

# Relationship Building in Private Education

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## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between relationship commitment and student loyalty, and the key determinants of relationship commitment in private higher education. Design/methodology/approach : A quantitative research study using questionnaire was adopted to examine the key factors affecting relationship commitment and the relationship between relationship commitment and student loyalty. 480 copies of questionnaire in Likert scales were distributed to current private higher education students in one of the largest education provider. A total of 444 valid questionnaire copies were collected which provided a response rate of approximately 92.5

15

**Index terms**— Private Education, Relationship Marketing, Loyalty, Commitment.

## 1 Introduction

Relationship marketing is important in business, but it is not clear whether the same applies in private education. Traditionally, people perceive business and education differently. Business is for profit and seeks competitive advantage in its dynamic environment (Jaworski et al., 2000; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010). Business organizations are usually run by private individuals, and offer products or services to customers. They are efficient and responsive to the changing needs because of the competition in market traditionally provided by governments (i.e. public education) and is non-for-profit. As education brings a better future to the society, countries and governments put tremendous efforts in developing education in order to strengthen the human capital of the society.

Besides public education, in order to raise the education level of citizens, many countries have also encouraged private organizations or parties to provide education in recent decades. Due to reduction in government funding, and the growing interest in education of private parties, there has been rapid growth in private educational organizations (Li, 2010). The education sector can be classified into two categories: one is owned by the government and heavily relies upon government funding (i.e. public education), and the other is owned by private parties and heavily relies upon students' tuition fee (i.e. private education). Private educational institutions rely heavily on tuition fee income and are accountable to students and students' families, while public educational institutions rely heavily on government funding and are accountable to the general public (Li, 2010; Levy, 2010). Besides, management style of private educational institutions is more business-like and they emphasize customer-first attitude while public educational institutions have more bureaucratic styles of management and provide services more for the well-being of the society than for profit (Li, 2010; Kwong, 2000). According to Hennig-Thurau et al. ??2001), the organization structure and culture are also different in public and private education; greater flexibility is found in private institutions.

Research from relationship perspective in the private education sector has been minimal, this research investigates whether relationship marketing concepts are applicable to private education. According to marketing concepts, having long-term relationships with students may provide competitive advantages to educational institutions because students provide a stable source of income to the institutions and they recommend their institutions to friends and relatives (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). It is worthwhile to investigate whether relationship commitment is a factor affecting student loyalty in private education, and to get a better

## 6 E) TRUST

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45 understanding of the key determinants of relationship commitment because this can help better resource  
46 allocation.

47 In relationship marketing, a higher level of relationship commitment leads to higher intention of the parties  
48 remaining in a relationship (Gronroos, 1990; student loyalty from the relationship perspective is important  
49 for managements of educational institutions when building a stable and quality relationship with students.  
50 As relationship commitment is crucial to customer retention, a better understanding of key determinants of  
51 relationship commitment is also necessary (Hocutt, 1998). The main objectives of this research are: to examine  
52 the main direct effect of relationship commitment on student loyalty; and to examine key determinants of  
53 relationship commitment.

54 ii.

## 55 2 Literature Review a) Relationship Marketing

56 In the present era of demanding customers and intense competition, relationship marketing has drawn attention  
57 from practitioners and academics (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Relationship marketing is considered as  
58 "establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges" ??Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 22).  
59 "Relationship marketing is an integrated effort to identify, maintain and build a network with individual  
60 consumers and to continuously strengthen the network for the mutual benefit of both sides, through interactive,  
61 individualized and value-added contacts over a long period of time" ??Shani and Chalasani, 1992, p. 44).

62 Education is people-based, involves a lengthy and formal relationship between education providers and  
63 students, and requires high level of customization in service delivery (Mazzard and Soutar, 1999). Educational  
64 institutions are considered as service organizations Kotler and Fox, 1995), building relationships with students is  
65 important. Students' satisfaction is based on a stable relationship (Gruber et al., 2010).

