

From Theory to Practice: Examining the Curriculum-Industry Gap Through a Digital Marketing Internship in International Education

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ABSTRAK

Terlepas dari perubahan konstan dalam cara pemasaran dilakukan di era digital, terdapat kurangnya keselarasan antara apa yang diajarkan dalam perkuliahan di universitas dan keterampilan yang dibutuhkan di lapangan. Makalah refleksi ini meneliti program magang selama sepuluh bulan yang dilakukan di Elite Star, sebuah konsultan pendidikan internasional di Indonesia, untuk menilai kesiapan peserta magang dalam menghadapi tantangan karir profesional yang dimulai di bidang pemasaran digital. Studi ini didasarkan pada teori pembelajaran pengalaman dan penelitian tentang keselarasan antara kurikulum dan praktik, dan mencakup empat domain kompetensi berikut: pembuatan konten; manajemen hubungan pelanggan; pemasaran acara; dan pengambilan keputusan berbasis data. Studi ini membandingkan persiapan akademis dalam empat domain kompetensi ini dengan praktik aktual, berdasarkan kinerja di tempat kerja. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa program universitas memiliki landasan yang baik dalam teori pemasaran, tetapi kurang memiliki beberapa keterampilan terapan, spesifik platform, dan sensitif konteks, yang sebagian besar dipelajari di tempat kerja. Implikasi dari temuan ini signifikan pada konsep perancangan ulang kurikulum Bisnis dan Manajemen untuk persiapan lulusan yang lebih baik untuk karir di lanskap pemasaran digital yang terus berkembang.

Kata Kunci: Kesenjangan Kurikulum-Praktik, Pembelajaran Berbasis Pengalaman, Pemasaran Digital, Magang, Pendidikan Bisnis, Pendidikan Internasional.

ABSTRACT

Despite the constant change in the way marketing is conducted in the digital age, there is a lack of alignment between what is taught in university courses and the skills required in the field. Reflection paper which examined a ten-month internship program undertaken at Elite Star, an international education consultancy in Indonesia, to assess the preparedness of the intern in the challenges of the professional career starting in the digital marketing field. The study is based on experiential learning theory and research on the alignment between curriculum and practice, and draws the four following competency domains: content creation; customer relationship management; event marketing; and data-driven decision making. The study compares academic preparation in these four competency domains with the actual practice, based on the on-the-job performance. Results show that the university program had a good grounding in the theory of marketing, but lacked some applied, platform-specific and context-sensitive skills, which were predominantly learned in the workplace. The implications of these findings are significant on the concept of redesigning Business and Management curricula for better preparation of graduates for careers in the evolving landscape of digital marketing.

Keywords: Curriculum-Practice Gap, Experiential Learning, Digital Marketing, Internship, Business Education, International Education.

INTRODUCTION

There has long been an antagonistic relationship between formal education and workplace readiness in the research literature on higher education. Academic courses provide students with conceptual structures, analytical abilities and domain knowledge, but may not be able to keep up with the fast-changing expectations of the consumer market and the technology changes in industries (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The challenge is most evident in digital marketing, which we have

seen change completely in the last ten years and is evolving rapidly that traditional education is unable to keep up.

Business and Management courses generally cover areas like marketing theory, consumer behaviour and organisational strategy in the core modules. But in order to implement digital marketing, which involves social media management, content creation, customer relationship management (CRM), and real-time data analytics, a variety of specific skills must be applied — ones that are not necessarily fully acquired in the classroom (Pianda et al., 2024). It is therefore not unusual that the graduate entering the field of marketing should feel that there is a gap between the theory and practice.

This gap is especially keen in the international education market, where consultancies like Elite Star are anticipated to take on the role of handling digital content approaches, engaging with students in massive quantities, arranging event-driven involvement, and analyzing outcome performance with data. This requires early-career marketing professionals to practice what they've learned in theory, in the real world, and in a challenging setting — one that is not always covered in universities.

