of claims by the academy and the industry commentators

(a) Many universities aim to teach employability skills in their courses however industry commentators often report university graduates are not ‘work-ready’ when they commence employment. Could you please comment on this?

(b) In Australia, a number of universities have industry accreditation for their courses and programs. They incorporate contemporary trends and knowledge into their degree programs through close and continuous consultation with their industry partners. Many incorporate work-integrated learning (WIL), including internships and engagement with the marketing communications industry in partnered projects, working with real clients through on-campus student marcoms agencies, plus other authentic learning and practice-based education strategies, with the objective of producing work-ready graduates. Could you comment on whether you feel these strategies contribute to graduates’ employability?

6. Desirable key employability attributes in graduates
(a) What do you consider the key desirable entry-level graduate employability attributes for your organisation?

(b) The literature review identified some examples of generic skills frameworks; commonly cited items included:

- the ability to work in a team;
- oral and written communication skills;
- interpersonal skills;
- the ability to interact with others.

Also commonly referred to were:

- problem solving;
- leadership skills;
- self-management;
- ability to work under pressure;
- information & communication technology skills;
- literacy & numeracy.


(c) Could you comment on the importance to you/ your organisation of these generic skills as part of being desirable employability attributes?

(d) Were they evident in entry-level university graduates at commencement of their employment? (Recap examples if necessary; the majority of these interviews will be conducted by phone so hard copy lists cannot be provided during interview.)

(e) In your experience, are some of these skills developed post-graduation in the workplace? Could you please give some examples?

7. Perceived gap in graduates’ employability skills between university and commencing employment

(a) Do you feel university degrees fully prepare graduates for employment?

(b) What are the strengths which are evident?
(c) Do some universities address this better than others? Could you please give examples? What are the main differences?

(d) Were there any employability skills lacking in entry level graduates in your organisation? (If yes) what do you feel were the most important?

(e) Should these skills be better addressed in university courses? How might this be achieved?

(f) If they are not addressed in university courses, how else might employability skills in graduates be improved?

8. Discipline-specific qualifications

(a) Do you consider a breadth of discipline-specific skills beneficial or important to improve employability of marcoms graduates – e.g. PR, advertising, digital, data mining & analysis or other skills? Are some skills more important than others?

(b) How important are the discipline-specific qualifications gained during university courses for graduate employability?

9. Role of stakeholders in developing employability skills

(a) Do you consider universities should be responsible for developing employability skills? Could you elaborate, e.g. which skills? What areas need strengthening? How might this be addressed?

(b) Should universities be solely responsible for developing work-ready employees?

(c) Do you consider employers/ industry should play a role in developing employability skills? Could you please elaborate, e.g. which skills should employers be responsible for developing? How might this be addressed?

(d) Do you consider industry bodies could play a role in developing employability skills? Could you please elaborate, e.g. how could professional industry organisations contribute to the development of these skills? What roles could they play?

(e) (If not already addressed) Do you consider graduate programs play a role in developing employability skills? Any graduate programs in particular?
(f) What role, if any, do you consider formal post graduate education (e.g. graduate programs) could or should play in developing employability skills? What other forms might this take?

(g) How could the roles of universities, industry and industry bodies be more clearly defined in developing graduates’ employability skills?

10. Does the current system best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employment?

(a) Is the current method of educating marcoms graduates the best possible to them for optimum employment?

(b) Do you feel the current system can be improved upon?

(c) What is the main thing you would change? How?

11. Do you have any other comments or suggestions for improvement in developing graduates’ employability?

References:


Appendix 2

Low Risk Ethics Application Form

Reference Number: ____ / ____ / ____

Instructions for completing this form:
For detailed explanations about how to complete each section of this form, place cursor on the next to the title of the section, and then press the “Ctrl” key and click. If you wish to unprotect the form, click on “Restrict Editing” in the “Review” tab, then click “Stop Protection” (N.B. it is easier to complete the form if protection is on).

PART 1 – Basic Details

1.1 Project title:
PREPARING UNIVERSITY GRADUATES FOR A CAREER IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS: EXAMINING THE ROLES OF UNIVERSITIES AND PRACTICE.

1.2 Ethical clearance dates:
From: 2-Mar-15 To: 31-Dec-16

1.3 Contact person:
Name (Title, First name, Last name): Anne Llewellynn
School / Organisational unit: School of Communication & Creative Industries Faculty of Arts and Business
Email address: a_l074@student.usc.edu.au; allewellynn@csu.edu.au
Contact phone number: 0417659477
USC Student number: 1083204

PART 2 – Prior Review

2.1 Prior review:
Has this project previously been reviewed and approved by another ethical review body? □ Yes □ No

2.2 Previously collected negligible risk, non-identifiable human data:
Do you wish to access previously collected data containing only non-identifiable data about human beings, in a project that can be described as a negligible risk project? □ Yes □ No
PART 3 – Matters requiring Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Review

