

ACQUIRING MARKETING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCES OF THE FUTURE - EXPECTATIONS OF POLISH STUDENTS

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Abstract

Higher education in specific professional competencies is each time a challenge to combine the expectations and capabilities of universities, the expectations of the labor market and the expectations of students. With regard to the competencies of the future, relevant to the marketing communications sector, the situation becomes further complicated due to the dynamically changing digital media and modes of communication. In Polish conditions, numerous research results are available, indicating the expectations of employers of the marketing communications sector. However, there is a lack of research dedicated to the competence offer of universities in this regard, as well as the expectations and interests of students. This article attempts to fill this gap. It presents the results of a survey of 156 students at Polish higher education institutions regarding the assessment of the presence of future competencies in the study plans of the majors they study and their perceived professional usefulness of these competencies. The results of the survey indicate the existence of a competence gap both between the offer of higher education institutions and the expectations of employers, as well as between the expectations of students and employers. This article was written as part of the implementation of the "Media and Communication in Education and Science" project, under the International Partnerships program, funded by the National Agency for Academic Exchange.

Key words: marketing communication; communication skills; education.

1. Professional competence - a bridge between the education and labour markets in the age of the digital economy

The process of acquiring professional qualifications and competencies is one of

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the most important concepts describing the practical effect of educational activities. It determines the preparation of an employee to meet the challenges of the labour market and the expectations of employers. The area of formation of professional competencies is interdisciplinary, as it is the object of interest of management (including mainly human resource management), pedagogy, sociology as well as social communication sciences. The problem of managing qualifications and competencies, which, as a subject of scientific reflection, is constantly developing in the field of management sciences, is also an issue itself (Draganidis, Mentzas 2006; Klett 2010). Competence management can be considered broadly, as a kind of management philosophy or as a way of thinking the organization adopts about all its assets, abilities and skills. We are then dealing with a kind of personification of business entities and other organizations. A narrower understanding of competence management is referred to as the competence of employees, especially their professional competence.

In Polish literature on human resource management, the terms “qualifications” or “competencies” are often used synonymously, as the scopes of both concepts overlap to a large extent (Orczyk 2009). Professional qualifications have, over the years, become synonymous with the effect of acquiring certain skills necessary for the work performance. The diversification of the qualifications obtaining process was unquestionably caused, in the conditions of successive industrial revolutions, by

the massification of educational processes, the inability to prepare pupils or students for the holistic use of a wide variety of skills, and at the same time, the dynamics of progressive civilizational changes as well as the need to adapt to the specifics of social, organizational and technical transformation (Gawronski et al., 2021). One of the most diversified and understudied competency resources are managerial qualifications (Chelpa 2003).

Formal education still remains one of the most important areas of professional preparation. This also applies to the marketing communications sector. As far as the level of competencies required to work in the sector is considered, higher education has a special role in the preparation of our industry’s workforce. From this point of view, universities should change and adjust their curricula as quickly and comprehensively as possible, updating them with new competencies to adapt to the evolving changes in the labour market (Ramley 2014; Mouritzis et al., 2018). Typically, however, traditional education systems take time to effectively develop and implement new or modified curricula. This results in a gap between the demand for competencies, reported by the labour market, and the provision of new competencies by education (Spada et al. 2022). In Polish conditions, this is evidenced by many years of research, conducted in the area of journalist education (Gawronski et al. 2009; Gawronski 2010; Gawronski and Polak 2010). However, the pattern of the defined competence gaps also occurs in other areas, including marketing communication. This, in consequence, creates space for both new, more dynamic and flexible educational entities, as well as new competency and educational platforms of more general nature (such as MOOCs and various open e-learning and m-learning courses) (Milićević et al. 2021).

Technology including artificial intelligence is changing in the area of communication. This includes remote work or changes on the labour market, and thus it affects the skills that an employee should have. The demand for professional profiles is evolving and more and more often employers are looking for employees with know-how and technological skills. STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) skills – science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Zizka et al. 2021) are becoming crucial. However, the new paradigm of market realities and employment puts social and personal skills (the value of which cannot be replaced by technological processes) ahead of concrete expertise. Skills such as critical thinking, analytical skills, emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility are becoming essential in the new reality (Finn 2011; Abdullaeva

et al. 2020).

