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Competences Basque Advertising Professionals Consider Most Important to Their Work: A Comparison 2008–2016

Abstract

This research explores the opinions of Basque advertising professionals regarding the importance of distinct areas of competence to their daily work and those in which they plan to pursue additional training over the next five years. Results of a survey conducted in 2016 are compared with data from a similar study conducted in 2008. Findings indicate that although sector opinion in the Basque Country regarding the relative need for specific competences in the workplace has not substantially changed between 2008 and 2016, digital marketing skills have become substantially more important during this period. The areas of competence practicing professionals continue to consider most relevant to their work are creativity and strategic planning, followed by digital marketing, sales skills, management, media planning, graphic design and advertising copywriting. In addition to the functional competences covered in the prior study cited above, this study addresses attitudinal competences, which individuals surveyed agreed were crucial in their field. The findings presented here offer professional insight into the relative weight that competences should have in distinct areas of undergraduate advertising and public relations curricula. Of interest to schools operating within the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, the data compiled on the importance of attitudinal competences in daily sector work strongly suggest that attitudinal competences should carry a specific weight in ECTS credits awarded in this type of undergraduate programme.

Keywords

Competences, advertising and public relations studies, higher education, attitudinal competences, advertising agencies, Basque Country

1. Introduction

The adaptation of university communications degree programmes to EHEA standards has been the repeated focus of academic scrutiny over

the past decade (Rodrigo-Alsina et al., 2014) and the subject of numerous monographs published by Spanish scientific journals such as *Icono 14* (2009), *Vivat Academia* (2012) and *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* (2012 and 2013). Many of the curricula adjusted to meet EHEA standards have now been implemented for at least five years, the point at which universities are encouraged to review and revise them as necessary. The transition to EHEA compatible degree programmes has taken place amid an ideological debate centring on whether universities should focus exclusively on training students to meet labour market demands or concentrate on producing well-rounded individuals who offer more than a specific set of functional competences to future employers. Without entering into this debate, we believe that even the staunchest advocates of the latter option appreciate the value of ensuring that students have the skills and competences they need to forge professional careers and compete in their sectors upon graduation. Perhaps of greater importance is the assertion frequently made that the competences universities are currently fostering are not the ones companies are looking for (Almat, Puig, 1999; Cajide et al., 2002; Mir et al., 2003; Mora & García, 2004). A number of authors who have studied this issue in depth (Alonso et al., 2009; Freire-Seoane et al., 2011; González et al., 2013; Nuñez et al., 2013) have discerned discrepancies between the competences university graduates have to offer and the expectations of potential employers throughout Spain as well as in specific markets such as Galicia and Madrid. One approach to bridging this gap calls for focusing instructional strategies on the development of competences (López-Ruiz, 2011) and self-directed learning (UNESCO, 1998; Bologna Declaration, 1999).

What competences universities should be nurturing is another topic of on going debate. The World Economic Forum's *The Future of Jobs Report* (WEF, 2016) provides a generic list of competences currently considered key to employability divided into categories such as physical and cognitive abilities, content and process skills, and cross-functional skills related to complex problem-solving, technical expertise, social interactions, systems analysis and resource management. In the same vein, the *Libro blanco para el diseño de las titulaciones universitarias en el marco de la economía digital* (2016), a white paper published by the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Energy and Tourism that provides a list of basic and specific competences to be covered by university degree programmes in disciplines related to the digital economy, singles out those considered key to students' future employability. As explained further on in the methods section of this article, the competences enumerated in the white paper on undergraduate degrees in communication issued by the Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA) (Murciano, 2005) are more tightly focused than those examined in this study. In any case, once a set of competences has been specified, the next question to be resolved is how their acquisition should be measured (Gallego, 2006; Corredor-Lanas et al., 2010; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2013).

Competence has been defined in a number of ways. López-Ruiz (2011) considers it "a system of knowledge, abilities and attitudes that are applied in an integral manner as appropriate during the execution of tasks and the resolution of complex as well as simple problems in the context of a given situation". This study has been conducted on the premise of this author's definition and the assumption that competence can be divided into three basic categories (Coll et al., 1992): conceptual, functional and attitudinal. Although the first two of these categories are more frequently associated with profession-specific competences and more heavily emphasised, almost all undergraduate university degree curricula require students to develop certain attitudinal competences prior to graduation. Protocols contemplate a review of undergraduate curricula introduced as part of the Bologna initiative once they have been fully implemented for a period of five years. As the 2016/2017 academic year marks the fifth anniversary of the implementation of the EHEA-compliant advertising and public relations undergraduate degree at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), a review and evaluation of this programme is now in order. The

research reported here, which was carried out in support of this process, entailed surveying Basque advertising professionals about the importance of various types of competences to their day-to-day work. Participants in the study were asked to indicate the degree to which competences listed in a prepared questionnaire were crucial to their own daily work rather than to enumerate the competences they believed university graduates should acquire. Findings will inform decision-making concerning the weight that different areas of competence should have in any future redesign of UPV/EHU's curriculum for this discipline.

