Value creation at the pre-selection stage of university study destination: perspectives of academics, marketing professionals and students in UK HE

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Abstract

With the marketisation of UK HE, grants for universities have been remained largely unchanged over a decade, producing increased competition. Therefore, universities must find ways to create value to attract students. Factors influencing students potential university choice is well researched. While value is attracting increasing research interest in HE, minimal research has been conducted into value creation at the stage before students have chosen their university, the focus of this study.

Deploying Ballantyne and Varey’s (2006) value creation model, this research used 32 semi-structured interviews, across 12 UK universities among 3 groups – senior marketing professionals, academics involved in student recruitment and students.

Key findings: The universities offer value propositions, integrating choice factors which potential undergraduates then evaluate to see which best delivers the outcomes they seek. Participants conceive of value as transforming lives by undertaking a degree. Regarding value creation activities, the research shows that relationships are developed between academics and students’, influencing their decision to study at that particular university. The relationship between academics and marketing professionals is tested by academic desire to play a greater role in designing the value proposition for potential students.

On communication between the university and students there is primarily one-way. However, this is sufficient at the pre-selection stage because although students enact consumer behaviour in assessing university offers, they do not have neo-liberal consumer expectations. That could be a missed opportunity for institutions. There is two-way rather than dialogic communication between marketing professionals and academics, missing an opportunity to gather insights that could enhance the value proposition.

The study shows that both tacit and explicit knowledge are used but explicit is more dominant. Trust plays a mediating role within and between value creating

activities. Even when there is a value creating activity that is only partially working, trust bridges the gap.

The study concludes that Ballantyne and Varey’s (2006) model can be applied to HE, generating insights and highlighting limits. There are opportunities to create and enhance value for potential students. The research establishes the importance of relationships internally and with potential students. Enhanced communication between university staffing groups could lead to more effective knowledge sharing.

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I hereby declare the thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Signature _Chandrani Samaradivakara_

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research investigates how value is created when potential undergraduates have not yet decided which university to attend. It evaluates how academics involved in student recruitment and university marketing professionals perceive value and value creation. Those who have recently made the choice of a particular value proposition, undergraduate first year students' views are then triangulated to assess how they received the offer. This study takes the conception of value as established by Gronroos (2008) – how customers feel after experiencing an offer from an organisation; whether they feel satisfied or are better off than before.

The study is set in the context of increasing marketisation in UK Higher Education (HE) (Dhanani and Baylis 2024; White 2017), evidenced by market characteristics – competition, customer-orientation and liberalisation (Naidoo and Wu 2014). However, while the UK government's policy is to create a market, prices are currently capped, with few private providers; so, it is not a free market (Tomlinson 2017).

A consequence of marketisation is that universities became active market agents, increasing and professionalising marketing directed to potential local and international students (Ross et al., 2007). To evaluate the nature of HE marketing, this study has investigated how active agents for higher education institutions (HEIs) create and deliver their value propositions to convince potential undergraduates to study at their university. In other words, academics and university marketers articulate to potential students how their university can match outcomes they seek. After interaction with academics and university marketers, if a student feels satisfied that they are going to get what they want out of the degree at a particular university, they feel confident in choosing that one over another. To set it in Gronroos' (2008) conception, students believe they will be better off than before at a particular institution; i.e. it will deliver the value they would like to receive.

Therefore, in capturing the views of these three critical actors engaged in the communication, design, offer and ultimately choice of university, the study seeks to understand what value is, how relationships, trust, knowledge sharing support its creation and how that is communicated to potential students. HE leaders can use the answers to such questions to evaluate recruitment strategy, to assess investment decisions and to enhance theoretical insight into value creation in HE (Maringe 2006). Available models show a gap especially as it relates to UK home undergraduates (see Behr et al., 2020; Ivy 2008). There is prior research into students' university choice which this study builds on. However, this research goes further, adopting a services marketing value creation model to explore HE recruitment decision-makers and academics' understanding, assumptions and the effectiveness of practices employed in creating value for potential students, the latter group also sampled.

1.1 Context

With 142 universities, more than a decade-long cap in UK home fees, the need to differentiate is becoming intense (Ivy 2008; Nicholls et al.,1995; Taylor and Darling 1991; Zakaria et al., 2024). To address such rapid changes, there is an expanding stream of cross-disciplinary education and business research into HE marketing which will be considered later in the literature section (Cubillo et al., 2006; Fisk and Allen 1993; Khan and Hemsley-Brown 2024; Ivy 2001; Ivy 2008; Murphy and McGarrity 1978; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2021; Wonders and Gyuere 1991). In 2024, government approved a small uplift in fees but simultaneously reduced some categories (e.g. foundation fees) and increased employer national insurance contributions (House of Commons 2024).

This research is at the intersection of dramatic changes in government, industry and consumer perceptions of the role and nature of HE (Marginson 2024; Komljenovic and Robertson 2016). A major turning point was the Robbins report (1963), which resulted in the number of UK universities increasing to widen access; by the mid-1980's there were 60, with continuing home student demand outstripping supply (Foskett 2010; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2010).

In the 1990s, policymakers made another substantial push to meet a 50% participation rate, which led to former polytechnics being granted university status, lower barriers for new institutions, thereby increasing university count to 142 (Universities UK 2024). As a result, university student numbers expanded (HEA 2005) and the path from school to university became normalised, which then resulted in a funding crisis (Bowl 2018). The Dearing Report then recommended, significant increases to the contribution students made, moving away from full government funding (The Dearing Report 1997). This was the most visible move to a quasi-market, where government still has control but universities have more freedom to determine their income sources (Bradley 2020), allowing “consumers” and government to make judgements about value for money among increasingly autonomous universities (Green 2004). Self-funding now contributes 53% of tuition fees, research grants and contracts 14% (House of Commons 2024). Private fundraising through academic and business activities has continued to grow (Universities UK 2024).

Universities responded to the changed policy setting by becoming more competitive and innovative in developing services to attract students (Bowl 2018). According to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2016: 8) report,

> *Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better-quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception.*

Given the decade plus cap in home fees, most institutions are in competition to increase or a few, to maintain student numbers (Dhanani and Baylis 2024). To be more competitive, they need to communicate effectively with students. Both these changes i.e. the need to understand students’ requirements and communicate effectively means that marketing has become central (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2022). Now universities use a range of marketing strategies from promotions, to selling techniques (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2022;

Molesworth et al., 2009) and through these negotiate the offer the institution is making and the value to the potential student.

There is literature examining how HE marketing has evolved (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006); they typically study specific techniques rather than the overall portfolio of recruitment strategy (see Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2022; Ivy 2008). Studies such as Hemsley-Brown et al., (2016; 2022) attempt to understand this broader question, examining two elements – branding and reputation. This study extends this further by applying and exploring a well-established concept in services marketing - value – as students make their choice of which university to attend (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). To do this, the study samples three different sets of participants, compared to prior studies which drew from one of these groupings (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2022).

For example, the largest segment of papers involves student samples, mainly studying what factors affect student choice of university, including the HE marketing mix (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015). Others are linked to marketisation and focus on students as consumers, sampling that population (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2021). Through these, universities actively seek ways to demonstrate the potential value of their degrees to attract students (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2021). Creating value-in-use for students is starting to attract interest among HE researchers. This study fits in that group. It is a topic established in product-based industries and mainstream services such as hospitality, tourism, financial services etc. but not as yet the case in HE (Pula 2022; Ramaswamy 2008; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

Research including all three stakeholders – academics, students and marketing professionals – remains a gap; since the collective interactions among these actors produce and demonstrate the value of the university. Academics are important as they are at the forefront of facing students, and they do participate in student recruitment activities as representative of the respective courses. HE Marketing professionals lead on student recruitment. Students engage with academics and university marketers to make decisions when assessing their potential university.

1.2 Value Theory

Having set the HE sector context, the broad area of HE marketing and where this study fits, I turn to the theory of value. The concept of value offers approaches to determine reasons and to what extent an individual places importance on services, items (Clover 2012). The theory dates to ancient philosophy, to ethics, to sociology, and in business to economic value (Milios and Dimoulis 2018). The economic value refers to conventional economic theories which explain the exchange value – the price of goods and services (Clover 2012).

This economic theory of value has two overarching conceptual positions – the theory of objective value and the theory of subjective value, the latter of which is the more modern, dating back to the late 19th century (Jensen 2002). To illustrate the position of the theory of objective value, an aspect such as the labour necessary to manufacture it is key (Curhan et al., 2010). Conversely, the subjective theory of value is premised on a consumer's understanding of how a service satisfies their distinctive needs (Curhan et al., 2010). The key to locating value is not the production costs but based on a personal determination of the importance of that service or good. For example, buying an online course in AI for data analysis helps you at work but a course in creative writing for the same individual could be out of personal interest because it improves their understanding of the books they like to read.

> "There is no simple or unified approach to conceptualising value in relationship to higher education…" (Tomlinson 2017 p. 3)

This study examined how universities create value for potential undergraduates. Value in this study is therefore aligned to subjective theory of value as set out by Ballantyne and Varey (2006 p.345).

> …the judgement of the value of things will change according to the needs of the particular evaluator. Thus, in any marketing exchange, there will be at least two evaluators, and their value perspectives become linked together as a reciprocal value proposition.

This study will therefore bring together “two evaluators” i.e. university and potential students. In addition, from the perspectives of students, the research will also investigate the views of HE marketing and academic professionals who design and execute policy, create strategy, develop relationship networks and communications plans. In other words, the aim is to explore the universities and the students’ “value proposition” (Galvagno and Dalli 2014). In this value construction process, a university is a market actor presenting an offer to the potential student who will make a judgement of the value of that offer in meeting their aspirations (Heinonen 2013).

Before proceeding further, it is important to briefly discuss the definition of value and value proposition adopted for this study. In chapter 3 there is discussion on relationship between trust and value creation. It shows in consumer markets value encompasses elements of trust, comfort and confidence. Therefore, value in these contexts is influenced by service setting and individual preferences.

For the purpose of this research, as previously highlighted, I adopted the subjective value as it applies to service delivery, grounded in the relationship marketing. This perspective examines how both students and universities perceive value as they interact with other another to co-create experiences that leaves students in a better position than at the start of their university selection journey. Therefore, this study adopts, Gronroos (2008) definition of value creation.

> Value for customers means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process or a full-service process, they feel better off than before. (Gronroos 2008, p303).

Simply put, a value proposition is what makes an organisational offering attractive (Kotler 2000). It shows how an organisation should position its offers to consumers against any competitors. Aligned with subjective value, value proposition should be tailored to distinct consumer segments. What value proposition offers is the ability to communicate about the superior value offer to the target customer group. Hence, this study adopts Payne et al., 2017) definition of value proposition;

> A customer value proposition (CVP) is a strategic tool facilitating communication of an organization's ability to share resources and offer a superior value package to targeted customers. (p.472)

The university as a service offering is a new phenomenon; hence, the research on HEI value creation through marketing is still emerging (Judson and Taylor 2014). Of course, in the UK, universities have a long history with Ancient foundations formed between 1250 to 1850 and civic universities which were established after 1850. Although these institutions are in someways exposed to competition, changes in UK HE have had less impact on them because of their oligopolistic position and extensive support from alumni (Dhanani and Baylis 2024). However, for the vast majority of HEIs, UK HE is a competitive marketplace, resulting in increased marketing to potential students.

There is no definitive list of marketing activities that a university can employ to recruit students; however, multiple factors influence students at the pre-sale stage, purchasing point and during the course – age, gender, programme choice, geographical location etc. (Hemsley-Brown 2016). To provide a sense of how the research has developed, a summary analysis is presented below, grouped into themes.

1.) Students' views of the marketing mix (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet 1998; Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003; Bowen et al., 2014; Hardie 1991; Ivy 2008; Noble 1989)

2.) Brand/ image associations of the university (Farr 2003; Fox and Kotler 1985; Gray et al., 2003; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007; Ivy 2001; Khanna et al., 2014; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2021)

3.) Communications (Bélanger et al., 2014; Bonnema and Van de Waldt 2008; Constantinides and Stango 2011 and 2013; Domański and Sędkowski 2014; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2022; Rutter et al., 2016).

Most of the studies which attempt to demonstrate how universities create value, for example, through their marketing mix, are based in a non-UK context. Most of this research is outdated as the UK HE market has undergone significant changes. Therefore, there is also a need for up-to-date research and within the UK context. Additionally, the relatively siloed nature of extant research allows this study to build a more integrated approach.

To further the study, I turn to the second research gap observed – methodology. For example, Chung et al., (2009), investigate the impact of information choices (e.g. brochures or agents) but their findings are about choice of international destination (country of choice at which to attend university). Additionally, most prior studies employ quantitative surveys; thus, allowing this research to probe for deeper insights through qualitative approaches. Other papers sample high school students (e.g. Bonnema and van der Weldt, 2008), seeking their HE study intentions; while, this study examines actual choices. Unlike students' demographic variables, the focus of some prior research (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2021), the choice factors in the value proposition are at work when students start university selection. Respondents still attending high school may not yet know whether their preferences will result in acceptance at their choice institution at the end of the application process. Of course, no single study can do all of these but it leaves room to contribute to knowledge in this research. This study uses a sample of first year students, from twelve different universities, specifically business schools, the latter selected because of their high registration volume and presence as a discipline in multiple types of universities in the UK (UUK 2017). This range is new to the research topic and is better suited to exploratory examination.

There is limited research into the perspectives of recruitment staff but this study will include their views. Previously their voices have been restricted to perceptions of communication tools, institutional branding and university marketing strategies. Johnston's (2010) study for example, reports recruitment staff opinion of university social media and symbolic value of university branding. Maringe (2005) and Maringe and Gibbs (2008) introduced a model focussing on raising the profile and strategic focus of university marketing after interviewing policymakers of universities from Zimbabwe. Due to differences among countries and cultures, the findings could be revisited (also Noble 1989 in Canada; Gatfield et al.,,1999 in Australia). These studies provide useful insights, on particular elements instead of a comprehensive view; and only from one perspective (students or universities) and not both, nor in their relationship to value creation. Therefore, this research addresses these gaps.

To address how academics, university marketing professionals and potential students conceive of and experience the offer, the value proposition, the study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: What do universities and students perceive as value in HE?

RQ2: How does the consumer value model, established by Ballantyne and Varey (2006) work in the context of HE marketing? It will examine three value creating activities in the model.

- Relationship
- Communication
- Knowledge sharing

RQ3: What role does trust play in value creation in HE?

1.3 Research Design

This section introduces briefly the specific model and methodological approach in this research. In line with the subjective theory of value as the overarching theoretical umbrella, Ballantyne and Varey (2006) have established the model below in services marketing. There are three key activities which are connected in the value creation process i.e. knowing, communicative interaction and relationship development.

- Knowledge sharing

Knowledge is at the core of an HE programme and therefore in university selection – as universities develop narratives for their courses, when producing materials and programme content, when students are applying. Knowledge here also refers to the generation of insight through marketing research, open days' feedback, knowledge-sharing among academic departments, at faculty level, other stakeholders and between those units and marketing teams. The research will discuss forms of knowledge i.e. tacit and explicit and how and if such knowledge sharing happens between HE marketing professionals, academics and other actors who support the presentation of the value proposition to potential undergraduates.

- Communicative interaction

Listening and informing are two key aspects of communicative interaction. Hence, tools such as the university prospectus, advertising are examples. In addition to these two, researchers argue that dialogue is needed as it is an advanced form of marketing communication which supports value creation (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). The latter is linked to the digital environment including social media. Much of the outreach marketing policies and practices are directed at below the line, i.e. traditional face to face interaction, which are more dialogic compared to above the line tools like advertising. The study will incorporate how students perceive university marketing communications and the nature of their influence on course choice.

It also examines the nature of communication between the two departments, marketing professionals and university academics as they contribute to the process of setting out the offer of the institution and the potential satisfaction that could be derived by a student.

- Relationship development

The university and the student have multiple opportunities to relate – events, open days, taster classes, social media – and that supports the development of a relationship. However, for successful management, the quality of the relationship is utmost. This is an important issue because relationships which are valuable to all parties provide the structural support for value creation as a collaboration. This is reflected in the quality of experience at university open events, course sampling and interactions with staff. Following Gronroos (2008) and Ballantyne and Varey (2006), relationship needs to be high quality and long term to ensure purchase and loyalty.

1.3.1 Methodological Approach

a. Epistemology

Consistent with the research aim, the nature of the study, this study took an interpretivist epistemological stance (Siebelt 1992).

b. Data collection

Following on from a realist philosophy, and prior research, this study employs a qualitative method. Data collection has been done in three stages. Totally 12 universities were selected, from ancient foundations to new universities (post 1990s).

- ✓ HE marketing policymakers' interviews – 12, 1 from each, all of whom are at senior management level.
- ✓ Business school academics' interviews – 1 each from 10 of the 12 HEIs, chosen from those who participated in student recruitment.

- ✓ Business school students' interviews – 1 each from 10 of the 12 HEIs among recently started, first year undergraduate students.

Questions for the face-to-face discussions were framed around the value creation triangle from Ballantyne and Varey (2006) and the extant services marketing and HE marketing literature. Questions were targeted to better understand views and activities connected to knowledge sharing, communicative interactions and relationship development to understand perceptions of value, the nature of trust and the efficacy of the model in HE services marketing.

c. Analysis of the data

Thematic analysis has been used to discern themes, sub-themes, nodes and related family codes, and produce the code book.

d. Why home undergraduates not international students?

With comparison to home students, international students' decision making is different. Research shows that many international students first decide the country for their future education (Cubillo et al., 2006; Mortimer 1997). After deciding the country, they decide which university to attend. Many studies show South and Southeast Asian students apply for the university through agents (Maringe and Carter 2007; Mazzarole and Soutar 2002). 50% of international students use agents to help to select a university (Das 2023). Agents have their own list of universities; hence, they sometimes, do not encourage a potential student to apply outside of that list (Denisova-Schmidt et al., 2020). Additionally, there are visa, language and other rules. The overseas students' journey and understanding of value is therefore, different from a UK student.

e. Why business schools?

There are three primary reasons for sampling business schools. First, unlike many other faculties business schools have similar admissions processes. Furthermore, business schools have higher demand in comparison to most other disciplines. Hence, this provides a good population to select an appropriate sample (Bryman and Bell 2015). Business schools are also well represented across the UK HE sector from ancient foundations to post 1992s.

1.4 Summary of the Chapters of the Thesis

Chapters 2 to 4 evaluate existing knowledge related to this research starting with the concept of a market before narrowing to HE marketing and then on factors influencing students' university choice. It then connects this to the theory of value in Chapter 3. The final Chapter in this section, Chapter 4 draws the strands together, discussing Ballantyne and Varey's model (2006) and how it relates to this study.

Chapter 2 examines the marketisation process of UK HE. It also investigates the extend of marketisation in UK HE and asses related concept of students as consumers.

Chapter 3 reviews existing literature on university marketing techniques, given that the fee cap significant need for marketing activities, including factors affecting university choice. It then connects these to the concept of value, introduces the process of value creation and the core role of trust.

Chapter 4 closes the conceptual review, addressing in depth the process of value creation as developed in Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model. Three main points are discussed – knowledge sharing, communicating and relating, setting out the key gaps in the literature to be addressed in this study.

Chapter 5 provides a rationale for and an account of the methodological approach taken, including the justification of the sample used in this study, and the data analysis approach.

Chapters 6 to 9 analyse, present and evaluate the research data and sets it in the context of the extant literature and insights generated from this study.

Chapter 6 – This chapter discusses universities' and students' perception of value.

Chapter 7 - Addresses the first value creation activity of Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model – relationship development. First, it looked at how relationships work between universities and students. Then it examined relationships between two internal stakeholders – marketing professionals and academics. It also explores how trust helps to establish and develop these relationships.

Chapter 8 examines the second and third value creation theme – communication and knowledge sharing. It analyses the forms of communication between university and students and then between academics and marketing professionals.

Knowledge sharing- first, it discusses types of knowledge, tacit and explicit, then how knowledge sharing happens. It also looks at how trust plays a role in effective knowledge sharing.

Chapter 9 concludes this research. It summarises how the research questions have been answered to address the identified research gaps. It also discusses limitations of this research, policy implications and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Marketisation of UK HE & Students as Consumers

2.1 Introduction

This chapter traces the marketisation of UK HE, and its related impacts. It considers the extent of marketisation of UK HE. It is also essential to explore the idea of students as consumers through the university choice factors literature. Progressive introduction of elements of consumer markets into HE is relevant to the study as value assessment is fundamental to customer choice.

2.2 Marketisation

To examine student recruitment, choices and value, it is first necessary to understand how the UK HE market developed, including the role of government. Additionally, neoliberalism and globalisation had a significant role in creating the UK HE market (Marginson 2006). Olssen and Peters (2005) argue that UK HE marketisation is consistent with neo-classical economic theory – expressed through diversifying choice, market-oriented funding, increased managerialism and competition.

In summary, HE marketisation is the gradual introduction of economic market logic. Reforming UK HE was done to increase participation, *aimed at strengthening student choice and liberalising markets in order to increase quality and variety of services offered* (Jongbloed 2003, p. 113). Transferring some tuition from government to students changed engagement with UK HE. For example, making performance data public and listening to students' voices (DBIS 2016). Prior to this, the UK HE had been relatively separate from politics as they had a specific role in society to educate elite students (Dearlove 2002).

The Robbins (1963) report was one of the most significant landmarks as one of the first major reviews of UK Universities. The consequences were not only an increase in number of universities and polytechnics but also expansion into new geographies, including rural areas, supporting growth, widening participation and active citizenship (Robbins 1963). As the number of students increased, with wider access to different communities, this combination changed the focus of universities.

In 1980 only 15% of the student population attend the full time higher education (House of Commons 1984). The student body was then mainly composed of male, upper class, undergraduate, diploma and full-time students with a small proportion of postgraduate students (Brown 2013). As Foskett (2010) observed, by the 1980s the Robbins report (1963) had achieved its desired effect with 48 universities, 30 polytechnics and 61 colleges (Brown 2013), leading to more choice.

Robbins (1963) still set out a principle that HE should be seen as both a private and public good, not a transactional service, with independence. *The report argued that higher education institutions should be free to establish… standards of competence without reference to any central authority* (Robbins 1963, P.231). Robbins recognised that there is trade-off between accountability and freedom of the universities, advocating for a balance. Therefore, the Robbins report does not share the neoliberal capitalist ideas which are evident under current UK HE policies, which I turn to next.

Although some funding was coming from tuition fees, the amount was nominal. There was no significant distinction between research and teaching grants. Prior to this period, the home student demand was high, and it was difficult to meet with the limited places available (Foskett 2010). UK marketisation was given its foundation policy – introducing tuition fees for non - EU students in 1980.

2.3 UK HE and Neoclassical economics

Neo-classical economists believe that consumers drive the forces in markets reflected in what they choose to pay for; the “forces” referring to supply and demand (Inoua and Smith 2022). Consumers want to be satisfied with the product or service, and the suppliers’ goal is to maximise profits (Morgan 2015). These concepts have far-reaching consequences in marketizing UK HE. The

Dearing Report (1997) changed the economic structure by shifting the drivers to students, “consumers”. The introduction of universal tuition fees and focus on preparing students to suit the demands of industries were major features. The idea of HE as a public and private good introduced by the Robbin’s report (1963) was replaced by the neoliberal idea of developing a private good which develops human capital to address industry demands (Bessant et al., 2017).

Therefore, with the dawn of the millennium, UK HE saw an increase and expansion with the introduction of fees, maintenance grants and loans to increase the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Moore et al., 2017). With regards to the introduction of value exchange, the 2012 increase of fees for English students is seen as another major landmark. Further, increasing fees to £9000 per annum for English undergraduate home students marked a significant increase from 2006 fees (Sá 2014). This then largely replaced state funding. Here, we see the foregrounding of HE’s purpose as providing private services as an exchange of economic value (Tomlinson 2018). The consequence is witnessed in the 2011 white paper, which placed students at the heart of the system, implying basic “customer service” orientation (Cruickshank 2016).

Other market driven metrics were also introduced to further promote customer reviews. One such is called key information sets (KIS) which set out to the public teaching satisfaction, student contact hours, graduate employment and salary average data. This was supported by the introduction of the National Student Satisfaction survey (NSS) in 2004, to share their views on institutional experience. These are indicators that transferring greater costs to students went hand-in-hand with increased demand for “service quality” and “value for money” (Tomlinson et al., 2021) which led deeper to deeper regulation, accountability, student satisfaction and graduate outcomes (Sirniö et al., 2016; Slaughter and Leslie 1997;). Besides, university league tables are now reflections of these and provide shortcuts to market choices (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

2.4 UK HE – as a Market

Before delving into the question of how much of a market UK HE is, it is important to understand the distinguishing features as set out by Brown and Brown and Carasso (2013).

1. Institutional autonomy – freedom to decide their own mission, vision, short, long-term objectives and strategic directions. UK Universities do decide (Marginson 2008).

2. Institutional competition – an organisation should be able to enter the market relatively easy (Porter 2000), thereby increasing competition. It also should provide choice for consumers. In the context of HE, students should have a choice of where, how and what to study (Brown and Carasso 2013). Funding linked to the number of students enrolled, which encourages institutions to have competitive recruitment techniques and freedom for institutions to increase or reduce their student intakes. These provide a solid foundation for a competitive market. However, for programmes which have compulsory placements such as medicine, nursing etc. there are caps (House of Commons 2024). Also, professional bodies will have a voice in the number of students taking the course (Universities UK 2024).

3. Price – In a free market the price of a good or a service will be decided by the number of players in the market, target market i.e., where the premium market can charge higher prices and lower prices for basic segments, based on consumer demand. With increasing number of HEIs, currently 285 in the market, universities are competing with each other for students (Universities UK 2024). At the same time, English universities are not allowed to decide the fees for UG, currently £9525 in England. Those who have a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) award are allowed to charge maximum tuition fees up to £9525 and others can charge £9000 (UCAS 2024).

4. Information - According to market theory, quality is protected automatically as consumers use the available information to select the product that is most suitable for them: suppliers that do not provide goods that are

suitable go out of business. Universities now have large professional marketing communications teams along with what the UK government asks of them.

So, while governments seek some of the benefits of the market (efficiency, choice, etc.), there are too many aspects of HE where government is directly involved or where the downside risks of markets may be too damaging to mean that simply leaving things to classical ‘free markets’ is not possible (Nixon 2020). In the UK, government is, for example, the direct source of funding for most education and research and seeks to ensure that HE delivers social and economic objectives (Nixon 2020). Research projects are mostly funded by governments (Marginson 2018). Hence, the UK market has become what has been termed a ‘quasi-market’ (Grand 1991), in which the hand of government provides significant guidance and influence. For the market of ‘home’ students, and the markets for research funding, it is a highly structured quasi-market.

Unlike traditional markets who compete on price, marketisation policies in UK HE are for providing greater choice for students, liberalising offers and the concurrent “quality” metrics (Jangled 2003, p. 113). Although through different mechanisms universities had to demonstrate value for money; there is resistance from academics to the label of market, especially the way it has been justified and enacted (Komljenovic and Robertson 2016). While there are some universities with private overseas campuses, many universities have professional services such as accommodation, conferences, consultancies, investments which operate as profit making. Within academia there are academics who apply for research bids and grants outside of the government. As Jongbloed (2003) highlighted, in HE there is no single market but there are several markets.

With these changes universities started to compete for funding, driven largely by domestic and international students; further increased by a number of colleges being granted degree awarding powers (Brown and Carasso 2013). Consequently, student recruitment attracts significant research attention as marketing departments started to play a vital role in UK HE, to capture the attention of a range of stakeholders, especially potential students.

2.5 Students – Are They Consumers?

So, we turn to an increasing debate about students as consumers. Policies such as university fees, league table rankings, student surveys, graduate outcomes etc. encourage students to behave like consumers in a market (Budd 2017). Some papers have described students as consumers, customers, clients, co-producers, and apprentices (Khatri and Duggal 2022; Matus et al 2021; Tight 2013). Others argue that the objectives of a degree should be instrumental, such as securing graduate level jobs (Wright and Horta 2018). The prominence of fees could drive the feeling that students are entitled to receive (passive receptors) rather than "read" for a degree, and therefore they should be classified as consumers (Lauder and Mayhew 2020).

To unpack the notion of students as consumers, it is useful to investigate the two vectors noted above: instrumentalism and passivity. With regards to instrumentality there is research suggesting that a degree can be a tool to acquire a better job and higher earnings (Budd 2017; Lauder and Mayhew 2020). That is one strand evident in the key 2011 government White Paper which discusses graduate demand for higher pay than non-graduates. However, there are counter arguments for this. Due to HE massification and the resulting oversupply of graduates, degrees have been devalued in the labour market (Tomlinson and Watermeyer 2022). This has brought down graduate earnings and forced some to settle in non-graduate, often low paid jobs (Cheah et al., 2021; Wright and Horta 2018). However, this may not be the case for those who study in elite universities, reflected in high league table positions (Brown and Carasso 2013). When and how do potential undergraduates factor rankings and potential salaries into their decision-process before choosing their university?

There is prior study of this question, under university choice factors. Nevertheless, there is ambiguity about when a student selects a university because of high job prospects. For example, Davies et al., (2021) studied 1400 school leavers and found that male and non-white ethnic groups select the "high wage" option; while low-income or mature students' choices were different. A systematic review of choice factors conducted by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015), found out of 40 choice factors, employability and job prospects are not the top student choice factors. Tomlinson (2008) conducted 53 semi-structured interviews, finding students believe that a degree will enhance their human capital. In more recent work, Le et al (2020) found that job prospects and employability are the most influential factor in selecting a university from a survey of 509 students. Therefore, there is still debate whether students are behaving rationally with regards to job prospects and employability.

The second behaviour Budd (2017) identified was student passivity, expressing entitlement to a degree at the end of the study period. As Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) discussed, increasing fees, competitors and introducing student satisfaction surveys had an impact on this sense of entitlement, while establishing the right to an enjoyable journey for this exchange (Nixon et al., 2018). Budd (2017) concluded this illustrates a shift of the responsibility of learning from students to universities.

However, although universities have increasing pressure to evidence student experience; students are still responsible for developing themselves, with universities facilitating this journey (Budd, 2017; Tight 2013). When considering a university, a potential undergraduate actively considers the learning and wider university experience (Ferrer et al., 2022). To understand these resources and how they are presented as potential value, I now bring the focus to university choices factors.

2.5.1 Factors affecting university choices.

Most HE marketing research is on factors which drive students' choice of university. This can be divided into two groups:

1) research on student-related elements – uncontrollable for HEIs

2) research on marketing related elements – controllable for HEIs

Papers on student related elements cover demographics, social surroundings, geographical location of both the student and campus etc.; these are factors outside university control. The extensiveness of these factors dominate the research – how all these elements affect the students' choice. The use of a value lens is a potential way to capture some of these at a more holistic level, which I explore in this research.

Typically, prior work has focused one or two elements, which I review here. Examining demographic variables, there is research on student gender (Boudarbat and Montmarquette 2009), race (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015; Ivy 2010), age/maturity (Oplatka and Tevel 2006), social status (Callender and Jackson 2008; Reay et al., 2005), family income (Briggs and Wilson 2007) prior education including parents (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2016; Ivy 2010). Availability of part time employment opportunities attract students to city universities (Ivy 2010). Some students prefer universities closer to home while others prefer to be away (Callender and Jackson 2008; Etikan et al 2016)

With regards to demographic factors, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016) and Ivy (2010)'s research are key. Hemsley-Brown (2020) integrated a range of student demographics i.e. family income, parental education, gender, ethnicity, age, school performance – to assess their effect on university choice. It is a study which mapped all the non-university factors across 140 UK universities with a large sample of 10, 400 students from all ethnic backgrounds. Ivy's (2010) research focused on students from British global majority students. Surveying 417 students from colleges across Leicestershire, and using two stages of students' decision-making, first if to enter HE and second, selecting a university. Unlike Hemsley-Brown (2016; 2021) he has not explored the relationship between the factors and students' choice but investigated the factors affecting these two stages. He identified five motives affecting university choice – career and economic, academic, social, family related. However, it is unclear from his results what is the nature of the relationship between the student motivations is identified and the two stages of the decision-making process the paper is based on.

