

Community Engagement and the International Student Experience: A Definition

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Abstract

Sustaining the benefits of the globally-competitive international education industry requires new thinking and a movement beyond simply measuring student satisfaction with their university experience. The often-neglected party in the international student experience is the host community. While community engagement has many positive impacts, few universities explore how additional value can be co-created through this link. Community engagement as a construct is not well understood. Through reviewing the extant literature this conceptual paper developed a definition of community engagement as it applies to the international student experience, being: *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 the student, the university and the community.*

Keywords: international education, international students, community engagement

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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; Agawal, Said, Sehoole, Sorozi and De Wit, 2008; Daghli and Chan, 2005). Recent evidence suggests that students want increased community involvement in their international education experience (Marginson, 2010; Agawal et al., 2008; Daghli and Chan, 2005; Townsend and Lee, 2004). 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 start looking beyond on campus university-student interactions. Interactions with international students could be further enhanced if universities facilitate value co-creation opportunities via community engagement activities. In doing so, many of the issues currently damaging the reputation and credibility of Australian international education may be alleviated.

Value co-creation is the principle marketing 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; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Payne, Storbacka 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, as they are the three salient stakeholders for this research. 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 through the co-creation of value. However, the absence of a cohesive agreement on exactly what community engagement is causes difficulties in using it as a marketing strategy. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to develop a definition of community engagement for the international student experience. In doing so, a better understanding of value co-creation via community engagement in the international student experience will occur; potentially yielding a competitive advantage as a marketing strategy towards international students.

Building a Definition of University Community Engagement

We build our definition of university community engagement in cumulative stages by firstly defining *community*, and then *engagement*. Next, we drawn these two definitions together and extend them so they are specific context of this study, resulting in a definition of *university community engagement*.

Defining Community

Despite the vast amount of research that exists on studying communities, there is no widely accepted definition of community across academia. However, many themes re-appear within the literature. Three common themes are: membership and belongingness (Unger and Wanderman, 1985); the sensation of one belonging to a larger dependable stable unit (Sarason, 1974); and belonging to a group where members matter to one another and to the group, along with the shared belief that member's desires will be met via their commitment to the group (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Concerning this research, community will be viewed in terms of *sense of community*, which signifies the importance of feeling comfortable and a part of a larger group. Establishing a 'sense of community' which develops social, professional and interpersonal networks during the international student experience should be a goal of universities. Additionally, it is important that 'community' be considered in terms of boundaries. Thus, community is limited to a specific geographic area, conveying a sense of locality, which signifies the importance of our informal social and interpersonal networks within the local region (Milofsky and Hunter, 1994). As such, for this research community may be defined as, *the local region where international students have the opportunity to develop personal and professional skills and establish formal and informal networks within the local society.*

Defining Engagement

Engagement can be defined from various perspectives. In this case, the definition for engagement will be adopted from the marketing point of view, as *consumer engagement*. This approach is justified by the notion that the international student is a consumer wishing to be engaged in the international education service experience. Definitions of engagement from a consumer perspective have just recently begun to emerge in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Cummings, 2007; Copeland-Carson, 2008). Engagement is posited as the level of involvement that happens inside the consumer depending on their connection to a product or service context (Plummer, Cook, Diforio, Schachter, Sokolyanskaya and Korde, 2007). The level of consumer involvement is inherently driven by cognitive and emotive processes (Plummer et al. 2007; Heath 2006). Other views of consumer engagement are similar. For example, Gregory (2007, p. 2) describes consumer engagement, from a public health perspective, 'as activities that encourage the involvement, participation and contribution towards policy development and implementation'. Moreover, it is noted that there are different types or levels of consumer engagement. Consumer consultation, disseminating information, active participation and consumer control, all signify engagement activities (Aslin and Brown, 2002). Consequently, it can be inferred that an engaged consumer is one who is occupied, focused and expresses a higher level of commitment to an issue (Aslin and Brown, 2002), or in this context, to a service experience. Therefore, engagement can be defined as *international students' level of commitment towards active participation and involvement with opportunities in the local community during their international study experience.*

