

## **Enhancing the International Student Experience with Community Engagement: A Conceptual Model**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Community engagement initiatives geared towards international students can provide universities with the ability to enhance the value of and create a more satisfying overall international student experience. However, few universities have developed this as an area of competitive advantage. The aim of this paper is to provide a new perspective in marketing international education drawing from the services marketing literature on value co-creation and the general literature on community engagement. Understanding how and why community engagement influences the international student experience will give universities a key advantage, and increase the value for the key stakeholders namely, students, the university and the community. In particular, the potential exists for successful community engagement initiatives to provide students with a better overall experience, the community too would benefit from cultural and intellectual capital growth, while universities gain an advantage in an increasingly competitive market. This paper presents a preliminary model of the role of community engagement as a mechanism through which to co-create value in the international student experience.*

**Keywords:** Higher education; international students; community engagement, value co creation.

## Introduction

The landscape of international education is changing. Students are seeking opportunities that are not only advantageous to their academic agenda, but also to their social and professional development within a global context (Marginson, 2010; Agarwal et al., 2008; Dalglish and Chan, 2005). Recent evidence suggests that students want increased community involvement in their international education experience (Marginson, 2010; Agarwal et al., 2008; Dalglish and Chan, 2005). Additionally, several national surveys report that students would like more interaction with the local citizens of the host nation (UKCOSA, 2006; Ward, 2001, 2006). Heightened interaction with local citizens equates to positive outcomes and a better overall student experience. Students who have higher levels of contact with the local community often experience better academic and social success (Furnham and Alibai, 1985), display lower stress levels (Redmond and Bunyi, 1993) and increased satisfaction (Noels, Pon and Clement, 1996). Thus, institutions need to look beyond on campus university-student interactions. Interactions with international students could be enhanced if universities facilitate value co-creation opportunities via community engagement activities. In doing so, many of the issues currently damaging the reputation of Australian international education may be alleviated.

From a marketing perspective, value co-creation is the premise of this research. Briefly, value co-creation is the joint creation of value in a collaborative effort by the supplier and the consumer (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, 2004b; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Payne, Storbaka and Frow, 2008; Gronroos, 2008). Moreover, in the context of this research, not only is the aim to co-create value between the supplier (universities) and the customer (international students), but also the community, supporting a tripartite perspective. Thus, as universities operate as businesses, community engagement initiatives are emerging as a clear strategy for practicing value co-creation. Marketing international education from a value co-creation perspective enhances the total value of an international education experience. Therefore, universities that successfully generate and market community engagement opportunities will create a competitive advantage. However, the absence of a cohesive agreement on exactly what community engagement is causes difficulties. Hence, the purpose of this research is to understand how community engagement can be used as a marketing mechanism to co-create value in the international student experience.

## Service Marketing

This research is couched in the parent discipline of services marketing. Although there was a focus on relationship marketing in the early 2000s (Rust and Siong Chung, 2006), many academics sensed the need for a shift and broadening within the service field to drive greater cohesiveness across the many facets of the discipline (Gronroos, 2008; Kotler, 2005). Vargo and Lusch (2004) were among the first to produce research that helped chart the new direction of service marketing, which centred on “marketing with” instead of “marketing to” the consumer—which is the main premise of value co-creation. Vargo and Lusch termed their perspective ‘service dominant logic’ (SDL).

Accordingly, some academics supported the perspective as the direction service marketing should be moving in, especially in terms of value co-creation (see Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Gummesson, 2008; Gronroos, 2006a,b, 2008; Payne et al., 2008). As the decade has passed, value co-creation and SDL have provided a base for further progression in service marketing—namely, the notion of utilizing balanced logics (Gummesson 2008) in order to keep up with competition and globalization (Grove, Fisk and John, 2003; Bitner and Brown, 2008). However, there is lack of research which considers value co-creation from a tripartite perspective, as would be the case of this research.

