



Digital Marketing Skills: Can Joint European Master's Degree Contribute to Bridge the Gap?

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Introduction

Digital marketing is marketing today and its future is entirely digital (Heinze, et al., 2017). The growing need for interactive communications with buyer persona requires definitely digital skills from the marketing staff in every organization. At the same time the needs for digital and social media skills increase in the organisations due to the fact that they are not anymore responsibility of one person in the company but are requirements for most of the job positions and for the internal communications (Holmes, 2016).

Recent research of the Digital marketing Institute identified that in the USA, the UK and Ireland the actual level of digital skills among marketers in the three countries “is equally low - scoring 38% on average” (Dodson, 2016). It is expected to decline due to the continuous innovation in the digital technologies. Boston Consulting Group study came to the conclusion that digital marketing gaps are bigger than the companies consider. Businesses have the biggest deficit in capabilities which importance will grow even more in the next years. These are skills connected to “mobile, video, testing, partner management, and organizational enablers” (Field, et al., 2015). The public consultation results on the “Agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems” (2016) reveal that students and recent graduates as well as the education institutions recognize that there is an inconsistency between the knowledge and skills of the graduates and the needs of the business and society.

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Digital marketing talent crisis is global and part of the wider digital skills deficit. Even the digital natives' generation has digital skills shortfalls. Research found that millennials are the least skilled digital marketers of all age groups in the leading digital economies of the USA, the UK and Ireland while self-employed are the most skilled (Dodson, 2016).

The article further explores the opportunities that Joint Degrees offer for bridging the digital marketing gap in five EU countries.

Literature Review

Digital marketing skills gap

Deficit of digital marketing skills is part of the larger global society issue of the lack of digital skills in general that hinders the digital transformation. European Commission monitoring of the digital single market identifies that most of the countries that are included in the current article discussion have a deficit in digital capacities.

Bulgaria has still low performance in digital skills compared to other EU countries. It belongs to the low performing cluster of countries. 57% of homes subscribe to fixed broadband. Most of the Bulgarians have basic levels of digital skills. Compared to EU average the Bulgarian Internet users engage the least in online transactions such as online banking (7%) and online shopping (27%). Bulgaria's businesses are trying to overcome the lagging behind but still need to invest more efforts in on-line commerce and business business use of social media, e-Invoices and cloud services (EDPR Bulgaria, 2017).

Greece also belongs to the Low performing cluster of EU countries. According to the annual EU report on digital progress insufficient digital skills are a barrier to the digital economy development. The percentage of the Greek population using the internet on a regular basis (66%) is one of the lowest among European countries. However, in 2016 more and more users have been engaging in online banking (28% compared to the previous year 21%). Companies have to use more on-line commerce and cloud-based applications. Co-operation among public sector, the education sector and industry in the Greek National Coalition for The Digital Skills and Jobs is expected to encourage the development of digital skills capacity with industrial relevance



(EDPR Greece, 2017).

Similar to Bulgaria and Greece Poland belongs to the low performing cluster of countries. The citizens in Poland with basic digital skills are 44% and it is below the EU average of 56%. Integration of the digital technologies in the businesses remains a challenge. Digital skills are included in the Third Axis of the Operational Programme Digital Poland 2014 – 2020. The Programme supports through projects education and information campaigns that promote benefits of digital technologies. Only one in ten Polish SMEs is selling online and the annual report conclusion is that that Polish businesses are not using at full extent the commercial potential of digital technologies (EDPR Poland, 2017).

Lithuania's performance is above EU average in all dimensions of the digital economy with exception of the digital skills. The number of Internet regular users is below the EU level but there is a steady increase in the number of enterprises which use digital technologies in business activities. Lithuanian businesses selling online are well-above the EU average. The Digital Agenda Strategy of the country recognizes labour market relevance of education as an important element of the digital transformation process. The overall assessment is that the country is part of the Medium performing cluster of countries. (EDPR Lithuania, 2017).

UK is the only country among discussed in the article where the digital literacy is high. Only 4% of the population has never used Internet. The UK performs above average in the European Union. 69 % of its population has at least basic digital skills in 2016. The UK employs also the largest number of ICT professionals in the European Union. The United Kingdom's digital skills are included in its Digital Strategy, published on 1 March 2017. It focuses on education and developing the full range of digital skills that individuals and companies need by public private and third sector co-operation. Thus UK is taking active steps to address its digital skills gaps. The adoption of digital technologies by the business is also much higher compared to the five above-mentioned countries (EDPR UK, 2017).

The digital skills gap requires actions both at organizational and governmental level. Support on the international level is also beneficial. The research of the EU institutions have identified that currently only 1 in 10 takes part in organised learning. These are primarily employees with,

higher skills levels and employees in the large companies. According to research performed on behalf of the European Commission one quarter of the interviewed “had not developed their skills since starting their job”. (EC, 2016)

At organisational levels researchers have explored different aspects of digital skills gaps. One of them is the difference between the knowledge and skills acquired at tertiary level of education and the business needs. Graduates have studied a syllabus that doesn't include digital techniques, and digital professionals have inconsistent abilities. The digital marketing and social media courses are in the process of becoming an integral part in the business education As Holmes (2016) concludes in the future programmes and courses for the basic digital and social media skills “may one day grow as commonplace as introductory college writing and computer skills classes”.