Internships are acknowledged as one of the best ways to fill this gap. They offer concrete work experience for students, allow for the application of learned concepts, and give students a feeling of the social and operational issues of the workplace. Internships are not intended to be a substitute for classroom instruction, but instead are meant to be supportive to the classroom (Liu & Lee, 2026). In order to optimize their role as bridges, however, it is important to define the point at which the curriculum prepares students and when they enter into experiential learning—and of what remains missing in business education.

Research Objective

This paper aims to explore the gap between the curriculum and the practice by providing a detailed reflection of an internship with Elite Star in the Digital Marketing and Communications division for a period of 10 months. The scope covered a wide variety of work, from creating social media content to interacting with students, organizing events, and monitoring and reporting on the success of social media campaigns. The study is based on experiential learning theory and the literature on alignment between curriculum and practice and has the following specific objectives:

1. The effectiveness of the Business and Management program in preparing the intern for the professional responsibilities of a job in an international education environment working in the digital marketing field was assessed.
2. To determine appropriate competency areas in which students' academic preparation was sufficient and areas in which it was insufficient.
3. How the experiential dimension of the internship helped to address those gaps and to develop and enhance professional competence over time.
4. To make evidence-based recommendations to curriculum reform and design of internship programs that better align to the needs of modern business practice.
5. This study adds to the discussion of what Business and Management programs can actually provide students in preparing for a career in the current digital marketing world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Curriculum-Practice Gap in Business Education

It's not a new issue, the gap between academia and industry is one of the most longstanding problems in higher education. This gap is most pronounced in the field of business and management education: students may have a high level of theoretical knowledge, but a lack of skills to carry it out in practice (*Research Methods for Business Students*, n.d.). The incorporation of applied learning in the university curriculum has gradually taken place, but critics claim that this development is not yet sufficient, especially in dynamic fields where the demands and practices of the industry change much faster than the review cycles of the university (Putra et al., 2025).

The ever-changing nature of digital marketing is one area where it presents itself as a challenge. The platforms, algorithms, consumer behaviors and industry tools evolve constantly and, even after revisions, curricula can be partially out of date when students finish the course. In a decade, digital marketing has experienced a complete restructuring, according to (Dwivedi et al., 2021), due to the evolution of social media platforms, data analysis tools and personalized communication technologies. Students won't be equipped for the marketing landscape of five years ago, and a curriculum designed to support that environment is unlikely to meet their needs today.

This does not mean that theory instruction is useless, but rather, that theory serves as a conceptual framework which helps students understand professional practice. The issue isn't theory per se, it's the lack of meaningful linkage between theory and practice. Rather than it being advantageous, work-integrated learning is essential in higher education, as argued by (Jackson et al., 2023), because it provides the type of experience that learning in a classroom cannot. So the real problem isn't that the curriculum fails to include the content, it is that the curriculum fails to provide conditions for students to learn and develop competence.

B. Experiential Learning as a Bridging Mechanism

Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes that knowledge is not just passed on from teacher to learner, but rather, it is built up in four stages: experience, reflection, conceptualization and active experimentation. Although the nucleus of this framework is still very believable, its application in modern higher education is inconsistent: that is, experiential components can be transformed into simulations that resemble real experience, but don't replicate it (Morris, 2020). This difference is profound — the extent to which a learner is given "real responsibility" makes a huge difference to the depth of learning produced by an internship.

Despite this, the argument for structured internships is strong. (Pianda et al., 2024) citse a body of consistent empirical evidence that shows that work experiences that are well designed measurably enhance career readiness, professional conduct and technical competency in a variety of fields. (Mustofa et al., 2023) also reports improvements in

adaptability, communication and problem-solving skills for interns, with both studies revealing greatest improvement in the competencies where they were least well trained. This lends strong support to the experiential learning model which serves as a specific antidote to the gap between the curriculum and practice.

The proposition of intentional designing of the work-integrated learning placement with regards to the rest of the curriculum adds another dimension to the success of work-integrated learning (*Building a Compelling Partner Proposition*, n.d.). An internship that is not linked to classroom instruction will not achieve the same — and often less — results than one that is carefully designed as a deliberate extension of what has been learned in the classroom.

