An exploratory study of relationship marketing as a mechanism to connect with and keep university students

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Abstract

Connecting with and keeping students are perennial issues facing universities. In Australia, the smaller universities in regional areas are particularly vulnerable to student loss. One plausible strategy for these smaller universities to adopt is relationship marketing. This paper presents the findings of a preliminary study that explores the conceptualisation of relationship marketing in a higher education context from a student perspective. Novel theoretical insights and useful practical findings were drawn from the five core themes that were the focus of this study – relationship dynamics, relationship experiences, relationship dimensions, social integration and institutional integration. Collectively these findings provide strong indications that relationship marketing has much promise as a mechanism for regional universities to connect with, and in turn, retain more of their students.

Introduction

The loss of students due to increasing competition between universities is an unfortunate reality for the smaller, regional universities in Australia (Marginson, 1997). Given this particular vulnerability, regional universities are seeking marketing initiatives that not only allow the institution to connect with its students but, more significantly, to give students a reason to stay (Blunden, 2002; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Sharpham, 1997). This being the case, this exploratory research set out to investigate students' perceptions of relationships with their university as a preliminary platform for marketing initiatives that may stem student attrition. Accordingly, this study focused upon five pertinent themes drawn from relationship marketing and education literature. The findings revealed rich and useful insights about how students connect with their university – a necessary foundation for the development of an effective relationship strategy.

Background

Marketing had "no place" in the Australian higher education sector until the late 1980s. Then, wide-sweeping industry reform bought market forces to the sector. The result was increased domestic competition and a reorientating of universities away from their traditional domain as public institutions and towards the idea of

customer-driven enterprises (Marginson, 1997). These reforms saw an expansion of the number of universities in the country. In particular, regional universities were introduced to the Australian university sector, as mostly existing technical colleges that were granted university status post-1986 (Marginson, 1997). Founded in regional locations these institutions are faced with a number of unique circumstances. Regional universities have a comparatively smaller population from which to draw students from due to their geographic location (Stevenson, Maclachlan, & Karmel, 1999), they tend to attract large numbers of mature-age students, with fewer school leavers and have more first generation higher education families attending (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

With a prevailing junior standing in the sector, regional universities have had to market themselves harder to enhance their status (Marginson, 1997) and, importantly, to connect with and keep their students (Sharpham, 1997). Unable to compete in size, large-scale employability and research, regional universities focus upon their strengths in their marketing endeavours, being access, customer friendliness, regional factors and teaching quality (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

For these regional universities in Australia, relationship marketing is a promising marketing strategy as it is a mechanism to increase student "customer" retention. The notion of building student "customer" relationships is new to Australian institutions, even though this strategy has been contemplated by universities particularly in the United Kingdom (Conway, Mackay, & Yorke, 1994) especially with regard to attracting international students (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Nonetheless, the emphasis upon student retention in Australia, while not new, is more discernible in the prevailing competitive domestic climate.

For many decades, the importance of retaining first-year students has been the focus of much research. Despite extensive study from sociological, educational, psychological and psychoanalytical slants (Lawrence, 1971), first-year student retention remains a complex and perennial concern with up to 30% of students considering withdrawal during this time (Blunden, 2002). While it appears scattered across various domains and literature it is plainly evident in practice that regional universities do make attempts to connect with their students. It is connection through relationships, however, that may inculcate students into the fabric of the institution and this may have the greatest potential to stem attrition.

Using marketing strategy to connect with and keep students

Relationship marketing (RM) strategies are seen by Australian universities as a marketing initiative that may bring about many advantages including the curtailing of student loss and improving the engagement of students in the learning experience. RM is an attractive strategy as it encourages personalisation in the interaction with customers. Anchored in "corner store" and "merchant trader" practices, (Grönroos, 1990) it seems likely that similar boutique-type, organisations that value small-scale would also find success with the strategy.

