

Students Are Not Customers: Reframing Student's Role in Higher Education Through Value Co-creation and Service-Dominant Logic



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Abstract This study explores student's role in higher education (HE) in terms of Service-Dominant logic and value co-creation. Traditionally, students have been designated as HE customers through the metaphor "students-as-customers." This study challenges this notion by highlighting the limitations of this view, which is mainly based on HE institutions' traditional marketing practices. Instead, through a critical review, based on service-dominant logic of marketing, and based on the recent research, it proposes that HE should be conceived as a service ecosystem, where students are active players with the main role of co-creating their education. Specifically, students should build an identity in an ecosystem that promotes better learning experience. Implications for university policies are discussed.

Keywords Service-dominant logic · Value co-creation · Higher education · Students · Service ecosystems

1 Introduction

HE institutions are increasingly adopting marketing practices to promote their services in a competitive landscape; this phenomenon is called "marketization of HE" (e.g., Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Molesworth et al., 2009; Taylor & Judson, 2011) or "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), which has led to the metaphor "students-as-consumers" (Clayson & Haley, 2005; Dollinger et al., 2018; Laing & Laing, 2016). The topic is discussed in terms of the probable implications of these business management practices for HE, a service related to the creation and diffusion of knowledge, research and innovation for society' benefit (Brighouse & McPherson, 2015).

Following earlier studies, this chapter states that conceiving students-as-customers may hamper their learning, the quality of HE and ultimately, society at large (Barnett,

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2011; Díaz-Méndez et al., 2019) because when education is viewed from a commercial perspective, the purpose and focus of learning is misdirected. Research has shown that students who perceived themselves as customers are more likely to demand an outcome from HE institutions (Finney & Finney, 2010), they feel entitled to receive a degree (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002), or may satisfy student's short-term requirements, instead of the long-term interest of students and HE institutions (Arboleda & Alonso, 2017; Laing & Laing, 2016). Empirical evidence states that consumer orientation negatively affects academic performance and pedagogic processes (Bunce & Bennet, 2019; Bunce et al., 2017).

To achieve and maintain societies' welfare, proper management and marketing practices are essential, especially to complex realities such as HE. Traditionally, HE institutions operate under a goods-dominant logic paradigm, which limits the contribution of the actors, perceiving universities as producers of degrees (Shafaqat et al., 2020). Researchers have identified that Service-Dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008) and, specially, value co-creation may serve as an appropriate framework to manage the complexities of HE (e.g., Dziewanowska, 2017; Judson & Taylor, 2014; Lusch & Wu, 2012). Service-Dominant logic (SDL) provides the theoretical background for the development of service science, emphasizing the integration of resources such as people, technologies, organizations and information to co-create value (Maglio & Spohrer, 2008; Spohrer et al., 2007).

Díaz-Méndez et al. (2019) built a model for the management of HE through value co-creators, stating that the designation of students-as-consumers is detrimental to the quality of HE, thus impacting society. This study (1) expands and explains the idea that SDL and value co-creation might serve as an appropriate framework for managing the complexities of HE and (2) explores student's role in the value co-creation in HE ecosystems. Therefore, the study addresses the issue: what is the student's role in HE institutions as co-creator of value rather than as customer?

This study is presented as follows. First, we present a review of the traditional role of students-as-customers in HE. Second, the SDL and value co-creation principles are described as a suitable framework to manage the HE service ecosystem. Finally, we reframe the student's role through the lens of SDL and value co-creation.

2 Student's Role in the Marketized University

When students are considered customers of HE, universities adopt a market orientation approach (Guilbaut, 2016). This approach encourages organizations to recognize customer's needs and competitor's capabilities by collecting and disseminating valuable information to create superior customer value (Narver & Slater, 1990). To achieve long-term success, organizations must adopt a customer-oriented culture (Deshpande et al., 1993; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Empirical research has demonstrated that having a customer orientation positively influences customer perceptions, hence improving firm performance (Brady & Conin, 2001). Given that HE

is acknowledged as a service provider, researchers have suggested that HE institutions should also adopt a customer-oriented approach for student's satisfaction and influence retention (Deshields et al., 2005; Hemsley-Bown & Oplatka, 2010; Webster et al., 2010). Although it is important to recognize a customer-centered perspective in HE, this approach emphasizes the customer as the organization's focal point (Deshpande et al., 1993); therefore, if the focus is on student satisfaction (e.g., Athiyaman, 1997; Elliott & Healy, 2001; Koris & Nokelainen, 2015), then academics may believe that students' demands must be met, hence resulting in confusion regarding the purpose of education and leading to the philosophy that "customer is always right" (Natale & Doran, 2012; Scott, 1999).