### **International Education services**

There is little research on international education services, which is the immediate discipline of this research. Nonetheless, a range of perspectives abound. The dominant view of international higher education pertains to the nature of the 'product' that is being exchanged, often perceived as a commoditised good, to be freely traded (Altbach and Knight, 2006). Thus, international education is perceived like any other commodity, (e.g. gold or oil), to be bought and sold in accordance with market values; reflecting a now outdated goods-oriented marketing perspective (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). A more contemporary view of international education services classifies the 'product' as a service, recognising the importance of effective marketing strategies that are needed in order to remain internationally competitive (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). While it is apparent that institutions want to be internationally competitive and attractive to students wanting to study in another country, there is a dearth of literature about international student consumer behaviour in the higher education market place (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001). The reason for this is the continuance of the commodity-based view adopted by many universities and which underpins marketing strategies targeted at achieving business outcomes such as funding, and an absence of a focus on the needs, wants and decisions of student customers in the international marketplace (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2004). International education as a service, as opposed to a good, changes the marketing framework (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Thus, while marketing international education will have some crossover from the business commodity point of view, it is important to note that it is a service and needs to be marketed accordingly.

Services have the capacity to deliver intellectual content (Sheehan, 2006). As the provision of intellectual content is at the core of international education services, it fits into the service sector category. Building relationships with stakeholders is central to service businesses, and in the case of international education services there is a need and benefit in developing interpersonal relationships between the institution and its students (Mazzarol 1998). Further, Gibbs (2001) discussed the desire of those involved with higher education to focus on relationship growth as opposed to "transactional deals between traders". Hence, relationships are a valuable component of services marketing (Gronroos, 2000), and it is from this platform that the relationship-based mechanisms that facilitate the co-creation of value for the student consumer that enhances their experience, thus creating global competitive

advantage for the institution is a plausible way to shift and advance the marketing of international education services.

## Community Engagement as a Mechanism to Co-Create Value

University community engagement is a mechanism for co-creating value for international students. The intention of Table 1 is to contextualise value co-creation and community engagement specifically highlighting what value co-creation is and postulating on its alignment with community engagement.

**Table 1.**

### *Proposed Value Co-creation-Community Engagement Nexus*

What Value Co-Creation Is	Value Co-Creation-Community Engagement Nexus
Joint creation of value by the company and customer—not the firm trying to please the customer	Creating competitive advantage via co-creating unique community opportunities for international students to participate in.
Allowing the customer to co-construct the service experience to suit her context	Working with different types of international students and being aware that each student seeks different types of community engagement opportunities; thus, different roles/levels of facilitation need to occur by the university
Joint problem definition and problem solving	International liaison committee discussing and collaborating on issues and solutions that better link international students to the community--in turn co-creating value for all stakeholders.
Creating an experience environment in which consumers can have active dialogue and co-construct personalized experiences; product /service may be the same but customers can construct different experiences	Understanding that all international students are actively participating in education as a service, but what makes the education experience unique is encouraging dialogue between the university and the student as to what they are interested in the community. This dialogue might take the form of feed forward, concurrent and feedback controls, facilitate the construction of unique experiences.
Experience variety	Facilitating a plethora of community experiences.
Experience of one	The university understanding that each student is an individual consumer. Some students may be able initiate community engagement opportunities on their own, only relying on the university to facilitate some initial contact on a single occasion and then step out of the way--only stepping into to facilitate if the need is communicated by the student.
Experiencing the business as consumers do in real time	The university looking at the international student experience from the student perspective.
Continuous dialogue	Purposeful communication facilitated by the university and practiced on a level to correspond to various students' desires.
Co-constructing personalized experiences	Understanding the uniqueness of each student's individual needs via working with them to construct their needs.
Innovating experience environments for new co-creation experiences	Comprehending and constructing new community experiences based on reciprocated dialogue and feed between students and the community

Source: Adapted from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p. 8)

