

HZ UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION

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The role of tracking the performance of digital marketing channels in improving decision-making

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Executive Summary

The following research justification report explains to what extent the current tracking of performance of the IHS digital communication channels is effective for the decision-making process. Having a clear monitoring strategy is a crucial component for the success of any marketing campaign. The research is based on the following information gaps:

- 1) The role of digital marketing in higher education and student recruitment.
- 2) The importance of tracking the performance of digital communication channels.
- 3) The anticipation of the marketing officers regarding digital marketing, utilisation of communication platforms, and monitoring their performance.
- 4) The level of performance of the general marketing & recruitment channels.
- 5) The level of performance of social media channels.

To fill in these gaps, literature research and field research are conducted. The field research consists of two parts – semi-structured interviews with four full-time employees from the Marketing & Communications team at IHS, and evaluation of performance using web analytical tools. The results from the interviews prove to be reliable and internally valid. However, due to certain research limitations and enough insights from the literature review and the interviews, the work of other educational institutions has not been considered. The discussions have been transcribed and deductively coded. The main tools used for web analytics include Google Analytics, Facebook Analytics and Facebook Ad Manager, eMarketeer Analytics and YouTube Studio.

Results show that the performance of the digital marketing channels and campaigns of IHS is already quite satisfying. Yet, several things can be optimised in terms of reporting. Five main points of improvement have been identified after the literature review and the interviews, which have provided a basis for building the professional product. To increase its effectiveness and the success of its activities, it is recommended that the marketing team considers the subsequent five suggestions for improvement:

- 1) Create a template with the key metrics, topics & channels
- 2) Provide future interns with tutorial materials and a training
- 3) Create a dashboard that presents overall performance of channels
- 4) Change towards more frequent meetings
- 5) Improve certain aspects of the campaigns and the channels

These recommendations can be implemented in the IHS strategy in a time frame of one week to six months, depending on the level of easiness.

Taking these recommendations into account, will help IHS improve the current performance of the online channels and progress further the reporting system that tracks this performance. This paper can be considered a valuable source of information as it examines three different types of research methods and can be used by other institutions as a starting point for reporting of web performance.

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Abbreviations

IHS	Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies
EUR	Erasmus University Rotterdam
SQ	Sub-question
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
BI	Business Intelligence
FT	Full-time (workers)
UMD	Urban Management and Development
UG	Urban Governance
CTR	Click-through-rate
CPC	Cost-per-click

Chapter 1: Preliminary Research

1.1 Company analysis & developments

The Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS) is an educational and advisory research institute on urban management at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, based in the Netherlands. With more than 60 years of history, the institution holds a rich portfolio of various Master tracks in UMD and UG, a PhD programme and short courses in the field of urban development. Moreover, in the last years, they have developed tailor-made training programmes combining in-country models and models for organisations in the Global South (IHS, Wikipedia, 2020). Situated in one of the most vibrant cities in Europe - Rotterdam, the institute has fostered a network of nearly 9,000 alumni across the globe sharing the same mission – “to develop human and institutional capacities, to reduce poverty and improve the quality life in cities” (IHS.com A, n.d.). Since 2004, IHS has been an independent limited company as part of the EUR Holding BV (IHS, Wikipedia, 2020). Its financial resources come mainly from students who are self-payers or scholarship awardees and from the projects that the institute takes part in.

The main goal of IHS and its mission is to find practical solutions to the global problems that today's society is facing, such as reducing poverty and improving the quality of cities based on three milestones: education, advisory services, and applied research (IHS.com A, n.d.).

At the core of the institute's vision stays the opportunity to bring theory learned in the classroom to real-life projects. Their philosophy for education is based on the concept that theory goes together with practical experience. They allow students to put knowledge into practice collaborating with classmates from over 45 countries. The institute's target are professionals and young people experienced in urban development, passionate about the environment, economics, land, and infrastructure. Even though the primary approach of IHS is B2C oriented, they also collaborate with various organisations across the globe such as universities, urban networks, and associations.

The competition between top universities in the world to attract more students is fierce. With the continuous growth of the world's population and bigger urban societies, specialists in this sphere are in great demand. In Europe, there are only several universities that offer a master's degree in urban studies, and IHS is one of the definite leaders as it is the institution with the most considerable number of urban study programmes. Combined with the high ranking of the EUR, the organisation has become one of the most attractive educational institutions for urban development.

The institute's structure is relatively flat as there are two main administrations – academic staff and professional services staff. The academic staff includes all teachers in different fields of expertise. The professional staff works into five departments – finance, marketing and communication, acquisition and management, educational management office, office management and HR. IHS is managed by a director and supervised by a Board of Commissioners appointed by Erasmus Holding and the Municipality of Rotterdam (IHS.com

B, n.d.). The institute is represented formally and legally by the director who oversees all activities, operations, and overall performance. All staff members have spent tremendous time applying their knowledge into practice and working in the field. They have shared their expertise with partners in other countries, providing support and services relevant to students and clients.

1.2 Problem analysis

Due to the increasing demand for skilled people in the sphere of urban planning and city development, IHS aims to get their hands on various marketing campaigns for the popularisation of the subject and the institute itself. With the rapid development of digitalisation and the increasing need to adapt effectively to the different online marketing platforms, IHS has to adjust its campaigns accordingly to attract top candidates in each program. In recent years, the marketing team has been focusing on attracting people from all over the world using various digital marketing methods. The Marketing & Communications department's primary responsibility is to promote the institute to potential applicants and ensure that it keeps its conversion rates improving by executing campaigns on the most suitable channels.

The main issue lies internally within the marketing department. According to staff statements, annual evaluations have been developed for each marketing campaign, and performance has been monitored for the past five years. However, due to the lack of time and personnel, a general report that tracks this performance is missing. Moreover, only one person is responsible for BI analysis, making it nearly impossible to compile this considerable amount of data in one place (6WCriteria Table 1, Appendix 1). An organisation that fails to track the performance of its digital activities effectively might perform poorly and lose potential customers. By having a clear overview of each digital platform, IHS will deliver more effective decision-making when it comes to marketing and will improve its monitoring system.

1.3 Information gaps and sub-questions

Some information gaps have to be appraised by looking into various sources of information in order to outline which marketing channels work best for the different courses and how their execution can be optimised. With the help of these gaps, the researcher can highlight insights that are later on used to develop the professional product.

As part of the analysis, the following information gaps are addressed, followed by sub-questions:

Information Gap	Sub-questions
<p><u>Gap 1:</u> The role of digital marketing in higher education and student recruitment.</p>	<p>SQ 1.1: To what extent does digital marketing play a role in student recruitment?</p>
<p><u>Gap 2:</u> The importance of monitoring and tracking the performance of digital communication channels.</p>	<p>SQ 2.1: Which key metrics are considered important for web analytics?</p> <p>SQ 2.2: What are the benefits of monitoring performance with Google Analytics and other web tools?</p>
<p><u>Gap 3:</u> The anticipation of the marketing officers regarding digital marketing, utilisation of communication platforms, and monitoring their performance.</p>	<p>SQ 3.1: What is the role of digital marketing in student recruitment?</p> <p>SQ 3.2: What are the main channels that IHS utilises?</p> <p>SQ 3.3: What type of content and campaigns does IHS have?</p> <p>SQ 3.4: How is the current monitoring of performance of channels organised?</p> <p>SQ 3.5: What key metrics are useful to show in an overview of the performance of the channels?</p> <p>SQ 3.6: What are the team's goals and KPI's when it comes to the performance of these campaigns and channels?</p>
<p><u>Gap 4:</u> The level of performance of the general marketing & recruitment channels.</p>	<p>SQ 4.1: Which channel does bring most visitors to the website?</p> <p>SQ 4.2: Which Master tracks/topics do yield most engagement and bring most visitors to the website?</p> <p>SQ 4.3: Where are most of the website visitors coming from (geo profile)?</p>

	<p>SQ 4.4: What is the performance of Google Ads? - To what extent are they financially efficient?</p> <p>SQ 4.5: What is the performance of the email campaigns?</p> <p>SQ 4.6: What is the average open rate and CTR?</p> <p>SQ 4.7: To what rate do the campaigns and the digital channels match the department's KPI's and bring the desired outcomes?</p>
<p>Gap 5: The level of performance of social media channels.</p>	<p>SQ 5.1: Which social media channels does bring most pageviews?</p> <p>SQ 5.2: Which topic does yield most engagement?</p> <p>SQ 5.3: What is the total reach of the Facebook page?</p> <p>SQ 5.4: What is the ratio between the paid reach and the organic reach?</p> <p>SQ 5.5: Which is the best performing post on Facebook?</p> <p>SQ 5.6: What is the performance of Facebook Ads? - To what extent are they financially efficient?</p> <p>SQ 5.7: To what extent does IHS perform effectively on Facebook compared to other universities and institutes in the same field?</p> <p>SQ 5.8: What type of videos yield most engagement on the YouTube channel?</p>

Table 1: Information Gaps & Sub-questions

1.4 Research Question

Based on the information gaps and sub-questions in the previous chapter, a research question is provided. This research question is used in the building of the research justification:

‘What is the current state of performance of the IHS marketing channels and campaigns across the different digital platforms?’

To give an accurate answer to this query, the researcher also investigates the following sub-questions:

- ❖ What is the current monitoring of the digital channels and how it can be executed better?
- ❖ How to improve performance of the channels by using web analytics?

1.5 Project aim

The main aim of this research is to provide IHS with a clear, informative overview of its marketing activities and to optimise the decision-making process on a managerial level (SMART Criteria Table 2, Appendix 1). The goal is to evaluate the performance of the marketing channels and analyse how data has been monitored up until now, and how this monitoring can be improved. First of all, to fill in the information gaps, field research has been executed accompanied by desk research. The desk research goes over data from external scientific sources regarding the relation between digital marketing and student recruitment and the role of tracking web analytics. In addition, the field research is quantitative, and it is majorly based on the method of web analytics such as Google Analytics, Facebook Analytics, etc. Moreover, semi-structured interviews have been applied. In that way, more in-depth insights from the staff members have been provided. All results from the various sources give the basis to create an overview that will present critical points for the digital marketing strategy. Lastly, the gathered data has been compiled to provide accurate recommendations regarding future marketing campaigns. The professional product will be a dashboard that will present the outcomes of each marketing channel. As a result, IHS will be able to make more accurate decisions in its future advertising projects and retain and attract more students.

Chapter 2: Research Approach

2.1 Research Design

A research design has been created to give a clear visualisation of how the overall process of the research has been carried out. (Figure 1). Firstly, preliminary research has taken place in the first two weeks of the work placement, during which the information gaps have been identified as well as the general layout of the research approach. In the rest of the weeks of the internship, the focus has been on desk and field research. The desk research includes a literature review of scientific articles. Then the field research has been done in two stages - semi-structured interviews with the marketing team and measurement of performance using web analytical tools. The last weeks of the internship have been dedicated to developing the professional product and preparing for the thesis defence.

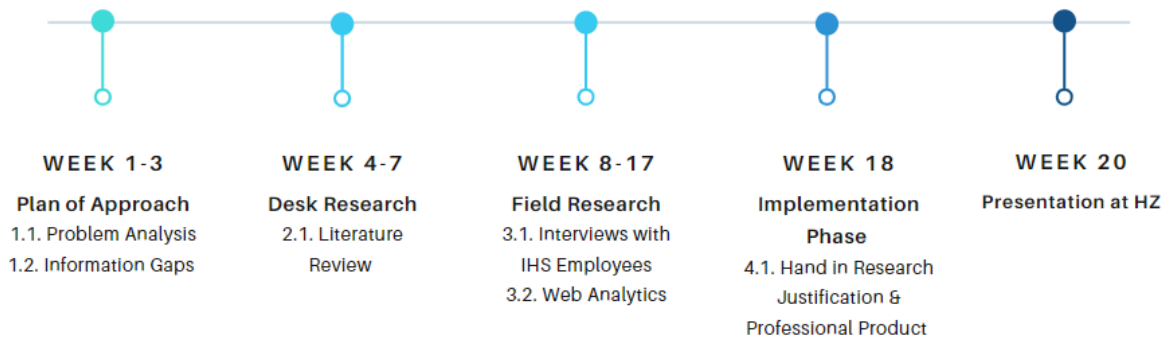


Figure 1: Research Design Planning

2.2 Approach per information gap

The different information gaps require different approaches. This chapter presents how each of the gaps is examined.