For the time being the digital marketing and social media gap is bridged by variety of in-house training courses and courses offered by organisations. For example in Bulgaria the university master's programmes in digital marketing have between 20-25 students per class. SoftUni is a start-up offering “learning by doing approach” attracting business trainers for courses and it has registered in October 2016 more than 200 regular participants and more than 2500 online (SoftUni, 2016). In Romania Google launched Atelierul Digita. It is a platform targeting students and entrepreneurs in Romania who want to develop their skills in digital marketing. Free tutorials are offered for building an online presence social media marketing campaigns, mobile marketing. The potential course takers can study a separate module or the whole online course, receiving a certification from Google and IAB Europe (Popescu, 2016).

A major challenge both for the university programmes and the training courses is how to develop training in accordance to the fast changing digital and social media world. The right training solution needs to be on-demand and mobile-friendly. On the other hand, the focus in these courses is often “the mechanics of technology overcritical thinking” (Kim, 2012). Skills courses may limit the career opportunities of students to technical experts (Lomerson et al., 2005) while companies require creativity, team work and



decision-making skills.

Research on digital skills gap identifies also other issues like making the development of digital capabilities a top business priority, the needs for strong organizational commitment for constant training, leadership that is convinced in sufficient investments and time devoted to training, support to self-learning. The Boston Consulting Group researchers came to the conclusion that the gaps and shortfalls are bigger than companies assume. Many marketers try to catch up on current needs instead of focusing on the requirements of future skills ((Field, et al., 2015). Bridging the digital gap involves care for self-learning, promotion of ongoing learning as a basic responsibility of staff and executives at all levels. Leadership in digital skills development from the top management is crucial (Field, et al., 2015). Policy makers also need to think differently about skills, encouraging, for example, industry certification programs for new skills and partnerships between community colleges and local employers (Bessen, 2014).

The digitalized marketplace and the lack of digital skills lead to outsourcing the marketing functions and breaking the consistency of the marketing strategy development and implementation. The organisations have to manage diverse stakeholders and try to benefit from the relationship with digital marketing agencies that realize the client digital marketing skills shortages (Quinn, Dibb, Simkin, Canhoto and Analogbei, 2016). Marketing staff needs knowledge and skills to integrate the traditional and the digital approaches.

Joint European Degree Programmes

Joint bachelor, masters and doctoral degrees are a major tool for the internationalization of the higher education. The Bologna Process starting in 1999 aimed to create by 2010 a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to promote the European education worldwide. One of the major action lines was the mobility and promotion of the European dimension in education along with co-operation in quality assurance, credit system and comparaty of the degrees (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). The Bologna process stimulated the development of Joint European degree programmes. The major characteristics of the joint degrees are the joint development of the

content by two or more universities, full recognition of the periods of the study in each partnering university and the diploma, mobility of students and trainers, joint research, international experience of the higher educational institutions and overcoming the shortage of staff and pooling together infrastructure. Joint European master's programmes have appeared either by the initiative of universities from different EU countries or were funded under the Erasmus Mundus programme and Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.

The studies on the Joint European degrees identify many obstacles in their functioning: legal discrepancies and specific requirements, quality assurance differences, the increased expense of setting up, quality assuring and accrediting joint programmes, cross-cultural differences, timing, administration, teaching language possibilities (Braathen, et al., 2010; Kuder, et al., 2011) A major challenge for the joint degrees is to secure sustainability and the number of recruited students. Changes in economic situation in one of the countries may lead to substantial decrease in the recruited students for the joint programmes. Joint programmes need clear strategy and modern marketing tools for promoting (Nickel, et al., 2009). They can be considered as test centres for a variety of initiatives originating both from the project teams and public bodies. Their importance is not based on numbers but rather on “attention-directing devices shedding light on current diffusion of ideas and practice” (Papatsiba, 2014).

Despite the barriers for the development of the Joint European Degrees they contribute for achieving the goals of European Commission new skills agenda (2016). They help to make qualifications in different countries to be more visible, understandable and transferable, the adoption of common competencies frameworks, validation of education and training. Joint degree programmes allow comparable assessment of students' and graduates' skills, give prospective students better international experience and more multidisciplinary. The public consultation on the modernization of higher education in the EU identified that the staff with international experience is still limited and in some universities the international experience is not considered to be an important asset. The presence of foreign students in



the educational process is assessed very positively for higher education courses but there could be more foreign students in the university classes. Qualification from abroad recognition is considered to be an important barrier in the European education. A major priority for change is to guide students to study the fields that are mostly demanded by the market (EC, 2017).

Methodology and results

The methodology of the study includes primary and secondary data collection. The primary data collection used online survey to study students' opinions and perceptions of the joint European master's programme in digital and social media marketing and focus groups. The online survey was conducted within the frames of JEMSS project. The project was funded by Erasmus Lifelong Learning programme and lasted from October 2013 until September 2016. The number of students from the five countries is more than 500. The overall number of respondents including other European countries is 731. The focus groups took place among bachelor and master students. Personal interviews with the teaching staff and administration at every partner university explored the experience and opinions on the development and running of a joint degree programmes.