3.1 Matters requiring HREC review:

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<th>Type of Research</th>
<th>Impact</th>
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<td>☐ Yes ☒ No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stem cell research, involving work with identified samples</td>
<td>☐ Yes ☒ No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research which could have a negative impact upon the pregnancy of a participant and / or a foetus</td>
<td>☐ Yes ☒ No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potential participants who are highly dependent on medical care, unconscious or otherwise unable to consent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potential participants who are cognitively impaired, or have a mental health condition, and so unable to consent</td>
<td>☐ Yes ☒ No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research intended to study or expose illegal activity or likely to discover it</td>
<td>☐ Yes ☒ No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clinical trials or clinical interventions</td>
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PART 4 – Risk Assessment

This section of the form provides a general guide to the level of review required for this research. Depending upon your answers to the risk assessment questions below, the guidelines for this question will indicate the minimum level of review required for the research. In some cases, this will indicate that a project still requires full HREC review. Click on the question mark for a full explanation.

4.1 Risk assessment:

In the table below, rate the impact and chance of risk using the following letters:

- X = No risk
- N = No more than minimal risk
- L = Low risk
- G = Greater than low risk

Rate both impact of harm (if it were to occur) and chance of risk occurring.

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic risks</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal risks</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Detail of risks:

4.2.1 Identify the initial risks that you considered were important to address in your research design:

1. Confidentiality and anonymity or all research participants;
2. Consent;
3. Some respondents may be graduated students who were taught at Charles Sturt University (CSU) by the Chief Investigator. Personal relationships between the Chief Investigator and the participants may influence the likelihood of participants’ responses being influenced by the identity of the Chief Investigator. The CSU graduates may feel imposed upon when asked to give the time to be interviewed and to participate, or obliged to participate given a perceived previous power relationship between Chief Investigator and the graduate;

4. It is possible participants may include those from Aboriginal background.

4.2.2 Explain the strategies used to negate or minimise those initial risks occurring:

1. Agency executives, industry partners, employees or members of professional industry bodies and industry employees/ university graduates will be made aware of the voluntary nature of the research in the Research Project Information Sheet. They will further be made aware of the measures adopted to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in the Research Project Information Sheet and will be aware that they are free to withdraw from the research at any time throughout the study. All data will be assigned a pseudonym (interview transcripts) and referred to by code rather than using personal identifying data in both the analysis and publication phase. No identifying characteristics will appear in potential research publications. Agencies/employers will be coded A1, A2 etc., graduates will be coded G-2:1, G-2:2 for graduates with less than two years in the industry, G+2:1, G+2:2 for graduates with more than two years in the industry, and IGB1, IGB2 for industry group bodies.

2. Interviewees will be fully informed of the nature and procedures of the research via an emailed Research Project Information Sheet. Participants will be fully informed of the voluntary nature of the research and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Participants in the interviewing process will be required to complete the Consent Form and return it via email to the Chief Investigator.

3. They will be made aware in the Research Project Information Sheet that they are under no obligation to partake in the research. Interviewees will be made aware of the voluntary nature of the research in the Research Project Information Sheet. They will further be made aware of the measures adopted to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in the Information Sheet and will be aware that they are free to withdraw from the research at any time throughout the study. It should also be noted that interviews will be conducted with students from a cross-section of Australian university graduates to avoid any bias.

4. In regard to this study, the researcher will not be requiring any demographic variables to be identified by participants such as cultural or language background. Participants will be invited to participate in the research, made aware of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the research at any time.

4.2.3 Identify any remaining risks that are still present in your research design, despite your attempts to minimise risks:

While all the above strategies will help to minimise risks, they will not eliminate them completely.

4.2.4 Describe your strategies to manage the harms if the remaining risks occur:
4.2.5 Explain the degree to which the anticipated benefits of the research justify any remaining risks and/or the “inconvenience” of participating in the research:

Whilst there is an inconvenience to research participants, i.e. the time factor involved in having to complete the interview, there are benefits to future marketing communications graduates, to industry and to the academy. This research study is intended to critically examine the many roles played by universities in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications (marcoms). The research question this study specifically addresses is: “Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?” In other words, what skills and knowledge are best delivered by the university and what should the contribution and role of industry be? The research aims to identify possible gaps in preparation of university graduates under the current system and potentially to suggest a model which could be employed by the academy and industry to better qualify graduates for practice. The resulting benefits would be to both graduates and the marcoms industry, as well as to tertiary educators to assist in developing future marcoms courses/ programs.

The help information associated with this application form will assist you to determine whether this proposed research requires full ethical review by the USCHREC. If it does, you should stop completing this form and instead complete a National Ethics Application Form (NEAF) for submission to the Committee. If however, it appears that the proposed project qualifies for E1(NR), E1 or E2 ethical review pathway, the following questions will help you to test this further. Click [here](#) for an explanation of these pathways.