Information Gaps 1&2

To begin with, to answer Gaps 1 & 2, a literature review is applied covering the topics: the relation between digital marketing and student recruitment, and the role of tracking the performance of digital channels.

The method that has been used for the review of the literature is a narrative review. The narrative review aims to summarise what has been written on a certain topic but does not generalise around one point (Davies, 2000; Green, 2006). Instead, it establishes the value of the particular opinion or theme (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). This type of reviewing can provoke research ideas by outlining differences in knowledge and raising more questions regarding the main topic (Paré, & Kitsiou, 2017). In this specific case, the main source of scientific articles is Google Scholar and other publications available on the web. The main purpose is to provide both the researcher and the examiners with a solid background for a better understanding of the thesis topic and highlight the research's significance (Cronin, 2008).

Information Gap 3

The next step of the research is the interviews that have been conducted before the researcher had started collecting Google Analytics data. In this way, it has been identified which channels are most often utilised and which metrics should be evaluated.

The approach that has been implemented is discovery-oriented so that different patterns and data sets can be outlined for the set-up of the professional product. Such insights are difficult to detect through typical quantitative research methods (Corbin & Straus, 2006). Instead of generalising the results statistically, the goal is to identify findings with valuable meaning in other contexts (Marshall & Rossman, 2008).

In the data collection, the sampling strategy is purposive (Lincoln & Guba, 2007) as the participants have been recruited according to their position, experience, and direct exposure to

communication channel practices (Felix, Rauschnabel, Hinch, 2017). The chosen employees work full-time, operate closely with digital marketing tools, and take part in student recruitment. The sample size is small since the researcher seeks more in-depth and information-rich data (Patton, 1990). The IHS Marketing & Communications team is small in its core, with only 13 people specialising in a specific field. For that reason, the actual number of participants is four.

The type of interviews that have been selected is semi-structured. This way of interviewing provides a general framework that can also incorporate conversational aspects between the researcher and the participant. The main advantage of this approach is that it offers flexibility to go into more details on a certain topic. The questions have been asked in a similar order or adjusted where needed according to the conversation. In the current pandemic situation, it is challenging to meet the employees in person. That is why the talks have been held online via the platform MS Teams (on the 13th, 15th and 23rd of April). All respondents have agreed with the interviews to be videotaped (each around 20-25 minutes), resulting in 18 pages verbatim transcripts, attached in Appendix Interviews. The operationalisation is based on the field research but also the information gaps. The sub-questions presented for Information Gap 3 have been used as the basis for the operationalisation of the main interview questions. The findings are valid as only employees who work directly on marketing and student recruitment have been interviewed (including only FT workers and excluding interns), and the questions are related to their work field.

The results from the interviews have been examined by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a valuable approach when the goal is to find out people's opinions and experience from a set of qualitative data, in this case, interview transcripts (Caulfield, 2019). Every interview has been written down manually, sentence by sentence, as said during the discussion. After transcribing the videos, the next step is coding and highlighting the key points valuable for the research question and the professional product. The type of coding that has been used is deductive, also known as concept-driven coding. This method works with a predefined set of codes, and then those codes are assigned to the qualitative data (Medelyan, 2020). These codes have been determined from the literature review for Information Gaps 1 & 2 and some themes that the researcher is interested in analysing. The codes are:

- Student recruitment & Digital Marketing
- Communication Channels
- Content & Campaigns
- Measuring Performance
- Key metrics
- Goals & KPI's

Information Gaps 4-5

The type of research for these Gaps 4 & 5 is quantitative as the primary method for observation is web analytic tools such as Google Analytics and Social Media Analytics. Implementing of such tools classifies which platforms generate the biggest engagement, monitor customers'

behaviour once they land on a particular page, and identify how to add value to each campaign. The major advantages of implementing this type of analytics are that it gives a clear overview of the traffic sources, the number of unique visitors, the time spent on the pages, and the content the yields most attention (Jigsaw Academy, 2014). The three pillars that are considered are:

- Target audience – who are the long-term visitors; what is their geo profile.
- Acquisition – from which channels are those visitors, which channels yield most engagement.
- Behaviour – customers' behaviour on the webpage; which content is the most engaging; which topics get most page sessions or clicks.

Once the data for each channel have been collected, it will be determined from where the students come from, the program they are interested in, the most engaging content, etc. The findings from this research are the key to the research result and the professional product.

Limitations

Due to certain limitations, this research gives insights only for the work of IHS and does not consider the activities of EUR or the other faculties. Thus, the results can be seen as reliable only for IHS. Because the insights from secondary sources collected in the desk research were enough and insights from interviews with the staff members were solid, no further investigations of other experts in the field have been considered. Another point that should be taken into account is the limitations of the analytical tools that have been used. The platforms have different algorithms that is why the data in the dashboards cannot be presented for exactly the same time frame and with the same metrics for each channel. However, it is still possible to measure the overall engagement of users.

Chapter 3: Results

The findings from the conducted research have resulted in three parts. Firstly, in the review of scientific articles are the theoretical findings of marketing in higher education and its implementation in student recruitment, and the importance of monitoring communication channels and benefits of web analysis. Furthermore, the literature background is followed by interviews with IHS employees from the Marketing & Communication department who have given more insights from a personal perspective on the faculty's marketing activities. In the end, Chapter 3.3 presents the essential data from the analysis of the IHS digital channels. This field research evaluates the performance based on data from Google Analytics and other analytical tools.

3.1 Literature Review

In the digital era that most industries develop nowadays, the evolving technologies give many opportunities to the business, education and research sector (Royle & Laing, 2014). Communication has been revolutionised by social networking platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, also seen as credible business tools (Levy & Birkner, 2011). The widespread adoption of digital marketing techniques, including social media and website, Google Ads, etc., has notably contributed to the personalisation of marketing and communication with users (Royale & Laing, 2014).

3.1.1 Digital marketing in higher education and its role in student recruitment

In 2008, LeFever gave social media the following definition: “new opportunities to create and communicate with people that care”. The dialogue that institutions can foster online is an excellent example of how this type of two-way discussion can be an effective way of promoting the activities of a university. Even though social media channels have a mediocre impact on the student's choice of higher education institution, compared to the traditional means of communication (Constantinides, 2011), many universities are rediscovering the potential of digital marketing.

A trend that has been aggressively developing in the last few years is the amount of time people spend online. Many critiques claim that it has more negative effects than positive. However, it helps students broaden their social skills and knowledge (Wang, Wei & Liang, 2011). In that sense, many higher education institutions have started to invest more resources into various communication channels, looking at them as a robust marketing tool. In the student journey, one of the most vital phases is stage one, the Awareness stage. In this phase, it is essential to make the best use of these digital marketing tools to reach and attract more leads. According to a study conducted in the Netherlands, prospective students seek mainly social interaction and information when browsing through the online platforms of the universities (Constantinides, 2011). Even though the paper also claims that social media plays a secondary role in the student choice of postgrad studies, COVID-19 caught many marketing officers by surprise, and they had to change their strategies. In the current pandemic, most of the marketing

activities of universities have been forced to move online. All fairs, meetings with students and academics, Open Days happen in the digital space on platforms such as ZOOM or MS Teams. Now, more than ever, the impact and power that social media and other online communication channels hold are priority number one to student recruitment officers.

In addition, another key metric that should be covered is stakeholder engagement and the role of communication channels in this engagement. According to research by Hootsuite, 98% of higher education institutions utilise social media to share content (Tatterfield, 2020). To prove how impactful social media can be as a brand awareness tool, they measured that 41% of university officials state that the university's activity on digital platforms positively increases the number of admissions (Tatterfield, 2020). A fundamental part of the content is its personalisation. In the last years, a large proportion of the market looking for higher education seeks more responsive, personalised, and adaptive engagement methods (Cole, 2019). Nowadays, prospective university students are aware and educated about digital channels and hold more influence than ever before in the admissions journey (App, 2018).

Furthermore, email campaigns remain the most preferred communication channel between parents and students in every phase of the student journey (App, 2018). The goal here for marketing officers is to send more personalised emails. Yet, with the growing number of applicants and bigger scope of admitted students, sending targeted messages to a large segment of the database might turn into a challenge. In this case, one beneficial trend that has been developing in the last years is marketing automation. Marketing automation is a mechanism that analyses data gathered about leads and potential applicants and then automates tailored campaigns or messages on a more personalised level than a human alone can do (Gole, 2019). The main advantage of such a system is that student engagement can be tracked, and certain value points can be outlined, such as website activity and emails open (App, 2018). In that way, recruiters can keep track of the leads that can be approached for a more personal approach.

One important word that must be highlighted here is tracking. When looking at the big picture, digital marketing is just one phase of the right approach to future students. Another crucial milestone is monitoring all these channels and how they perform, which is the topic of the next chapter of the literature review.

3.1.2 The importance of monitoring performance of digital marketing channels

Social media data has played a key role for various businesses to analyse and utilise quickly and effectively (Mayeh, Scheeper & Valos, 2012). The development of an online marketing strategy brings a large amount of data with itself, and usually, these data are very detailed and immediately accessible (Nibusinessinfo, 2021). Yet, most of the time, the unstructured nature and significant volume of this information make extracting the most valuable bits very challenging (Mayeh, Scheeper & Valos, 2012). That is why it is crucial to know which metrics to measure and how to use these insights to make correct decisions for your communication strategy.

Having clear admission goals and KPIs on how to track admitted students and their website activity can bring valuable insights in setting up a well-defined marketing strategy that keeps applicants engaged (App, 2018). In today's digital era, several metrics should be well defined when building an online marketing strategy. It is vital to understand the demographic characteristics of the audience such as where it is coming from. In addition, how they reached the website landing page was through a paid campaign like Google Ads or an organic post on Facebook. And lastly, the main aim would be to figure out how and when they lead to a conversion (Service, 2019).

Effective digital tracking can obtain a more precise overview of the digital efforts of the organisation. As a result, marketing officers can determine the ROI more effectively by knowing who looked at the content, how the website has been used and what types of leads are visiting the online platforms. Most often, the tracking of the digital marketing accounts of companies is reviewed and monitored through Google Analytics. Google Analytics is a web analytics service provided by Google that reports website traffic, including session duration, pages per session, bounce rate, etc. (Wikipedia, 2018). Some of the key metrics that are important when measuring different sorts of online activity are the number of pages viewed per visit on the website, how long visitors stay on the website, what kind of keywords they refer to, number of clicks, also known as clicks-through-rate (CTR), open rate of emails (NiBusinessinfo, 2021). In a higher educational institution, the main benefits of this type of tracking are making the recruitment activities more effective. Moreover, by improving conversion rates and utilising the proper channels to reach more leads, more adequate campaign decisions can be expected and a more efficiently planned budget.

Web analytics is a convenient tool that gives a complete picture of the effectiveness of most of an organisation's online activities and marketing strategy. For example, by finding out how users find the website, analysts can tell where and how to advertise. Additionally, depending on how much time visitors spend on certain pages, it can be determined which content yields the most engagement and which areas can be improved. By gaining a detailed understanding of the digital performance of the campaigns, marketing officers can also evaluate where they are standing among their competitors and how close they are to the benchmark for the sphere they operate in. Lastly, all these metrics and insights can only help a management team plan, optimise, and measure its future campaigns more profitably and compellingly.

3.2 Interviews

After reviewing the scientific articles, the next step of the project is the interviews with current staff members of the Marketing & Communications team at IHS. Since the scientific framework delivers a general picture of the relation between digital marketing and student recruitment and the importance of web analytics, this research stage aims to capture different meanings associated with digital communication channels. These meanings are based on the views of the IHS marketing officers who have sufficient professional experience in the field (Felix, Rauschnabel, Hinch, 2017).

The primary purpose of the interviews is to identify critical points that can be used in the development of the professional product and outline the key metrics that the marketing officers consider useful. These metrics will be used as sort of an “inventory” when building the final dashboard. To summarise the interview findings more systematically, the main thematic areas were divided into five sections.

3.2.1 Student Recruitment & Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is considered an “inseparable part of the work” (Interviewee 1) by all four interview participants. It is “one of the most important platforms for recruitment right now” (Interviewee 3), and it “has always been the most important way to build brand awareness and reach students” (Interviewee 4). What the officers at IHS are trying to do is “to have a digital marketing strategy that can answer a lot of questions in lots of different ways from lots of different perspectives” (Interviewee 4). According to Interviewee 2, “it is especially good for awareness and shaping the image of IHS”, because “you do not just promote the product, you promote the brand and the institution itself” (Interviewee 4). In the case of IHS and higher educational organisations, the student journey is also known as the funnel. “The top of the funnel is usually the awareness phase, there is social media, the website, the brochures” and “these remain the same throughout the funnel, they just intensify, depending on what information the student needs” (Interviewee 1). In the current situation we live in and the fact that digitalisation is developing rapidly, a big part of the recruitment is already online, “because you cannot meet all international students in person” (Interviewee 3) the communication happens on online platforms.