All the above factors affect students' university choices; however, most of them are out of the university's control, although there were projects such as AimHigher to bring students from disadvantaged backgrounds into HE (Chilosi et al., 2010).

Moving forward this assessment of students as consumers there are a number of factors within university control. A considerable amount of research is on information sources (Bonnema and van der Weldt 2008; Khan and Hemsley-Brown 2024; Veloutsou et al., 2004), physical appearance of the university (Shkoler and Rabenu 2023; Wilkins et al., 2013), quality of the academic staff and the courses, research success, academic rankings and university social facilities such as faith groups, societies; (Agrey and Lampadan 2014; Shkoler and Rabenu 2023; Wilkins et al., 2013); marketing communications to potential students (Constantinides and Stagno 2013; Gatfield et al., 1999; Gray et al., 2003; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Mortimer 1997; Simões and Soares 2010); university image and reputation (Ahmad 2015; Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet 1998; Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015; Ivy 2001; Nguyen and LeBlanc 2001; Pampaloni 2010); branding (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007; Ivy 2001; María et al., 2006); segmenting (Briggs and Wilson 2007; Hemsley-Brown 2020; Khanna et al., 2014; Simões and Soares 2010; Soutar and Turner 2002) and targeting and positioning (Farr 2003; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2010; Soutar and Turner 2002).

Such a range of work has over time produced much clarity on choice factors though there remains debate about which are the most important. For example, while some identified university reputation or rankings as the most important (Briggs 2006, Nguyen and LeBlanc 2001) others have identified choices in university programmes as the most important factor (Robertson 2000; Umashankar 2001). As Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) argued HE, is not a homogenous market; therefore, different students will have different circumstances and choices.

Besides, the sector evolves and post-Brexit and post-Covid factors are still being felt and influencing potential undergraduates' views of HE. A subjective value perspective could support a more fluid accommodation of these factors as they ebb and flow over time. High regards or prestige are ranked by some students as having higher weighting in assessing their value for shortlisting (Casidy and Wymer 2018; Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012; Collyer 2013; Lim 2018; Matzdorf et al., 2015). Much of the prior research shows that potential students seek information regarding reputation, courses and campus (Ahmad 2015; Nguyen and LeBlanc 2001; Pampaloni 2010; Veloutsou et al., 2004). Academic reputation is largely based on university rankings (Brankovic et al., 2018). The criteria for hierarchy is determined by a ranking organisation (Webster 1986). For example, UK ancient foundation universities such as Oxford and Cambridge are seen as world top 5 universities because ranking organisations, such as the Times Higher Education has positioned them as such (Times Higher Education 2023). The strong reputation of Cambridge University attracted students (Briggs 2006; Briggs and Wilson 2007; Whitehead et al., 2006).

Reinforcing the view that different segments in the market rely on different elements, for example, Bonnema and Van der Weldt (2008) argue groupings of students which belong to the “have lots ”- students come from affluent families, “aspiring-have-lots” – those who come from middle class backgrounds and “university lifers” – those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds but want to have a better life – all of them rely on information about courses, while “little direction”- those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds with little motivation, see sports as key. These studies show particular details that are and are not important for different types of students.

Most research which discuss the institutional elements also highlighted the importance of potential outcomes and benefits by joining a specific HEI. These include career prospects (Bonnema and van der Weldt 2008; Imenda et al., 2004; Jung 2013; López-Bonilla et al., 2012; Perna and Titus 2004; Veloutsou et al.,2004), although as I stated above it is ambiguous how specifically career prospects affect choice. Other benefits which attract students to particular universities include experiential benefits, lifestyle and social factors (Callender and Jackson 2008; Callender and Mason 2018) and the overall expected experience (Bonnema and van der Weldt 2008).

To sum up this discussion of students as consumers, students do consider these choice factors when they are applying for a university. In a traditional market, consumers will consider their choices, then evaluate their options using relevant factors, then come to a conclusion, whether to purchase, what and where to purchase. In marketing, these are recognised as the 7Ps or 4Ps or the marketing mix (Kotler et al., 2023).

2.5.2 Marketing mix in HE

The application of the conventional marketing mix to HE has produced a rich strand of research. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) used secondary data provided by HESA to conduct a survey using a random sample of 62 international students from developed (54%) and developing (45%) countries. The results showed that pricing and product have the most important impact on international students' university selections. In terms of the product, in keeping with other studies, students are attracted to the core degree, its status and tangible attributes (campus, library etc). Fees, available scholarships and students' perception of value were recognised as important elements of pricing. University alumni, university web sites, the British Council, and other promotional media were ranked as critical sources of information in assessing if a specific university or course met the needs of the student. The challenge with this research is overgeneralisation; criticized by researchers as they appear to "treat the target market as a single homogenous market", where one message "fits all sizes" (Bonnema and van der Weldt 2008, p. 326). It also samples international students, which I noted in the introduction to this study is not within scope.

A further point on category, as Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) used the traditional marketing mix but services marketing has three more elements i.e. people, physical evidence, and process (Fox and Kotler 1985; Gray 1991; Gronroos 1984). People such as academics, admin officers and marketing staff play a major role in an industry such as HE (Guilbault 2016; 2018; Snijders et al 2022; Wong and Chapman 2023). I have already observed the importance of facilities, location, physical appearance of the campus in the literature above. Process is about application, website navigation, ease of engaging with the University.

Similarly, Ivy (2008) and Ivy and Naude (2004) developed a framework for HE marketing. Ivy and Naude (2004) started with the 4Ps in HE marketing and then Ivy (2008) extended it to 7Ps. His empirical data supported two elements of the traditional marketing mix (promotion and price) and one from the services marketing mix (people). He also identified four other categories: programme (could be equated to product/service), prominence (linked to brand image), prospectus (a part of promotions), and premiums. One of the limitations of Ivy's (2008) study is that the sample only draws from MBA students. Postgraduate, especially MBA students have a different set of needs from undergraduates and many are from overseas.

Therefore, there is still a research question about the bulk of the market – undergraduate, typically home students. Ivy's (2008) sample was selected from South Africa where the education market context is different from the UK. The study also did not consider the impact of social media which is now a large part of student's media consumption and platform on which to relate to universities (Peruta and Shields 2017).

These studies provided the breakthrough application of the marketing mix to HE and then developed further. There are studies which investigate the services marketing mix, 7Ps in HE such as Behr et al., (2020); Lim et al., (2018) and Ndofirepi et al., (2020). There is a correlation between the marketing mix and student choice of study destination as found by Gajic (2012) who demonstrated that every element of the mix is important to undergraduate students when selecting a university.

However, all these studies focus on using the mix in devising marketing strategies. There is still room to explore these issues to address some of the limitations observed above. Extant research do not focus on the idea of creating value, a core concept of services marketing in other sectors.

Universities do use the marketing mix in the value proposition to show what they are going to deliver for potential students. There is common ground between the 7Ps and controllable choice factors. However, this research is focused on selecting a university, not how they behave during university life. As Budd (2017) stated, students are responsible for developing themselves and it may not be applicable to consider their behaviour as a consumer since the way a student engages with a degree is significantly different from a customer consuming other service. When selecting a university, students do demonstrate consumer characteristics. Many undergraduate students visit a number of universities prior to making their final choice; they compare choice factors; they consider the 7Ps. They will also have emotions and trust involved in this decision making.

2.6 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has provided an overview of marketisation of UK HE, setting out the critical changes which introduced and established increasing aspects of a market in UK HE. By limiting state funding, universities started to operate like private, profit-making entities in some markets - from increased student numbers, to create graduates who are training to fulfil industry demands. These gradual changes drove UK HE to compete for students, with recruitment policies becoming more important. UK HE has some autonomy in many aspects besides competition for students. Universities are also accountable for their performance, measured through metrics such as NSS, TEF and league tables. Fees are also governed by the government. Therefore, it was concluded that HE has a quasi-market – a market which enjoys some autonomy but has substantial government control.

The logical follow-on was an exploration of the concept of students as consumers. There is significant research showing the student journey is not directly equivalent to a consumer journey; in particular, since they are responsible for their own learning and development. However, through the review of university choice factors, including the services marketing mix in HE, potential undergraduates do consider value propositions when deciding their university, within the pool allowed by their qualifications and experience. UK HE as a quasi-market is not homogenous and so choice factors vary and can be subjective. Therefore, students do largely behave like a consumer in the process of selecting a university.

Chapter 3: The Connection between Marketing, Services and Value

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I have examined the marketisation of UK HE, and the resulting question of students as consumers. Over seven decades and in particular over the last three, regulatory changes have meant a more competitive environment and therefore, research on student recruitment started to attract academic interest. That included factors influencing students' choices, as well as elements of marketing mix that motivate them to select a university. However, it also shows that these specific strands have not been addressed from a value perspective.

This chapter goes on to assess the implications of marketisation of UK HE, the concept of marketing and then connects this the theory of value and how that is related to HE.

3.2 Student recruitment and marketing

Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2021) systematic review, set out the main research themes in HE marketing. They have identified marketization of HE, marketing communications, branding, marketing strategy, recruitment, alumni and gift-giving, as the five main subjects. Table 3-1 below, summarises each theme from mid 2000s to 2018.

University branding with 23 publications is the largest group. Advertising and the marketing mix are not as popular as before with 3 publications for each category between 2005 and 2018. With a comparison to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2006) prior review, this is a significant drop. Social media marketing (Miller 2013) is a new theme that has overtaken advertising from their 2006 research. Marketing strategy in HE still receives attention but very few are focused on relationship. This is an important concept as a pre-requisite to delving into value, that this chapter will develop further, at a later point.

Main Subject Focus	Number of papers	Date range of the papers
Marketisation	17	From 2007 to 2018
Marketing Communication	9	2007 to 2018
• Advertising	3	2012 to 2016
• Social Media	8	2012 to 2017
Branding	23	2005 to 2018
• Image and Reputation	13	2006 to 2018
Marketing Strategy	5	2011 to 2016
• Market Orientation	6	2009 to 2015
• Segmentation, Targeting and Positioning	4	2008 to 2016
• Marketing Mix	3	2011 to 2015
• Relationship Marketing	5	2010 to 2017
Recruitment, Alumni and Gift-giving	9	2009 to 2018
Total	109	

Table 3-1 HE marketing literature review shown by subject (Hemsley -Brown and Oplatka 2021)

Relationships allow organisations to interact and build value with customers (Gronroos 1997). Such relationships are important for HE too as it is a service delivered over a long period of time, through an iterative cycle between both the university and student (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2021). Among those studies, most are about student loyalty. For example, de Macedo Bergamo (2012) discusses how perceived quality affects student loyalty, as do Purgailis and Zakssa (2012)'s study of Latvian universities. Jain et al., (2022) propose a framework highlighting the importance of communication, trust, commitment and service quality effects on loyalty. Communication and trust support relationships in creating value for consumers. However, as noted above, few studies have discussed this and none focused on the UK.

3.3 What is marketing?

Prior to understanding value and the activities of value creation – relationship, communication, knowledge sharing – I set out below the relevant core concepts of marketing.

Marketing is:

> The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably – Charted Institute of Marketing (CIM) (2024)
>
> The activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. – American Marketing Association (AMA) (2007)

Both the conceptions of marketing above are well-established, having been updated to reflect the services revolution and to go beyond financial profitability to include benefits to *society at large* (AMA 2007). Before these more current conceptions, marketing moved through different eras from the industrial revolution. There was the production era, where a company can produce anything and sell to consumers (only 1P in marketing mix - product), followed by the selling era (i.e. 2Ps in marketing, product and promotion) as competition for customers increased. Advertising, branding, public relations became important during this time. In the 1980s, the consumer era dawned with all 4Ps – product, promotion, price and place – aimed at the customer (Kotler 2020).

This was accelerated as services began to impact economic growth, reflected in the AMA's (2007) definition. They clarified that marketing is about delivering customers' needs and wants but also about making an exchange for what is of value to customers. It is about engaging a number of organisational units such as sales, marketing, human resources etc. It is also more than a transaction but a process which involves all those stakeholders with customers and agents who deliver to them.

To do that, building strong customer relationships and relationships within the organisation are important. The first part of this is, given prime place in Kotler's (2020, pg27) foundational work, where he defines *marketing as the process by which companies engage customers, build strong customer relationships, and create customer value in order to capture value from customers in return*. This is further illustrated in the following diagram to show connection to value.

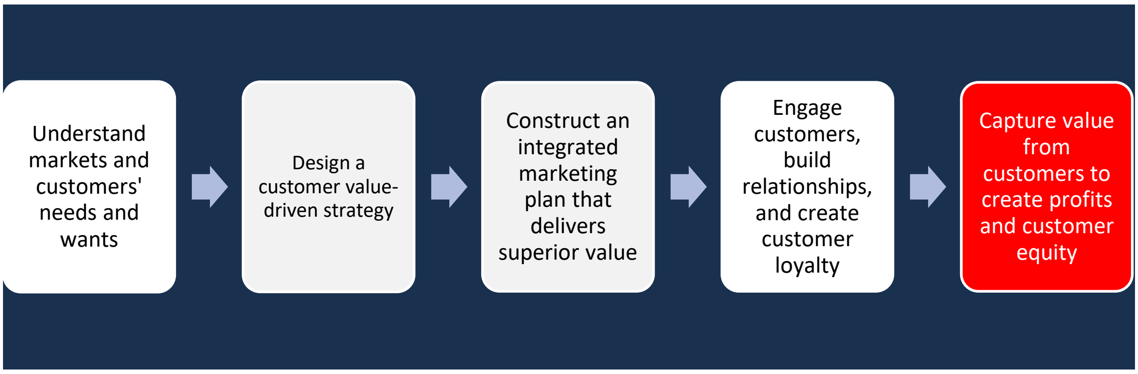

Figure 3.1 Value creation process Source Kotler 2020

By examining the above model, this iterative, on-going relationship allows the organisation to understand what consumers perceive as value relative to what they are being offered. Furthermore, every activity in marketing i.e. understanding customer's needs and wants (the benefits they seek), analysing the marketing environment (including competition such as between universities), segmenting the market (groups of students for e.g. undergraduates, postgraduates), then targeting (in this study undergraduates) and positioning (e.g. research-intensive), developing the specific strategies and then control mechanisms – all combine to deliver value for customers in conventional markets.

However, Kotler (2020) focuses on one type of relationship which is between consumers and the organisation. As per the AMA (2007) definition, there are other *institutions/functions* – internal relationships such as staff groups (marketers and academics) and relationship between employees across functions (schools outreach, alumni, student ambassadors, academics etc.). All of these functions collectively contribute to value creation.

This is supported by a body of research showing that successful relationships across different functions create value for consumers (Vargo and Lush 2008; 2014; Ballantyne and Varey 2006). In their own words, value *is a subset of some overarching value construct, according to which, value is not created by the customer but by several parties, including the firm and the customer* (Ballantyne and Varey 2006, p346). However, in order to deliver an offer which is valued by consumers as noted above, companies have to understand what consumers are seeking, including collecting feedback. Some services like hotels provide discounted rates to spend wedding anniversaries for those couples who previously honeymooned in that hotel.

Of course, one can argue that HE is a one-time purchase; repeat purchase is rare (Yang et al., 2020) and therefore, relationships are not needed. However, it is not solely about undertaking another degree, but about developing a long-term relationship with graduates through alumni, and likewise, with potential students who are planning to attend a university. There are engagements on social media and through school visits, campus visits, application taster days and open days (Samanta 2022). These different points of contact could allow universities to develop relationships with potential students. My study investigates importance of these factors and how they contribute to potential undergraduates' assessment of the value being offered.

Having outline the overarching theory of marketing, its connections to building relationships and how that is linked to value for customers, I will review the concept of value in economics, consumer behaviour and marketing.

3.4 What is value?

Above, we saw that marketing is concerned with exchanges that produce value for organisations (e.g. universities) and customers (here potential undergraduates). It was also connected to the production era as the industrial revolution took hold and factories could manufacture large volumes of product. This link is related as while there are differing definitions of value, the conceptual core is about production of new goods and services.

Consequently, most conceptions of value are primarily associated with economic terms, summarised under the objective theory of value. In *Das Kapital*, Marx (1894) described value as the amount of labour hours and all costs spent in any production. He summarised, *that which determines the magnitude of the value of any article is the labour time socially necessary for its production* (p.39). General prices for goods is an expression of value. However, in different markets, the price of a good will not purely depend on costs and margin. If the market is a monopoly, suppliers can charge whatever prices they can achieve.

Some authors have based their value concept on money and business transactions, firmly grounded in the economic perspective on value. For example, Woodall's (2003), definition of value is based on what is received (demand) and what the organisation provides (supply). This is similar to definitions of value as a trade-off, monetary exchange etc. (Zeithaml et al., 1990).

More currently, Mazzucato (2018) discusses how different types of resources (human, physical, and intangible) interact to produce new goods and services. For example, in order to produce an attractive holiday package, the marketing team develops an idea, conduct research to understand what customer needs are; hotels, flights need to be arranged through different partners, attractive adverts are made, and the sales team sells. She also discusses value as distribution of these products and reinvestment in production when defining economic value – which is usefulness to society. From the latter, the connection to services, collaboration internally and relationships to produce value for customers are more evident.

This is more closely linked to the subjective theory of value, positioned as the opposite of objective value reviewed above. Subjective value is premised on a consumer's understanding of how a service satisfies their particular desires and needs (Curhan et al., 2010). Value could be about the physical and emotional investment an individual has made, or about the time they invested (Holbrook, 1999; Gallarza and Gallarza and Saura 2006). However, in a highly competitive market, the price of a good will be determined by factors such as brand value, competitors, prices etc. Hence, luxury goods are expensive as consumers are willing to pay for them, since they think these brands have higher value than competitors (Mazzucato 2018).

This complexity is compounded as the meaning of value can differ from person to person based on their circumstances. Zeithaml's (1998) definition of value seems to be the most widely adopted in services marketing as it is multi-dimensional, comprising both economic and customer aspects. It also shows that, value is about benefits and sacrifices which are often about personal interaction with a service.

In summary, until about the mid-19th century, to determine the value of a good or service, economists mainly used objective theory of value, based on supply and demand (Woodall 2003). Hence, the value of an item was independent from any consumer perception or thoughts or impact of wider society (Mazzucato 2019). If supply is high and the demand is low, the value of a product decreases. Towards the end of the 19th century, this started to change and economists started to show that the value of a good or a service is not determined only by supply and demand but also by what consumers are prepared to pay. In other words, what they perceive as the value of an item. In this way, value is in the "eye of the beholder" or subjective, as set out in 21st century conceptions of services marketing as seen in Kotler (2020) and Ballantyne and Varey (2006).

The next section contextualises value in the services sector, given that education is a service. Services are themselves intangible and perishable and therefore difficult to illustrate compared to physical products (Vargo and Lush 2004). The sub-section below sets out what is meant by services and how services marketing differs.

3.5 Services:

Services are provided when someone does something to help another (Gronroos 2013). For example, a dry-cleaning company provides a weekly collection and return of uniforms to a catering brand, thus allowing them to focus on their core business. The service activity might be delivered by an individual, household or a company.

There are services that require further help from the provider. For example, in school, a student comes to classes to learn mainly in the classroom. However, some children might need support because they have special needs and so a separate, trained expert is brought in, alongside the main teacher. The expert and main teacher interact with the child to learn of their needs, progress and when to introduce new material. At the same time, the child and carer can influence the service through feedback, regular contact, building a long-term relationship.

Whether a consumer buys a product/service or not, they consume services (Gronroos 1979; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008). In order to consume a service, they use resources they have acquired. For example, going to a UCAS fair or an open day, assumes that a potential student has an understanding of the purpose of the university registration body, has considered what subjects they are interested in, and what are their likely A-level results.

Consumers are concerned about what they do with a service by using the resources they already have. Consumers spend resources such as money, skills and time to obtain what they want, or what they see as value for themselves. As per the discussion above, what they value will be subjective to each person. For example, someone cooks a meal for their family, which allows them to gather around the table, an activity which is valuable to that person. To create that value, the person is spending time, looking at recipes and resource such as food, electricity etc. In this scenario, value has been created by the individual as a self- service process (Gronroos 2013).

There is a nuance in the discussion above; however, it is acceptable to say that in services delivery:

> Value for customers means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process (cooking a meal) or a full-service process (eating out at a restaurant or withdrawing cash over the counter in a bank) they feel better off than before. (Gronroos 2008 p303).

It is also outlined above that value can be measured in financial terms (Ortiz 2013). Equity gained through a house, wealth gained through cost savings, for example. At the same time, in consumer markets, value always has elements such as trust, comfort, ease of use, affection and confidence. Therefore, consumers' (potential undergraduates, in this study) perception of value should be understood.

For this research, I have therefore adopted subjective value as it applies to service delivery that is based on the tenets of relationship building. It studies both students' and universities' perception of value as they initiate, develop and engage in setting out an offer, their value proposition and negotiate an agreement about value that could be achieved in choosing to study a particular programme at a specific UK HEI. Before such choice is made, for an offer to be made, it has to be created. In this study, academics and marketers at the HEI considering the needs and wants of potential learners develop the proposition. It is to this question that the study now turns.

3.6 How is Value created?

So, far in this chapter, we have seen how the conceptions of marketing developed from the industrial revolution to reflect modern concerns. This follows a similar pattern to the origins of value moving through a production era to the services era. Both theories track the movement from objective value to subjective value. The latter is particularly visible in services marketing which requires multiple stakeholders to collaborate, to build relationships to produce value that satisfies both parties. This value creation is under review here as it underlines the research.

There are two sides to value creation, i.e. consumer and company (Gronroos 2012; 2013). While organisations create value by designing, manufacturing and developing product/services; consumers create value by using the offerings (labelled value in use by the pivotal work of Vargo and Lusch 2004). For example, while Disney provided entertainment through Mickey-Mouse, consumers can also experience additional value through Disney World (Heinonen et al., 2013; Prahalad and Ramasamy 2004). By experiencing an offer from a company, consumers help to determine the value (Gronroos 2011). Value is not only in the service function, but also an experience (Ramaswamy 2011) and the experience is subjective to individuals. It does not happen in isolation, but through interaction, online or offline (Gronroos 2012).

It follows, then that value creation is an ongoing process (Heinonen et al., 2013). Holbrook (2006, p.212) define value as an *interactive, relativistic preference experience*. Interaction could be between functions – within the organisation, subjects (employee across the functional borders or employee and consumers) and objects. Interaction can happen in many ways which should ideally end up in a transaction (Gronroos 2013). By using a product a or a service, a consumer should be better off in some way (Gronroos 2008) and both parties should experience benefits through interaction. Yet transactions might make consumers worse off or through the transaction the provider might suffer (Echeverri and Skålen 2021). Therefore, for value creation, both a university and a potential undergraduate are needed, as set out next.

3.7 Importance of interaction to value creation

At the beginning of this chapter, I have discussed what marketing is, and how at the core sits the function of value creation through the AMA (2007) definition. And how that definition highlights the importance of creating relationships. In this section, I have examined the definition of marketing further and then what contributed to value creation. The AMA (2007) definition identifies marketing as set of activities, institutions and processes which create value for consumers. By maintaining ambiguity about which agents carry out activities, by just keeping it as “set of institutions”, it opens up the possibility that not just the service but different types of agents, i.e. universities, HE marketers, alumni and students can create value (Anker et al., 2015).

These first definitions of value and of marketing have been one-way – where organisations create value and deliver this to customers. Even the AMA (2007) definition did not initially allow consumers to create value and organisations to capture that value (Anker et al., 2015). However, the later AMA conception (2007) in this chapter, discusses the importance of exchange. For exchange interaction is needed, physical or virtual (Ravald and Grönroos 2011). Interactions in services means the interacting parties are involved in each other’s practices, i.e. a dialogical process (Gronroos 2013; Ballantyne and Varey 2006). For example, when a flight passenger asks for an upgrade to business class, they are involved in the service provider’s production process. If the airline staff agreed to the upgrade, positive value accumulation can occur for the consumer. If the staff say no, the reverse is true. Thus, both consumer and service provider have a direct influence on each other’s value creation. This study will examine such interactions among HE marketers, academics and potential undergraduates.

The interaction referred to above is important in itself but more effective because of the outcome it produces – information sharing or knowledge exchange happens, which can lead to improvements in the offer or better understanding of the service context (e.g. barriers such as caps on how many library users can simultaneously use one e-journal) (Ballantyne and Varey

2006). Such knowledge exchange takes place across functions within the organisation, with consumers and with other organisations. Knowledge sharing could happen through formal training and informal discussions between, among parties. Bhati et al., (2021) argue that because of the informal nature of some knowledge sharing, it depends on the parties' goodwill. Their willingness will determine the success of the sharing process. Culture and trust influence willingness (Bhati et al., 2021; Higuchi and Yamanka 2017). Bhati et al., (2021) found that people from individualistic societies are reluctant to share. Highuchi and Yamanka (2017) found long-term collaboration develops trust among actors to facilitate knowledge sharing, which is essential for value creation.

3.8 Trust and knowledge sharing

This study explored the nature of trust as facilitator of value creation among UK HE marketing professionals, university academics involved in student recruitment and undergraduates. It is to this that we now turn.

3.8.1 What is trust?

Trust is a vital element of human life, which shapes how we interact with one another, relationships corporation and functioning of the institutions. Trust can be defined as *faith in the moral integrity or goodwill of others produced through interpersonal interaction that leads to …bonds of sentiment, norms and friendships* (Ring and Van de Ven 1994 p93). From the perspective of the giver of trust, it can be seen as the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on those words, actions and decisions of another (Hagenauer et al., 2023; McAllister 1995). The first definition discusses the production of faith between actors through interaction, its role noted above in developing relationships and enhancing value propositions. The second definition focuses on volunteering to share and willingness to accept what is being shared.

Trust is more than mere confidence or reliance on just anything. It is about relying on another's goodwill. Unlike relying on machines or processes which involves no moral expectations, trust is about one human being assuming another one will not exploit the vulnerability (Baier 1986). The familiar of trust therefore, experienced just not as disappointment but as betrayal – a moral harm, that undermines the very basis of human connection.

Vulnerability is an essential element of trust. When someone trust another, they place themselves at risk, acknowledging one's dependence on another. This vulnerability makes trust both precarious and valuable (McAllister 1995). Act of trust involves a moral gamble which requires faith in another's character, which can never be fully guaranteed by evidence or reason which leads to the rationality of trust. While some argues that rationality of trust justified by past behaviour or reputation while other argues trust involves a "leap of faith" which is beyond reason alone can support (O'Neill 2002).

This corroborates conceptual approach to trust. Conceptually, trust could be defined as a psychological state involving the willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of another's behaviour (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Conceptually trust is viewed as multi-dimensional, and trust could be summarised in to following four categories.

1) Benevolence based trust - is about the positive intent of an actor- i.e. they do not have intention to harm another even when there is opportunity.

2) Competence based trust is about capabilities and knowledge in a particular knowledge/ activity domain.

3) Cognition-based trust - This refers to the rational decision to give or withhold trust. This type of trust is based on solid and concrete connections that remove uncertainty from the relationship (Ziegler and Golbeck 2007).

4) Affect-based trust: This form is emotional. This type of trust evolves over a period into deep workplace relationships with others. Both parties share an emotional investment in each other's wellbeing.

While benevolence and competency-based trust should co-exist, the knowledge source should be both benevolent and competent to establish trust (Ziegler and Golbeck 2007). Like competence-based trust, cognitive-based trust is about an employee’s rational ability. It is a deliberate decision to trust another based on the long-term performance of that employee because their capability has been proven before (Ziegler and Golbeck 2007). Affect based trust produces emotional attachment between people.

Using Levin et al., (2002) to classify ways in which trust works; Table 3-3 provides a summary. There are four variables affecting trust, demographics, organisational similarity, social capital of the participants and knowledge source behaviour. Although Levin et al (2002) argues that a proper hierarchy positively affects the establishment of trust between parties, this may not be true in many contexts (Wang et al., 2014). Employees might perceive it as a relationship of formal channels and that could be counterproductive in developing trust.

Factor	Example	Explanation
Demographics	Age, Gender, religious background	Similar demographic variables can facilitate shared beliefs and platforms for communication. This can facilitate relationship development, which over time can produce trust.
Organisation similarity	Similar job functions Close proximity Working on the same project	Organisational design reflected through formal structures can build trust among those employees. At the same time, wider formal structures may work as a barrier too as it can illustrate power and authority.
Social capital	Strong relationship between knowledge seeker and sharer. Shared beliefs, shared goals/ vision in the given time.	Those who share similar capitals may trust each other better.
Knowledge source behaviour	Knowledge sharers availability, discretion, receptivity	This refers to individual behaviour

Table 3-2 Factors affecting trust within the organisation (*Levin at al., 2002)*

Social capital emphasises the importance of networks and group membership. It also includes trust, obligations and flow of information (Putnam 2000). In Putnam's (2000) study of trust, he discusses reciprocity and trustworthiness among members with similar identities, shared understanding and existing trust (Levin et al., 2002), without which the group ceases to function.

Therefore, trust is essential to reduce uncertainty (Luhmann 1979). Human interactions are interactions are inherently involving risks. Trust functions as a social lubricant, allowing cooperation and to function smoothly.

Trust has many effects on an organisation, especially for sharing knowledge and ideas. It is difficult to embed rigid policies for employees to share their knowledge. At the same, to establish trust, it is important to have good communication among involved parties. Some argue knowledge sharing itself is communication (Rumanti et al., 2017). Creating common understanding among employees about the organisation's goals is one such important way to establish trust among staff. It not only supports people to work towards common goals, it reduces the amount of time and energy spent on individual issues and motivations. By providing employees a common platform to demonstrate trust-building behaviours such as receptivity and discretion, trust is enhanced. Therefore, communication among parties plays a vital role, at the heart of which is knowledge sharing, both tacit and explicit which I will discuss in the coming sections.

3.9 Relationship

As noted before, interactions and immediately above, trust can lead to the development of relationships (Ravald and Grönroos 1996). Such relationships are important to knowledge sharing and value creation. Relationships can be identified as an ongoing interaction between the organisation and different actors in its microenvironment (Ravald and Grönroos 1996). In services marketing, the endpoint of relationships is to create long-term customer loyalty (Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota 2010; Vivek et al., 2012). Long-term relationships with customers give them safety, credibility, security etc. That circle reinforces trust between consumers and the organisation (Grönroos 1994).

In a meta-analysis of trust, Geyskens et al., (1998, p. 225) summarised trust as *the extent to which a firm believes that its exchange partner is honest and/or benevolent* (also Moorman et al., 1992), in other words based on a relationship. For example, by gifting and providing discounts, companies can build relationships (Marchand et al., 2017). This study has already set out the connection of relationships to services, to marketing and to value creation, supported by trust. The empirical stage explores this.

3.10 Communications

Reference is made to trust, interactions and relationships above, but those will not take place without communication among the parties involved in exchanging value. This section, therefore, introduces communication before it is developed further in the context of Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model in the next chapter. Smith and Taylor (2004) summarises communication as the transfer of information, ideas and meaning across functions and understanding from sender to receiver. It provides the structural support for people to collaborate, make decisions and to achieve organisational goals. Communication provides insights and deeper understanding of the interacting parties, thereby facilitating trust (Popova et al., 2019). As observed above, trust works as the facilitator to share knowledge and information which influences the success of a relationships between university and potential student.