C. Digital Marketing Competencies and the Limits of Classroom Instruction

Marketing is a competency-rich, very dynamic and practically focused field. In addition, content strategy, social media management, audience engagement, and data-informed decision making are among the key skills that marketers need to possess in today's digital landscape, as highlighted by (Dwivedi et al., 2021), and influencer communication, platform-specific messaging, and the creation of personalized content are also highly relevant, as emphasized by (Joshi et al., 2023).

This poses a significant pedagogical challenge. A student might be able to fully grasp the concept of content marketing in a class, but not demonstrate the ability to create valuable visual content in real time for an actual social media user in a particular platform. The conflict is not a “knowledge gap”, but rather an “execution gap”, and in practice is profound — not something that can be easily solved by curriculum design. The most critical competency gaps in graduates, as noted by (Putra et al., 2025) in their study of work-integrated learning curricula, are related to the competencies that are least simulated in the classroom.

It is not a call to dismiss theoretical marketing education in favor of only vocational education in Universities. Instead, it highlights the need for a more intentional incorporation of both — one that teaches students the conceptual frameworks they need to grasp digital marketing, as well as the actual ability to execute it. If you look at it in that way, internships are not a substitute for classroom instruction, they make it up.

D. International Education as a Demanding Marketing Context

The international education consultancy field is a very interesting field where we can study the dynamics described above, owing to several key factors. To begin with, marketing in this particular sector requires a high degree of sophistication and complexity of both providing information, managing relationships and building up trust towards the audience, which faces the most important decision-making point of their life (Joshi et al., 2023). This, indeed, calls for more than just basic marketing knowledge from a student's side.

Second, the industry engages itself through two platforms at once, which means that practitioners must be able to engage in managing online campaigns and large volumes of direct communications as well as personal engagements as part of one comprehensive marketing strategy (Dwivedi et al., 2021). For a young marketing professional, dealing with these multiplatform demands in the actual world is entirely different from running a mock marketing exercise in a class setting.

The third aspect and the one most pertinent to the current paper refers to the rapid development taking place in the field of international education concerning student behavior and the dynamics of platforms (Maitri et al., 2023). The difference between the curricula and actual practice is thus bound to be very large in this field. It is in this dynamic setting that the issue of curricular practice gap analyzed in this paper arises.

RESEARCH METHODS

The internship process used in the current analysis is based on a qualitative reflective research design. The internship program lasted for about ten months, between March and January of 2025-2026. The internship process was conducted in the Digital Marketing and Communications division. A qualitative research design is suitable for the above case due to its capability to explore the experiential elements of professional practices better than the quantitative research design (*Research Methods for Business Students*, n.d.).

The initial approach to analysis is that of systematic reflection in which the internship experience will be assessed using the background gained in theoretical and practical aspects from the previous Business and Management course. The reflection process will focus on four competency domains relevant to the internship position – content creation, CRM, event marketing, and evidence-based decision making.

The data were collected from three main sources: actual involvement in marketing activities on a daily basis, observations of team interactions and workflows (Naz et al., 2022) as well as documental evidence such as weekly performance reports and campaign analysis. The use of both qualitative reflections and quantitative data makes for a well-balanced assessment procedure in line with the principles of internship research (Jackson et al., 2023).

Company Review

Elite Star is an international education consultancy firm established in 2017, with operational presence in Indonesia and the United States. The company is dedicated to supporting students who aspire to pursue higher education abroad by providing comprehensive guidance throughout the application process.

Services provided by the company are extensive and include selecting universities to apply to, helping with applications, applying for scholarships, and preparing for standardized tests like IELTS, TOEFL, IB, and SAT. Using the brand name GlobalStudy.id, Elite Star is very proactive in promoting international education by means of online and offline marketing.

The office in Jakarta, situated in the SCBD area, is used as a focal point for connecting with the Indonesian students. The corporation operates in both B2C and B2B sectors, which necessitates

various marketing strategies. The combination helps the enterprise create collaborations with learning organizations, as well as connect directly with the future students.