There are three important value co-creation themes to consider when looking at Table 1. Firstly, is the notion of the joint creation of value. Mutual collaboration underpins community engagement (Onyx 2008; Low 2008). Similarly, without reciprocated collaboration amongst all stakeholders, value co-creation cannot occur (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, 2004b; Payne et al., 2008). The second theme in the table is continuous dialogue. Willingness to communicate should be facilitated by the supplier to the other stakeholders to better grasp what the stakeholders want from the experience (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Payne et al., 2008). A breakdown of dialogue will obstruct any value co-creation efforts. In this case, dialogue will allow the university to recognize what students are looking for in the community and what the community members may have to offer. Finally, the concept that value co-creation experiences are subjective, thus unique for each customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, 2004b; Payne et al., 2008). International students may have some general similarities in what they seek in their experience, but ultimately, each student will have individual desires. Universities that can work mutually with students and communities to help construct a unique personalised service experience will have a competitive advantage (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004, 2004b).

A final issue to consider with community engagement and value co-creation is knowledge acquisition and how it changes over time. Organisations often treat customer experiences as unchanging; when they should understand that knowledge and perceptions change over time (Dagger and Sweeney, 2007). The premise of this research is that customers' (international students') perceptions during a service experience go through multiple phases.

In brief, the review of the literature has highlighted six clear gaps as summarised next.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

**Gap 1:** There is little agreement regarding the definition of community engagement and what activities it encompasses (Low, 2008). The lack of agreement of community engagement results from the notions that it is unique and tacit, which makes it difficult to measure (Rogers, 2009; Low, 2008; Onyx, 2008).

**Gap 2:** While there is some research on universities placing students in the community, there is little research that provides concrete links to community perceptions on the roles students and universities play in the community, or the roles that the community plays to the students and universities (Brunning, McGrew and Cooper, 2006). Additionally, although much of the co-creation literature notes the importance of stakeholder collaboration (Payne et al., 2008; Abela and Murphy, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), the emphasis is mostly towards dual co-creation, not tripartite co-creation. This signifies the need to study community engagement from a tripartite perspective, in this case students, the university and the community.

**Gap 3:** There is an absence of empirical research on value co-creation which measures how customers engage in value co-creation (Woodruff and Flint, 2006; Payne et al., 2008).

**Gap 4:** Little research has examined how community engagement can co-create and enhance the value of the international education experience. To date, many studies conducted on marketing international education have centred on: institutional factors such as marketing department size, recruiting tactics, institutional focus and employee (faculty) qualifications (Ross, Heaney and Cooper, 2007); ethical dilemmas, namely, re-focusing of marketing on the student and not target financial/marketing figures (Lubber and Dale, 2005; ARIES, 2001); re-aligning marketing core competencies (Russell, 2005); critical success factors (Mazzarol, 1998); and delivery mechanisms of international education marketing (Gomes and Murphy, 2003; Adams and Walters, 2001). While some of this research may mention student experience in the community, none explores value co-creation with multiple stakeholders in community engagement opportunities.

**Gap 5:** Currently, value co-creation and SDL ideas have not been studied within the context of international education as a service. This coincides with the overall lack of empirical value co-creation and SDL research (Cova, Ford and Salle, 2009; Arnould, 2008; Gray, Matear, Deans and Garrett, 2007). Therefore, using aspects of value co-creation within an international education context will provide research in a context currently untapped.

**Gap 6:** Lastly, little international education research has provided empirical evidence on how student experiences change over time (Durrant and Dorius, 2007; Dalglish and Carol, 2005). Hence, a longitudinal element would be advantageous.

Based on these gaps, a starting point in research is to develop a conceptual model from the existing literature that goes some way to addressing the above gaps, that is, addressing the research question: *'How does community engagement co-create value across the international student experience over time?'*