In this study, communication is defined as *the human act of transferring a message to others and making it understood in a meaningful way* (Houman Anderson 2001, p168). This definition focuses on the efficacy of communication in producing the desired effect rather than on the frequency or modality of information exchange. Communication is a theme which has been widely researched as it plays a vital role in the process of creating the value in use (Ballantyne and Vary 2006). Communication sets up a platform to inform potential students regarding the university offer and supports dialogue between the two.

Earlier research gave more attention to traditional one-way marketing communication and information sources. For example, Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008) discuss the importance of direct sources from the institution, media sources (print, electronic and outdoor) and social sources (from individuals with whom the learner may interact). Later research such as Constantinides and Stagno (2013); Domański and Sędkowski (2014); Robinson and Dobele, (2020); Simões and Soares (2010) identify the university website as the main information source, which is still one-way. Bamberger et al., (2020) Haywood and Scullen (2013); Maresova et al., (2020); Sheilds and Peruta (2019); argue that social media plays a vital role as an information source and as a tool to develop two-way communication. These researchers are primarily focussed on communication between universities and students. There is limited research of communication between recruitment functions and academics within universities (Hanzaee and Taghipourian 2012). Further, information sources are regularly changing with new technology. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to explore the nature and impact on communications, how that links to value propositions, a focus of this research.

3.11 Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing in HE happens in many ways such as teaching, research, formal and informal engagements including temporary consultancy with external organisations (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). However, to understand what potential students' needs and wants are, universities also must gain knowledge from potential students. Similarly, to determine the value proposition (what the university is offering to potential students) it is necessary to share knowledge between departments (Dee and Leisyte 2017). Later in this study, in chapter 6 – the theoretical framework, I have discussed in detail how knowledge sharing supports value creation using Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model.

In this research, I examine two university departments; firstly, academics who are the forefront of delivery, engaging with students extensively through teaching and research. Therefore, they have tacit and explicit knowledge of students' needs and wants, the outcomes they want to achieve. On the other hand, the second group, university marketing departments develop and communicate the offer of the specific university to their potential students. They interact with students early in advance; therefore, they have deep understanding of potential students and their needs too. Both groups possess specialist disciplinary and competitor understanding that shape the offer a university sets out to potential students. This research investigates to what extent these two departments share their knowledge and how that contributes to creating value for potential students.

The above section sets knowledge sharing and trust in the context of value creation. I briefly touched on the role of communications for knowledge sharing and trust building and how this study will address these issues. I will now show how this is captured in a value proposition.

3.11.1 Value proposition

So, far this review has shown the development of value in marketing, in services, in HE and in value creation. Reference is made to the ways of capturing those and university choice factors into an offer for potential undergraduates. This is the focus of this closing section of the chapter.

At the initiation stage for potential students – deciding which university to apply/ offer to take up – it helps to understand the value proposition concept. In simple terms, value proposition is a package of benefits or solutions that makes an organisation attractive over others (Kotler 2000). Aligned with the subjective theory of value, organisational value propositions should be different to different groups of consumers (Kotler 2020). As per discussions in the previous sections, value does not transmit from the organisation to consumers but is created by interacting with one another, through communications built on knowledge exchange and trust, potentially deepening into relationships. Payne et al., (2017) argue:

> A customer value proposition (CVP) is a strategic tool facilitating communication of an organization's ability to share resources and offer a superior value package to targeted customers. (p.472)

Payne et al., (2017) go on to identify four main characteristics of a value proposition. First, it also should have the ability to differentiate itself from competitors. Secondly, it should consider how value gets distributed across consumer relationships, i.e. before, during or after consumption. For example, watching a movie in a cinema, much of the value will be created during consumption but for a computer game or an education, value will increase by engaging iteratively. Third, pertinent resource sharing as it allows deeper engagement with the consumer, resulting in value creation between both parties. Finally, the firm should determine which value proposition characteristic to emphasise.

Building on these foundational characteristics, Payne et al., (2020) outline a process-oriented view of how firms can design and deliver their value propositions effectively. The focus of the VP depicts the business from the customer's perspective, rather than as a series of internally oriented functions, and consists of three steps: (1) *choose the value*, (2) *provide the value*, and (3) *communicate the value*. Choosing the VP includes understanding customer needs and assessing how well meet those needs with clear differentiated benefits, relative to price, with comparison to comparison to competitors (Payne et al., 2020). Providing the VP is about creating superior value for the consumer and communicating the VP includes key marketing activities needed to inform the customer the superior value with comparison to the competitors,

Value Proposition Canvas created by Osterwalder et al., (2015) allow businesses to design, test and visualise the product of service offer for consumer structured way. There are two sides to VPC, the customer profile and value map. Following diagram illustrates both sides of the VPC.

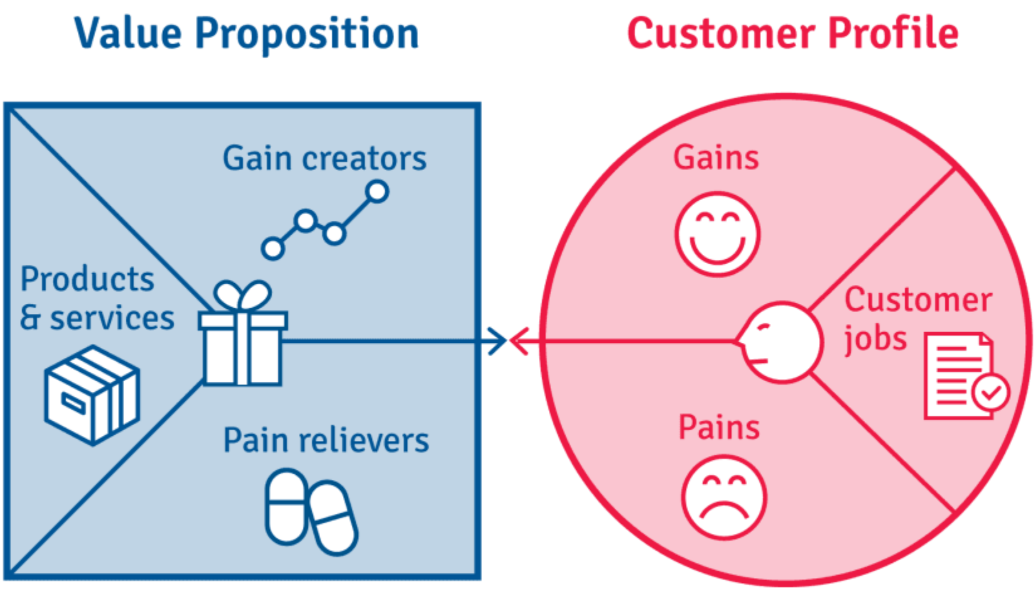

Figure 3.2 Value Proposition Canvas Source Miro (2025)

While the circle represents the customer profile, the square represents the value map or proposition. There are three elements in customer profile;

1) **Jobs –** the things your customers are trying to get done by using a product or service. Jobs could be different according to the context (Osterwalder et al., 2014) – three types of jobs, emotional, functional and social.
   Based on the university choice literature such as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) , emotional jobs could be identified as jobs around career aspirations (feel confident about career opportunities and positive feel about future aspirations), application process (feel supported and guided through the university application process, reduce stress and uncertainty about university acceptance), financial jobs (reassurance about affordability and long-term value of a degree).

Functional jobs are more practical steps a consumer should take to be successful in the process (Osterwalder et al., 2014). This includes decision making such as shortlisting and choosing which university to attend by gaining knowledge from university open days, application taster days, school visits, university websites, league tables and any other information sources. This is followed by submitting the application on time through UCAS, applying for funding and final acceptance of the offer from the university.

Social jobs are based on how students want to be seen by the society (Osterwalder et al., 2014). This includes being perceived as a capable, ambitious, mature and independent person, meet expectations of family and peers, a strong academic and professional identity, and these are core parts of being in a university community.

2) **Pains** – Pains identify blockages and problems the customer may encounter while trying to get the job done (Osterwalder et al., 2014). In the UK HE context, these includes, complex application entry requirements, communication breakdown with universities, complex UCAS application processes, understanding university league tables, pressure from families and peers, high tuition fees and student depts concerns.
3) **Gains –** Osterwalder et al., (2014) describe the positive outcomes the customer expects when the job is done. In the HE context, this will be aligned around receiving offers from a suitable university, strong academic and administration once enrolled, well-structured degree programme, access to modern facilities such as IT labs, library etc., opportunities for internships, placements to enhance the employability, graduate success, a sense of belonging and security, meeting family and peer expectations, and belonging to a network with academics and peers.

Value map on the other hand, shows how an organisation can get the customer's job done while reducing pain points and maximising gains for consumers. There are three components in the value map briefly contextualised for this study below.

1) **Product and services** – This represents the offers to consumers to get their jobs done (Osterwalder et al., 2014). In HE, products and services are simply the degree programmes they offer and the services supporting its delivery. This could be undergraduate, masters or PhDs with options to study full time, part time, online or face to face.
2) **Pain relievers –** How the business' products or services can minimise or reduce the mentioned pains based on the customer profile (Osterwalder et al., 2014). In HE application process guides, clear deadlines, one to one communication, transparent tuition and accommodation costs, opportunities for work placements, internships and flexibility for a sandwich year, strong employer partnerships and embedding employability skills into degree programmes can be seen as pain relivers.
3) **Gain creators** – This is where the business highlights how to create the gains based on the customer profile (Osterwalder et al., 2014). To create gains it is important to understand what customers are seeking and then create accordingly. In HE, gain creators should be around creating a well-qualified academic team, have modern facilities, strong connection with industry and a strong career support team, creating placement opportunities for students through live projects and clients, well supported pastoral care system, and provide opportunities to connect with alumni.

By looking at both Payne et at (2017;2020) and Osterwalder et al's., (2015) Value Canvas it reinforces the role of marketing in understanding customers' needs and wants (pain points) and findings ways to change those pain points to gain points by delivering products and services.

In HE, value proposition is based on the difference between expected benefits against the investment to take the programme, in comparison to other courses (Dranove and Marciano 2005). This resonates with some of the characteristics of Payne et al.'s, (2017) definition. The expected benefits are aligned with university choice factors such as teaching quality, university rankings, safety on campus, facilities etc. and are considered as elements of the value proposition (Pawar 2020). However, it is important to note that students' expected benefits are not choice factors. They are the outcomes of completing a programme such as securing better employment, becoming highly skilled and confident. Choice factors help students to make the decision of which course/ university to attend. They also assist students to achieve expected benefits. Therefore, it is common among universities to use choice factors in their value proposition, allowing differentiation across a range. The nature of the relationships between and among HE marketers, academics and potential undergraduates as they engage with a university's value proposition is at the core of this study.

3.12 Summary of the chapter

In this chapter, I have examined marketing and its role in value creation. Classical conceptions of marketing set value creation as a fundamental principle. Value creation evolves through interaction between consumers and companies, and different functions within the organization.

Such interaction leads to three important value creating activities – knowledge sharing, relationship building and communication. While knowledge can take many forms, in the context of this study, I looked at tacit knowledge and explicit forms. Sharing both forms of knowledge is important for creating value, but it only happens if and when actors trust each other. Trust plays a vital role, and without trust, knowledge sharing will not happen, nor will relationships develop.

Communication is also a facilitator in establishing trust among parties. It helps members to understand each other. This chapter noted that there are different forms of communication. Passing information is one-way communication; while passing information and dialogue including feedback is categorised as two-way communication. Even further, dialogue between parties promotes the creation of long-term relationships. Those long-term relationships are key to establish trust.

All three strands, i.e. knowledge sharing, communication and relationships are interconnected. These three strands are also connected with successful interaction. As I have examined through the AMA (2007) definition of marketing, these three strands are necessary for creating value. These can be examined through the value proposition, since it is the tool that organisations use to articulate value, including differentiation from competitors.

Chapter 4: Theoretical framework: Value Creation Model for HE

4.1 Introduction

Chapters 2 to 4 take a progressively narrower review of the HE context within which this research has been conducted. This then moved into the literature on marketing in HE and students as consumers, observing prior contributions and potential gaps for this study. The last chapter, then took this deeper, delving into the role of value in marketing, the elements that underpin value creation. This chapter brings together the extant HE marketing literature, the gaps in current studies of value propositions in HE and the services marketing value framework that is employed in the research.

In line with subjective value, Ballantyne and Varey (2006) have established within the non-HE services sector, which is outlined in more detailed below. In the previous chapters, I discussed how universities operate like a market (or quasi-market) and therefore, through value propositions they differentiate themselves from other universities. These are characteristics of organisations operating in traditional markets. Therefore, the question arises if and to what extent such models which are applicable to service organisations are relevant to HE too, itself an ancient part of the services sector. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) discuss value creation activities for service organisations (insurance, healthcare, telecommunications etc.), those who provide “intangible” solutions, often transitioning from monopolies or government services, to open, neoliberal conceptions of markets today.

I have used Ballantyne and Varey’s (2006) model to investigate if and how it is possible to create value for potential students at the point when they are applying for a university. In their value creation model, there are three different value creation activities – knowledge sharing, relationships and communication, the basic concepts which were introduced in the last section of the previous chapter.

4.2 Creating value through three different value creation activities.

Based on the argument that there are distinctions between services marketing and goods marketing, since the late 1970s a growing body of work on the former has evolved. In their seminal work, Vargo and Lush (2004) bring much of that (re)evolution to a head as they introduced their own proposal for a service-dominant (SD) logic while challenging the usefulness of the original idea of services based on comparison to goods – i.e. service characteristics such as intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, and perishability (Fisk and Allen 1993). They posit that SD logic is primary because every marketing action, whether a physical product or an intangible service, at the intersection is a shared provision of services. For example, after buying a physical appliance, by using it consumers can use multiple services – parts warranty, helplines, referral schemes etc. It is important to note this was not new thinking since Gronroos (2014), and the earlier work of Kotler (2000) discussed this in their conceptions of service marketing.

However, Vargo and Lush (2006) extended their argument by positioning relationship and interaction with consumers at the heart of marketing and value creation. With that theoretical leap, the customer is the arbitrator of what value was delivered through their experience. This contradicted the established argument at the time, that organisations create value and deliver to consumers. With this SD logic, value was no longer seen as delivered but co-created between company and consumer (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Grönroos, 2008). Therefore, customers are creating value through consumption while companies facilitate this co-creation (Gronroos 2013). Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue that although SD logic discusses the importance of value co-creation, they did not pay too much attention to interactions. As established in the last chapter, interactions are necessary to create value.

Ballantyne and Varey (2006) in their value creation model, by setting out the three value creating activities extended Vargo and Lush's (2004) value creation concepts by highlighting marketing exchange as a major overarching idea that is reflected in interactions (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). According to Ballantyne and Varey (2006, p. 336), *put another way, to reveal the controversial aspect of this agenda, the time logic of marketing exchange becomes open-ended, from pre-sale service interaction to post-sale value-in-use, with the prospect of continuing further, as relationships evolve*. Their work is now established as providing deeper understanding of the potential to create value through interaction – between customers, suppliers and any other market actors. As summarised at the end of the last chapter, this dialogic exchange is possible through three linked enablers – which are knowing, communicative interaction and relationship development, which I will assess in detail below.

Before that it is necessary to explore the shortcomings of the model. The main charge against this model is that it is missing the human experience element or put another way, acknowledging that having conscious agency is part of our experiences (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2016; 2018). Without recognising those experiences, it does not capture the full range as brand/university and consumer/ student jointly create value. They argue that human beings are not just operant resources. There is some validity to this. In the previous chapter, I have discussed, through interaction both company and consumer can create value together. Therefore, companies do have impact on consumer value creation, for example, upgrading to first class on an airline is reliant on the company agreeing. However, at the same time, consumers can be rational. They are not completely controlled by companies or universities, and they can choose what they would like to purchase or at which university to study. In practice, as noted in the previous chapter, marketers have different value propositions for distinct consumer groups. Therefore, they have the freedom to select what is suitable for them. Or what they think is of greater value to them.

From the above arguments, for consumers to co-create value, they should consume the product or service. However, this does not happen when an undergraduate student is applying for a course. They are considering university choice factors as they begin to interact with universities to understand what value the institution can offer.

As per the above section where I have discussed services and value, it became clear that in markets such as HE (where there are characteristics of a market and students have some traits of consumers), consuming a service does not begin only when a student enrols for a course. Students gain an experience about being a student at a specific university by attending open days, taster days and during school visits, or interacting with a university in a range of ways (TikTok, reviews, YouTube, speaking with alumni, etc.). It may not be as rich an experience as a first year UG student but nevertheless it is an experience. Especially taster days, for example, provide an opportunity for potential students to experience what it is to be a student here. Although financial transactions are yet to happen, as noted in the previous chapter, regardless of whether a consumer buys a service or not, service consumption still happens. In other words, potential students are consuming the service offered by the university, a mini version, a shop window. Through these interactions if a potential student gains insight, have a clearer understanding of choices, they will be in a better position to make decisions but, then they can influence value. These interactions provide the opportunity for universities to understand what students are looking for, objections, enhancements to be made and that interaction with potential students becomes a cycle in which to demonstrate their value proposition. Therefore, they both are co-creating the value proposition. Hence, Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model is highly applicable for the scenario I am investigating.

In addition to its seminal place in the services marketing research, this model has been validated in different ways. González-Mansilla et al., (2019) investigated how value can be cocreated by hotel customers using this model. Their finding shows dialogue, transparency and access (which leads to creating a relationship) are important for co-creation of value. Similarly, Ehret and Wirtz (2017) researched organisational use of machines to enhance value, using Ballantyne and Varey (2006) to illustrate value in use. However, applications to HE are as yet untested.

I will now discuss and evaluate the underpinnings of the model.

4.3 Communicative interaction

Marketing communication is the most visible feature of marketing practice, providing information about organisational offers (advertising, product demos, fairs etc.). Although there are many forms of marketing communications, most of them could be categorised into three different processes i.e., informational, communicational and dialogue (Ballantyne and Varey 2006).

The intention of informational communication is to transmit facts. This could be about products/services or news about the organisation itself. No interaction with stakeholders is necessarily intended because it focuses on passing information, persuasive messages. The seller has dominant power and the consumer voice is mostly absent (Vargo and Lush 2004). Organisations with informational dominance will have heavy investment in customer relationship management systems to capture and store details about their buying patterns etc. (Ballantyne and Varey 2006).

On the contrary, communicational mode is based on two-way interaction with consumers and stakeholders. Listening, gaining feedback are valued here. Making and keeping promises in this form are the key sources of value (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). Collecting feedback after the service, monitoring consumer forums and responding to consumer reviews (both positive and negative) are common and this is then used for interaction (Steyn et al., 2019).

A generic definition of dialogue is having a discussion between and among people. However, it could also be identified through interaction and patterns of collective learning (Varey 2002a). As observed under knowing or knowledge sharing, learning together through dialogue depends on trust among the parties (Varey and Ballantyne, 2005). Without being trustworthy, dialogue will come to an end (Poloski et al., 2021). Once there is dialogue and learning together is established, it is an essential basis for innovation and creativity within firms (Ellinor and Girard 2023).

Mainstream production or service-oriented marketing adopts informational and communicational modes. Unlike these two, dialogue provides the opportunity to reveal something new and learning together provides a platform for relationship development (Hsieh and Hsieh 2015; Jiang et al., 2022). It also allows participants to disagree on knowledge positions as evidenced in Dell's open forum where laptop users can give free consultancy and the company interacts with those customers letting them know which has been acted on, which not and why. Further, dialogue does not necessarily need to be face to face; it could be non-verbal, or on a digital platform (Ozuna and Steinhoff 2024; Raghubansie et al., 2015). From above, dialogue is inherently relational, open ended, creative, collective and value creating.

University websites, social media platforms, newsletters, digital prospectuses are some communication tools that HE employ. They are mainly used for transmitting information to potential students (Rao and Hosein 2017). Digital newsletters are mass emails; intranets are other forms of university communication tools used for communication between university departments. This study investigates forms of communication within universities for value creation as they seek to convince potential undergraduates to join them.

4.4 Relationship development

We have seen how knowing can support or hinder value creation. Likewise, the nature of communicative interaction supports knowing and potential dialogue with customer or potential students. The forms support or slow value creation. This research investigates both. We turn now to the third side of the triangle of Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) value creation model.

Marketing has developed from being one-way to two-way transactions. From the earlier chapters, it was also well established that marketing consists of interaction within networks of relationships (Gummesson 1998). It could also be viewed as an open-ended process where interaction with customers happens as a part of an exchange process. As outlined under knowing and communicative interaction, these foundations support the model.

From our day-to-day experience, once there is an interaction between two or more parties, there could be a relationship. It could be long term or short term (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). By interacting overtime, the quality of the relationship will emerge. Managing a high-quality relationship is important because once the relationship is beneficial to all parties, it supports value creating activities (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). Long-term relationships with potential customers allow both company and customers to create value for each other (Johnaesova and Vanova 2020). Another factor which facilitates a long-term relationship is the emotional attachment to a product/ a service or a brand, a sense of belonging that motivates them to maintain or augment such long-term relationships (Drezner and Pizmony-Levy 2021).

The main type of relationship existing within HE is the relationship between students and the university. Within the university, there are other relationships but mainly between functional departments. This study investigates if both types of relationships create value for students and if they do, then what influence that has on its value creation of the value proposition.

4.5 Knowing

Knowing or having a knowledge, competency or accumulated work experience in a specific area is an important human skill for survival (Vargo and Lusch 2004a). Knowledge is acquired through lived experience and active learning. The two dominant forms of knowledge are tacit and explicit (Nonaka et al., 1996). Tacit knowledge is know-how or built-in knowledge gained through long term exposure to work, by observation, imitation, and mutual experience (Haldin-Herrgard 2000; McAdam et al., 2007). This knowledge operates at more unconscious level and in many organisations, there is a lack of recognition of its importance. Unlike tacit, explicit knowledge is gained through training, careful monitoring and controlled mechanisms such as exams. Because of this nature, explicit knowledge could be transferred easily from one to another. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue while both forms create value, the first is applied directly in creating value. The second is a store of knowledge that can be usefully accessed in creating value.

Many organisations make significant investment to capture, store and transfer explicit knowledge through data warehousing, customer relationship management systems (Kelly 2015). However, tacit knowledge had been ignored. This is despite the fact, it derives from working and learning together as employees, across functions to achieve organisational goals such as cost efficiencies, improving customer satisfaction and ultimately improved customer value.

Vargo and Lusch (2004) argue that knowledge is the fundamental instrument for competitive advantage. However, both forms of knowledge are subject to expiry; tacit knowledge expires faster than explicit knowledge. This is because it is unrecorded and changes in the external environment impact on tacit more than explicit knowledge. Without a clear mechanism to capture this form of knowledge, HEIs could lose knowledge forever (Pavlicek 2009).

To share and circulate tacit knowledge there are two important factors that need to be considered – willingness of people who hold it (customers, suppliers or employees), and trust of the motives for sharing knowledge between the parties. To be successful, organisations should nourish both. The quality of the relationship between employees and managers nurture the trust between them and play a vital role in knowledge renewal and circulation. It is also important to note that knowledge sharing itself is a form of communication (Gumus 2007). Therefore, a strategy such as relationship-oriented internal communications may be used to activate knowledge sharing. This could allow for trust development between employees and departments to achieve competitive advantage. An effective knowledge renewal strategy necessitates open interaction and dialogue between suppliers and customers, thereby facilitating constant re-examination of what is being delivered, what is not and what they have taken for granted.

There are many actors involved in HE for student recruitment such marketing professionals, event staff, cleaners, academics, etc. They all are knowledge sources in their own ways. I am examining three main actors, students, academics and marketing professional and the existence of both knowledge types i.e. tacit and explicit knowledge and how that knowledge has been shared within the organisation.

As per Ballantyne and Varey (2006), there are three ways to share and exchange knowledge; hierarchical exchange, inter-functional exchange and network exchange.

A. **Hierarchical exchange** – Knowledge exchange happens through formal channels top to bottom, primarily. Although upward movement of knowledge sharing occurs, they are subject to regulations and constraints.
b. **Inter-functional exchange** – Knowledge is exchanged between internal customers (or suppliers and customers) within the departments along the value chains, end to end. These knowledge exchanges are validated by reference to external consumer needs. Therefore, high consciousness of such needs is necessary for the success of these exchanges.
c. **Network exchange** – Unlike the other two patterns, here knowledge is generated and shared within a network of participants who are enthusiastic and comfortable to share knowledge for a common interest or a goal. Most of this type of knowledge generation and circulation happens spontaneously. They may legitimise their knowledge through hierarchical exchange within the organisation.

Although these three patterns do exist in many organisations, Ballantyne and Varey (2006) found that pattern 1 i.e., hierarchical exchange is dominant. The other two patterns of knowledge sharing become invisible or ignored, though they are more fluid forms of knowledge sharing. Knowing is therefore about uncovering existing insight, encouraging sharing, building trust to facilitate tacit and explicit forms of exchange. This is an ecosystem where interacting parties deliberately or spontaneously transmit past, present and potential aspects of their experience which can enhance the value they are co-creating.

4.6 Value creation

For the development and communication of a solution for a student's need, or value creation, all three elements set out in the model are necessary. While relationship build a future, through activities communication provides necessary interaction and the foundation for learning together. Knowledge sharing allows insights, tacit and explicit to flow. That then means network exchanges open the opportunity to further develop relationships. Therefore, all three elements are interconnected and rely on each other. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue these three elements are not exclusively based on any single domain (customer or firm) but between customer and firm as productive exchange connections. Using that, I propose the following diagram to summarise the whole concept of vale creation

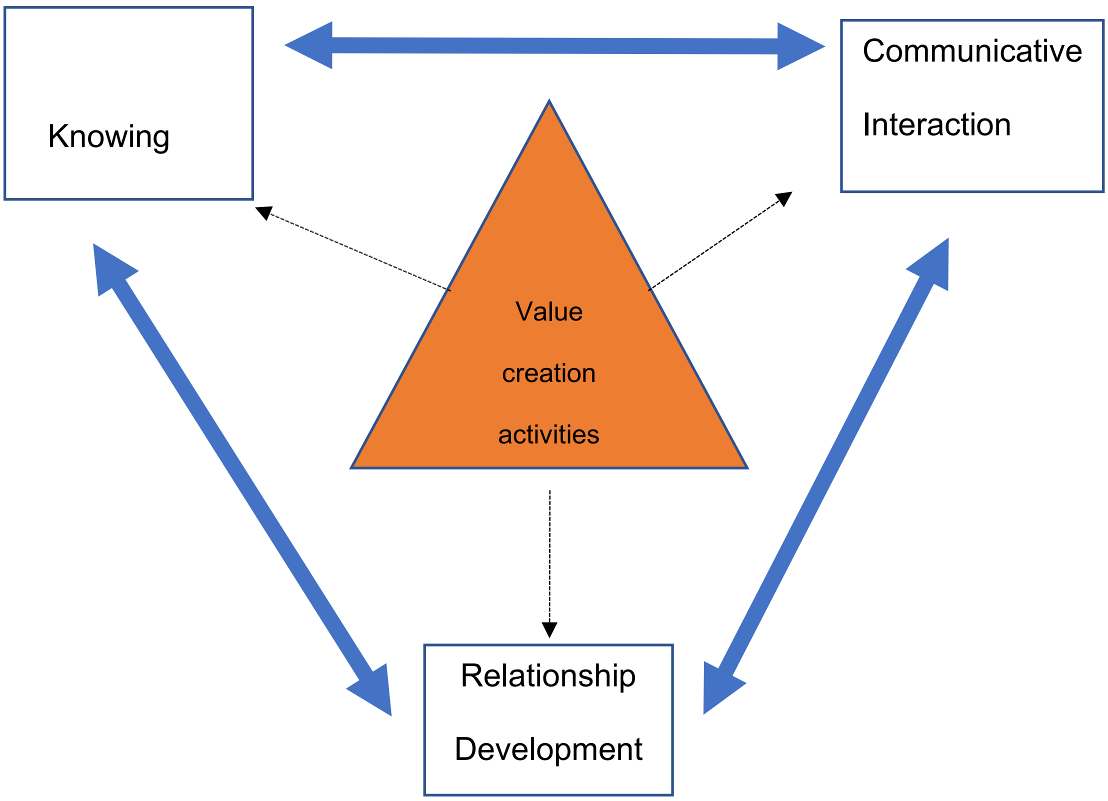

Figure 4.1 Value creation activities   Source – Ballantyne and Varey (2006)

4.7 Summary of the chapter

This chapter closes the literature review, addressing in depth the process of value creation as developed by Ballantyne and Varey (2006), the theoretical model employed in this study.

To ease navigation, it is helpful to summarise the path that has been taken to arrive at this stage of the study. Chapter 2 examined the marketisation process of the UK HE, including the question of how marketized is UK HE. The concept of students as consumers is a logical consequence for review next. These are concluded by reviewing the implications understanding value creation and value propositions at the pre-selection stage between potential students and the key university actors. Chapter 3 then assessed what existing literature says about marketing techniques universities employ because of increased marketisation. To do that it explored factors affecting university choices. It then connected these to the concept of value, introduces the process of value creation and the core role of trust between consumers of a service, providers and the departments designing and making the offer to potential undergraduate students. This final chapter, then summarised the three sides of the triangle of value creation – knowing, communicative interaction and relationships, connecting to the gaps in the literature outlined in chapters 2 and 3. It sets up the rationale for pursuing the research questions, the key participants and their roles.

Chapter 5: Methodology: Exploratory Research among HE Marketers, Academics and Students

5.1 Introduction

Having reviewed the marketisation context, its impact on UK HE academics and HE marketers as they make their offer to potential students, the study set out the development of value in marketing and services marketing before setting out the main theoretical framework employed in the study. The conclusions of that review show the role of choice factors and shopping behaviour among both potential undergraduates and competitor universities. It also set out the key role of different actors at the offer stage before students decide where to study. In particular, the roles of academic and marketing departments as they design, offer and produce a value proposition to and with students. This chapter takes that further to set out the research questions arising, the possible philosophical approaches, methods available and the choices made for this research. The research objectives are set out and the use of semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool is justified.

It rationalises the use of convenience sampling technique and thematic analysis. The sample was selected from different universities, from new universities (former polytechnics to ancient foundations). Altogether there were 12 universities. There were 12 marketing professionals, 11 academics, and 10 students were included in the sample.

5.2 Researcher's position and philosophy

My professional and educational life has been in the sphere of HE and the discipline of marketing. Over 7 years I worked in undergraduate student recruitment and since then lecturing marketing and research methods to both home and international students. I have worked in the public and private sector in the UK and overseas. I have witnessed changes in UK HE and student recruitment from multiple perspectives.

With the introduction of full fees in 2012 (Khan and Hemsley-Brown 2024), it was visible how both students and universities became more conscious about the value of a degree. University policy makers started to make more deliberate policies addressing market needs. Student-centred teaching and learning strategies became increasingly central. Students became even more so, the heart of everything. I have been instructed by senior officials on the importance of happy students and treating them as customers, also increasingly mirrored by students.

I have witnessed increasing student participation in university marketing activities such as faculty open days. Further to student participation, more and more parents, guardians and even grandparents of potential students are coming to the university. This made me realise the importance of understanding students and university marketing modes and views on the process of value creation at the pre-study stage. As a marketing professional, I have sound knowledge of creating and delivering value for customers through marketing in the services sector. However, in the HE literature, this field of study remains limited, with some adjacent studies as analysed in the literature review. Hence, I decided to investigate this topic.