2. Competences of the future in the field of marketing communes – an attempt at operationalization

According to the research on the Polish marketing communication sector, both universities and employers from the marketing communication industry expect cooperation primarily to develop the most popular field of cooperation so far, i.e. the student internship system. In addition, business expects cooperation to be able to acquire employees with higher qualifications, i.e. graduates who had been prepared for work in a better way. At the same time, companies in the marketing communication sector are moderately interested in the possibility of influencing curricula and adapting them to their needs. Moreover, they expect the universities themselves to place greater emphasis on the development of communication and cooperation skills among students. Business also draws attention to the need to develop creativity, innovation and cognitive flexibility at universities as their importance is increasing in a world increasingly dominated by algorithms. The Fourth Industrial Revolution provides mobile computing and information technology that is significantly changing economies, businesses and societies. And just like the previous ones, it affects the labour market by creating demand for millions of new jobs, but also the demand for new qualifications and skills of employees (Monitoring the education market, labour and marketing communication 2020).

Polish research also confirms that marketing communication sector shows little interest in cooperating with universities in the field of scientific research or the use of academic research infrastructures. At the same time, researchers expect greater business involvement in financing scientific activity. The results of the study in this regard reflect the structural features of Polish economy, which is called the “sub-supplier economy”. It produces low added value, relies on low labour costs and limited innovation. The latter feature is reflected in some of the lowest inputs on R&D in the EU and the small share of the sector participating in the expenses (“Cooperation between universities and enterprises from the marketing communication sector” 2021).

In the knowledge society, organizations operate at a global level; the economy is characterized by strong competition and cross-sectoral interdependence. Flexible production systems and other consequences resulting from automation, robotization, moving towards the use of artificial intelligence are the hallmarks of the fourth industrial revolution and the modern concept of industry 4.0 (Davies 2015). This is also reflected in the responsibility of the state and educational institutions for the development of modern education, focused on new competences and qualifications. Improving the accessibility and quality of education and vocational training to help people of all ages adapt to new technologies is currently one of the priorities of European Union countries (The Fourth Industrial Revolution and its impact on the labour market 2020).

It is therefore necessary to study the impact of new technologies on labour markets and to modernise policies and education so that it is geared towards rapidly improving the level of education and skills of people of all ages, in particular with regard to STEM and non-cognitive soft skills, which will enable people to realise their unique human potential. The scope of intervention should include school curricula, teacher training, extending its attractiveness beyond traditional low- and medium-skilled professions. Governments should also facilitate the renewal of vocational training for individuals who have acquired new qualifications in the course of their work. Countries should focus on the digitalisation of formal and non-formal education so that learners can learn about new technologies at the stage of education, which they will use later at work. Thanks to such measures, it will be possible to adapt the qualifications and skills of employees to the requirements of the labour market. The educational offer should be prepared in cooperation with enterprises and educational units (Economy 4.0... 2016; Nedelkoska &

Quintini 2018).

Digital education covers two main streams. Firstly, it is the development of digital competences for learners. Secondly, the pedagogical use of digital technologies to modify, transform and improve teaching processes. The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, also known as DigComp, describes the model digital competences and it has already been used by many European countries. DigComp divides ITS IT competencies into five areas:

- information and data processing competence;
- communication and cooperation;
- creation of digital content;
- security;
- solving problems (Digital Education at School in Europe. Eurydice Report 2019).

The challenges and possible benefits of digital education are extremely diverse. From the labour market perspective, the gap in the skills of the workforce is most important. An increasing number of jobs require basic skills in information and communication technologies, and more and more new jobs are based on specialized digital competences. From a societal point of view, the biggest challenge is inclusivity, e.g., IT divides people into those without basic IT skills or with only basic IT skills and highly qualified and talented individuals, which can substantially widen the existing gaps in society. From an educational point of view, the challenge is not only to ensure that young people develop the digital competences they need, but also to reap the benefits that technology can bring to educational processes, both in formal and informal education. It is also important to guarantee the safe use of digital technologies. Threats aimed at students, such as cyberbullying, internet addiction or loss of privacy, have been a major concern for some time (Digital Competences and Remote Learning in the European Union 2020; Ogonowska 2016; Rozkrut 2018).

Competences that distinguish human work from the work of information systems, robots or artificial intelligence are of key importance. These are the areas in which a human being will still be difficult to replace and thus they have been called the competences of the future.

