Decision-Making Behaviour of Potential Higher Education Students

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Abstract

This paper examines the decision-making behaviour adopted by candidates hoping to gain entry into Higher Education. Whether or not the potential students operate a systematic process, thinking logically throughout each step and choosing the alternative with the most favourable ranking, is worthy of discussion. Secondary research confirms the many variables influencing this process, particularly within the USA. However, in-depth knowledge concerning the criteria that British students employ and their thoughts regarding decision-making is limited. Hence an exploratory study incorporating Sixth Form pupils of a High School in the NW of England and students from across the UK attending an open-day at a university also in the NW was undertaken. Results indicate that applicants do follow the sequential stages from 'problem recognition' to 'evaluation of alternatives' using parents' as well as teachers' advice throughout, although there seems to be a gap in the information needs of potential students, which many universities are not currently satisfying.

Introduction

Punj and Staelin (1978) stated that 'little is known about the underlying *student buyer behaviour* and how they select a college'. Even in the late 1990s there is much to learn about how potential students attend to, absorb and store data in order to make logical and rational decisions on choice of university/college. Given the time spent, and the complexity and variety of choices involved, one would classify such decision-making as *extensive problem solving* (Kotler, 1997). Here are some of the features of the extensive problem solving process faced by typical potential purchasers of UK Higher Education.

The majority of prospective HE students at undergraduate level will initially select six institutions, (at the start of their second academic year of 'A' levels) ten months prior to possible entry. They are then forced

to narrow their choices down to two institutions after a further five months. They do not know what their examination grades will be until just six weeks before their chosen degree course commences. Consequently they are making selections based on the condition of passing their examinations and obtaining the required grades. Whilst they are making these decisions about what to study and where to go, they will not be able to experience college life until they obtain a definite place and then enrol at that particular institution. Once at their location, the consumption process may last for three or four years.

There is evidence that the 'pre-purchase' information acquisition process in University decision-making is being carried out with greater involvement by the prospective student and their parents. For example more parents are attending open-days and potential students are requesting more detailed information. It is not clear, however, whether this is the result of student fees being introduced in the UK from September 1998. Nevertheless, the investigation and comprehension of the decision-making process, as undertaken by these students is becoming increasingly important, particularly for the institutions themselves.

What is being offered to prospective students (a university or college course) is not a tangible product, but a *service* Roberts and Allen (1997). It is impossible to gain experience of the service in advance (Cowell, 1991; Solomon, Suprenant, Czepial and Gutman 1985). In addition, the consumption process may last for several years and so the element of *risk* (of a wrong choice) is considered to be very important (Blythe and Buckley 1997; Mitchell 1995; Murray 1991). The interactions between a (potential) student and the university are many and varied. They include the first contact with the institution, by enquiry or application, through to graduation and employment via open-days, induction programmes, teaching and assessment. This article examines the student decision-making process by drawing on, and empirically testing, ideas from the broader literature on consumer behaviour and services. The relevant literature is summarised in the next two sections.

Student Decision-making Process

As people make decisions, they participate in different types of decision-making behaviour. Consumers may apply effort and time in making their decisions, but this will vary according to the individual and the current environment.

The basic five-stage process outlined in Figure 1 (Kotler, 1997) has formed the basis for studies of consumer buying behaviour (Chapman,

1981; Dembrowski, 1980; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). It can be applied when consumers purchase either goods or services. It starts when a consumer recognises a problem, and finishes with a purchase and post-purchase evaluation. When services are being purchased, alternatives are often evaluated without the benefit of any direct experience of the 'product'. Students do not have the opportunity to 'test drive' their future HE course. Since services are associated with greater degrees of intangibility, the quantity and quality of information available to the consumer prior to purchase is small. However, by gaining more knowledge in the relevant areas and increasing the amount of searching, consumers can feel more confident about making a decision. Hence by asking knowledgeable friends, consumers can obtain details about experience qualities (Gabbott and Hogg, 1994; Mortimer, 1997; Nagel, 1981; Woodhall, 1989; Zeithaml, 1981). The acquisition of word of mouth information acts as a risk reducing strategy for those embarking on Higher Education, which by its nature requires a great deal of involvement with the student as consumer (Friedman and Smith, 1993; Kellaris and Kellaris, 1988; Murray and Schlacter, 1990; Paulsen, 1990; Roberts and Allen, 1997; Saunders and Lancaster, 1982; Stewart and Felicetti, 1991; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1985).