3.2.2 Communication Channels

To begin with, the first point that has been mentioned is the communication channels that IHS uses, which were described as “a pretty standard package of channels” (Interviewee 1). “The main channel is the website and everything that needs to be shared goes from the website to the social media channels” (Interviewee 2). Another essential channel is the newsletter and the mailings in eMarketeer (Interviewee 2). “EMarketeer is a software which is integrated with the CRM system and is used for the emails campaigns” (Interviewee 1). “The emails are mostly targeted to student recruitment because they can be a bit more personalised” (Interviewee 3). The social media channels are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter, and YouTube, which is not that active and is used mainly for “storing and displaying the videos when needed” (Interviewee 2). Furthermore, IHS works with partners, including education listing websites, such as StudyPortals, FindAUniversity, Masterstudies and Docsity (Interviewee 4).

Three out of the four participants say that Facebook is the least performing channel, “not in terms of reach but in terms of the algorithm, and the best performing is LinkedIn” (Interviewee 2). According to Interviewee 4, they are “really dependent on Facebook because it brings the most traffic and a big audience but at the same time this traffic does not convert very well and does not boost performance”.

3.2.3 Content & Campaigns

When it comes to content, the team is trying to keep candidates “informed not only about the academic criteria, but also about the programmes, what the career opportunities are, who the teachers are, what classmates you will have” (Interviewee 1). The content is adapted according to the channel and, most importantly, to the target audience. “Depending on the audience, there are more professional things like thesis, testimonial from students, publications from staff, which we try to share more widely” (Interviewee 2). “But when there is more academic content like partnerships or PhD defences, this goes mainly on LinkedIn” (Interviewee 2) because “the target there is working professionals” (Interviewee 3). Instagram and Facebook are “more interactive and personal” (Interviewee 3), and the content that goes there is “pictures of the classrooms, student life, any kinds of live events” (Interviewee 2).

The recruitment team works with the so-called reoccurring campaigns. Those campaigns are implemented in the strategy as reoccurring every month or year, requiring similar actions. Such campaigns are Facebook and Google Ads updated every quarter per Master track, email campaigns, deadline campaigns, Early Bird, scholarship promotions and the Unibuddy live chats.

3.2.3 Measuring Performance

To track the channels, “the priority is to focus on the channels that have the highest cost like Google Ads” (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 1 is also the BI responsible person who says that she does not produce a report but only checks if the campaign is overspending or not working. However, one thing that is done regularly is “keeping an eye on where the people come from in website traffic” (Interviewee 1). Another downside that has been pointed out is the fact that “there are so many channels, but no overview on demand of how they perform and that is something that can be achieved” (Interviewee 1). “There is no report yet where we have the results of each campaign neatly lead out so that we can compare because with all the reoccurring campaigns” (Interviewee 1). “It would be nice to compare those year on year to see if something changed” (Interviewee 1). According to Interviewee 4, “some of the reporting that is done is not fully embedded, so some things get missed and some reporting is not as rich all the time”. “The team puts a lot of energy into monitoring performance, but the information is kept in different places” (Interviewee 4).

The current monitoring of the performance of the channels is done by one person specialised in Business Intelligence. Depending on what type of data is needed, the tools used for measuring the performance are Google Analytics, IHS own CRM or the analytic tools in the platforms themselves. For example, Facebook has Facebook Ad Manager specialised only in ads. One downside that the team members have noted is that a limited number of people have sufficient training on how to work with web analytical tools, which makes the process even more time consuming and insufficient. Additionally, the program currently used for building dashboards and reporting performance is called Power BI, but only the BI analyst has the needed skills to operate with it.

3.2.4 Key metrics

Each participant has been asked to point out the most important metrics that should be covered in an overview of the channels.

Interviewee 1: traffic to the website, top 5 pages, engagement, keywords overview, how the channels perform, who engaged with them, what region engages with what content, clicks to apply, clicks to website, an overview of the most important channels, measure channels against each other on website traffic, measure them on clicks to apply, specific channel that brings a specific country, specific topic that is interesting for a specific country

Interviewee 2: topic of message or piece of content, the format if it's visual, or writing or video, how it performs – click and rate, social metrics - shares, comments, likes, the website – clicks and time spent reading it, topic and platform.

Interviewee 3: Instagram engagement, what type of content is most engaging, email campaign – conversion rate, conversion, and engagement on the different channels.

Interviewee 4: engagement, “we have engagement, geographical location but not all of that happening across all metrics”.

3.2.5 Goals & KPI's

The main goals that were outlined from the team members were the following:

- “to showcase, to engage and to inform people” (Interviewee 1)
- “a better tracking system for non-recruitment content, so for corporate content across platforms” (Interviewee 2)
- “to have a tracking system, cross-platform, easy to use that does not break the bank; that shows us how different content pieces live, how they perform on the different platforms, to be able to compare content types; finding what content works for us in what context” (Interviewee 2)
- “to work on a transition from Facebook to Instagram and LinkedIn”, “boost our follower audience”, “create more personal engaging content” (Interviewee 3)
- “we are not just working to find new people, but we are really looking to engage with the community that we have” (Interviewee 4)

In terms of KPI's of the campaigns that the team develops, Interviewee 1 defined “traffic to website”, “if a specific campaign worked for a specific country”. While Interviewee 4 pointed out - “to keep recruitment where it is”, “to work across the portfolio of all IHS activities” and “to have a clear relation between the projects that we are leading to more students through our research work”.

3.3 Web Analytics

The last chapter of the results goes over some of the key data from the main communication channels using various analytical tools. As mentioned earlier, organisations commonly use web

analytics to track user behavioural patterns on digital platforms because it monitors traffic, the number of website visitors, and page views (O'Donoghue, 2017). In the case of IHS, the main digital channels that have been chosen for observation are the channels mentioned by the employees during the interviews. These online platforms include social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, eMarketeer, used for email campaigns, and lastly education listing portals. Furthermore, some of the reoccurring campaigns that the team works with are also covered such as Google Ads and Facebook Ads. The platforms themselves often support the analytical tools used and include Google Analytics, eMarketeer Analytics, Facebook Ad Manager and Facebook Analytics, and YouTube Studio. Due to the different algorithms of the different platforms, it is hard to present data for the same time frame or with the same metrics. Yet, it is possible to estimate average engagement by observing some of the main metrics such as page sessions or views, new users, CTR (for emails), link clicks, and impressions.

To begin with, the channels that have been evaluated first are the ones that have the highest cost and play the role of a paid promotion. These are Google Ads and the education portals. Google Ads are the campaigns that have the highest cost and bring the most traffic to the website, followed by the education portals such as Study Portals and Masterstudies (Figure 1, Appendix 2). The topics that yield the most engagement are Planning, the general UMD and Infrastructure. Looking specifically at Google Ads can be outlined the geo profile of the target group and the topics of their interest as the ads are organised by geolocation. Even though the primary target of IHS is the Global South, the biggest number of clicks comes from Europe. Together with Asia, these two regions seem to be the leaders in bringing new website visitors. The most popular Master track among European candidates is Governance, followed by the specialisation Land, while in Asia, the two main tracks are Planning and Environment (Figure 2, Appendix 2). When observing the budgeting of the Google Ads campaigns, it has been seen that the Western part holds the second-highest total cost. However, it brings the least traffic to the website (Appendix 3). At the same time, for example, the budget for Latin America is almost twice lower than Western, but it brings more considerable traffic.

Moving on to the email campaigns, their overall performance is quite satisfying compared to the average number for the higher education sector. As stated in numbers, the average open rate for the sector in 2020 was 34% and the benchmark for CTR around 6% (Miller, 2020). In the case of IHS, the average open rate is around 45%, and the CTR around 9% (Figure 3, Figure 4, Appendix 2). These rates prove that email campaigns are one of the most efficient and cost-free means of promotion.

Another major component of the digital marketing package of IHS is social media. Here the best performing channel is Facebook, with a significant difference compared to the one after it – LinkedIn (Figure 5, Appendix 2). Contrary to the opinion of the marketing employees, Facebook brings a lot of users to the website and has the highest session duration, followed by YouTube and Twitter. However, that does not necessarily mean that all these users convert and represent quality leads. The followers of IHS on Facebook are around 51k, and the total reach is 108k, as the reach here is the number of unique people who see the content (Appendix 2, graph 5). It is interesting to lay out that the paid reach is considerably bigger than the organic

reach, which is normal. Still, it is very close to the total reach, meaning that the Facebook Ads bring the desired outcome with an average cost of £ 0,30 per result. As a reference to other key platforms on social media, the followers of IHS on Instagram are around 1,330, and on LinkedIn the IHS page has approximately 5, 670. Compared to its main competitors in the Netherlands, the performance of IHS on Facebook is average, taking 5th place. Yet, the engagement numbers are quite low which is not a positive indicator. The leaders are the University of Amsterdam with 135k followers and the University of Groningen with 101k.

Lastly, the channel that is not necessarily the main tool for promotion, but is still monitored, is YouTube. The focus is on what type of video receives the most views. The most popular one among viewers, taking nearly half of the total views, is the IHS webinars with around 50%, followed by student testimonials (Figure 6, Appendix 2). The section 'Others' is not considered here because it compiles various videos that do not fall under the same topic or category. Webinars and testimonials are also the preferred types of videos by the marketing officers, especially testimonials. They can be re-used on social media post and stories, email campaigns, and website content.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, tracking performance plays a key role when measuring the effectiveness of digital marketing channels. Web analytics is the tool that increases the possibility of IHS to turn visitors into prospective candidates. At the moment, online communication is being executed quite skilfully by the marketing team, and the performance of channels brings the desired outcomes. However, in terms of reporting, there are a few gaps that need to be closed. By improving the current reporting of performance, the team will make more precise decisions about its digital marketing strategy. To find a sufficient solution, this research covered the points: the relation between digital marketing and student recruitment, the role of tracking performance, the opinion of the marketing officers, and the performance of the marketing campaigns and the social media pages.

Literature Review

As outlined in the literature review, student recruitment and digital marketing are tightly connected, especially nowadays in the fast-developing digital era that we live in. The results also infer that engagement on social media and other online channels as part of the marketing strategy of universities can positively impact the admissions resulting in a higher number of enrolments. By improving communication, adding a personal touch, and working towards higher customer engagement, marketing officers can help prospective students make a well-considered decision regarding their study choice.

Furthermore, web analytic tools such as Google Analytics play a vital role in monitoring the behaviour and patterns of website visitors and from what source they come. Some of the main metrics that have been presented in the articles include engagement rates, page likes, geographical spread, page sessions, CTR and open rate. All these metrics, if examined sufficiently, can bring many benefits to the planning of any marketing team, and can significantly improve decision making. These benefits include reducing unnecessary campaigns, reducing, or increasing the budget for some ads, changing the approach to a specific target group.

Interviews

The next step of the research was to analyse the opinion of the M&C team on how important digital marketing is, its relation to student recruitment, and most importantly, the tracking of channels' performance. According to the four employees that have participated, digital marketing has been a key component in their recruitment strategy. They put a lot of effort and resources to deliver informative and multi-layered content. Overall, the content and the campaigns are perceived as very effective.

Although tracking of the recruitment channels is already happening, it is done only by one person who is trained and has sufficient knowledge of BI and web analysis. In addition, there is no clear structure for reporting, which is seen as a downside by the team. As a result, campaigns' decision-making processes and planning are not entirely efficient because no

overview compares the platforms. The staff's key metrics that can be useful for such an overview include engagement on the website, the type of content and the channels that yield the most engagement, conversion of the email campaigns, and an overall comparison of the main channels.

Web Analytics

The last step of the research was looking into the actual numbers and evaluating the efficiency of the key marketing channels. Starting with the recruitment platforms, Google Ads are the most beneficial campaign as they bring most of the traffic to the website, followed by the university listing portals. The email campaigns are another very beneficial tool as they perform on a very high level and the open rate and CTR are above the benchmark for the sector. Additionally, from the social media package, Facebook performs significantly better than the other platforms, which lists IHS in the top 5 among its competitors in the Netherlands. Lastly, the most popular videos among YouTube users are the webinars and student testimonials.