The competences include:

- Cognitive competence – commonly referred to as thinking competences. It is a very broad concept, encompassing both creativity, logical reasoning and solving complex problems;
- Social competences – necessary in a work environment that requires contact with other people, teamwork or people management. These include, first of all: effective group collaboration, leadership and entrepreneurship, as well as emotional intelligence;
- Digital and technical competences – these are the so-called hard skills. Digital competences, which are of fundamental importance, are particularly important in this respect. They are not limited to programming or data analysis, but cover a wide range of skills from digital problem solving to knowledge of privacy or cybersecurity (van Laar et al. 2017).

The competences of the future can only be effectively shaped within the framework of a broad and flexible educational system, focused on lifelong learning, not limited to formal forms of education. The axis of this system should be a human being who understands the need for constant education and acquisition of new skills. The basic structure of this ecosystem is formed by institutions providing formal education, understood as learning at school and at university, but the necessary role in it is played by all organizations providing opportunities for non-formal and informal education. Employers, NGOs, offline and online course providers, local communities, etc. play a special role there. Formal education institutions develop knowledge and skills, but, above all, cognitive and

social competences that allow them to draw on the opportunities inherent in education provided as part of an open educational system (Lauder & Mayhew 2020; Włoch & Śledziowska 2019; Łapińska et al. 2022).

Developing technologies also create new opportunities and challenges for practitioners in the marketing communication industry. The adoption of digital marketing techniques, basing it largely on social media, has significantly contributed to the individualization and individual targeting of marketing, in which product providers communicate to a greater extent with individual users and consumers, increasingly moving away from marketing communication based on mass communication (Brady et al. 2008). Digital marketing can be understood as a sub-branch of traditional marketing, using modern digital channels to place products and, above all, to communicate with stakeholders (Royle and Laing 2014) or as the use of digital technologies to create integrated, targeted and measurable communication that helps to gain and retain customers while building deep relationships with them based on cooperation, partnership and loyalty (Wymbbs 2011). Skills used in digital marketing refer to knowledge and awareness of the application of digital marketing in creative industries and other spheres of activity, where it is particularly widely used. In literature, you can find research results showing gaps between the skills of employees and the expectations of employers in the marketing communication industry. They are usually limited to a specific country and do not show global trends (Day 2011; Valos et al. 2010; Royle & Laing 2014). In Polish conditions, research on digital competences in the marketing communication industry is usually conducted by environmental institutions associating market participants. In addition to this, in 2020 the Sectoral Council for the Marketing Communication Sector, which is an advisory body of the Minister of Development in Poland, started developing an up-to-date catalogue and competences of the future based on empirical research. This may constitute a market determinant of education directions in the area of marketing communication. One of the statutory tasks of sectoral councils is to inspire the best possible matching of education to the requirements of employers, so that people who choose a specific industry as a workplace are best suited to it. Marketing, and marketing communication, is a field undergoing dynamic transformation and revolutionary transformations, which means that the demand for competences is dynamically changing over time. According to the authors of the study, the sectoral council should be a link between the industry and public administration institutions that manage the stream of public funds and educational institutions. One of the key tasks is to recommend the development of services tailored to the needs of the marketing communication industry, for which participants will be able to receive public funds. At the same time, these qualifications and competences should be a determinant of modernized plans and educational programs that are implemented by universities in the area of marketing communication (Gawroński et al. 2021).

So far, three editions of this cyclical study of training and development needs in the marketing communication sector have been held. The research took place in 2020-2022. The results obtained can therefore be compared and changes in the anticipation of the demand for skills of employees now and in the near future can be observed. The materials resulting from the research cover not only the perspective of employers, but also of the perspective of the employees of the sector. In 2020, employers were mostly interested in training employees in the following areas: strategy (63 percent), new marketing technologies (56 percent), project management (49 percent), and planning and effectiveness of marketing campaigns (46 percent). Employee expectations were similar, with campaign planning and effectiveness coming before project management. In 2021, the perspective of employers changed. In the first positions, they indicated: Internet marketing and project management (66.7 percent each). The podium was complemented by the areas of marketing communication and creativity (57.8 percent each). In 2022, employers considered the following areas to be the most important: technological and digital, communication, analytical and management-related areas. On the other hand,

the employees proposed to improve their qualifications in: using communication tools and channels, management, analysis and communication. The cited reports contain detailed developments of the desired training within such generally presented areas as, for example, strategy. At this point, it is worth noting that the collected expectations of both companies and employees are not bold, futuristic visions of the future, but a sober response to the competence gaps observed today (Competences in the world of marketing communication. 2022).