## Conceptual Model

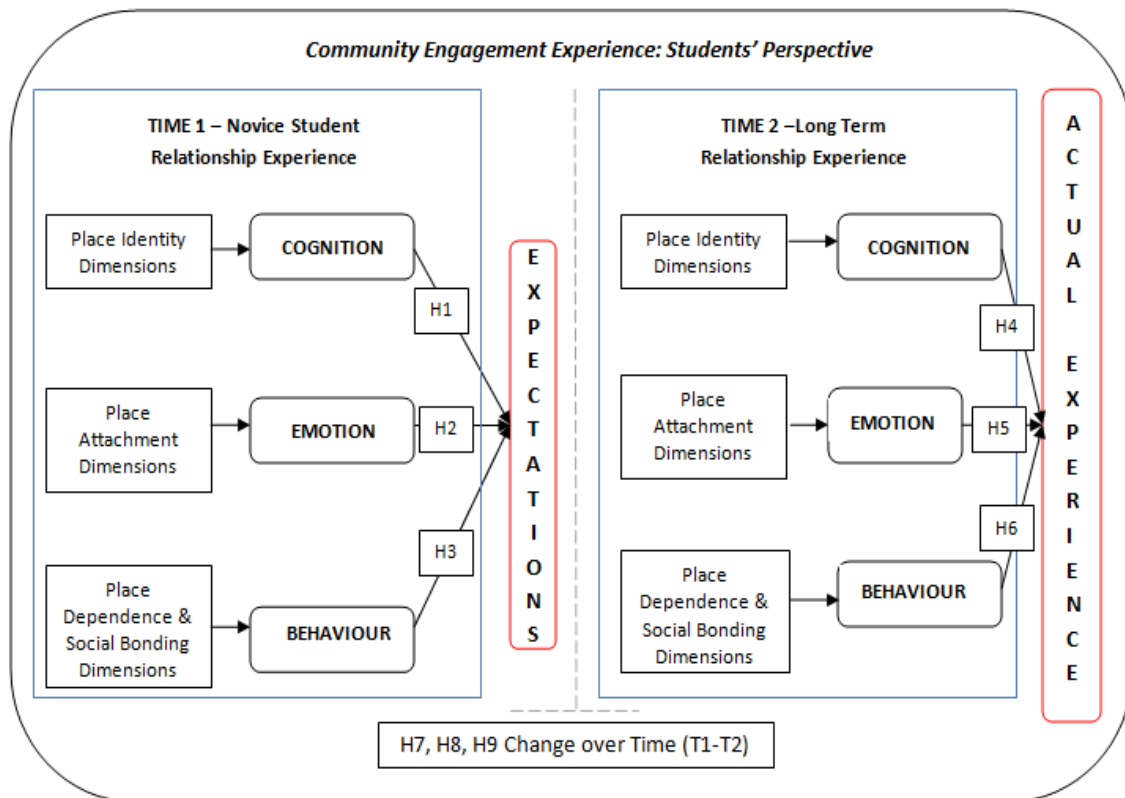
In this section the conceptual model is articulated (see Figure 2), commencing with a definition of community engagement. Central to this study is an understanding of international students' attitudes' about community engagement at the beginning (expected) and the end (actual) of their experience. Thus, the seminal tricomponent model of attitudes developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) is used with the following discussion addressing the cognition, emotion and behaviour elements of this model. Finally, the notion of expectations is detailed.

**Defining Community Engagement.** For this research, community engagement is the mechanism through which value can be co-created. However, within the extant literature there is little agreement on how community engagement should be defined and operationalised (Low, 2008). Three themes are observed. Firstly, mutual knowledge sharing, collaboration,

production and creation are common dimensions cited in the literature (e.g. Onyx, 2008; Muirhead and Woolcock, 2008). Secondly, a global or international context was apparent in most definitions (e.g. Temple, Story and Delaforce, 2005). Thirdly, the notion that university community engagement activities are university-specific (Winter, Wiseman and Muirhead, 2006; Garlick and Palmer, 2008) and indeed, discipline-specific (Mayfield, 2001) was apparent. Thus, drawing from the review of the extant literature, the following definition of university community engagement is offered:

*the mutual creation of knowledge and value networks on a personal and professional level, via international student involvement and participation in unique university facilitated community experiences; which enriches the international student experience, assimilates local and global cultures, and yields superior value for all stakeholders (the student, university and community).*