The research has certain limitations as it considers only the work of IHS and the information from secondary sources. Also, the monitored platforms have different algorithms, and not all of them can be compared using the same metrics or time frame. However, this paper gives valuable insights into the topic of tracking performance of online communication channels because it covers three types of research methods – scientific articles, interviews with staff, and web analytics. Other educational institutions can use these insights as well in building effective strategies for tracking performance and campaign decision-making. To give some advice on improvement of the current monitoring system of IHS, the next chapter establishes five recommendations for optimisation that are build considering the resources and capabilities of the M&C team.

5. Recommendations

The scope of this research covers ongoing topics that should be continued in the future to optimise the decision-making of the marketing strategists. As shown in the research results, one aspect that can be improved is the reporting of performance of these channels. What is currently missing is a structured way of reporting performance across platforms in an understandable and well-visualised way so that all team members can take part in the decision making. The recommendations given in this chapter can be implemented in a short period of time and they will help the team to plan its marketing campaigns in a more precise and cost-efficient manner.

5.1 Create a template with the key metrics, topics & channels

Timeframe for implementation: 1-2 weeks

One of the main steps that needs to be covered first in reporting of performance is to have a template of which channels and metrics to track. Such a template can be an Excel Sheet, listing the types of promotion, sources, topics, and metrics. For example, there are two types of promotion – paid and unpaid. In addition, there are different sources in each category - study portals, Google Ads, social media. Metrics can be CTR and open rate for email campaigns, views on YouTube videos, duration of page sessions, etc. As a result, the analysts can quickly consult what type of campaign they are tracking and what data they should look into (Example in Appendix 5). Such a guide is easy to have because it will take no longer than one week to be prepared by the BI analyst, and it is also cost-free.

5.2 Provide future interns with tutorial materials and a training

Timeframe for implementation: 1-2 months

To fill in the skill gap of missing sufficient knowledge in BI, another recommendation is to create a guide or a video (recorded session) on how to operate with BI tools and Power BI. It is crucial to know the basic activities of a BI analyst in order to understand the meaning behind data. As mentioned earlier, Power BI is the programme used for building dashboards. To work with it effectively, interns should have all steps visualised so they can familiarise themselves with the process. This can be easily done by recording a video with each step in building a dashboard, from extracting the information from Google Analytics to importing it as an Excel file and then to Power BI. By having such a tutorial, it will be way easier to comprehend information. Additionally, it is time and cost-efficient. This tutorial will be accompanied by a training provided by the BI analyst during the onboarding of the interns which usually happens in the first two weeks of the work placement.

5.3 Create a dashboard that presents overall performance of channels

Timeframe for implementation: 2-3 week

Creating a dashboard with the general performance of the online communication channels will be one step forward to a more structured and comprehensible way of presenting results to the team. As mentioned, the tool that will be used will be Power BI because the main purpose of the programme is building reports and it offers a wide variety of data visualisations. Moreover, since one of the team's goals is to have a cross-platform evaluation of performance in one place, such a dashboard will showcase the key metrics for each platform, its performance, and a comparison between the different channels. As a result, the team will be able to make more optimised decisions regarding its marketing strategy.

5.4 Change towards more frequent meetings

Timeframe for implementation: 3-6 months

At IHS, the overall evaluation of the performance of the channels does not happen in a structured manner, which is not the most efficient approach. That is why it might be more useful if there are team meetings either every quarter or after the first half of the academic year. In that way, the team will have more accurate and reliable results from each channel and campaign. Also, the staff will have to prepare regular reports so they can keep all dashboards up to date. These meetings can start after the first three months of the academic year. In that way, the BI responsible person will have time to prepare an overview of the performance for the first quarter and will be able to adjust some components, if needed, for the next quarter. The reports will be presented to the team by the BI analyst during the monthly topic-based meetings, using Power BI as the programme is more interactive and gives a more elaborated visualisation of graphs.

5.5 Improve certain aspects of the campaigns and the channels

Timeframe for implementation: 3-6 months

This paragraph suggests a few improvements that can be implemented in the future planning of the campaigns.

- Budgeting & panning of Google Ads based on engagement

During the evaluation of the performance of the Google Ads, it was noted that the budget for 'Western' is the second highest, but the ads campaign does not bring a lot of traffic to the website. The single cost per ad, on average €0,30 is the highest of all four ad groups. A solution would be to look at how many candidates come from each region and if it will be beneficial to keep the same budget for the ads, or at least focus mainly on the topics with a highest interest.

- Different type of content for social media

To transition from Facebook to Instagram or LinkedIn, the content that goes there should consider the type of target audience. People on Instagram are usually the younger generation. They like personalised posts, less text, and more visuals. On the other hand, the ones on LinkedIn are working professionals, and the content there should be informative and presented



more formally. The recruitment team and the social media team should develop a plan on what type of information can go to both platforms and how to boost the number of followers.

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Appendix 1

6W Criteria

Table 1

What What is the problem?	There is no general overview that tracks this performance and presents an overall report of activities.
Why Why is it a problem?	The team does not have a clear reporting where they can track performance.
Who Who has got to do with it?	The Marketing & Communications team of IHS
When When has it become a problem?	It has become a problem in the last 5 years since the company is highly dedicated on their marketing campaigns.
Where Where does the problem arise?	It arises among the team member of the M&T team of IHS.
How How has it arisen?	It has arisen due to the lack of time and trained personnel.

SMART Criteria

Table 2

Specific	To retain enough data in order to be able to create a clear report of the marketing activities of IHS and help them optimise the decision-making process.
Measurable	The goal will be accomplished when the gathered data is sufficient and it can be implemented in a general report for the company.
Achievable	The goal can be accomplished since all resources that are needed are available, there is support from the in-company supervisor, and the budget is nearly 0.
Relevant	It is relevant as the team aims to have a general overview of their marketing activities but have not had the time to invest in it.
Time-bound	The goal can be achieved in 4-5 months which aligns with the time frame of the work placement.

Appendix 2

Graphs

Figure 1

Source: Google Analytics

New Users and Sessions by Source Specific

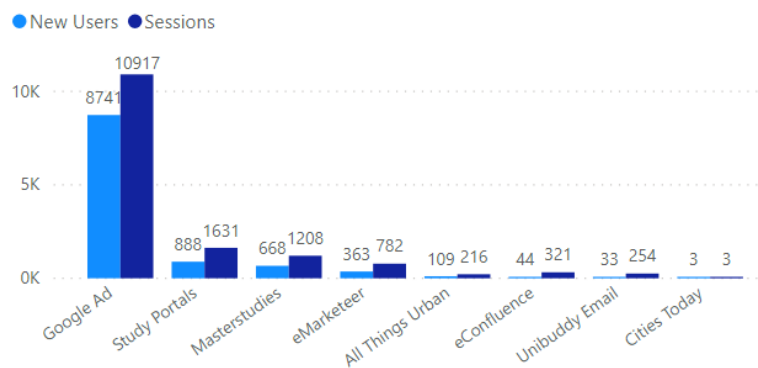


Figure 2

Source: Google Ads

Clicks by Location and Promotion Topic

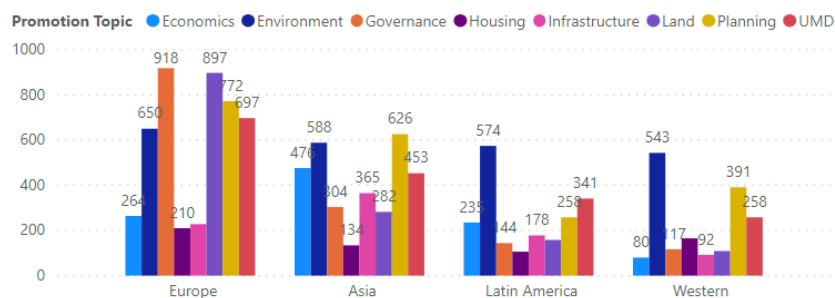


Figure 3

Source: <https://www.campaignmonitor.com/blog/email-marketing/university-email-benchmarks/>

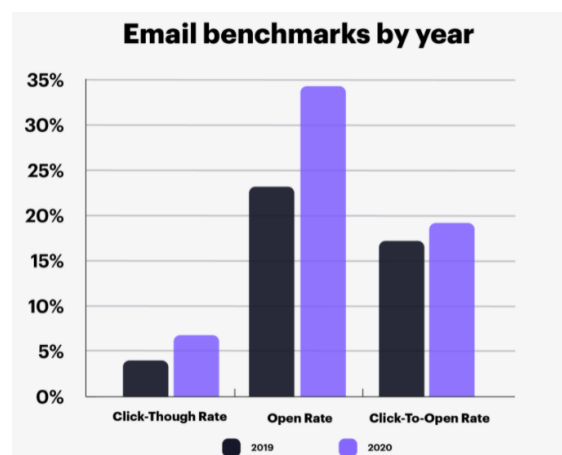


Figure 4

Source: eMarketer Analytics

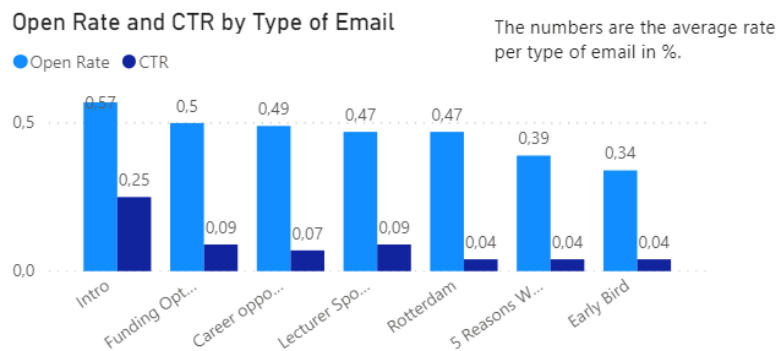


Figure 5

Source: Google Analytics

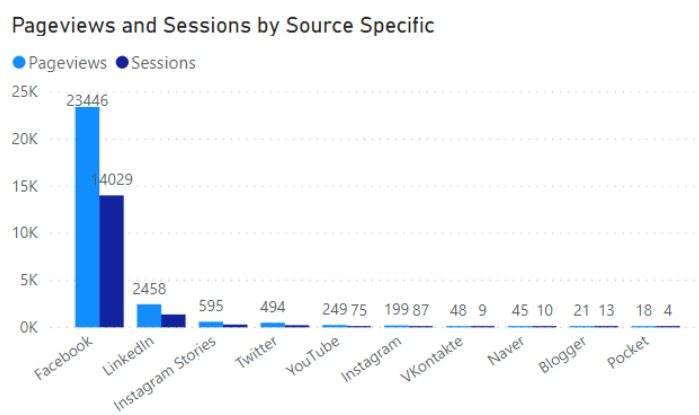
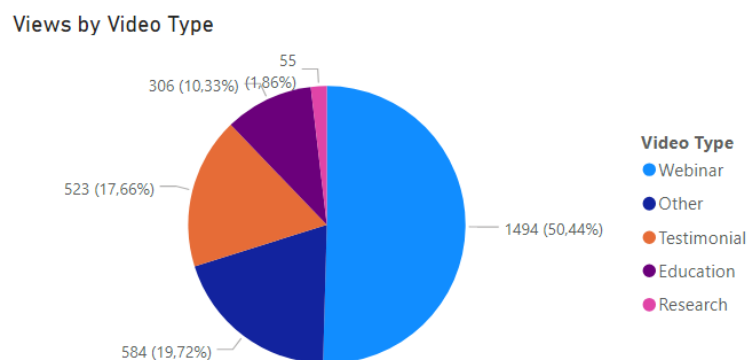


