

## **Do you want 750% growth in student academic mobility? The power of relationship marketing**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the characteristics of a successful service learning that has sustained a student academic mobility program. Since 2001 over 100 students have participated in Curtin's Occupational Therapy Abroad program (Goddard & Gribble, 2006) model. Between 2007 and 2012, over 600 students will deliver 156 000 hours of allied health services across four international host sites (School of Occupational Therapy, 2007). This 750% growth is primarily due to the relationships forged between the School of Occupational Therapy, the host sites and other stakeholders. This model allows allied health students to undertake a seven week international clinical education placement. The authors argue the adoption of a relationship marketing mindset by the School of Occupational Therapy has created a successful trans-national educational experience.

A relationship marketing approach is pivotal to driving these relationships to the highest rung of Payne's (2000a) Customer Loyalty Ladder - partner. This delivers mutually beneficial outcomes to Curtin University staff and students and the staff, clients and communities of the service learning partner. Relationship marketing is a company's efforts oriented towards "...attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships" (Wong & Sohal, 2001). The strategic cultivation of critical relationships is mapped from 2001 to 2008. The authors' purport that the development of relationships over an extended period of time is the key ingredient for high status, sustainable and profitable student academic mobility. Relationship marketing techniques underpinning the partnerships are highlighted; focussing on the interdependence and co-operation that reduce barriers and foster further exchange.

## **Do you want 750% growth in student academic mobility?**

### **The power of relationship marketing**

**Keywords:** relationship marketing, student academic mobility, service learning, partnerships, customer loyalty

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A relationship marketing approach is pivotal to driving these relationships to the highest rung of Payne's (2000a) Customer Loyalty Ladder - partner. This delivers mutually beneficial outcomes to Curtin University staff and students and the staff, clients and communities of the service learning partner. Relationship marketing is a company's efforts oriented towards "...attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships" (Wong & Sohal, 2001). The strategic cultivation of critical relationships is mapped from 2001 to 2008. The authors' purport that the development of relationships over an extended period of time is the key ingredient for high status, sustainable and profitable student academic mobility. Relationship marketing techniques underpinning the partnerships are highlighted; focussing on the interdependence and co-operation that reduce barriers and foster further exchange.

#### **Introduction**

Since 2001, exponential growth has seen over 150 students enrol and participate in the Curtin University of Technology Occupational Therapy Abroad program. Planned growth from 2007 through to 2012 will see over 600 students deliver 156 000 hours of allied health service to clients of the four international clinical host partners in China, India, Ukraine and South Africa (School of Occupational Therapy, 2007).

The multidisciplinary program offers occupational therapy, physiotherapy and human communication science (speech therapy) students an international service learning clinical placement in China, India, South Africa or Ukraine. International service learning provides students with the opportunity to develop cultural competence through exposure to an alternative social, cultural and health service milieu provided by international host partner sites. Two key drivers of this program are the attainment of Curtin University of Technology Graduate Attributes of demonstrating cultural awareness and understanding; recognise and apply international perspectives; and life long learning (Curtin University of Technology, 2006), and to meet the call by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (OECD/CERI, 1994) to establish international curricula that prepare students for performing (professionally/socially) in an international context.

The seven week program includes cultural and language orientation, the clinical placement, documentation of findings, report writing, handover, assessment of professional practice and a debriefing process. Students undertake a comprehensive cultural and language orientation program specific to each host country prior to travelling. They then live and work for a period of four to five weeks in the host country delivering allied health services to host site clients. They are accompanied by the clinical supervisor, who facilitates the program for the first ten days. The clinical supervisor then returns to Curtin University, conducting remote supervision via email, webcam, phone, WebCT and instant messaging services. Students experience learning seven days a week, 24 hours a day, living and practicing in the same environment as their clients.

