The question is no longer whether it is right or wrong to view Higher Education as a service focused industry. That is so ten years ago! It is more about how we can create and co-create with students an experience which generates the maximum mutual value for them and for the institution.

Legitimate and generative debates have been had about whether students should be seen as customers in our universities. An important compilation of such debates was put together in a very significant edited volume by Molesworth, Scullion, and Nixon (2011). In that volume, Maringe, in an article entitled ‘The student as consumer: affordances and constrains in a transforming higher education environment’ argues that placing the consumer at the heart of decision-making in HE helps to democratise the HE experience, increase accountability; and contribute to a better quality HE experience for all involved (p. 51). Whatever we do in the name of improvement has the ultimate goal of creating more or better value for students.

The problem in HE has been that of perpetual borrowing from the business sector with little generative theory and evidence to underpin what we do and what we value in our own sector. The use of terms and concepts such as: service encounters; loyalty; customers; consumers; customer experience and customer satisfaction have met with vigorous resistance from those on the left of the debate (see for example Gibbs, 2011; Brown, 2011; Furedi, 2011). Research on HE marketing is thus being driven largely by people with a marketing background working in HE. For now, we have to accept their leadership in this field and indeed, their contributions has been immense over the years.

This special volume is no exception. It has a focus on creating value for students through for example a better understanding of the service encounters, (teaching and learning encounters) and how their quality can be enhanced; understanding the relationship between student loyalty (progression and applying for further study) is related with the student experience.
(their academic and non academic experience); exploring university segmentation as a basis for classifying institutions and demonstrating the value they can create for students; exploring the opportunities created by mobile technologies fast outpacing desktop technology as a tool for teaching and learning in HE; and understanding what MBA students value on a university website.

Chandra, Gruber, and Lowrie begin with an excellent and well researched piece on how to mitigate failure amongst students through understanding the factors which male and female students consider important amongst their teachers/professors. The paper uses an innovative “laddering interviewing” technique to explore service recovery encounters and discovers that both male and female students value staff: who listen actively; who demonstrate expertise; show friendliness and empathy. However, it also discovers that female students prefer more communal approaches to problem solving while their male counterparts show preference for quick fix solutions. The paper has much to offer as it underpins the reality of service failure which is uncommon in HE.

The second paper by Quintal, Shanka, and Chuanuwawatanakal, from Curtin Australia explores the relationship between student experience and loyalty. Based on a convenience sample of 400 through a pen and paper survey, they discover that home students and overseas students share much in common in terms of their expectations of: the university image; facilities for career preparation; and personal and academic development. However, the paper identifies subtle differences and advises the development of what the authors term a ‘Gestalt student experience.’

Paper three is based on research conducted by Morard and Shamma in Cairo which aimed to discover the dimensions which can be used to segment the university system in Egypt. They discover that two important factors distinguish universities in their market positioning. These are perceived quality and level of internationalisation and identify a four classification system of universities in Egypt. With different scores on the two by two matrix, they discover an interesting classification based on what they describe as legacy, prestige, imitators and uncertain universities in the country.

Hayes and Walker explore the growing importance of mobile technology and mobile internet usage which they claim is overtaking desktop learning amongst young people and reveal the opportunities and challenges which this new way of experiencing teaching and learning creates.

The final paper by Elbeck and Vander Schee focuses on how to meet MBA student expectations of website effectiveness through an efficient E-service delivery in HE. Using another innovative KANO approach, they engaged 110 MBA students who identified 23 features which characterise ideal college websites. The paper provides useful management and design advice to those who have this responsibility in universities.

Marketing in HE is about creating value that students need. This issue goes a long way to suggest ways in which such value can be created and is a much recommended read for all those with an interest in HE.

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REFERENCES