3. Research methodology

As part of the "Media and Communication and Education and Science" project, an international team of researchers assessed the expectations of students from 4 countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Latvia) regarding the desired competences that they would like to obtain during their studies in fields related to social communication and marketing communication. For this purpose, a questionnaire survey was carried out on a group of 588 students of first- and second-cycle studies. Its aim was to verify the presence of competences of the future in educational programs, through opinions obtained from students. The study was performed using the CAWI method in the period May-June 2021. The sample size obtained, as well as the fact that it was selected in a deliberate way, taking into account the university students participating in the project, makes it impossible to extrapolate the results to the whole population. However, the results are an important indication of educational standards, because the study covered those universities that are intensively developing modern educational programs in the field of marketing communication and constitute a recognized brand on the higher education market. The study used the survey questionnaire as a research tool, formulating questions to obtain as true as possible declarative assessments, in accordance with the self-assessment methodology applied in the measurement of communicative competence (McCroskey 1994; McCroskey and McCroskey 1998; Duran 1983). 156 completed questionnaires were obtained as a part of Polish students' opinion survey.

Verification of competences in the field of perceived professional suitability and presence in study plans was based on the classification of key areas and competences contained therein, indicated in the research and reports of the Sectoral Competence Council. The competences of the future for the area of marketing communication include in this typology a total of 13 general training and development areas, containing several or a dozen or so issues, assessed differently by employers from the point of view of their suitability on the labour market. Apart from the detailed results of the Sectoral Competence Council survey, six key competence areas defined by employers were selected.

These include: 1. Strategy area; 2. New marketing technologies; 3. Planning and effectiveness of advertising campaigns; 4. Project management; 5. Area of creativity; 6. Managerial skills. Each of these competence areas was assigned to detailed issues, which then, as a result of the conducted research, were arranged according to the criterion of training potential that had been indicated by the participants of the labour market. Ultimately, 20 competences of the future were selected, which are of particular importance for employers of the marketing communication industry. These 20 competences were assessed by the students surveyed.

4. Research results

The presented study included verification of the extent to which the surveyed students perceive the presence of individual competences of the future in their study plans. Their task was to determine whether (even within one subject of teaching) they had encountered subjects on their educational path, aimed at educating selected compe-

tences. In order to reduce the risk of different interpretations of individual names of competences, respondents were given a glossary of terms, which aimed at clearly defining specific names of competences. The results of the study on the presence of competences in study plans are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The presence of marketing competences in study plans declared by the surveyed students.

| | Number of observations | N | % |
|----------------------|------------------------|------|------|
| Social_media | 135 | 156 | 86,5 |
| Digital_marketing | 129 | | 82,7 |
| Content_marketing | 126 | | 80,8 |
| Design_thinking | 123 | | 78,8 |
| Creative_thinking | 108 | | 69,2 |
| Customer_experience | 84 | | 53,8 |
| Media_planning | 81 | | 51,9 |
| Goals_management | 75 | | 48,1 |
| HRM | 75 | | 48,1 |
| Analytics_SEM_SEO | 63 | | 40,4 |
| Building_commitment | 63 | | 40,4 |
| Data_analysis | 63 | | 40,4 |
| Mobile_marketing | 57 | | 36,5 |
| Big_data | 51 | | 32,7 |
| Budget_management | 48 | | 30,8 |
| Influencer_marketing | 42 | | 26,9 |
| Time_management | 42 | | 26,9 |
| Data_science | 42 | | 26,9 |
| Machine_learning | 24 | 15,4 | |
| Agile_management | 21 | 13,5 | |

According to the presented data, the key competences, educated as part of the fields of study related to marketing communication, refer to its component, which is digital marketing. The three competences highlighted by students relate directly or indirectly to this area (social media, digital marketing, and content marketing). Students also indicated two clearly perceived competences related to creativity (design thinking and creative thinking). At the same time, a very low rate of presence in the study plans of competences was noted. This concerns the digital economy and industry 4.0 – data science and machine learning and may be surprising. Time management and agile management, which are important and desirable managerial and social competences for employers, are recognized by students to an extremely limited extent.