This study builds upon earlier research (Monge et al, 2009) conducted prior to the planning of the curriculum currently being implemented. As in the first instance, this study has examined areas of competence rather than specific competences. We did not, for example, attempt to pinpoint the importance of highly specific competences related to graphic design such as the ability to use particular software programmes or master individual aspects of visual aesthetics such as the use of contrast, composition or colour mixing. Professionals were asked to express their opinions of the utility of competence in broad areas such as graphic design rather than those needed to solve specific tasks.

It must be stressed that the advertising market in the Basque Country is substantially smaller than those in major urban centres such as Madrid and Barcelona. Firms in the Basque Country that advertise tend to be smaller, launch fewer nationwide campaigns, and have more modest promotional budgets than their counterparts in larger markets. A substantial share of sector business in the region is driven by industrial firms that spend more on direct sales promotions and trade fairs than conventional forms of advertising. As a result, agencies operating there are smaller (as noted further on, only 11% of the firms surveyed for this study had more than 30 employees), have modest turnovers (45% have an annual of turnover under €500,000) and only a third mount countrywide campaigns (Etxebarria, 2010). As a consequence, sector professionals in the Basque Country are required to be more versatile and less specialised than their colleagues in larger markets. In small agencies with fewer than five employees, it is not uncommon for one person to assume the roles of both manager/CEO and designer. The relatively low start-up cost of mounting an advertising agency fosters the creation of new enterprises, not all of which are able to survive for long periods. More than half of the agencies interviewed for the study conducted by Etxebarria (2010) noted above had been operating for less than a decade. The findings presented here must therefore be understood to reflect the realities of the advertising profession in a peripheral market.

2. Methodology

This section covers the objectives of this study, methods implemented, and the sample on which analysis was based.

2.1. Objectives

The objectives of this research have been to:

1. identify the areas of competence Basque advertising professionals consider to be most important in their daily work;
2. break down the responses received by professional profile (graphic designer, copywriter, account manager, etc.);
3. determine the areas of competence in which individuals surveyed plan to pursue further professional training over the next five years;
4. ascertain whether sector opinions and attitudes regarding competences have significantly changed since a similar study was conducted in 2008; and
5. determine what attitudinal competences are considered to most important by the professionals surveyed.

2.2. Methods

Study participants were asked to respond to an online survey questionnaire created using Google Forms. As practically all advertising professionals in the Basque Country have access to an Internet connection at their place of work, this approach did not introduce a risk of bias. The questionnaire was carefully planned and designed.

The first step was to prepare a list of areas of competence to be analysed, which initially included those previously addressed in the study conducted in 2008 (Monge, Etxebarria, 2009) and others identified by means of a review of the existing literature and a limited, informal sounding of regional professional opinion. The later involved asking a select group of professionals to indicate which of the competences covered in the 2008 study they thought should be eliminated from the list being prepared for the new study as well as any others they believed should be included. Two new areas were added to the list on the basis of this consultation: “research” (advertising effectiveness and data analysis) and “journalistic copywriting” (a competence considered to be distinct from the category “advertising copywriting” explored in the earlier study). In addition to providing fresh angles of inquiry, these two competences were of particular interest for the substantial number of ECTS credits (24 and 18 respectively) linked to them in UPV/EHU’s undergraduate advertising and public relations curriculum. The areas of competence covered in this study are graphic design, web design, creativity (ability to come up with striking and effective ideas); strategic planning (branding, consulting, marketing); digital marketing; SEO/SEM; sales skills; management (team management, personnel selection, strategic decision-making); media planning; advertising copywriting; journalistic copywriting; internal public relations (internal communications); external public relations (publicity, media relations); research (advertising effectiveness and data analysis); event management; photography; audiovisual production; and software development. Although digital marketing and SEO/SEM might appear to be overlapping areas at first glance, findings confirmed the wisdom of drawing a distinction between the two. Whereas SEO/SEM is a highly focused area of specialisation, digital marketing positions call for a broader range of skills.