The Occupational Therapy Abroad program is built around a series of strategically managed educational partnerships and collaborations with Australian, Indian, Chinese, Ukrainian and South African health care providers (see Table 1.), community based organisations (government and non-government), industry and university partners. The host sites form the basis of the relationship between Curtin University and other complimentary organisations such as schools, professional bodies, businesses and industries. This collaborative approach to learning and teaching supports the service learning model by concurrently contributing to development of the service learning site and delivering an educational experience for students. This Curtin program is driven by the World Health Organisation (WHO) Global Health Agenda which highlights the need

for global partnerships to tackle health issues including human rights and the investment in health to reduce poverty (World Health Organization, 2006). The philosophy of the program is also consistent with the World Federation of Occupational Therapists position paper on Human Rights and the United Nations Millennium Development goals that call for inter-sectoral partnerships to resolve complex global health issues.

Universities need to adopt a business-like approach to increasing student academic mobility. As such, the authors propose relationship marketing as a cost effective framework for establishing, delivering and growing an international clinical education program that enhances student academic mobility. This paper outlines strategies the School of Occupational Therapy have implemented to enable the exponential growth in student mobility through this international clinical education program. The authors propose that marketing strategies commonly used traditional retail markets have a place in increasing student academic mobility.

### Mobility program growth

The most influential factor in creating the successful infrastructure, capacity and potential for 750% growth (see Table 1.) in student academic mobility is The School of Occupational Therapy's strategic cultivation and fostering of 'relationships' with key individuals and partner organisations. Relationship development is a complex task requiring time, patience, determination and personal and team ability. In order to foster support for the growth of the program a strategic plan for the expansion of the international program was developed with a vision to 2012 (School of Occupational Therapy, 2007).

The programs' impact brings tangible and intangible rewards for students, staff, university and clinical partners above and beyond the initial investments. For these international programs, the essence of relationship marketing is the development of mutually beneficial long-term relationships with strategically significant customers (or host sites) where the synergies produce outcomes neither the host site nor Curtin could achieve on their own.

Marketing professionals across a variety of industries have used relationship marketing strategies to successfully transform potential leads into loyal customers (Berry, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Payne, 2000b; Peppers, Rogers, & Dorf, 1999). The relationships between the Occupational Therapy Abroad host sites and Curtin University began as relationships between individual university faculty members and the host sites. The starting point of these intimate relationships based on personal connections have been a pivotal step in establishing the long term sustainable institutional relationships between multiple partners that allow this program to grow. Integral to the enhancement of these relationships has been the personal and proactive commitment demonstrated by each pioneer staff member. The passion and determination of these staff members have become embedded in the organisational structure including The School of Occupational Therapy curriculum, Strategic Plan and most significantly, the school's culture - with multiple staff members committed to the vision and values of the international clinical education program.

**Table 1. Growth in Occupational Therapy Abroad program 2001 – 2011**

Country	Host site	Year program started	Students per year										
			2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008*	2009*	2010*	2011*
China	• Shanghai BoAi Rehabilitation Centre	2001	6	7	8	8	8	16	27	27	32	32	40
India	• Anandaniketan Society for Mental Health	2005	-	-	-	-	14	22	28	28	28	42	42
South Africa	• Uitenhage Provincial Hospital	2007	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	8	12	16	16
Ukraine	• Boyarka Children's Home and Ladizhinski Orphanage	2008	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	16	24	24
<b>TOTAL STUDENT NUMBERS</b>			<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>122</b>

### Service learning as a model for student academic mobility

This international clinical education program utilises a service learning model (Goddard & Gribble, 2006). Service learning creates opportunities for students to integrate theory from the lecture theatre with real world clients and organisations (Kenworthy-U'ren & Peterson, 2005; Preston & Symes, 1992). As such, service learning has a powerful impact on students' professional development by improving self-efficacy, self-esteem, and confidence in interpersonal skills in social and political arenas (Gitlow & Flecky, 2005). Programs engage local and host organisational staff in the creation of the learning experiences and also include faculty and clinical practitioners as full collaborators for project design, execution and communication. Utilising organisational staff for ideas and guidance is a vital component of building and growing the relationship between service organisation and the University faculty and enables staff to take a vested interest in the outcomes of the program. By engaging with community organisations, students extend their learning beyond the classroom, allowing projects to be embedded in a theoretical foundation with clear learning objectives and reflective components (Kenworthy-U'ren & Peterson, 2005). Action learning is generated from the human interactions occurring between the service learning facility staff, Curtin students and clients to resolve real issues. Learning arises not simply from representation of conceptual material but from the questioning that occurs amongst fellow students and staff as they tackle 'unfamiliar' problems together (Lester, Tomkovick, Wells, Flunker, & Kickul, 2005).

