Towards a model for assessing the role of marketing students and graduates in SMEs: facts, fiction and future

Introduction

“…the UK economy, society and small enterprise…offers a never ending stream of subjects for research”, thankfully this means small business researchers are unlikely to run out of worthwhile research topics concerning SMEs (Curran & Blackburn, 2001, p 159).

In an uncertain employment market (IDBR report December 2011), graduates are having to work harder than ever to differentiate themselves (Rae, 2007), making “employability” a high priority for educators in all subjects, including marketing (Andrews and Higson, 2008). Yet, whilst there are clearly identified links between work-based learning embedded in the curriculum and enhanced student employability (Lester & Costley, 2010, Metcalf, 2010, Brodies & Irving, 2007), much of this evidence comes from the larger, corporate business perspective. Why the preoccupation with MNEs, when 99.9% of all UK registered companies are SMEs (BIS Report, ONS, January 2011)?

DHLE, AGR, and other published data which are heavily relied upon by various stakeholder groups, do not appear to be set up to effectively track graduate exit into SME businesses, as employees or start-ups. Similarly, not much is known about the current situation in respect of roles available in SMEs for marketing students and graduates (SME facts, graduate-jobs.com, 2013). Hence, this research will focus on the specific needs of small-to-medium sized firms, asking: “What is the role of marketing students and graduates in SMEs?”.

Marketing orientation and the small firm: the role of marketing students in SMEs?

As SME managers often aren’t from a marketing background (Coviello, 2002, Stokes, Fitchew, & Blackburn, 1997), it has been observable for some years (Weinrauch et al, 1991), that their marketing activities are often being implemented in an unstructured and spontaneous way (Gilmore, Carson, Grant, 2001). As a result, the success of SME marketing activities is heavily dependent on what may outwardly appear to be erratic decisions, due to a lack of marketing expertise (Brooks & Simkin, 2011). Certainly however, there are industries and fields where the SME firm itself is inherently a “marketing organisation” (e.g. consultancy, events management, social/digital media training, customer insight etc), and these may have been started by graduates or experienced ex-blue-chip marketing managers, seeking the autonomy of self-employment. Correspondingly, SME management knowledge of marketing is, according to some, integral to the level of marketing orientation of the firm as a whole (Blankson, et al, 2006), but it is unclear as to whether this is commensurate with an increased propensity of the firm to want to employ a marketing graduate.

This would lead us to consider the value of marketing graduates as SME practitioners, to undertake marketing activities in a more systematic manner. “University leavers, including those seeking marketing jobs, could benefit small to medium-sized enterprises, [and] will be in demand among companies… one in five [FSB members] said they planned to take on a graduate intern, [as] people who have been through university, have skills which are positive from the point of view of an employer.” However, the Centre for Enterprise report of the same year suggested that “almost nine in ten SMEs were not planning to invest in hiring graduates” (Marketing graduates could benefit SMEs, 2010).

However, as Herein lies a potential ‘reciprocity paradox’: SME managers as student professional development mentors. Arguably, exposure to SME owners and ‘live’ client projects for
networking benefits are critical for students (Lopez & Lee, 2005). This is, therefore, an issue for course content. Should aspects of SME specific work-based learning opportunities be embedded within marketing ALL programmes?

**The role of SMEs and marketing educators in matching students with SME needs**

As recently announced, the UK Government plans to enable engagement at a deeper level with businesses, prompted by recommendations from the Heseltine review (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012), to “make the UK the best place in Europe to start, finance and grow a business; to encourage investment and exports …and to create a more educated workforce”. Although not new initiatives, ‘Local Enterprise Partnerships’ (LEPs) and ‘Enterprise Zones’ are certainly gaining attention (McCann, 2012), making it clear that small-to-medium sized businesses (SMEs) are key to the achievement of these aims.

Concurrent to business development initiatives, students are faced with an increasingly competitive employment marketplace (Collinson, 1999, Collinson & Shaw 2001), coupled with conflicting needs of their own, in paying back student accrued debts and achieving financial independence. With pressures on HEIs to perform well against DHLE exit-point benchmarks, employability related course content and experiences, including personal and professional career planning have also received much attention by researchers (Tymon, 2011). Consequently, course developers need to ensure the currency of their programmes of study (Rae 2007, Resnick et al 2011), drive exit-employability (viewed by many as an entry point/application criteria (Wellman 2010, Collinson 1999), and enhance student retention/satisfaction factors. Further, there is an increasing body of literature reviewing the “marketing/entrepreneurship interface” notably driven by Carson and Coviello (1996), so further analysis of fitness for SME specific purpose of marketing course content is critical (Jones & Hegarty, 2011, Andrews & Higson, 2008).