**PART 5 – E1(NR) / E1 Test**

This section of the form determines whether a project which appears to qualify for expedited review, requires review via the E1(NR) / E1 or E2 pathways. Your answers to the questions below will determine how you move through the trigger questions. In some cases, this will indicate that a project still requires full HREC review (FR). If this occurs, stop completing the checklist, and start completing a NEAF.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.1 Third party identification: 😐</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Could third parties be able to identify participants from the disseminated results of the research?</td>
<td>☑ Yes – go to 5.1.1&lt;br&gt;☒ No – go to 5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1.1 Potential identification is problematic: 😐

| Are potential participants likely to consider this identification problematic (e.g. because of the associated risks)? | ☑ Yes – go to 6.1.1<br>☒ No – go to 5.2 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.2 Participation of minors: 😐</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will persons under the age of 18 potentially participate in the research?</td>
<td>☑ Yes – go to 5.2.1&lt;br&gt;☒ No – go to 5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.1 Outside standard educational context: 😐

| Will the participation of the young people occur outside of a standard educational context? | ☑ Yes – go to 5.2.2 |
5.2.2 Parental / guardian consent: ☐
Will a parent, or appropriate guardian, consent to the participation of the young person participants?
☐ Yes – go to 5.3
☐ No – go to 6.2.1

5.3 Unequal relationship: ☑
Is there a direct and current unequal relationship between the potential participants and a member of the research team, or with the perceived sponsor of the research?
☐ Yes – go to 5.3.1
☐ No – go to 5.4

5.3.1 Anonymous participation: ☑
Does the party with the perceived power over the potential participants know about their participation?
☐ Yes – go to 6.3.1
☐ No – go to 5.4

5.4 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander research: ☐
Does the research involve the intentional recruitment of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people or, because of the nature of the research, the probable incidental recruitment of a high proportion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people? Alternatively, does the research involve issues of established significant interest to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, in which ethical sensitivities could be substantial?
☐ Yes – FR required
☐ No – go to 5.5

5.5 Toxin, pathogen or therapeutic product: ☑
Does the research involve exposure to a human toxin, the injection of an agent, the ingestion of a substance for a therapeutic and research purpose, or exposure to a human pathogen?
☐ Yes – FR required
☐ No – go to 5.6

5.6 Tissue extraction or invasive procedure: ☑
Does the research involve the conduct of an invasive procedure or the extraction of tissue where the initial extraction has at least a partial research purpose?
☐ Yes – go to 6.6.1
☐ No – go to 5.7

5.7 Ionising radiation: ☑
Does the research involve the exposure of humans to ionising radiation?
☐ Yes – go to 5.7.1
☐ No – go to 5.8

5.7.1 Medical purpose: ☑
In addition to the research purpose for the exposure, has the exposure been prescribed, requested or otherwise initiated by a medical practitioner?
☐ Yes – go to 5.8
☐ No – go to 5.7.1.1

5.7.1.1 Medical scientists: ☑
Does the radiation physicist report indicate that the level of radiation is more than that of standard diagnostic medical x-rays, or more than the recommended dose constraints for research participants (see explanation)?
☐ Yes – FR Required
☐ No – go to 5.8
5.8 Sensitive personal information: ☑

Will sensitive personal information be disclosed, or made available, to the researchers?
☐ Yes – go to 5.8.1
☒ No – go to 5.9

5.8.1 Identified sensitive personal information: ☑

Will the researcher(s) know the identity of the individual to whom the sensitive personal information relates?
☐ Yes – go to 6.8.1
☒ No – go to 5.9

5.9 Incentive: ☑

Will participants be offered an incentive, as opposed to a reimbursement?
☐ Yes – go to 5.9.1
☒ No – go to 5.10

5.9.1 Voluntary consent: ☑

Could the incentive undermine the voluntary nature of the consent?
☐ Yes – go to 6.9.1
☒ No – go to 5.10

5.10 Limited disclosure involving deception or active concealment: ☑

Does the research involve limited disclosure in which potential participants will be intentionally deceived or subject to active concealment of important information about the research project?
☐ Yes – FR Required
☒ No – go to 5.11

5.11 Regulatory privacy: ☑

Will the research involve access to identified personal information that is subject to regulatory privacy arrangements, prior to the consent of the individuals named in those materials?
☐ Yes – FR Required
☒ No – go to 5.12

5.12 Highly unstable country or critical of an oppressive regime: ☑

Will the research be conducted in a highly unstable country and / or conducted in a country where it could be perceived as critical of an oppressive regime?
☐ Yes – FR Required
☒ No – go to 5.13

5.13 Suicide ideation or self-harm: ☑

Will the research ask participants about whether they have considered, or attempted suicide, or self-harm?
☐ Yes – go to 6.13.1
☒ No – go to Part 7

If you have moved through the questions in Part 5, without being referred to Part 6 or to a Full Review (FR) by the HREC, and if your responses to risk assessment questions in Part 4 indicated an E1(NR) or E1 ethics review pathway, then this research appears to qualify for
expedited review via either the E1(NR) or E1 pathways. Do not do Part 6. Proceed now to Part 7 to complete your application.

If you were directed to Part 6, but then were returned to Part 5, and your responses to risk assessment questions in Part 4 did not indicate that Full Review (FR) is required, then this research appears to qualify for expedited review via the E2 pathway. Do not do any remaining questions in Part 6. Proceed now to Part 7 to complete your application.