RM can be employed as an alternative or complementary means to enhance profitability. While it has many definitions in the literature, RM is essentially about having, keeping and knowing customers (Berry, 2002; Harker, 1999; Jackson, 1985). Since its inception, the momentum of RM can be sourced to its intuitively sound rationale of proactively encouraging long-term customer-to-business

relationships in a fashion that would result in sustained competitive advantage (Grönroos, 1990; Harker, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Many organisations have attempted to implement a RM strategy, with some more successful than others. Over time, research has identified that there are some prevailing characteristics of a service context that make the success of RM more probable. For instance, relationships are particularly evident in service contexts where intangibility (e.g., consultancy) and inseparability (e.g., counselling) create a necessary interpersonal aspect (Barnes, 2001; Berry, 2002; Grönroos, 1994; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000). Furthermore, industries faced with intensifying competition (e.g., telecommunications) and the presence of increased consumer sovereignty in supplier selection (e.g., insurance) there is a higher likelihood of RM success. Additional industry traits include businesses where customers demonstrate a periodic or ongoing desire for a service (e.g., medical services); the nature of the service requires frequent face-to-face contact and two-way communication (e.g., hairdressing); and the service is of a high-involvement and high-credence nature (e.g., financial planning, Barnes, 2001; Berry, 2002; Grönroos, 1994; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000). Reviewing these aforementioned qualities, it can be seen that RM is a fitting approach to addressing university dropout. In the extant literature, few studies have examined RM within a university context (e.g., Judson, Aurand, & Karlovsky, 2007) with no known studies undertaken in an Australian context.

Given the multi-faceted and context dependent nature of customer-business relationships (Holmlund & Törnroos, 1997), it is not surprising that RM is a somewhat ambiguous, non-specific and ill-defined phenomenon (Bagozzi, 1995). However, there is consensus in the literature that the most germane insights come from exploring relationships through the perceptions and experiences of the customer (Barnes, 2001; Fournier, Dobscha, & Mick, 1998; Simpson & Licata, 2007). In the light of these aspects, this research set out to explore and document students' perceptions of the dynamics (Theme 1), experiences (Theme 2), and dimensionality (Theme 3) of their relationship with their university.

The subjective nature and lack of empirical research into relationship dynamics (Theme 1) and relationship experiences (Theme 2) in higher education meant that no existing literature could be drawn upon. This, however, was not the case for Theme 3 relationship dimensionality where some empirical studies formed a platform upon which to catalogue the dimensionality of relationships in an Australian higher education context. Many studies have aimed to identify generically applicable dimensions of relationships; they are, however, flawed as active relationship dimensions are dependent upon the specific service setting (Barnes, 2001). A review of the literature found the following key relational dimensions: cooperation, customisation/personal attention, two-way communication, interest, friendship, rapport, empathy, trust, understanding, kept promises, competence, similar values, sincerity, support, caring, honest, commitment and benevolence (Barnes, 2001; Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). In particular, trust has been found to play a pivotal role in customer relationships (Cowles, 1997; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992) with a distinction made between trust and trustworthiness (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002).

Connecting with and keeping students: An education perspective

The notion of engaging first-year students through relationships as an instrument to enhance learning has been addressed in the education literature. What is known is that good teaching in higher education is about helping students to learn (Prosser & Trigwell, 2002). Integral to this good teaching is the forging of relationships between students and their lecturer (Parker, 2004; Prosser & Trigwell, 2002; Ramsden, 2003). Notably, being a study of higher education, the term lecturer is used in this paper rather than teacher, with lecturer referring to staff engaged in tutoring and lecturing activities.

Connecting with, or integrating, a student into the university is also a driver of student retention. Tinto's (1975) seminal model attempted to explain the interaction processes between the institution and the individual and how these processes result in different types of college dropout. Tinto's (1975) model is based upon Durkeim's theory of suicide (1951), postulating that suicide was more likely in individuals who were not sufficiently integrated into society. Universities are social systems and academic systems with voluntary withdrawal analogous with suicide according to Tinto (1975). Particularly pertinent to this study was Tinto's (1975) concepts of social integration and institutional integration because they address student connection and retention.