Marketing becomes a necessity in the case where there are many competing companies in the marketplace. The firm employs a variety of technologies in support of their marketing strategies. They employ social media, instant messaging technologies, and data processing platforms to assist them in communicating and decision-making.

Organizations-wise, the integration of digital marketing and personalization techniques is in line with recent trends in educational strategies. Integrating both online and offline approaches, Elite Star will be able to successfully influence its target market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Each of the four subsequent sections will examine the core competency areas of the internship, using both the approach of education as well as experience in assessing them. The key issue that guides analysis in all four areas is, "How prepared was the intern in this area because of the Business and Management program, and how much of the internship experience shaped their skills in the field?"

A. Content Creation: From Marketing Theory to Creative Execution

Marketing communication theories that were offered through the Business and Management curriculum helped to understand basic aspects related to branding, targeting and message crafting. As a result, I found the acquired knowledge rather helpful in making decisions regarding tone, messaging, and targeting. In this regard, the curriculum succeeded in performing its role effectively.

Nevertheless, an important void was realized in relation to the process of technical execution. In essence, there were no courses dedicated to teaching students how to use tools in graphic designing and visual communication as well as social media platform formatting needs. The process of designing content in terms of creating Instagram and WhatsApp posts could not be achieved without gaining tool knowledge, which had to happen through experience and practice. This conclusion correlates with (Dwivedi et al., 2021), stating content creation to be one of the most challenging digital marketing skills to acquire.

These approaches can be seen in action in Figure 1, which shows an instance of the social media content created while on the internship. It shows the combination of visuals and informative content that create marketing materials that are visually appealing.



Figure 1. Digital marketing content designed to promote international education programs through social media platforms

(Source: Author's Internship Documentation, 2025)

The introduction of the content strategy was met with increased engagement levels, with engagement levels increasing by approximately 25%. This is in agreement with findings from (Kumar et al., 2024) that visually pleasing and information-laden content significantly increases user engagement.

The content creation process allowed participants to develop technical skills in the use of design software and strategic skills for identifying their audience and presenting their message. From an academic perspective, it allows us to see how digital marketing concepts apply in a practical setting.

B. Outreach Activities and Customer Relationship Management

However, more than just creating online material, the internship entailed reaching out to potential students directly. This included initiating contact with WhatsApp Business, emails, and phone calls; replying to queries; and providing individualized assistance for studying overseas. This campaign resulted in over 500 approaches and over 100 consultations from students, clearly indicating that there was great engagement from the prospective clients. This illustrates how personal communication fosters trust and enables future students to make sound judgments.

Theoretically, all the above-mentioned practices can be placed within the concept of relationship marketing, which emphasizes building long-term relationships with consumers rather than making single deals with them. Speaking about educational consultancy services, such concepts as trustworthiness and credibility acquire great importance for making students' decisions because they invest in education significantly.

Figure 2 illustrates the process of how outreach activities are carried out using teamwork within the marketing team, illustrating how team members interact and exchange information to reach potential students through digital media.



Figure 2. Team collaboration and outreach activities conducted to engage prospective students through digital communication channels

(Source: Author's Internship Documentation, 2025)

Figure 2 depicts how community engagement is a team sport where the interaction among the marketers is pivotal. It highlights how cooperation and coordination are fundamental in achieving the marketing objectives. Proper communication within the team ensures consistency in the message and smoothens the outreach process.

Moreover, such experiences were instrumental in developing soft skills like communication, interpersonal relationships, and problem solving. Working with different people requires flexibility and the ability to solve different problems, which are important skills in the workplace (Jackson et al., 2023).

C. Event Marketing and Experiential Engagement

Event marketing was one of the critical components of the internship process; there were plenty of opportunities to interact directly with the target audience. Some of the events that we arranged included company presentations, essay writing workshops, and alumni shows. Such events served as forums through which we could provide relevant information.

