

The Roles of Engagement: Value Co-created Community Engagement between International Students, the University and the Community

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Abstract

The Australian international education industry is facing turbulence. Economic circumstances and refocused marketing strategies from overseas rivals are creating intense competition, forcing Australian universities to rethink their strategies. Current research postulates that community engagement enhances the strategic capability of universities. Within the international education industry, enhanced community engagement may create a means of differentiation. However, marketing university-community engagement requires an understanding of stakeholder roles. Using SDL as a framework, in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted to explore the role perceptions of international students, the University and community—revealing high correlation regarding the students' and the University's roles, with some conflict concerning the community's. The findings support utilising SDL's value co-creation premise to guide community engagement marketing initiatives in this context.

Introduction

Today, community engagement is part of the strategic agenda of universities in Australia and, indeed, worldwide. Community engagement is a key element of contemporary university mission statements, driving an ever increasing imperative to develop an explicit understanding of the nuances and parameters of what it is to engage with the community (Cuthill and Brown, 2010; Silka *et al.*, 2008). Much of the literature on university-community engagement is relatively recent (e.g. Onyx, 2008), and consequently many gaps are apparent. One of these gaps is an inadequate understanding of the roles different stakeholders play; be they the university, the community or the student, within the international education experience. While there is some community engagement research from the university and student perspectives, there is a dearth of research that considers the community's perspective (Bruning, McGrew and Cooper, 2006). That is to say, a holistic understanding of each stakeholder's role from their own perspective, along with the perspectives of the other parties, has yet to be explored. Community engagement seeks to benefit all stakeholders—providing students with an enriching total international education experience, the community benefitting from enhanced cultural capacities and intellectual capital, while universities may garner a point of competitive advantage.

On the whole, community engagement creates value for all stakeholders. This value is co-created, requiring all stakeholders to be involved with the practice. This being the case, our study explores the role perceptions of the university, community and international students—in the co-creation of community engagement experiences. As such, we draw from the service dominant logic (SDL) literature to frame university-community engagement in this context.

Marketing International Education

Like many service industries, higher education operates on a global scale and viability is paramount. For example, the United States are focusing marketing initiatives towards international students to supplement financially struggling domestic populations. This consequently creates a ripple effect on the Australian international education domain. Coupled with the strongest Australian dollar since it was floated in 1983, such events present major obstacles for the 18 billion dollar Australian international education sector. Moreover, ethical issues such as international student violence and systematic visa impropriety, compound the challenges. As such, Australian universities could benefit from revising their strategies. Community engagement is one plausible strategic option for universities, as recent research has demonstrated (e.g. Garlick 2000; Muirhead and Woolcock, 2008). Research also conveys that students want heightened community interaction within their overseas education experiences (AUSSE, 2008; Marginson, 2010; Dalglish and Chan, 2005; Townsend and Lee, 2004). Although, at present, community engagement is not a main focus of international education service providers (Marginson, 2010) or the Federal government, who have delayed this portion of the international student plan (Murray, 2010). While international students are calling for increased community engagement, many industry bodies remain unresponsive.

Student-oriented, University-facilitated Community Engagement

Our perspective draws from the stakeholder roles and the SDL (particularly value co-creation) framework. Specifically, this paper takes a student-oriented view of community engagement.

This customer-focused approach dominates marketing thought, allowing organisations to understand customers and how other stakeholders offer resources to the value co-creation process (Lusch and Webster 2011; Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008). With international students (customers) expressing the desire for more university-facilitated community engagement (Marginson, 2010), our approach is congruent with popular customer-oriented marketing thought and the SDL framework. In the context of our study, the university typically initiates and facilitates a relational process—bringing together the student with the community (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002). Ideally, the university would welcome the community’s input and encourage international students to take advantage of community engagement offerings. Concurrently, the community must be willing to work with the university and students predisposed to actively participate in the offerings made by the community. Thus, community engagement is an exercise in value co-creation.

Parallels can be drawn between Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) notion of SDL and community engagement. Hence, SDL is a viable marketing approach for framing community engagement in the international student experience. Five SDL premises are relevant (Table 1).