The consumer may enter or leave at any stage. A person partaking in routine response or *limited* decision-making, may not employ the whole process, whereas a person engaged in *extensive problem solving* will usually apply each phase. For example, under extensive problem solving, the consumer (student) will perform active searching and use much time in trying to appraise the alternative 'brands' available. Initially, they form a 'consideration set' consisting of 'alternatives from which choice is made' (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard 1995, pp. 215), and then may apply a number of decision rules 'to make a selection from the choice alternatives (Engel *et al.* 1995, pp. 222). Due to their initial lack of knowledge of the 'products', they may spend a long time obtaining the relevant information and choosing where to take their custom.
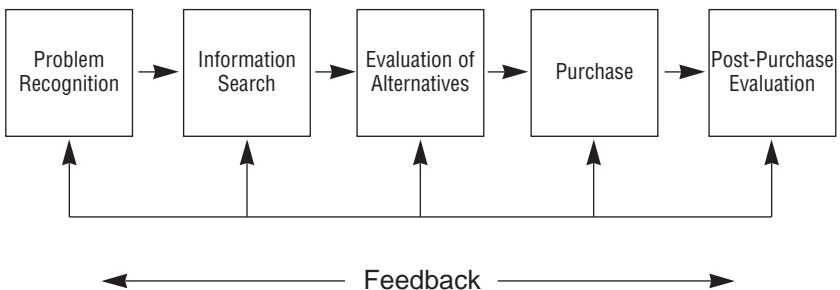
Gabbott and Hogg (1998) also refer to the model reproduced in Figure 1 in order to summarise three classifications of consumers; the *cognitive consumer*, the *learning consumer* and the *experiential consumer*. In terms of buyer behaviour within Higher Education, one is concerned with the *cognitive consumer*, whereby consumers when confronted with a 'buy task' will adopt an organised and practical method of solving their problem. They will therefore collect information (via prospectuses/hand-books, the Internet,) to quantify (ask

teachers/parents, attend open-days,) the possible benefits linked with the alternatives present and then make a well-balanced decision. Prospective students face a huge array of choices with over eighty universities and fifty Colleges of Higher Education to choose from. According to Gabbott and Hogg (1998), this simplified approach permits 'complex behaviour to be broken down into meaningful chunks' as the consumer progresses logically throughout the sequence of events, in order to solve their problem.

Research into Student Buyer Behaviour

Gorman (1976) makes a distinction between *uncontrollable* factors of HE provision such as location and *controllable* factors such as academic reputation where high standards can be established and monitored. He reported that location and size were the criteria most frequently used in deciding which college to attend (Leister and Menzel, 1976; Wright and Kriewal, 1980). 'Reputation for academic quality' was of secondary importance (Anderson, 1976). The impact of location has not been widely discussed (Tight, 1996). It may however increase in importance as students face accelerating costs continuing their education, and many select to live at home and travel daily.