A list of 14 distinct and clearly defined attitudinal competences to be addressed was prepared on the basis of information culled from a variety of previously published studies and articles (Murciano, 2005; Bisquerra et al., 2007; Fundación Pere Tarrés, 2016; CEPES, 2016; Fariña, 2016). These are enumerated in Table 6 in the Results section.

Once these lists had been compiled, a trial questionnaire was prepared and sent to a small sample of professionals for review. This was done to ensure that the questionnaire used in the definitive survey would be easy to understand and that all competences were clearly defined and distinguishable. This questionnaire requested participants to provide information on three topics by choosing from pre-determined responses presented on a scale of 1 to 5:

1. Rate the importance of the following competences (skills/techniques) in your daily work on a scale of 1 to 5.
2. In which of the following areas of competence/knowledge do you intend to pursue training over the next five years? Indicate the degree of your intention to further your expertise in each area by choosing one of the answers provided on a scale of 1 (not likely) to 5 (very likely).
3. Rate the importance of each of the following attitudinal competences in your daily work on a scale of 1 (not very important) to 5 (very important).

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the definitive study. Email messages containing a link to the questionnaire were sent to an initial list of candidates who were asked to forward the request to co-workers after taking the survey. The initial round

of recipients included professionals who had participated in the prior study as well as others recruited by telephone and listed in the three main sector directories published in the Basque Country (Guía de Comunicación Abierta de Irekia, Directorio de Agencias del País Vasco de tallerd3.com and the membership roster of the Asociación de Agencias de Publicidad de Bizkaia). To make the sample as representative of the full sector as possible, professionals working for a broad spectrum of enterprises providing communications services to other companies (PR agencies, mobile marketing agencies, e-commerce firms and design studios, for example) were as to participate in addition to employees of firms that defined themselves as advertising agencies.

Data gathered was analysed using Google Forms analytics software and Excel.

2.3. Sample

A total of 185 responses from professionals affiliated with 81 agencies were received during the months of March, April and May 2016. Due to the lack of any official census of professionals working in the Basque communications sector, no reliable confidence/error values could be established. Nevertheless, on the basis of a prior study (Monge et al., 2009) in which this universe was estimated to comprise 1,500 individuals, we were able to arrive at a margin of error (also estimated) of close to 6.8%, a confidence level of 95% and a heterogeneity level of 50%.

The professional profiles of survey respondents were broken down into categories. The table below provides a comparison of percentages and numbers for each in the both present and previous study.

Table 1. Breakdown of professional profiles represented in 2008 and 2016 samples

Professional profile	Percentage and number	
	2008	2016
Management (CEO, partner)	28.2% (59)	16.7% (31)
Creativity (copywriter, creative director)	16.7% (35)	17.7% (33)
Design (designer, web designer, copywriter/designer, photographer, art director)	22.5% (47)	24.2% (45)
Accounts (account executive, account manager)	13.9% (29)	11.8% (22)
Planning and strategy (media planner, branding manager, PR professional, consultant)	9.1% (19)	15.6% (29)
Social media (social media manager, community manager, SEO)		4.3% (8)
Programming (programmer, web programmer, IT specialist)	4.3% (9)	4.3% (8)
Other (administration, production)	5.3% (11)	5.4% (10)

The difference in the weight of management profiles in the two samples (16.7% in 2016 compared to 28.2% in 2008) is attributable to a change in approach. Whereas participants in the 2008 survey had been asked to identify themselves as management professionals if they were partners in the firm they worked for, participants in the 20016 study responsible for performing tasks pertaining to several categories were asked to indicate the one to which they devoted the greater part of their time. Percentages for other profiles remained stable between 2008 and 2016 with two minor exceptions: more respondents in the 2016 study described their position as being aligned with planning and strategy (15.6% compared to 9.1% in 2008) and several respondents in the most recent study indicated their work was focused

on social media (a profile not contemplated in the prior study that applied to a mere 4.3% of the individuals in the 2016 sample).

A breakdown of the sample population from the perspective of the size of the firms respondents worked for accurately reflects the reality of the Basque advertising sector, in which the majority of agencies have a maximum of ten employees. Data on this particular point was similar to that recorded during the 2008 study.