In my previous education at UG and Master's level, I have conducted research into related topics in the HE sector– university marketing, British global majority and international students' university choices. These studies sparked my desire to conduct this study and influences the methodology for the current study. I have a sound knowledge in both quantitative and qualitative research methods. However, I did not decide the research methods, but the research questions and extant knowledge shaped the methods. While qualitative analysis provides the context, quantitative provides definitive answers; I was seeking to create an HE conception of value as a decision-making framework from the perspective of both students and policy makers.

As a result, I am aware that I bring my personal journey into this research. I have also worked and lived in three different countries. I believe in marketing, especially where it creates value for people. And I believe value is not something which can be measured only through money. Consistently, it is my view that everyone should have access to education, for their own purposes, institution or self-funded. From my experience as a student who did not pay for my UG degree, I learnt anything free still comes with a cost. I did not have a choice of the programme or the university I wanted to study. Only the top 5% of the student population could get into a university. The range of metrics or performance indicators were not there to rely on.

Many of my friends who passed the A/L exam with top grades could not get into a university because of limited spaces. I see room for state action on quality and a role for public and private institutions. I used to believe UK HE is closer to a full market like the United States (US), and students are consumers like any other industry. Working and living in different countries, in different industries, and especially doing this research changed my view of higher education and students as consumers. Therefore, I was mindful of this while I was analysing the literature.

I have been also mindful on selecting the samples in this research, i.e. not limiting the research to only my colleagues who are involved in student recruitment but across the sector from different grouping of universities, marketing professionals, academics and students. That made access harder, the study more complex, time and pressure increased but it is appropriate to the research objectives. I am conscious of the way both my academic and professional experience and preconceptions may have affected the study, particularly in the qualitative phase i.e. interpretation of themes.

5.3 Research Decisions

The research philosophy adopted for this study includes assumptions of an interpretivist worldview. Practical choices flow from this – research approaches, strategies and methods to satisfy the research. Before evaluating these. I will first define epistemology. This is that aspect of the research where the fundamental ideas are questioned, the core principles used to create understanding (Bryman and Bell 2015; Saunders et al., 2019), a base philosophy. Although there are many philosophies available to researchers, I am going to limit this discussion to positivism and interpretivism as they both have been part of my research journey, with positivist dominance in marketing literature. There are many debates about the meaning and implications of these two approaches.

Positivism is the scientific approach to research where the focus is on generating laws or principles (Saunders et al., 2019; King et al., 2019). The positivist approach assumes there is a reality which affects everyone, and research can "test" it and therefore, generalise the findings to a wider population. Hence, empirical observations dominate positivist research. In contrast, interpretivists believe that there are multiple realities and different people understand these realities in their own context, based on their culture, language, social background etc (Williams 2000). A positivist researcher aims to discover "truth"; hence, the stance is objective to the subject of study. Interpretivist researchers show that people react to being studied; hence, they conclude, it is impossible to gain objective knowledge (Silverman 2016).

As I have been a statistician and a data analyst, I saw the world in numbers, influencing the way I approach this research. Before preparing the research proposal, I started with a positivist philosophy. I was certain that value is one reality, and it affects everyone in the student recruitment in the same way, particularly because the concept had been tested in services marketing. Furthermore, I was accustomed to being objective from the research itself. I was able to look at a list which contained numbers reflecting demographic shifts and let the patterns follow.

However, the previous research and the research questions themselves did not allow adoption of positivist thinking fully. As I conducted background reading, looked at prior research, the need of adopting a different approach was evident – the area of study was underdeveloped; the models had been built and tested in different industries and conventional neoliberal markets. During the research implementation, engaging with other researchers and through peer-review, I also realised that my professional, academic and disciplinary lived experiences could not be separated.

Revisiting the research questions of this study, the main purpose is investigation and interpretation. The literature review shows that there is a gap in understanding the perceptions of these three different stakeholder groups as it relates to understanding value. Therefore, there is a need for deeper probing and exploration (Saunders et al., 2019). In the initial stage of studying a new phenomenon, or in a new context, it is important to understand how participants play different roles in the same sector, interpret the same reality i.e. mapping student needs to produce a value proposition matching those needs, the outcomes of which is the process of creating value for all sides.

In other words, data should be collected on what those terms mean to the people being researched and how they interpret that (Silverman 2016). Consequently, to understand what creating value means to them, how do they interpret the campaign content and how that is enacted in policies, internal collaboration, and set out as an offer in external communication that gives a university competitiveness, data collection techniques based around conversations are more suitable (Saunders 2019). In-depth interviews allow for more participant-centred research, facilitating discussion, multiple responses, questioning, following up and clarification (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015).

5.4 Research Approaches - Abduction in this study

At the start of this chapter, I reflected on my own background and how that impacts my role as researcher. In the philosophy section, I refer to my initial positivist philosophical beliefs. These were added this to the study as an iterative, reflexive aspect as the study became clearer. That took me down a third option between deductive and inductive approaches to research, the abductive, which is discussed further here.

While the deductive approach focus on testing an existing theory; the inductive on developing a theory from particular points and generalisation it (Bryman and Bell 2015). Interestingly, it is very difficult to identify any research as deductive or inductive but that there is a dominance in one approach over another (Bryman and Bell 2015).

Aligning with my own experience, this study is more than induction; here it is abduction. Abduction allows the researcher to identify new insights and produce new discoveries while employing particular frameworks and acknowledging their own lived experiences influencing choices made. With my career as a university lecturer and as a professional marketer who has been engaged in student recruitment, it is difficult to isolate that experience and knowledge.

5.5 Strategies – Why Qualitative research and Data Collection Tools:

As noted above, qualitative methods have a better match to the purpose of this research. Qualitative research is about getting insights into peoples' subjective understandings of the world (Bryman and Bell 2015), which is what this project calls for. There are number of ways of collecting qualitative data.

Observations, focus groups, case studies, interviews are some common tools (Proctor 2005). Semi-structured interviews involve a number of predetermined questions and topics (Samaradivakara et al., 2024). Although the researcher follows a systematic order of asking questions, respondents are expected to provide detailed answers (Bryman and Bell 2015) with room for deviation.

Given that this study has some prior knowledge, within HE and in traditional services marketing, there is a basis to draw some structured jumping off points. Although there is a range of studies using interview techniques in HE marketing, very few interviewed university policy makers (2 in total) and none had interviewed university academics. Many interviewed university students.

5.5.1 Semi-structured, In-depth Interviews.

The in-depth interview is deployed to establish trust between the researcher and the respondent (Corbin and Strauss 2014; Silverman 2016) and provide deep insight into the respondent's perceptions (Stokes and Bergin 2006) consistent with the aim of this study. Further, this research is about understating a phenomenon, a perceptual conception of three stakeholder groups in HE (Cresswell 2013). Compared to case studies here I am not attempting to understand a specific event but to hear the voice of participants as they make decisions and their views in this specific context (Sudarevic et al., 2013). So, in-depth interviews are better suited to those objectives. According to Kvale (1994 p.1), *the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world.* This is the purpose of this research, to understand and then theorise. According to Miller and Glassner (2011, p. 137), an interview is powerful because of *its capacity to access self-reflexivity among interview subjects".* Interviews were able to reveal respondents' experience with devising student recruitment policies, engaging with and experience of living through that process (Samaradivakara et al., 2024).

I could have used techniques such as observation or ethnography i.e. embed into a university marketing department while they develop their recruitment campaign. This might have provided the insights this thesis is examining. However, this research investigates three different populations and therefore the complexity would have been substantial. Also, access to 12 different universities across the HE sector would have been near impossible within the timeframe, alongside the regulatory processes that govern these groups, and potential students who are not yet under the HEI's.

This research, therefore, adopted two different forms of semi-structured interviews, i.e. face to face and remote interviews. These two forms were used as they allowed me to access participants who are geographically spread. Researchers adopt these techniques for wider access, better reach to the sample population, to save time and money (King and Hornberger 2010).

11 interviews in this study were conducted face to face. 10 of the interviews were conducted in the participant's office and one was conducted in a reading area of a coffee shop. Bryman and Bell (2015) note that it is easier to establish rapport with participants as I was physically there. I could observe participants' body language to see if they understand the questions, felt comfortable and I was able to react, to ensure rich data access (Proctor 2017). However, there were challenges as I had to travel all over the UK to get an hour/ hour and a half interview. It also meant added burden on participants to arrange access, meeting spaces and office introductions.

The remaining 11 interviews were remote interviews as it was the best way to connect with the participants based in the UK when I moved base to Asia. Remote interviews in qualitative research have become common. According to King and Hornberger (2010),

> *Perhaps the most obvious advantage of remote interviewing is that it can facilitate the inclusion of participants who are geographically distant from the interviewer, without the need for time consuming and expensive travel or the recruitment of local interviewers (*King and Hornberger 2010 p.80).

It is easier to schedule a telephone interview than a face to face to interview (Brinkmann 2014). Participants' interviews were based in their own home or in a place away from their offices.

5.5.2 Conducting remote interviews – Advantages and Constraints

There were 4 telephone interviews and 7 video conferencing calls in this research. At the point of interaction, the objective of the research has been explained clearly and the time required for the discussion. Almost all telephone interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. Although literature suggests that there is a danger in respondents perceiving a conversational style semi-structured interview as a simple informal chat (King and Hornberger 2010), this did not happen in this study – mitigated by early notice, introductory context setting and using the interview schedule to steer the conversation. This specific group were familiar with research. Of course, there was a lack of face-to-face, non-verbal cues to pace the interview (Berg and Lune 2012), but I was attuned to the respondents' voice and change of the tone which helped me to largely overcome this problem.

In each interview, prior to the formal questions, I had a brief informal chat about topics such as weather and travel which helped to put them at ease and build a rapport (Burke and Miller 2001). It is still challenging to achieve the natural interaction while concentrating on the interview guide and keeping respondents on time and topic (Berg and Lune 2012; Thomas and Harden 2008). It was not only about building rapport but about gaining the trust of the respondent with either face to face or remote interviews (Thomas and Harden 2008). In every interview, I emphasised Lancaster university ethics procedure, especially on anonymity of data to encourage that trust.

Similar to telephone interviews, in a video conference call, building rapport with participants may be hindered, especially dropped calls may be negative (Simeonsdotter Svensson et al., 2014; Weller 2017). Lack of bodily presence makes it difficult for respondents to feel the impact of the interviewer (Longhurst and Johnston 2023). In-person, day to day activities such as making someone tea, office colleagues coming and going, provides a rhythm of life and affective atmosphere for both interviewer and respondent. In a platform such as Zoom, it may be difficult to establish this kind of a rhythm and atmosphere. Contradicting this, there are studies which have concluded that a technology such as video calling, helps to establish a better rapport – due to respondents having the option to choose the location and without interviewer physical presence, participants feel less dominated (Weller 2017). Like telephone interviews, in building rapport, I tested the technology prior to interviews, had contact phone numbers, alternatives to make both parties feel they have choice and that this is an authentic activity worthy of their time (Simeonsdotter Svensson et al., 2014).

Most remote interviews went as planned and were productive. Out of 7 interviews which were conducted by video conferencing, only one interview was interrupted by technology failure. That was arranged for a later date and conducted face to face to compensate. Like the telephone interviews, before the formal discussion, chatting about the weather and setting was encouraged. Prior to a meeting, the chat feature was used beforehand as a reminder, for a hello and as a reminder to join the link. Additionally, prompting and gesturing was used to keep the conversation going.

5.5.3 Interviews and interview guide

The emphasis was given to semi-structured open questions, some pre-prepared. This included topics drawn from the literature around creating value, marketing policies and student choices. Two sets of semi-structured interview guides were developed i.e. for marketing professionals, academics and a separate one for students. The 3 core ideas under Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model were used to create the interview guide as it forms the foundation of this study. Most of the questions were focused on three value creation activities, i.e. relationships, communications and knowledge sharing. Participants from the two professional groups discussed the university recruitment policies on understanding student needs, the design of a matching value proposition and how that came together to create value for both parties, their own perceptions and experiences. While, for students they were encouraged to talk about their experience of engaging with and their perceptions of university marketing policies based on the needs they are seeking to satisfy the factors from the extant literature on university choice inspired by Binsardi and Ekwulogu (2003); Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown(2014); Ivy (2008); and Ivy and Naude (2004).

5.5.4 Conducting interviews

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Three pilot interviews were conducted i.e. one retired academic, a former marketing professional who is working in a different field and an undergraduate student who has left the university. They had similar characteristics to the participants of this study which is essential for piloting or pre-testing (Bryman and Bell 2015). Piloting helped to see how respondents interpreted the questions, ensured the links to the prior research were appropriate or revised and to sense check the elements of the value model were able to translate to the context of HE. Using Hennick et al., (2011) as a guide the following technical issues were assessed through pilot interviews.

- How quickly respondents were able to understand the questions
- If there are any questions that needed to be adapted and rephrased
- Logical flow of the questions
- Ability to answer the research questions from the information gathered using the interview schedule
- Whether the interview guide is too long or short

Although there were some similar questions asked from all three groups, I had to rephrase a few questions for academics and for the students as these two groups were unfamiliar with the vocabulary of some questions. Further, some questions in the professional interview schedule were directly linked with strategies and creating value which would have been difficult for a first-year undergraduate student to answer. Those questions were replaced.

There were some probing questions, and these were used when I needed more information or clarifications. Almost all participants were able to provide detailed answers. However, in some cases there were spontaneous questions asked in response to issues raised by the respondent which was advised by researchers such as Bryman and Bell (2015). It was important to react to interviewee's answers in exploratory studies such as this in order to access the participants' experience.

5.5.5 Being a researcher – Managing myself

In-depth interviews can produce a tendency to become a dialogue which might not generate the information to answer the research questions (Bryman and Bell 2015). Therefore, being friendly and open while being professional and non-threatening was required (Bryman and Bell 2015). In my previous studies, I have interviewed respondents from ministerial level to radical university students and so have found that balance to allow participants to express their perspectives and meaningful stories.

I was careful of the time as most respondents had a very busy schedule although I wanted to get comprehensive answers for my questions. Most interviews lasted about 45 minutes apart from two interviews which were about hour and a half. At the beginning of the interview, they both assured me that they are happy to be more detailed and have nothing scheduled in their work calendars afterwards. I did not want to over-extend either but took time.

5.6 Selecting appropriate universities

This was something I had to clear at the beginning. Initially I was planning to limit my research to four universities, I soon realised I could not justify my selection as there are many universities spread all over the UK hence I explored number of ways to identify appropriate universities for my study.

By looking at the development of UK HE, there are major historical moments from the Robbins Review to the Dearing Report. Often these are linked to a point in time when a policy change was made to marketise HE (Boliver 2015). This is commonly employed in research and policy work in UK HE (Boliver 2015). In simple terms, there are two main categories, traditional and new (Ackroyd and Ackroyd 1999). The traditional universities consist of collegial structures, where academic freedom is highly regarded and academia is the primary focus (Ackroyd and Ackroyd 1999; Dearlove 2002).

The traditional universities are consolidated into 3 groupings:

5.6.1 Ancient universities

Two oldest universities, Oxford established in 1096 and Cambridge in 1209 (Tight 1996).

In the 1400s, three other universities were founded - St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen. In the 1500s, they were joined by Edinburgh.

5.6.2 Redbrick universities

These universities were founded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflecting industrial roots in the collective noun that they have come to be known as (Boliver 2015). Universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield, Exeter, Newcastle, Southampton and Leicester, Manchester, Liverpool, Durham, Leeds, Leicester, and Nottingham, with the University of London and its colleges, all falling under this grouping (Boliver 2015).

5.6.3 The Plate-glass university

These universities were founded in the mid twentieth century following the Robbin's Report. Universities of Aston, Keele, Lancaster, Bradford, Bath, and Warwick are some universities in this category (Beloff 1970).

5.6.4 New Universities:

Contrasting to traditional universities, new universities are founded after 1992 when many Polytechnics were granted degree awarding powers (Deem et al., 2007). Most of them are teaching oriented with few specialist, research focus universities. There are even later universities, modern institutions like Worcester and Newman, for example. In this study, I have focused on the former Polytechnics for consistency.

I have therefore, used the historical origins to navigate the complexity of varying approaches. This approach has been consistent and a validated sampling technique (see Bridges 2021). As a result, I used 12 universities across the sector groupings for this research.

5.7 Sampling framework to recruit and target participants.

As outlined above a deliberate, known approach was taken to identify the same population among UK universities. Purposive sampling was then applied to recruit participant institutions. It is a technique which uses specific qualities and experience to select or target potential participants for the study (Etikan et al 2016). Inclusion and exclusion in the sample is determined by the researcher's theoretical understanding of the topic being studied, alignment to the research objectives, appropriateness of the respective participating staff member (Robinson 2016).

Prior to identifying the final sample, several universities for the study were considered. Given the exploratory nature of this study, difficulty to access, I decided that two out of six of ancient universities would support the study in testing and building the theory. Similar to this out of 11 Redbrick universities, I interviewed 3. Likewise, 3 out of the 7 Plate-glass universities and 3 new universities, though there are over 50 universities in the latter category. Although it could be argued that 3 new universities may not have been sufficient, it was difficult to include more universities in this sample due to time constraint, limited word count of the thesis and more importantly, that the sample is able to meet the research aims and objectives, a cross-sectional exploratory study. The table below summarise the universities in the study.

Category of the university	Number of universities I have used for this study
Ancient universities	2
Redbrick university	3
A university belong to the University of London	1
Plate-glass university	3
New Universities	3

Table 5-1 Universities participating in this study

To delineate the individuals to be interviewed for this study, I identified the profile of marketing professionals and their influence in making university wide marketing policies, developing and setting out the value proposition and academics who have deep knowledge of their disciplines, who spend more time with students in the learning journey as well as having a role in student recruitment for first year students.

University marketing professionals are highly influential in policy making and deciding university strategies. Those in this study lead their function and sit on senior leadership groups influencing the university's present and future direction. This specific group are experts in HE marketing who can draw upon their professional experience and knowledge and define characteristics that underpin this phenomenon (Tremblay 1982). They are therefore, well positioned to comment on how they communicate with their academic teams internally, how and why they develop and set out their offer to potential students, familiar with points of interaction with students. In other words, they ultimately sign off the university value proposition - are at the heart of understanding student needs, course mapping to those needs, can decide the choice factors that can be put into messaging which may convince a potential undergraduate that their needs will be met in coming to this particular HEI; that they will receive the value they seek (Flick 2006). Their role gives them tacit and explicit knowledge and interaction; their activities may or may not develop trust to facilitate knowledge sharing, that ultimately, produce value for the institution and the potential student.

Senior university marketers are intimately involved in the formation of marketing communications related to student recruitment, have access to inhouse research and relevant institutional and sector data. They routinely interact with administrative managers responsible for student support and with academics on how to create and demonstrate that potential students will achieve their needs by coming to this university, i.e. whether they will receive the value they seek, whether this institution has the desire, evidence and processes that support co-creation of that value. It was therefore important to capture their perceptions on value creation through marketing, the focus of this study.

Academics' roles have also significantly changed with marketisation of the sector. As shown in the literature review, outside the classroom there are weighty responsibilities for student experience and outcomes (Macfarlane 2007). Academics, especially those involved in student recruitment have an in depth of understanding of what students seek, what is possible and what support is available to meet the needs of those students – the value that is being sought (Lubbe 2014). Each activity in the academic role is a key component in creating value for potential and existing students; hence, it was important to gather their views, stories, experiences of undergraduate student recruitment (Darabi et al., 2017). Like their marketing peers, senior academics have access to university wide agendas and policies that inform how the university presents its offer to students. Academics for example, actively spend time in the STEM labs working alongside and with students leading, working, solving problems. In other words, they are active generators and co-creators of what students perceive as the value they are achieving by studying a particular course. Academics set this out at open events, in taster sessions, videos, emails, small group interactions and knowledge sharing with potential students, families and sponsors.

First year students were selected because they are still new to the system and unlike 2nd and 3rd year students their memory of the process that they went through to select the university is fresh (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015). Business school students were selected because they make the largest proportion of the UK undergraduate student population. In the academic year of 2022/23 there were 587,165 (HESA 2024). From the literature review, I showed how dominant UG students have been as a research population, especially as they choose a university. However, what they perceive as value, how and why they interact with their chosen university academics and marketers and how the value proposition meets their needs is an under-researched area.

5.8 Gaining Access: Obstacles and Gatekeepers

Once I understood the sample frame, I emailed 30 university marketing departments across the sector meeting the sampling frame. I started with emailing marketing professionals with a summary of my research, topics that would be covered and anticipated duration of interviews. An explanation of the ethics guidelines and reassurance were also included. Nudzor (2013) explains these are essential as it provides enough details for a participant to decide to attend or not. Once interviewees agreed to participate in the study, I sent the email invitation with time, place and formal ethics documents.

Response rates from senior marketing professionals was good. 8 marketing professionals agreed in the first instance and 4 of them needed reminders. 8 of them declined. 10 of them never replied to the first email or the reminders. Experience with academic’s response rate has been rather the opposite. It was easy to organise interviews with new universities as academics were more involved in student recruitment. Other universities had a high rejection rate citing lack of time or lack of suitability. For several universities, I had to email about 10 academic staff members to get 1 interview.

For 8 universities, to more directly connect with academics with the appropriate experience, as a second, step, I decided to contact a colleague who works for a sector professional body and she recommended some of her contacts, a snowball sample recruitment technique (Bryman and Bell 2015). This referral process successfully reached more of the target population, producing 5 interviews (Silverman 2016). This insider snowball technique has its own benefits; it mainly saves researchers time and provides confidence to participants to agree an interview (King et al., 2011).

However, I contacted potential participants directly stating they have been recommended by my colleague. In this way they still could decline, which some did. This method responds to ethical guidelines – to avoid pressure from an insider to participate which could affect their free, genuine, informed consent. With these challenges among academics, I had to revise my sample to 1 academic interview from certain universities as set out in the table below.

Type of Universities	No. of total academic interviews
Ancient universities	1
A university belong to the University of London	1
Red brick university	2
Plate-glass university	3
New universities	3

Table 5-2 Number of university academics participated in this study according to the type of the university.

Students were mainly recruited through advertising. Adverts were sent through student newsletters, flyers and Moodle pages. I contacted undergraduate course administrators and four agreed to publish the advert in their undergraduate e-newsletter. Lecturers advertised my poster on their Moodle site. Where I could not access the newsletters or lecturers, I went to the campus and distributed flyers. This method was used as it is an established method for participant recruitment (Hennick et al., 2011)

The advertisement summarised the purpose of the research, interviewee criteria, what to expect during the interview, institutional ethics clearance, my contact details and a reward of participation, i.e. £20 Amazon voucher. Offering incentives in research like this can increase participation (Robinson 2014) and is a way to acknowledge participant time and effort (Persad et al., 2019). However, I had to be mindful about the risk of getting responses from participants who do not represent the sample criteria (Robinson 2014). To minimise that, I asked them to send me an email from their university account. By advertising through Moodle sites, it minimised the risk, providing 6 student participants, about half of what I sought. Hence, I had to use the other possible ways to access potential participants, recruiting a further 4 for the total of 10 student participants. I could not recruit from two, labelled in the data analysis as Plate-glass university 2 and new university 2.

5.9 Ethics and Challenges of Research

Before collecting data, I had to get permission through my university ethics review process. Having submitted the ethics request form to my supervisor and another reviewer, there were number of areas I had to address before I was granted permission to carry out my data collection. Ethical issues are not limited to data collection but run through the entire research process from conception to final write-up (Flick 2018). Using Flick's (2018) seven stages, this research addressed the relevant ethical concerns:

1) Thematising – an interview study should, beyond the scientific value, also consider improvement of the human situation. The objective of this research is to investigate how marketing can create value for potential HE undergraduates; hence, the findings of this research will be of benefit to HE students, families, universities and the communities they serve.

2) Designing – This involves obtaining participants' informed consent to participate in the study, securing confidentiality and considering the possible consequences of the study of the subjects. While developing the ethics

form, I also developed a participant's information sheet and the consent form clearly outlining that participation was voluntary. It stated that participants would not be encountering any financial, physical, psychological, emotional, legal or social risks by participating.

3) Interview situation – The consequence of the interview interaction for the subject needs to be considered – such as stress during the interview and changes in self-understanding. My interview schedule did not ask personal questions nor questions related to highly confidential matters. They are mainly based around participants' perception of student recruitment elements; hence, it was low-risk research.

4) Transcription – The confidentiality of the interviewees needs to be protected. Transcripts were coded, anonymised and stored in an encrypted password protected folder. They are also stored in the secure section of my university data cloud.

5) Analysis – This involves how penetratingly the interviews can be analysed. Again, each interview has been coded and anonymity of participants is maintained.

6) Verification – Information in my computer will be available for examination at any time and university cloud data will be available for 5 years.

7) Reporting – Again the issue of confidentiality comes into play when reporting private interviews in public. The same process has been undertaken to protect participants' confidentiality. I have used generic job roles and collective nouns for academic and HE marketers to reduce risk of identification.

In the information form, I explicitly reinforced that participation is voluntary, and they have the option to withdraw before and during the interview. Withdrawing after the interview was limited to two weeks as it would be difficult for me to identify each individual interview as I would have anonymised the data and have pooled it with other interviews.

Once agreeing for an interview, I emailed a copy of the participant information sheet and consent the form. This was done at least two days prior to interview as that would have given sufficient time for interviewees to read and familiarise themselves. If they had any doubt, they were encouraged to contact me or my supervisor. Before beginning of interviews, I again explained to them the ethics mitigations and summarised what was in the participant information sheet.

As I mentioned earlier, a research interview is not a dialogue (Kvale 1994). I had to be mindful about my power as the controller of questions and the interview. Power dynamics during interviews occur in several ways. I conducted interviews in two universities where I used to work, and four interviewees were my ex-colleagues. One of them was in a senior position and others were the same level as me. Although I do not work in either of these universities, my interviewees perceived me as their colleague which could have affected their responses, i.e. too much information or possible breach of confidentiality. To avoid this, at the beginning of the interview I reminded them of my position, as a doctoral student not a former colleague.

Another way I experienced power dynamics was interviewing very senior marketing professionals, and senior academics. Some of these were deputy vice chancellors and some were in deanships, at University Executive level. I was nervous at the beginning of interviewing those who were “top managers” and I was a student, which created a power imbalance. It felt like interviewing people from a different class in society. Such power imbalance should be recognised and reflected on hence disclosure between researcher and participant should be encouraged (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Mao and Feldman 2019; Mertens and Ginsberg 2009). To address this, I used the pilot interviews. I recorded my pilot interviews, listened and identified where I struggled. I also read interviewees’ LinkedIn profiles and their profile on the university webpages before invitations were sent and before the actual interview. This prior knowledge provided time to process, to prepare and build confidence. At the beginning of the interview, I provided a summary about myself and my research which helped (Mao and Feldman 2019).

With student interviewees it was the other way round. In the pilot interview I could feel that I was interviewing as a lecturer not as a research student. Through my pilot interview I learnt how to not to sound like a lecturer but as a student. I simplified the interview schedule. Mao and Feldman (2019) discuss the importance of developing a good rapport with the participants from a different social group prior to the interview. At the beginning I spoke about someone I knew who is starting university at the time same as them and challenges she and her family were facing. This helped me to break the ice.

5.9.1 Why business schools?

As per my brief discussion in the introduction chapter, there are two primary reasons for sampling business schools. First, unlike many other faculties business schools have similar admissions processes. This is evident in UCAS study options published in 2025 (UCAS 2025). Furthermore, business schools have higher demand in comparison to most other disciplines. For an example there were 343,650 students studying business and management related courses in the academic year 2023/24 (HESA 2024). Hence, this provides a good population to select an appropriate sample (Bryman and Bell 2015). Business schools are also well represented across the UK HE sector from ancient foundations to post 1992s.

However, it is important to note that business school does have something of its own ethos, therefore, how business school participants perceive and interpret value may be different to those who study a different discipline. Research such as Muddiman (2018) discuss these differences in student studying different disciplines. As Muddiman (2018) states, it is unclear if instrumental students study business related subjects or business subjects make them instrumental but there are logics associated with different disciplines.

At the same time, this study is not only related to business studies students, as the theorisation of value and how it is created or perceived offers not only a model for researching this across three different population groups but also reflects the context and practices of HEIs. Many HEIs in the UK and elsewhere engage in the same kinds of pre-enrolment activities, and therefore this project is likely to be of interest to them. This research is exploratory in nature, therefore, findings cannot be generalised, and it was never meant to be.

5.10 Data Analysis

The 12 marketing professionals and 10 academic interviews were analysed together. The 10 student interviews were analysed separately. Although they are participating in the same student recruitment activities, every individual participant perceives their reality of student recruitment and value creation differently because it is shaped by their university role, level of student engagement and cultural background. Tierny and Dilley (2002) found that interviewees who are in the same category often use different frameworks, knowledge and context to make sense of their reality, in constructing their responses to interview questions, consistent with an interpretivist view.

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis as it is a flexible tool, often employed in exploratory and qualitative research to uncover patterns in the data (Silverman, 2016). The purpose of thematic analysis is to examine data to detect common ideas, sub-themes and patterns in relation to understanding human experiences and situations (Guest et al., 2012). Consistent with this, thematic analysis can be applied in abductive, interpretivist research working well with the scope of this study (Creswell and Cresswell 2017). Literature suggests it works well with a range of open-ended questions (Corbin and Strauss 2014) which is the case in this research. It explores social issues and participants' views of the world (Corbin and Strauss 2014). Thematic analysis is valuable to understand how people make sense of particular fragments, consciously or unconsciously (Ericksson and Kovalainen 2015). It is also suitable to chunk, evaluate and synthesize large data sets (Saldana 2021). It combines both data driven and theory developing research (Saldana 2021). Hence, thematic analysis is consistent with the objectives of this study.

Prior to analysis, data was prepared for analysis by going through the transcripts, reading them and correcting any words transcribed wrongly by comparing against the recordings (Silverman 2016). This process helped to familiarise myself with the text. The same stage was used to compare field notes, interview notes and to develop the theoretical ideas for the remainder of the data gathering (Creswell 2013). The following steps of Rowley (2012) were used for data analysis.

5.10.1 Documentation

Documentation in this research were transcripts and the audio files (Saldana 2009). I tried to do it manually and it was time consuming. Subsequently, the transcript output of Otter, an audio web tool was exported into word documents and checked against the audio files, making corrections as noted above for accuracy. At this stage, any identifiers such as name of the university, location, roles or interviewee's names were removed and anonymised to protect participants' privacy, aligned with ethics (Hennick et al., 2011), sample below.

Can you take me through the most recent marketing undergraduate campaigns?

Okay um we have an annual cycle of recruitment. And our most recent campaign would be are open days. For an example we have a campaign currently running for an open day to end of March. But the most recent cycle was aimed at 2019 applicants who will be applying January for September 2019 start would been the talent last year when we had the three open days in September, October and November. Campaign was focused on ur out door advertising which often busses for an example. We have lots of digital and online activities, targeting those who have enquired previously and a people who might be interested, where we were tracking where people have come from or, the website for an example we could remarket to them. And try to find the interest in one of the open days and increase attendance. We normally get a several thousand people registered for open days which were open days and we normally get about half actually turned up.

Okay

So For an example we had September an er number of people who were registered and then half turned up, we then contacted people who hadn't turned up to promote the next day, so we goes off. So that was the most recent campaign we ran specifically related to open days but we run a number of campaingns through out the year, depending on the timings, time of the year and the urr whether is it a marketing campaign attracting enquirers or whether it is a campaign in to promote applicants so that they got all the information they needs about the uniervsity to take a decision whether they want to come here.