In relation to Figure 1, there are outside stimuli as well as internal influences affecting a buyer's consciousness, which may or may not lead to a purchase. Chapman (1981) implies that student college choice is influenced by a set of student characteristics (*internal*) together with a series of *external* factors. Internal variables refer to

Source: Kotler, P. (1997)

Figure 1 Consumer Buying Decision Process

aspects of student performance and level of aptitude and aspiration. External variables relate to influences from outside such as family or teachers or friends. Courses that are available with the benefits that they offer, are the most important characteristics students look for when choosing a college (Erdmann, 1983; Saunders, Hamilton and Lancaster 1978; Sevier, 1987; Taylor, 1994; Walker, Cunnington, Richards and Shattock, 1979). Still of importance were the costs (course fees and living in expenses) of attending the institution and where their friends decide to go. Riggs and Lewis (1980), for instance claim that individual student choices were more strongly influenced by their friends attending than by the views of school teachers and parents. Where the percentage of class mates attending an institution is high, this will also increase the probability of others doing likewise (Fuller, Manski and Wise, 1982). However, Kallio (1995), Campbell (1977), Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith (1989), Houston (1981) and Murphy (1981) all note that students refer to parents (influential agents) as having the most significant impact upon their decisions. Krone, Gilly, Zeithaml and Lamb (1981) suggest that students employ multi-attribute frameworks to evaluate places to study. They claim that the most important criteria that people use when making a decision are those concerned with career prospects and better progression into a decent position of employment. People therefore see the opportunity of career advancement as a priority when deciding whether or not to continue their studies (see also Saunders, Hamilton and Lancaster 1978).

Welki and Navratil (1987) performed a multi-variate analysis of the enrolment decision. They showed that parental preference, cost and financial aid opportunities, campus attributes such as location, the student-faculty ratio and academic programmes were among the most influential factors. Cain and McClintock (1984) say that the 'best outcomes for all parties results from good matches between student values and college characteristics. It is to our advantage to provide both the process and the information that make such matches possible'. Higher Education institutions need to be aware of the influential forces that affect students when they enter this intricate decision-making process and gain an understanding of these variables if they are to satisfy students' needs effectively. For instance, Foskett and Hesketh's (1997) research of the post sixteen market claim that knowing how pupils make their decisions is important for competing and surviving in the market place. They go on to say that 'when young people begin to formulate their opinions and the point at which these crystallise into firm choices,

remains largely unexplored through research. Furthermore, the extent to which such choices are shaped by a range of family, social, economic and institutional variables has received little attention.' Their study of the Further Education sector found parents to be the most influential agents in initiating their off-spring to continue studying. This was also highlighted eleven years previously by Ball (1986), whose study of the secondary education level noted that parental attitudes, parents' professions and neighbourhoods, influence 'the forms of talk within the family'.

Methodology

The objectives of this research are to build on previous academic findings and extend the limited knowledge of the student decision-making process in Britain. Therefore an exploratory study was undertaken which provides further understanding of the *'problem recognition', 'information search'* and *'evaluation of alternatives'* stages in the process.

Main sample

A longitudinal study of a sample of 19 pupils from a Sixth Form 'College' of a High School (11 years old to 18 years old) in the Bolton area (NW of England) which contained pupils from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, was undertaken. This article reports on findings from the sample during the period November 1996 to February 1997. The pupils were in the Upper Sixth Form and already applying to go to university. The profile of the sample, contained a ratio of 53 per cent males to 47 per cent females, with all respondents being eighteen years or under.

During this period, research was carried out in three stages. The first stage was during November 1996. At this time the majority of pupils had already completed their UCAS forms and had received acknowledgement from the UCAS office. Some however, were still referring to the extensive library of university prospectuses and UCAS guide books, as located in the open-study areas of the Sixth Form and the careers library. One of the authors met the pupils on alternate Fridays, and the main aim was to get to know the pupils and develop an affiliation with them. During the visits, pupils were informally interviewed in groups of 4 or 5. Notes were taken whilst the pupils were talking, and they were copied and documented at the end of each discussion. The notes

provided the basis for designing the more structured discussion groups at stage 2.