Figure 6

Source: YouTube Studio



Appendix 3

Financial Overview of Google Ads

Geo Region	Type of Ad	Topic	Avg CPC	Total Cost
EU	Google Ad	Planning	€ 0.20	€ 154.61
EU	Google Ad	Governance	€ 0.15	€ 136.00
EU	Google Ad	Land	€ 0.16	€ 139.36
EU	Google Ad	Environment	€ 0.16	€ 101.00
EU	Google Ad	General	€ 0.14	€ 97.61
EU	Google Ad	Economics	€ 0.18	€ 46.74
EU	Google Ad	Infrastructure	€ 0.18	€ 40.14
EU	Google Ad	Housing	€ 0.19	€ 39.21
Total				€ 755.03
Asia	Google Ad	Planning	€ 0.17	€ 107.82
Asia	Google Ad	Environment	€ 0.18	€ 103.51
Asia	Google Ad	Economics	€ 0.18	€ 83.77
Asia	Google Ad	General	€ 0.16	€ 73.74
Asia	Google Ad	Infrastructure	€ 0.17	€ 62.55
Asia	Google Ad	Governance	€ 0.17	€ 52.62
Asia	Google Ad	Land	€ 0.18	€ 52.02
Asia	Google Ad	Housing	€ 0.17	€ 22.42
Total				€ 558.45
Western	Google Ad	Environment	€ 0.38	€ 204.07
Western	Google Ad	Planning	€ 0.36	€ 139.47
Western	Google Ad	General	€ 0.36	€ 91.59
Western	Google Ad	Housing	€ 0.38	€ 62.90
Western	Google Ad	Governance	€ 0.36	€ 42.28
Western	Google Ad	Land	€ 0.38	€ 40.88
Western	Google Ad	Infrastructure	€ 0.38	€ 34.65
Western	Google Ad	Economics	€ 0.38	€ 30.58
Total				€ 646.42
LatAm	Google Ad	Environment	€ 0.23	€ 130.41
LatAm	Google Ad	General	€ 0.20	€ 67.29
LatAm	Google Ad	Planning	€ 0.22	€ 57.96
LatAm	Google Ad	Economics	€ 0.24	€ 56.44
LatAm	Google Ad	Infrastructure	€ 0.22	€ 39.85
LatAm	Google Ad	Land	€ 0.23	€ 35.62
LatAm	Google Ad	Governance	€ 0.22	€ 32.30
LatAm	Google Ad	Housing	€ 0.23	€ 24.51
Total				€ 444.38



Appendix 4

Template Example

Type	Source	Source Specific	Promotion Topic	Sessions	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration
Paid Promotion	Search Advertising	Google Ad	Economics	11	0,00%	0	0,00%	37,45	2626,18
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eConfluence	Economics	11	0,00%	0	100,00%	1,00	0,00
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Economics	11	100,00%	11	0,00%	3,00	255,82
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Economics	11	100,00%	11	100,00%	1,00	0,00
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Economics	11	0,00%	0	100,00%	1,00	0,00
Paid Promotion	Search Advertising	Google Ad	Economics	356	93,82%	334	78,09%	1,56	23,78
Paid Promotion	Search Advertising	Google Ad	Economics	111	39,64%	44	60,36%	1,31	214,76
Paid Promotion	Search Advertising	Google Ad	Economics	11	0,00%	0	0,00%	6,09	103,18
Paid Promotion	Search Advertising	Google Ad	Economics	11	0,00%	0	0,00%	2,00	144,64
Paid Promotion	Search Advertising	Google Ad	Economics	167	79,64%	133	79,64%	1,40	99,78
Paid Promotion	Edu Portal	Masterstudies	Economics	22	50,00%	11	50,00%	2,00	50,55
Paid Promotion	Edu Portal	All Things Urban	Economics	28	28,57%	8	32,14%	5,75	576,21
Paid Promotion	Edu Portal	Cities Today	Economics	3	100,00%	3	0,00%	3,33	72,33
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Economics	78	0,00%	0	85,90%	1,00	0,00
Paid Promotion	Search Advertising	Google Ad	Economics	289	96,19%	278	84,78%	1,23	2,12
Paid Promotion	Edu Portal	Masterstudies	Economics	81	60,49%	49	28,40%	3,84	325,07
Paid Promotion	Edu Portal	Study Portals	Economics	204	68,63%	140	30,88%	3,38	254,39
Paid Promotion	Edu Portal	All Things Urban	Environment	97	55,67%	54	30,93%	3,41	246,22
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eConfluence	Environment	56	0,00%	0	0,00%	3,57	169,64
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	22	0,00%	0	0,00%	2,00	98,59
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	22	50,00%	11	50,00%	1,00	7,59
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	100,00%	11	100,00%	1,00	0,00
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	0,00%	0	100,00%	1,00	0,00
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	0,00%	0	0,00%	13,18	1351,00
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	100,00%	11	0,00%	1,00	23,27
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	100,00%	11	0,00%	1,00	14,18
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	0,00%	0	0,00%	13,18	286,18
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	0,00%	0	100,00%	1,00	0,00
Unpaid Promotion	Email	eMarketeer	Environment	11	0,00%	0	0,00%	3,00	42,45

Appendix 5

Transcripts of Interviews

Coding Legend:



Grad Interview 1

- Name of the research project: Grad Project -What is the performance of IHS communication channels?
- Speakers (identified by pseudonyms): Mihaela Kracholova (MK) – Host; Desislava Yordanova (DY) – Interviewee 1
- Date and time of the interview or recording of the event: 13/4/2021, 15:00 CET
- Context and setting: Due to the current situation with the pandemic, the interview has been held online via the platform MS Teams
- Duration of interview or recorded event – 25min

MK: Hi, good afternoon! First of all, thank you for taking part in the interviews for my graduation project. Your opinion will give me very valuable insights that will be later on used in the further progress of my research. The main purpose of this interview is to help me identify the key points that should be covered in the development of the professional product and the recommendations which can be given afterwards.

As a beginning of our conversation, could you please introduce yourself briefly - your name, position at IHS and main responsibilities?

DY: Sounds good. Hi Mihaela! Happy to help! My name is Desislava Yordanova. I am the current marketing Advisor at IHS, and I am also the current Business Intelligence at IHS, so I have a bit of a double role. I worked for the institute for about 7 years now mainly focusing on marketing and BI just for the last couple of years. Yeah, some of my main responsibilities, I am in charge of the recruitment planning of the year. So, I make sure we enroll enough students for all of our programmes, and also creating dashboards and reports for finding new business opportunities and assessing our current performance.

MK: Thank you! In the beginning I would like to start with a couple of more general questions that are about digital marketing and student recruitment. And my first question is to what extent digital marketing plays a role in the student choice of Master studies or in student recruitment in general?

DY: That's a very good question Mihaela. I think digital marketing, for the last years, has really become inseparable part of our work, and especially in the last year when we could no longer travel. I have to say before Covid we were doing already quite a lot online, and the only thing we were left for offline was traveling to different countries and presenting at fairs and holding our Open days on campus. So, all these were very seamlessly transferred to online events as well. So, I would say this is the only way currently to communicate with students, therefore very important. And I think in the

last year, not just us but many universities have perfected further using these channels by organizing additional live chats or online Open days or presentations online to give students a chance to actually get to know the schools better.

MK: That actually is very true and maybe covers half of my next question which was if Covid has affected your marketing strategy in the last one year and in what ways, you mentioned already a few things but if you can tell me a bit more?

DY: Yeah certainly. I think it has forced universities to keep even a closer touch with students, simply because online is the only way to communicate. So, I have seen schools making their academic staff available on channels like Unibuddy where students can more content related questions, organizing specific topic event for example specific for admissions or specific for a certain programme where more can be asked in depth than what's on the website. Yeah, and I think just generally making more sources available as possible.

MK: Yeah, and we know that, let's say in the student journey there are different stages, and I guess you have different approaches for, for example admitted students compared to prospects. So, if you can tell me how do you use social media and all the other communication channels that you use in the different stages of the customer journey? Maybe briefly because we will go into more depth about the content later on. But just so you can tell me the difference between your approaches.

DY: Yeah, so in marketing you probably already know, we use something called the funnel. And the top of the funnel is usually the awareness phase and I'd say everything goes in the awareness phase. There is social media, there is email, there is the website, there is the brochures, there is webinars. So, anything that can introduce you in any way to the programme. And I would say, those remain more or less the same throughout the funnel, they just intensify depending on what information students need. So, if I am somebody who has been already through the website and I am interested and I've been through social media, I have seen more or less what life is about. Then the next thing would be to be in more close contact I guess with the staff of the university, look for more resources to find out if that's the topic I want, if I fit the academic criteria. So yeah, I think all channels are valuable at all times simply because everything is connected nowadays, so I wouldn't say that just one channel does the job of bringing awareness but they all work together, all the time.

MK: From what I know in the last years you have made a few changes in your marketing strategies and the way that you, let's say promote the activities of IHS online. So if you can tell me briefly what changes have been made in the last years, maybe what improvements in the different communication channels that you use?

DY: I think what we've tried to do most is focus on content, so make sure there is a sufficient content not just on the website but also in our email campaigns and in our social media. Sufficient in a way that can really be informed about the programme and not just about the academic criteria but what's really going on, what are the career opportunities, what is the content, who is going to teach you, what classmates you are going to have. I would say we really expanded on that and we also expanded on showcasing content from our real-life projects which is something that IHS specializes in. Yeah, and making ourselves available, I would say

MK: Sounds good, and talking about those topics we can move on the next part where we will go more in-depth and let's say in details about the communication channels, campaigns and the content that you have online. So, my first question here will be, what online channels do you use to promote the study programmes that IHS has?

DY: I would say we have a pretty standard package of channels. So, we've got of course our social media channels, we've got email. But we also work with partners, for example study portals as education listing websites, Docsity is another platform that promotes education abroad to prospective students. Yeah I would say those are the main, We have our video, webinars, live chat, we are on the Unibuddy platform. Yeah I think those are the main.

MK: A broad range of channels. And then if you can give me a brief overview of the target group, it's clearly students but if you can outline maybe countries or main locations that you are focusing on?

DY: Yes, of course we work with some target countries. Because we simply cannot target the world as well but because we also have certain history of working mostly in the Global South, so countries from the Global South definitely make our list. But most recently countries from the Global North as the interest in urbanization grows. So we usually have followed this system of primary, secondary and tertiary focus countries where the primary are our main focus countries like China, like Russia, like Indonesia. But we also have secondary countries where we know there is some interest and we try to stimulate this interest but with limited extent. And then we have our tertiary target countries and those are countries where we get really high interest out of nowhere and we try to keep an eye on it and see if this interest persists or it's just an outlier.

MK: And in that sense a question that comes to my mind is are trying to adapt the content according to the location, let's put it this way or it's more general content that is broadcasted to all target groups?

DY: I think it depends on which channel. For example, if we are using Facebook Ads, we have something called the story lines so this is a story line kind of a story with a couple of selling points that we know tend to work in certain areas. For example, for Nord America, Nord American countries we always add a selling point to study in Europe because we've come to know that this is an important factor in deciding to study abroad.

MK: Yeah.

DY: So, we similarly adjusted for example for Asia we know university rankings are really important so make sure we mention those. When it comes to content in our mailing campaigns, we organize this not by country but by programme interest because we simply do not have the capacity to do it, but yeah by programme interest and making sure that people get the same type of information across all the programmes.

MK: Okay, and I know without looking at the data it's hard to estimate that but still do you see a certain communication channel that is performing better or that is let's say more interesting for students, they are more active there or any type of content?

DY: Yeah I mean things have definitely changed since I started working in marketing. Back then Facebook was the rising star, now that's not longer the case. Nowadays platforms like Instagram, like TikTok they are really interesting for people. We are not on TikTok simply because our target audience is young working professionals and the TikTok audience is a bit of a different age group. But yeah certainly the channels are changing and Facebook is good for some things but not anymore for others.

MK: Alright. My next question will be, do you work with any reoccurring campaigns? And if yes, which ones?

DY: Yeah, there is definitely stuff that needs to happen every year. I would say a lot of our campaigns have become reoccurring simply because we had the time to create them, test them and filter them. So now we are confident whenever we roll it out that it's okay. So yes, I would say we have advertising campaigns that are reoccurring for example Facebook ads for every quarter. We have the same set-up for Google Ads. We have our email campaign that is also mated which is also reoccurring basically. For anyone new who is added to the list, they get the emails from the beginning. We have certain deadline campaigns that we follow every year like the Early Bird and so on and so forth.

MK: We mentioned emails a couple of times so I want to bring this question here about marketing automation because I think it's on the rise again recently. So maybe of you can tell me a bit more what role it plays, are utilizing it in your marketing strategies and how it works for you?

DY: Yeah I mean it's been one of my main focuses the last couple years because I could definitely see the value and we wanted to be more personal and we wanted to be more efficient, and that could not be done anymore with manual mailing campaigns. So, we precured this software called eMarketeer which integrates with our CRM system and we use that to run our mailing campaigns. And like I said these are reoccurring so everyone who joins the campaign gets the whole information flow from the beginning.

MK: Okay, alright. Now I'd like to move on to how you measure this performance if you measure it and also the KPIs at the end that you have as an officer at the Marketing & Communications team. So, we mentioned a lot of communication channels and different types of content and campaigns. Do you measure the performance of these channels? If yes, how? And if you can mention the metrics are you focusing on?