**PART 6 – E2 Test (this part is only completed if part five directs you to do so)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.1.1 Specific consent sought for identification:</th>
<th>☐ Yes – go to 5.2</th>
<th>☐ No – FR Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the informed consent process discuss the identification of participants and seek participant consent?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.2.1 Participation inappropriate for minors:</th>
<th>☐ Yes – FR Required</th>
<th>☐ No – go to 6.2.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the research involve activities, as part of the research process, which are illegal, unsafe or otherwise inappropriate for minors?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.2.2 Young person consent:</th>
<th>☐ Yes – go to 5.3</th>
<th>☐ No – FR Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is it possible to justify seeking primary consent from only the young person participants?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.3.1 Captive relationship:</th>
<th>☒ Yes – FR Required</th>
<th>☒ No – go to 6.3.1.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should the unequal relationship be described as a captive one?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.3.1.1 Strategies to address:</th>
<th>☒ Yes – go to 5.4</th>
<th>☒ No – FR Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there strategies in place to safeguard the voluntary nature of participation, and to manage any risks arising from the unequal relationship? (N.B. these strategies should be provided in section 4.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.6.1 Extraction of blood:</th>
<th>☐ Yes – go to 6.6.1.1</th>
<th>☐ No – FR Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the procedure involve the extraction of blood only (ie it involves no other tissue extraction or invasive procedure)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.6.1.1 Experienced person:</th>
<th>☐ Yes – go to 6.6.1.2</th>
<th>☐ No – FR Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will the blood be extracted by a person with appropriate training and expertise?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 6.6.1.2 Blood handling procedures: 
Will the standard precautions for the handling of blood be adhered to?

- Yes – go to 5.7
- No – FR Required

### 6.8.1 Prior warning: 
Are potential participants given forewarning that they will be asked to disclose sensitive personal information?

- Yes – go to 6.8.1.1
- No – FR Required

### 6.8.1.1 Duty to disclose:
Is there any legal, contractual, professional or moral obligation that might compel the researchers to disclose the information to third parties?

- Yes – FR Required
- No – go to 5.9

### 6.9.1 Justification:
Is it possible to justify the value of the incentive and why it should not be considered coercive?

- Yes – go to 5.10
- No – FR Required

### 6.13.1 Counselling or psychological / psychiatry experience:
Does the research team include someone with appropriate counselling, psychological or psychiatric experience?

- Yes – go to Part 7
- No – go to 6.13.1.1

### 6.13.1.1 Timely referral and support:
Is there an effective mechanism to refer participants to an appropriate source of support?

- Yes – go to Part 7
- No – FR Required

### PART 7 – Project description

#### 7.1 Project description:
Provide a project description (minimum of 100 and maximum of 1 000 words). This should provide:
- a lay description of the question / objective(s) of the research
- the research design elements intended to achieve these objectives
- what participants will experience / undertake

This research study is intended to critically examine the many roles played by universities in preparing graduates for a career in marketing communications (marcoms). The research question this study specifically addresses is: “Who should teach what in order to best prepare marketing communications graduates for optimum employability?” In other words, what skills and knowledge are best delivered by the university and what should the contribution and role of industry be?
The overall aim of this study is to investigate what is perceived by some authors (for example, Todd, 2009; Windels, Mallia & Broyles, 2013) to be a gap in the employability skills of graduates on entering the marcoms industry and to determine whether existing university courses adequately prepare students for entry into the industry. The study will gather the views of practitioners, professional bodies and marketing communications university graduates, in order to determine what they see as the appropriate roles of universities and employers in preparing graduates for employment.

The literature reviewed gives differing opinions about the roles of university, employers and industry in developing work-ready marcoms practitioners. There is the point-of-view that universities should maintain their traditional role and provide graduates with new, discipline-specific knowledge. Some scholars (for example, Gustavsson, 2013; Hasselberg et al., 2013; Muller & Young, 2014; Washer, 2007) object to what they perceive as substitution of improving and developing personal intellect, traditionally associated with higher education, with skills development, traditionally addressed by vocational education and workplace training. The benefit of industry in contributing to the development of graduates’ employability skills is supported by many scholars and debated by others (for example, Andrews & Higson, 2008; Barrie, 2011; Cranmer, 2006; Oliver, Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009; Oliver, Tucker, Jones, & Ferns, 2007). The benefits of WIL, internships and work experience, authentic learning projects involving ‘real’ clients and other real-world learning opportunities, including international experiences, have been investigated and, in the main, endorsed as beneficial in preparing graduates for employability. There is the opportunity to more thoroughly investigate these areas in relation to marcoms graduates. Several universities do claim to teach employability skills through their marketing communications or media studies courses with various work-integrated learning and authentic learning strategies (for example, Charles Sturt University, 2014; Edith Cowan University, 2014; University of Canberra, 2014; University of the Sunshine Coast, 2014; University of Technology, 2014; University of Western Sydney, 2014). However, there is no clear consensus as to what role industry and practice should play; whether universities should incorporate generic skills development into marcoms courses or if these skills should be taught by industry or others.