In this international service learning model, the clinical supervisor's role is to step back from the placement (Drain et al., 2007; Goddard & Gribble, 2006) allowing students to assume responsibility for their learning while the clinical supervisor performs a subsidiary supportive role in the educational process. This is possibly due to the long term trust based partnerships with the host site. The arrangement assists students to grow personally and professionally, reaching higher levels of self actualisation (Preston & Symes, 1992). Students develop critical reflection skills in the process of actioning their clinical skills rather than just reflection on theory (Raelin, 2006, p. 155) This is achieved through participation in the organisational problem solving process and decision making based on community need and also contributes to development of the relationships.

Once service learning was established as the pedagogical model for the creation of this international clinical education program, the next step was to foster relationships with sites able to host allied health students from Australia. A pivotal decision, made early in the program, was for one site in each country to be chosen and through culturally sensitive interactions build relationships with that one site so that the international service learning program could be sustained over many years. For this aspect, relationship marketing was selected and implemented.

#### **Relationship marketing and student academic mobility**

Wong and Sohal (2001, p.3) define relationship marketing as a company's efforts oriented towards "...attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships..." while Buttle (2000, p. 1) states the objective of relationship marketing is "...the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial long-term relationships with strategically significant customers". Of significant interest in maintaining the Occupational Therapy Abroad relationships across international borders is Peppers et al. (1999, p.45) claim that relationship marketing is about "...a firm being willing and (more importantly) able to alter their behaviour towards a specific customer, based on information gained directly from the customer or from external sources". The Curtin program purports that a key factor in the growth and sustainability of international student mobility has been the development of high-level relationships with the international sites capable and willing to host students for a mutually beneficial purpose (see Figure 1). In response Curtin has been attentive to the needs expressed by the host sites and those needs that can be fulfilled by the students who participate in service learning.

The relationship between the China host site (Shanghai Bo Ai Children's Rehabilitation Centre) and the staff at the School of Occupational Therapy is in its seventh year and this is the fourth year of the relationship with the Indian site (Anandaniketan Society for Mental Health). The purpose and benefits for this ongoing exchange are mutual for the host sites and students. For example:

- residents and children in the host sites receive thousands of hours of allied health services from occupational therapy, physiotherapy and human communication science students throughout the year, services that residents and children of host centres might otherwise not receive;
- host site staff observe clinical practices of students that vary from their own (e.g. patient handling).
- Discussions between senior management, host site staff, university staff and students results in reflection and ultimately aspects of the Australian clinical practices being adapted to suit the needs the needs of the clients by host site staff. For example, students have modelled taking children (using wheelchairs) to the parks and through the streets of Shanghai. As a result, BoAi staff now frequently take the children to the local parks;

- Curtin students gain practical experience through a culturally diverse location where personal and professional skills are enhanced. Students observe clinical practices different to their own experiences in Australian clinical education and reflect on these experiences through journals and debriefing sessions.

Figure 1. – Axioms of Transactional Marketing and Relationship Marketing (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000, p. 122)