In a student-oriented university, if terms are not used correctly, a comparison of students-as-customers leads to problematic interpretations for teachers and staff about student's role in HE. Universities must provide a student-centric learning experience that responds to student expectations and to societal and other stakeholders' interests, which are not always the same. Ng and Forbes (2009) describe this as an "ideological gap" representing the difference between students' expectations and what the institution believes is best for them; as they conclude "paradoxically, true student-oriented marketing puts the university ideology at the center of marketing efforts and that marketing may well be an effective tool to communicate such ideologies" (p. 40). Therefore, a customer-centric university should respond to students, community, and society interests.

Another misleading approach for designating students-as-consumers is that, if students are customers, then teachers are service providers. To remain competitive, HE institutions should manage and measure customer (i.e., student) satisfaction. Given that the metaphor is conceived from the Total Quality Management framework, where customer satisfaction is related to service quality, measuring teaching quality through students' surveys has been the main approach to measure the quality of service delivery and service encounters in HE (Conway et al., 1994; Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

Effectiveness of the student evaluation of teaching (SET) has attracted much academic attention (Clayson, 2008). However, SET has been a controversial subject because it can be easily influenced by several factors. Pounder (2007) categorized the analysis into student-, course-, and teacher-related factors. Several factors are not related to quality but may influence student's evaluations. The common and controversial method to improve SET is grade inflation, when teachers may inflate students' grades to receive better ratings (Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Langbein, 2007). Typically, SET are one-dimensional measures that do not capture the teaching quality (Lindgreen et al., 2022). Díaz-Méndez and Gummesson (2012) reported that students' value teacher's characteristics such as being fun, young, friendly and dressing formally. Psychological research provides evidence that a teacher's physical attractiveness is positively correlated with student's ratings (Riniolo et al., 2006).

Despite the lack of consensus in the SET research, in a meta-analysis and literature review, Clayson (2008) concluded that student's satisfaction is related to their evaluations but not to their learning. If learning is measured more objectively, then it is less

likely to be related to evaluations (p. 16). Similarly, Uttl et al. (2017) conducted an up-to-date meta-analysis of the effectiveness of student evaluation and the relationship between teacher's ratings and student's learning, concluding that there is no significant correlation between students' evaluations of teachers and learning. Therefore, they suggested that these practices are useless to measure teacher effectiveness.

Finally, the designation of students-as-customers has problematic interpretations for the management of student's role in HE, which can lead to a low quality of HE and affect graduate students, who may not be prepared with the competences and skills to face the professional and personal challenges of the marketplace, hence producing a long-term harmful effect to society at large. The learning experience exceeds student satisfaction; although important, it is also a short-term goal. HE institutions should manage the co-creation experience within the service ecosystem for lifelong learners. Therefore, SDL might serve as an appropriate framework for the particular characteristics of HE (Díaz-Méndez & Saren, 2017; Lusch & Wu, 2012).

3 Higher Education as a Service Ecosystem

3.1 *Resource Integration in HE*

Traditionally, the resource-based view of the firm has focused only on the resources provided by the organization for the creation of a competitive advantage (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990); however, SDL proposes a network-interrelated approach in which all actors provide resources for the process (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2012). Value co-creation occurs through the resource integration of providers and beneficiaries and across service systems (Vargo et al., 2008). Resources can be classified as operands and operants; the former are those that are acted upon for value creation, similar to tangible elements (i.e., classrooms, books and notebooks) and operant resources are those that are capable of acting on other resources (i.e., cognitive abilities, engagement and emotions) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

HE institutions provide both operant and operand resources for all actors. Given that teachers and students are key actors in the value co-creation process, resource integration is given by the repeated interactions between and among the parties. For instance, suppose a case study discussion in a marketing class, the teacher facilitates a case about a business problem. Students receive this as an input and use their own resources such as previous knowledge or analytical skills (operant resources) to elaborate a solution, then the teacher and the students discuss the possible solutions and practical implications of the business decision-making process. They are collaboratively creating value by integrating resources, involving personal and classmate's resources.