## 66 3 b) Relationship Benefits

67 Providing benefits and value to customers is the means to encourage them to stay in their relationship with a  
68 particular company (Berry, 1983;Bitner, 1995; ??Olter and Armstrong, 2004). The ability to provide superior  
69 benefits and value to customers is a prerequisite when establishing relationships with customers (Ravald and  
70 Gronroos, 1996). The relationship marketing theory suggests that in the competitive global marketplace, partner  
71 selection may be a key element in competitive strategy (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Morgan and Hunt (1994)  
72 considered relationship benefits as the quality of services and goods relative to other suppliers. Relationship  
73 benefits are the superior benefits provided to customers, which are highly valued by customers.

74 Students are customers of education and expect to get benefits in the relationship (Finney and Finney, 2010).

## 75 4 c) Relationship Termination Costs

76 A common assumption in relationship marketing is that termination has switching costs and seeking an alternate  
77 relationship leads to dependence (Heide and John, 1988;Jackson, 1985). "Termination costs" and "switching  
78 costs" are often interchangeable terms in research studies. Though Morgan and Hunt (1994) considered switching  
79 costs to be of an economic nature only, switching costs may also comprise psychological and emotional costs  
80 (Sharma and Patterson, 2000). Adidam et al. (2004) defined relationship termination costs as the perception  
81 of net losses (financial, emotional, or time) that may result from dissolution of the relationship. In their public  
82 education study, the perceived costs to a business student include both economic and non-economic sides of  
83 switching costs; costs might include the loss of friendships or loss of credits on switching to another educational  
84 institution. The losses cannot be made good by an alternate supplier.

## 85 5 d) Shared Values

86 "Shared values" is a shared code or a shared paradigm that facilitates a common understanding or perception of  
87 collective goals and actions (Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998). Shared values are defined as "the extent to which partners  
88 have beliefs in common about what behaviors, goals and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate  
89 or inappropriate, and right or wrong" ??Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 25). It means two parties having similar  
90 perceptions can enhance their communications and avoid misunderstanding. Holdford and White (1997) found  
91 that pharmacy students who shared the same goals, ideals and codes of conduct with their public schools were  
92 more likely to commit to a relationship with the school.

## 93 6 e) Trust

94 A trustworthy party is one that is considered reliable and has high level of integrity and associated qualities of  
95 competence, consistence, fairness, honesty, responsibility, helpfulness and benevolence. Morgan and Hunt (1994)  
96 used reliability and integrity together to define and conceptualize trust. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) defined  
97 trust as "when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity".

98 In public education, Adidam et al. ( ??004) conceptualized trust as confidence in an exchange partner's  
99 reliability and integrity basing on personal experiences individual student has had with his/her education  
100 institution.

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## 101 7 f) Relationship Commitment

102 The building of relationship commitment is very important because the level of commitment determines  
103 relationship strength and the intention of the parties to (Hocutt, 1998). Relationship commitment is defined  
104 as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with the other is so important as to warrant  
105 maximum efforts at maintaining it, that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to  
106 ensure that it endures indefinitely" ??Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Relationship commitment entails a desire  
107 to develop a stable relationship and confidence in the stability of the relationship (Anderson and Weitz, 1992).

108 This research adopts Moorman et al.'s (1992) concept of relationship commitment as an enduring desire to  
109 maintain a valued relationship, and investigates the key determinants of relationship commitment in private  
110 higher education.

## 111 8 g) Student Loyalty

112 Loyalty is defined as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently  
113 in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences  
114 and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" ??Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Loyalty comprises  
115 of repurchase intention and word-of-mouth (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Repurchase intention implies doing more  
116 business with the company in future and considering the company to be the first choice. It is a customer's  
117 judgement about buying again a product or service from the same company while taking into account the current  
118 situation (Hellier et al., 2003). Word-of-mouth is to say positive things about the company and recommend the  
119 company to others. Some studies on student loyalty have adopted the two aspects of loyalty identified by Zeithaml  
120 et al. (1996), i.e. repurchase intention and word-of-mouth. This research adopts the repurchase intention aspect  
121 of student loyalty because it aims to ascertain whether the existing sub-degree students of private higher education  
122 institutions would continue to pursue bachelor degree courses at their current education institutions in future.