Theme 4 of this study is social integration, which refers to the extent and ability of the interaction between students in the university social system (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975). For example, informal social integration may include interaction among peers, supportive groups or subcultures within university. Peer-group interactions provide a positive and strong link between the academic and social systems as do student-lecturer interactions (Tinto, 1975). Student-lecturer classroom contact today has more emphasis as Australian university students work part-time, have less engagement and involvement with the university and have increased expectation borne from higher fees (Blunden, 2002; Tinto, 1997). It has become clear that many students, particularly younger students, need a strong face-to-face teaching component and socialising in their learning experiences gained from on-campus teaching (Wilson, 1997). Today, the physical classroom where face-to-face interaction takes place may be the only opportunity for social and academic integration to occur for some students (Tinto, 1997).

Next, institutional (or academic) integration is the final theme of interest in this research (Theme 5). Institutional integration generally reflects grade performance and intellectual development at university. Grade performances reflect an individual's ability to meet the explicit standards and preferred style of academic behaviour of an institution. Grades achieved by an individual represent a tangible resource and are considered the visible, extrinsic rewards of university participation. Intellectual development refers to a person's appraisal of, and identification with an academic system's norms. It is an intrinsic reward that forms a part of an individual's personal and academic development (Tinto, 1975). Retained students tend to perceive education as a process of appreciating ideas, gaining knowledge and appreciate teaching quality, as opposed to only valuing the vocational benefits education offers (Kilminster & Miller, 1989; Medsker & Trent, 1968).

Research focus

The focus of this research is to investigate the engagement of first-year students through RM as a possible strategy to stem attrition in regional universities in Australia. This study pursues five core themes. Drawing firstly from the extant RM literature, there are three themes of interest, namely: relationship dynamics (Theme 1), relationship experiences (Theme 2), and relationship dimensions (Theme 3). The remaining two themes – social integration (Theme 4) and institutional integration (Theme 5) – are couched within the education literature.

Method

Data collection was from first-year, on-campus, full-time undergraduate Business students at a regional Australian university. Specifically, this research investigated the relationships these students formed with their lecturers during their first year of study at university. This exploratory study employed both interview and focus group methods. The researcher undertook the role of interviewer and moderator.

The interviews were undertaken prior to the focus groups and were individual, face-to-face and semi-structured in configuration with the interview participants selected using a stratified sample with a random start from a list generated by the university. The goal of the interviews was to gain initial insights into the conceptualisation of RM in higher education as a precursor to the focus groups. Six (three male and three female) full-time, internally enrolled, undergraduate, first-year, Australian Business students at a regional university were interviewed. They were of a variety of ages and backgrounds including direct school leavers and mature age students who gained entry to university via a variety of methods including standard post-high school entry, bridging courses and mature age entry.

Focus group participants were then recruited through lectures. Once screened for eligibility, a total of 26 participants were selected for three focus group sessions. Of the 26 students recruited, 20 (eight male and 12 female) students presented on the day for the actual focus groups. They represented a broad range of age groups with 13 direct entry school leavers, four mature age direct entry students and three mature age students who gained entry via a bridging course. The interviews and focus groups produced a number of findings that will be discussed next.

Findings and discussion

Theme 1: Relationship dynamics

The first of the RM themes examined relationship dynamics. Five threads of discussion were pursued. The first thread of discussion surrounded students' views on the university as an enterprise. The university was initially perceived by students as an education institution in that it was considered a place of learning, an extension of high school; however, first hand experiences of students brought with it the realisation that it is business-like. Students' first interaction with the university (predominantly administration and divisional staff) gave rise to awareness that the university is an organisation, particularly when clerical problems are encountered.

In terms of the second thread, students' perception of their relationship with the overall university, respondents felt that this was dependent upon the people with

whom they interact, including administration staff, friends, and other students. Nonetheless, the most salient relationship was that formed with lecturers as these, in turn, were most powerful in determining their relationship with the university as a whole. Given the magnitude of this finding, the study subsequently narrowed its focus to student-lecturer relationships.