DY: We want to measure everything, but we don't. For now it's a priority to focus on the channels that tend to have the highest cost like Google Ads, for example that we and I myself keep an eye on. But then again it is not something that I look at on a weekly basis. I do not produce a report. I just check it to see if the campaign is overspending, or if there is something wrong, or if the region is not reached and so on. And then ideally you have everything connected and you can just find it out through your CRM where a person came from. In reality it's not the case, and it has been a struggle to get this done not just by us but by many other universities as well. And then we ask in the application form how do they found out about us so if they say from an ad then we go back and we say 'Yeah, okay this is the amount of money we spend on ads regardless social media, Facebook ads or Google ads and then we calculate the ROI based on that. But we do keep an eye on where people come from in the website traffic on a regular basis so if we are running a social media campaign of course we wanna see this back in the traffic of the website and this is something we keep an eye on. But we do not have a report yet where we have the results of each campaign neatly, lead out, so that we can compare because like I said we do a lot of reoccurring campaigns every year so it would be nice to compare those year on year to see if something changed.

MK: Yeah this is actually kinda connected to one of the questions that I have and it is maybe the downside that you have at the moment or the challenges that you have in the planning so basically it would be ideal to have better overview how all channels are performing if I understand correctly and maybe just have everything in one place so that everyone can have access to it, and maybe people doing social media have an overview okay this content is working, this not.

DY: Yeah absolutely, that would be ideal to have everything in the same place. Because as I said in the beginning we have so many channels and we don't have the overview on demand of how they

perform and that's really something that we can achieve, and I hope that your contribution can help us get there.

MK: I hope so, too. Okay maybe if you could outline a few metric you would like to see covered in such report or what are the key points?

DY: Yean, I mean from the top of my head. It differs a bit because different channels use different metrics. For example, Facebook uses engagement, YouTube uses views. So, yeah this is something that can be discussed in more details. But definitely, I'd say traffic to the website is one thing we want to see, we want to see to which pages for example top 5. We want to see if we are looking only in content, we want to see I guess engagement.

MK: Yeah, from what I know for example when we have worked together, the different keywords that the different target groups are using because they differ from my work on Google ads for example. That can be something that is included.

DY: Yeah, absolutely an overview of the keywords to have indeed. That can be agreed on at a later stage. But the basic things that we want to see are how they perform, if we had content, who engaged with it if we can make any conclusions, for example what region engages with what content and so on.

MK: Yeah, exactly. Okay we are moving on to the last questions. I think during the interview you mentioned a few things but still what are the main goals of the communication channels and maybe as someone who has worked in the field for so long what do you bring as a value to the content?

DY: I would say the main goal is always to showcase, to engage and to inform people. After all that is why they find these channels because they need some sort of information. So if we can be as open and informative as possible while we are being engaging not just simply boring with all the information. Yeah, I'd say those are the ideal combinations.

MK: Okay, and the last question is what are the KPIs of the M&C team of IHS?

DY: Yeah, that is a big question, maybe I can talk about the KPI's of the campaigns that we are using?

MK: Yeah, yeah okay.

DY: So that would be tied with the different channels and that they have different metrics that you can look into. But definitely traffic to website is one metric, I guess if we want to look if a specific campaign was done for a specific country let's say, did it work in this target country, which cities performed for which topics, sometimes there are differences. So yeah it really depends, let's we wanna reach let's say 5,000 people with this campaign. Is this realistic – I don't know. So you can make it as crazy as you want. But at the end, still the most important is clicks to apply, clicks to website and I guess engagement on the website.

MK: Okay, alright. I think we've covered most of the things that I wanted to know. But in the end is there anything that you'd like to add or that we didn't go over but you'd like to share it?

DY: I am not so sure. We spoke a lot. So, ideally what you wanna see in a dashboard like this is an overview of your channels, at least the most important channels. You wanna see the performance of these channels but then a unified metric, a system let's say we wanna measure them against each other on website traffic, you wanna measure them against each other on clicks to apply. And then that's the measurement, but it is interesting sometimes just to explore. So things that we don't need for our budgeting let's say, but things that are interesting to know like is there a specific channel that

brings a specific country or a specific list of countries, or is there a certain topic that is interesting for a specific country that we didn't know that before. So yeah, I'd say it's good to have the clear overview but also nice just to find things that might be interesting as well.

MK: Alright, that was very interesting. I hope my contribution will be valuable and I think this will be an ongoing project that you will continue with in the near future. Thank you very much for the participation and the very detailed answers. And I think I will wrap it up now.

Grad Interview 2

- Name of the research project: Grad Project -What is the performance of IHS communication channels?
- Speakers (identified by pseudonyms): Mihaela Kracholova (MK) – Host; Stefana Cozan (SC) – Interviewee 2
- Date and time of the interview or recording of the event: 15/4/2021, 13:00 CET
- Context and setting: Due to the current situation with the pandemic, the interview has been held online via the platform MS Teams
- Duration of interview or recorded event – 18min

MK: Hi, good afternoon! First of all, thank you for taking part in the interviews for my graduation project. Your opinion will give me very valuable insights that will be later on used in the further progress of my research. The main purpose of this interview is to help me identify the key points that should be covered in the development of the professional product and the recommendations which can be given afterwards.

As a beginning of our conversation, could you please introduce yourself briefly - your name, position at IHS and main responsibilities?

SC: Okay, yeah, my name is Stefana Cozan. I work in IHS since 2015, I work as a Marketing & Communications Officer. My role changed throughout the time. So initially I started working on content and creating content for our social media, also on website development so I created a couple campaign websites for IHS in the beginning. I am also the main designer, graphic designer of IHS. Gradually I moved towards more of a coordinating role, regarding corporate content so we gradually we made a distinction between different activates we have, and what's more sales oriented and what's more communication, and PR let's say related. And now I am also in charge of the alumni relations. So that is kind of what I do.

MK: Okay, thank you. First, I will begin with a few general questions and I would like to ask first of all your opinion about the role of social media and how do you see it in the student choice. For example, do you think students look on Instagram or Facebook to get to know IHS?

SC: So on the social media channels in general?

MK: Yes, exactly.

SC: Well yeah, we have been using them for a while, some of them more than others. Definitely Facebook has been our main channel for a long time which is not the case anymore. I think to speak in general terms I think they are still very much relevant, we still have a lot of people who view our content or it appears in their feed so it reaches a lot of people. And I think it's especially good for

awareness and shaping up an image of IHS especially for people who have not come here yet, I think it is a good first contact with us but also for alumni. So, a big part of those, who yeah, who our content reaches are alumni and it is a good way to keep in touch and with them is also a bit nostalgic. I think that answers your questions.

MK: Yeah, and on that topic a little bit about the content. Right now, we are living in this pandemic situation that very much everything had to move online especially for promotion, showing the facilities of IHS. So, are you trying to be let's say more aggressive on social media in that sense that you try to show even more? How did your strategy change during the pandemic?

SC: I think for, I would go in the direction of how our strategy was affected or impacted by the pandemic. I don't think we were ever prepared for this, in a way, of course risk management is a thing but I think it took us by a surprise of how much our activities changed, even if they are still standing right now. But education being off-campus, that's something that I don't know if we could have anticipated exactly for how long that happened. So there are types of content that we cannot supply anymore, regardless of how much we would want, and it was quite important. So, all the face-to-face activities have stopped literally. We have been receiving more records of what happened from our staff like activities, some of them are ZOOM screenshots. So in a sense, yeah, it's a negative impact because you don't have the pretty photos. And that was an important thing at least for channels that are visual, a bit more visual, but also by being there we could see what happens, we could pick up on news, or just snap a few photos or chat with the student. So that yeah, definitely has changed. And I don't know if we became more aggressive with posting more but I did notice we have more density of posting about activities that do happen and publications, and people approach is a bit more, I think they themselves are a bit more active academics. So when they post we are able to see it.

MK: Okay, alright and I guess we can do a nice transition from here to more in-depth questions about the content and the channels that you use on social media. So, if you can tell me which channels exactly you are using, also not only like Instagram but if you have any other, also the website? If you can just tell a little bit more about that?

SC: Yeah, so well we have let's start with the main channel, that's the website. That's definitely a thing. So, yeah everything that we need to share, ideally goes from our website to our social media channels. We also have our newsletter, so that's not really social media but it is also a very important channel, the mailings. And strictly social media, social channels are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. We also have a YouTube, but I would not say it is active because we don't make video content on a regular basis. So it's not something that we produce, we just have our corporate videos. We use it to store the videos and to display them when we need them. I would not list it as a channel, but it does happen that people find it so and they watch videos there. So I guess this is it.

MK: Okay and in that sense if you can give me a few examples of the types of content that you share so like news articles, videos and apart from that? What else do you have?

SC: So, on all the channels?

MK: Yes, all of them.

SC: So, I think the audience is a bit different so it varies, depending on the audience there are things that are more professional like a thesis, graduation, graduation plus thesis, testimonial from the students, publications of staff. This we try to share more widely but there are some that are a bit

more specific so that goes on **LinkedIn** so **academic content, more partnerships, events** that we have...when we have, **webinars, any kind of professional resource or tool**, we try to amplify when we find posts from students or alumni or staff, we just amplify it by sharing. So, we don't always make an item ourselves we can just share what they post. Same for **Twitter** but a bit more informal. So, on **Twitter** especially events when there is anything happening like webinar, any partners, partners tag us a lot on **Twitter** so we kind of just reshare from them. Of course, we have our **messages that we share** and are also a bit more on the professional side. Also, in the past we used to do **pictures of Rotterdam** and things like that. And yeah that kind of takes me to the **Instagram, Facebook** which is a bit more informal. There are a bit more students and alumni who are not really interested in reading an academic paper on **Facebook** but they kind of wanna see **picture of the campus, what is going on with students, courses what we've been developing**. And for **Instagram** as fun as possible but yeah we post...we used to post some **things from the classroom**, so **whenever a course started or ended, upcoming events or webinars, fairs** when we used to go on education fairs that used to be a thing, also from there from on the spot, **any kind of live events**.

MK: So can we say that you try to adapt the content according to the audience and the channel. That's a thing right?

SC: Yes, yes, it's a thing. Although there is some content that we post everywhere like important pieces we try to go across the platforms.

MK: Yeah, of course.

SC: But yeah in general we try to adapt.

MK: Are there any campaigns that you do every year, that are reoccurring every year. And if you can give me a few names, if you know from the top of your head?

SC: Yeah, I don't really work with reoccurring campaigns so that's not a way in which I structure communication, more for visibility. I do know we have **reoccurring campaigns in the marketing and recruitment area** so that's a bit different and then we do have regular ones because you need to recruit people which happens in cycles. So, that's a bit different and that's not something that I directly do so I wouldn't be able to give you clarity on that. The only example I can think of are graduations and openings, year openings. I am not sure I see it as a campaign, but it is a little bit of planning. So, we plan a bit ahead maybe if we are going to talk with students, how many students we talk to we post photos and stuff like that so that's maybe something that we do regularly.

MK: And in this group of questions the last one would be, I know without looking at the data it's a bit hard but just your personal opinion which is for now the best performing and the least performing channel that you are using?

SC: Yeah sure. **The least performing is Facebook** not in terms of ads but in terms of reach because of the algorithm. And **the best performing is LinkedIn**.

MK: Okay, that's actually interesting. I guess it's because of the age of your target group because it's a bit different from Bachelor programmes and other universities.

SC: Yeah it's the age but also **the type of content** because urban masters, first of all it's post grad so yeah the age and the level of academia, you are not doing a Bachelor degree so you are not addressing high school students who are considering to move on, you are **considering university graduates**. And also urban fields are accessible but they are also a bit technical, they can be a bit technical and for this kind of fields **LinkedIn** does more the trick, like people are more interested in

reading more complicated topics on more professional platform. That's what I would say. And the algorithm. It's also a bit independent of us. LinkedIn just has a really good algorithm.

MK: Yeah, okay and from here I will move on to the last part of the questions which will be a bit more about let's say the performance of these channels. But first of all, my question would be what are your goals as part of the Marketing & Communications team, what do you wanna achieve at the end with all the content that you share?