Table 2. Size of agencies employing survey respondents and their weight in sample

Number of employees	Percentage and number	
	2008	2016
1	1.4% (3)	4.3% (8)
2-5	20.1% (42)	31.2% (58)
6-10	23% (48)	21% (39)
11-20	25.8% (54)	18.8% (35)
21-30	11.5% (24)	13.4% (25)
30+	18.2% (38)	11.3% (21)

3. Results

3.1. Areas of competence deemed most important in daily work

There was almost no shift in opinion between 2008 and 2016 regarding the areas of competence Basque advertising professionals considered most relevant to their daily work. Those rated most important in the 2008 study (creativity with a score of 4.06 and strategic planning with a score of 3.57) maintained that status in the 2016 study (scoring 3.89 and 3.72 respectively). Digital marketing skills, on the other hand, have become much more important, rising from tenth place in the 2008 study with a score of 3.18 to third place in the 2016 study with a score of 3.63 – only slightly below creativity and strategic planning.

Following the above three, in order of importance, were sales skills, management, media planning, graphic design and advertising copywriting. As neither the order in which respondents ranked the importance of each category nor the scores they received changed significantly between 2008 and 2016, we are able to conclude that these eight represent the core areas in which advertising professions must demonstrate competence in their daily work.

Table 3. Areas of competence professionals considered most crucial in their daily work (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)

Areas of competence	2016	2008
(in order of importance)	Mean±SD	Rank / Mean
1 – Creativity (the ability to come up striking and effective ideas)	3.89±0.95	1 (4.06)
2 – Strategic planning (branding, consulting, marketing)	3.72±1.19	2 (3.57)
3 – Digital marketing	3.63±1.12	10 (3.18)
4 – Sales skills	3.51±1.21	5 (3.39)
5 – Management (team management, personnel selection, strategic decision-making)	3.39±1.24	6 (3.35)

6 – Media planning	3.17±1.24	4 (3.44)
7 – Graphic design	3.13±1.33	3 (3.45)
8 – Advertising copywriting	3.11±1.21	8 (3.26)
-----Mean score-----	3.01	3.17
9 – Internal public relations (internal communications)	2.99±1.15	9 (3.21)
10 – External public relations (publicity, media relations)	2.89±1.19	12 (2.92)
11 – Research (advertising effectiveness, data analysis)	2.89±1.21	-
12 – SEO/SEM	2.81±1.06	11 (2.94)
13 – Web design	2.76±1.30	7 (3.30)
14 – Journalistic copywriting	2.75±1.31	-
15 – Event management	2.61±1.23	15 (2.57)
16 – Photography	2.46±1.03	13 (2.92)
17 – Audiovisual production	2.43±1.11	14 (2.75)
18 – Software development	1.98±1.01	16 (2.35)

After these broad areas of competence traditionally associated with advertising came a series of others more specialised such as research, SEO/SEM, web design, journalistic copywriting, event management, photography, audiovisual production and programming, all of which seem to have been perceived as being complementary to the previously mentioned eight core areas but of lesser relevance. The notable shift in opinion regarding web design skills – which ranked seventh in importance in 2008 but only thirteenth in the present study – was striking. It would appear that 2008 represented a high water mark for such services and that this particular skill set is now less important on a daily basis than others.

A breakdown of respondent opinion by job profile reveals quite interestingly that the score accorded to creativity by advertising professionals across the board (with the exception of programmers) was higher than the 3.01 overall mean score registered for the complete list of competences examined. Respondents in every professional category apart from design and programming gave similarly high scores to the area of strategic planning. There was consensus across the spectrum of profiles represented in the sample regarding the importance of the two most highly rated areas of competence. Table 4 provides a breakdown of opinion by professional profile and area of competence. Scores above the overall mean for competences evaluated (3.01) are highlighted in green and those below the overall mean are highlighted in red.

Table 4. Average scores (scale of 1 to 5) by area of competence and respondent profile