This study will gather the views of practitioners, professional bodies and marketing communications graduates, to determine what they see as the appropriate roles of universities and employers to prepare graduates for employability.

Four areas of interest will be addressed by the data collected. These areas of interest constitute the overarching aims of the study:

1. To identify any key skills gaps in marcoms graduates, between graduation and employability, as perceived by marcoms industry employers.
2. To identify any key skills gaps in marcoms graduates, between graduation and employability, as perceived by the key marcoms industry professional bodies.
3. To identify any key skills gaps in marcoms graduates, between graduation and employability, as perceived by graduates.
4. To identify the role each stakeholder, including universities, employers and key marcoms industry bodies, might take in addressing any employability skills gaps between university and practice.

The methodology will be a qualitative study, grounded theory style approach (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In this study, the sample has been identified and will be selected in advance of the data collection. It will be conducted in four phases:
1. The marketing communications industry – employers of graduates. A representative sample of ten (10) executives from a suitable mix of creative, media, experiential, digital and public relations agencies;

2. The professional marketing communications industry bodies (one key spokesperson from each body) including Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA), Media Federation of Australia (MFA), The Communications Council, Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) and International Advertising Association (IAA);

3. Phases three and four will each seek to interview ten (10) graduates from a representative group of universities, currently employed in the marcoms industry. Phase three – graduates who have been working in the industry for two or less years;

4. Phase four, graduates who have been working in the industry for more than two years.

This study will employ data collection through a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants. Interviewees will be invited to participate in the research study by email. A copy of the Research Project Information Sheet and a Consent Form will be emailed to all participants. The Information Sheet will fully detail the nature and procedures of the research and invite participants to either email or telephone the Chief Investigator if they have questions regarding the research or their involvement in the research. The Consent Form will be signed and returned by the participants via email to the Chief Investigator.

The interviews will be conducted one-on-one, either face-to-face, by phone or via Skype, and will be digitally recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service. Data will be analysed using inter- and intra-textual thematic analysis (Maykurt & Morehouse, 1994) and will be coded to identify categories and phenomena, and development of a theory (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding university education outcomes and graduate employability in the marketing communications field. The study will have the limitation that the findings may not be generalizable given the size of the sample. However, by selecting interviewees across a range of relevant practitioner, industry bodies and graduate stakeholders, the study seeks to make the sample representative. The voices of the two graduate groups will be less representative than those of industry and this will be considered when analysing findings.

The findings will help identify potential areas of study to be undertaken in a further research project. Future areas of investigation could explore the specific limitations raised by this study and could also guide further investigation into implementation of recommendations.

7.2 Researcher expertise: 🌐

List the relevant qualifications, experiences and / or skills of the research team which equip them to conduct this research (maximum of 200 words). In the case of student research, the response to this question must also discuss the supervisory team and any matters where the student will need extra training and / or support.

The researcher, Anne Llewellynn, is employed as a full time academic (Lecturer in Advertising) at Charles Sturt University (CSU). She has also had more than twenty five years’ experience in the marketing communications industry as a practitioner. She holds a Graduate
Certificate in University Learning & Teaching (CSU). She has conducted research resulting in publication of two papers for which she was Chief Investigator in the second:


Anne is experienced in data collection methods using semi-structured in-depth interviews. This methodology was included in research for the above paper.

This research study is a requirement for preparation of a thesis for the degree Master of Arts, Faculty of Arts & Business, University of the Sunshine Coast.

The supervisors are:

Associate Professor Rod McCulloch, Principal Supervisor ([rmccullo@usc.edu.au](mailto:rmccullo@usc.edu.au))

Dr Ian White ([IWhite@usc.edu.au](mailto:IWhite@usc.edu.au))

Dr Vikki Schaffer ([VSchaffe@usc.edu.au](mailto:VSchaffe@usc.edu.au))

Relevant USC Research Essentials programs for HDR students have been attended by the researcher.

### 7.3 Participants:

Provide details (maximum of 300 words) in relation to the potential participant pool, including:

- target participant group
- identification of potential participants
- initial contact method
- recruitment method

Enclose with your application any recruitment text (e.g. advertisements, flyers, letters, emails), and (if relevant) permissions or endorsements of the research project by organisations which allow you to access these participants.

**Target participant group & identification of potential participants.**

The study will carry out semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants drawn from four groups:

1. The marketing communications industry – employers of graduates. A representative sample of ten executives from a suitable mix of creative, media, experiential, digital and public relations agencies. These will be selected from key, high profile agencies with whom I have professional industry connections. They will be approached direct by me. These will include:
   
   Creative agencies – Clemenger BBDO Sydney & Clemenger Group; George Patterson Y&R, Ogilvy, BMF Advertising, M&C Saatchi and others similar;

   Media agencies – UM (IPG Mediabrands Australia), OMD (OMD Worldwide, Omnicom Group), TMS Group, Group M, PHD and others similar, plus Carolyn Maloney, Talent & People consultant, MAD People;

   Digital agencies – M3W Advertising, Devotion Digital, Tribal Worldwide (DDB Group), Mediacom (Group M) and others similar;
Experiential agencies – Momentum Worldwide Australia, Maverick, Traffik (Clemenger Group), Fuse Sydney (OMD) and others similar;

Public relations agencies – Primary Communication, Edelman PR and others similar;

2. Professional marcoms industry bodies. A spokesperson from each of the five key industry bodies with whom I already have professional industry connections and contact details; they will be approached direct by me:

Australian Association of National Advertisers;
Media Federation of Australia;
The Communications Council;
Public Relations Institute of Australia;
International Advertising Association.