The second stage took place during December 1996. By this time, many of the sample were receiving offers and attending university open-days. On alternate Fridays, group discussions were carried out with a maximum of four and a minimum of two pupils per group. During these meetings, a tape recorder was used and the transcribed discussions provided ideas for the wording of the subsequent formal questionnaire. Stage 3 took place in January/February 1997. A fifteen page questionnaire (incorporating sixty-one questions) was given to each respondent. Nineteen pupils from a total population of twenty six responded; the remaining seven pupils were not applying to attend university, but seeking employment or taking a full year out to travel. The questionnaire consisted of three main components. As far as possible, the components reflected the 'problem recognition', 'information search', and 'evaluation of alternatives' stages of Figure 1. However, the discussion groups had confirmed that the stages were not necessarily discrete and sequential and fed back into each other, and this was recognised in the grouping of items in some questions.

Control sample

Findings from a sample of pupils from a single school may be limited in their applicability. Consequently, at stage 3, a questionnaire containing the same basic components was distributed to a sample of 48 attendees at an 'open day' for a business studies degree course at a NW university in February 1997. Completed questionnaires were received from forty-six potential students, but with one spoilt questionnaire, this produced a response rate of 91.6 per cent. The ratio of males to females was 59 per cent to 41 per cent respectively. However, the most noticeable difference in the profile of this sample was that 13 per cent of the respondents were over the age of nineteen years. Thus opinions of 'mature' students, absent in the main sample, were captured to some extent in the control sample. This sample completed the questionnaire while waiting for interviews.

Findings

The results are presented descriptively and are then discussed in relation to the literature and previous studies.

Problem recognition stage

The questions relate to how the members of each sample were made aware of the possibility of higher education, when they decided to apply for university places and what were their initial impressions of universities. According to Bird (1994), there is an increasing number of middle-class parents who attended university and now want the same for their own children. Other research evidence also suggests that parental education (in particular the father's education level) has an impact upon attendance of Higher Education (Hossler and Stage, 1992; Manski and Wise, 1983; Stage and Hossler, 1989) often causing students to think about their education earlier than those students whose parents have no experience of college life. Interestingly both the main sample and control sample showed a higher proportion of fathers (44 per cent and 48 per cent respectively) having experienced college or university than those of mothers, (31 per cent and 44 per cent respectively).

In both samples, the most frequently stated response was that teachers at school or college were responsible for introducing pupils to higher education, (38 per cent and 47 per cent for the main and control sample respectively). However, almost a third of all total responses in each sample reckoned that parents were responsible, (29 per cent and 32 per cent for the main and control sample respectively). Pupils were also influenced by themselves (self-motivation), with 25 per cent of all replies from the main sample, in comparison to 10.5 per cent of all replies from the control sample. For example, one respondent recalled 'Since I can remember, I've always wanted to go to university.' The final influence on awareness was that of friends with 8 per cent and 10.5 per cent of all replies, from the main and control sample accordingly.

Approximately one third of each sample had made the decision to proceed to higher education prior to the final sixth form year. The control sample contained a higher percentage of respondents who made the decision in the last three months before the deadline for UCAS applications (Table 1). This was probably a reflection of the wider age range of this sample.

The pupils in the main sample were asked what initial impressions they had about universities. For some the impressions were of 'improving knowledge and education' (29 per cent) and of time at university 'being hard work' (14 per cent). For these pupils, problem recognition related to the content of courses. Others took a wider view of the higher education experience. They viewed universities as being big with a lot of facilities (6 per cent) and saw it as a means of

TABLE 1
Dates of decision to enter higher education

When did you decide to continue your studies?	Main Sample %	Control Sample %
Before June 1996	33	30
July to August 1996	45	27
September to November 1996	22	43

'enjoying living/socialising' (23 per cent) or of 'gaining independence and becoming self-motivated' (17 per cent) or of 'meeting friends for life' (11 per cent). Clearly, this group perceived the benefits of higher education as more than just the intellectual content of the course.

Information search stage

Although it is sometimes difficult to separate this stage from the previous one, there is evidence that the prospective students do seek different types of information from a number of sources in order to aid their decision-making.