Respondent profile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Management	2.90	2.48	3.74	3.03	2.58	3.03	3.90	3.55	3.29	3.13	4.58	4.55	3.13	2.94	1.90	2.55	2.42	3.23
Design	4.82	3.86	4.02	2.45	1.98	2.36	2.84	3.09	2.16	2.70	2.64	2.66	2.16	2.30	2.14	2.66	3.05	2.02
Creativity	2.91	2.36	4.76	4.30	3.52	3.15	4.36	3.73	2.94	2.97	3.12	3.39	2.42	2.70	1.67	2.88	2.55	2.36
Accounts	2.09	2.18	3.18	2.82	2.68	3.82	4.32	4.00	3.64	4.00	3.95	4.45	3.73	3.05	1.77	2.77	2.45	3.32
Planning & strategy	2.00	2.07	3.72	3.17	3.41	4.31	4.38	4.03	3.55	2.76	3.31	3.83	2.72	2.79	1.66	1.79	1.90	3.93
Social networks	3.00	2.00	4.13	4.63	3.88	3.88	3.63	4.63	2.63	2.50	2.75	2.88	2.13	4.13	2.00	1.50	2.63	3.63
Programming	2.75	4.13	3.00	1.50	1.13	1.25	1.38	2.88	1.13	2.00	2.75	1.75	1.00	2.88	4.13	1.25	1.63	2.13
Other	3.00	2.78	3.33	2.89	2.78	3.56	3.67	3.78	2.78	3.67	3.89	3.33	2.44	3.56	2.33	2.44	1.89	3.56

Areas of competence analysed in Table 4:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Graphic design 2. Web design 3. Creativity (ability to come up with striking and effective ideas) 4. Advertising copywriting 5. Journalistic copywriting 6. Media planning 7. Strategic planning (branding, consulting, marketing) 8. Digital marketing (Internet, mobile, interactive) 9. External public relations (publicity, media relations) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Internal public relations (internal communications) 11. Management (team management, personnel selection, strategic decision-making) 12. Sales skills 13. Event management 14. SEO/SEM 15. Software development 16. Audiovisual production 17. Photography 18. Research (advertising effectiveness, data analysis) |
|--|--|

An examination of the data contained in the table above on a profile-by-profile basis yields information of great relevance to the design of undergraduate minors in advertising and public relations.

It indicates, for example, that the areas in which individuals currently engaged in the management aspects of advertising feel professionals must demonstrate competence on a daily basis, are, in order of their importance: management (4.58), sales (4.55), strategic planning (3.90), creativity (3.74), digital marketing (3.55), external public relations (3.29) and research (3.23), followed (to a lesser degree) by internal public relations (3.13), event management (3.13), advertising copywriting (3.03) and media planning (3.03).

Although professionals specialising in the design side of advertising consider graphic design (4.82), creativity (4.02) and web design (3.86) to be the competences most essential to their work, they also underscore the relative importance of digital marketing (3.09) and photography (3.05). The focused skill set cited by individuals in this group reflects the technical nature of design positions, which are often held by people with fine arts degrees or other types of secondary or post-secondary training in design or graphic arts rather than graduates of university advertising and public relations programmes.

Copywriters and creative directors rate creativity (4.76), strategic planning (4.36), advertising copywriting (4.30), digital marketing (3.73), journalistic copywriting (3.52) and sales skills (3.39) as the areas of competence most germane to their daily work but also stress the value of skills related to media planning (3.15) and management functions (3.12). It is fair to assume on the basis of these scores that beyond generating ideas and copy for specific projects creative agencies are also responsible for the development of clients' overall advertising strategies, which in today's market supposes designing and revamping their online presence. As respondents in this category indicated that sales skills were fairly

crucial to their work, we can assume they shoulder the responsibility for selling their ideas to clients. This group also considered media expertise and team leadership skills to be relatively important.

Account directors and managers placed a heavy emphasis on skill sets related to sales (4.45), strategic planning (4.32), digital marketing (4.00), internal public relations (4.00), management (3.95), media planning (3.82), event management (3.73), research (3.18), creativity (3.18) and SEO/SEM (3.05). The exception was a polyvalent account manager whose personal perception of competences required on the job went far beyond those obviously needed to promote advertising campaigns developed by others. The average score accorded by this individual (3.23) was, in fact, the highest within the entire sample population.

Respondents whose work focused on strategic planning unsurprisingly gave the highest score to that specific area of competence (4.38) followed, in descending order of importance, by media planning (4.31), digital marketing (4.03), research (3.93), sales skills (3.83), creativity (3.72), external public relations (3.55), journalistic copywriting (3.41), management skills (3.31) and advertising copywriting (3.17). The range of competences emphasised by this group reflects the profile of a classic planner capable of using data to determine the right mix of formats for delivering an advertising message and successfully negotiating the purchase of the required time or space with each media outlet involved – an individual equally at ease carrying out tasks related to the research, strategy and business aspects of advertising.