This process involves the term "resourcing," defined by Lusch et al. (2008, p. 8) as the transformation of a potential resource into a benefit, which is composed of

Table 1 The process of resourcing for a case study discussion

| Stage | Description (Lusch et al., 2008, pp. 8–9) | Case study discussion |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Resource creation | It involves human knowledge and ingenuity (operant resources) in the creation of resources (operand and operant) | Teachers use their expertise and research skills (operant resources) to perform a series of activities such as collecting, organizing, and analyzing information to write a case study on a real business problem |
| Resource integration | It is a basic function of all service systems. Resources are integrated through knowledge and skills | Teachers facilitate the case study to their students, previously they have had provided the conceptual knowledge to solve it Students integrate resources, such as previous knowledge and analytical skills, so they can use the “input” in the form of a case study, provided by the teacher to prepare a solution This process is also given in the class discussion |
| Resistance removal | There are often barriers (tangible and intangible) or resistances that must be removed before potential resources can be made useful. The barrier to resource creation is often the removal of user or customer resistances. Resistances are almost always intangible and attitudinal in nature | Not all students have the same background, analytical skills, or may be willing to solve the case. Thus, barriers need to be removed to complete the assignment |

resource creation, resource integration, and resistance removal. Table 1 describes this process applied to the case study discussion as a teaching resource.

HE can be seen as a system that possesses a constellation of resources that can be applied in the previous example, such as a special classroom to develop case study discussions, technology, university politics, government educational policies, alumni network, or industry relationships. Figure 1 illustrates the process of value co-creation between the interactions of the teacher–student relationships.

3.2 *An Ecosystem Perspective of HE*

The focus of SDL shifts from interactions among the multiple actors involved in the co-creation process and emphasizes systemic understanding of value creation of

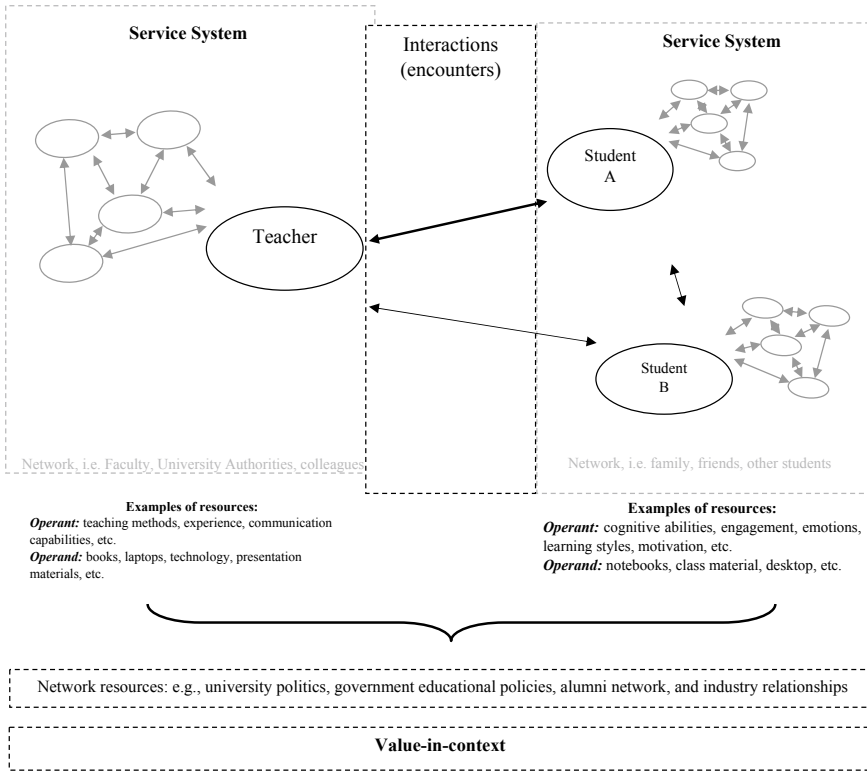


Fig. 1 Value co-creation process in Higher Education, micro level: classroom. *Source* Based on Vargo et al. (2008) and Chandler and Vargo (2011)