The desk research studied the courses and the joint master's programmes in the field of digital marketing and social media. The results in the five countries show that university digital and social media marketing courses are increasing. In the UK a great variety of such programmes exist while in Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania and Poland they just start to grow. The students graduate with Master of Art (MA), Master of Science (MSc) or Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree depending on the programme content.

Most of the courses are delivered in the official language of the countries but there are also a number of programmes taught in English or students can choose to write a dissertation in English. For example in Poland the programme Electronic Business promotes the opportunity to a practical use of the English language. The international programmes are also thought in English, German, and French language.

The number of the students varies. They can

be at least 5 in the executive programme of City College in Bulgaria and in Romania, 15 in Lithuania and Greece, 25-30 in the International Business School, Bulgaria and 15-20 at the UNWE, Bulgaria. In the UK the number of students is much bigger due to the more mature stage of the digital marketing studies. In Poland no estimation of the number of the students can be made since most of the digital marketing studies are in programme modules. The number of the enrolled students differs throughout the years but the programmes tend to increase their popularity and probably the number of the students.

Entry requirements differ. In Bulgaria most of the students entering digital marketing programmes have a Bachelor degree in economics or business. The number of students with engineering/and or computer sciences degree is growing. In Greece students must have undergraduate degree studies from an accredited institution. The enrolled students come mostly from the business sector studies and a small percentage is from non-business majors like computer science. In Lithuania the students in Electronic Business Management are mainly IT students. There are no preferences for candidates from selected fields of Bachelor degrees. Polish system promotes multidisciplinary approach, 2nd level digital marketing programmes can be studied by people that graduated with a bachelor degree in history or geography. In the UK approximately 50% of the Universities require an undergraduate degree in Marketing/IT related or Business and approximately 50% of these universities will consider undergraduate degrees in any subject.

Admission Process. In general the admission requirements follow the general rules for master studies in countries discussed: a Bachelor degree, and/or work experience, essays, recommendations and foreign language proficiency. In Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Poland the major requirement is a Bachelor degree. Some of the Greek universities require Bachelor degree and language proficiency in English, French, German or Spanish (e.g. Athens University of Economics & Business). In the UK the minimum undergraduate entry requirements depends on the institution – e.g. higher ranking in the university league tables and more popular universities require higher classification degrees. The majority of universities will accept any classification of undergraduate degrees, some



universities will require first or good honours degrees some require 2:1 or 2:2. Unlike Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania, Poland and Romania, many universities in the UK have a flexible entry policy and would consider credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), including work-based experience. Often a minimum of two years' work experience is required if applicants do not have an undergraduate degree or a lower degree than required. For foreign students in the UK language proficiency is required.

Curriculum Description. The number of courses per master programme in the countries has a great variety and is between 6 (UK), 8-9 in Greece, and 10 in Bulgaria, and Lithuania for a whole digital marketing programme or 3-5 for a digital marketing module in a more general programme. The number of credits needed for graduation is in the range of 60-180 credits. In Bulgaria the credits awarded for digital marketing programmes are 75: 60 for ten courses and 15 credits for a master thesis/dissertation. In Lithuania 60 credits are awarded for the courses and 30 for the master thesis. In Greece and Bulgaria all masters programmes require a dissertation. In Poland 2nd level programmes require minimum 90 ECTS points (3 semesters) but usually universities offer programmes of 120 ECTS in 4 semesters. Master thesis and internship is obligatory for 2nd level studies.

All UK masters courses aim to achieve a minimum of 180 credits or 1800 hours or study time as per the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK. One credit is equivalent to 10 hours study time. This is different to the European model of ECTS, where 1 ECTS is equivalent to 25 hours study time. To satisfy the UK QAA minimum requirements for a Master's degree the majority of the UK universities offer 6 taught modules equivalent to 20 credits (3 modules in semester 1 and 3 in semester 2 and the dissertation/ project in semester 3 equal to 60 credits).

Internship is not included in the Bulgarian, Greek, and Lithuanian Master's programmes. The reason is that most of the students are working and do not have time for an internship though their job is often not connected to the digital marketing area. In Poland master studies include internship. The comparative analysis for the courses offered in the digital marketing programmes shows a similarity of

the topics. No direct comparison can be made because the logic of including a course is based on the overall design of the programme, the university where it is offered, etc. Courses are similar as content could be offered also under different names.

Way of delivery. Digital marketing courses are offered in different forms. In Lithuania students can study online or full time. Programme duration is three semesters. In Bulgaria the two programmes are full time for two semesters. The International Business School implements block delivery of the courses in order to attract business people in the teaching process. In Greece the programmes are both full time for two semesters and four semesters part time. In Poland most of the master courses are full time. In the UK 90% of the courses are on campus with one university offering the whole course online and one with a combination of 12 months on campus and 3 months online learning (blended learning). There are also universities offering block delivery, which means that one module is taught for six weeks at a time instead of conventional model where several modules are taken at a time during a semester of study. The full time course ranged in duration from 12-16 months.

Joint degrees development

Desk research has identified differences in the Joint degree programmes in the five countries. In the UK the Joint Master Programmes are offered in various fields. However, according to statistical data the majority of joint programmes are in the fields of science, technology and engineering. Language of instructions is English. In Bulgaria and Lithuania double degree programmes are popular primarily in the field of management and project management.