One such event had over 200 attendees, proving how event marketing is a tool that can attract attention and encourage participation. This allows businesses to engage their audience through fun, interactive activities which may not necessarily be achieved using regular marketing techniques.

Figure 3 depicts how participation and engagement take place.



Figure 3. Educational event and webinar conducted as part of marketing campaigns to promote international study opportunities

(Source: Author's Internship Documentation, 2025)

Academically, events marketing is a sub-category of experiential marketing – a marketing strategy that involves creating memorable experiences that influence consumer behavior. Experiential marketing increases emotional engagement and strengthens the consumer-brand relationship, according to Schmitt (1999).

The victories of these campaigns have proven the importance of integrating online marketing with offline marketing. The social networks assisted in spreading the message and attracting attention, yet there was an opportunity to meet the public on a personal level.

Involvement in event planning allowed me to develop exceptional organizational and coordination skills. Through such activities, I was able to acquire valuable skills of planning, managing my time, and working effectively in teams.

D. Data-Driven Marketing and Performance Evaluation

Another critical component to the internship experience was keeping track of the effectiveness of marketing activities via weekly reporting and data analysis. This entailed monitoring the level of audience interaction and gauging the success of campaign activities.

Using tools such as Google Spreadsheets made the handling and analysis of information much easier, allowing for better decision-making and proving that information could be backed by credible facts. As data-driven marketing gains more recognition and acceptance, it is important to note that it is a key aspect when trying to establish a competitive advantage.

Linking figures to marketing campaigns enhances the effectiveness of the effort through the process of continuous improvement. This can be illustrated through the analysis of engagement figures that will allow the team to determine what works best for them.

Learning-wise, the experience provided significant insights regarding the importance of analysis in digital marketing. The experience also emphasized the importance of critical thinking in analyzing information and making sound decisions.

E. Integrated Skill Development and Professional Growth

The internship provided a balanced approach by including content generation, outreach, event planning, and data analysis in order to enhance both technical and interpersonal skills.

From a technical perspective, I developed skills related to designing, content management, and data analysis. These skills are vital for modern marketers, particularly within the digital environment.

Internships do not only develop technical skills but also soft skills like communication, team-working, adaptation, and time-management skills, which have been found to be important skills required in the job market in general (Pianda et al., 2024).

This illustrates the importance of incorporating these skills through practical training through internship programs. Students learn how to apply theoretical knowledge in practical situations, and it is essential in preparing individuals for the job market of today.

CONCLUSION

The internship in the Digital Marketing and Communications department at Elite Star provided insights into the practicality of using digital marketing tools to promote international education. Specifically, the lesson learned was that content creation, engagement, and event participation have been key to enhancing the level of audience engagement in line with marketing objectives.

Operationally, practical insight in the use of social media, communication with customers, and campaign development were among the experiences I gained from my internship. The successes in terms of increased engagement and the effectiveness of my outreach efforts prove that such strategies work. These findings coincide with the current literature on digital marketing influencing consumer behavior (Dwivedi et al., 2021) (Joshi et al., 2023).

Learning-wise, the internship provided me with an opportunity to hone both technical (such as content design and data analysis) and soft skills (communication, collaboration, and adaptability). This finding coincides with previous literature indicating that internships are crucial for developing employability competencies (Jackson et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the internship experience shows the connection between experiential and theoretical learning and highlights the importance of digital marketing tools in promoting international education services.

RECOMMENDATION

Given what we have discussed so far, we would suggest the following. In regard to the organization, using data analytics in digital marketing will provide us with more insights on how our audiences react and how effective our communication strategy is. Using more interactive content, for example, webinars and short videos, may be helpful in achieving higher engagement levels.

As for the outreach, the personalization of the message will be a critical factor for increasing the success of our outreach efforts. The use of some easy-to-use automation software won't reduce the quality of the communication process.

In turn, future interns should develop their digital marketing and communication skills prior to participating in an internship. Actively taking part, good time management skills, and being willing to study will significantly contribute to the outcome.

Finally, for future research, the examination of the long-term effects of using digital marketing within the educational sector may be suggested.

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