within a specific context (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Vargo et al., 2008). The multi-disciplinary development of the collaborative nature among actors has evolved into a “service ecosystem” perspective (Lusch et al., 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2011, 2016; Vargo et al., 2017), which is a metaphor derived from the literature on biology (Lusch et al., 2016) and can be defined as a “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 11). Given that HE is a complex and dynamic entity comprising various actors that interact with each other, such as students, teachers, academic staff, parents, alumni, prospective students, government, and society, it fits into the framework of service ecosystem (Díaz-Méndez & Saren, 2017).

The perspective of interconnectedness implies that all actors participating in the process have the same role, that is, to be engaged in the service-for-service exchange through resource integration for value co-creation; therefore, these relationships can be termed as the actor-to-actor (A2A) orientation, which is a broad and dynamic system-oriented approach (Vargo & Lusch, 2011, 2016). Actors include humans

or collection of humans (organizations) (Lusch & Vargo, 2014), and interactions between humans and machine/technologies (Storbacka et al., 2016). Actor interactions are dynamic and evolve gradually, which lead to complex relationships in the system. Storbacka et al. (2016) define “actor combinations” as the possible interactions among actors, ranging from dyads, triads, and networks (e.g. human-to-human (H2H), human-to-machine (H2M), or many-humans-to-humans (MH2H)). The learning process is given at a classroom and other activities performed by the student. Teacher–student (i.e., H2H) interactions occur during a specific assignment or a faculty orientation to students. The most common interaction in HE is the teacher-to-many-students (i.e., H2MH) in a classroom.

These relationships are given in a specific context that determines the process of value co-creation. This view allows considering multiple levels of interactions among actors: micro, meso, and macro. Moreover, there is a meta-layer representing the evolution of the previous levels (Akaka & Vargo, 2015; Chandler & Vargo, 2011). Figure 1 shows the micro level, and Figs. 2 and 3 the meso- and macro-layers applied to the HE ecosystem.

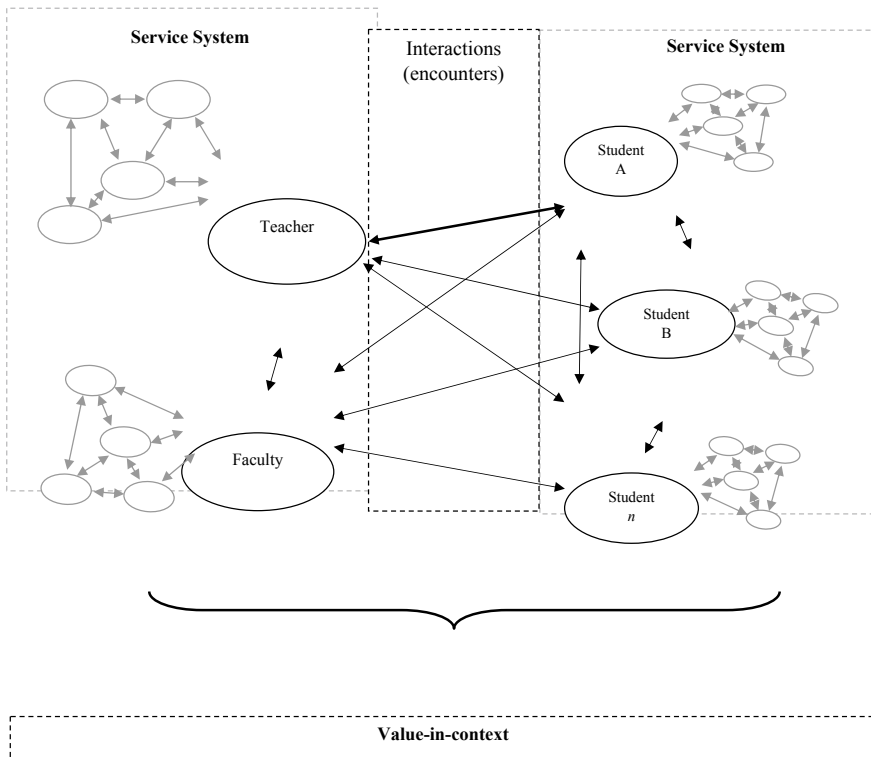


Fig. 2 Value co-creation process in HE, Meso level: university. *Source* Based on Chandler and Vargo (2011)