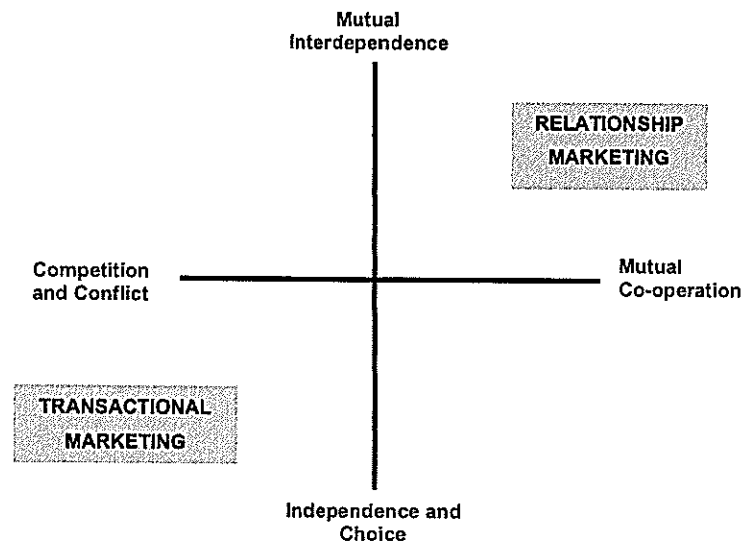


Figure 1 highlights that successful relationship marketing is interactive, rather than the arms-length approach more commonly associated with transactional marketing. Relationship marketing enhances mutual interdependence and co-operation, creating a win-win situation for both customers (host sites) and the service provider (Curtin University). Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000) suggest efficiencies and economies of scale are created from the interdependence between parties. The Occupational Therapy Abroad program has created synergies for students and the host site staff and clients whereby each key stakeholder is reliant on the other for the continuation of each programs' excellence. The continuing success of the School of Occupational Therapy's international clinical education program is dependant upon the host partners remaining committed to hosting the students. The program also allows students to attain the clinical education practice hours mandated by the World Federation of Occupational Therapy. The philosophy of Human Rights and cultural sensitivity is also built into the curriculum and professional accreditation standards. Reciprocally, the quality of life of clients and the professional competence of staff from the host sites are enhanced through the delivery of thousands of hours of allied health services by students (see Figure 1).

Relationship marketing is recognised as a significant corporate strategy to generate and retain a customer base (Payne, 2000a). Beyond transactional, the transformational aspect of relationships allows services and customers to grow together, forming complementary life long relationships. Higher education has become a competitive climate reflecting many aspects of traditional industry competitive markets. So the University sector, now more than ever, has to embrace the business practices that allow them to differentiate their products and services and enhance competitive advantage and profitability. Internationalisation strategies are one method Australian universities have used to product differentiate themselves in the current competitive environment. Potent international clinical education programs, such as the Occupational Therapy Abroad program, can become drawcards for students in selecting universities or courses in the competitive higher education market in Australia. With the success and subsequent growth of the Occupational Therapy Abroad program, prospective students are contacting the School of Occupational Therapy with queries about participation in this innovative international clinical education program illustrating, anecdotally the programs' ability to act as a service differential from other courses. Thus the relationships forming between the university and international partners are forging pathways for sustainable international student academic mobility.

Delivering effective student academic mobility through international clinical education experiences can be expensive for students, time intensive for faculty staff and often difficult to locate suitably qualified occupational therapists to supervise students in the host country. Due to the economies of scale resulting from the growth of the program and the long term relationships, the School of Occupational Therapy's annual costs in delivering a growing international clinical education program is decreasing on a per student basis. Time and costs expended

in coordinating the travel and learning logistics of the 22 students who participated in 2005 is significantly more than the time and costs of coordinating the 59 students participating in 2007. Because the students travel to the same host sites each year, the operational logistics are simplified each year.

Wong (2000) suggests the cost of recruiting a new customer is five times greater than the ongoing investment to retain the loyalty of an existing customer. The Occupational Therapy Abroad program has built relationships with one host site in each country. Each year, the Directors of the host sites invite Curtin students to return to deliver allied health students return to deliver services. The effort and costs related to coordinating each trip take advantage of the economies of scale bought about by returning to the same site as both the customer and provider understand each others expectations and the actions that must be completed in order to successfully deliver the services. As Rothwell states "...sustainability in collaborative ventures rests on long term customer satisfaction which is based on the perception of exchange" (2005, p. 321). As the relationship between international sites and the School of Occupational Therapy matures, the capacity to exceed expectations of the host sites becomes more achievable. Recently students delivered client manual handling training to the staff of the centre in Shanghai and built a culturally appropriate playground in the Indian centre – service contributions that were never envisaged when these programs first commenced.