**Figure 1:**  
Conceptual Model



The conceptual model was initially adapted from Payne et al.'s (2008) value co-creation framework. Figure 1 illustrates the preliminary model for this research. This model extends Payne et al.'s (2008) original model in a number of ways, thus providing a unique contribution to the literature. Notably, Payne et al.'s (2008) model was conceptual and generic, thus we sought to contextualise the model and integrate the notion of co-creation of value. In particular, because the customer is the ultimate decider of value in the value co-creation process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Vargo & Lusch 2004), the model focuses on the student perspective initially, as the student is the only

stakeholder paramount to the determination of value. The university can only provide value co-creation opportunities with the community, and the community also acts as a medium for value co-creation to occur.

Briefly, the box surrounding the entire framework represents the students' entire community engagement experience, as all community engagement experiences are individually unique (Onyx 2008; Garlick & Palmer 2008). All of the elements of the framework must occur within each community engagement experience for value to be co-created. Next, the two bigger identical boxes represent Time 1 (Novice) and Time 2 (Long Term) in the student relationship experience. These boxes were developed to parallel the literature on the change in perceptions of service encounters over time, as a service is consumed. The three rounded boxes, inside the two bigger boxes, with the terms behaviour, emotion and cognition are adopted from Payne et al.'s (2008) model on value co-creation. These are the independent variables that comprise the students' relationship experience. These components can be measured from Time 1 to Time 2. The rounded boxes are also preceded by squared boxes with the constructs of interest being: place identity, place attachment, and place dependence and social bonding dimensions.

The long thin rectangular box, found in between the two student relationship experience boxes, represents the initial expectations that students have about community engagement. This is affected by their relationship experience attributes (behaviour, emotion and cognition) working at a novice level (Time 1) within the consumer experience. Like the Time 1 and Time 2 boxes, this component of the model was derived from the literature on change in perceptions of service encounters over time, as a service is consumed (Dagger and Sweeney 2007). Expectations will be operationalised by generic items pertaining to each of the independent variables, plus an overall expectation item.

The actual experience box, the long thin rectangular box found outside of the second student relationship experience box, symbolizes the actual community engagement experience a student participates in. Again, this is affected by their relationship experience attributes (behaviour, emotion and cognition), but considers the change of the attribute due to the long term customer experience the student has gained. Identical to the Time 1 box, the Time 2 rounded boxes are also preceded by squared boxes with the terms place identity, place attachment, and place dependence and social bonding dimensions. As mentioned, these are constructs that will operationalise the independent variables and are expected to change over time.

From the conceptual model, nine hypotheses emerge which could be tested in future research. These hypotheses are represented by six boxes on the arrows and three boxes below the model. The arrows represent the flow of the variable throughout Time 1 and Time 2 (represented by H1-H6) of the community engagement experience. Boxes H7-H9 represent the variables level of change from Time 1 to Time 2.

Hypotheses. The first three hypotheses illustrate that the variables (behaviour, emotion and cognition) at the novice stage of experience (Time 1), will affect students' initial intentions towards community engagement situations.



*H1 – Cognition will affect initial community engagement experience at the novice stage.*

*H2 – Emotion will affect initial community engagement experience at the novice stage.*

*H3 – Behaviour will affect initial community engagement experience at the novice stage.*

Hypotheses four, five and six state that at the long term stage of experience the variables (behaviour, emotion and cognition) (Time 2), will affect students' actual perceptions towards community engagement experience.

*H4 – Cognition will affect actual community engagement experience at the long term customer stage.*

*H5 – Emotion will affect actual community engagement experience at the long term customer stage.*

*H6 – Behaviour will affect actual community engagement experience at the long term customer stage.*

Lastly, the final three hypotheses state that the variables (behaviour, emotion and cognition) will have changed in time (novice to long term customer) regarding the level of influence that each variable has on students' perceptions towards community engagement experiences. These hypotheses are modelled from Dagger and Sweeney (2007).