'Word of mouth' is a frequent source of information, with parents (78 per cent and 64 per cent for the main and control sample respectively) and friends (39 per cent and 35 per cent for the main and control sample respectively) often being consulted. Both samples therefore acknowledged the influence of parents. The influence of friends may sometimes be indirect:

'I listen to my mates, but I wouldn't let them put me off a course or a place if I liked it'
'As everyone is going, we all talk about it'
'I've been to stay with friends at uni. and I see what goes on'

When asked for the main reason why they wanted to go to university, the responses reflected early formed conclusions of the benefits of university as a result of information searching. Many of the pupils were looking beyond the 3 or 4 years at university and expressed the main reason for higher education as 'to get a decent and well paid job' (23 per cent main sample; 26 per cent control sample) or 'to obtain a qualification/degree' (19 per cent main sample; 27 per cent control sample).

Others gave reasons relating to the university 'experience' and reinforced the educational and social benefits which had formed their first impressions.

As is seen in Table 2 below, the initial information searching activity included evaluations of course content, locations and reputations of universities, and specific grade requirements. Such information was obtained at least in part from the various prospectuses and careers advisors with 50 per cent of the main sample using careers officers as their first source, followed by 30 per cent referring to handbooks or prospectuses and 20 per cent asking friends or parents for information. The information seeking continues after the UCAS form has been completed. The probability of achieving the required grades seems to be a dominant factor when respondents change their minds. This was the most frequently stated reply by the main sample (33 per cent) and the second most popular reply by the control sample (25 per cent) in causing students to reappraise their choices. Open-days for example, help students to decide which offers to keep and this was the second most popular response by the main sample (20 per cent), yet the most frequent reply by the control sample (37 per cent).

Evaluation of alternatives stage

In each sample there was a great deal of variation in the amount of time the prospective students claimed to have spent in evaluating alternatives. The majority spent two months or less, but over 12 per cent of the

TABLE 2
Main reason for choices

When did you place your chosen set in that particular order?	Main Sample %	Control Sample %
Course specifics and course content	39	25
Location and geography	22	26
Social reasons	11	18
Reputation of the institution	11	12
It's the order which I prefer	11	12
The grades requirement	6	7

TABLE 3
Time spent evaluating alternative universities/colleges

How long did the evaluation process take place?	Main Sample %	Control Sample %
Couple of weeks	19	9
1 month	19	18
2 months	31	34
3 months	13	14
4–5 months	12	20
7 months or more	6	5

main sample and over 20 per cent of the control sample took in excess of 4 months (Table 3). In all cases, however, there is a substantial gap between the time the 'consumers' recognise the need for a 'product' and the time they make a purchase (Greenleaf and Lehmann, 1995).

The evaluation process was difficult for pupils in each sample. Some of the reasons given for the difficulty were (in order of frequency of mention): the sheer number of universities and variety of courses; the amount of information to read, particularly on courses similar in content; the issues associated with living away from home; making a decision based on a prospectus; lack of experience at making choices; lack of assistance.

The specific *main* deciding factors for choosing the final two selected universities/colleges were stated as: location (33 per cent); course content (30 per cent); grade requirements (12 per cent); university/college facilities (11 per cent); accommodation (7 per cent); 'city life' (7 per cent). Of course, several factors may have simultaneously affected the decisions, and the current study has not measured the weights attached to the factors, nor the level of homogeneity of the responses.

Discussion

The Consumer Buying Decision Process of Figure 1 did contribute a practical model with regards to the consequential stages through which potential buyers of higher education would proceed. It must be noted

that the stages of the model are not mutually exclusive, because levels will overlap for some students depending upon their current situation. However, all pupils did at some point in time progress through the phases of deciding what college and course to consider, followed by which one to apply to, with the intention of attending (Cain and McClintock, 1984).