3. Ten graduates from a representative group of universities, currently employed in the marcoms industry, who have been working in the industry for two or less years. Graduates will be recruited from a cross-section of Australian universities to avoid any bias. Initial contact will be made by me to Charles Sturt University (CSU) graduates who are known to me (and for whom I have contact details) to request them to participate in the research study. I will also request them to suggest graduates from other universities who are known to them or with whom they work who may be willing to participate. I will then follow the recruitment method detailed below. I have developed a separate recruitment email to be sent to CSU graduates which is attached to this LREF.

4. Ten graduates from a representative group of universities, currently employed in the marcoms industry, who have been working in the industry for more than two years. Graduates will be recruited from a cross-section of Australian universities to avoid any bias. Initial contact will be made by me to Charles Sturt University (CSU) graduates who are known to me (and for whom I have contact details) to request them to participate in the research study. I will also request them to suggest graduates from other universities who are known to them or with whom they work who may be willing to participate. I will then follow the recruitment method detailed below. I have developed a separate recruitment email to be sent to CSU graduates which is attached to this LREF.

Initial contact & recruitment method.

Participants will be contacted by email initially to ascertain interest in taking part in the study. In the email invitation, each contact will be informed of the steps to ensure the anonymity of their answers. They will receive a detailed Research Project Information Sheet and will be required to sign a Consent Form.

7.4 Data:

Provide details in relation to the data collection, including:

- method
- location
- duration of participation (ie how long it takes participants to complete questionnaires, attend interviews etc)
- analysis
Enclose with your application a copy of any surveys, interview questions or testing protocols, or at least a sample which gives a sense of the most sensitive or intrusive line of questioning.

**NB. Consent forms will be kept separately from the individual data.**

**Method.**
Semi-structured in-depth interviews using an interview guide prepared by the Chief Investigator in order to give direction to the interview. The interviews will be conducted one-on-one, either face-to-face or by phone or Skype, and will be digitally recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service. The interviewee's name will not be used in the recorded interview as a step to protect the person's identity. In the email invitation to participate, each contact will be informed of the steps to ensure the anonymity of their answers. A copy of the Research Project Information Sheet and a Consent Form will be emailed to all participants. The Information Sheet will fully detail the nature and procedures of the research and invite participants to either email or telephone the researcher if they have questions regarding the research or their involvement in the research. The Consent Form will be signed and returned by the participants via email to the researcher.

**Location.**
Interviews will be conducted in the Sydney metropolitan area (NSW) or by phone or Skype.

**Duration.**
Interviews will be 45 minutes.

**Analysis.**
The data will be analysed after each phase to allow constant comparison. Data will be analysed using inter- and intra-textual thematic analysis (Maykurt & Morehouse, 1994). Once the audio files from the interviews have been transcribed the data will be coded into categories using four steps:

- **Open coding** (dissecting the data into discrete fragments);
- **Axial coding** (making links between codes and grouping conceptually similar data to form categories);
- **Selective coding** (selecting a core category and relating it to other categories);

(Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 137)

- **Development of a theory.**

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2010)

**7.4.1 Data storage, disposal and future use:**
Provide details of data storage and disposal, and indicate whether you intend to use the data collected in this project in future research projects, or make it available for use by other researchers.

During the study, interview recordings and transcriptions will be password protected on the Chief Investigator's Charles Sturt University 'P' (personal) drive which is computer accessible and is backed up twice daily. A backup copy of all digital records will also be stored on a password protected USB drive which will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the Chief Investigator's CSU office.

A further backup copy will also be stored on a password protected USB drive which will be kept in a locked filing cabinet with the principal supervisor, Associate Professor Rod McCulloch, at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

After the study is completed, computer files will be deleted and any copies of paper transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Chief Investigator's CSU office. The data collected in this research project will not be used in future research projects nor will it be made available for use by other researchers.

**7.4.2 Identifiability of data:**
The information collected by the research team from participants will be in the following form(s):

Note: You can select more than one option and provide an explanation (e.g., for voice recordings)

☑ Identifiable ☑ Re-identifiable ☐ Non-identifiable

Details:
The interviews will be conducted one-on-one, either face-to-face, by phone or via Skype, and will be digitally recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service. The interviewees will be identifiable at the time of collection during the interview process. The interviewee’s name will not be used in the recorded interview as a step to protect the person’s identity. All data will be assigned a pseudonym (interview transcripts) and referred to by code rather than using personal identifying data in both the analysis and publication phase. No identifying characteristics will appear in potential research publications. Names of employers, marcoms agencies, businesses or professional industry organisations will not be identified. Agencies/employers will be coded A1, A2 etc., graduates will be coded G-2:1, G-2:2 etc. for graduates with less than two years in the industry, G+2:1, G+2:2 etc. for graduates with more than two years in the industry, and industry group bodies will be coded IGB1, IGB2 etc.