SC: Yeah, I would like to, because now we track content for recruitment and that's very well done by the recruitment team. I would be more interested in being able to have a better tracking system for non-recruitment content so for corporate content across platforms. It's been hard to find a way of reporting that is consistent and easy to use by different interns who swap. Sometimes we did manually but that took a very long time. And it's not being constant so whatever we monitor it's not always constant. So that for me is a goal that I would like to have met in the future, to have tracking system, cross-platform, easy to use that does not break the bank. And that shows us how different content pieces, how they live, how they perform on different platforms, how they perform, you know, if they get better results than other. I want to be able to compare content types. So platforms I am kind of...I already know what works but I am interested in defining what... I know you don't have a content recipes but more finding what content works best for us, in what context and so on. I think you do that best by monitoring.

MK: That actually covers most of my...the following questions that I had but it's still quite good that you mentioned all of this because I wanted to see what type of information you would like to see in such a dashboard that I will be working on. So I think you mentioned most of the things. Also for the downside, if you see any, and you also said that maybe by better tracking, by having this overview and all these cross-channel tracking of everything. So you can have everything in one place and you see okay this is not working we invest more there and less here.

SC: Yeah. I think that's the main goal for me. But of course I can think of others like content planning system. We have pretty good set-up now on Monday. But it's still not clear sometimes what goes where, who does what. I think it's also because we work from a distance, it's been harder to coordinate. That was something we had to learn...but yeah just content production in itself I think setting up processes but that does not relate that much to have a dashboard. That's just a side note for myself...yeah processes of creating content smoothly. Wishful thinking but yeah.

MK: Maybe to wrap it up, is there anything you would like to add or maybe if any specific metrics that would like to see in such a dashboard even though it might a little bit about student recruitment, but still is there any kind of information that you are interested to see in such an overview?

SC: Yeah definitely, I want to see for myself is more relevant to see the topics, so topic of message or piece of content, the type, so the format if it's visual, or writing or video. How it performs so it basically comes out to clicks and about rate. Yeah shares if we are talking about social metrics, shares, comments, likes. But yeah if we are talking about the website – clicks and times spent reading it. And having all these types of content, the topic and the platform. That would be pretty cool

MK: Okay, sounds pretty good to me. Thank you so much for the interview and for taking part.

Grad Interview 3

- Name of the research project: Grad Project -What is the performance of IHS communication channels?
- Speakers (identified by pseudonyms): Mihaela Kracholova (MK) – Host; Katica Kiss (KK) – Interviewee 3
- Date and time of the interview or recording of the event: 15/4/2021, 15:00 CET
- Context and setting: Due to the current situation with the pandemic, the interview has been held online via the platform MS Teams
- Duration of interview or recorded event – 25min

MK: Hi, good afternoon! First of all, thank you for taking part in the interviews for my graduation project. Your opinion will give me very valuable insights that will be later on used in the further progress of my research. The main purpose of this interview is to help me identify the key points that should be covered in the development of the professional product and the recommendations which can be given afterwards.

As a beginning of our conversation, could you please introduce yourself briefly - your name, position at IHS and main responsibilities?

KK: Hey, my name is Katica Kiss and I started working as an intern at IHS in 2019 as a corporate relations and alumni intern so I spent 6 months at IHS before. And back then my responsibilities were more admissions related and student experience and so on. And then I rejoined the team in 2020 August as a full staff member, and right now I am marketing assistant mainly focusing in design but lately I got some recruitment tasks as well and I am also an enrollment officer for students so I help them before...I help them with their application and admission process. So it is a very broad position but my main tasks are recruitment, social media and marketing.

MK: That's actually a great transition to the next couple of questions that I will ask you about because they are mainly about digital marketing and its relation to student recruitment. So my first question is to what extent digital marketing plays a role in the student choice and in general in student recruitment?

KK: Great question Mihaela. I think it plays a very big part because nowadays student usually check everything online. So I think the open days and physical events are a bit outdated by now, especially with the current pandemic I think digital marketing is playing a bigger part in student recruitment right now. And of course it is much more...much easier to just google things and that's why I think our digital profile and our online profile is very very important for students. And I think that is the most... one of the most important platforms for recruitment right now.

MK: That's true and you mentioned the pandemic maybe if you can tell me like in the last years a lot of things changed especially in your field since you can't travel, so maybe if you can tell me how Covid affected your marketing strategies or did it change anything?

KK: Yeah, yes it definitely changed many things especially with open days and fairs that I previously mentioned. So before the pandemic most of our recruitment actually happened offline so we attended a lot of education fairs and we had physical events for students. And now with the whole pandemic everything went online which on one hand is good, on the other hand is bad because we reach much more people with the online events because it's just easy to join in and listen to the presentations and webinars. But on the other hand, I feel like the engagement is much more passive because there are a lot of participants who just join without a camera, with the microphone turned

off so they are not as engaging as they were in person. Because in person if they already come to the booth, they already have questions, and they are much more interested while now with just joining ZOOM it's not that much of a commitment so also of course the conversion rates are much different. And yeah I think these are the most important ones since we are recruiting international students, the other side of student recruitment was already online, because of course we cannot meet all our students, international students in person so you already have a big part of our marketing strategy being online. So this was...yeah...I think the fairs and the offline events were the biggest change with Covid.

MK: I can imagine, it wasn't expected by anyone but anyway. Onto my next question as we know in the student journey there are different stages, we have the prospectives, we have the admitted students, you even work very closely with alumni and you mentioned that you did that also during your internship. We will talk about content a bit later on but still do you make any difference in the different stages and I mean for the content for example do you adapt the content accordingly?

KK: Yes, I would say that we mostly use emails for student recruitment, for prospective students especially because they can be a bit more personalized than if we just look at a social media post, that's not always directed at them. So we use emails for prospective students and then we also use Instagram although for current and prospective students to kind of make it a bit more personal with student experiences, but that is also for alumni so it's not just dedicated to prospective students. And Twitter and LinkedIn we use for more professionals and partners because not only as an educational institute we also have research and project partners. With LinkedIn we also share more company related news not just for students but for partners. And, yes, Facebook was initially used for alumni because we had...we still have a big alumni international group on Facebook that is still surviving but we will see in the previous questions that Facebook is less and less relevant for other things.

MK: Yes, that's true. One of your colleagues mentioned the same that Facebook maybe doesn't play that big of a role anymore.

KK: Yes, exactly.

MK: Mentioning all these channels, I will move on to the next part of the interview which will be more about content, the channels and the campaigns that you work on. First of all, if you can outline the main digital channels that you use to promote the study programmes at IHS?

KK: Yeah, so we use Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, also our website of course, also email marketing via eMarketeer. We can also say Google ads, Google my business but I'd say those are bit less of an importance than what I mentioned before.

MK: And what types of content do you cover in the different channels like videos or news articles, some of the main things that you do?

KK: Yeah so on Instagram we usually share stories and posts. The stories are actually getting more and more personal, interactive and we also ask for feedback there, what the audience wants to know about. And I think this is the most informal and the most personal channel that we use. Facebook as I said is slowly dying but we still post everything there as well because we have a huge reach on Facebook, while on Instagram we still try to boost it. So I could imagine a transition from Facebook to Instagram maybe in the future to kind of transfer our audience from Facebook to Instagram and LinkedIn so the other more relevant channels. So on Facebook we also share student related news or events and recruitment as well. LinkedIn is more professional I'd say, so we share a

bit more professional content like PhD defenses, and less personal things. We use Twitter mostly to just keep up with what's happening and we don't usually create news there, just reshare what we see from partners from colleagues, from everywhere and from everyone. And with email marketing we usually reach prospective students or inform our prospective students about events that we organise and news items.

MK: That's interesting and we can maybe conclude that you try to adapt the content according to the channel and the audience that you have. But for example, have thought...would it be beneficial to coordinate that according to the country that the person is coming from, you work with a lot of international students? Do you see this as a relevant metric that can be used?

KK: Yes, I think so because the different social media channels especially are very different in our target countries. So for example in Africa they don't really use social media that much, they like to be informed via email or even via WhatsApp. So that is very different from what you will expect in Europe or US. And the same goes with Asia, less reachable on Instagram but maybe on Facebook they are more reachable.

MK: My next question is, without looking at data it's a bit hard to estimate that but still from personal perspective, we already said that maybe Facebook is the least performing channel right now. On the other hand, which one do you think is the best performing one or maybe the best one to promote your activities to the target group that you have?

KK: I would say the best ones now are Instagram and LinkedIn. Instagram is more for student recruitment because it is very personal and I think students use it a lot especially the younger audiences that we are trying to reach right now so a bit more fresh graduates and 20-23 years old. But also LinkedIn is important because it kind of shows IHS as a company and that's more professional. So if we want to target working professionals who also attend our courses for them it's easier to use LinkedIn than Instagram.

MK: My next question is a bit related to the online events that you mentioned a few times already. And if you can for example walk me through the process of promoting these online events, where do you promote them, and maybe do you measure the conversion rates from let's sending the email to how many participants actually signed up?

KK: So with the campaigns we usually do an email...email marketing so we send an email to all prospective students. If it is country specific, we send it to that specific country, of course, so that is one of the steps. And then we also create a news feed item or an event item on the website so we can redirect the students who are interested there. So, for example from the email as well. We also do social media so Instagram post, Facebook post, LinkedIn post depending on the content of the event or the campaign that we are doing. But usually, yeah, they are linking back to our website, we generate a crowd on the website as well and engagement. And we also create banners, it is a bit easier and more of a visual element. But, yeah, email, website and social media is the three pillars that we usually do with any kind of event or news or campaign.

MK: Mentioning the events which are some kind of a campaign. Do you work with reoccurring campaigns or are there any campaigns that you do every year that engage more students?

KK: Yeah, I think I didn't talk about the monitoring, so the feedback from the campaigns. So this is usually done by Desi, I think, so she is monitoring most of our campaigns how they perform. But yeah we usually work with reoccurring campaigns as we are already building the list of reoccurring campaigns. And yeah the current one that is the most relevant, I think, is the Unibuddy live chat

which started in January and it's gonna finish in June so that's one event per month and it's the same, we always do the same promotion for all the 6 and we have a unified design so that people see it's more of a series not just individual events. But we also have other reoccurring campaigns like the Early Bird campaign, the OKP promotion that is always the same, or the scholarship promotions that we did. We also use Facebook ads for the master tracks that are usually the same, and the cold leads call which are happening every spring.

MK: Okay, and from here I'd continue with the last part of the interview which is maybe the most interesting for me because it will give me useful insights for the professional product that I am developing. So, you mentioned already we work with Monday for creating dashboards where we keep track of different activities not just the campaigns but for pretty much everything that we do at IHS. But do you think that there might be a better planning or in general a better planning for different communication channels?

KK: Yeah, I really like Monday because I think the structure is pretty easy and it's pretty logical. What I am missing from our Monday boards are the engagements and the monitoring of the campaigns because we tend to forget to do that. So, it would be super nice if we saw the impact of our promotion because we are still promoting everything the same way but it would be nice to see okay how many people we reached, what's the conversion rate.

MK: Yeah, if actually those campaigns are working in the desired way.

KK: I mean in the picture they do work because the result is okay but I am sure if we see the numbers we can think of improvements as well.

MK: You already mentioned in one of my previous question that you measure the performance which is done by one of our colleagues Desi who is also the Business Intelligence person in the team. But is there anything, maybe a channel, or type of content that you would like to see like measurements of its performance that hasn't been done yet like Google Ads, videos?

KK: Yes, I would say for example Google Ads because I worked with them very briefly but I really don't know the conversion rates or how we are performing with that. Although I think we are doing well because Desi is still doing it and she is the one who is monitoring these so I think that monitoring of those has already happened. I would also say maybe Instagram engagement because it is always interesting to see okay what type of content they are most engaging with, what do they like to see, likes, not just about engagement but all these. Instagram would be an interesting channel to look at.

MK: Yeah okay, I think that covers my question. The next thing is what are the goals of, for example, that you have as part of the Marketing and Communications department at IHS, and maybe the KPI's of the team and maybe what is your ultimate goal at the end?

KK: As I said before I would really work on the Facebook and Instagram transformance because we have a lot of people, we have a lot of alumni, we have a lot of current students, so our connections...the connections there are big. So, I really feel like since Facebook is dying we should use that and turn them towards other channels like Instagram and LinkedIn. I think those are the two most important ones now because Instagram is for more younger generations and I think prospective students, while LinkedIn is more professional so we can work also on our company profile, we can also attract professionals. So I would say those two channels are the most important and how to boost our connections on both. Because I think on LinkedIn we have a lot of connections actually with all the partners and staff members and current students and alumni and everything so I

think the connections there are very important. But we are not utilising it as much as we could. And on Instagram we should definitely boost our follower audience so that's something that I think a crowd from Facebook would do. And also maybe create more personal engaging content which we are actually doing now so I think this worked on.