Table 1 – Relevant SDL Premises

SDL Premises*	Application to this Research
FP4 – Operant resources are the fundamental source of competitive advantage	Operant resources refer to the University’s ability to create awareness and offer avenues for students to partake in community engagement experiences.
FP6** - The customer is always the co-creator of value	In the context of higher education and community engagement, value co-creation is the catalyst for the communal creation of knowledge and skills benefiting all stakeholders (students, University and community).
FP7 – The enterprise cannot deliver value, but only offer value propositions	The University can only offer value propositions via community engagement opportunities. Students have to participate in the propositions for value to emerge.
FP8 – A service-centred view is inherently customer oriented and relational	Continuous reciprocated communication and dialogue is needed between the student, University and community to build relationships which yield co-created value.
FP10 – Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary	While the University can offer value propositions, students always determine the value of their individual community engagement experiences.

**Premises sourced from Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 7 **F6 is the principal underpinning premise of this research*

Methodology

This study was undertaken at a regional university in Australia. Exploratory data was sought from the three parties involved with community engagement – the university, community and international students. In-depth interviews were used to gather information from community members and University staff as they were geographically dispersed with differing schedules. Judgement sampling was used to select four University staff with expertise related to international students, while five respondents were selected from the community who possessed relevant knowledge and experience with international students and/or community engagement. In terms of the students, focus groups were possible because they were all available during common hours on campus. Convenience sampling was used to recruit three focus groups comprising a total of 22 international student respondents. Specifically, the focus group student respondents were balanced in terms of gender (males = 10; females = 12), representative of all three university faculties (Business = 5; Arts = 4; Science = 6; Undeclared = 7), levels of study (undergraduate = 14; postgraduate = 8) and nationality (American, German, Canadian, Bulgarian, Danish, Dutch, South Korean, Bangladeshi, South

African, Tahitian, Iraqi and Japanese). Drawing from the literature, a moderation guide was developed for use in both the in-depth interviews and the focus groups to address research objectives. It sought to a) develop a definition of community engagement; and b) addressed the perceived roles of all three stakeholders. Specifically, each stakeholder reflected upon their own role and then commented on their perceived role of the other parties.

Findings and Discussion

From the exploratory research, the following definition of student-oriented, university-community engagement emerged: *Active student participation in community experiences within the local geographic area, which are likely facilitated by the university and result in the co-creation of knowledge, skills and relationships for all stakeholders.* This definition is reflected in the stakeholders' perceived roles. The findings pertaining to perceived roles are presented in Table 2, with discussion to follow.

Table 2 – Perceived Roles in Community Engagement

Stakeholder Perceptions	Perceived Community Engagement Roles				
	Students' Role	University's Role	Community's Roles		
	Proactive resource integrator	Flexible facilitator	Approachable and accommodating	Two-way communication via the University	Directly approach students
Student Perception	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓
University perception	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓
Community perception	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓

Key: Level of agreement on stakeholder role(s) within the focus groups and in-depth interviews ✓ Low; ✓ ✓ Moderate; ✓ ✓ ✓ High

The student's role from the student's perspective was the first theme of interest. The students' perception of their own role was dominated by a 'proactive' theme. This is displayed with three ticks in Table 2 for all stakeholders, indicating a high level of agreement amongst the stakeholders. Specifically, student respondents framed the interplay between the roles as follows: the University and community collaborate in the first instance to provide engagement opportunities, with students then obliged to take advantage of these opportunities. This finding was echoed by a focus group participant that stated, "I think we need to be proactive. But, I need to feel comfortable...before I can be proactive. Being viewed as tourist doesn't make feel comfortable. I want to be seen as part of the community".

The students' role from the University and community perspectives was congruent. In-depth interview respondents concurred that the main role of international students is a willingness to participate in available community engagement offerings. Respondents believed this was a structured pathway to encourage international student interaction within the community, allowing them to step outside of exclusively associating with other students in solely University environs. It was perceived that moderating and offering community engagement activities regularly over time creates comfort, stimulating student initiative. One community member commented, "Students have to have some initiative. The University brokers tension between the student and community...this is the key to generating proactive

energy amongst students...it lets them become more independent, free and confident". Importantly, respondents noted that levels of student impetus will vary individually.

The University's role from the student perspective was the second area of interest. Student perspective on the University's role was that of a facilitator, as indicated with three ticks on Table 2. This aligns with Onyx (2008) as one of three roles that universities play regarding community engagement, the 'mediator'. Students phrased this role in various ways such as the University "educating", "creating awareness", "establishing connections and links" and "initiating and assisting with communication between stakeholders". One participant posited, "There is a general lack of avenues into the outside community. The University needs to do a better job of creating community engagement awareness". Thus, it is inferred that students are expecting the University to play a mediating role, creating an "engagement bridge" (Garlick and Palmer, 2008, p. 73) and connecting them to the community. To bolster university facilitation, students agreed that effort should be put into community engagement at the beginning of the international student experience and constantly supported throughout, remaining flexible to shifting student needs.

