Student-Based Conceptualisations of University Brands:
A Brand Loyalty Model.

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Business Administration.

Newcastle Graduate School of Business
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July 2018.

STATEMENT OF DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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July 1, 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest thanks to those who have assisted me throughout this dissertation.

First, I offer sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Fred Chao. His guidance, wisdom and good advice have profoundly shaped the quality of my work. I also extend gratitude to the lecturers in the Doctor of Business Administration programme whose teaching has been essential to the development of my research skills, and my comprehension of the concepts that are central to this study.

I furthermore acknowledge the services of two firms that have been invaluable in the completion of this project. Research Now was engaged to collect the data for this study, and professional editing services were provided by The Expert Editor.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study is to present an empirically tested customer-based brand equity framework for higher education institutions. Using an adapted service brand model, the framework addresses gaps in the higher education brand literature by incorporating a comprehensive inventory of brand attributes and dimensions, and by identifying their relative influence on student perceptions of university brands and the process by which brand loyalty is created as the ultimate expression of brand equity. The results are compared with other service sector studies on which the model is based.

The positivistic research involves the collection of quantitative survey data sampled from current, Australian university students. The partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) method is selected for its suitability for causal or structural equations where estimates of both the structural and measurement relations are required, and for complex hierarchical component models with two or more layers of formative and reflective constructs.

The study indicates that of the university brand attributes experienced by students, those most meaningful to them are employee service, followed by self-image congruence, feelings about the brand, and the core service. Whilst students' appraisal of controlled and uncontrolled university brand communications precedes and influences their subsequent assessment of the education service, it is their evaluation of those university brand attributes directly experienced during study that results in either satisfaction or dissatisfaction, determining their consequent brand attitude, and whether they are ultimately loyal towards the university brand.

The results suggest the model is applicable in the university context, and the process by which university brand loyalty is created is comparable to that of other services industries. A comparison of the current study results with those of earlier empirical studies using the same model in other industry settings, reveals variances that can be explained by industry context and the extent to which the service is experience and credence dominant.

By linking the higher education brand equity creation processes to that of other services, the findings contribute both to the higher education brand literature, and to services branding literature more broadly. From a managerial perspective, the scales and model provide a useful diagnostic tool for higher education brand managers to measure brand performance and make evidence-based decisions concerning brand strategy.