Next, respondents were posed the question 'when does a relationship become a relationship?'. In terms of this third thread of discussion, participants believed that a relationship becomes a relationship upon the first meeting. The first meeting establishes the starting level (positive or negative) through assessment of common interests and compatibility. The first meeting is a fragile interaction where the relationship willingness is determined with face-to-face contact preferred. Generally, the more time spent together in the initial meeting will influence the type of relationship formed as there is a greater exchange of information, while the topic of conversation will affect how rapidly it develops. The relationship then evolves beyond the starting level to a higher or lower level as familiarity increases and trust/distrust is placed in each party. Importantly, the relationship level is subjective and varies between parties.

This then led to the fourth thread of discussion, being the professional versus personal nature of their relationship with lecturers. It was found that relationships with individual lecturers could not be easily classified; rather they were across the spectrum from semi-professional to semi-personal. Notably, no relationships were regarded as altogether personal or entirely professional. It was rationalised that as the attitude and personality of each lecturer varied so did the nature of their relationship. The relationship with the university as a whole was considered a professional one that had mutual benefit.

Finally, the dissolution of the student-lecturer relationship was addressed. The exploratory study found that at a university level, participants perceived themselves as adults having adult relationships. Thus, they felt that lecturer relationships only ended if they wanted them to. By explanation, respondents found that the relationship drops to a lower level than during the term, but there is still the option to keep up contact or interaction outside of classes so as to sustain the relationship with the lecturer.

Overall, these findings provide particularly rich information about the relationship perceptions of students. This serves as a valuable compass to understand their orientation and points of reference so universities can better connect with their students. In addition to the theoretical merit of these findings, they also provide a platform upon which to design student-centred RM initiatives that are effective in universities.

Theme 2: Relationship experiences

The study then moved on to examine the relationships experienced by students, Theme 2. On the whole, participants were satisfied with their student-lecturer relationships. Participants had experienced relationships ranging from mediocre to excellent noting that they had interacted with up to eight lecturers during their first year of study. Interestingly, participants felt they would not allow themselves to get involved in or continue with a "bad" relationship by avoiding contact and doing more work on their own to circumvent the situation. As a part of exploring the relationships experienced, the characteristics or markers of a "good" student-lecturer relationship were probed and students' provided explanations of their respective consequences as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: "Good" student-lecturer relationships

Characteristics	Consequences
Interactive	"Increased class participation" "Do better in the course"
They listen	"Feel more important and included in the class"
Enthusiastic	"Course becomes a priority to study for" "Course does not become a chore/boring"
Great attitude toward subject	"Generates more interest in the topic/course"
Non-judgemental	"Better learning environment" "Confident to take a stab in the dark to answer a question" "Relaxed about learning"
Rapport/approachable	"More comfortable communicating with" "Easily contactable"
Steps outside the text: Uses real world examples	"Take notice of things in the real world and can apply what is learnt in class"
Communicates clearly	"You can relate to what is said"
Cares how you are going in the course	"Feel more important and included in the class"
Wants to help you	"Better learning environment"
Makes university fun/enjoyable	"More motivated to be up-to-date with the course workload" "Look forward to going to classes"
Encourages us to make friends in class	"Increased class participation" "Better learning environment"
Some social interaction outside of class	"Don't feel the professional barrier"
Understand other commitments	"More comfortable communicating with"
Makes an effort to build a relationship	"Easily contactable" "More motivated to be up-to-date with the workload" "Feel more important and included in the class" "Better learning environment"

As shown in Table 1, there were a number of characteristics of "good" student-lecturer relationships. Characteristics such as interactivity, listening, being non-judgemental and approachable positively impacted the learning experience of the student. It is apparent in the students' description of the consequences that these characteristics made students feel safe (e.g., "confident to take a stab in the dark to answer a question"), welcome (e.g., "look forward to going to classes", "don't feel a professional barrier") and a sense of belonging (e.g., "feel more important and included in the class") which inspired learning and scholarship. Another point of merit was that the degree of enthusiasm and attitude of the lecturer toward the course content, further inculcated student interest and participation.