Various graduate recruitment focussed media have been reporting on the recent rise in the number of opportunities provided to graduates by the “increased engagement in the graduate labour market from SMEs” (Gradual shift in the graduate labour market?, AGCAS, 2012). Some of the definitions used to identify various Undergraduate routes to employment date back to the 1960’s, and arguably do not reflect current practice. For example, the DHLE term ‘niche graduate posts’ “…is a term used to describe occupations that, while not traditionally requiring a degree, require a combination of expert and soft skills that today's graduates are more likely to offer than non-graduates, and so are increasingly likely to be filled by them…and many roles in SMEs, where flexibility and multiple skills are needed.” (Gradual shift in the graduate labour market?, AGCAS, 2012).

Many of these soft skills may be acquired through placements during sandwich courses (Brown & Ahmed, 2009), and there is consistent evidence to support placement experience has a positive correlation to improved degree classifications and employability (DHLE, 2011). But even these data do not provide the necessary detail to assess if these courses really prepare marketing graduates to match the specific needs of smaller business employers (Holden & Jameson, 2007, Martin & Chapman, 2006).

**Research questions**

This research will consider questions including: Is it possible to establish the level of pre-existing marketing orientation of a SME? Does a SME which already has a marketing orientation in practice see a need to employ marketing students or graduates (or are existing owner-managers and other staff themselves graduates from marketing courses)? What is the
propensity of a SME to proactively recruit a marketing graduate in order to further develop the marketing orientation of the firm? Can we identify existing levels of marketing graduate employment in SMEs (current frequently cited measures DHLE, AGR, etc do not provide clear distinctions)?

**Methodology and methods**

With the marketing orientation and recruitment needs of SMEs as a primary concern, this proposal aims to explore apparent gaps in literature (many of which are highlighted by Wellman 2010), and published information available for tracking UK HEI exit destinations, considering the fitness-for-purpose of current methods related to measuring marketing student SME employment. Hence this paper proposes to identify a range of perceived weaknesses in published data and seek to identify a range of pertinent issues relating to the employment of marketing graduates, from the perspective of a sample of SMEs. The research being presented here, in its primary exploratory phase, will undertake a qualitative multi-method and multi-perspective study. *For a summary of the research process, please see the appendix.*

In-depth, case study research with multiple members of UK based, technology related industry sector SMEs, located in the South East, will be triangulated with student focus groups and semi-structured interviews with marketing graduates as well as educators. The reason for developing cases with a few firms and more than one individual within each firm, is to gain a deeper understanding of the various roles that students and graduates can perform, i.e. not just the owner-managers’ views as recruiter, but the experiences of employees from various points within the company of working with students on short-term projects, voluntary work, summer jobs, consultancy and internships, as well as graduate recruits. This would allow the researcher to take into consideration various personality, capability and experience related inter-plays within the frame of reference, as highlighted by Orser et al (2007). The aim of the resultant qualitative data from mixed methods and multi-perspectives is to identify and correlate needs of SMEs as employers, with SME roles for marketing students and graduates, and thereby extract suitable recommendations for marketing educators.

**Conclusions**

For both SME Managers and students, having clearly identifiable mutual gains is critical to ensuring equal engagement and reciprocity. But we might ask who really has the most to gain? Is it the SME business, whereby they benefit from “fresh-talent”, ideas and marketing activities finally having the attention they require? Is it the inexperienced marketing professional, who may either be looking to start an extended career with the firm, see the role as a vital stepping-stone, pay back their student debts, or simply test knowledge gained in studies practically? Is it the course provider in enhancing their exit-employability statistics, which in turn may motivate more students to apply to their course? Or a blend of these?

It is anticipated this research will provide valuable insights for SMEs in employing marketing students; for students themselves in assessing their employability and marketing educators for developing SME inclusive curricula. Could this lead to the development of a model for matching SME role needs with marketing students?
Bibliography


### Methodology

#### The role of marketing students/graduates in SMEs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research strategy</th>
<th>Qualitative analysis, multi-methods, predominated by case study strategy</th>
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| Data collection methods | Case study data collection from multiple members of technology sector SMEs  
Focus group of current marketing students  
Semi-structured interviews with recent marketing graduates  
Semi-structured interviews with recent marketing HEI educators |
| Sampling strategy  | Non-probabilistic, stratified random sample  
Cases: SMEs in UK, SE, technology sector, >5 up to <250 – to data saturation point  
Focus Groups: UG marketing students - convenience  
Interviews: recent UG marketing graduates, HEI educators– convenience, judgment |