Regardless of the presence of individual competences in educational programs observed by the respondents, it is important to see how students perceive the real and practical usefulness of the competences. Of course, their opinions are most often not verified by a professional activity and are only a reflection of how the respondents think – which may prove useful in their professional work in the future.

The results of the study in this area are presented in Table 2.

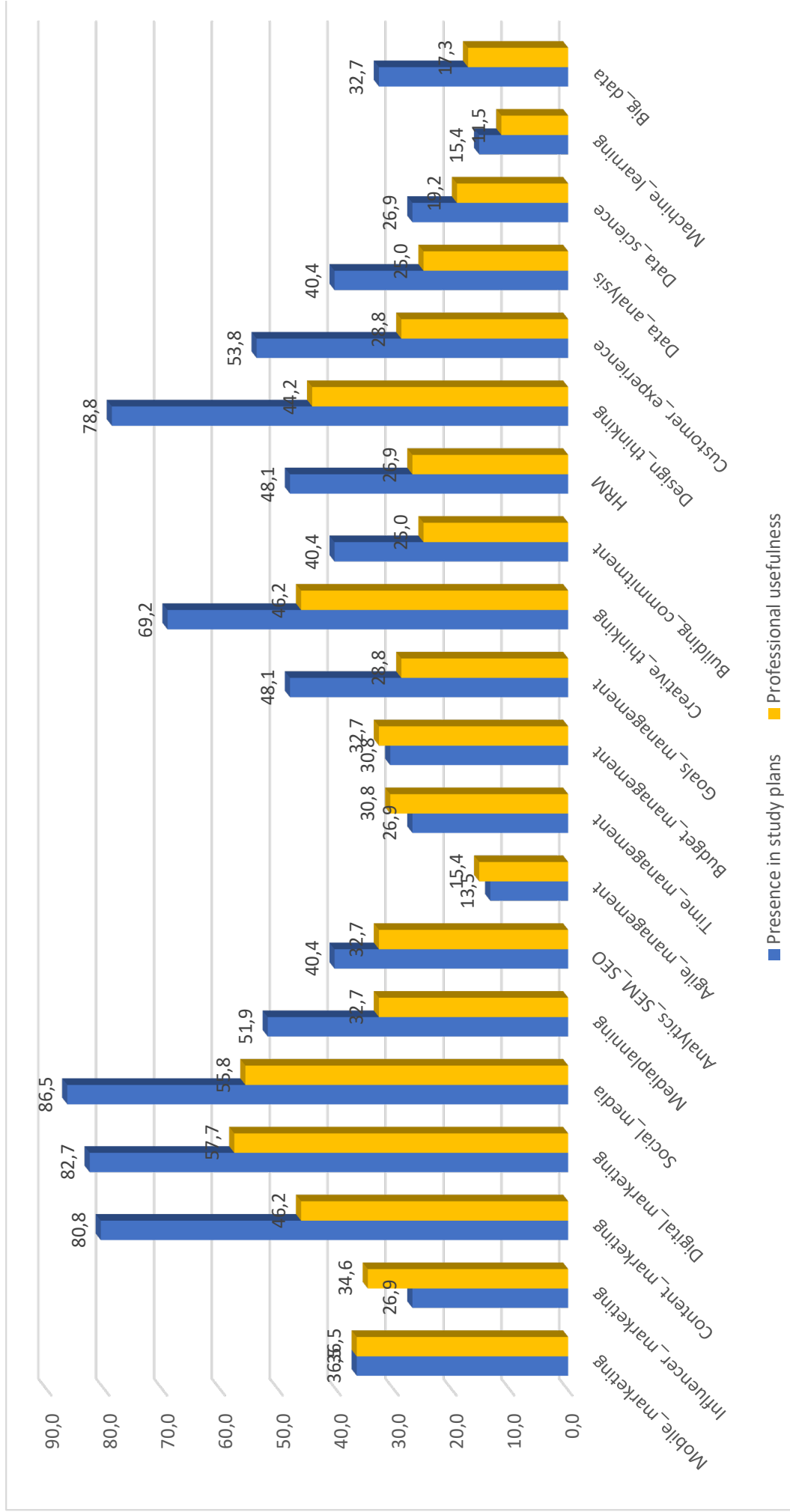
Table 2. Professional suitability of future competences concerning the area of marketing communication – in the opinion of the surveyed students.