Leading on from discussion of 'good' relationship, the characteristics and consequences of 'bad/mediocre' student-lecturer relationships (Table 2) were investigated.

Table 2: "Bad/mediocre" student-lecturer relationships

Characteristics	Consequences
Little rapport/professional aloofness	Negative impact upon effective learning Poor or declining motivation Easily distracted in classes (chatting) "Not comfortable in classes" "Don't interact in class much" "Don't enjoy classes"
Talk at you not to you	"Don't understand content as well" Learning decreased as cannot ask questions
Poor organisation	Lack of interest in topic/course Negative impact upon effective learning
Teaches exclusively from text book	"Tend to lose respect for them" Easily distracted in classes (chatting)

Across all four characteristics of "bad/mediocre" student-lecturer relationships the impact upon student motivation and learning were palpable. Students "don't understand the course content as well", "don't interact in class much" and "don't enjoy classes." Collectively, the findings regarding relationship experiences revealed a link between the nature of the student-lecturer relationship and the student's learning.

The findings evidenced that "good" relationships have positive outcomes on a number of fronts. Students had a sense of connection, which may help stem student attrition but also their learning is inspired and actualised. Relationships best described as "bad" or "mediocre" brought forth negative learning and connection issues. A key outcome of this theme is that it has articulated precisely the traits that lecturers may embrace (or avoid) so as to connect with students. This novel contribution to the scholarship and practice of teaching has the potential to advantage both learning and retention orientations of an institution if used to practically underpin a relationship-engagement strategy.

Theme 3: Relationship dimensions

For the final RM theme, relationship dimensionality, the aim was to develop a coherent catalogue of the parameters of a student-lecturer relationship. To achieve this aim, respondents participated in an activity whereby they were given a list of 13 dimensions, some of which were provided in a statement form to ensure correct interpretation with the key dimension bolded (see, Technical Appendix). Respondents then identified and ranked those dimensions which were relevant to their student-lecturer relationships. The dimensions were drawn from seminal RM literature (e.g., Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). As a part of the activity, participants had two options – they could consider the dimension in relation to all the lecturer relationships they had experienced; or they could complete it with one particular lecturer in mind. Most chose the former option.

Next, the participants were asked to appraise and discuss the dimensions, highlighting those that they felt had the same meaning and then to suggest other relevant dimensions for inclusion. Thus, seven dimensions were included, being: spend time, trust, communication, cared, support, reliable and competence. Four dimensions were excluded – cooperates, customised/personal attention, empathy, and sincere.

The following Table 3 presents the final 16 dimensions ranked in order of importance and the meaning/actions assigned that resulted from this process. All of the 16 dimensions presented in Table 3 were regarded as important markers of student-lecturer relationships. To tailor the dimensions to the context, some were renamed to better reflect the meanings that the participants gave to them based upon the discussion and their definition of these dimensions, and how lecturers showed these attributes.