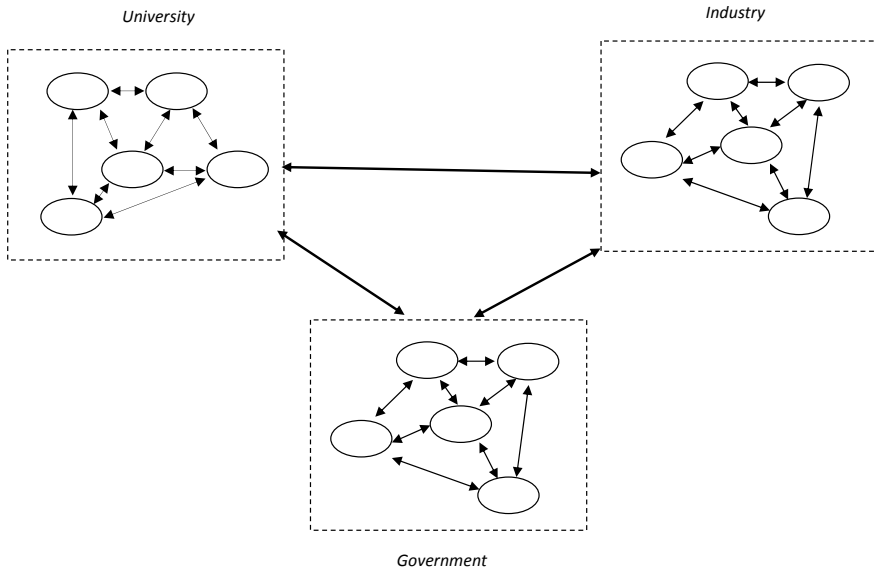


Fig. 3 Value co-creation process in HE, macro level: network. *Source* Based on Chandler and Vargo (2011)

HE is composed of several actors who use and integrate resources for benefits and of network resources such as university policies or educational politics integrated in the process. The interaction among actors in the HE ecosystem produces different results for different parties. In an interdisciplinary approach, Matthies et al. (2016) integrated the nature and business perspectives of ecosystem service and introduced the concept of *value-in-impact* to describe the flows of positive and negative impacts through the value network. For HE ecosystems, Díaz-Méndez and Saren (2017) investigated the effect of customer's surveys of teaching quality and its influence on value co-creation in an HE ecosystem, introducing the metaphor of "ecosystem pollution"; the authors concluded that, if teaching quality is assessed only by student's satisfaction surveys, the co-creation process in HE might be compromised and adversely affected by this element.

4 Managing the Ecosystem's Resources for the Value Co-creation

This study states that the ecosystem perspective to designate HE is proper because it involves the interrelationship of different actors who integrate resources for value co-creation. Given that students, teachers, faculty, researchers, and other actors may perform multiple roles in HE (Brady, 2013), the definition for actors' interactions by

Storbacka et al. (2016), that is, human-to-many-human (H2MH) is more appropriate. Understanding the service ecosystem requires in-depth analysis of the relationships among individuals and among system entities (Wieland et al., 2012). SDL emphasizes a more holistic view by highlighting the influence of institutions (i.e., rule, norms, beliefs, and meanings) and institutional arrangements (interdependent assemblages of institutions) that shape the interactions within the system in the process of co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

For a successful co-creation of value in education, all actors must engage in the process of resourcing for the benefit of the ecosystem. Students depend on the teachers and network resources and their own for an effective process (Díaz-Méndez et al., 2019; Storbacka et al., 2016). SDL provides a framework to manage the complexities of HE, especially because it considers the collaborative nature instead of only a single party in the process (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). The service ecosystem nature of HE expands the dyadic vision of student–teacher interrelation and “exchange” of resources.