Figure 5.1Screenshot of one of the transcripts (new university 1 – marketing professionals).

5.10.2 Concept development, coding, themes

According to Saldana (2009, p.3) code in qualitative research is "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data".

Using Clark and Braun (2017) as a guide, the following procedure was used to develop the coding framework.

5.10.3 Familiarising with the dataset

In addition to the iterative process noted above, to achieve this close attention to a large dataset, transcripts were read and re-read for the respective participant groups.

Using Saldana (2021) coding manual as a guide, I identified this stage as stage A which reflects the familiarising myself with transcripts and start initial coding. Key features of this stage included,

- Listening to interview recordings and noting first impressions in relation to particular transcripts, and overall
- Highlighting of parts of the text that appear significant – (initial coding)
- Documenting of ideas and thoughts
- Re-reading of all transcripts - to check accuracy of transcription (prior to importing into NVivo) and inform thinking about potential codes and themes
- Identification of preliminary code hierarchies to enter into NVivo
- Finalise the coding framework.

The repeated playing of each audio recording that was necessary to carry out the verbatim transcriptions of 32 transcripts has been labour intensive but has provided for real immersion into the data. This work has provided me with greater clarity about how I can proceed with the next stage B. Using Ballantyne and Varey (2006)'s model on creating value and the initial codes coding framework has been created.

Then transcripts were also uploaded into the well-established Nvivo qualitative software.

5.10.4 Generating initial codes and code book.

While reading the transcripts, data was divided into segments, and I labelled each segment with a code using Nvivo, which is common practice in data dense qualitative interviews (Elliot 2018). Initial coding has been done to address RQ1 which focuses on descriptive aspect of the research. Moving from initial focus on descriptive aspect of the research to reflect ways to link codes into value creation framework which is moving towards conceptual level. This means moving from initial focus on superficial descriptive responses (in relation to underlined parts of the questions) to probing the data at a conceptual level.

I had to avoid over-coding the interviews as it will be difficult to then reduce the codes into themes (Saldana 2021). Using the first three interviews I created the code book in a reflective way, going back and forward adjusting as new data was reviewed. Based on that the rest of the interviews were coded. If there were any additional codes derived from other transcripts, they were added to the coding manual. After coding all the transcripts, overlapping codes were narrowed and I was therefore able to create the final coding book. The same coding book was applied to academics, marketing professionals and students. Figure 5.2 provides a screenshot from my final codebook.

Name	Description
academic focus	Academics are getting to know student's interests in programmes
academics profile	What are their background
Bespoke Student Support	Students get personalised support
Career prospectus	Opportunity to find jobs
class size	Number of students in a class
communicative	How does the university interact with stakeholders
communicational	It's a two way communication
dialogical	On going discussion between the university and stakeholders
informational	Just passing information – one way communication
creating adverts	How do they create adverts – how do they use human resources to create the adverts
distinctive practice	Practices which are unique to one university
entry standards	Criteria they use to admit students in to a programme

Figure 5.2 Screenshot from my final code book for all the participants

5.10.5 Searching for themes.

Similar codes were identified and grouped. By looking at codes and the associated extracts, themes were identified. Codes which did not fit into any themes were saved in a different folder as they might be needed at a later stage as more data was collected. The latter was done manually. I also printed all the codes, cut them and pasted on a wall and re-arranged them into themes, visually and continuously, especially in the early stages as each interview was converted to data. I shared these with experienced supervisors and peers in my doctoral away days.

5.10.6 Reviewing themes

I reviewed themes to identify which are collapsing on each other, or themes which could be broken into separate themes, and those which do not have enough data to support. Through this reflexive process, additional data gathering, analyses and feedback, I further refined until I had the final themes.

5.10.7 Defining and naming themes.

Through the cycle of refinement, I was able to identify the essence of what each theme was about and understand what aspect of data each theme captured. Using this as a guide, the analysis for each theme was written while aligning with Ballantyne and Varey's (2006), value creating activities, i.e. communication, relationships and knowledge sharing.

The following figures are some of the documentations of this process as I worked through creating the themes that form the analysis.

Figure 5.3 First set of themes

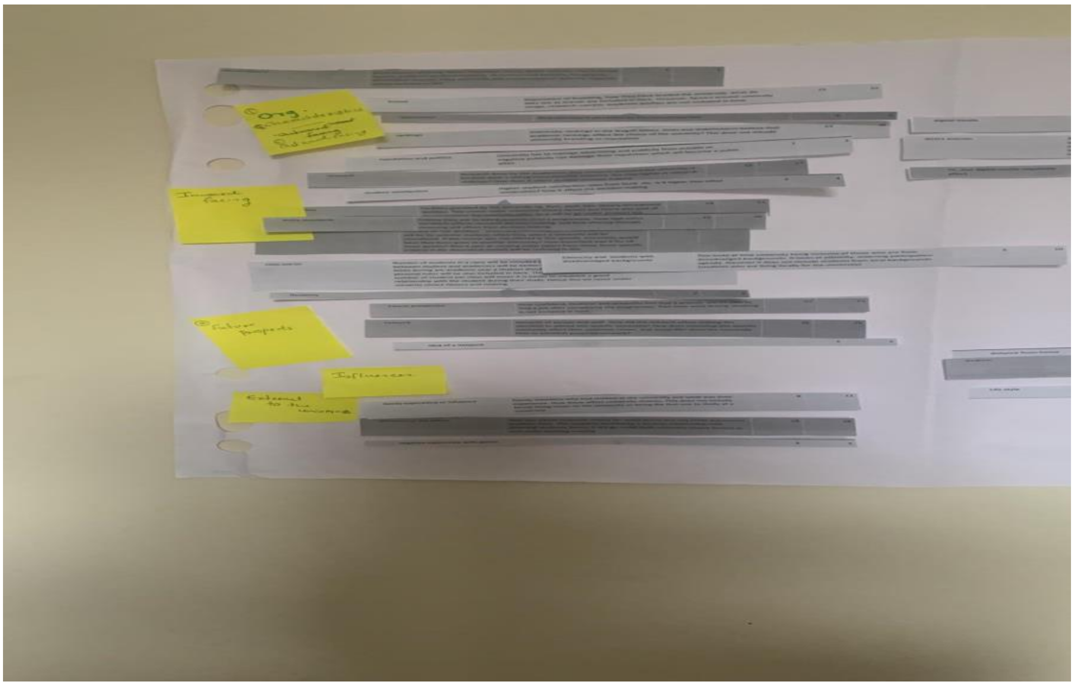

Figure 5.4 After first revision

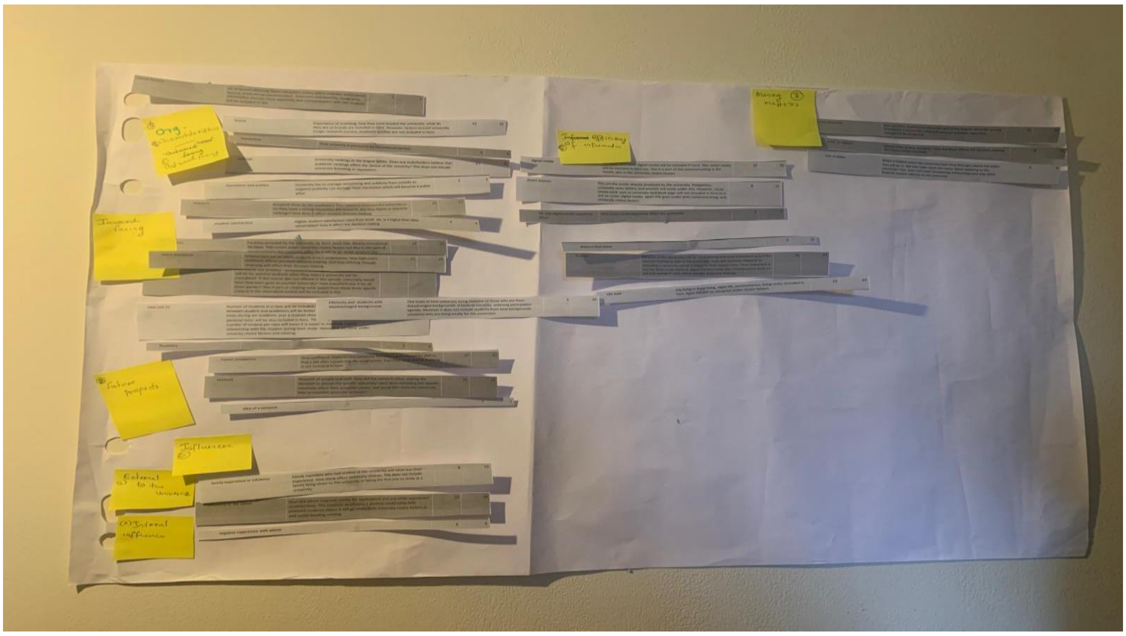

Figure 5.5 Third set of revision

The above three pictures evidenced how I have revised themes. Sticky labels are the themes and they have been revised two more times in order to arrive at the final set of themes. At the end, there were three overarching themes, nine main themes and a large number of sub themes.

5.10.8 Producing reports

In this phase I had fully refined themes and which I used in my detailed analysis and discussion chapters. These are presented in chapter 6, 7, and 8.

5.11 Summary of the chapter.

This chapter examined the research philosophy that influenced the research – research design decisions and the data gathering techniques. It is also a reflection of my personal journey on this PhD. It was clear that my personal and professional background had some effect on methods I employed. It also emerged that throughout the research the way I looked at the world also changed. The chapter set out the appropriateness of the data collection tools to the research objectives and how the weaknesses were mitigated. The rationale for the sample selected in the context of the sector, gaps in population previously studied and the links to the theoretical framework being tested. Ethical concerns in the design of the study are addressed and I show what solutions were used to preserve the study integrity. Given the exploratory nature of this research, the analytical methods, process and impact on the data set is explained and evaluated as the study sought to uncover perceptions of value proposition design, understanding of value and aspects of value creation.

In summary, as a result of the methodological review, this study samples the population of HE marketing professionals – to capture their perspectives, how they understand their roles in designing messages, why they make certain decisions they believe will produce a value proposition that convinces potential students their needs and aspirations will be met through their HEI. Though HE marketers lead, they do not play this role in isolation and are in a collaborative with academics to understand the needs of potential students, the creation of the offer and the delivery of that in a value proposition. Therefore, the role of academics is critical to answer the research questions and meet the overall aim of the study.

To put this another way, to understand the value model, the designers of the offer - academics and HE marketers – should form the population from which this study draws its sample. Similarly, the recipients of the value proposition – students - have to be included to develop insights into their views as they receive and engage with the HEI. Since the model has dialogic characteristics, given my own background, the study adopts an abductive, qualitative approach to study the research populations to answer the research questions.

The answers to these questions, my findings, are presented in subsequent chapters. It starts with analysing the meaning of subjective value for each party, i.e. university and students. Then it moves to the design and creation of value by applying Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) value creation activities. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are focused on those three activities. The final chapter concludes the research, synthesising key findings in relation to the research questions.

5.11.1 Gaps in the literature

As a result of this review of current knowledge, there is a gap in the current research– to what extent are conventional theories of services marketing relevant to a quasi-market such as HE? Hence, the study deployed a specific model of value creation from traditional neo-liberal markets to the context of HE. The review also showed that marketing professionals in HE play a substantial role in deciding the future recruitment success of the university through their value propositions to potential students. However, their voice is largely absent from the current research, despite their growing importance as the pressures of competition intensify neo-liberal practices in HE.

The reverse is true of students – but mainly in the area of choice drawn from among overseas and school, college students. However, there is a paucity of work exploring how the university value proposition for undergraduates is received, perceived, processed and why it may or may not produce conviction that it is the best match to their needs and desired outcomes, the value students seek. This study examines this dynamic.

While marketers have become prominent, academics have always played a crucial role in outlining how a potential student will be able to achieve their aspirations on their course, at a particular university. They collaborate with their HE marketing peers to arrive at and deliver the value proposition to prospective students. Therefore, the assumptions, understanding and actions of academics is critical to answer the research questions and meet the overall aim of the study.

Chapter 6: What do universities and potential undergraduates perceive as value?

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analyses of participants' perceptions of value, aligned with the subjective theory of value. This study employs the concept of value as established by Gronroos (2008), where value refers to how customers feel after experiencing an offer from an organisation; it is whether they feel satisfied or are better off than before. For example, students believe they will be better off if are able to receive a degree from a particular institution, i.e. it will deliver the value they seek. This thesis then takes participants' conceptions of value forward by analysing how they are reflected through value propositions to potential undergraduates.

To orient this and the next 3 chapters, a reminder of the overall aim and research questions of this study. The research explored how academics and university marketing professionals conceive of their offer, the value proposition to recruit undergraduates, and how those potential students experience and engage with this offer. Therefore, the study asked the following research questions:

> RQ1: What do universities and students perceive as value in HE?
>
> RQ2: How does the consumer value model, established by Ballantyne and Varey (2006) work in the context of HE marketing to create value? It will examine the three value creating activities in the model.
>
> - Relationship
> - Communication
> - Knowledge sharing
>
> RQ3: What role does trust play in value creation, across Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) value creating activities - relationship, communication and knowledge sharing?

6.2 Value in the context of HE

This has been analysed by categorising marketing professionals and academics as one group as they are the presenters of the value proposition and students, the recipients as a separate group to understand how they perceive the match to their needs and potential outcomes. Additionally, aggregating interviews from marketing professionals and academics into one dataset makes sense as they represent the university, though they belong to different departments.

The key headline from the study is that I found that Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model can be applied to UK HE. It shows that the participants understand value in HE as subjective to each type of university rather than objective value. Due to this subjectivity, it is clear that service marketing models such as Ballantyne and Varey (2006) are relevant to the sector, especially as marketisation continues. Over the course of this and the next two chapters, I will be outlining how the data from participants in this study understand value and, using that lens, how value is created and presented at the pre-selection stage.

Since value is the overarching concept of this thesis this section is shorter than the other sections. It is the foundational piece for the rest of the findings and therefore makes sense as a short but stand-alone piece rather than combining it with one of the other two chapters, as it effectively feeds into both.

6.2.1 What do university marketers and academics understand as value for potential undergraduates?

University participants in this research understand value as transforming students' lives. By going through a degree programme, *a student should be a changed person* (Academic – New University 1). Key secondary aspects emerged from the data set around transformation of self, some presented in the table below.

Secondary sub-themes	Participants
Students changed for better	3
Better prepared for employment	3
More confident	4
Develop transferable skills	5
More independent	2
Personal achievement	2
Higher earning potential	6

Table 6-1.1 Universities participating in this study

From the above table, higher earning potential stands out, followed by "transferable skills" and students becoming "more confident than before". The following four quotes evidence this theme of personal change.

> They should have changed for better after three/four years spending time and engaging with scholarly activities. (Marketing professional – Ancient foundation 2)

> It is very easy to recognise a final year student. You can clearly see how mature they have become. (Some) of them have gone through placement and become you know …..I guess first year and even their second year. The way they talk, and their mannerism is completely different (Academic – Plate-glass 1)

> Our aim is to make them you know…. more independent, and employable graduates, and better human beings….. I guess ultimately that is the purpose of HE – (Marketing professional, Red Brick 1).

> By doing this degree programme our students should be better prepared for a job. Their success is our success. (Academic- New university 1)

According to the first three quotes, setting out the transformation that a student should experience on their course, or at university should be at the heart of demonstrating the value to be received over the period of study. The third quote to some extent and last quote makes the aim of the course much more concrete with a specific outcome, securing a job. In other words, by the end of a degree programme a student should be in a better off than when they started their university study. It could be through becoming independent, employable or by becoming mature. It could be feeling better as a human being or more practical like securing a better job. This is the overarching conception of value from participants in this study. For academic participants this reflects Gronroos's (2008) conception of value where he argues, by consuming a service, a consumer should be better off than before. It also shows that their conception of value is not a service offering or a product or a function but an experience. This aligns with research such as Ramaswamy (2011) who discussed value as experience.

However, while this conception is consistent across the sample from ancient to new universities, there are specific criteria they focus on when they go into details. At the pre-university selection stage, in order to transform students' lives, they focus on university choice factors. These are subjective to each university. For example, those who work in new universities agree that they work in a teaching led rather than research led research lead HEI university and that is the focus of their illustration of value to potential undergraduates. Similarly, participants from other universities, such as Plate-glass, Red bricks and Ancient foundation perceive value for students based on their research solving problems.

> Our position is clear, that is we are teaching led university and that is the value. Our academics are mostly practitioners from industry, which brings experience to the classroom. (Academic – New university 2).

> We are one of a group of research-led university, our research contributes in many different ways in today's world (Academic – Plate-glass 3).

From the above two quotes, their perception of value is subjective to the universities within which they work. In line with the definition of Gronroos' (2008), to deliver this experience of a university degree for students, universities design and present different offers, value propositions. The first quote shows that staff in this sample with industry experience will provide their lived experience to their students, while the second quote focuses on the impact of research, assuming that has substantial weight in convincing potential undergraduates of the value to be gained at that particular university.

As per discussions in the literature review, value propositions are designed to demonstrate what is the benefit package being promised and how that is differentiated from competitors (Payne et al., 2017). Both participants assume that students are making choices, in line with marketisation effects that produce students as consumers. Conceptually, it fits into the theory of subjective value established in classical research in marketing and economics (Grönroos and Voima 2013).

6.2.2 Programmes as part of the value proposition

Out of those value proposition elements, programme seems to be the second most important criteria. It was agreed by 19 university participants out of 22.

Making the selection of the programme is a high-risk for students since it involves risks such as financial, psychological, functional and social (Robinson and Dobele 2020; Simões and Soares 2010). Satisfaction with the selected programme has a positive impact on motivation to complete it (Behr et al., 2020). Further, research on student retention validate this; once a degree programme meets students' expectations, there is a high tendency for them to progress successfully (Behr et al., 2020). Therefore, selecting the right programme plays a vital role when a student chooses their future study destination. Consistent with prior research, universities in this study understand this and concentrate on their courses at the centre of their offer (Rao and Hosein 2017).

Academics and marketing professionals also confirm this prior research, as supported by the selected data points below.

> That would be the top reason a student would choose. They look for the course that they want to do first. And then the university offers. (Marketing professional, Ancient foundation 2)

> We know that ultimately, the course is, is critical. (Marketing professional – Red brick 2)

> So, the programme and the programme content is very important. (Academic – New university 3)

This resonates with well-established research such as Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003); Gajic (2012); Ivy's (2008) and Ivy and Naude (2004) findings where they studied the importance of 7Ps, and university choice factors, especially product, in other words the programmes. It also validates arguments made by most recent research such as Behr et al., (2020) who focuses on programme importance.

While research in various contexts did confirm the primary place of the course, those studies did not focus on other aspects such as employer engagement, assessments with live clients in student recruitment etc. In this study, participants voice the connection between such activities and the value they set out to potential undergraduates.

> We have an agency called xxxxx which is an internal agency and the members of the xxxx, they manage clients. This is a real-life experience. (Academic – New university 1)

> We offer a link with xxx [a global top 5 consultancy] and we do talk about it a lot during our open days which enhances students' job prospects. (Academic – Redbrick 1)

These two quotes show that two similar experiences of doing real work, especially with a global brand contributes to changing a student's real skills and belief in those skills giving them a better chance at securing work and performing well in the role. University participants in this study are clear about the need to set this out to potential undergraduates as a core part of the course, as the value they will receive in undertaking to study at this HEI. In the extant research, study of extracurricular activity discusses the importance of joining faith, university societies and sports groups (Agrey and Lampadan 2014; King et al., 2021). Although these elements enhance students' experience, and may change them for the better, securing a better job is not as visible.

6.2.3 Academic rankings and value propositions

Another aspect of the value proposition which came to light was academic rankings, which are widely understood as important in previous university choice factor research. Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2021) point to 23 studies in this area between 2006 and 2019.

> Of course, research ranking is important, that's who we are. (Academic, Red brick 3)

> Research ranking, yes, it is really important, and we are top (Marketing professional – Plate-glass 2)

From the above two quotes, university participants from Plate-glass and Red brick universities believe research rankings are important. It is also clear that is part of their identity and so key to their value proposition. However, this is again subjective. Those who are from new universities recognised academic rankings are important but admitted that it is not something they are not strong at. Instead, they set out in their offer their staff industry expertise and how they can bring this to the classroom.

Although marketing professionals and academics in this sample discuss the role of academic rankings, they believe students do not pay close attention to it. However, there is inconsistency among university participants. The following excerpts from interviews demonstrate this well.

> The rankings are just one part of their decision. Also, the rankings have been affected by other factors than research (Marketing professional, Ancient foundation 2).

> But does a typical undergraduate really have a concept of what research success means? Probably not. But they do understand rankings (Academic, Ancient foundation 2).

> Academic Ranking not so much more for undergraduate but more for postgraduate international students (Academic, New university 1)

> Academic rankings. Yes. That's going to be another sort of factor in their programmes (Academic, New university 2)

The above four quotes evidence this disagreement and it is not specific to any university group (marketing professional or academics) in this study. While the first three quotes suggest academics perceive that research ranking is not something students are able to understand, but the last one shows that students consider rankings to a certain level. Interestingly, this is not specific to a type of university since it is visible across the data.

Based on the views of academics and HE marketers, this study has at this point, found that value can be employed as a theoretical framework to understand the conceptions underlying offer design to potential undergraduates in the UK. The core of what is perceived as value – education as transformation – has been at the heart of theories of education for centuries (Marginson 2024). Value can, therefore, be deployed as an overarching lens across design assumptions, choice factors and promised outcomes in the offer made to potential undergraduates. As a broad category, value as perceived by the HE participants sits within the ambit of subjective value, specific to the strengths of HEIs. Both academics and HE marketers make a conscious effort to differentiate their offer as a way to convince students this course, this university is the best match to their needs for transformation of self (skills, knowledge) or circumstance (job recruitment advantage, performance) – and so, the concept of a value proposition as deployed in conventional neo-liberal markets is employed by HE practitioners. This section of the analysis has therefore produced a holistic integration of choice factors under the umbrella of value.

6.3 What students see as value?

Students' understanding of value was more tangible than academic or marketing professionals. They all stated that they want to be in a better position when they enter the labour market. Some even used terms such as *competitive advantage* (Student, New university 2). When they were asked what the ultimate outcome of a degree programme is, 9 out of 10 participants said it is about getting better paid jobs. In other words, by engaging with academia, they should be able to be in a better position in their lives agreeing with HE participants and as noted above, Gronroos' (2008) definition of value.

Showing that academics and HE marketers in this study are matching their offer to the needs of students, the programme is the most important element to student participants too. However, they voice additional features that could give better outcomes for them and use that to differentiate respective universities. This reinforces the finding from HE participants observed above, the role of work-related features as a way to show students that if they came to this HEI, there is already evidence of such skills being supported. It is an acknowledgement that they will choose one course over another if they think their needs and the outcomes they seek will be best met there. It is reflective of the dynamic of value proposition, of mutual exchange in a market, the shopping behaviour of a consumer in discriminating each university based on future value.

> I applied to go to xxxx Redbrick uni, and as a course they have a partnership with xxx [global brand]. And that was my top university, for a real long time because of that connection with xxx[same global brand]. (Student, Redbrick 1).

> And… the McKinsey Trading Screen and it's just literally cool, like, it's … related to that cycle of the trade process. And I never seen a course like that. (Student, Plate-glass 2).

> Not the programmes themselves, but what features in the programmes. So, in the sense, do you guarantee placements, do they guarantee internships, is that an international project …definitely one semester that you'll be doing abroad…? So, it's these extra additional features in the programme. (Student, New university 2).

The quote here from the student about a big, global brand is chosen because it actually shows that the story delivered from the academic, in the prior section above, has reached students in the way intended. Their perception and insistence about repeating this as a “big deal” in their offer to potential undergraduates has clearly landed successfully and impactfully, during the exchange between HEI and student before they came to study. Furthermore, it is not just the degree in terms of classes and raw content that makes the difference, but other things that enhance such as internships.

The above quotes demonstrate that this finding is a step forward from researchers who had done work on the HE marketing mix (Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003; Gajic 2012; Ivy 2008; Ivy and Naude 2004), and other university choice factors (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2004; 2016). These activities are seen as work integrated learning (Rowe and Zegwaard 2017) and ground disciplinary content; disciplinary skills; while enhancing workplace awareness, workplace experience (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007) of students. Prior research on work integrated learning address these as a part of embedding these skills into curriculum (Taylor and House 2010) with less focus on the importance of these for student recruitment. Participants in this study believed that such content in the university value proposition would encourage them to believe they will receive the value they seek.

6.3.1 Rankings in value propositions – student's perspective

Contradicting most marketing professionals and academics in this sample, academic rankings are another important element in value proposition that students discussed. Institutional position in league tables, and university rankings are perceived as important. Out of 10 student participants, 8 stated that they paid attention to university rankings. Of note, 7 were studying at Red-brick, Plate-glass and Ancient foundations. Only 1 student belonged to a new university. Students who did not pay attention to university rankings were from new universities which were not ranked highly anyway. This is consistent with previous work such as Reay et al., (2005).

> But academic ranking was a big one, I really wanted somewhere that was kind of top 20. I think it was also because I wanted somewhere that I knew who did a lot of research – (Student, associated with University of London).
>
> Obviously looked at sort of the league tables…. I wanted to fill out that aspirational choice, I want to study in a better one – (Student, Plate-glass university 1).
>
> I did take into account the academic rankings… – (Student, Redbrick 1).
>
> I knew what the rankings were; that it's a blanket of security at the end of the day. If academic rankings are higher, then it probably is … good enough to go to with job prospects as well – (Student, Redbrick 2).

These quotes show that academic rankings are something undergraduate students in this sample considered when assessing the value offer from different universities. Applying to a research focused university has been considered as a 'security blanket', 'easy access for research funding' and 'a better choice'. These findings resonate with those who have conducted research in university choices such as Amsler and Bolsmann (2012); Collyer (2013); Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016); Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2021); Veloutsou et al., (2004); Lim (2018) where they state high regard or prestige place a university in a higher position than physical appearance. Furthermore, statements like “studying in a better one” demonstrate that rankings help students in this sample to differentiate universities from one another. Unsurprisingly, among student participants in this research, there is a disagreement about ranking but it is not as visible as academics and marketing professionals.

> I wouldn't say it was a big impact. Like, when I went to the open days, you know, lecturers would be like, some mentioned about rankings. But it's not something, it's not something I researched to find out. – (student, New University 2).

The first three quotes shows that students who are from Plate-glass and Redbrick had some understanding and considered rankings while one participant from a New University did not. As I stated above, importance of ranking is subjective to the type of the university. The one student who did not pay attention to ranking is from a lower ranked, new university.

6.4 Summary of the chapter

This chapter examined what universities (both marketing professionals and academics together) and students understand as value in this research. Universities believe value is an experience which transform students’ lives for better. This was common across the participant universities in this study. However, there are differences to their value proposition and that was linked to each type of university. In other words, subjective value is at work.

Although students’ idea of value is focused on landing in a better job, they believe university is to change their life (by getting a high paid job). Furthermore, they had subjective opinions on value propositions.

Both parties believe programmes are highly important in a value proposition. However, they discussed other features such as extracurricular activities. With regards to ranking although all interviewees believed rankings are important, university participants thought students are less concerned about rankings, unsurprisingly reflecting the type of university also. Subjective value as against objective value is an applicable framework to HE based on the participants' views in this research.

Chapter 7: Relationship as Value Creating Activity in HE

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter is focussed on the conception of value among both university and student participants. Having understood their perceptions and assumptions about the concept of value, this and the following chapter go deeper into how value has been created using the three value creating activities in Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model i.e. relationship building, communication and knowledge sharing. This chapter starts with relationship or relating as that is the main outcome of value creation activities. There are two main reasons for relationships to be presented before the other two activities. Firstly, because relationships provide structural support for the creation and application of knowledge resources (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). Second, knowledge sharing and communication are ways in which effective relationships can be developed and therefore will be treated after in chapter 8. Also, because of the first reason, relationships are discussed in detail in one chapter while the other two value creating activities are amalgamated together and then presented.

7.2 Relationship or relating

To examine this theme in the dataset, the existence and nature of relationships in HE as potential undergraduates decide where to enrol, there are 4 sub-themes, linked to key actors who are involved in building relationships. These are:

1) Sub-theme 1 – relationship between students and university: the role of school visits and open days.

2) Sub-theme 2 – relationship between students and alumni – how students and universities used alumni to select the potential study destination.
3) Sub-theme 3 – relationship between students and admin staff – what kind of relationship exists and how they impact potential students' decision.
4) Sub-theme 4 – relationship between academics and marketing professionals as the two functions principally responsible for the value proposition, i.e. the benefits of study at this HEI, the promised outcomes.

7.3 Sub-theme 1 – Relationship between university and potential undergraduates

This sub-theme focuses on the value designers (university) and value receivers (potential student) in undergraduate recruitment. They are the principal actors, and they are involved in the most active relationship before a university is chosen. The services marketing literature outside HE, suggests that the earlier these key players develop a relationship, the greater the likelihood of students selecting that university (Vivek et al., 2012). A long-term positive relationship establishes trust (Johanesová and Vaňová 2020) and data in this research shows that students will select the university based on that trust. Participants also share how they establish such relationships, including aspects of trust-building, employing a metaphor of a journey that both university and students go on at least over 2 years. My data has shown two important milestones in this process:

1) School visits
2) Open days/ Taster days

Through these activities, universities can demonstrate and communicate benefits, outcomes, i.e. potential value of doing a degree at this specific university.

7.3.1 School Visits

The first stage of building a relationship between students and a university is when the university did a school visit. In this sample, 9 of the student participants interacted with the university they ultimately chose through school visits while they were in their first year in Sixth form. This is three years before they start university. Those visits set the base to establish trust. Especially starting early relationship allows students and universities to slowly build trust. Both university and student interviewees perceive this first physical interaction as important.

University participants in this study shared different choices made to build trust. Some universities do this by sending their best professionals. This was common, especially among marketing professionals' interviews. Out of 12 marketing professional interviews, 11 of them stated that for school visit days, they will send their *best staff members* (Marketing professional -ancient foundation 1) or *the best team* (Marketing professional – Redbrick 1, Plate-glass 1). All marketing professionals agreed that whoever does the school visit should be "armed" with accurate information, with good team and communication skills. Since this is the first step to develop a long-term relationship between prospective students, they want to put in their best efforts. Established, traditional relationship marketing research such as Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016, 2018) previously presented this finding, and this study supports that conclusion.

On the other hand, ancient foundations have indirect substitutes establishing connections with schools, prospective undergraduates prior to university staff.

> In most cases when we visit a school, one of our current students had already visited (Marketing professional, Ancient foundation).

These advocates act organically without university intervention as per participants. The main purpose of such visits is to demonstrate a current student's own experience and encourage prospective students to apply for these specific ancient foundations. This then is taking the form of word-of-mouth, which prior services marketing research shows more trustworthy than official staff of organisations (Rehaman et al., 2022). As Levin at al., (2002) argue students from ancient foundations can relate to another student since they belong to the same age group. This allows them to initiate a relationship with the specific university and slowly build up to establishing trust.

Although the ancient foundations marketing professionals see these organic, current student visits to school alma mater as important in setting out their university offer, students who participated in this study could not recall the individual who represented the university. This was consistent for students who organically came to school or university marketing staff or academics visiting those schools. However, all the participants except two students from ancient foundations said they can remember someone coming from the university.

> I was in my 6^{th} form and I think… a person from xxx uni came to visit. They gave us a speech….. (Student – Redbrick 2).

> I can remember a student from xxxx uni came and talked to us and we were like, oh wow; it was great. (Student - Ancient foundation 1).