Blood (2006) describes the importance of relationship building in the growth and management of a service learning partnerships. From the School of Occupational Therapy's experience it is suggested that universities:

- a) Develop a curriculum structure around international community development projects. This requires access to projects that allow students to go beyond understanding concepts in the abstract, requiring them to apply skills to real tasks. During the Occupational Therapy Abroad program, students assess, set goals and implement treatment programs whilst immersed in a culturally diverse country where verbal communication barriers constantly challenge the students clinical decision-making, this has been enhanced through students having access to scholarship funding that is directly attached to the formulation and delivery of a project that students propose after assessing the needs of the host site;
- b) Develop programs that engage local and international practitioners in creating the learning experiences together with the international host site. High level and frequent communication between the key stakeholders in the host sites and the School of Occupational Therapy are critical to sustaining the relationships;
- c) Incorporate into the program faculty staff, clinical practitioners and other community stakeholders as full collaborators in project design, execution and assessment. Students complete clinical case notes and develop a series of program recommendations for both the host site and the Curtin program. These recommendations are presented back to the host site to see how they might be integrated into daily operation with the support of the Curtin program.

Wong and Sohal (2001) state that building relationships should increase the level of trust and commitment a customer has towards a company. These higher levels of trust and commitment are then generally associated with higher levels of customer retention and relationship profitability. This is particularly important in the development of a mobility program as customer retention ameliorates the need to form new relationships, create new infrastructure and gain new knowledge in the time-consuming lead up process. Relationships develop with the progressive exchange of information (both personal and company specific) between the two parties and become of greater value over time, for example in China the logistics of accommodation, localised transport, health care and orientation to the local area etc. are all arranged by the host site. Mutual trust is demonstrated by an increasing amount of information being divulged by each partner and assimilated into the practices of both the customer and the organisation. The behaviour of each party is then based on an informed knowledge base (Mitchell, 2000). This ongoing communication between all key parties is vital to ensure that trust and commitment continue to build as the program expands, with each partner sharing in the success of the other. For the first six years of the China program, the same faculty member travelled with each student cohort. The level of trust with key stakeholders within the China program has reached the stage that in 2007 that new faculty staff have joined the program and travelled with the students with express support from the Director of the BoAi centre in Shanghai (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005).

## **Relationships**

When universities begin to grow student academic mobility programs they must be perceptive of the developmental stages of the relationship to foster each exchange as a means of strengthening the relationship and must 'give something' of value to the partner, as the term service implies. Wong and Sohal state relationships are "...a series of interactions which build an awareness of a shared relationship through trust and commitment" (2001, p. 2). Investment in time, commitment of human resources and an understanding of cultural diversity are

the most effective tools the School of Occupational Therapy has utilised in monitoring and fostering these pivotal relationships. In fact, the relationship between the key contact in the School of Occupational Therapy and the Director of the Bo Ai Centre has transformed into both a business and personal relationship with the exchanging of culturally relevant gifts, visits to the family home and invitation into other business relationships that would not otherwise be possible. This is also an important aspect of other secondary stakeholder involvement that has provided credibility to the program. When developing marketing plans to grow student academic mobility, universities must ensure a full understanding of the range, intimacy and quality of all relationships within their immediate sphere of influence and those that will be required to be built. A solid understanding of the role, strengths and weaknesses of each relationship is critical. Once the relationships are understood, implementation of strategies to foster each relationship to its optimum are vital to achieve the student academic mobility objectives.

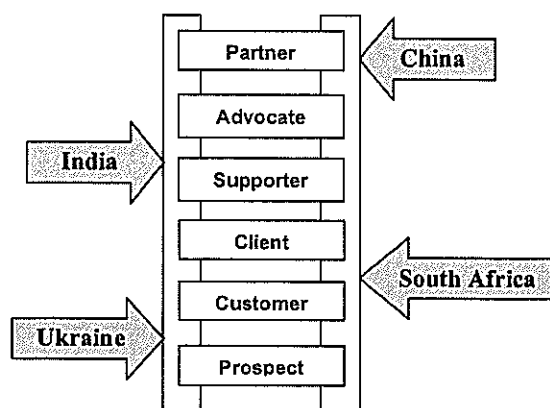
In exchange for long term commitment and loyalty, customers expect unprecedented support to value-add to the services being provided (Cannon & Narayandas, 2000). The School of Occupational Therapy have supported the relationship through the sponsorship of the directors of the India and China sites to visit Australia and explore Perth-based disability service providers and to present their work and values to key university and community partners. This reflects the 'supporter' level of loyalty in Payne's model of customer loyalty (see figure 2, below). These visits have allowed opportunities to further build the personal and professional linkages between the service learning partners. In order to foster this commitment by the University, Key Account Management, has been utilised to enhance the relationship marketing function so critical to international service learning relationships. Each Occupational Therapy Abroad program is led by a staff member who has a personal connection to the host site, the health issues and the country; a passion for the relationship over and above the role of clinical supervisor and has established personal, professional and organisational networks that allow for an ongoing commitment to the relationship.