The information about participants reported / published / disseminated in the public domain will be in the following form(s):

☐ Identifiable ☑ Re-identifiable ☐ Non-identifiable

Details:
No person’s individual name and no business names or organisation names will be reported, published or disseminated in the public domain.

The information about participants stored at the end of the project will be in the following form(s):

☐ Identifiable ☑ Re-identifiable ☐ Non-identifiable

Details:
Personal interview data will have identifiers removed and replaced by a code as outlined in 7.4.2. As indicated, this material will be securely stored and will be accessible by the Chief Investigator only. Interview recordings and soft copies of transcripts will be stored in a password protected folder on the researcher’s CSU ‘P’ drive, accessible via computer and on the USC ‘R’ drive. A backup copy of all digital records will also be stored on a password protected USB drive which will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the Chief Investigator’s CSU office. Any hard copy of transcripts will be coded and stored under codes only in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office. These will not be re-identifiable.

7.5 Informed consent:

Provide details of the appropriate informed consent procedure, including when this occurs, and attach a copy of any informed consent materials (including the Research Project Information Sheet).

Potential participants will be invited to take part in the research by email; each contact will be informed of the steps to ensure the anonymity of their answers. A copy of the Research Project Information Sheet and a Consent Form will be emailed to all participants. The Research Project Information Sheet will fully detail the nature and procedures of the research and invite participants to either email or telephone the researcher if they have questions regarding the research or their involvement in the research. The Consent Form will be signed.
and returned by the participants via email to the researcher prior to the commencement of their interview.

7.6 Dissemination of results:

The research will be reported in a thesis being prepared for the degree of Master of Arts to be submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Business, University of the Sunshine Coast. Once submitted and graded, it will be accessible online. Results may also be presented at external or internal conferences or meetings, or by publication.

7.6.1 Provision of results to participants:

Participants will not specifically be provided results of this research. Once it is publicly accessible online they will be advised of access details.

References:

Evaluation and Assessment Conference: Assessment and evaluation for real world learning, November 2007, Brisbane.


# PART 8 – Members of the Research Team

USC researchers should list USC email addresses below. If team members are supervisors of students doing this research as part of their academic program, indicate this, and specify the principal supervisor.

## 8.1 Chief Investigator:

| Title: | Ms |
| Family Name: | Llewellyn |
| Given Name(s): | Anne |
| Relevant Qualifications: | GradCert (Univ Learning & Teaching), Charles Sturt |
| Contact Address: | 44 Opperman Way, Windradyne, Bathurst, NSW 2795, Australia |
| Email Address: | a_l074@student.usc.edu.au; allewellynn@csu.edu.au |
| Contact Phone number: | 0417659477 |
| USC Student number: | 1083204 |
| Role in the research team: | Chief Investigator/researcher (only the Chief Investigator will have direct contact with participants or potential participants). |

## 8.2 Other team members:

| Title: | Head of School, School of Communication & Creative Industries  
Associate Professor in Creative Advertising |
| Family Name: | McCulloch |
| Given Name(s): | Roderick |
| Relevant Qualifications: | DComm, Charles Sturt  
MMktg, Charles Sturt  
GradCert (Univ Leadership & Mgt), Charles Sturt |
| Contact Address: | University of the Sunshine Coast  
90 Sippy Downs Drive  
Sippy Downs, Queensland, 4556 Australia |
| Email Address: | rmccullo@usc.edu.au |
| Contact Phone number: | +61 7 5459 4867 |
| USC Staff number: | |
| Role in the research team: | Principal Supervisor |

| Title: | Doctor |
| Family Name: | White |
| Given Name(s): | Ian |
| Relevant Qualifications: | PhD, James Cook  
BA James Cook  
Dip Teach Kelvin Grove CAE |
PART 9 – Declarations

9.1 Contact person: 🌎

We, the research team for this project, confirm that all members of the research team have read relevant sections of the current edition of the "National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research" and the USC Research Ethics "Guidelines". We accept responsibility for the ethical and appropriate conduct of the procedures detailed in this Application Form, confirm that we will conduct this project in accordance with the principles contained in the National Statement and the Research Ethics Guidelines, and confirm that the research team will comply with any other condition laid down by the USC Human Research Ethics Committee.