7.3.2 Open Days/ Taster days

This is the second stage that students can interact with the university, usually on campus. This provides the opportunity for them to see the university as well as current students (ambassadors), academics and other staff. Here potential undergraduates can experience some aspect of being in that specific university.

As per the quotes below about student ambassadors these interactions are important for establishing trust. Although I did not ask students to place them in a hierarchy, from the analysis, I have identified academics and student ambassadors as most important in terms of credibility. Although admin staff were mentioned in 4 student interviews in this research, they were not categorised as important. Similarly, marketing professionals is also seen as less important although students do acknowledge they have some influence in their choice which is reflected in the previous section. Although marketing professionals and admin staff are important in the campus visit, they are not at the forefront and interaction with potential students is limited. Even those who have the initial interaction, are therefore limited in building a first contact into a longer-term relationship. This contradicts the findings from research such as Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) and Ivy (2008). Given that this study is of the pre-selection stage, this finding moderates the general conclusion of admin impact on university choice. Additionally, since the study explores the value proposition to potential home undergraduates, as well as how this is received by students, the question of admin relationship is beyond the scope of this research and the questions being examined.

On the contrary, trust of student ambassadors and their role at the pre-selection stage as set out by interviewees was clearly emphasised.

> I actually remember the girl (student ambassador) that I was working with cause she was like so nice… she probably persuaded me… So excited about the course as well… So, I felt like their word is more trustworthy (than lecturers). (Student – Plate-glass university 1).

> I just think the student ambassadors are really friendly at xxx. Because they were so good for my open day and they really inspired me to go there. (Student – New university 1).

> But the thing I can relate to is all the student ambassadors … it's so nice to get the opinion of an actual student who's going through university rather than a teacher who is going to tell you that their course is good. (Student – Ancient foundation 1)

According to Ballantyne and Varey (2006) it is the quality of the relationship that could be managed not the relationship itself. In order to achieve this quality, it is important to establish trust, i.e. the willingness to believe, between both parties. By closely examining the above three quotes, there are points to note when it comes to establishing the trust between students and ambassadors. Student ambassadors are seen as a fellow student and potential students do not perceive them as representatives of the university. Therefore, potential students believed ambassadors had a similar vision, and goal as the share similar social capital (Levin et al., 2002) which is a factor that develops trust. Student ambassadors are also seen as aspirational models who students can look up to. Their words were much more believable, convincing than “other” university staff.

Although this student ambassador and potential student interaction sparks the relationship and trust between the university and potential student, it is difficult to see that this initial interaction could develop much further, as a relationship emerges when two or more parties interact with each other over a period of time (Varey 2002). However, the perceptions above illustrate that these initial interactions are important to establish trust and can influence choice. At the end of the day, student ambassadors do represent the university and through them, the university can plant seeds to build potential students’ trust.

Academic participants and student interviewees show that the open day at a particular HEI, the interaction between potential students and academics contributes to developing a relationship, i.e. unlike student ambassadors it sets the base to develop long-term relationships. In most universities sampled here, initial interaction between students and academics begins with open day visit presentations. This is where they get the opportunity to demonstrate the value proposition of the programme at their university. This happens through academics who present to potential students the courses they lead, pass rates, facilities, extra- curricular activities and employability rates etc. The following quotes from two lecturers’ evidence this well.

> We have an inhouse advertising agency (a business centre)… They do client work, the campaigns and what we have come here and given them an experience of joining the agency even before they've applied. You know, they decide to come here (Academic, New university 1).

> We have kind of … a mock session. I remember, we were three people, three academics in the room. So, …. firstly, showing them the facilities, we have and showing them the rooms we have. I emphasize the message that, you know, in the University of xxxxx, we don't have big

> lectures; we always work in smaller sized rooms, and almost like a seminar room with a maximum of 30, 35 students in the room. So, we tend to know people personally (Academic, New university 3).

While they offer insights about what a student should expect from the course, they also emphasise the importance of the service setting. In services marketing, service space or setting plays an important role to interact with the customer (Bitner 1992). This setting is important to how a seller's offering is valued and received. Bitner (1992) argues that environments which have pleasing conditions is where people would like to spend time and money. In other words, it is about potential value if they chose to study here, what the university can offer to enhance the potential student's future learning experience. In Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) research, they take this further, emphasising the importance of the service setting for value creation. This research shows this is the case in these HEI contexts too, especially as a student will be spending three years of their life in this service setting. The impact of service setting will be discussed in a different section but as a medium for relationship development it is worth mentioning here.

> I remember going to talk with Dr xxx. And you can tell, how passionate she is about the subject.... And I like the fact that she was straight up, like if this isn't the university for you, that's fine. You need to find the right one for you, rather than selling the university to you. They're more concerned about what's best for you. (Student, New university 1)

The above quote shows how the first interaction in that service setting shapes their ideas about the university. Enthusiasm for the subject is viewed as authenticity. They also appreciate the honesty or being '*straight up'*. This student highlights that the lecturer had their best interest in mind; "more concerned about what is best for you" means this lecturer is interested in student choice than selling a course that may not be suitable for the student. While this could be a start to a relationship, it also begins with trust in the academic. This is especially as the student will have to rely quite substantially on lecturers for their future success, the value they seek. This statement shows benevolent trust (Ziegler and Golbeck 2007), where the student feels that academics have no intention of harming them by forcing a course. On the other hand, this statement also shows competence-based trust (Ziegler and Golbeck 2007). Therefore, it is valid to say that as per literature in this case, both benevolence and competency-based trust are apparent (McAllister 1995). Although this interaction lasted a few hours, it can portray an image of the university or the value that can be added that will affect that potential undergraduate's university choice. In Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model establishing trust is significant in creating value.

> The actual people who run the course in Redbrick 1 … were late to present … which obviously like a bad start when compared to Redbrick 2. They didn't really apologise for it but it was like "you gonna come here anyway?". (Student, Red Brick 2).

The above vignette tells the consequences of complacent behaviour in an open event too. Although this university is higher-ranked in the league table, this student did not solely consider league tables to make the choice of which university to attend. Therefore, university ranking is important in the value proposition, consistent with prior research such as Matzdorf and Greenwood (2015); Sahlberg (2016) but it can be overridden by other factors, including in this story, the trust or lack thereof in personal interactions.

First interactions support the establishment of trust and in the long term, a good relationship (Ivanova et al., 2020). There are two notions worth discussing from this example. First, tardiness and second being unapologetic about this and so the first interaction has been violated, working against the development of trust, in particular, benevolence trust. This student felt that the lecturer does not have their best interest at heart. In other words, the student interviewee did not feel they could gain the support needed to achieve their ambitions, the value they are seeking, and so it was unsafe to invest their future in this specific Redbrick university. It also shows that trust hangs on a small thread, especially if trust is being established, it can be discarded in one move. Therefore, establishing trust is a delicate process built on honesty, connection and appropriate communication (Hagenauer et al., 2023). Those who presented as “too friendly” were equally unwelcomed in participants’ views, illustrated below.

> In Redbrick university the lecturer came wearing cargo shorts. He came to the room saying, “How you all doing?” I felt really uncomfortable. They can be friendly, but … I was worried how are they going to teach us and keep a structure, an order in the class (Student, Redbrick 1).

This student is making judgments of the capability of the lecturer by his appearance and communication. In other words, competence-based trust (Ziegler and Golbeck 2007) is undermined. Such trust is a crucial aspect of the value proposition on offer at this Red brick, and in sharing their emotions, the details and implications they perceive for the future experience in the classroom, this participant has made clear how it led them to conclude that this HEI would not deliver to the outcomes, the benefits, i.e. the value they want from a university.

These initial academic introductions can be impactful beyond a taster day. Quite distinctly, the ancient universities’ participants deliberately organised for academic contact with prospective undergraduates to start early, so they could have continuity post-registration, as voiced by a Marketing professional, Ancient foundation 2.

> And it's because they [academics] want the best students. They are the students they're going to be teaching and have really close contact with (Marketing professional, Ancient foundation 2).

Continuing on, this participant observed that setting this out to undergraduates before registration is not only a core part of their offer; it is also positioned as a self-interest for academics – *if you don't have to select the student that you want to teach... you [academics] are the one who's going to struggle* (Marketing professional, Ancient foundation 1).

In comparison with student ambassadors, for example, this supports the development of long-term relationships with academics, from the preregistration through to post-registration. *And what it means is that every week… if you're a student, meeting [the academic] one on one …and talk about whatever essay or experiment you might be working on. And we [academics] do that the whole way through your degree for every subject*, as contextualised by Marketing professional, Ancient foundation 1. This sits well within Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) views about what improves the quality of a relationship over time.

This interaction over 3-4 years allows academics and students to better understand each other, learning together through dialogic communication; thereby, facilitating greater trust between both parties. In other words, the consequence of which is achievement of value for those students. Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model of trust-building is reflected in this story but also their wider conclusions about value. While all types of universities do not have the same pedagogic model, all universities in this study, can facilitate relationship-building. And that characteristic is more likely to allow students and academics to produce the benefits they seek – i.e. value.

7.4 Conclusion for relationship between students and university

Figure 7.1 below summarises the nature of interactions, impact on trust and the prospective undergraduates' decision to continue to engage with that HEI or to continue exploring elsewhere. The first 2 stages of interaction help to build trust with HEIs that the potential student could attend. At the first stage, it is about marketing professionals and current students' word of mouth (WOM) (only for ancient foundation) initiating contact and laying the base for the next step. At this stage benevolence trust is important. However, if it gets damaged potential undergraduates may eliminate this university from their shortlist. The second stage, visiting campus and participating in activities, including with current students, potentially establishes both benevolent and competence-based trust with academics. The role of student ambassadors is limited to establishing benevolence-based trust. With trust, students start to develop good quality, long-term relationships.

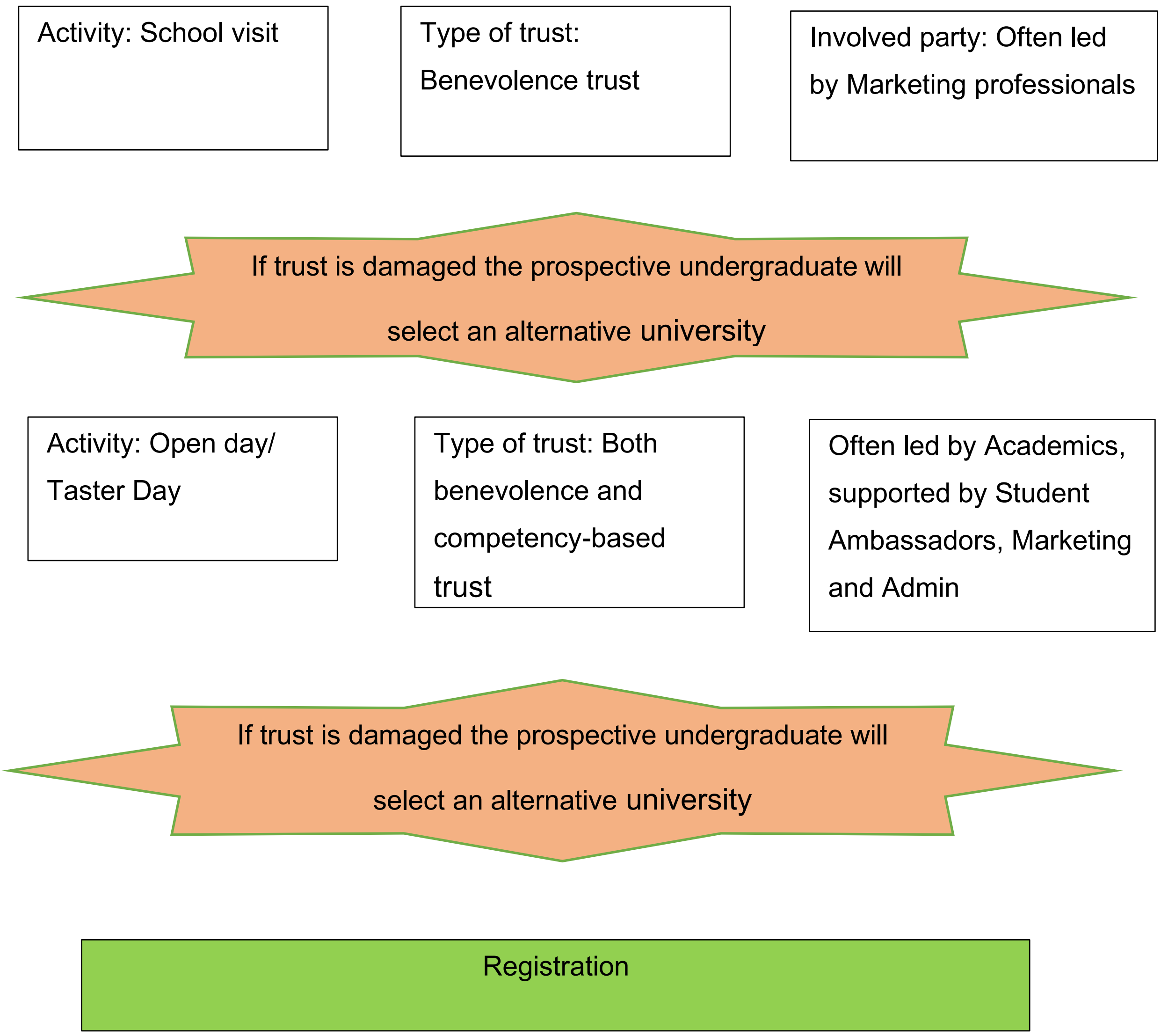

Figure 7.1 Interaction and developing trust

In the value creation model Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue that relationships are based on trust. Without that trust, relationships will come to an end. Relationship is a primary value creating activity. Hearing the views, examples and perceptions of participants in this study, through interaction in the early stages when students start to consider university courses, HEIs can initiate their value proposition and value creation activities.

7.5 Sub-theme 2 – Developing relationship and trust through Alumni

Alumni and admin staff had been perceived by student interviewees in this study differently to academics and marketing participants. Alumni influence in prospective undergraduates' perceptions of potential value is somewhat limited, though both student participants from the ancient foundations say otherwise. Both students agreed that once they have a close connection with alumni, they understand the value proposition and the actual value delivered as a reality, not a promise. It is viewed as insider knowledge of application processes and tips.

> Alumni I think it's quite a big thing. At xxxx a lot of people who go say like mom and dad went and then the other uncles went, aunties (Student – Ancient foundation 2).

> My grandma was having lunch and talking about how I had an interview. And a woman at another table, turned around and went, "Oh, my grandson went to xxxx". So, my grandma instantly got her grandson's telephone number... And he's like in his 30s. And I was made to ring him up and I asked him about the application process, which horrendously hasn't changed at all. So, it was really useful (Student - Ancient foundation 1).

Alumni, therefore, have an extended role in presenting their alma mater's value as they embody experience, success and commitment to their university by participating in activities aimed at potential undergraduates. Furthermore, alumni are unpaid and, therefore their words have greater independence, are more trusted, in agreement with Rehman et al (2022) and Snijders et al., (2020).

> We do not have recruitment activities. Alumni had organised some school visits and school recruitment event, because they also want their children and others to attend xxx university (Marketing professional- Ancient foundation 1).

Since they understand the value sought and may share similar social capital with potential undergraduates and their families, it is easier for such alumni to connect and establish trust (Levin at al., 2002). In this case, the alumnus wanted to ensure that the university keeps its centuries-long status quo, so inviting potential students into a successful club. This finding agrees with Dean and McLean (2021) who previously found that ancient foundations and their alumni maintain relationships, for both status and commercial purposes. For this, relationships are based around both benevolent and competence-based trust (Connelly et al., 2018).

This was not the case for other universities. Of 10 student interviews, 7 students were unfamiliar with alumni. Among the 3 who had prior understanding, they voiced little attention to alumni, a selection of sharp, direct views below make the point clear.

> To be honest, I don't even know if they even bothered with that [alumni] (Student – Redbrick 1).

> I don't actually know any alumni from xxxx. I met current students. (Student – Plate glass 2).

The relationship and value creation evident from the experience of study participants from ancient foundation universities is not seen in the data among the other universities. Although they admit alumni are important, it is an underused or disconnected resource.

> We don't have a history of engaging with alumni in an effective manner. So, we've probably got, you might describe them as last generation's alumni. Or we just lost contact (Marketing professional – Redbrick 1).

> I think one of the reasons alumni is important is that we're one of the country's biggest teacher training institutions. So, all of our teachers that are graduating, many of them will go on to teach in sixth forms. So actually, we need to stay in contact with those teachers, because they'll be the next generation of influencers, for students coming through. (Marketing professional – New university 3).

Interestingly, both academics and marketers were consistent in their views with those of student participants.

> It's not the programme level [alumni] but at university level that they keep in touch (Academic - University associate with University of London).

> So, in the US, it's just what you do... It's a very kind of smooth transition, you always come back to the university, and you engage. In the UK, we don't, we don't really cultivate that sense of emotion (Academic -Plate glass 3).

The last quote shows the importance of deeper, emotive links with the alma mater and the other excerpts set out how that could be used to create value for potential students, especially striking in a new university interviewee setting out the direct link between their teacher training alumni and the powerful role they have in guiding students to choose to study at this particular HEI. The reciprocal engagement with alumni could bring advantages for marketing and could create trust for potential students.

As Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue, value creation, i.e. co-creation of an offer that is a win-win for both parties, is not only about the trust in the dialogic nature of a relationship but also has a temporal dimension, allows learning together over time. Among the sample here, universities appreciate the importance of developing long-term relationships through alumni and early establishment of trust, but they have not invested in designing a role for them as part of their value proposition to potential undergraduates, except for ancient foundation participants. The application of the model uncovers a substantial gap in university value proposition design, which according to the majority of participants in this study is neglected in practice and policy. Some argued that this is a feature of UK HE, but through the lens of Ballantyne and Varey (2006), we can uncover the specific characteristics of value creation which this sample articulates are ignored – trust building, investment of time in relationship cultivation, dialogic communication and learning together.

The interviewees from the ancient foundations in this study share extensive commentary about the relatively hands-off, self-organising nature of alumni activity. This study did not investigate the origin of this practice. That said, since ancient foundations have been using their alumni for centuries, they compensate for the inadequate design integration of alumni roles into the value proposition to potential undergraduates through engagement over long periods of time. This is summarised in Figure 7.2 below.

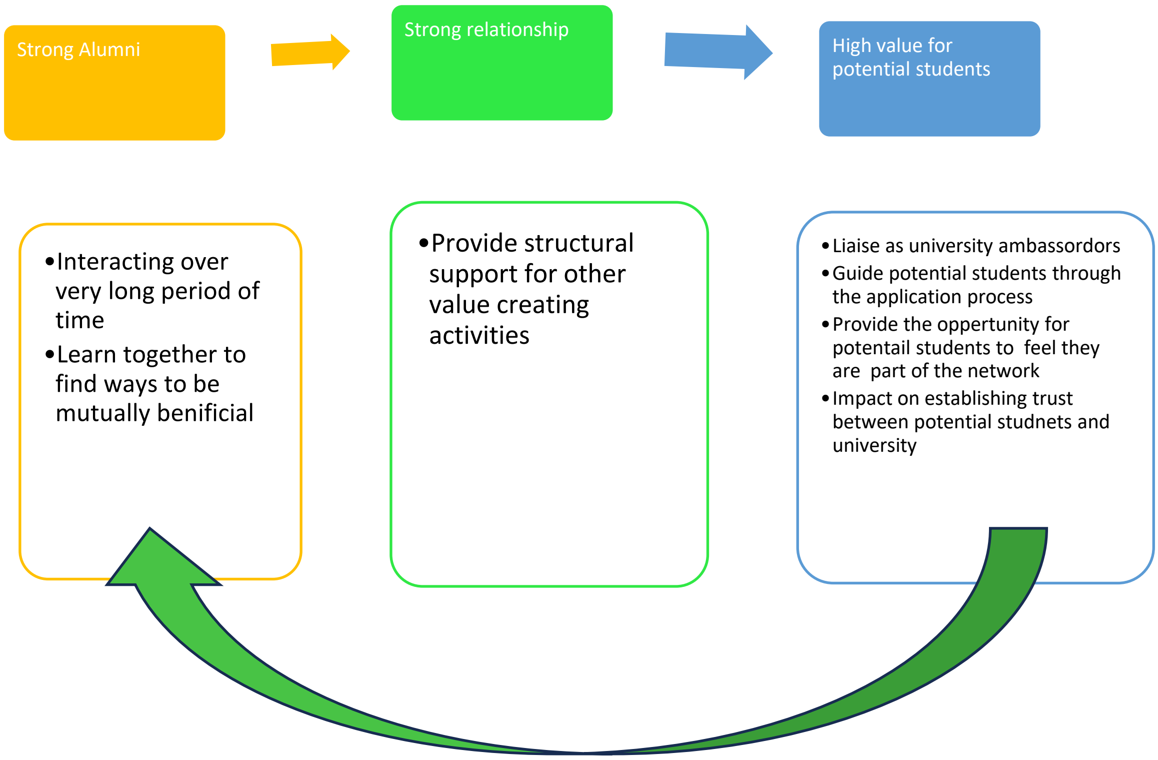

Figure 7.2 Ancient foundation structure

Research such as Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) agree with this argument, where they discuss the emotional attachment which leads to a sense of belonging that motivates them to develop long-term relationships with the university. This also provides structural support for other tangible value creating activities such as donations etc.

7.6 Conclusion of sub-theme 2 - Relationship between alumni and students

From the above analysis, under this theme, apart from ancient foundations in this study, other participants do not build alumni into their value proposition. Since they do not have an active engagement with alumni, there is no mutual learning or emotional connection. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue, to create value, it is important to learn together, and in this study the remaining participants note they do not even start the value creation activities. The model therefore allows this study to locate a potential missed opportunity for the sector but more directly, the particular elements of value creation that are neglected as reflected in the voices of the participants.

7.7 Sub-theme 3 – Relationship between students and Admin staff

Both academics and marketers interviewed, agreeing with prior research perceive admin as important to develop the initial relationship and as a choice factor in selecting a university. Research such as Jain (2022); Snijders et al., (2022) argue for the key role of admin staff; while others such as Guilbault (2016); Wong and Chapman (2023) show they have an indirect impact. To establish a clear understanding of this sub-theme in the data, all quotes from academics and marketers were placed in a continuum and analysed, summarised in the diagram below. Data has been placed in a continuum where one side is highly important and the other is not important. Participants Plate-glass 3 and Ancient university 2 interviews stated admin was highly important while the New university 2 states they are not. Participants from the University associated with university of London stated efficiency of admin staff does not affect them due to the model they operate. Data was unavailable for Ancient university 1 and Redbrick 2 universities. The rest of the university opinions were oscillating between highly important and not important.

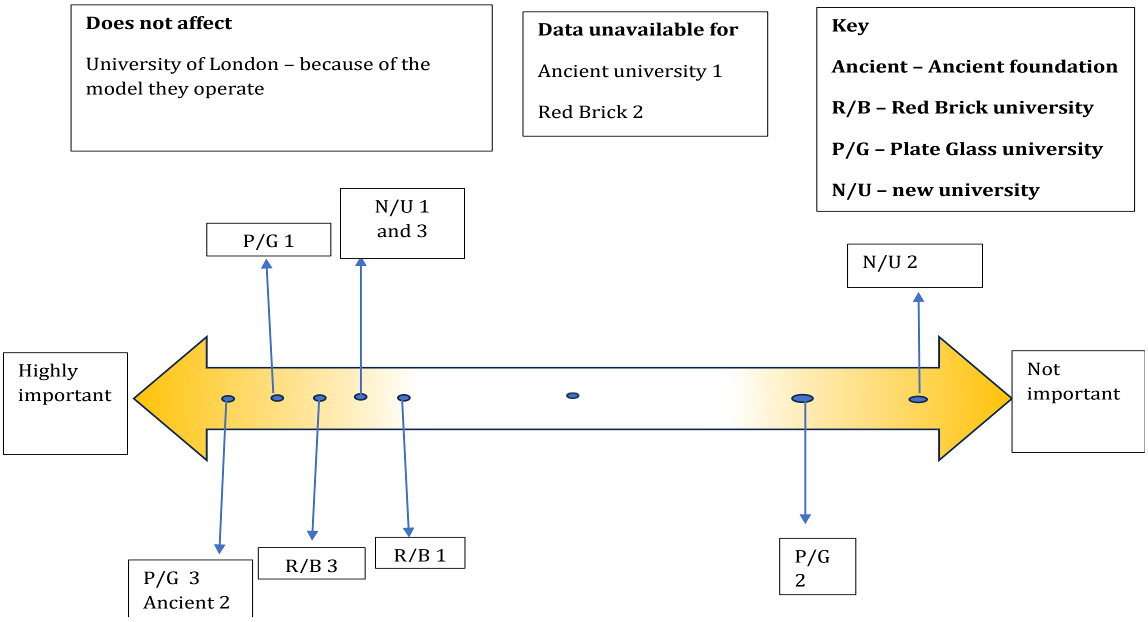

Figure 7.3 The role of administrative staff efficiency in shaping university choice; Perspectives from marketing professionals and academics'.

However, student interviewees did not perceive administrative staff in the same way. During the discussion, they were given a choice list and asked to say how important each was and any explanations for their preferences. For ease of access, a selection of excerpts is summarised below by university type in this research to illustrate the difference in admin role at the pre-selection stage as viewed by student participants sampled here. As per Table 7-1 out of the 10 student participants, 6 undergraduates stated admin staff did not have any impact on their ultimate choice of the university at which they were going to study. 2 others did not engage with this. Among the chosen quotes, most are clear and they also reinforce a similar message.

Type of university	Student
New university 1	neutral
New university 2	Not important at all.
Plate-glass 1	Important
Red Brick 1	Not important at all
Red Brick 2	Not important at all
University of London	Not important at all
Ancient foundation 2	Important

Table 7-1. Students' experiences of admin staff

Definitive statements from a Red Brick student interviewee that admin staff "definitely did not" influence their choice is countered by a new university undergraduates prioritising other factors, commenting that it is *not in the forefront for me* (Student, New university 1). These two stories make two clarifications of prior research where the opposite has been shown, prominently by Ivy (2008). On the other hand, from this research, one can see that the examination of the pre-selection stage of undergraduates suggests greater subtlety in the role of admin staff at the decision-making point. They do play a role but the sample here suggests it is at a later stage, and as Ivy (2008) found efficiency in process is important, but this study adds further depth by placing that post-university selection. Secondly, in the context of this study, at the early stage of creation and delivery of the value proposition, admin staff are likely to have a secondary role. In the voice of Plate-glass 1, it becomes a hygiene factor when deciding on the value that they could gain by choosing to study at a particular HEI.

> And it just, it's more security, knowing that the money that I'm paying for university is definitely worth it (Student- Plate-glass 1).

These participants' lived experiences and perceptions add to the findings of Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota (2010) and Sampaio et al., (2012). They argue that operational staff directly influence student satisfaction while they are studying at a university. The data from this study, by delving deeper into undergraduates' pre-start of study perceptions and assessments of value propositions from universities, uncovers deeper assumptions that add insight to extant research – arguably the count of activity which are weighed up by undergraduates to arrive at a satisfaction score is as yet not being recorded in their scorebook before they have started their course. This position was held in the minority by 2 study participants, one from a new university and another from a Plate-glass. In other words, this study helps us to locate the point at which admin staff start to influence what Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota (2010) and Sampaio et al., (2012) note as a crucial factor that influences student satisfaction.

7.8 Conclusion of sub-theme 3 – Importance of admin staff

As this chapter is about the theme of relating in the dataset, extant research identifies administrative staff and efficiency as a key factor that one could expect participants to raise (Ivy 2008). Admin staff is one group with whom potential undergraduates must interact and therefore their role in the design and delivery of value propositions could lead to building trust, setting the foundations of a potential relationship, especially if they are likely to meet again over time.

The exploratory nature of this study and the focus on pre-university selection interaction between universities and potential undergraduates allowed participants to delve deeper into their behaviours, assumptions, perceptions and lived experiences. In doing so, it uncovers that potential students sampled do not consider admin as a critical part of the value proposition or relationship building before joining the university. Therefore, opportunity to develop a value creation activity such as a relationship is minimal. Despite the majority of HE marketers and academics saying that this group of staff are important, the data suggests that they assume such significance after undergraduates have decided on the university to attend.

7.9 Sub-theme 4 – Relationship between academics and marketing professionals

One of the distinguishing features of this research is in its sampling of value creators, academics and HE marketers and value receivers, i.e. potential undergraduate students. Together, the study seeks to bring the voices of these participants to life at the university pre-selection point, using the lens of value creation. Since academics and HE marketers design the value proposition for potential undergraduates, Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) framework suggests they will need to work closely and especially learn from each other.

However, while this in an important sub-theme in the dataset, there is consistent commentary from both academic and HE marketing participants that they have divergent views of their respective roles in creating and presenting the value proposition to potential undergraduates. While most academics in this study believe they should be actively engaging in student recruitment strategies; marketing professionals believe academics should focus on scholarly activities and teaching. This tension was prominent across the sample, from new to red-brick universities. Analysis of this sub-theme is presented below in two data nodes.

1) Marketers' views on engaging academics in creating the offer for potential undergraduates.
2) Academics' views on their role in designing the offer.

7.9.1 Data node 1 – Marketers views on engaging academics in creating the offer for potential undergraduates

The following table displays a selection of excerpts which I have analysed around this node. They are chosen to illustrate attitudes, judgements about technical skill, perceptions of role boundaries, existing ways of gathering insight and motivations to exclude and include. These segments of data show that there is a mixed perspective on academic involvement and is it is spread across different types of universities participated in this study. Their opinions oscillate from being highly positive to negative.

Type of University	Negative, positive or neutral
New university 1	Negative
New university 2	Negative
New university 3	Positive
Plate-glass 1	Negative
Plate-glass 2	Negative
Plate-glass 3	Positive
University of London	Positive
Red brick 1	Positive
Red brick 2	Negative
Ancient foundation 2	Negative
Ancient foundation 1	Positive

Table 7-2. Marketing professionals' idea of academics.

While some marketers interviewed are willing for academics to participate, some have mistrust. This mistrust is around technical competency, *Academics may not understand this* (Marketing professional, New university 1), regarding the ability to assess value proposition consistency. The participant from New University 2 and Plate-glass 1, the latter observing, *Academics are academics'* suggest that it is out academics (Marketing professional, Plate-glass 1), remit. Even those who are positive about academic engagement in marketing activities, there is no real encouragement and proactive support, for example, the impersonal retort, *they can directly email us* (Marketing Professional, New university 3). This resonates with the competency-based trust (Levin et al., 2002). Ancient foundation 1 and Redbrick 1 stand out. *Absolutely critical to engage them* (Marketing professional, Redbrick 1), *They are very much interested, we involve them in great capacity* (Marketing professional, Ancient foundation 1). These participants believe in academic participation and mutual collaboration. Value creation research, Dollinger et al., (2018) suggests the latter is key to harnessing the insights which are needed to design the value proposition, including those for potential undergraduates.

Based on prior research Dollinger et al., (2018) and the model of value creation (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006), along with insight, interaction and feedback should be expected as those lead to communication and learning together. I note them here based on the participant quotes chosen to illustrate the challenges of collaboration for insight, but I will develop these further in the discussion of the next major theme analysed from the data, communication.

7.9.2 Data node 2 - Academic's opinion of getting involved in marketing campaigns

Most academics in this sample would like to participate in recruiting potential undergraduates, the kind of practice that value creation research suggests will lead to a better match between offer and need.