### Loyalty

Payne's (2000b) relationship marketing *Ladder of Customer Loyalty*, (see Figure 2.) states that the majority of marketing strategy is focussed on the lower two rungs of the ladder – i.e. identifying 'prospects' and attempting to turn them into 'customers'. Payne (2000b) purports that the goal of marketing should be to move the most profitable 'customers' to the highest rung of the ladder in order to create long term partnerships. Figure 2. demonstrates the current status of the relationships between the School of Occupational Therapy and the host sites. The China stakeholders have attained the highest rung on the ladder as a result of the mutual benefits each key party gains from the ongoing relationship. It must be noted that the China partnership has not yet reached the top of the ladder indicating that relationship building and mutual understanding is a dynamic process – and the time and effort in cultivating the pivotal relationships is lifelong.

The relationships between the key persons and organisations in the India tripartite are continuing to build strength with mutual benefits beginning to be recognised. The Ukraine and South African programs are in the early stages of development and are building on the lessons learnt from the China and India programs. The personal contacts between Faculty staff and the Ukrainian and South African host sites mean these relationships have moved beyond the lower rung of the ladder.

Figure 2. - Ladder of Customer Loyalty and the OT Abroad Program (Payne, 2000b, p. 113)



The process of elevating a host site up the Customer Loyalty Ladder towards 'partner' is not simple. Payne (2000b) states organisations must develop explicit knowledge and in-depth understanding of a potential partner's

needs – but most importantly, the organisation must deliver the goods or services as promised. This is an important aspect of the sustainable nature of the relations that Curtin has built; making small but firm commitments to ensure that the promises made to a host site can always be delivered. However customer satisfaction must move on to be replaced with “...customer delight, by offering a quality service that exceeds expectations.” (Payne, 2000b, p.112). The Curtin program delivers this through the service component of the program, by being able to offer more to the host site than simply the presence of students, this is particular evident in India where each year Curtin students coordinate donations from across Perth’s disability service providers and take much needed equipment to the residents of Anandaniketan in India. To reciprocate, the manager of the India centre has presented a gift to the School of Occupational Therapy – in appreciation of the beneficial service gained by the centre and the relationship with Curtin that is sustained. Rather than simple presentations, Curtin has gained an understanding of the rich cultural meaning behind ‘acknowledgement’ and has effectively built this knowledge into the operations of new and developing programs.

There are massive challenges facing universities when implementing and co-ordinating a relationship marketing model to enhance student academic mobility. Fournier, Dobscha and Mick warn managers of the difficulties in cultivating intimate relationships with customers. “...it is alarming how quickly and thoughtlessly relationships can be destroyed through the muddled actions we often engage in...it is time to think about and act on what being a partner in a relationship really means...” (1998, p.85). Understanding and demonstrating cultural sensitivities has been critical to climbing the Customer Loyalty Ladder for the India and China programs. For example, the presentation of a commemorative plaque to the Bo Ai Centre in Shanghai, from Curtin University was an appropriate method of expressing the gratitude the partnership has forged and enabled the host site to promote themselves locally as having a professional affiliation with an international academic institution. The level of trust that has developed allows for problems to occur, to be resolved and for the relationship to continue building. For example when the Curtin clinical supervisor departs, the Director of the centre is left with authority vested by Curtin to drive the direction of student work, so that it reflects the values and objectives of the host site.