Partner universities (countries) depend on the experience and desire to cooperate. Most of the Central and East European universities prefer partners from the developed EU countries that have more experience in teaching the programmes or are world renown for their research in the area.

The experience in the joint programmes proves that there are a variety of issues that create barriers in their development. The external environments (legal, financial, political), differ. There are also constraints within each partner institutions like diverse learning credit systems, the needed minimum and maximum length of study. For example in Greece degrees that are not awarded



by public universities are not recognized at the moment. Hence the educational institutions that offer Joint masters in Greece usually offer the degree from the partner university.

A fundamental issue in the joint degree development is also the lack of common understanding of what a Master's degree entails, diverse teaching methods used and preferred in various countries; different quality of academic provision, dissimilar exam system and modes - workload for students and grading is uneven across institutions. The fees structures and the possibility to receive financial support are also different. Multicultural experience of students is also very important for the joint programme success.

There are also differences in the academic calendar, visa requirements for students, time for curriculum planning and development across different institutions, university budgets dedicated to the master's programmes and quality assurance.

The conclusion from the desk research in the five countries is that the organization of a joint degree programme on Digital and Social Media Marketing requires careful planning and implementation of the best practices.

Primary research results

The research identifies differences in the expectations of the UK students and the students from the other four project partners' countries. The UK students consider the knowledge and skills that they will receive in SEO, Social media monitoring and Social media optimization as most important while the students from Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania, and Poland rank high the soft skills like creativity, team work, presentation skills, communication, and client management. Perhaps one of the reasons for this finding is that the digital market in the UK is more advanced and students are more aware of the knowledge requirements to pursue a career in digital marketing.

An interesting fact is that students with Bachelor Majors in Computers and Engineering also consider "soft skills" as more important than the optimization, metrics, planning, content development and other major aspects of digital marketing. The explanation could be that he students do not have a very good understanding of

what a professional in digital marketing should know or the assumption that digital marketing skills should be included by all means and in addition the marketing experts should possess additional "soft skills". In fig 1 the preferences to knowledge and skills of students in Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania, and Poland are benchmarked to the opinions of students in the UK.

The main incentive to study in a Joint Programme is the expectation that there are going to be more opportunities to work and study and better carrier prospects. In all countries these are the two major reasons chosen by the respondents. Another important factor is the quality of the courses. 17% of all the respondents consider that a programme accredited by more than one European university has a higher quality. However, the students that hold this belief are twice as many in Bulgaria than in the rest four countries. The belief that it would be cheaper (13%) is probably associated with the tuition fees that most of the students have to pay when they study full-time abroad. The largest number of students that have chosen the answer is from Bulgaria and from the cluster "other countries" where the number of students from FYROM, Serbia, and Romania dominate. The living standard of most of the people in these countries does not make a full time study abroad affordable without a grant.

Most of the students (60%) prefer the combined work and study mode of the programme which is typical for most of the Master's degree programmes. Every fourth respondent has chosen the full time mode but with a placement included. The experience of such educational approach like in the UK has been very positive through the years. One of the major problems is that the universities need to have very good cooperation with the business in order to secure placements for the students. In many countries like Bulgaria and Lithuania the students often find placements by themselves. In case the internships are funded by a governmental institution the duration might be different from the one required in the master's programme.. The desire to study and have practical experience is confirmed also by the respondents' answers to the question "Would you be willing to work for a company that would pay your study fees and a living stipend/bursary?" 95% of the



respondents answered positively. The favoured language of instruction in the Joint degree programme is English. In Lithuania almost half of the students (48%) prefer to study in their native language. The interest in German, French, Spanish and other language of instruction is very low. UK students also choose to study in their native language in a Joint Degree programme.

Many of the students prefer two semesters which is a trend for master's curriculum development in many European countries where the Bachelor studies are three academic years or six

semesters. However, the discussions with students have identified that two semesters are not always enough to get the necessary theoretical and especially practical experience when students try to combine work and study. The interest towards four semesters of studies is combined with a semester abroad or a semester for internship. More than half of the respondents in Poland and the UK would choose the four semester programme if it has a semester abroad or with an internship. For the rest of the partner and other countries group the number of students is between 22-30% of all the respondents in the respective group.