## 123 9 III.

## 124 10 Research Framework

125 The conceptual framework was based on concepts and findings from relationship marketing literature. The model  
126 was modified from the studies of Morgan and Hunt (1994), Adidam et al. (2004), and Holdford and White (1997),  
127 sought to illustrate the relationship between the factors: relationship benefits, relationship termination costs,  
128 shared values, and trust, and relationship commitment, and the relationship between relationship commitment  
129 and student loyalty (Figure 1).

## 130 11 a) Research Hypotheses

131 Relationship benefits generate positive impact on relationship outcomes, such as, continuation of a relationship  
132 (Gwinner et al., 1998; Patterson and Smith, 2001), site commitment (Park and Kim, 2003), commitment to  
133 the service business (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002), exporter's commitment to importers in exporter-importer  
134 relationships (Obadia, 2010), and satisfaction in retail banking (Dimitriadis, 2010). Therefore, it was proposed  
135 the same in private higher education:

136 Hypothesis H1: Students' perception of relationship benefits has a significant positive impact on relationship  
137 commitment.

138 Dwyer et al. ??1987) suggested that anticipation of high switching costs by customers generates commitment  
139 to an ongoing relationship. Besides the economic side of switching costs, they also consider socio-psychological  
140 costs, such as worry and loss of reputation, which contribute to the commitment. Switching costs affect customers'  
141 commitment in the financial services industry (Yanamandram and White, 2010). In industrial marketing and  
142 distribution channels, extant literature suggests that the relationship may continue to exist because of the high  
143 switching costs perceived by the buyer (Porter, 1980; Ping, 1994). Findings of Vasudevan et al. (2006), Burnham  
144 et al. (2003), and Patterson and Smith (2001) suggest that relational switching cost that involves psychological  
145 and emotional discomfort due to breaking of bonds and loss of identity is positively associated with commitment.  
146 Therefore, it was proposed the same in private higher education:

147 Hypothesis H2: Students' perception of relationship termination costs has a significant positive impact on  
148 relationship commitment.

149 Shared values have been found to have positive impact on relationship commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).  
150 The parties share similar beliefs in behaviors, goals and policies. Similar perspectives, including shared language  
151 and shared narratives are important for sustaining ongoing relationships (Chua, 2002; Nahapiet and Ghoshal,  
152 1998). Therefore, it was proposed that: Hypothesis H3: Students' perception of shared values has a significant  
153 positive impact on relationship commitment.

154 Trust enhances commitment to a relationship by reducing transaction costs in an exchange relationship,  
155 reducing risk perceptions associated with the partner, and increasing confidence that short term inequities can  
156 be resolved in the long run. Trust has been found to be a factor affecting commitment in many previous studies  
157 (Spake and Megehee, 2010; Nusair and Li, 2010; Cassab and MacLachlan, 2009; Cater and Zabkar, 2009; Morgan  
158 and Hunt, 1994). Therefore, it was proposed that:

## 15 B) RESULT

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159 Hypothesis H4: Students' trust in the education institution has a significant positive impact on relationship  
160 commitment.

### 161 12 Year

162 Tino ??1975, ??993) suggested that commitment directly affects student loyalty. Adidam et al. (2004) and  
163 Holdford and White (1997), based on the model of Morgan and Hunt (1994), investigated the relationship  
164 between students and their public education institutions.

165 The findings suggested that relationship commitment had great positive impact on acquiescence and  
166 cooperation between students and education institutions and negative impact on propensity to leave. Therefore,  
167 it was proposed that: Hypothesis H5: Students' relationship commitment to the education institution has a  
168 significant positive impact on student loyalty.