*H7 – Cognition will be stronger for novice customers than for long term customers.*

*H8 – Emotion will remain consistent from novice to long term customers.*

*H9 – Behaviour will be stronger for long term customers than for novice customers.*

The nine hypotheses put forth all focus on the influence that will occur cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally within a specific community engagement experience at two points in time. As it is likely that the aspects that affect students' behaviour, emotions and cognitions in a community engagement situation will change over time, it is important to measure this change in order to provide marketing initiatives that co-create value for the duration of the experience. In doing so, this will help with customer retention, which is important to a service organisation's marketing success

**Cognition.** Regarding cognition, both the disconfirmation better-worse than expected and the expectation no chance-certain probabilistic belief scales developed and refined by Oliver (1980), will help guide its operationalisation. Scales drawn from the place attachment literature focused on place identity (an attribute of place attachment) (Jorgenson and Stedman 2001; Kyle, Graefe, Manning and Bacon, 2005; Wickham and Kerstetter, 2000; Mowen, Graefe and Williams, 1998; Hammitt, Backlund and Bixler, 2006), will be adapted.

**Emotion.** For emotion, Richins' (1997) study on various emotional scales will be the basis for operationalising this construct. Scales used by Wickham and Kerstetter (2000), Jorgenson and Stedman (2001), Williams and Roggenbuck (1989), Mowen et al. (1998) and Hammitt et al. (2006) have been widely used in place attachment literature and will be adapted to the context of this

research in terms of attachment to the community. Lastly, portions of scales from social learning and social capital literature (Onyx and Bullen, 2000), linked specifically to community engagement, along with engagement scales developed by Krause (2005) and Krause and Coates (2010) will be also adapted to the context of this research.

**Behaviour.** Regarding behaviour, Oliver's (1980, 1993) better-worse than expected (disconfirmation) scale and Ajzen and Fishbein's 1980 refinement of the affect-belief behavioural expectancy scales will guide early scale development. Arnould and Price's (1993) experiential constructs which concern expected versus actual experiences may also have some influence regarding scale creation. With that said, these scales only provide a foundational base to operationalise behaviour, as they are not specifically designed to measure behaviour within this context. Thus, scales adapted from community engagement, social learning and social capital literature (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Gallini and Moely, 2003; Krause, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2010), as well as adapted place attachment scales focused on place dependence and social bonding (attributes of place attachment) (Kyle et al., 2004; Jorgenson and Stedman, 2001; Wickham and Kerstetter, 2000; Williams and Roggenbuck, 1989; Hammitt et al., 2006) from the tourism and leisure literature, will be the starting point for operationalising the behavioural variable for this higher education context.

**Expectations.** Continuing, the dependent variable, expectations, also requires measurement. There is no one accepted way to measure expectations of service experiences (Parasuraman, Ziethaml and Berry, 1994). However, there appears to be support for the Expectancy Disconfirmation with Performance Model (EDPM). The EDPM is the perspective taken for this model and considers both expectations and performance (disconfirmation), as opposed to solely performance, when assessing service quality (Robledo, 2001). As such, expectations will be likely operationalised in terms of overall expectations of the experience in regard to three constructs (cognition, emotion and behaviour). A four item assessment, in the form of 7 point Likert type questions ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Patterson, 1993; Oliver, 1997) will be used to assess overall expectations in terms of the three constructs. Thus, each of the expectation items will be derived from SERVQUAL service literature (Parasuraman, Ziethaml and Berry, 1988), community engagement literature (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Gallini and Moely, 2003; Krause, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2010) and place attachment literature (Kyle et al., 2004; Hammitt et al., 2006).

## **Conclusion and Limitations**

In summary, the purpose of this paper was to develop a conceptual model for understanding how community engagement can be used as a marketing mechanism to co-create value in the international student experience—in turn, creating a competitive advantage. Rather than viewing community engagement and value co-creation as discrete constructs, this research views of community engagement as value co-creation. The next step in this research is to conduct an empirical study with the goal of generating contributions to theory but also useful and meaningful findings for practice.

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