As only eight respondents identified themselves as being primarily engaged in the area of social media, data compiled on competences related to emergent professional positions such as community manager and social media manager was far more limited. The competences members of this group cited as being crucial to their work were advertising copywriting (4.63), digital marketing (4.63), creativity (4.13) and SEO/SEM (4.13). Following this core set of skills came journalistic copywriting (3.88), media planning (3.88), strategic planning (3.63) and research (3.63). The unexpected level of importance accorded to media planning by members of this group may possibly be attributable to their responsibility for planning related to advertising carried out on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn rather media planning in the larger sense of the term, which traditionally covers television and radio broadcasting. Apart from this question, the competences valued most highly by these respondents suggest a job profile centred on the production of content appealing to readers and search engines alike and the design and analysis of actions carried out in the course of digital media campaigns.

Programmers accorded only two competences on the list scores above the cross-the-board mean: programming and web design, both of which received an average score of 4.13. Such a limited focus strongly suggests that programming is compartmentalised within the sector and that no Basque agency is currently attempting to integrate the communications and technological aspects of advertising. Social media professionals, the most comparable group in the sample, considered programming and web design skills (to which they gave identical scores of 2.00) to be of negligible value. On the basis of this data, we can assume that professionals charged with the more technical aspects of advertising communications are seldom, if ever, involved in other areas such as strategic planning and design.

Given the diversity of roles it covered, the profile denominated “other” (a category that included administrative, human resources and production personnel) was not analysed in depth. In the light of the scores individuals in this group accorded to each competence, it would appear that SEO/SEM professionals tended to situate themselves in this category, which represented a mere 5.4% of the sample.

3.2. Intention to pursue further training over the next 5 years

Respondents were also asked to indicate their level of intention to pursue further training over the next 5 years in each of the competences covered in the study. Whereas the data compiled regarding the importance of each to daily work sheds light on the relative weight they should hold in each course included in the UPV/EHU's undergraduate degree programme in advertising and public relations, this information (provided in Table 5) is useful in determining what sort of continuing education options the university should be offering practicing sector professionals in the form of masters and other post-graduate degrees and specialist courses.

Table 5. Areas in which respondents intend to pursue further training over the next 5 years (degree of intention measured on a scale of 1 to 5)

Areas of competence in order of perceived importance	2016	2008
	Mean±SD	Rank/Mean score
1 – Digital marketing	3.64±1.08	2 (3.20)
2 – Strategic planning (branding, consulting, marketing)	3.34±1.16	1 (3.23)
3 – SEO/SEM	3.05±1.22	5 (2.85)
4 – Management (team management, personnel selection, strategic decision-making)	2.95±1.32	4 (3.00)
5 – Creativity (ability to come up with striking, effective ideas)	2.87±1.26	3 (3.14)
6 – Sales skills	2.73±1.22	8 (2.63)
7 – Research (advertising effectiveness, data analysis)	2.65±1.25	-
---Media---	2.46	2.67
8 – Layout/web design	2.37±1.26	9 (2.62)
9 – Media planning	2.32±1.12	6 (2.76)
10 – Advertising copywriting	2.22±1.25	10 (2.50)
11 – Graphic design	2.20±1.18	7 (2.67)
12 – Internal public relations (internal communications)	2.15±1.05	11 (2.48)
13 – External public relations (publicity, media relations)	2.06±0.97	12 (2.48)
14 – Photography	2.01±1.04	13 (2.39)
15 – Audiovisual production	1.98±1.02	14 (2.32)
16 – Event management	1.96±0.99	15 (2.31)
17 – Software development	1.92±1.04	16 (2.08)
18 – Journalistic copywriting	1.88±1.01	-

As was the case in the study conducted eight years earlier, the overall mean value of participant responses regarding short- and mid-term plans to pursue further training in the most recent study was lower than the mean value of responses to the earlier question concerning the importance of individual competences (2.46 in comparison to 3.01).

The two areas in which respondents expressed the greatest level of intention to pursue further studies over the next five years were digital marketing (3.64) and strategic planning (3.34). These results were similar to those recorded in 2008, although strategic planning edged out digital marketing by a small margin in that study. The third greatest area of interest was SEO/SEM (3.05).

Following these, in order of importance, were management (2.95), creativity (2.87), sales skills (2.73) and research (2.65). It was particularly striking that research (an area traditionally associated with academic rather than professional endeavour) was among the areas of competence given higher than mean scores.

The questionnaire also offered participants the opportunity to list other areas in which they were interested in pursuing further training. Three mentioned big data.