### 169 13 b) Research Design and Methodology

170 A quantitative research study using questionnaire was adopted to examine the key factors affecting relationship  
171 commitment, and the relationship between relationship commitment and student loyalty. 480 copies of  
172 questionnaire were distributed to current private sub-degree students in one of the largest higher education  
173 provider.

174 For the purpose of this research, a private higher education institution was identified from the list of higher  
175 education institutions available on the website of Education Bureau of the HKSAR Government. Enrolment of  
176 students in this institution accounted for approximate 11% of the total number of private subdegree students  
177 in 21 higher educational institutions in Hong Kong. This institution was approached and it agreed to allow  
178 the researcher to administer the questionnaire survey to sub-degree students at the campus. Convenience  
179 sampling technique was used to approach the students because students are the direct customers of the education  
180 institutions.

181 Student loyalty was measured with three items, adopted from a previous study in education context (Nguyen  
182 and LeBlanc, 2001). Relationship commitment was measured with three items, and trust was measured with four  
183 items, adopted from Holdford and White (1997), a previous study in public education. Four items of relationship  
184 benefits and three items of shared values were adopted from previous studies in public education (Adidam et  
185 al., 2004; Holdford and White, 1997). Questions for measuring relationship termination costs were adopted from  
186 Sharma and Patterson (2000). The 7-point Likert-type scales were anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 7  
187 (strongly agree) for all questions.

188 The content and construct validity of each variable had already been evaluated by the original authors,  
189 therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the content and construct validity of the multidimensionalitem scales  
190 should accurately represent the variables concerned.

### 191 14 IV.

192 Analysis And Result a) Data Analysis Confirmatory factor analysis was performed for all variables: relationship  
193 benefits, relationship termination costs, shared values, trust, relationship commitment, and student loyalty.  
194 Cronbach's alpha was used to test internal validity, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient greater than 0.7 is considered  
195 as satisfactory (Bryman, 2008). Structural Equation Model was used to test the positive association of hypotheses  
196 H1 to H5, and calculate the variance of relationship commitment explained by the factors and the variance of  
197 student loyalty explained by relationship commitment in the research model.

### 198 15 b) Result

199 A total of 444 valid questionnaire copies were collected which provided a response rate of approximately 92.5%  
200 out of the 480 copies sent out. 60.4% of the respondents were female. 98.2% of the respondents were in the  
201 age range of 18 to 25. 40.1% of the respondents were associate degree students and 59.9% were higher diploma  
202 students. Almost half of the respondents were studying business courses.

203 Reliability and validity were assessed to ensure the information is trustworthy. Cronbach's alpha was used  
204 to measure consistency among the items in each variable of the questionnaire, and a value of 0.7 or above is  
205 considered as acceptable and having internal consistency (Shin et al., 2000). The variables of this research had  
206 Cronbach's alpha values from 0.785 to 0.877 (Table 1) were therefore acceptable.

207 The covariance matrix produced values ranging from 0.229 to 0.819 for each pair of construct, which are  
208 lower than the recommended level of 1.0 (Koerner, 2000) (Table 2). The result suggests that the constructs are  
209 statistically distinct within the CFA model, and provides evidence of discriminant validity.

210 Hypothesis H1 and H2 are supported by empirical evidence.

211 Relationship benefits and relationship termination costs show strong influence on relationship commitment, as  
212 indicated by high to moderate standardized coefficients 0.563 and 0.371 respectively. Shared values construct has  
213 a small direct effect on relationship commitment (standardized coefficient 0.116), Hypothesis H3 is supported.  
214 However, hypothesis H4 should be rejected, the standardized coefficient of -0.038 suggests that trust has non-  
215 significant influence statistically on relationship commitment in private higher education. Hypothesis H5 is  
216 supported by empirical evidence.