Once they had decided to continue with their studies ('problem recognition') they commenced the basics of 'information search' via the UCAS directory book. This was used as a starting point by both the main and control samples, followed by talking with the careers officers/teachers (50 per cent and 65 per cent respectively) and assessing the institutions' prospectuses (30 per cent and 16 per cent respectively). 'Evaluation of alternatives' incorporated discussions with 'trustworthy personnel' such as subject teachers, parents and friends. Parents have an influential impact upon their offspring with both samples. Factors that mainly impact upon this evaluation stage are those of the course content, the reputation, as well as location of the university and social considerations. Attendance at open-days was also stated to be a valuable source in appraising the final evaluation stage, often changing students' choice sets in the process (Gorman, 1976; King, Kobayashi and Bigler, 1986; Sevier, 1987). Many noted that the open-days' organisation, structure and personnel, created the biggest impressions. 'Being shown around dingy laboratories by a cocky post-graduate does not attract you to the University.' If this situation occurred, students would return to the previous stage of the model and search for further information until their consideration sets were correctly adjusted.

From the different courses and institutions within their consideration set, students who engage in rational decision-making will make comparisons between the varying attributes (for example, geographical location, distance from home, content/structure of the intended programme of study, required entry grades, accommodation facilities, and so forth) so selecting the course and institution which has the best value on the greatest number of benefits (Chapman and Stealin, 1982; Coupey, 1994).

As discussed previously, there is a great deal of risk associated with choosing the 'right' course and selecting the 'right' institution. The level of risk is elevated by the intangibility of the service, as well as the time involved. 72 per cent of the main sample and 64 per cent of the control group said that they were 'afraid of making the wrong decision'. When asked if they found 'gathering information' to be complicated or involved, 55 per cent and 61 per cent respectively stated that it was

involved due to the huge array of institutions all with similar offerings (courses). Comments were also noted regarding the difficulty in obtaining 'user-friendly' prospectuses, which show clear details of the programmes of study and the university environments. The programme of study (its content/structure, duration of time, careers options) seems to be one of the key reference sources that students use when making their decisions and yet many prospectuses do not provide comprehensive details. For example, many students remarked on there being 'loads of prospectuses which were either boring or just difficult to understand'. The prospectus is the first piece of tangible evidence but in many cases it does not seem to be serving the students' information needs. The provision of information is an essential one due to the quantity of risk incorporated (Mortimer, 1997).

Risk is also increased due to students not being confident in achieving their attainable grades. For instance, 44 per cent of the main sample and 41 per cent of the control group stated that 'organising and prioritising data' was both complicated as well as involved, due to the uncertainty of their estimated grades. Solutions to this problem involved discussions with subject teachers and/or the placing of universities; by combining high and low entry requirements on their UCAS applications.

How might institutions respond to the findings?

Universities need to address the issue of perceptions of inadequate information. For example, although some institutions are sending out promotional videos and attractive literature, many according to students are failing to do so. A gap seems to exist between the provision of accurate and detailed information from the institutions and the demand for user-friendly prospectuses by the students. The respondents from the main sample made suggestions regarding prospectuses.

> 'Brochures which are glossy with an interesting front cover would be a good start.'
> 'There needs to be pictures of the University in general, together with course handbooks from individual faculties.'
> 'It would be helpful to have guides with details of the grade requirements too, instead of having to refer elsewhere for such details.'

The perceived and sometimes actual absence of such information creates anxiety for the student. The prospectus is often the first main contact. Consequently it needs to be a professional document containing realistic and relevant information. Course information, including

analyses of the mandatory and optional subjects, methods of assessment, field trips and work experience modules for all years of the programme of study, must be covered. By highlighting areas of common concern, such as accommodation availability, financial implications of student life, the department's facilities and progression of graduates into employment, potential students will be more knowledgeable when selecting their places of study.