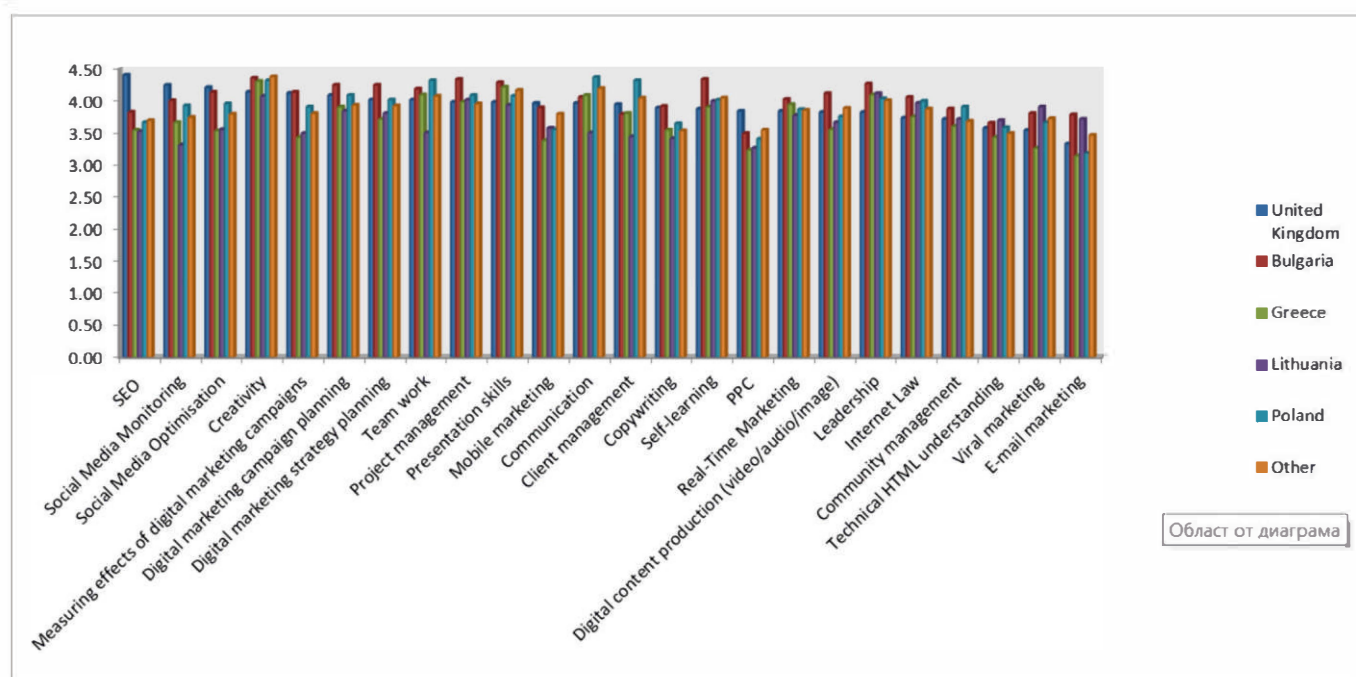


Fig 1. Knowledge and Skills Importance ((on 5 points scale)

The requirements for a master thesis or dissertation always require a semester or at least 3 additional months in the summer. When such semester is included there is often a debate about the tuition fee in this semester which universities try to keep and the students do not always consider a full tuition fee for this semester fair.

The tuition fees per country logically depend on the average income in the analysed countries. However, the successful implementation of Joint Degree Master programmes with European and American universities in the countries proves that even in the markets with the lowest level of average

income there is a potential for paying higher tuition fees when the curriculum of the programme is attractive, when it provides a background for a good future carrier and the way it is delivered (entrance requirements, time of the seminars, etc.) is customer-friendly.

Focus Groups and Interviews Results

Focus groups among Bachelor and Master programme students revealed the reasons to study in general in a Digital Marketing master's programme and the preferences for a joint European programme. They can be summarized as follows:



- **A better career and job prospects.** Most of the students believe that digital is the basis of the future successful business and marketing in particular and therefore studying in such programme is a step forward to a successful carrier. Lithuanian students with minor studies in Marketing believe that such studies “*would provide an opportunity to deepen the knowledge of current study area*” and that “*digital marketing gains more importance nowadays*”. For Polish students a master's degree in digital marketing also provides more job opportunities. For example a student suggested “It is a fresh idea and a modern approach. ...Marketing is a rapidly changing field...” Another student supported this view with a comment that the area of studies is important for the labour market.

- **Entrepreneurial prospects.** Students at University of Salford commented that the ability to learn a skill and being able to start up a business on the back of the course is be very attractive. For an area of growth this presents itself as an added opportunity for those who learn and work as part of the course and then set up their own digital agency – not worrying about employment but thinking about self-employment.

- **The course's content.** The undergraduates consider that the courses content is of major importance. According to Polish students just theory does not make a Master's programme attractive. “*Certainly needed studies. But we want more practice not theory. Important are internships and continuous contact with real problems and not theoretical examples*”. Lithuanian students think that the professors delivering the courses in the programme are also important criteria for selection of the study programme.

- **The reputation of the university.** Students in the UK and Greece underlined the importance of this criterion when they choose where to study. For example in Greece for the majority of postgraduate students that graduate from City Colleague's Digital Marketing and Social Media Masters, the brand of the University of Sheffield is one of the key factors for enrolling. A postgraduate student in the UK made a comment: “When I graduate from my MBA in Salford I would say to all back home in India that I have an MBA from the UK.”

- **The programme duration** is another reason for choosing a programme. The length of the programmes depends to a large extent to the educational traditions in the countries.

- **Happiness and studying with friends.** At University of Salford the students discussed the impact of peers and social networks on choosing. “your learning journey”. The focus group revealed that knowing others who go through the same process and being part of that learning community is an important course decision-making aspect.

The major benefits of the joint programme are the recognition of the degree and the international experience.