Table 3: Dimensionality of student-lecturer relationships in rank order

Dimension	Meaning
Honesty	"Honesty is more important as honest feedback is more valuable than a supportive person, considered to be very close though not the same thing" "Like trustworthy, honesty is given and returned, it involves constructive feed back that enhances your learning" "Constructive advice to put on right track"
Spend Time	"Didn't shuffle you out of room"
Trust	"Have no choice but to trust what they tell you!" "You assume they are competent in the info they give you, similar to 'lots of information' but I picked it as it referred to useful information" "Providing relevant information, specific guidance to get the right answer to the question, lots of useful info, exam related about what is needed to just pass"
Lots of information	"Not straight from the book – must enhance learning, as long as not info-overload, and is useful, must be relevant" "To do assignments, assumes competent and knowledgeable staff"
Communication	Poor, unusual communication styles mask the level of competence that the lecturer has. Students cannot move past communication issues finding that they cannot and do not try to assess competence "If you have trouble understanding what they are saying then you are getting nothing out of it in terms of learning content and that defies the point of going to the lecture/tutorial"
Trustworthy (i.e. rapport)	"Rely on them that they are telling you the truth, you trust what they say – decided on trustworthy but discussed trust – consider the same from discussion" "Person seemed trustworthy, indicated as they were very open about themselves and gave personal information and encouraged us to do the same, trusted us with their personal info and we returned the trust"
Cared	Cared/supportive – "like that they care how going in course as well as honest feedback too. If cared would give honest feedback!" "Asked how I was coping, how I liked the course"
Does right thing by me	"Want them to teach you the right things, do the right thing by you in terms of career"
Support	Shown by attitude to help students learn, not condescending or with little feedback, identifying good and bad points in work, effort from lecturer showing that they want to and are willing to spend time with you, helps you learn because you can seek advice and they will help you "Asks for your ideas, wants to know what you think, creates a safe learning environment where it is okay to be wrong"

Competence	Demonstrated by reactions in class, thinking on feet, providing meaningful answers, being organised, clear and precise explanations, presentation style, use of real life examples and stepping out of the textbook "If employed at university they must be competent and it is hard to judge competence, as you do not know the topic yourself"
Committed (i.e. relationship willingness)	"Always offer help to solve problem, give individual students attention/assistance as required (customised)" "Showed by the way they taught the class, making themselves available and making us feel welcome"
Promise (i.e. reliability)	Closely related to trustworthy "Reliability in that they are going to be somewhere if they say they will"
Interested in my ideas/thoughts	"Constantly ask for your input of how you perceive things and encourage your opinions, always good to hear what other students think too"
Understanding	"Person related well to being a first year student, understood other work commitments and that we do many subjects and want a social life too, comforting as knows the pressures we are under and shows how to approach the subject more effectively"
Classify as a friend	"Not to party with, just consider an approachable person"
Values education	No description could be generated as considered self-explanatory

As presented in Table 3, honesty was ranked as the most important dimension by respondents describing it as valuable because it allows for learning to take place. The low ranking of the dimension "classify as a friend" corroborates the findings of Theme 1, in that students do not see the relationship as a personal one. "Values education" was ranked last as, given the education context, it appeared to be an assumed trait.

These findings help create a better understanding of the attributes of the context-specific relationship between students and lecturers. These contextualised dimensions are novel and therefore are relevant theoretically as they show that active dimensionality does vary depending upon setting. Also, the real practical value of these findings lies in the meanings given by students. The rich and detailed examples and discussions show *how* relationships can be enhanced not just *what* the dimensions are. Such information may be used to develop specific best practice guides for how to connect with students through relationships.

Theme 4: Social integration

Regarding social integration, the number of friends upon starting university, number of friends made at university, the number of friends outside of university and place of residence were found to be the main indicators of social integration. Notably, the vast majority of respondents were from the geographic catchment area of the university and perhaps not surprisingly, older respondents were less concerned with inside-university friendships as they had large outside-university network. It was found that those respondents straight from school knew a greater number of people upon commencement of university. The place of residence during the term appeared to have the largest impact upon the size and diversity of friends made as well as the speed at which friends were made in the first few weeks

of university. There was a broad range of responses to questions about their participation in formal (e.g., sporting clubs) and informal (e.g., talking with other students outside of class) activities. Some participants were more socially engaging than others but as explained by the respondents, this was mostly dependent upon lifestyle and personality rather than factors such as communication about and availability of social activities. There was consensus though that greater social integration made the transition to university a more enjoyable and less daunting experience.

Given that institutions are somewhat unique in the social facilitators they offer to students (e.g., sporting groups, residential colleges and mentor programs), variations in participation in formal functions are to be expected; however, the value of this finding lies in the acknowledgement that peer relationships between students makes them feel connected to the university. Facilitating social engagement either in classrooms or through various clubs and groups will be advantageous to student retention. Like many of the other findings in this study, it gives students a reason to stay and in some respects, represents a social switching cost or barrier that is likely to be a factor considered when leaving university.