217 Relationship commitment has a strong influence on student loyalty, as indicated by high standardized coefficient  
218 of 0.796. It can therefore be concluded that hypotheses H1, H2, H3 and H5 are strongly supported with empirical  
219 evidence in the research model. The factors affecting relationship Y commitment together explain 71.7% of  
220 relationship commitment ( $R^2 = 0.717$ ), and relationship commitment explains 63.4% of student loyalty ( $R^2 =$   
221 0.634).

222 V.

## 223 **16 Discussion**

### 224 **17 a) Theoretical Implications**

225 The results of this research support the direct effect of relationship commitment on student loyalty, and the direct  
226 effects of relationship benefits, relationship termination costs, and shared values on relationship commitment in  
227 private higher education which is consistent with most of previous research studies' results in business context.  
228 However, unlike the common finding in most relationship marketing literature that trust is a determinant of  
229 relationship commitment, the direct effect of trust on relationship commitment is found to be insignificant in this  
230 research. The rejection of predictive effect from trust on relationship commitment in private higher education  
231 environment provides a new angle to the application of relationship marketing concepts in education settings.

232 Most previous studies related to relationship marketing concepts were conducted in U.S. and Europe; little  
233 attention has been paid to Asian countries, particularly Hong Kong. This research verifies applicability of  
234 relationship marketing concepts in the East.

### 235 **18 b) Managerial Implications**

236 This research shows that relationship commitment has a substantive and positive effect on student loyalty in  
237 the private higher education industry. The higher the relationship commitment of students with an educational  
238 institution is, the higher is the student loyalty. The student will pursue further studies in the current private  
239 higher education institution if the student has high relationship commitment. Therefore, education providers  
240 have to focus on enhancing relationship commitment in order to increase student loyalty.

241 Education providers can use the results of the path analysis to understand preferences of private students  
242 (customers) and allocate resources to enhance the factors that affect students' relationship commitment which,  
243 in turn, enhances student loyalty. With the findings of this research, education providers can gain a better  
244 understanding of factors affecting relationship commitment, and therefore can plan to nurture them. Considering  
245 all the four factors (relationship benefits, relationship termination costs, shared values, and trust) affecting  
246 relationship commitment, the  $R^2 = 0.717$  indicates that 71.7% of the variance of relationship commitment is  
247 explained by these four factors in the proposed model.

248 The construct of relationship benefits is the most influential determinant of relationship commitment in the  
249 private higher education. Relationship benefits include education quality, internship opportunities, placements,  
250 professional seminars, and company visits etc. (Adidam et al., 2004). Education providers have to improve these  
251 perceived relationship benefits continuously in order to raise relationship commitment of students.

252 The construct of relationship termination costs is the next influential factor. This provides signals to education  
253 providers that students' perceived costs, both economic and non-economic, are important consideration in building  
254 relationship commitment in private higher education. Education providers have to increase the relationship  
255 termination costs in order to raise students' relationship commitment with the education institution. The  
256 construct of shared values is also a determinant of relationship commitment in the private higher education  
257 industry. The more the staff and students have similar values on education issues, such as learning behavior,  
258 assessments and work-load, the more the students will be committed to the relationship with the educational  
259 institution (Adidam et al., 2004). Although the influence of shared values on relationship commitment is not as  
260 strong as that of relationship benefits and relationship termination costs, private education providers still have  
261 to raise the perceived shared values between students and education institution in order to increase relationship  
262 commitment of students.

263 Unlike the common finding in relationship marketing literature that trust is a determinant of relationship  
264 commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), the direct effect of trust, characterized as having confidence in partner's  
265 reliability and integrity, on relationship commitment, is found to be insignificant in this research. The path  
266 coefficient from trust (TR) to relationship commitment (RC) is not significant ( $H4: ? = -0.038$ ), which suggests  
267 trust has non-significant influence statistically on relationship commitment, in the private higher education  
268 context. This result provides new insights into relationship marketing in the private higher education context.  
269 This finding is not surprising because the primary intention of private sub-degree students is to get degree places  
270 after the 2-year sub-degree study. Sub-degree students may consider studying at the current education institution  
271 as a stepping stone to degree programmes, and their desired degree programmes can be offered in other education  
272 institutions. In the study of Grayson and Ambler (1999), the results suggested that the influence of trust on  
273 relational outcomes was moderated by length of relationship.