Managing the bundle of resources for the learning process is an essential component of the management of HE institutions. Following past studies, this article proposes that to reframe the students' role as co-creators, universities should manage their value-in-use and value-in-context (Chandler & Vargo, 2011) to offer a value proposition that students may derive via resource integration of. Specifically, value-in-context is improved by providing a better learning experience that promotes learning identity, considering the resources of the ecosystem. Education experience shapes students' identities (Raaper, 2019). Co-creation should lead to higher student identification with their purpose because they are involved in the process, which, in turn, should lead to build a learning identity, which is a component related to better academic performance (Smyth et al., 2015). The more the students engage in their education, they have a better understanding of the process, thus achieving positive outcomes (Bunce et al., 2017). When there is a successful co-creation process, students benefit from the value proposition provided by any other actor of the service ecosystem engaging in the resourcing process (Lusch et al., 2008).

Another key factor is to provide the necessary resources to the students to enhance their learning experience, which is given by the accumulation of the moments derived from the interactions with the actors of the ecosystem. It constitutes a main factor for the value co-creation in HE contexts (Dollinger et al., 2018). Institutions must provide learning experiences to develop operant resources, such as knowledge, and specific skills according to the field of study (Kelly et al., 2016). This asset will provide the necessary abilities to cope with the potential challenges in their professional career. Successful learning experience also integrates positive emotions, that is, cultural resources (Arboleda & Alonso, 2017). HE institutions should provide these elements to improve the system by balancing students' demands with education (Obermiller & Atwood, 2011).

Therefore, to improve value-in-context for HE institutions, the resources provided by all actors in the ecosystem must be managed to improve students' learning identity and experience through the process of resourcing.

5 Implications and Conclusion

This study has different implications for university managers. Implementing the SDL and value co-creation framework should lead to different management practices. First, universities should promote engagement in students' value co-creation behaviors to build identity and provide a better learning experience. Willingness to co-create relates to the extent to which students are willing to integrate their resources with those of the firm (Arnould et al., 2006). Neghina et al. (2017) explored the motivations for value co-creation in professional and generic services. The findings indicated that developmental motives lead to willingness to co-create in professional services. Developmental motives are those related to consumers' expectations of skills development and increase knowledge. Therefore, the higher the learning, the more value is derived through resource integration (Hibbert et al., 2012). Universities should educate students on the probable benefits when they engage in their education. They have an active role in the value co-creation process; therefore, they may be aware that the quality of their resources will impact the value obtained.

Second, universities should focus on the implications of the value-in-use and value-in-context, which students are perceiving and will soon perceive, that is, in the professional market. University managers should be aware that students have changed; therefore, different philosophies, such as value co-creation, should be implemented. Especially, nowadays, because students may consider different ways to pursue their lifelong learning; and online learning tools play a major role in the Higher Education ecosystem (Veluvali & Suriseti, 2022). For instance, the platforms *Knack* or *Kalibr* offer different technology innovative resources to validate the applicants' aptitudes and attitudes. Sites such as *Accredible* or *Degreed* certify a candidate's skills in a lifelong learning environment, challenging university degree certification. Technology provides new ways to deliver value to the HE ecosystem. By 2022, MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) constitute a market of US\$ 7.55 Bn, with a potential growth of 35% for 2032 (FactMR, 2022). By 2021, MOOCs accounted for 220 million of learners, with more than 1.670 credentials (specializations, micro masters, and programs, among others) provided by more than 950 universities the participation across the world, hence entering into the online degree and corporate learning markets (Shah, 2021). These are examples of actors in the ecosystem that, traditionally, universities from a good-dominant logic may not have considered.

HE institutions should move to competency-based learning, which is practice and contextual oriented, where students are more independent and organize self-learning through interactive and experiential teaching approaches (Yakovleva & Yakovlev, 2014).

Finally, it is important to consider students' inputs for value co-creation. Universities should encourage students' participation in the development of the value proposition and rethinking of the ecosystem policies (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). For instance, as recommended by Bunce et al. (2017), university managers should promote dialog

with students to create awareness of the different implications of various viewpoints such as students-as-consumers metaphor and the negative implications for their academic performance.

In conclusion, this study reviewed the metaphor of student-as-customers as a consequence of the marketization of HE; the possible negative impacts of this metaphor are analyzed and presented, especially, the detrimental consequences for the quality of HE and society. The SDL and value co-creation are presented as a framework to deal with the complexities of HE. Following past studies, the role of students as co-creators was presented and explained.

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