3.3. Respondent opinion regarding attitudinal competences

The last area explored in this study was the value of attitudinal competences in the workplace. Student acquisition of professional attitudes and the ability to resolve problems (as opposed to knowledge and skills) is the subject of much academic debate. Most universities now regard these concepts as universal competences that should be nurtured and demonstrated in all courses featured in their undergraduate curricula. The Universidad Antonio de Nebrija in Madrid, for example, issues ECTS credits for teamwork and leadership. What had not been previously clear up was whether practicing professionals consider such competences to have the level of importance educators attribute to them.

As 83.3% of the subjects surveyed held non-management positions, the findings of this study can be reliably construed as reflecting the attitudes of average sector employees. The figures provided in Table 6 clearly indicate the importance of attitudinal competences in their day-to-day work. Given that the overall average score of 3.97 recorded for conflict resolution (the attitudinal competence deemed least important) was higher than the 3.89 accorded to creativity (the most highly rated functional competence), we can confidently conclude that practicing professionals consider attitudinal competences key to on-the-job performance.

Table 6. Respondent opinion regarding the importance of attitudinal competences in their daily work (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)

Attitudinal competences (in order of perceived importance)	2016 Mean±SD
1 – Responsibility/ Commitment to every project	4.77±0.38
2 – Flexibility / Ability to adapt to change	4.70±0.45
3 – Honesty / Trustworthiness	4.68±0.47
4 – Initiative / Proactivity	4.66±0.50
5 – Cooperation / Capacity for teamwork	4.61±0.54
6 – Resilience / Ability to cope with stress	4.51±0.63
7 – Loyalty / Commitment to company	4.51±0.61
8 – Motivation to achieve goals / Continuous self-improvement	4.41±0.65
9 – Empathy / Ability to identify with others and see things from their perspective	4.37±0.67
----Media----	4.40
10 – Self-awareness / Self-control	4.21±0.75
11 – Leadership / Ability to mobilise and motivate others	4.14±0.86
12 – Life-work balance / Ability to balance personal and professional needs and commitments	4.11±0.90
13 – Networking / Ability to establish a network of professional contacts	3.98±0.87
14 – Conflict resolution	3.97±0.85

After calculating the mean score for each of the above competences (4.4), a tally was made of those with scores above the mean for the entire list. However, given that even the lowest-rated competence had received a score of almost 4 on a scale of 1 to 5, it was evident that little could be gained by dwelling on their relative importance. The results of the survey

on this point clearly indicate that advertising professionals in the field consider all these competences essential to their work.

That said, it is logical to conclude that the five competences respondents rated as being the most important – commitment to every project (4.77), the ability to adapt to change (4.70), honesty (4.68), proactivity (4.66) and capacity for teamwork (4.61) – should figure importantly in undergraduate curricula.

4. Conclusions

This section provides a summary of conclusions drawn from the findings of this study. The fourth objective of the present study (to compare data compiled during research conducted in 2008 and 2016) will be interwoven with the exposition of findings related to the other objectives laid out in section 2.2 of this paper.

Findings related to the first objective of this research, which concerned the possible evolution of key competences in the Basque advertising sector since 2008, indicate that very little has changed apart from a notable rise in the importance of digital marketing. Almost all of the areas in which respondents indicated that competence was crucial in their sector in 2016 (creativity, strategic planning, sales, management, media planning, graphic design and advertising copywriting) had been highly rated as well in the prior study conducted in 2008, the exception being the growing area of digital marketing. On the basis of this data, it would make sense for UPV/EHU undergraduate programmes in advertising and public relations to focus on these core competences and offer elective courses in more specialist areas indicated by study respondents to be of lesser importance or only relevant to certain job profiles such as programming (not usually offered as an elective in the context of this type of degree programme) audiovisual production (an area habitually accorded more weight than necessary given the fact that the same schools at UPV/EHU also offers a degree in audiovisual communication), photography, event management, web design and SEO/SEM.

The second objective of this study was to determine which areas of competence were most important for each specific professional profile represented in the sample. Although respondents across the spectrum (apart from programmers) accorded creativity and digital marketing higher than mean scores, they also (with the exception of designers and programmers) stressed the relevance of media planning and strategic planning. Despite the fact that journalistic copywriting was one the areas of competence that received a score below the overall mean score for the entire set of competences examined and ranked a humble fourteenth in importance, we nevertheless recommend that it not be made an elective subject given that creatives and planners (both key sector profiles) gave this area an above average score.