Academic participants believe they should have an active role in devising the offer, and some do that and many deliver activities that demonstrate the value proposition to those potential students. The following table is an analysis of academic interviews, their perception of participation. It has looked at the type of university, opinion summary and if that opinion shows marketers are willing to involve academics in value proposition design (positive) or disagree (negative) or if they are middle ground (neutral). Following table summarise the academics opinions.

Types of University	Negative, positive or neutral
New University 1	Positive
New university 2	Positive
New university 3	Positive
Plate-glass 1	Positive
Plate-glass 2	Positive
Plate-glass 3	Positive
University which has affiliation with University of London	Positive
Red brick 1	Positive
Ancient foundation 2	Positive

Table 7-3. Academic's opinion of getting involved in marketing campaigns.

All the academic participants have a positive approach for engaging in designing the offer to potential undergraduates. Prior research (Dollinger et al., 2018) requires insight sharing from those who understand the needs and hopes of customers. The quality of the insight and collaboration produces a stronger value proposition, more likely to persuade (Higuchi and Yamanka 2017). In sharing insight, the needs of potential undergraduates can be better understood by all parties that are responsible to gather the choice factors that will be set out in the value proposition. The aspiration is to produce value for both potential undergraduate and a particular university, the latter hoping to influence them to select that HEI of which to study.

The academic interviewee from new university 1 perceives the academics as representing the brand. Most of them believe they possess deep understanding of students. One academic goes further, stating rather they would be involved since they have continuous interaction with students compared to a marketing manager. Another outlines a supportive role to actively promote the offer shared by marketers on their social media. Academics have not questioned their competency to work with marketers to design the value proposition.

Although the marketing professionals in this study do like to engage academics in marketing, it is not as strong as the academic participants' desire. 1/3 of academic participants would like to be involved in designing and devising the offer for potential undergraduates. This is highlighted by the ancient foundation interviewee above, where she says that academics should not feel like "pawns", dictated to by marketing what to do in the open days. As noted in Conway (2012), these types of divisions are common in universities.

7.10 Summary of sub-theme 4 – relationship between academics and marketing professionals

The employment of the value creation framework (Ballantyne and Varey 2006) gives insight into the nature of the relationship, the major theme of this chapter. This particular sub-theme, academics and marketers, and the nodes analysed here, show these two parties' collaboration is not as strong as it could be and that could reduce their collective ability to produce value for potential students.

7.11 Summary of the relationship chapter

Chapter 6 presented the analysis and findings related to the major theme of value as perceived through the triangulation among the three interview groups. The conclusion is that the sample believes and shared lived experiences of what they understood as value for students as they choose an undergraduate programme – an offer built around personal transformation which helps a student to be better off than before. Ultimately, by employing the framework of value, participants align their perceptions with the subjective theory of value.

Following on, in this chapter I start the discussion of the value creation model (Ballantyne and Varey 2006) with the first major theme in the data - relationships. Overall, the richness of the data allows for an exploration of the sub-sets of the model, applying some aspects from services marketing to HE, clarifying others and testing the boundaries of some. From this analysis, relationship between academics and students starts from school visits and then develop through various contact points such as open days and applicant taster sessions. This relationship is important, and they helped the research to explore trust between the university and potential students. Engagement between potential students and student ambassadors also spark the beginning of trust but is then truncated.

Other sub-themes examine elements of relationship development between universities and potential undergraduates – alumni, admin staff, temporal commitment, marketers, and academics. The study found that potential undergraduates, before registration do not have a strong relationship with university admin staff, partially clarifying prior research (Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003; Ivy 2008; Jain 2022), likewise, except for the ancient foundation participants, alumni are not integrated into the design of the value proposition. This then illustrates the temporal dimension sub-theme since for relationships to be high quality, it is built up over time through trust and learning. Given that the alumni are quietly ignored by most interviewees in the activities shared in this research, the application of Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model to HE allows the identification of potential areas for policy change. This is also evident in suffusive comments from HE participants about the relationship between academic staff and marketing. The former are keen to develop the relationship but marketers, not so. Consequently, there is a tension between these two groups which the model would suggests would hamper effective offer design, value proposition delivery and therefore missing an opportunity to convince prospective undergraduates to select a particular HEI at which to study.

The chapter is therefore able to present the first of the three dimensions of the value creation model (Ballantyne and Varey 2006) to answer the research question about the nature, role and use of relationships in the value proposition employed at the pre-selection stage of undergraduate student recruitment.

Chapter 8: Communication and Knowledge Sharing as Value Creating Activity among HE Marketers, Academics and Potential Undergraduates

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter evaluated the data among HE participants through the services marketing value model. I examined the nature of value creating activities between potential students and universities, then between marketing professionals and academics. Relationships are, however, not possible without communication and knowledge sharing; therefore, I turn to this theme from the code book for analysis and discussion. Here, communication will be discussed first and then knowledge sharing.

8.2 Theme 1 - Communication as value creating activity

Following the model, when creating value, communication acts as a medium so that service actors can interact with one another (Varey 2005). In their research Ballantyne and Varey (2006) discussed three forms of communication, i.e., one-way communication (unidirectional), two-way communication (bidirectional with feedback loops), and dialogical interaction (the latter meaning a network of communication). Data is analysed from three parties i.e. students, academics and marketing professionals and reported in two sections, one for each sub-theme:

1) Sub-theme 1 - University and students – both HE marketers and academic are classed as the university here.
2) Sub-theme 2 – Communication between functions – specifically between marketing professionals and academics.

8.2.1 Sub-theme 1 – Communication between university and students

From the literature review and the last chapter, there are multiple points at which universities communicate with prospective students, such as school visits, open days and taster days (Brown 2013). The student interviewees suggest that one-way communication represents the primary form before enrolling at university. The two quotes below reflects on the unidirectional flow of information, noted by the 1st participant below that *it was quite top down*.

> The university does a lot more talking to like, … to us. There wasn't a lot of communication up from the students (Student – Ancient foundations 1).

This participant also recalled their experience of one-way transmission of information during the university visit to their school. This agrees with classical communication theory (Gibson 2002) where the primary focus of any communication is to pass information between two parties i.e., sender (the university) and receiver (student). However, in services marketing, this is typically not a value-creating activity.

> So, they spoke … just like a big summary of like modules and things. (Student – Red Brick 2).

This was a common recurring code in the data among student participants, all of whom experienced similar encounters. The second student voice also noted that there was little dialogue summarising, *and then we went to … the Bloomberg suite, [to see] like how we can use it* (Student – Red Brick 2).

All student participants in this study received either or combinations of leaflets, prospectuses and small souvenirs from the prospective university. The new university undergraduate interviewee shared the items sent to them.

> I remember receiving little flyers in the post. And little things like chocolate and maps of xxxx city. And obviously, emails.... (Student - New university 1).

This supports prior work from Marchand et al., (2017) in services marketing, where gifts are used for building relationships between customers and companies. This study shows a similar purpose in HE, extending engagement over time, which in value creation helps to develop relationships. Universities intentionally remind prospective students of their value proposition, and interactions over time, like findings from Ding and Zhang (2020).

Therefore, one way communication dominates the lived experiences shared by potential students within this sample as they engage with universities, in agreement with findings such as Sheilds and Peruta (2019). It also shows that dialogue is not taking place between universities and potential undergraduates. Dialogue is more effective than one-way communication for building trust which as shown in the last chapter, develops relationships (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). Perhaps the dialogue might happen later, once they become a student at a specific university; however, at this stage it does not. Therefore, universities are missing an opportunity of going beyond one-way to interacting dialogically – where deeper understanding can be used to develop value for both parties.

8.2.2 Forms of media supporting dialogue

Other forms of media can produce dialogue as Sheilds and Peruta (2019) found in their study of media use in HE marketing, such as online and social media. Some student participants directly make this point in the excerpts below.

> I think of the online booklets and leaflets they sent, and the university website (Student- Red brick 2*).*

> … the online like explorations of the campuses and like … the virtual guides (Student - Ancient foundation 2).

Alongside the 2 student participants above, all student participants agreed the university website was the main information source, a recurring finding among prior research such as Constantinides and Stagno (2010 and 2013); Domański and Sędkowski (2014); Ivy (2008) showed the importance of traditional media but also the power of word of mouth. Among the 12 in-depth student interviews, 1 from New University 2 said he applied for the specific university because his schoolteacher encouraged him to apply for that HEI. This finding reinforces the conclusion that the university website and initial mailings etc, remain a one-way form of communication, potentially limiting the ability to create value.

On the other hand, social media tends to be more dialogic (Rutter et al., 2016). Student participants interviewed note they engage with social media in other aspects of their lives and some did look at university social media.

> I watched some videos on YouTube and from xxx website, like students in the universities saying how they found like, just living (Student, Plate-glass 2).

There are ample prior studies of Instagram, and Facebook (Bamberger et al., 2020; Maresova et al., 2020), both for passing information and for building relationship with prospective students.

> I joined their social media, and oh at least, apart from maybe their Instagram page I looked at while I was applying (Student, University with University of London).

This student also noted *but [other] social media really wasn't somewhere that I kind of looked at [to] the research the uni at all*, unlike the first quote from Student (Plate-glass 2). This connects with a student (Red brick1) who was more definitive, *social media wise again, look, I just didn't follow any of the social media*.

To bring this to a close, all student participants in this study did not engage with university social media, disagreeing with Haywood and Scullion (2017). As heard in the voices across a range of university types above, including Ancient foundation (student 1) who noted *they don't have a social media presence that much*. The analysis shows that undergraduate participants had used social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram but just to seek information on the university. Student interviewees did not share lived experiences of interactive engagement on university social media but rather information-seeking or information receiving. Two-way and dialogic forms of communication produce more trust, insight, knowledge sharing and relationships than one-way (Ballantyne and Varey 2006).

What is evident from the voices of students set out in this section, is that the communicative interaction pillar has a secondary, mediating role especially since it is one-way, while; knowledge renewal and relationship development are the aspects of the theoretical framework which are more fully supported by the data gathered and analysed. The role communications play here, based on these findings is to support the relationship and trust evolution by setting out the universities' offerings and demonstrating the value proposition. Students are receptors (Morsing and Schultz 2006).

> We have very strong links with xxxx (an international automotive company) and that is something we are proud of. We do talk about it a lot during our open days. (Academic – New university 2)

In other words, being sold the benefits which is a key feature of one-way communication (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). In two-way communication information needs to flow both ways. i.e. sender (university) and receiver (students) (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). Although there is some information flow from students to the university as feedback, it is limited. Mechanisms are in place to collect feedback from potential undergraduates at school visits and open events, typically using emailed surveys, none of the student participants in this study were motivated to complete them.

Interestingly, unlike other industries such as fast-moving consumer goods or service industries (Hsieh and Hsieh 2015; Jiang 2022), one can argue in this study, that this one- way communication is sufficient for participants because universities do take their time to build a long- term relationship through different interventions which we have previously discussed under the relationship theme (open days, visit days and taster events) and trust. Unlike mainstream service industries, students have been in touch with the university since they are about 16 years old and it grows in intensity as they come closer to registration deadlines. Since this is a high investment decision, this slow process is important. In other words, it is a cumulative, complex process. Therefore, those interactions allow for face to face, personalised interaction with prospective undergraduates, making visible the university and its academics agreeing with existing research from Storme et al., (2017). These interactions also provide the opportunity to witness non-verbal communications as found recently by Ozuna and Steinhoff (2024). These create the base for a long-term relationship and trust.

8.2.3 Conclusion on sub-theme 1 – Communication between university and potential undergraduate

In summary, the research data from potential students, shows that a one-way communication system dominates. Therefore, based on the theoretical framework underpinning this study, the findings so far, suggest that this part of the model does not hold up in participants' lived experiences of their HEIs. Prior services marketing literature, in non-HE contexts show that without dialogue, it is difficult to develop trust (Yang et al., 2015) and to establish a long-lasting relationship (Pang et al., 2018). However, there are two main further points to consider here. First, from this and prior research both universities and students do not purely rely on communication to develop trust (Hemsley- Brown and Oplatka 2015). Potential undergraduates consider university rankings, league tables, teacher recommendations etc. when they make a university choice. Universities use one-way communication to establish the ground work, which other activities builds on. It sets out what they think students want to know, and are interested in, supporting their choices while hoping to attract them.

Although this is the case with regard to the communicative interaction pillar of the framework, as per discussion in sub-theme 1 above and literature, universities do manage to develop long-term relationships and trust by interacting with potential students, through open days and taster events, discussed in the previous chapter. The findings here show that communicative interaction is one-way and potential students accept this in HE, unlike other neoliberal markets.

Student participants here employ shopping behaviours of a consumer in pre-selection but do not make their choice like consumers or act like consumers post-choice (as established in research from Budd 2017). They are iterating and expanding their understanding of the university value proposition as it matches their needs and wants. Communications, in particular, two-way and dialogic forms play a more dominant role in other services like insurance, based on prior research (Finne and Grönroos 2017), but this study shows it is not the case here.

8.3 Sub-theme 2 – Communication between departments

Although there is established evidence that marketing communication is the process which converts marketing resources to economic outcomes (Fill and Turnbull 2023), communication is also a tool for people to collaborate and achieve objectives. As noted before, communication is essential to establish trust, which can develop long-term relationships, which is enhanced by knowledge sharing (Varey 2002). In the last chapter, under the theme of relationships, I discussed how these two staff groups, i.e. HE marketers and academics, see their roles in working together to present the value proposition to potential undergraduates. In this sub-theme, I analyse further the data on communication between these two university staff groups.

HE marketers interviewed in this study consistently outlined what they provided to academics who present the university's offer to potential undergraduates – for example, marketing materials and event programmes. Marketers also actively shared their experiences of collecting post-activity feedback from academics. The latter activity categorises their communication as two-way, a more effective form than one-way communication as set out by Ballantyne and Varey (2006).

Both marketing professionals and academic study participants note that the latter group have a minimal role in the planning and design of the offer, consistent with the norm in HE from studies by James and Derrick (2020); Lubbe et al., (2014). Following quotes evidence this.

> Interesting thing is marketing manager … that is never in touch with [students] decides how to run the campaign [rather] than academics who

> interact with student's day to day (Academic, Plate-glass 3).
>
> I'm thinking more about why did they not come and talk to us about marketing practice, because as much as we are academics, we're all practical, because we teach marketing (Academic, Plate-glass1).

There is more recent research which says that academics do have a role in discussing, sharing insights, providing feedback, resolving issues of trust as the HE marketers prepare the value proposition for the university (Falqueto et al., 2020; Vandersmissen and George 2023). It is worth noting that, in their paper, they have defined "faculty/ higher practitioners" as senior academic staff such as head of colleges, deans. However, in this research, I have defined academics as teaching/research staff members who have regular interaction with students including course leadership, teaching and research and who participate in recruitment activities for potential undergraduates. As found in this study, discussed in the last chapter and evident from above quotes, academics wanted a greater role in value proposition design; however, HE marketers were less uniform in their view.

Ballantyne and Varey (2006) noted that trust, interaction, time and collaboration are key to sharing insights and that was the focus of the analysis under the theme of relationship in the last chapter. However, for the creation of value they show that there should be dialogic communication between and among teams who possess knowledge that could enhance the value proposition. As I showed in the data excerpts in the last chapter in table 7.2, most HE marketers did not feel that academics need to be more involved, though a couple noted it is essential. Quotes such as *It is very important to involve them because they directly engage with our students* (Marketing professional- University which affiliated with London), and *I think it is absolutely critical to engage them* (Marketing professional – Red Brick 1) evidence the positive notion, *We don't get them involved, we want them to do their teaching* (Marketing professional – New university 1) shows the negative notion towards to academic engagement of designing marketing campaigns. This negative attitude sets up the barrier to communication that academic participants are voicing in this study – a lack of trust. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) establish the principle that without receiving the trust of another and being seen as trustworthy, dialogue comes to an end. Most HE marketers here do not give that trust to academics, and they argue this is so for a range of reasons, discussed below.

8.3.1 Sub-theme Node 1 – Barriers to dialogic communication

8.3.1.1 Marketing professionals' perceptions of their own expertise:

Marketing professionals believe their role is to lead these activities. Their assumption is that gives them power in designing the offer for potential undergraduates. Unlike academic participants, their lived experiences have given them the training and qualifications lead these tasks. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) resolve this by arguing for two-way, dialogic and on-going communication to build trust; further, that participants can disagree about what their respective knowledge positions might be.

8.3.1.2 HE Marketers lived experiences of the academic role:

In the narrative from the marketing professionals' interviews, most reflect on what they think academics need to do – i.e. teach and research. They conclude from their contexts, that there is no need to waste academic time on devising value propositions, and this assumes that marketing professionals understand the value proposition in its entirety. The risk here is that marketers are not sending the best message to the potential students, because they may not necessarily understand HE, especially the programmes, as well as academics do. Marketing interviewees also suggest that there is adequate feedback from academics to give them enough to assess how effective their offers are to prospective undergraduates. Academic participants in this study, do not agree. This brings out a tension from the model as it could affect the creation of value. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) show that dialogue cannot be reduced to one group's activity or to one person's viewpoint alone; it is by nature built on communication and relationship.

8.3.1.3 Lack of dialogue:

Lack of dialogic communication between these two functions make it less interactive which increases the problems around trust. According to Ballantyne and Varey (2006), by relating and communicating with each other effectively, participants can learn from each other. This resonates with research such as Pološki et al., (2021) where they show that poor communications between functions creates further mistrust producing a cyclical effect. Therefore, academic interviewees collectively and consistently share stories where the relationship is weak and identify what they believe are multiple communication gaps. These then, in their perceptions result in a less convincing offer to potential undergraduates, and that marketers are to blame.

8.3.1.4 Bureaucracy and hierarchy in the system:

Aside from the tensions noted above between the two staff groups in this study, an issue which affects both functions within the university is what I have categorised as issues related to structure – bureaucracy and the hierarchy which goes with that.

> We sent information through to the heads of departments, the Dean of the faculty and the Associate Dean … (Marketing professional, Plate-glass 1).

Keeping the various parties noted in the practice described above informed about marketing offers is inclusive and consistent with Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) value creation model. However, this is a long chain of transmission (researched by Fill and Turnbull 2023) before it gets to course leads and academics who are actually involved in recruiting potential undergraduates as observed by another participant below.

> We run reports and create dashboards … it goes through the head of the college. Then... to respective deputy head, then to department head. It is quite a long process you know… (marketing professional, New university 3).

Tierney and Minor (2004) found that less hierarchy within organisations improves communication. This is in line with Ballantyne and Varey (2006) with the findings from this study suggesting that such bureaucracy reduces the potential for value creation by a multi-layered chain between the academic at the delivery and the marketer. The greater the hierarchy, the risk of distortion of the message is higher as found previously in Tierney and Minor (2004) in services marketing.

8.3.2 Sub-theme Node 2 – Communications Feedback

Having looked at the barriers to dialogue, as I have noted above that communication barriers are evident from university participants sampled, there is two-way communication. It is classed as two-way because there is feedback collected by marketers from academics involved in student recruitment. Such feedback helps managers to change, adapt policies and tactics as well as a quality control function (Borch et al., 2020; Park et al., 2014). The excerpts below reflect the views of all 12 marketing professional participants:

> We do collect feedback from academics about how open days went (Marketing professional – Plate-glass 2).

> We email and ask them to complete a survey (Marketing professional - ancient foundation 2).

These quotes support a systematic approach to collecting feedback in the study. From the literature, there are various ways to collect feedback including focus groups, survey, or interviews (Borch et al., 2020). In this research, the most common tool for feedback is through surveys. This has been identified as the main tool of collecting feedback by 10 universities (except Redbrick 2 and 1, New university 1, who did not mention a specific tool). These surveys contained both qualitative (open ended questions) and quantitative (Likert style questions) elements which resonates. A key problem with collecting feedback through surveys is they do not support a dialogue (Cathcart et al., 2014), the latter which can provide deeper and more specific understanding of contexts and meanings (Darwin 2017; Steyn et al., 2019). All 12 academics in this research agree with the findings of these studies, consistently sharing that view as seen in the voices selected below:

> They ask us to complete a survey…… I am not sure what they do with them, to be honest. It might be better if they come and talk to us. So, they can at least capture what we think (Academic – Plate-glass 2).

> I think feedback should be collected through discussions, probably not for every event but for the overall recruitment cycle (Academic -University of London partner).

According to Ballantyne and Varey (2006 p 3), dialogue is the *extended version of a discussion between two or more parties.* The desire expressed by academic participants for extended feedback would support knowledge sharing and learning, both of which are value creating activities in the model (Ballantyne and Varey 2006) analysed as major themes of the study, in the previous and the next chapter. The narrowness of the feedback instrument coupled with hierarchy, little discussion and a perception that such dialogue is not needed points to missed opportunities for enhancing communications.

8.4 Summary of the theme communication

The major theme analysed and discussed in this section is the second of the three value creation activities – communication. The prior chapter focused on the theme of relationship and its sub-themes. The next section will complete the value creation triangle by looking at knowledge sharing. All three activities are interlinked and mutually supportive of each other. Without communication, relationships cannot be developed, and knowledge sharing will not happen. Therefore, this analysis focused on two sub-themes of communication: first, between university and students and second, between university staffing groups – i.e. HE marketers and academics involved in recruiting potential undergraduates. On the second sub-theme, I also analysed two nodes to further understand barriers to communication in value creation and the second node, instruments used by HE marketers to gather post-activity feedback from academics, as uncovered in the participants' narratives.

On sub-theme 1, the participants show that communication is one-way from university to the potential undergraduate. Importantly, one-way communication is accepted by these potential students in HE, unlike other neoliberal markets. So, the student participants here employ shopping behaviours of a consumer (websites, brochures, visits, tasters, gifts, social media platforms etc.) in pre-selection but have not acted like consumers because they have no two-way or dialogic communication.

On sub-theme 2, there is limited interaction between marketing professionals and academics who participate in recruitment activities. Between these two parties there is little active efforts to develop communications that could enhance their relationship, which affects trust and knowledge sharing; consequently, impact the value proposition made to potential undergraduates.

8.5 Theme 2 - Knowledge Sharing: Gaps and Opportunities to Improve Value Creation

8.5.1 Knowledge Sharing

As this study employs a services marketing model (Ballantyne and Varey's 2006) as a lens to understand how universities design and present their value proposition to potential undergraduates, Chapter 7 and earlier part of this chapter investigated the two value creating activities, i.e. relationship development and communication. This part of the chapter presents the third major theme in the study, knowledge sharing, which is a form of communication Gumus (2007), the latter being the final part of the triangle of value creation.

First, in sub-theme 1, I analyse and evaluate the data as it relates to the two types of knowledge reviewed in the literature, tacit and explicit knowledge and how universities mine them. Sub-theme 2 follows, evaluating the knowledge exchange mechanism which includes hierarchical, inter-functional and network exchange among the participants of this study.

8.5.2 Sub-theme 1 – Forms of knowledge in the universities in this study:

8.5.2.1 Tacit Knowledge:

This form of knowledge is know-how or built-in knowledge gained through long-term exposure to work, by observation, imitation, and mutual experience (Haldin-Herrgard 2000; McAdam et al., 2007). It operates at a more unconscious level and in many organisations, there is a risk of not being recognised as an important resource (Pavlicek 2009). Interaction allows actors to learn from each other as reflected immediately below by the Marketing professional, *people like, say, my head of admissions, fantastic insight … to help us… and also lots, many years of experience*. By doing so information sharing or knowledge exchange happens which is important for value creation (Ballantyne and Varey 2004). This story below illustrates some of the key aspects well:

> Our head of admissions is somebody who I worked with very closely, in understanding where students are applying from…? What is xxx applicant looking like, you know, for the postcodes, what are their agendas? What are they wanting to study? What do they go out and do and trying to get as much information as possible… to get a sense of who we should be targeting… And why don't they come here? (Marketing professional – New university 1).

According to this participant, this person has valuable insight into multiple aspects of the way the university should design its offer to potential undergraduates. The painting of a picture of this colleague fits with the aspects of the theory set out immediately above, not just knowledge but also their longevity in the university marketing department and their technical skills. In other words, the head of the admission has had long exposure in this domain and have gained substantial practical work experience. Understanding the needs a student has and the outcomes they desire is at the heart of designing an offer that captures the value, i.e. the benefits a potential student is seeking. That value proposition is the outcome of value creation activities and may or may not convince the potential undergraduate to study at a particular university.

Similarly, the second quote below, evidence experience and intelligence in a specific geographic area which produces unique insight, often vested in those individuals.

> The University was quite lucky because we work with those recognized teachers that will have a lot of insights about the audience and in the markets they come from, because they're based in those regions. They have ideas and insights that we cannot learn that easily (Academic – Plate-glass 2).

Their exposure to potential students and their regional context has made these colleagues sources of knowledge for this university. These characteristics reflect findings from prior literature such as Hadjimichael and Tsoukas (2019); McAdam et al., (2007); Pavlicek (2009) where they discuss tacit knowledge acquisition through their lived experience, observation and imitation. The power of releasing tacit knowledge among colleagues as a value creation activity is captured in the last part of this excerpt, *ideas and insights that we cannot learn that easily* (Academic Plate-glass 2).

In this research, two marketing professionals shared deliberate tactics of incorporating tacit knowledge. Others did not directly reveal tactics to uncover tacit knowledge. That does not mean they do not seek such hidden insight, but it does reveal a pattern in the literature, which has shown that without a clear mechanism to uncover such insight, it is common to lose it (Ballantyne and Varey 2006), with a negative effect on the organisational offer.

Another area of tacit knowledge that was visible is through alumni, ambassadors, current students and admin staff, though the study could have probed the latter group some more. Alumni have lived experiences as former university students, some of which is shared with current students and ambassadors. Their knowledge and ability to generate trust is only recognised by ancient foundations and while all university HE marketers recognise their value, there is little by way of a relationship to support them.

Chapter 7 examined how marketing professionals use ambassadors deliberately to harness tacit knowledge. Potential students in this study confirm how valuable this was in believing the university value proposition. Universities are possibly missing an opportunity here to turn this from a transaction on open days to a relationship. The characteristics to support this interaction turning into a broader role for schools and other outreach, mentoring of potential students is significant.

Ancient foundations have the same opportunity with current students who act as ambassadors voluntarily. Applying the model points to an opportunity for policy change to take a more structured approach to this group, in a similar way as they do with alumni. Clearly current students are sharing an authentic experience with potential students on their own initiative.

Now I turn to discuss explicit knowledge.

8.5.2.2 Explicit Knowledge:

Explicit knowledge is the knowledge gained through formal trainings, qualifications, data systems results and patterns (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). In this research, there is a range of examples of dedicated mechanisms and actions to include explicit knowledge in offer design. Most of the university participants had extensive lived experiences of training, practical ways and stories about how they develop their current staff. All marketing professionals (12/12 participants) agreed that their universities have a customer relations management (CRM) software, and they do use them for understanding student recruitment patterns, develop plans and for building staff capacity as seen below.

The first piece of data points to the sense of urgency that this particular HE marketing interviewee felt in not having a CRM system. There is also the sense that this has put them behind due to limited experience.

> We weren't up and running with a CRM until very late. And so, we've only had really couple of years, actually working with it– (Marketing professional, Plate-glass 2)

Having access to such explicit knowledge is of such importance that some universities have developed this internally, rather than the usual way of sourcing from external specialist providers.

> We have an in-house built CRM…. it does need some updates and modernising, but it gives us what we want … about our students, where they come from, touch points. Yes, we use the system… to monitor all recruitment data and make predictions – (Marketing professional – Ancient foundation 1)

It is made obvious by this participant that the explicit knowledge produced from the CRM system is a control tool for senior leadership, to guide the design, amendment and targeting of the value proposition to potential undergraduates. These findings concur with prior research on explicit knowledge (Higuchi and Yamanka 2017).

8.5.3 Conclusion of sub-theme 1 - Forms of knowledge among universities:

For value creation it is important to have both tacit and explicit knowledge following Ballantyne and Varey (2006). Most university interviewees, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not recognise tacit knowledge, nor were they able to immediately or with further probing able to speak about the mechanisms to reveal such insights from their teams. In established services markets, knowledge is one of the dominant sources for competitive advantage (Higuchi and Yamanka 2017). However, despite marketisation, universities are not as consumer-driven, competitor driven as conventional markets (Budd 2017) and perhaps the participants are reflecting that lived reality. There were two participants, however, who did recognise explicitly the need to leverage tacit knowledge to improve their offer to prospective students. Also, despite participants not directly pointing to having similar mechanisms, they do work collaboratively with other HE marketers and with academic leadership, which must include both tacit and explicit knowledge. In summary, by applying a value lens to this study, we can identify potential opportunities to further explore or an area for policy change that would improve value creation through recognising and using both forms of knowledge.

8.6 Sub-theme 2 – Knowledge exchange mechanisms:

Reference is made immediately above to knowledge as competitive advantage. Prior research shows that to elevate that insight into advantage over others in the marketplace, knowledge sharing is essential (Abdul-Jalal et al., 2013). I will analyse and discuss the outcomes from the data in relation to knowledge sharing tools including hierarchical, inter-functional and network exchange among the participants of this study.

Analysis of university participants data shows that knowledge sharing happens within their university taking the form of hierarchical exchange (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). Similar to what the analysis revealed for the major theme communication in the last section, knowledge passes through the formal hierarchy – from marketing professionals to college head, to deputy, to subject group leader, then to the course leaders and academics, as shown below from both sides of the knowledge sharing parties in this study.

> What we want to know will be coming from our head of the college – (Academic -New university 1).

This is in agreement with Ballantyne and Varey (2006) who set out that knowledge is legitimized through these formal structures. This dominant channel of transmission is top-down as we hear in the voice of the academic above. Likewise, the HE marketer below, deliberately points to the explicit guidelines or norms for such knowledge sharing.

> We inform everything to deans and head of colleges and faculties – (Marketing professional- Red brick 1).

Research such as Levin et al., (2002) found a formal structure can support effective information flow and knowledge sharing. However, Ballantyne and Varey (2006) took issue with this, arguing that the hierarchical sharing is less effective in value creation, preferring inter-functional exchange and network exchange as producing more fluid knowledge exchange. Inter-functional refers to the exchange of knowledge between the internal customers, here marketers and academics. That knowledge is made valuable by reference to potential student needs.

Although there is sharing about potential students' needs, there is a pattern which has run through the evaluation and discussion of the data – that academics and HE marketers could work more collaboratively. The literature review discussed how relationship, knowledge sharing and communication are intertwined (Gumus 2007; Rumanti et al., 2017). In chapter 7, evaluation of relationships, I have shown that there are limits in how academics and HE marketers perceive each other's roles; in theme communication, provides data to support two-way flow not dialogue; and here, the consequence is limited inter-functional exchange. All of these reflect the partial trust on both sides as trust is essential for sharing knowledge (Putnam 2000).

Marketing professionals in this sample believe that academics are not trained or have the required knowledge. Sentences such as *we are the specialists, academics have specific job of teaching (*Marketing professional, new university

3), make the point about lack of competence based trust (Ziegler and Golbeck 2007) Competency works as a facilitator to establish trust and to share knowledge (Szulanski 1996). Even when there is trust, there needs to be a willingness to share as Rumanti et al., (2017) found. This is heightened by inadequate opportunities for both parties to interact with each other. Trust between both parties could mitigate the perceived risk of unworthiness (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1996) as evidenced by the participants from ancient foundations. While this research did not investigate the factors for reluctancy in sharing knowledge, the literature around marketisation means greater commercial positional power in universities to managerial services (Brown and Carasso 2013). There is a heartfelt desire in this voice:

> We have got so many ideas of how to present our courses ... but marketing people do not even want to listen to those – (Academic, Redbrick 2).