Much work has been performed on the impact of promotional materials and yet many Universities seem to be ignoring it (Campbell, 1977; Chapman, 1979; Dominick, Johnson, Chapman and Griffith, 1980; Eusden, Gough and Whittaker 1990; Spenceley, 1988). A specific 'parent prospectus' could also be developed in order to reassure parents' key worries regarding job prospects and the presence of pastoral care whilst their child is away from home. Such booklets could be distributed when students request information from the institution or when parents attend campus visits. Nowadays much course information can be accessed via the Internet and changes during a year can be speedily incorporated, thus maintaining current web-site details throughout the information search period. Interaction between the student and the institution is increasingly occurring via electronic searching. At the sixth form school studied, however, such facilities were limited with only one computer in the library, and pupils found it easier to use hard copies of other materials.

Many respondents stressed open-days as being invaluable, both in deciding which institutions to apply to, (prior to UCAS submission) and afterwards, with regards to their acceptance of offers. Hence an open-day should be co-ordinated to include all the major features of an institution as well as emphasising its positive attributes. Ensuring that the student guides are pleasant, and yet informative, is essential in leaving the potential student with a favourable impression. Institutions should also arrange visits for students whilst in their lower sixth form, prior to UCAS submission. Parents who accompany them should be 'targeted' and become more involved in the open-day. For instance, having their own information sessions whilst their offspring are doing or seeing something else is one such way of meeting parents requests for information. This is already practised by some universities and such occasions can be used to foster good student relations. Another way institutions can nurture affiliations with potential students is through inviting careers officers and teachers to participate in open-days. Once there, students could be given information packs to take home, incorporating for example, pens/notebooks that endorse the university's name and logo.

Programme specifics and location, with geographical position of the institution, are considered to be important variables in the evaluation process. A university should be aware of any competitive advantage it has in this area, such as the uniqueness of the course, the accessibility of the place of study and the presence of local attractions. Both samples were influenced by the course as well as the location (geographical area of the UK, city or rural campus, and so forth) of the institution (Table 2) but social reasons (clubs, bars, theatres, and so forth) also had an impact upon choice. These seem to be important factors after deciding what course to take. Many students wanted to study in a cosmopolitan city, where it is easier to build an active social life so any cultural and social facilities surrounding the University need to be accentuated. Promotion of these features is vital in enticing potential students.

Conclusions and Limitations

The surveys suggest that potential students find the decision-making process to be complicated and risky, despite spending long periods of time investigating and examining all the evidence. With the introduction of student fees in 1998, this is likely to create even further complications as potential students search for institutions which will offer the best value for money. Universities must research their current and potential students' requirements in such a competitive environment. Finding out why possible students choose not to enrol is just as important as analysing the motivations of those who did decide to enrol.

The exploratory study reported here comprised only small groups of people, with 19 in the main sample of the Sixth Form of a High School and 45 in the control group from across the UK. Although the Sixth Form of the High School covers a large catchment area with pupils from other schools being encouraged to enter, the sample is likely to differ in comparison to that of the population of a Further Education college, for instance. However, the control sample which incorporated those applying to a 'new' university, did capture mature students as well as those doing the vocational courses as a route to Higher Education. As a whole, students from private and public Sixth Form schools need to be sampled as well as mature students who are contributing to the accelerating growth in the sector of Higher Education. Furthermore, the investigative period had a duration of just four months. The main sample are to be followed throughout the basic five stage process of figure 1 in order to assess their consumption behaviours and post-consumption feelings or expectations over a period of time. By studying a small group

of prospective students in-depth over the period, one expects to gain insights into the decision-making processes adopted. Any propositions which emerge can then be tested with larger, more representative samples.

Weightings of the different attributes were not measured. Further analyses are required to quantify the relative variables and respective trade-offs which students would be prepared to make whilst considering their decisions. Conjoint analysis techniques could be applied to assess which criteria have the most influence when evaluating the alternatives for all participants. It is also necessary to examine if these variables change throughout the decision-making process.

However, a concentration in this article on the 'problem recognition', 'information search' and 'evaluation of alternatives' stages of the decision-making process, with in-depth (mainly) qualitative data from samples of prospective students has provided universities with practical ways of meeting some of the stated 'consumer' needs.

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