274 They commented that the length of relationship may change the nature of association between relational  
275 constructs, and there is value in future research to investigate the relational dynamics with respects to the length  
276 of relationship. In the current research, students just spend two years in the current sub-degree study and

277 they have a strong desire to get Year degree places in their desired education institutions, therefore, trust has  
278 non-significant influence on their commitment towards their current education institution.

279 Apart from the length of relationship, in order to get better understanding on the influence of trust on  
280 commitment, Moorman et al. (1992) suggested that other factors, such as economic factors and power, may affect  
281 how relationship operates, and future research can examine how trust interacts with these factors in affecting  
282 relational outcomes. Ganesan and Hess (1997) also suggested future research can study the impact of moderators,  
283 such as phase of relationship, reputation of the organization, and level of environmental uncertainty, on the link  
284 between trust and commitment. In the current research, it studies the direct effect of trust on commitment, while  
285 the impact of moderators which mentioned by Moorman et al. (1992) and Ganesan and Hess (1997) has not  
286 been investigated. In future, the current research can be extended to investigate the moderating impact of these  
287 moderators on the relationship between trust and commitment in order to understand the trustcommitment link  
288 better.

## 289 19 VI. Limitations and Future Research

### 290 20 Limitations

291 Firstly, due to time constraints, a crosssectional study was conducted, which was unable to take the actual  
292 behaviour of respondents into account.

293 Secondly, measurement scales used were adopted from previous studies. As the features of private higher  
294 education context may be different from features of other contexts, the adopted scales might not be as effective  
295 as scales tailor-made for a particular context.

296 Constructs that capture contextual characteristics have not been discussed in this research. The characteristics  
297 of higher education may affect the findings of the research.

298 Thirdly, some constructs that were thought to affect relationship commitment in previous literature were  
299 not included in this research. Only 71.7% of variance of relationship commitment is explained by relationship  
300 benefits, relationship termination costs and shared values, implying that there should be other factors affecting  
301 relationship commitment; and only 63.4% of variance of student loyalty is explained by relationship commitment.

302 Fourthly, the impact of moderators on the link between trust and relationship commitment was not included  
303 in this research.

## 304 21 Future Research

305 Firstly, future research can consider developing measurement scales for education in eastern environment. This  
306 may help education institutions' managements make better decisions.

307 Secondly, future research can consider conducting a longitudinal study to trace the changing preferences  
308 and behaviors of students (customers). The use of multiple time frames allows researchers to track behavioral  
309 intentions of students (customers) over time.

310 Thirdly, future research can consider adding constructs that capture contextual characteristics. This is  
311 important because of the rapid expansion of education in most parts of the world. The current results show  
312 that 71.7% of variance of relationship commitment is explained by three major factors and 63.4% of variance of  
313 student loyalty is explained by relationship commitment. Obviously, there are some unexplained portions which  
314 have not been captured in this research. The non-captured portions may be related to contextual characteristics.

315 Fourthly, future research can consider investigating the impact of moderators on the link between trust and  
316 relationship commitment. This may help better understanding of the influence of trust on commitment.

317 Figure

318 1 2 3

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Figure 1: Relationship

1

	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Relationship Benefits	4	0.785	0.804
Relationship Termination Costs	5	0.858	0.863
Shared Values	3	0.855	0.859
Trust	4	0.871	0.873
Relationship Commitment	3	0.877	0.880
Student Loyalty	3	0.834	0.857

Figure 2: Table 1 :

2

	RB	RTC	SV	TRRC
RTC Estimate	0.458			
	0.046			
	0.550			
SV	0.314	0.475		
	0.051	0.044		
	0.416	0.563		
TR	0.119	0.398	0.670	
	0.055	0.047	0.034	

Figure 3: Table 2 :



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