The University's role from the University and community perspectives was then explored. Echoing the student responses, the in-depth interview results concurred that the University's role was to facilitate. Common themes from the interviews referred to the University as "the moderator of communication for the stakeholders", the "medium for building partnerships", and a "connector". However, while most interviewees agreed that the University played a facilitating role, there were contrasting views on when and what types of facilitation should occur. Some thought community engagement facilitation was most important in the beginning of the international experience and then supplemented when necessary. High levels of facilitation early in the experience, are inferred from the respondents' idea that students are most uncomfortable in the beginning and want to identify and connect with the community. Alternatively, other respondents thought that the University should provide consistent facilitation. One respondent articulated, "The University plays the role of a conduit. Its community engagement role is ongoing and never ending".

Additionally, a lesser, but relevant finding was that the University is sometimes "closed-off" and "unwelcoming". Some community members thought the University lacked scope in their facilitation role; stating that, "Community engagement is not about the University putting on more campus events. It's about them reaching out to the community...sponsoring off-campus non-university events...creating awareness about positive off-campus happenings". Congruently, the need for the University to play a continuously adaptive role is posited by the community engagement literature (Suarez-Balcazar *et al.*, 2008), but not thoroughly explored.

The community's role from the student perspective was explored next. Two key trends regarding the students' perception of the community's role transpired. First, the students thought the community should be "open-minded" and "accepting" of international students. "A willingness to except international students...to be more inviting...this helps remove stereotypes and make us more comfortable," is how a student framed it. Fitting with the extant literature (Garlick and Palmer, 2008; Silka *et al.*, 2008), the second finding revealed that students felt that the community should be able to approach the University, creating two-way collaborative communication. One student said, "It seems that both the community and the University lack communication with each other...and need to get better at it". Over their experience, students believed that the timing of community's role was dependent upon the

type of community engagement experience. In some cases, they play a brief collaboration role. In others, the collaborative role is ongoing.

The community's role from the University perspective revealed different findings. Most University respondents believed that the community's role was to communicate with students via the University. The majority of respondents said that it was in the best interest of the University and students that community engagement be initiated through the University. A respondent stated, "Communities can proactively source the Uni for community engagement...but they need to be cautious about directly contacting students...for security purposes...it's in the best interest of the Uni". Only after "comfortable relationships are established", did most respondents perceive it to be suitable for the community to directly approach students. This corresponds with the University's facilitative perception of its role, and the community engagement literature (e.g. Garlick and Palmer 2008; Onyx 2008).

The community's role from the community perspective was the final area of exploration. Depicted equally with two ticks for every role in Table 2, community respondents suggested that their role is contingent upon the situation. As one community respondent stated, "The community's role regarding international student community engagement is dependent upon the activity, purposes, time frame and context. In general, we want them to feel welcome by being friendly, polite and helpful...if the situation calls for it...further communication can be sought with the University and/or the students". Thus, we infer that there are times when it is appropriate for the community to directly approach international students, if it creates a heightened sense of comfort or belongingness.

Although this conflicts with the moderating role of the university, this finding adds depth to the research. Some types of community engagement may not have or need a university pathway. Contrasting views of the community's role may signal a lack of cohesion between the community and University. However, it is important to acknowledge that the University in this study is young, and has been working diligently in developing the international student experience. Moreover, the absence of clarity on the community's role is not limited to new institutions. Its role with established institutions is still being developed (Gumprecht, 2003), with no exact formula applicable across the field (Garlick and Palmer, 2008).

Over time, most of the respondents expressed that the community should be consistent in working with the University. Respondents thought that the communities should feel comfortable in outreaching to universities, with some stating universities could create a welcoming sense to the community for better collaboration. Creating a mutual sense of respect, responsibility and benefit for all stakeholders are the cornerstones of both community engagement and value co-creation (Abela and Murphy, 2008; Bringle and Hatcher, 2002). This also creates a more mindful community, which was mentioned as a secondary role.

Conclusion and Future Research Intentions

In summary, value co-creation frames community engagement. Understanding stakeholder community engagement roles provides practitioners a clearer scope on how to co-create value in the international student experience; in turn, creating a competitive advantage. These preliminary findings are part of a larger study that seeks to generate longitudinal panel data to help advance theory and the practice of university-community engagement in the international education service industry.

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