Theme 5: Institutional integration

As outlined by Tinto (1975), integrating, or connecting, the student to the university enhances student retention. Accordingly, for this final theme, the research set out to explore and identify the most relevant attributes of institutional integration as perceived by students. It was found that course difficulty, course expectations and administration difficulties emerged as the predominant indicators of institutional integration. Specifically, the course was best if it was challenging but not difficult; however, the content of the course and the pace of the course were not what was expected by students upon commencement of their degree. Administration difficulties were encountered more often than expected which influenced initial perceptions of the efficiency of the university as an organisation. Respondents' initial intention upon commencement at university was to attend all lessons. Interestingly, missing classes tended to be premeditated by students' rather than spontaneous, with lectures missed more than tutorials. Prior knowledge of the content and other priorities determined if the class would be skipped and content caught up at a later date.

The leading implication here is that these aspects – degree expectations, degree difficulty and administration difficulties – are used by students to judge their connection with the university system. They reflect the individual's ability to meet the explicit academic standards of the institution as well as their appraisal of the academic system and norms, as noted by Tinto (1975). Administration difficulties fall outside of Tinto's (1975) work, but it was of significance in this study. As Tinto's (1975) model may be reflective of institutions in the 1970s, the role of administration difficulties is not beyond reason in today's universities of which there are a greater quantity that service a much larger student population. What can be drawn from these findings at a practical level is that such administrative contact points, while perhaps perceived to be outside of the core business of the university, do influence student views of their connection with the institution.

Limitations and future research

As is the case with any research, there are limitations to this study. The relationships investigated were context-specific and taken at only one point in time;

examining the views of a specific student segment at a Queensland-based regional, publicly funded university in Australia. Nonetheless, this study is no different in this respect from other empirical studies examining customer-to-business relationships through a cross-sectional design (e.g., Odekerken-Schröder, De Wulf, & Schumacher, 2003). The method chosen also imposed some limitations.

Building on this study's findings, future research that assesses how generalisable the results are to other student groups, faculties and university contexts is encouraged. For example, how similar are the relationship perceptions of first-year, advanced-level and final year students? A further fruitful area of research would be an examination of the student-lecturer relationship formed with post-graduate students and higher degree research students such as those undertaking doctoral studies. A study comparing and contrasting student relationship experiences between on-campus and off-campus undergraduate student, across different faculties, at private universities and from different countries would also be an avenue for continued research. Importantly, quantitative studies that address the perspective of lecturers, specifically in terms of their relationship endeavours with students and the outcomes of these efforts are encouraged. Finally, examining the stability of the findings over time is recommended.

Summary

In summary, this exploratory study sought to investigate RM as a plausible strategy through which to address student attrition at smaller Australian universities. Five core themes were of interest. Theme 1 – relationship dynamics – found that students' relationships with their lecturers principally determined their relationship with the university as a whole. In terms of relationship experiences (Theme 2), a practical catalogue of traits that lecturers may embrace (and avoid) was developed while Theme 3 not only identified and contextualised active relationship dimensions but gave insight into *how* relationships can be enhanced. The importance of peer relationships (Theme 4) and the impact of administration difficulties (Theme 5) on students' connection with the institution were further key outcomes of this study. On the whole, this empirical research provides novel theoretical contributions and useful insights for practice. Importantly, the overarching implication of these findings is that they provide preliminary support for the notion that RM is a mechanism that will allow universities to connect with and keep their students.

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Technical appendix

1. **Understanding**
2. **Empathises** with my problems
3. **Committed** to relationships with students
4. Provides me with **lots of information**
5. **Customised** or personal attention
6. **Interested** in my ideas or thoughts
7. **Honesty**
8. Tried to **do the right thing** [benevolent]
9. **Cooperative**
10. **Trustworthy**
11. Has **same values** about the importance of education
12. **Sincere**
13. Classify as a **friend**