- Getting a degree recognized in the whole Europe or at least in more European countries and networking. A student from the UK defines the benefit in the following way: “*Yes, I think it's very attractive. There is nothing better than seeing the world and getting to know other people and cultures. First of all, you create a global Network, which is always helpful. At the same time, you are influenced by a new culture and new people and get to see how they conduct marketing, which ads a lot to personal creativity.*”

- Learning from other countries and cultures and broader opportunities is another benefit. The students commented that it would be interesting to understand how Digital Marketing is being applied by practitioners in other countries.. For the UK students course could be made attractive by emphasising “The Gap Year” alternative A Polish student describe the benefit in the following way: “*We are a generation which is travel-oriented. We love to meet new people and learning about the world.*”

- Better opportunity for work. Lithuanian student claims “*employers might find it more advantageous to employ a person who graduated from such study programme and it might help in seeking specialization related employment in another country*”.

The focus group revealed the interest of students to spend a semester abroad. For Greek students UK is the most preferred country to spend a



semester abroad. One of the main reasons to prefer the UK was the perception that the country is more advanced in the field and with greater opportunities of employment afterwards. For example a postgraduate student commented *"Maybe this is stereotype, but in the UK I hope for a higher level of education."* Another one thinks that: *"...after studying in the UK it would be easier to find a job than after graduation in other country."* Study in another country sounds interesting." Polish students are opened for a semester abroad in different European countries. *"In each of the countries there is a lot to learn. Trip abroad study in another country sounds interesting."* Bulgarian and Lithuanian students share similar opinions. The UK students are interested to travel to other European countries like Germany, France and Spain but not that much to Bulgaria, Lithuania and Poland. However, studying in the latter is described as an opportunity to learn about the international trade differences between East and West of Europe.

Lithuanian students are not interested in South European countries (Italy, Spain and Portugal were named). According to students who were on Erasmus exchange *"people there are very different and difficult to work with because of their mañana attitude"*, and studies rarely being delivered in English despite claims of otherwise. Most students in Lithuania would choose "English speaking countries" because "it would be easier to overcome language barrier". Lithuanian students do not mean only native English speaking countries as Great Britain or Ireland, but also the Scandinavian countries. Norway, Sweden and Finland are preferred because of the "high quality of education", "education system is being focused on people", "students who studied there speak highly about conditions to study there", and "people speak English pretty well there". Some students also mentioned *"good economy"*, *"serious people"*, and *"attractive climate"*. Among such countries are the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Reasons are similar to the ones of choosing Scandinavian countries: *"high quality of studies"*, *"good economic situation of the country"*.

There are also students that would prefer study programme in one single university (local or foreign). Some of the Lithuanian students said that they *"prefer stability and such model means less*

uncertainty and fewer changes". Stability, less stress and more stable opportunities *"to find full-time job and create a family"* are also important factors..

Major barriers for students to study in a Joint European Degree Programme are:

- **The costs of studying** in particular for the international students have been named as the core issue of focus. The cost of living was referred to by the postgraduate students in the UK. Other commitments – children, family, mortgage, also influence the opportunity to study abroad. A Polish student made a comment *"Fees would influence a number of students. This significantly restricts access to knowledge. It is not good."* For Lithuanian and Bulgarian students money issues are seen as a possible barrier to participating in a Joint Degree Programme. *"If I would need to go to study abroad (especially to a country like Norway) on my own expenses, it would probably mean saving for it or even taking a loan. I would need to consider seriously how valuable the experience and knowledge abroad would be and would it pay off."*

- **Programme duration and the semester abroad.** If the programme is two semesters it will be difficult to be one semester abroad. For example one student suggested *"Yes, I would be interested. I just think it's a little difficult to do this [a semester abroad] during the 1-year program, because there is just no time to do this. I think it fits better into the 2-year Master's programme."*

- **Confidence in the programme** (undergraduate level). The students find it difficult to convince themselves to join a course without prior history. It will take a long time to build a brand name for the course. Therefore it is important that the brand building activity of the Joint programme starts early. Most of the programme selection is made based on a personal recommendation and it would need a very successful word of mouth campaign to get the first cohort of students recruited in such programme.

- **Lack of confidence in the competency of the partner universities.** For example a student from Lithuania mentioned that she and her friends in a full-time Master's Degree programme "were very



disappointed as reality did not match the information they found about the university before applying there". She is worried that *"even checking study programme, qualification of the professors, ratings of the university and feedback of peers on internet is not a guarantee of good learning experience in the foreign university"*.

● **Language for students that do not study in English or have in general low foreign language proficiency is another barrier.** In other countries like Lithuania students do not see language as a barrier to participating in a Joint Degree Programme. They rather see opportunities to improve their language skills. *"Even if my language skills are not sufficient in the beginning, I think I would be able to learn and improve quickly. And improving my foreign language skills is great possibility"*.

● **Branding confusion of the programme.** In Bulgaria, Greece and Romania where project partners offer programmes in cooperation with UK universities there is an understanding that this is an additional programme within the existing framework. The focus groups with students confirmed the need of a clear positioning of a Joint European Master's Degree programme.