Regarding the third objective of this study, which focused on what type of professional training sector workers intended to pursue over the next five years, findings reveal that respondents were most interested in strengthening their competence in areas such as digital marketing, strategic planning, SEO/SEM, management, creativity, sales skills and research. On the basis of this information, we recommend that UPV/EHU focus its executive post-graduate and specialised training programmes on these areas of competence. It should be noted that two of these (SEO/SEM and research) were not among the areas of competence rated by respondents of this study as most relevant to everyday work.

SEO/SEM and digital marketing ranked fifth and second respectively in the 2008 study in terms of the areas in which participating professionals were most eager to enhance their knowledge. However, according to data compiled during the current study, sector professionals now consider digital marketing to be the third most important area of competence from the perspective of daily utility and SEO/SEM a distant twelfth. Although a wide variety of advertising professionals continue to be interested in pursuing further

training in digital marketing (the area ranked third in importance in the 2006 study), SEO/SEM appears to be a more highly specialised area of expertise. This shift in opinion indicates that trends cannot be reliably predicted five years in advance solely on the basis of stated intentions to seek additional training in given areas. Whereas some predictions may be on target, but others may not.

Given that research appears to be of great interest to advertising professionals and their academic counterparts alike, universities would do well to consider developing post-graduate programmes geared to the needs of professionals engaged in areas such as consumer issues, data analysis and advertising effectiveness.

In terms of the fifth objective of this study, which focused on attitudinal competences, findings indicate that sector professionals consider all of the competences covered in the 2016 study to be of great importance to their work. The fact that the lowest rated competence in this category (conflict resolution) garnered a higher score (3.97) than its functional counterpart creativity (3.89) leads us to conclude that attitudinal competences should be integrated into university curricula as specific rather than transversal competences. One option would be to offer a curriculum featuring courses worth a specific number of ECTS credits that focused on projects requiring students to demonstrate attitudinal competences rated highly in this study such as commitment, flexibility, teamwork, proactivity, and resilience. Although the scope of such projects could be broadened to cover functional competences such as strategic planning, creativity and graphic design as well, the professional opinions expressed during this study provide ample justification for incorporating attitudinal competences into university curricula.

5. Discussion

It is appropriate to begin this discussion with a recognition of the limitations of this study. Firstly, although the sample of 185 Basque advertising professionals surveyed provided valuable information on their sector, it did not meet commonly accepted standards for representativity (5% margin of error and a confidence level of 95%).

Secondly, as noted in the introduction, the fact that the advertising professionals participating in this study work in a peripheral market must be taken into account. Had the survey been conducted in a larger market such as Madrid or Barcelona, study results might have been significantly different on certain points. In such markets one might expect professionals in each category to focus on fewer areas of competence, fewer study subjects to have management profiles and a greater number of subjects to hold production positions or work in the emerging area of social media. Given that a certain number of UPV/EHU graduates will logically seek work in these markets, a similar study surveying the attitudes of professionals working in major urban areas capable of supporting larger agencies would be of great interest.

Thirdly, as previously noted, the scope of profiles examined (employees of companies providing communications services) did not cover the full range of career perspectives open to advertising and public relations graduates. Findings do not, for example, reflect the opinions of in-house communication directors of firms that handle their own advertising, who presumably would have placed a greater emphasis on the importance of internal and external public relations, which ranked among the lowest scoring areas of competence in this study.

Fourthly, the findings of this study reflect the opinions of working professionals. While such input can provide valuable orientation for decision-making related to curriculum design, it cannot be considered a substitute for the criteria of educators.

Despite these reservations and limitations, we consider the insights gleaned from this study involving practicing professionals to be of utility in the determination of the specific

weight that the areas of competence examined should have in UPV/EHU undergraduate advertising and public relations programmes. Furthermore, the relative homogeneity of the results of studies conducted in 2008 and 20016 point to a certain consensus over time regarding the relative importance of the competences examined in day-to-day sector work. This particular point is relevant in that the detection of significant shifts in professional opinion on this topic between the 2008 and 20016 would have rendered the data useless for the purposes of curricular design, which must be undertaken with a long-term outlook. The minor changes observed over the period in question, such as the growing relevance of digital marketing (which rose from being the tenth most important competence in 2008 to the third most important in 2016) are directly attributable to evolving trends in the advertising sector.

In short, the findings presented here not only provide orientation for determining the weight distinct areas of competence should have in university curricula, but also indications of those in which practicing professionals are interested in pursuing further study in the short- to mid-term future. Last but not least, they confirm the importance of attitudinal competences in the day-to-day work of communications professionals and point to the need for university curricula to ensure that students acquire them.

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