| | Number of observations | N | % |
|----------------------|------------------------|------|------|
| Digital_marketing | 90 | 156 | 57,7 |
| Social_media | 87 | | 55,8 |
| Content_marketing | 72 | | 46,2 |
| Creative_thinking | 72 | | 46,2 |
| Design_thinking | 69 | | 44,2 |
| Mobile_marketing | 57 | | 36,5 |
| Influencer_marketing | 54 | | 34,6 |
| Media_planning | 51 | | 32,7 |
| Analytics_SEM_SEO | 51 | | 32,7 |
| Budget_management | 51 | | 32,7 |
| Time_management | 48 | | 30,8 |
| Goals_management | 45 | | 28,8 |
| Customer_experience | 45 | | 28,8 |
| HRM | 42 | | 26,9 |
| Building_commitment | 39 | | 25,0 |
| Data_analysis | 39 | | 25,0 |
| Data_science | 30 | | 19,2 |
| Big_data | 27 | | 17,3 |
| Agile_management | 24 | | 15,4 |
| Machine_learning | 18 | 11,5 | |

While analysing the results of the study, it should first of all be noted that the assessment of the perceived usefulness of competences is generally lower than the assessment of the presence of competences in the educational system in which the respondents operate. This means that universities develop competences that are assessed as useful - in the best case- by only half of the students. Most often, however, the suitability indicators are significantly lower. The assessment of the usefulness of the three most important competences reflects their high and perceptible presence in the educational process. More than half of the respondents consider competences in the field of social media and digital marketing to be useful. Other competences have varying attractiveness in terms of their usefulness, although there is a general correlation between what students expect and what universities offer to them. It is worth noting that key competences for Industry 4.0 and the digital economy (relatively “difficult”) are assessed as the least useful by the respondents.

A graphical comparison of the results, indicating the differences between the offer of plans and curricula and students’ expectations, measured by the assessment of professional suitability, for all analysed competences, is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Comparison of the offer of competences in study plans and assessment of their suitability by the surveyed students.



5. Discussion and conclusions

The survey results presented here lead to somewhat surprising observations. Firstly - a significant part of the expectations of the labour market is reflected in teaching plans. Once again, a caveat should be made that the survey was conducted in only three non-public higher education institutions in Poland. Thus, any broader conclusions or extrapolation of the results of the survey to a larger population cannot be drawn. This may be due to the higher organizational dynamics of private schools which have less bureaucracy and tend to be smaller, flexible units. In contrast, large universities, have the ability to adapt quickly to changing market conditions. Also, the cooperation with market players - businesses - can be carried out at a more professional level in this regard than is the case of public schools. A large part of the competencies desired by the marketing communication sector is present in formal education, as evidenced by the declarations of the students surveyed, indicating that they have encountered educational content relating to selected competencies, qualifications and skills. Of course, there is also a noticeable variation in the presence of all the competencies selected for the study. What may be surprising is the fact that the focus on education of slightly more strict, analytical competencies, which, in the opinion of representatives of the labour market, are of particular importance, and are those against which there is a competence gap in the labour market, was abandoned. This may be due to the fact that education in the field of marketing communications is usually placed in the area of social sciences and humanities, which is not conducive to building competencies based on quantitative methods. Nevertheless, it shows the interdisciplinary nature of the education of social communication specialists and the need to supplement area-based competencies with others when the job market expects them. The generally lower assessment of the professional usefulness of particular qualifications and competencies than the high parameters of their presence in plans and curricula would indicate is also a surprising result of the survey.

It is a matter of particular interest that marketing communications students only partly rate digital marketing and social media competencies as useful, while they regard the other qualifications as even less useful. The attempt to explain the reasons for this must be based on the continuation and deepening of research in the presented area. This does not change the fact that the presented results can be a certain recommendation for universities educating in the field of marketing communication

while considering market-desirable qualifications to be more strongly and clearly reflected in educational programs. And above all, how the content of educational process should be designed so that its usefulness was highly assessed by students who seek the achievement of individual competencies.

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