● **Duration of the time abroad.** Polish students consider that 3 months should be the maximum period since they have life at home. *"We have our plans. I would not leave for too long."* Majority of students in Lithuania also think that family or work commitments might be major barriers for participating in a Joint Degree Programme if students have to go abroad for a semester. *"If you have a full-time position you would like to keep, it would be impossible going abroad for a semester to study."* *"On the other hand, if you have a family and your spouse would not like you to go, it might not work too."*

Advantages of a Master's Programmed in Digital Marketing for the University

The interviews with the university teaching staff and the administration had to explore their understanding of the opportunities and barriers of such programme when it is developed as Joint European master's studies.

The administrative staff in Bulgaria, Greece, and Lithuania is positive for having foreign students from other institutions/countries for a semester as part of the joint programme curriculum. In Greece participants perceive joint programmes as potentially offering opportunities but concern was expressed due to the potential cannibalization with the Digital Marketing and Social Media Masters City Colleague offers at the moment. For example, it was felt that since only one semester is offered abroad then some of the current or potential students interested in the existing program may switch to the new programme.

The UK staff considers that the Joint Programme is potentially going to enhance opportunities for students who are interested in learning Digital Marketing related subject area. The market for this course is predominantly outside of the UK. Expert staff interviews confirmed that the European market is positive in terms of Joint master's programmes and demand of these by students. However, for wider markets such as China, India and Middle East where students are sponsored, their sponsors prefer to deal with one legal entity when it comes to approving for student's learning.

The administrative focus group in Lithuania considers the programme as an opportunity. The Lithuanian project partner KTU does not have a digital marketing master study programme yet but would be interested to have such a study programme. It would *"enrich the portfolio of study programmes offered at the university already"*, especially in form of a Joint European master study programme as *"it would relate to challenges important to the University of interdisciplinary internationalization and student mobility"*. On the other hand it is difficult *"to expect student mobility from master level students as most often they have jobs and then mobility is challenging to combine with work commitments"*.

The representatives of the administration expressed the opinion that such programmes provide in general more opportunities for the universities. For the Bulgarian and Lithuanian administrative staff the benefits of joint study programme cover *"going international, demonstrating potential of teaching staff"*, *"getting*



new contacts and gaining new experience”, possibilities to teaching staff “*for personal growth through teaching to foreign students*”, “*building a network of teaching staff*”, opportunities “*to deepen and widen the areas of scientific research too*”.

The overall assessment of the administrative and teaching staff can be summarized with the comment of the Greek participants in the focus group: “*Very interesting project with many issues and many more will arise*”.

The major administrative problems to be resolved are:

- **Need to have global recognition for the programme.** In case the programme lacks such qualities Joint degree partners may lose international students. For example a representative of the UK administration pointed out: “*Although joint degrees are recognised by the EU, they have to be carefully managed to get global recognition. For example countries such as China and India tend to be only interested in who issues the certificate. Chinese students are less happy with Double degrees. For Chinese students the name of the programme should ideally include 'Communications' in the programme title since having just Marketing does not mean much in their understanding.*

- **Partner commitment and programme administration.** The research in all project partner universities identified partner commitment from top management to operational level of the courses as an important prerequisite to get the project implemented successfully and over the long term. The UK administration identified the need of a lead partner for the management of the entire programme; otherwise it is difficult to see who is responsible for the final decision on student acceptance, advancement and graduation. “*If the student never studies with Salford it would be difficult for us to issue a certificate even a basic one which is needed for a joint degree.*” The administration of City University College underlined that distributed administration creates barriers in programme implementation.

- **Students' records and mapping student journeys across different semesters.** In Greece the participants also suggested that to avoid issues student records should be owned by the university

that awards the degree but all universities should keep a copy of students. In the experience of City College collaborating with academic institutions abroad, City owns the students. Therefore a clear decision is necessary on who will do book keeping, how records will be copied to other institutions.

In Lithuania it is defined by Ministry of Education of Republic of Lithuania and regulation on joint study programmes rules that a student is “owned” by institution with which he/she signed the study agreement. In case of a joint study programme with foreign partners, student is also “owned” by Lithuanian partner if he studies in Lithuanian institution during his mobility period. The experience of the Bulgarian and the UK proves that there is need to have a list of step on and step off certificates titles which can make the programme work – just in case students decide to stop after so many modules it has to be clear who and how can recognise their achievements. The Joint Master's programme between University of National and World Economy and Nottingham Trent University has an option for students to get only a Bulgarian diploma if they do not take courses in the UK.

Coordination of the entire study life cycle from recruitment to alumni management is also needed and has to be solved before the start of the Joint programme. Institutions can have also potentially semester clashes. For example Salford Business School has six entry points and six weeks long block teaching modules. In Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Poland the programmes are organized around one or two entry points.

- **Regulations.** Potential issues may arise from different marking schemes, awards of degrees and other. In some partner countries there is a need to have degree approval from the ministry of education etc.

- **Financial issues.** Tuition fees and breakeven point also influence the benefits from a Joint Master's Degree programme. In the case of City College the breakeven point is with at least 10 students, 8 thought modules, 1 dissertation, and 1 year duration. The Joint programme has to consider different costs in different countries e.g. teaching hour payment is quite defend in the five partners' countries. Salford Business School needs to recruit



at least 25 students to make the programme economically viable for the Salford Business School. In Bulgaria the number of students to break even is 20 students. KTU sets prices for students per ECTS credit which makes up tuition fee. Administrative staff estimates that university would break even if "*at least 12 students are enrolled in the study programme*". Student loans and financial model for the course has to be clearly mapped out and agreed to help students to compare the benefits and costs associated with this programme.