Having completed this application form, I believe that this project qualifies for (tick one box):

- [x] Expedited Ethical Review Level 1 (Negligible Risk)
- [ ] Expedited Ethical Review Level 1
- [ ] Expedited Ethical Review Level 2

9.1.1 Student research: 🌎

Is this project student research as part of an academic program?
- [x] Yes – Specify academic program: Master of Arts
- [ ] No
### 9.1.2 Funded:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes/No with Specify</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is this project funded research?</td>
<td>☑ Yes – Specify: Research Training Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 9.1.3 Conflict of interest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes/No with Specify</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is a declaration in relation to pecuniary or other potential conflict of interest required?</td>
<td>☑ Yes – Specify:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 9.1.4 Signatures of research team:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signed:</th>
<th>Date: 23 / 01 / 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Print Name: Anne Llewellynn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signed:</th>
<th>Date: <em>27</em> / <em>01</em> / <em>2015</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Print Name: Associate Professor Roderick McCulloch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signed:</th>
<th>Date: <em>28</em> / <em>01</em> / <em>2015</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Print Name: Dr Ian White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contact person, all principal researchers and supervisors, and students doing the research as part of their course must sign this application form. Attach additional sheets as required. Emails confirming the above to humanethics@usc.edu.au are accepted if signing is difficult.

### 9.2 Faculty Authorising Officer:

This part of the form is completed and signed by a Faculty representative – either the Executive Dean, the Head of School, or the Associate Dean (Research). In the Faculty of Arts and Business, a Faculty Human Research Ethics Peer Advisor can act as the Authorising Officer (see explanation).

*I have considered this application and recommend it for ethical review. I confirm that the qualifications and experience of all investigators are appropriate to the study to be undertaken, and the necessary resources are available to enable this research to be conducted.*

### 9.2.1 Research merit:

**The project has been considered to have research merit by the following process:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ A University process (eg confirmation of candidature, internal competitive grant)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
☐ An external process (eg competitive grant)
☐ A Peer Reviewer – Name:
   *If this is likely to be an E2 review, also supply the actual peer review with your application*

### 9.2.1.1 Additional review required: ☐

I believe further independent and expert review of the merit of this research is required.

☐ Yes ☐ No

### 9.2.2 Research safety: ☐

*My view with regards to the safety of this research is (please answer yes to at least one of the below):*

- ☐ It does not warrant consideration for this research
- ☐ It has been considered by a University process (workplace health and safety)
- ☐ The Authorising Officer is satisfied regarding safety levels
- ☐ Yet to be considered

### 9.2.2.1 Additional review required: ☐

I believe further independent and expert review of the safety of this research is required.

☐ Yes ☐ No

### 9.2.3 Signature of Faculty Authorising Officer:

Signed _____________________________ Date: _____ / _____ / ______

Print Name ____________________________

### 9.2.3.1 Comments / concerns of Faculty Authorising Officer (if required):

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

PART 10 – Checklist
Use of this checklist is **optional**, however it will assist researchers in submitting a complete ethics application and may therefore reduce ethical review and approval timelines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall application checklist</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics application form <em>complete, concise and written in lay terms</em></td>
<td>☒</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics application form spell/grammar check completed</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethics application form signed by all parties</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Signed by each of the researchers</td>
<td>☒</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Signed by each of the supervisors</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Signed by a Faculty authorising officer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review submitted [exceptions are confirmed HDR students, previous HREC approval, competitive grant awarded. If the ethics review pathway is E1(NR) or E1 – then the reviewer needs naming only on the application form]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research instruments attached:</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- *Surveys / questionnaires</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- *Interview scripts</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- *Recruiting material e.g. advertisement, letter</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- *Other – Specify:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Project Information Sheet attached and previously reviewed by a peer for understanding, readability and spelling/grammar</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Consent form attached</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Copy of approvals / permissions attached e.g. Education Qld, Aboriginal community elders, Queensland Health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Copy of licences / certification attached e.g. Blue Card</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Copy of endorsements attached e.g. community organisations, employers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* If used    # If considered necessary
27 March 2015

Michelle Searle  
Director, Office of Research  
Toll: +61 7 5459 4574  
Email: humanethics@usc.edu.au

Ms Anne Llewellyn  
Ass Prof Rod McCulloch  
Dr Ian White  
Dr Vikki Schafer  
University of the Sunshine Coast

Dear Anne, Rod, Ian and Vikki

Expedited ethics approval for research project: Preparing University graduates for a career in marketing communications: Examining the roles of Universities and practice (F/15/727)

This letter is to confirm that on 27 March 2015, following review of the application for ethics approval of the above named research project, the Chairperson of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Sunshine Coast granted expedited ethics approval for the project.

The Human Research Ethics Committee will review the Chairperson’s grant of approval and the conditions of approval at its next meeting and, should there be any variation of the conditions of approval, you will be informed as soon as practicable.

The period of ethics approval is from 27 March 2015 to 31 December 2016. Could you please note that the ethics approval number for the project is HREC: F/15/727. This number should be quoted in your Research Project Information Sheet and in any written communication when you are recruiting participants.

The standard conditions of ethics approval are listed overleaf. If you have any queries in relation to this ethics approval or if you require further information please contact a Research Ethics Officer by email at humanethics@usc.edu.au or by telephone on +61 7 5459 4574 or 5430 2823.

I wish you well with the success of your project.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Searle  
Director, Office of Research