MK: Yeah, I think so too.

KK: But we still need more followers on Instagram.

MK: That was a very detailed answer, thank you so much. And at the end, the most important question for me would be, when working on this overviews and measuring the performance of all these channels, what is the information that you'd like to see in such an overview or a dashboard that will be presenting these data, what are the metrics that you would be interested in?

KK: I would be interested in the engagement with Instagram, I think the engagement is the most relevant because with conversion I don't think anyone would decide to do their Masters just because they have a cool Instagram page. So I think it is hard to measure conversion with Instagram. But engagement I think that could work. And also with our email campaign, I think the conversion rate is already being monitored there. But yeah conversion rate and engagement with of course different channels and Instagram.

MK: Yeah maybe at the end to see the overall traffic to the website because I think this is the general...the centre to all of them

KK: Yeah of course everything leads back to the website so you can only measure the conversion between these two if you check the website and how many people actually applied. But it is a very big task so if you decide to do that...

MK: Yeah it is very broad I must say but I am up for the challenge. So, I hope it will all work out well in the end.

KK: I hope so too.

MK: Is there anything that you'd like to add at the end of this interview or maybe that you think is relevant but I didn't ask you about?

KK: No, I think your question were very nice Mihaela and thank you for taking me for this magnificent project. And good luck!

MK: Thank you for your time!

Grad Interview 4

- Name of the research project: Grad Project -What is the performance of IHS communication channels?
- Speakers (identified by pseudonyms): Mihaela Kracholova (MK) – Host; Fergal Raftery (FR) – Interviewee 4
- Date and time of the interview or recording of the event: 23/4/2021, 12:00 CET
- Context and setting: Due to the current situation with the pandemic, the interview has been held online via the platform MS Teams
- Duration of interview or recorded event – 18min

MK: Hi, good afternoon! First of all, thank you for taking part in the interviews for my graduation project. Your opinion will give me very valuable insights that will be later on used in the further progress of my research. The main purpose of this interview is to help me identify the key points that should be covered in the development of the professional product and the recommendations which can be given afterwards.

As a beginning of our conversation, could you please introduce yourself briefly - your name, position at IHS and main responsibilities?

FR: Thank you, so thanks Mika for the introduction. So, my name is Fergal Raftery. I have been working at IHS since 2017. So, I am a Marketing & Communications Officer but in that time my role has changed quite a lot. I worked for the Education Management department...so I work explicitly...I also used to work in the Admissions team. And now most of my range is looking sort of business-to-business relations and partnerships and corporate relations strategies for IHS.

MK: Okay, that's great. Quite a broad field I must say but thank you. First of all, from what I know you have some experience in student recruitment so my first questions will be a bit more general. And let's start with to extent do you think digital marketing plays in student recruitment and maybe in the student choice for Master studies in general?

FR: Yeah...definitely. So, I worked in the field even before IHS I worked at two other universities and digital marketing has always been sort of the most important way that you really sort of build brand awareness and also sort of to reach students. So...I mean when you choose a Masters programme, the way you used to do it was, you travel to the country, you do a fair and then you come back. But that's expensive, it's quite inefficient and now you can do something like digital marketing strategies where I can promote to you, I can show our product on our website, I can then link you to our social media web pages where you can hear from student voices. You can then supplement that with a sort of a webinar where academics are giving a sort of understanding of what we do. Choosing a Masters is not like buying something off shelf, you really need to spend time doing the research sort of deciding if something is right for you so it's very important that you have a digital marketing strategy that can answer lots of questions in lots of different ways from lots of different perspectives.

MK: Yeah, okay thank you! And in the current situation we are living in I think that no one expected a year ago, how Covid affected the strategies at IHS and in particular the digital marketing, did it affect it in any way and was there a change?

FR: So, something that I think that is very interesting. Generally of you work in digital marketing, you are already quite aware of this, there is something you wanna do if you are Nike or anyone else, you don't just promote the product, you promote the brand so you promote the institution itself. So, when Covid hit we really didn't know what to do but something that came quite naturally from us is we very much we set back from the messaging and digital marketing strategy that promoted scholarships or a product or a Master programme of itself. Instead what we did, we really promoted what IHS was doing itself so how are we adapting, how are we answering your concerns being very sort of upfront, sort of promoting, sort of policy documents and ways of coping, elevating student voice. These are all sorts of things that really helped to reassure clients or students. And it was actually a very effective sort of way adjusting the digital marketing strategy for Covid.

MK: Yeah... in the previous interviews with your colleagues we quite broadly went through the topic of how you promote the Master studies and I think we don't have to cover this now, but I am more

interested in...from what I know you work on campaign IHS&I. So if you can give me more insights, what it is about, who are you targeting?

FR: Yeah...so in a lot of the same way, we knew that students are aware of us, our website functions well, we have a good awareness as a sort of brand and people know what our product is. But that's really not enough, you really need to provide more richness to your sort of digital persona. So the way we do that is the IHS&I campaign which is simply an bulletin for all non-academic activities that IHS do together with our Master students. So this will be social events, this will be cultural evenings, it will be quizzes, it will be trips around the Netherlands, it might be a trip to another country. The idea is even when you are thinking about IHS and you are about to make a decision, you really want to know how the students are experiencing it. So, it's very important that we are elevating the student experience on our social media channels and on our website.

MK: And In that sense do you measure the performance of IHS&I or maybe would it be useful to have these insights if you don't have them yet?

FR: Yeah, so I mean I think there are two parts of this question. So, I measure the score activity of the campaign and sort of monthly reporting activity through newsletter that we create. So, every time we produce this newsletter we do check for a click-through-rate, open rate and how that sort of mediated. And we have also...last year we did an exercise where we didn't open call to students, to say, what sort of content would you like to see in these campaigns. Weirdly, obviously is that students are quite happy with the product itself, it has very high interaction levels but when we asked what they wanted, they didn't have better ideas so there were no suggestions basically. Saying that though, I would say that's all we do in terms of reporting, in terms of performance reporting there is sort of a qualitative way that I would measure how a campaign works and that's as if we are able to produce student content regularly across the calendar. That's something we are not able to do so again we would have done that if Covid was not around but normally we have a much closer relationship with the students as a marketing team so that would have been happening.

MK: And maybe do you try to...I know you are not that much let's say into the social media department because Stefana is mainly focusing on that but do you think that current targeting of the content and the communication channels is beneficial is it working? I mean for example on LinkedIn the content that goes there?

FR: I mean I do think that. I think something that is very difficult is to decide...I think what we are very good at is presenting and addressing IHS as a brand, as an institution. But how we sort of adapt that messaging to across different platforms I know that's going to change the way that you communicate and the content that you produce. That's much more difficult and to be honest larger institutions don't do that very well either, because you would align different academic schools, different departments, sort of having different LinkedIn strategies so it's quite hard for a small institution as IHS to do that.

MK: Okay yeah I get it...I totally get it. And I know it's quite hard without looking at the data to answer my next question, but still do you see a certain communication channel that brings more traffic to the website because this is like the 'mother'?

FR: I saw this question before the interview and I was like...I was really thinking about it. So I don't know. Something that I think...something that I am very interested in is you have a way of measuring performance that's very important in digital marketing obviously. But measurement is only half of the work. So when I saw this question which channel brings the most traffic, I think the answer in reality is Facebook, we are actually really really dependent on Facebook as a channel and as a

window. And frankly the way IHS is set, the way that Facebook is set up, if you follow us, you are going to see content from us. We are posting most days of the week. Similarly as soon as we decide that there is a real push on recruitment that we have a product that we want to promote, once we put money behind an advertising campaign, the numbers are huge, the amount of traffic that we can get to the website is massive and we have 50 thousand followers so that really really makes a difference. But it's also...it's also a traffic that is not really helpful for us, it doesn't convert very well, it's very good at giving us an audience but it's not... it doesn't really boost our performance I would say.

MK: So, if there is let's say a better overview how channels perform there might be a better planning, can we say that?

FR: Yes.

MK: Let's say where to invest more, like the ads?

FR: Yeah it will be about...I think we are very sort of dependent on Facebook as the place where we put all our energy and we should probably make sure that 25% of our energy goes to 4 different platforms and they all speak to each other.

MK: Yes, so we mentioned performance couple of times already and measuring performance so I will continue with the last part of the interview that is maybe with the most important insights for me and the professional product I am working on. So, do you see a downside at the current monitoring of the communication channels, or is there a way maybe to improve it or it's working fine?

FR: A little bit of all of them, I'd say. So, something we decided as a team is that we really want to... we were talking about how as a strategy...how we would take only projects. And we said it would be good if we had a template for how we do the reporting for all new projects that we do but then we decided that it's so much work and it takes so much time, it would mean that we'd reduce the amount of work we did too much. So, what we have now is we have a monitoring system which is quite havoc, it's not quite structured. Sometimes we do, you know, if we do a campaign, we have great interns who were able to do the reporting for us of how we are doing. But some the reporting we are doing is not fully embedded so some things get missed and some reporting is not as rich all the time.

MK: Actually one thing that I forgot to ask you in one of my previous questions. Apart from IHS&I do you take part in any other campaign like online events, and do you think they are working well? Let's say are the conversion rates as the desired?

FR: Generally...I think that's something we have been talking about already is we do things quite well as a marketing team and we are trying to see what we can be doing better so we were doing things through big portals like Facebook or maybe Google and that was not very strategic. So, now I do a lot of recruitment with partners. So this means that we are bringing our expertise and we are bringing our networks, and we are working with specialists within the field. And that has been much more beneficial, it means that we can sort of create content that might be reoccurring content, it might be brand new content. So, we don't have to invest a lot of time and energy but I guarantee the audience will be specialized, it will be relevant, they will engage and we will probably be speaking to 50-100 students.

MK: And maybe if you can mention some of the partners you work with or the portals?

FR: Yeah, so StudyPortals and FindAUniversity are kind of the market leaders, Masterstudies as well. And we work with a new partner Docsity who is not as well-known but works very much in the same way because they are doing a much better job than some of the other portals, so in the portal world. So, it is interesting to see that not always the big brands are the best people to work with.

MK: Yes, that's actually interesting. And going back to measuring performance, what I am most interested in is you know when I work on this overview, what are the metrics or what data would be interested that you think is useful for the future planning of the campaigns and budgeting for example of the channels? What do you wanna see like engagement or maybe geographical spread of what content students look on the different locations or which channels they use most?

FR: I mean it's a really good question and it's really hard to answer. So what I would say is, something we have an ability... we put a lot of energy into monitoring performance and things like that but all the information is inside those, it's all kept in different places. So, what I don't really have an understanding of if someone comes to Instagram and then they do an event with us and then they make an application and then they do something else, I don't have a narrative that goes through that. That's very hard to do there is a reason for that. To do that you would need sort of sophisticated CRM system that we are never gonna get. But generally speaking it would be great if I was able to...because we have engagement, we have geographical location, we have how they engaged but I don't have all of that happening across all of the metrics. So, if I have an understanding of how people move through those, that would be really good. Generally speaking, engagement is always the most useful one, we really know that sort of numbers is not the big one, I don't care about reach, I'd be much more interested in knowing, engagement is very good metric for saying how well someone has understood who we are as an organization and as a brand. I think this is the golden criteria.

MK: yeah, okay that's quite useful for me, I will keep it in mind. And lastly I would like to finish with, maybe if you can outline at the end of the day what are the goals of the Marketing & Communication team and KPI's for let's say those communication channels?

FR: I think for a lot of people and this genuinely true, marketing and digital marketing gets put in a certain context. It is very much about creating new business, about finding new people to engage. In reality we do something different at IHS where we are...we are not just working to find new people but we are really looking to engage with the community that we have. So for that reason I think it's quite important that we see digital marketing as being essential to IHS business development generally. So what that means is, the KPI's we are looking for are to make sure that we work across the portfolio of all our activities, in sort of raising our project work, our research work as well as selling the Master programmes that we do quite well already. And so I think in terms of KPIs I think we obviously want recruitment to stay where it is but I would also like to see sort of there to be a clear relationship between the projects that we do leading to more students that is helping the research that we are doing through the PhD that we provide as well. So sort of an ongoing journey going through all of IHS would be nice to see for our students.

MK: Okay and at the end is there anything you would like to add that maybe I didn't ask but you wanted to share or?

FR: I am very interested to see what you produce Mika.

MK: Yes, I hope my work will be valuable for the team so we will see at the end how it works. Thank you so much for participating and for your time.