● **Student support.** Potential confusion may arise with library resources, emails, personal tutoring systems and student welfare support. There are many questions to be answered in the process of the programme development. What email account will the student have? What e-resources will they access to e.g. from what university (ies). To access library or any resources students need to have email account at the particular university. These accounts offer different benefits. The universities in Bulgaria usually do not support them after graduation. Just the opposite is the approach of the University of Salford. A Salford email account is free for live and offers with free online storage space.

● **The equivalence of learning experience between UK and other systems within the region** is also an issue. A major problem is ensuring consistency of learning experience among the different institutions. There are also resources that are not online, for example administrative support, personal tutoring, student services, career services, etc.

● **Cannibalization effect.** The payment fee structure can also influence the cannibalization because the same course can be done in a "cheaper" country and the students might enrol elsewhere. Distribution of fees among partners needs prior agreement and procedure.

● **Potential conflict among universities.** Another possible issue identified relates to potential conflict of interests. One respondent from the administration in the University of Salford suggested "*Some unis may not want to be involved in joint degrees. For example University A does not want to provide a joint degree with University C because they are not peer, or of the same standard.*" Clear communication process and regular update

meetings amongst partners will help to resolve the conflicts. "The Joint programme definitely needs "pioneers" - individuals in place who have the desire to drive the programme development forward in all partner organisations".

● **Teaching and learning complexities.** Difference in educational systems also impacts the complementation of the joint programmes. KTU administrative staff considers that the lack of experience in the joint programmes might be a barrier that can be overcome with the partners help. Challenges might include matching "*credit system, course structures, methods for teaching and grading*" and "*administration of entire student's study process from enrolment to the giving a degree diploma to him especially taking into account his mobility period*"

● **Teaching expectations for students are also different.** For example "*getting marks of 80+ whereas in the UK it is more 69+ which is perceived as very good.*" The respondents suggested that key aspects need to be clarified. For example how do you choose the profile of the people that will teach, how do you choose from the various countries and universities. The Joint Programme needs to have clear benchmark which allows parity across all partner organisations in terms of assignment verifications, peer moderation, samples of assessed work moderation, external examiners involvement.

● **Accreditation of a Joint Degree Programmes in the country.** During the focus group in Greece it was suggested that the joint master's programme could be accredited by reputable associations in the field e.g. CIM, IDM. In the UK any new master's course has to have industry body accreditation. Some of the main industry bodies are SEMPO, CIM, and IDM. Whilst industry is less problematic getting university approvals is a major issue for the University of Salford. New master's programmes can start during the time between two consecutive accreditations. The official accreditation of the programme is done during the next cycle of the university programme accreditation. The industry has mainly an advising role in the process of programme development in Bulgaria, Lithuania and Poland. The administrative and teaching staff of KTU in Lithuania "do not see any barriers for not getting an accreditation" for such a degree.



● **Having foreign students from the partner universities for one semester.** In the UK there are new opportunities for international students to take a semester abroad but this practice is not widely used and experienced. The other partners also have a different level of experience with foreign students. However, all of them agree that there is a need to think about international students more holistically not just getting them to sit in the classroom. Social integration is an important aspect of the studies.

Conclusion

The demand for digital marketing experts is growing throughout Europe. The Joint Master's Degree in Digital Marketing or Digital and Social Media Marketing provides access to the practice and educational experience of more advanced partners. In the case of JEMSS project university partners from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Poland can benefit from the University of Salford and City College (as part of the University of Sheffield) experience. The results of the desk research, the online survey, the focus groups among students, professors and the administrative staff lead to the following conclusions:

● Digital marketing is an attractive area of studies both for national and joint degree master 'programmes. Similar to the national courses students would like to acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge and skills that will provide better chance for their professional development. Regular update of the curriculum and its correspondence to the business needs is a must for the programme development.

● The Joint programme will attract students because they can increase their international experience, get a diploma recognized by more than one European university and prepare better for the globalized world. A semester abroad is a good option that saves money compared to three or four semester study abroad. However, for some students studying abroad may come into conflict with their current job and family responsibilities.

● The interviews from the academic and the professional services staff suggest that there was an initial support for Joint master's programme.

However, the accreditation of such programme is a complicated endeavour in Greece, Lithuania, Poland and the UK.

● The major challenges are to develop an attractive content and to solve the numerous administrative issues of the Joint European Programme. It needs to be clearly differentiated to avoid cannibalization with the existing masters. The focus groups with the administrative staff raise a lot of issues that have to be carefully considered to ensure success.

The partners in the JEMSS project supported financially by Erasmus programme created exciting teaching materials both on paper and digitally. However, the administrative issues in order to develop the Joint Master's programme needed enormous additional efforts that the partners were not ready to implement. The phenomenon BREXIT worsened the chances for the establishment of a Joint Master's European Degree. Thus such a Master's programme has a potential to narrow the digital marketing gap in the partners' countries but the probability to become a reality today is very little.

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