Defining University Community Engagement

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 were observed. Firstly, mutual knowledge sharing, collaboration, production and creation were 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. University of Queensland, 2006; 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, we offer the following definition of university community engagement: *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 the student, the university and the community.*

Community Engagement as a Mechanism to Co-Create Value

University community engagement is one mechanism for co-creating value for international students enrolled at Australian universities. Accordingly, the intention of Table 1 is to contextualise value co-creation and community engagement, specifically highlighting what value co-creation is and is not and its alignment with community engagement.

Table 1 – Value Co-creation and Community Engagement

What Value Co-Creation Is Not	What Value Co-Creation Is	Value Co-Creation–Community Engagement Nexus
Customer focus	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.
Customer is king/always right	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.
Delivering good customer service or pampering the customer with value	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.

Mass customization of offerings that suit the industry's supply chain	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, facilitating the construction of unique experiences.
Transfer of activities from the firm to the customer as in self-service	Experience variety	Facilitating a plethora of community experiences.
Customer as product manager or co-designing products and services	Experience one	The university understanding that 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.
Product variety	Experiencing the business as consumers do in real time	The university looking at the international student experience from the student perspective.
Segment of one	Continuous dialogue	Purposeful communication facilitated by the university and practiced on a level to correspond to various students' desires.
Meticulous market research	Co-constructing personalized experiences	Understanding the uniqueness of each student's individual needs via working with them to construct their needs.
Staging Experiences	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.
Demand side innovation for new products and services	Not applicable	Not applicable

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

There are three important value co-creation points to consider when looking at Table 1. Firstly, is the notion of the *joint* creation of value. Mutual collaboration underpins community engagement (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, 2004b; Payne et al., 2008). Without reciprocated collaboration amongst all stakeholders, value co-creation cannot occur.

Accordingly, the second main item in Table 1 is that of continuous dialogue. Willingness to communicate is best 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 they are unique for each customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, 2004b; Payne et al., 2008), is the last prominent theme established in Table 1. International students may have some general similarities in what they seek in their experience, but ultimately, each student will have something unique that they desire. Universities that can work mutually with students and communities to construct a more personalised service experience will have a competitive advantage (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004, 2004b).

Conclusion and Future Directions

In summary, the purpose of this paper was to define and contextualise community engagement from the perspective of international students. The main contribution of this paper is the development of a definition of *university community engagement*. Given the absence of definitions for this construct in the extant literature, this paper advances the field of international education marketing. Furthermore, these definitions offer university practitioners more concrete parameters that can then act as a basis for implementing programs aimed at enhancing the international student experience. A secondary contribution of this paper is the contextualisation of community engagement as a value co-creation mechanism. Rather than viewing community engagement and value co-creation as discrete constructs, we propose a view of community engagement *as* value co-creation. This paper is part of the conceptual development of a wider project exploring how universities can co-create engagement opportunities for international students. The planned collection of longitudinal panel data will seek to establish the expectations of community engagement of international students upon arrival and compare these initial expectations with their actual community engagement experiences at the conclusion of their stay.

Overall, the research aims to gain insight on the current gaps in the literature pertaining to the building of competitive advantage via value co-creation marketing strategies that offer a more enriching international student experience. In this context, the service experience value is enhanced by the university offering and facilitating value co-creation opportunities through community engagement. Understanding that value co-creation marketing initiatives require a collaborative and reciprocated dialogue/communication, joint knowledge creation and sharing is the key to sustaining this competitive advantage. Utilising community engagement initiatives as a potential avenue for creating a competitive marketing advantage, allows the organisation to provide the consumer with a unique service experience over time. In many ways, value co-creation and community engagement in the international education context simply requires a change of perspective towards valuing all stakeholders involved with a service experience.

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