Customer loyalty can be enhanced through the development of predictability in the organisation-supplier relationship. Stevenson and Moldoveanu (1996) believe that today’s organisations are ignoring the human need for predictability. An organisation is faced with the prospect of receiving an uncertain level of service if suppliers change on a frequent basis. By returning to the same site each year, both the host site and the university students sense of predictability is enhanced. Stevenson and Moldoveanu state that “...without predictability, people will be too scared not only to take risks but to take any actions at all...” (1996, p. 72). Cultivating relationships with a relatively stable group of stakeholders assist each party to understand what to expect from each other. The development of solid relationships with the clinical supervisor and students groups makes host site employees daily routines more predictable allowing them to focus on delivering the best possible service to the clients. For example, students have demonstrated the same patient handling skills and principles each year; host site staff have observed the repeated practices and begun to utilise them in their own work. This skill transference is strengthened as Curtin students are physically in the BoAi centre for 12 weeks per year and Anandaniketan for nine weeks per year. Wong (2000) believes managers face their toughest tests when confronting the variables of relationship marketing that are difficult to control (e.g. changing customer perceptions of trust and commitment). The service learning partners need to be intuitive in discerning when issues may potentially damage the commitment of the host site. Universities need to remain proactive to ensure service provision, timeframes or student performance continually exceeds the host site expectations.

The Occupational Therapy Abroad program has embraced Buttle’s (2000) three stages in forging the sustainable partnerships:

1. Customer Acquisition Plan – each program has locates partner organisations, found common ground, invested time, maintained frequent contacts via multiple communication sources. The growth of the initial relationship has been enhanced through the utilisation of already existing networks and partners;
2. Customer Retention Plan – the program do not aim to change the host sites’ operations. By acting in a culturally sensitive manner we ensure the students contributions are valued by the host site and clients;
3. Customer Development Plan – ensure the presence of reciprocal activities (e.g. visits to sites, invite key stakeholders to your university/local area for personal and professional development).

The most significant challenge facing universities commencing an international service learning clinical education placement is the acquisition of partners with whom to forge strong and sustainable relationships. This initial decision in fact becomes a driving force for many of the foci of subsequent staff choices, curriculum decisions and the professional image and public perception of the University. So it is a decision that should not



be entered into either lightly or with little investment of time. For each of the four host countries, the School of Occupational Therapy has tapped into existing networks that facilitated an introduction to the host sites that may not have been possible on an individual basis. Many of these networks have been in the form of Non Government Organisations (NGO) who have already built relationships with the host sites; in fact the NGO in many cases has been retained as a secondary stakeholder in the program, making valuable contributions to the operational nature of the program. In the case of China, the faculty member utilised a contact from a World Health Organisation collaborating centre and was able to gain introduction to the host site in Shanghai through existing *guanxi* with the Director of centre. In India, contacts were made through Equal Health, a NGO who had been delivering medical services to the India site for three years. A fundraising organisation delivering essential food and clothing to the children in the centre in Ukraine was the School of Occupational Therapy's linkage. A faculty member who had previously lived and worked in Uienthage in South Africa gained access for the students to the Uienthage Provincial Hospital through professional and personal affiliations that gave direct insight into the need for services in this area and the ability of the School to provide assistance.

The tripartite relationship between Curtin, Equal Health and the Anandaniketan site in India has furthered strengthened the bonds between the three organisations. As a result of the program the Equal Health medical team has now expanded to include allied health team members. This creates sustainability and consistency in program delivery as the work that the Curtin students complete is carried on by the Equal Health allied health team. The provision of coordinated services between service delivery partners is critical to ensuring the relationship with the manager and staff of the India site is sustained. The three-way reliance ensures high level communication between the key stakeholders thus ensuring continuity and consistency with the allied health program at Anandaniketan.

### **Relationship strength**

In today's global market place, universities continually seek innovative processes to attract students to their particular courses. Wong (2000, p.3) states that "...the development of long term relationships with customers is imperative to gaining competitive advantage", with (Knox, 2000) outlining three reasons why stronger customer relationships might forge a competitive advantage for an organisation:

- a) Systems cost reduction - whereby the partnership allows for more efficient work practices. For example, the host sites receive thousands of hours of allied health services for nil remuneration, the student benefit from the development of the learning opportunities that have multiplied over the years. The potential of competing allied health programs in the local market to compete with a large, successful international clinical education program is unlikely given the start-up costs, thus allowing Curtin's program to maintain a competitive advantage in attracting prospective students;
- b) Increased Effectiveness through Innovation - whereby partners invest in innovative practices and services when the bond between the customer is on the higher rungs of the relationship marketing ladder (see Figure 2). Both the host site and students are now willing to trial creative solutions to service delivery. The creative programs attract future students to the program sustaining the growth;
- c) Enabling technologies - whereby an organisation will gain a competitive advantage through the use of up-to-date technologies (e.g. the India site has recently upgraded to broadband technologies in order to enhance its communications with the key personnel in Australia as well as improving the speed of communication for the staff and students). As a result, Generation Y students are lured to the programs and able to stay connected to peers and family around the world.

The Occupational Therapy Abroad team believe the relationships cultivated require consistency of communication to enhance the status of the relationships with partners. An organisation with a focus on relationship marketing requires "...the whole business to be concerned with the achievements of the marketing goals..." (Peck, Payne, Christopher, & Clark, 1999, p.423). Peck et al (1999) emphasise that in implementing a relationship marketing strategy, the firm needs to ensure that their organisational structure and culture is capable of supporting the proposed customer focus. It is imperative that the manager facilitates the team to work together to ensure the customers needs are met as efficiently as possible.

For universities, focussing on a greater level of perceived service quality from both students and host sites will be beneficial. The strength of the relationship appears to be positively correlated to the level of customer satisfaction. Anecdotally, the fact that students continue to apply for this competitive entry program and self fund the full cost of their participation reflects a degree of long term customer satisfaction with the service. In turn, if the individuals from the host site and the university can demonstrate a sense of trust and commitment then all will benefit from the improving strength of the relationship. Wong (2000) states that for trust and commitment to exist a relational bond must be created. Relational bonds are the psychological, emotional,

economic or physical attachments in a relationship that are fostered by association and interaction between the partners.

University managers of service learning programs should create an environment that allows staff to increase the quality and intensity of contact between key individuals, to strengthen the relationship so that a “partnership” can develop. By fostering the strength of the relationship, the overall level of perceived quality subsequently improves. In exchange, the customer’s propensity to engage in favourable behaviours towards the firm will multiply. This is clearly evident through the increasing support that is given to student groups year after year as they return. The relationship reaches a point in Payne’s (2000) stepped process (see Partner level in Figure 2) where the international host generates some of the learning activities through providing access for student to the network of the host site.

### **Conclusion**

Conceptually, relationship marketing has a principle role to play if the higher education sector is to effectively establish lasting relationships that build on advantages of economies of scale, repeat business and partnerships with community, industry and government. International service learning is a vehicle to establish these mutually beneficial partnerships ultimately growing international student academic mobility. The success and growth of the Curtin Occupational Therapy Abroad program supports the notion that international student academic mobility cannot grow without long term commitment to international partners who provide the very source for mobility to occur. A cocktail of risk averse behaviour in the university sector, focus on short term results, an environment of ‘rationalist’ behaviour and the superficial importance given to cultural competency potentially spell disaster when attempting to facilitate mobility programs based on student learning. The longevity and growth of the Curtin program is achieved through investment of time, personal passion and strong philosophical belief by the Occupational Therapy Abroad team as to the vision of the program.

The complexity of a trans-national education experience requires relationships to be developed at each level of interaction, including staff, organisations, governments and between countries. The barrier blocking this investment in many cases is the time lag between investment and return, identification of what constitutes ‘return on investment’ and a lack of engagement with potential partners to determine benefits the program brings to them. A rigorous approach to relationship marketing then ensures customers can remain in the relationship with some surety and predictability in the long term. From the university perspective this assists in retaining the programs academic integrity; reduces the level of academic risk present in the program and allows previous success to be built on, rather than locked away. With the majority of the relationship work required to occur prior to a student leaving the country it is no surprise that many Universities will fail to invest the time, finance or allow faculty staff to invest the physical and emotional energy required to establish, let alone grow the programs such as these.

Success for the Occupational Therapy Abroad program in providing increased student academic mobility is indicative of the work done by Faculty staff to embed the program into curriculum, adhere to professional accreditation requirements, meet Faculty and University strategic plans and address the global directions and priorities for higher education.

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