As a result, if we follow the value creation model (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006), the offer, the value proposition is limited because the full understanding of potential undergraduates' needs does not feed into the final marketing messages. The latter is the limiting factor Ballantyne and Varey (2006) set out for inter-functional forms of knowledge sharing, heard in the quote below.

> It will be nice if we can work together. I mean at the end of the day we need good students and give a good experience to our students. Interestingly, marketing has not shown any enthusiasm – (Academic, Plate-glass 2).

This means that network exchange for knowledge sharing is not possible based on what we have found from the participants in this study. In this form of knowledge sharing, knowledge generated is organically shared within what could be described as informal, collaborative groups, motivated by a shared interest (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). There is some sense of that within the marketing teams and within academic teams but not necessarily between functions.

8.6.1 Conclusion to sub-theme 2 – forms of knowledge sharing

The sample of universities have a hierarchical exchange of knowledge through a formal structure. The also have some aspects of inter-functional exchange but that is limited by the weak relationship, previously discussed in chapter 7. A common characteristic of network exchange is that knowledge generated and shared within a network of participants who are willing and comfortable to share information. However, with two-way rather than dialogue as found under the analysis of the communication theme, network exchange is not supported by the data and analyses here. Lack of communication and collaborative infrastructure between academics and marketing professionals has led to some lack of trust.

8.6.2 Summary of theme 2– knowledge sharing

From the above analysis and evaluation of the theme of knowledge sharing, and sub-theme 1, forms of knowledge and sub-theme 2, forms of knowledge sharing, the application of the value creation model to study how HE marketers and academics exchange insight and learn together, has allowed the research to uncover the extent to which this limits or enhances what these two functions offer to potential students in the HE sector.

8.6.3 Chapter Conclusion:

In the previous chapter, in order to understand how the services marketing consumer value model applies to HE, I examined the relationship between students and the university, then between marketing professionals and academics. Relationships are, however, not possible without communication and knowledge sharing – these are the remaining two value creating activities in the model which this research has tested in the context of university pre-selection. The study finds one-way communication is dominant between universities and students and two-way communication between the two university groups examined. There is no dialogue between any parties which works as a barrier for value creation, especially to establish trust among parties.

This study, therefore, shows that the model can identify where there are gaps in knowledge-sharing and where there is room for potential enhancement of communications to produce a better value proposition. Since there is no dialogic communication, and no pre-established trust network of knowledge, the study also concluded that exchange is absent. This is powerful insight from applying this value lens and the value creation model to HE.

Chapter 9: Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

9.1 Introduction

With marketisation, UK HE has experienced much change. Universities have become more autonomous, accountable and in competition for student numbers (Brown and Carasso 2013). It is evident from the literature review, research on university marketing has grown substantially – studies which focus on student recruitment strategies, HE marketing mix, branding, which can be summarised under the heading of university choice factors (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2016).

Creating value is the core of marketing. As per my discussion in the literature review, industries operating in any other markets are highly focused on understanding consumer's needs and wants which allows them to create propositions and deliver value. This is an established research area in conventional services marketing.

However, there is a paucity in HE despite being one of the largest service industries, especially at the pre-selection stage for potential undergraduate students. Therefore, this research investigated the concept of value creation within HE at the university pre-selection stage by using a seminal services marketing model i.e. that of Ballantyne and Varey's (2006). It explored what academic staff, marketing professionals of universities and potential undergraduates understand as value. It also sought to understand the three value creating activities in the model, namely relationship development, communication and knowledge sharing within the context of UK HE.

I have used three value evaluators – potential undergraduate students, university marketing professionals and academics who are involved in presenting the university's offer to those students. There were 32 participants altogether from 12 different universities, in order to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: What do university staff and students perceive as value in HE?

RQ2: How does the consumer value model, established by Ballantyne and Varey (2006) work in the context of HE marketing to create value? It will examine three value creating activities in the model.

- Relationship
- Communication
- Knowledge sharing

RQ3: What role does trust play in facilitating the value creation activities – relationship, communication and knowledge-sharing?

This concluding chapter provides some closing reflections, contributions this research has made, limitations, implications for policy and suggestions for further study.

9.2 What do university staff and students perceive as value?

In chapter 6, I presented the conception of value in HE as viewed by the participants in this study, as transforming students' lives through engaging in HE programmes. This was the common thread among all three participant groups (academics, marketing professionals and students), setting this out as a desire to be better than their current state, post study. This shows that the consumer value conception of Gronroos (2008), as the achievement of a better state, in conventional services marketing is applicable to HE.

The core of what is perceived as value – education as transformation is evidenced throughout the analyses. Both academics and marketing professionals believe, the transformation of a student will be either based on changing students' perception of the world or changing them to be able to secure better employment. It is consistent across all the different types of universities in this sample.

However, how that future outcome is delivered to students is specific to each university, i.e. based on their perceived strengths. Consequently, value propositions that universities put forward is specific to each university's context or based on characteristics of their broad grouping. Universities use the more tangible, university choice factors based on existing research, to construct the value proposition. For example, while those who belong to the high ranked group prioritised university rankings; others focused on their teaching staff. In other words, they focus on a) what is important to them and b) what they see as their USP, or what marks them out as different or better. This positions conceptions of value in this research in line with the economic subjective theory of value (Mazzucato 2018).

Students have a more tangible understanding of value as it is based on the outcomes they can reach through the course. They believe the value of a degree, at the pre-selection stage, resides in that HEIs ability to convince the student they will be better prepared to secure a job and higher income afterwards. Using terms such as *competitive advantage* portrays that they all want to be in an improved position when they enter the labour market, be in a better position in their lives. This was their prime reason, which reflects an instrumental view of HE (Budd 2017). This is not subjective to any type of student, i.e. it is common to those attending ancient foundations to new universities. However, similar to universities, they use the value proposition made by universities to judge what is the best way to experience HE. That judgment of the value proposition, students' belief in the likely outcomes that could be achieved if they chose to study at that HEI, is subjective to each potential undergraduate. This disagrees with the findings from research such as Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2021), where they found observable patterns in undergraduate university selection.

From this research, programme was the most important element in the value proposition, consistent with several prior studies. Elements such as research rankings is important for students' decision making especially those who attend high ranking universities (Ball et al., 2005). Research on university choice factors covers all the above areas (Hemsley-Brown and Opalatka 2016) and marketing mix (Ivy 2008).

Those choice factors are included in the value proposition, into design assumptions, promised outcomes for potential undergraduate students. Therefore, both academics and HE marketers make a conscious effort to differentiate their offer as a way to convince students this course, this university is the best match to their needs for transformation of self (skills, knowledge) or circumstance (job recruitment advantage, performance) – and so, the concept of a value proposition as deployed in conventional services marketing is employed by practitioners. Therefore, this study has produced a holistic integration of choice factors under the theoretical frame of value, subjective value and its sub-concepts of value creating activities.

9.3 Value Proposition Canvas

By examining the literature and findings of this research, the following value proposition canvas was created. However, this is not specific to any type of university but for the UK HE industry in general. From Figure 9.1 below, it shows that students are looking for ways of being successful in their university journey and universities should be able to find ways to meet those by addressing the pains that students may be facing. While doing that universities should also focus on creating gains. These activities will differentiate them from their counterparts which will should ultimately lead to higher student satisfaction and more market share.

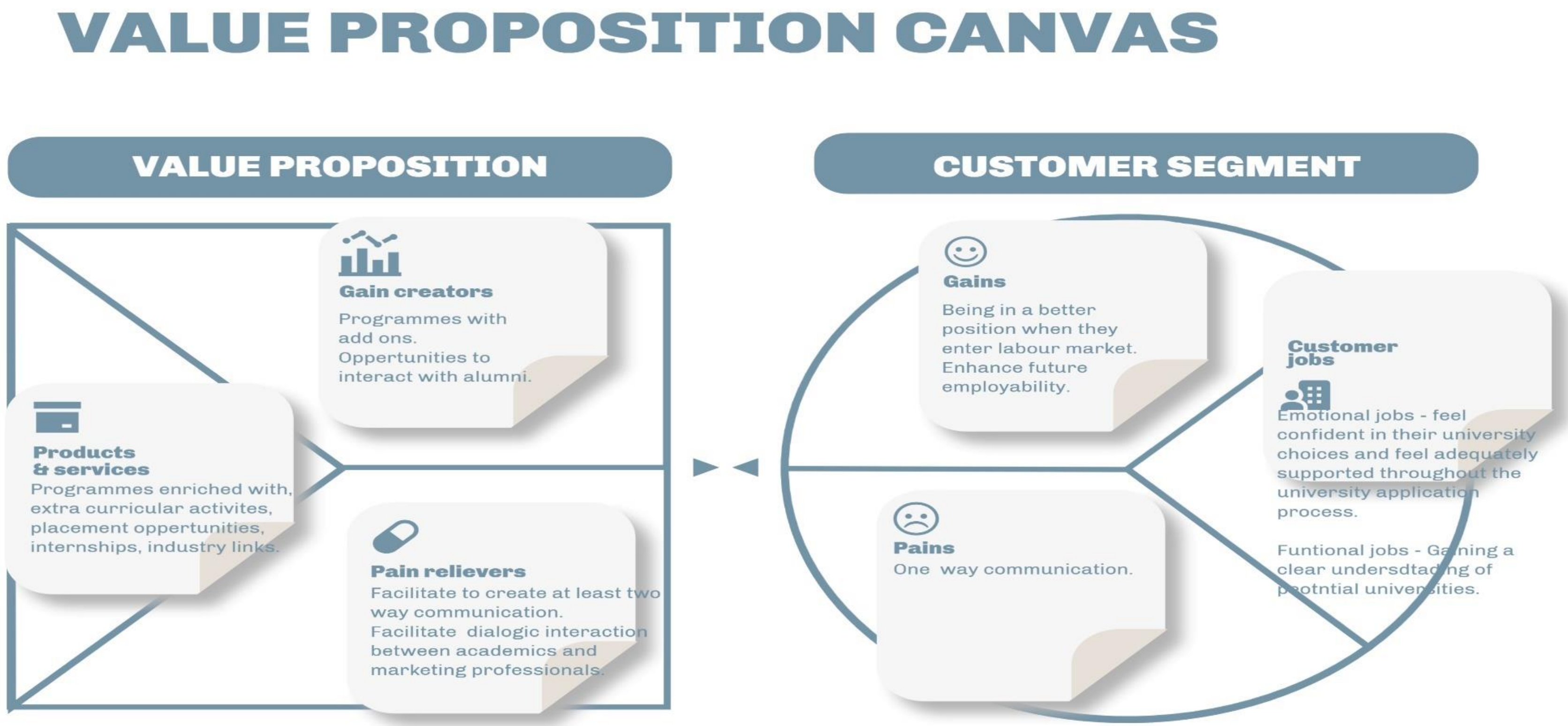

Figure 9.1. Value Proposition Canvas HE

While the circle represents the customer profile, the square represents the value map or proposition. There are three elements in customer profile;

9.3.1 Jobs

The overall findings demonstrate that functional jobs and emotional jobs are important for student university choice.

Functional jobs are primarily centred around gaining a clear understanding of potential universities. They achieve this through open days, application taster days and school visits. The analysis, particularly in chapter 7, highlights how interpersonal interactions, mainly with university academics and ambassadors play a pivotal role and inform students' decision making. These relationships translate functional information into meaningful insights about institutional suitability. Furthermore, the influence of alumni is particularly important in Ancient foundations, suggesting that established alumni networks hold an important role in these particular contexts. Overall, these findings show that university choices are guided by both information seeking and relational experiences.

Emotional jobs are focused on students' need to feel confident in their choices and adequately supported throughout the university application process. As evident in Chapter 6, this emotional reassurance is shaped through various interaction points in open days, application taster days and school visits. Students evaluate specific features of the course such as opportunities for placements, extra-curricular activities, and industry partnerships. While university rankings were seen as a form of security for some students, their importance were related to specific types of universities. In contrast to functional jobs, emotional jobs are inherently affective in nature, making trust in an important element. The Chapter 7 discussion shows that trust develops gradually throughout extended period prior to application, and if it gets violated students will not consider that specific institute further. Although literature such as Ivy (2008) emphasise the importance of role of admin staff in supporting during the application stage, the findings from chapter 7.7 sub-theme 3, shows participants in this study did not consider admin staff to be important in their emotional jobs. Overall, these insights highlight that emotional jobs are strongly aligned with long term relationship building processes, and the reassurance from course related attributes while revealing some divergence between this study's findings and existing literature.

9.3.2 Pains

Pains represent blockages and problems the customer may encounter while trying to achieve their objectives (Osterwalder et al., 2014). As highlighted in chapter 8, the most significant pain students encounter is one-way communication whereby universities do not facilitate the opportunity for genuine dialogical interaction. This limits knowledge sharing between two parties. Despite this limitation, it is evident that students nonetheless have to rely on this one-way communication to meet their functional informational needs and emotional reassurance. Although Ballantyne and Varey (2006) emphasise the importance of dialogic communication in fostering trust, this study reveals a different dynamic; trust is developed through long term interaction with a range of stakeholders. This suggest that, in the context of university choice, trust formation is gradual and relational rather than communicative in a dialogical sense.

9.3.3 Gains

My analysis demonstrates the key gains students seek aligns with Osterwalder et al.'s (2014) definition of gains as the positive outcomes, i.e. what the customer expects when the job is successfully completed. For the participants in this study the most significant positive gain is the expectation of being in a better position when they enter the labour market upon graduation. As discussed in subthemes 6.3, students using terms such as competitive advantage reflects a clear desire to enhance their future employability and overall life prospects, agreeing with Gronroos' (2008) definition of value. Achieving this desired outcome relies on the fulfilment of both emotional jobs and functional jobs, while integrating practical information seeking with emotional reassurance to evaluate how effectively university can support their ambitions.

In the context of this study, the value map illustrates how universities attempt to support students in completing their functional and emotional jobs, while reducing pains and enhancing gains students seek. It contains three components, which contextualised for this study below.

9.3.4 Product and services

Overall, the analysis indicates that products and services identified by Osterwalder et al. (2014) represent the institutional offerings to consumers for getting their jobs done. As highlighted in Chapter 6.2, both academics and marketing professionals in this study emphasised that academic programmes are the most significant component that university offer to enhance student's overall life prospects. Participants also noted, when programmes are coupled with extra-curricular activities as discussed in sub-theme 6.2.2 and reinforced by university rankings albeit with some disagreements/differences – this enhances the ability to position their students in a better position in the graduate labour market. These institutional offerings are viewed as mechanisms through which universities can help students to secure a stronger future position, thereby contributing to their overall life enhancement.

9.3.5 Pain relievers

In conclusion, pain relievers refer to the ways in which a business's products and services can reduced the pains customers experience (Osterwalder et al., 2014). Within the context of this study, the most significant pain is identified as dominant one-way communication. Although current practices may suffice for basic information transfer, they restrict opportunities for universities to gain insights from students. Despite knowledge sharing and capturing being essential for value creation (Ballantyne and Varey 2006), this practice remains prevalent. It is therefore critical for universities to develop mechanisms that facilitate two-way communication between students and universities, drawing on the various interaction points outlined in Chapter 7.

Addressing this pain should not be limited to improving communication with students but extend to internal communication within the institution. Chapter 7 highlights a weak relationship between academics and marketing professional participants, while Chapter 8 highlights structural barriers for developing a dialogic interaction, ultimately undermining trust. To establish effective pain relievers, universities must address these barriers while simultaneously fostering two-way communication with students. Such approach es will allow universities to determine the pain students experience and gain they seek but will also support to co-create value for both students and universities.

9.3.6 Gain creators

As per the model, gain creators refer to the specific ways institutions create positive outcomes based on customer profiles (Osterwalder et al., 2014). Students in this study are primarily seeking to enhance their employability skills, securing a stronger position in the labour market, ultimately improving their lives. As discussed in the product and service section, universities attempt to address these expectations by offering programmes coupled with extra-curricular activities including strong industry links and placement opportunities etc. While these are positively viewed, a common theme emerged among all participants in a notable gap in the role of alumni as potential gain creators. As per the conclusion in Chapter 7.6, apart from Ancient foundation universities in this study, other participants did not include alumni into their gain creators, suggesting a missed opportunity for universities to leverage alumni as a valuable source of labour market advantage. This gap indicates that universities could further advance their gain creators by systematically incorporating alumni into their gain creators.

In summary, as the Value Proposition Canvas has demonstrated, that student’s university choices are shaped by interactions between their functional and emotional jobs, the pain that hinder these jobs, and the gains they are seeking to achieve. It also shows that universities do have mechanisms in place to relieve pains, provide support to fulfil both types of jobs (while providing information students are seeking, building emotional reassurance) and increase students' long term employability prospectus.

However, gaps remain, particularly related to communication, underused alumni, limited internal communication, relationship and trust between adamic and marketing professionals. Addressing these issues presents an opportunity for universities to strengthen their pain relievers and gain creators, and to deliver a better, student-centred value proposition.

9.4 How does the consumer value model, established by Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) work in the context of HE?

To answer this question all three value creating activities in the Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model have been discussed because all three i.e., relationships, communication and knowledge sharing are connected, facilitating and amplifying each other.

In a marketised environment, one way in which universities differentiate themselves from others is through the offer they make to students, in a value proposition to potential undergraduates (Pawar 2020). These reflect characteristics of organisations operating in conventional services marketing. Therefore, the question arises if and to what extent such models which are applicable to conventional services are relevant to HE too, itself an ancient part of the service sector. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) discuss value creation activities for service organisations (insurance, healthcare, telecommunications etc.), those who provide "intangible" solutions, often transitioning from monopolies or government services to open conceptions of markets today. Services are provided when someone does something to help another (Gronroos and Voima 2013) and are central to marketing activity (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). I have used Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model to investigate if and how it is possible to create value for potential students at the point when they are applying for a university. The conclusions from applying the three value creating activities under the model are set out below.

9.4.1 Relationship:

There is a relationship between potential students and academics and that makes a significant contribution when they select a university. Through school visits, open days, and application taster days activities are initiated. Over a 2-year period, potential students build those initial contacts into relationships with academics. Student ambassadors have a significant role too since they contribute to developing the relationship between potential students and the respective university.

Moving on to the role of alumni in developing relationships, apart from those at ancient foundations in this study, other participants did not have a strong connection with alumni. Since they do not have an active engagement, there is little possibility of a relationship between university participants and alumni to influence the value proposition design or delivery. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue that by relating, actors can learn together to create value. The model therefore, allows this study to locate a potential missed opportunity for these HEIs but more directly, the elements of value creation that are neglected. However, it is important to note, alumni are different, represent those who had already graduated from the university (McAlexander and Koenig 2001) and are not sampled among the groups in this study.

Extant research identifies admin staff as one group with whom potential undergraduates must interact (Ivy 2008) and therefore, their role in the design and delivery of value propositions could lead to building trust, setting the foundations of a potential relationship, especially if they are likely to meet, over time. The exploratory nature of this study and the focus on pre-university selection interaction between universities and potential undergraduates allowed participants to delve deeper into their behaviours, assumptions, perceptions and lived experiences. In doing so, it uncovers that potential students sampled do not foreground admin as a critical part of the value proposition or relationship building before joining the university. Therefore, opportunity to develop a value creation activity such as a relationship is minimal.

Despite the majority of HE marketers and academics saying that this group of staff are important, the analysis suggests that they assume such significance after undergraduates have decided on the university to attend. This finding helps to clarify some prior research. Non-academic staff are important but at the pre-selection point, the students here do not see this as a decisive factor. In other words, it has less weight before they decide to make their selection of where to study.

The model allowed the research to analyse relationships between university and potential undergraduates, between admin and potential student, between alumni and HE marketer and the final sub-theme relationship between academics involved in student recruitment and HE marketers. Analysis has shown tension in the relationship between marketing professionals and academics. While academics would like to develop a closer relationship, marketing professionals are sceptical. They do not trust that academics have the skills to participate in creating value (Conway 2012).

The model has allowed the study to analyse relationships between universities and potential undergraduates, and between HE marketers and academics. These sub-themes could be deductively produced in the analysis because the research was designed around the model using these key relationships. What inductively emerged was the relationship between universities and alumni involved in presenting to potential students and between students and academic admin staff.

9.4.2 Communication:

Without communication, relationships will not be developed and knowledge sharing will not happen. From this study, between these university participants and student interviewees, there is one-way communication, with little evidence of other forms of communication – two-way and dialogue. The literature review identified the latter two forms as more effective in supporting value creation. One-way communication suggests that the primary objective of these marketing professionals is to inform prospective students about their respective universities' offers.

However, unlike other markets discussed in the literature review, this one-way communication appears to satisfy the initial needs of potential undergraduates. Students have acted like consumers although there is no two-way or dialogic communication. Such a finding opens up the possibility of clarifying one part of prior research – the controversial issue of students as consumers. From this study, student participants employ shopping behaviours of a consumer (websites, brochures, visits, tasters, gifts, social media platforms etc.). However, by studying the pre-selection stage, we can see such behaviours occurring before undergraduates decide where to study. Prior research already shows that students do not see themselves, largely as consumers (Budd 2017). In other words, students have different kind of relationships with universities at different points in their student journey. They could also be potential clients and partners, during or after graduation.

Between marketing professionals and academics in this research, there is two-way communication. It is difficult for these two parties to go further and engage in dialogue since there is limited trust. Further, there are too many layers in the information flow hierarchy which disrupt developing a closer relationship and effective communications. Since marketing professionals and front-line academics in this study do not have effective communication. In other words, despite academics being keen, marketing professionals believe that they already have enough input from academics. This nature of information exchange reinforces that division and lack of understanding. Furthermore, university participants make little active efforts to develop communications that could enhance their relationship, for example static forms of feedback, that then further affects trust and knowledge sharing.

9.4.3 Knowledge sharing:

There are two different types of knowledge sources: tacit and explicit. For value creation both source of knowledge is important (Ballantyne and Varey 2006) and is used by designers of the offer to produce the value proposition. In this research, that was limited to HE marketing professionals as academics did not have an active role. This study revealed both sources of knowledge exist although perhaps unsurprisingly, few participants recognised tacit knowledge. There were two university HE marketing participants who shared techniques to uncover tacit knowledge and discussed how they incorporate tacit knowledge into the design of their undergraduate offers. Explicit knowledge was recognised by all marketing professionals sampled who discussed how they capture and utilise that for the offer. Applying value theory has helped to recognise potential opportunities which could be explored by universities or an area for policy change that would improve value creation.

Knowledge sharing was examined between marketing professionals and academics. As noted in the literature, communication and knowledge sharing is interlinked. Since communication is only two-way and it has to flow through many hierarchies, it disrupts effective knowledge sharing. This is coupled with marketing professionals' mistrust of academics. Therefore, knowledge sharing is not as effective it could be. Universities in this sample demonstrated hierarchical exchange of knowledge through a formal structure, with some aspects of inter-functional exchange but the model shows that the latter is limited due to weak relationships.

9.5 Summary of the model:

This study examines how the Ballantyne and Varey (2006) model can be used to understand value creation for HE, and how the different parts of this, different people involved in a variety of roles, either work together or perhaps conflict. In this way it can provide an analytical framework to understand value creation not only at the point when students are making their choice but throughout the university experience, during and beyond HE. This study has exposed some tensions, or disconnects, by using the model. The model also specifically clarifies some of the consumer behaviour that students employ at the pre-selection stage. This is more nuanced than a general view of students as consumers.

One can argue that there is no necessity of having every element of the value creation triangle since UK HE is not fully marketised (Brown and Carasso 2013). In the literature review, it was clear that UK HE is quasi market. However, the counter argument for the model has revealed gaps across all three value creating activities – having a strong relationship, better communication and learning together could well provide better value propositions, attract and convert students to choose a particular university. It also inductively found that relationships with particular groups of actors (alumni, admin, marketing staff, academics, current students, including ambassadors) who present value propositions to potential undergraduates have different impacts and could be better harnessed at the pre-selection stage.

9.6 What role does trust play in value creation?

Trust plays a key role with regards to successful value creation for potential students. The study has shown that the three value creating activities in Ballantyne and Varey's (2006) model could be performing sub-optimally because of lack of trust. This is seen in the perceptions of academics and marketing professionals about the need to collaborate, the nature of their relationship, and that communications are limited to two-way. That then results in limited knowledge sharing, therefore reducing the value they gain from each other and, following the model, likely impacting what they offer potential students.

On the contrary, where there is trust between potential undergraduates and the university i.e. with academics, with alumni, with current students (only with ancient foundations) and partly with ambassadors, this leads to the creation of value for universities and potential students. Through school visits, open days, and applicant taster days, universities in this study build relationships based on benevolence and competency-based trust although communication is one-way, although the model previously showed that one way communication is insufficient to create trust (Ballantyne and Varey 2006). Chapter 8 shows this; however, critically one-way communication is accepted by these students in HE, unlike other traditional markets. That is because of the trust they established during the initial stages which led to the development of relationships, especially with academics and thereby the university.

This study has shown some limitations in the interaction between marketing professionals and academics who participate in recruitment activities. Between these two parties there is little active effort to develop communications that could enhance their relationship, which affects trust and knowledge sharing. Consequently, this impacts collective learning and the quality of the value proposition, with knock on effects on how students perceive the value of that offer. In other words, this weakness in internal communications can lead to loss of competitive advantage - i.e. students decide to apply elsewhere.

Therefore, as established in classical literature, trust plays a mediating role for value creation activities within teams and between the participant groups studied here. Even where there is a one-way communication between university and students, trust bridges the gap of not having two way or dialogic communication. As previously stated, where there is trust and that has been nurtured into a good relationship, that has a significant impact when a student selects their future study destination.

9.7 Contributions

This research has contributed to knowledge in four different ways set out below.

9.7.1 To marketing literature:

Marketing has become increasingly important in HE. The current HE literature is dominated by studies of choice factors, branding, strategies and the marketing mix. However, the core of marketing is value, yet value has been under-researched in HE marketing. This research has therefore, employed a seminal model from conventional, services marketing and applied it to UK HE, one of the oldest, advanced and esteemed educational services in the world. With progressing marketisation, UK HE is a semi-government controlled, quasi-market and arguably, becoming more neo-liberal (Bradley 2020).

Although value creation activities in this model have been researched in the conventional services, it has not been tested with all three value creating activities in any sector. Previous researchers have researched one of the three value creating activities, individually in specific studies. Cheung et al., (2021) investigated communication only; relationship development was the focus of González-Mansilla et al., (2019) and knowledge sharing, again as one part of the model researched by Ehret and Wirtz (2017).

This study is considering value creation for undergraduates and therefore it has to include the designers (HE marketing professionals, academic involved in undergraduate student recruitment) and the receivers (potential undergraduates). In scoping the research, all sides of the triangle are in play to produce a value proposition that will convince an undergraduate to select a particular HEI. This meant that the research needed to study the three value creating activities. Since this had not been done in conventional services marketing nor by Ballantyne and Varey (2006), this study takes an interpretivist, exploratory design. This is one major contribution to the literature.

What the model shows is value creation does not happen in HE like it does in other services industry. However, it does produce evidence of strong applicability across the three elements of value creation and their underpinning concepts. Therefore, this study has demonstrated the efficacy, limits and opportunities to apply this model into different services settings such as the UK undergraduate market.

9.7.2 Contribution to HE literature:

HE marketing research has focused on tactical decisions such as university branding, marketing mix, choice factors, student recruitment strategies (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2021). Value creation is a holistic approach and is an under-researched topic in HE marketing. A few studies have investigated value in HE as a co-creative process, when students are in their study, such as enhancing classroom experience through embedding technology and developing students' employability skills through different activities. This research is about value creation and proposition design before students choose where to study.

The study has therefore, attempted to bring clarity by focusing on the pre-selection stage where the value proposition is created, offered, amended and interactions with potential undergraduates begin. This pre-selection clarity, before students have chosen where they will study, has served to uncover findings that add to and clarify previous research, for example students as consumers at the pre-selection stages.

Choice factor research has dominated HE marketing research and the vast majority of those are positivist, quantitative surveys. So, you can generalise to the population but not necessarily to understand the why, the how, the lived experiences and underlying perceptions of potential undergraduates. This study is qualitative in nature, allowing those realities to come to life through the voices of its participants, contributing depth, richness and potential new topics to the literature.

9.7.3 Contribution to methodology:

The sample used in this study is from different type of UK universities from ancient foundations to new universities with 12 participating universities. This sampling frame across the sector brought out diversity of practice, context, subjective perceptions of value, comparative perspectives within type and across type. A similar study (Kuo 2009) has included different groups within university. This study deliberately targeted the senior leadership of the HE marketing function, a group under-represented in the current literature, where they are, it is primarily around recruitment and little focus on co-creation of the offer between HE marketers and academics involved in recruitment.

Research that has sought to bring these participants is rare and I could not locate a similar study at the time, which also included marketers, academics and students. It included two different stakeholders within the university i.e. academics and marketing professionals as well as and prospective undergraduates, the key actors in the value creation triangle. This was aligned to the research questions, the theoretical model, research approach as well as the opportunity to triangulate the views of these key value makers and value receivers. It also allowed for comparisons and contrasts within each sample group, across those groups and the types of university. This study has brought their views, narratives and perceptions to life across the sector. It also suggests that these three stake-holders should be brought together into conversation with one another more closely.

9.7.4 Marketing practices in HE:

This study largely focused on very senior executive marketing professionals and academics involved in undergraduate recruitment. Each theme, sub-theme and specific nodes of analyses uncovered strengths and gaps in practice that could be improved at both institutional policy level and practice.

Alumni – there is much research on this topic, especially in the United States, Australia and in the UK in Ancient Foundation universities. However, this research shows that perhaps this is not being effectively managed across all university participants, even among the participants from ancient foundations. The tacit knowledge is largely left uncaptured.

Admin – prior research (e.g. Ivy 2008) found that admin staff affect student decision-making. However, prior to application, this study suggests, there is little trust among the student participants, little weighing to their role in the value proposition. The use of Ballantyne and Varey (2006)'s model suggests that managers can more effectively direct and use staff at the right stages, including perhaps limiting their roles at this point.

Current students and ambassadors – they carry substantial credibility in the eyes of potential undergraduates. However, ambassadors do not have the chance to build relationships in a structured way and are transactional. Both current students and ambassadors possess considerable tacit knowledge which they are able to share with potential students in School or on campus events. Current students of ancient foundations do freely promote their universities, in the case of ancient foundations and that is both a challenge and opportunity, as the university may benefit but is also unaware.

Feedback – academics and marketing could substantially improve insight, collaboration and the production of value propositions. To do this there needs to be active communication and trust to build relationships.

9.8 Limitations of this research and suggestions for further study

This study deliberately focused on part of the student journey which narrows the value creation factors, as it did not delve into value in use – in other words, when a student enrols and start their degree as an undergraduate student. The value creation triangle might be different as there will be more opportunities for a student to communicate and develop a better relationship with a university. There is also the question of co-creation of value at all stages which is starting to gain research attention.

This is an exploratory, abductive study and therefore reflective of these participants world views and experiences. It is not possible to generalise to the UK University sector or to the staff groups or student populations. By encompassing a large-scale survey there could be more conclusive understanding of the phenomena of value creation at the pre-selection stage for undergraduates.

This study has limited the sample to three stakeholders, i.e. academics, marketing professionals and first year undergraduate students. For example, it was not feasible to include students who had received an offer but not yet accepted but their views would be valuable to bring an even deeper focus to the subject of this research. There are number of other institutions involved in creating value for consumers such as admissions, international offices, academic registry etc. It is worthy to involve those departments too.

This study sampled academics from business departments, and almost all the participants had a good background knowledge and understanding of the subject of marketing. This may not be the case for those who are from other faculties which is not part of this sample.

Further research could be into universities that have two-way communication with students and see if they have a better value creation for prospective students.

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