RECONCEPTUALISING THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT COURSE SELECTION

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Abstract

The overall aim of this study was to review and evaluate decision making models and establish if they adequately reflect the journey of prospective full-time postgraduate students, in a contemporary media environment. Higher education has become much more competitive (Universities UK, 2016), and postgraduate students are an increasingly important income stream. They are also part of the millennial generation, highly influenced by their peers, technologically savvy and always digitally connected (Euromonitor International 2011).

The literature review revealed that whilst general decision making models have developed to a more circular, less linear approach, within higher education, there has been little development. This highlighted a gap in knowledge regarding how millennial postgraduate students approach their course selection decision making.

The methodological approach consisted of a social constructionist/interpretivist philosophy. Under an inductive research strategy, seven focus groups (50 people in total), and nine interviews were conducted. These consisted of UK, EU and International students, on marketing-related postgraduate courses, at one English post-92 University. Full transcripts were analysed using thematic coding.

The results and discussion revealed a number of important points, and led to the construction of a new framework. The circular framework introduced an engage construct, as the research highlighted rational and emotional decisions, and that decisions do not always commence with a wide choice set. Five different application patterns were established, together with highlighting the importance of evaluating the students' pre-purchase experience during the application process. Online forums, word-of-mouth/electronic word-of-mouth from past/existing students, family and friends are important influencers, as students considered postgraduate study from one month to four years prior to starting a course. Finally, three higher education specific touch point categories were developed: brand owned, partner, social/external.

1. Introduction and structure of thesis

The purpose of **chapter one** is to provide an overall understanding of the thesis. This section provides an overview, leading to the research question, aims, objectives and research gap. It also explains the structure of the thesis to assist the reader.

UK postgraduate higher education recruitment significantly contributes to the UK economy, estimated at £39.9bn or 2.7% of GDP (Lock 2015), and is therefore an important area to research. Furthermore, since 2002-2003 there has been a 54% increase in students on taught postgraduate courses, and a 200% increase in non-UK postgraduate enrolment within Business and Administration (Grove 2017; Universities UK 2014; Higher Education Commission 2012). However, the UK share of the non-UK student market has recently fallen from 12.6% to just under 10%, in a period where foreign students worldwide increased by almost 8%, suggesting the UK is becoming less attractive as a study destination (Morgan 2016). This highlights the competitive nature of postgraduate recruitment and the need to have an up-to-date understanding regarding how course selection decisions are made.

The era in which a person is born can exert significant influence on their behaviour as consumers (Solomon 2009). However, there is some debate regarding whether students should even be considered as consumers or customers (Guilbault, 2016). The Millennial Generation (born 1982-2004) are a primary focus for full-time postgraduate student recruitment in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) (Moore 2012; Universities UK 2015). Moreover, the Millennial Generation have spent their entire lives in the digital age, have a need to interact with others online, and are more likely to use social media to do this (Chrysochoi et al., 2012; Eleftheriou-Smith 2012;, Smith, 2012; Bolton et al., 2013; Kozar and Hillier-Connell). Furthermore, it was predicted that the digital era would significantly alter consumer behaviour because of these new media channels (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick 2010), with a move to two-way dialogue (Galan et al., 2015). Social media facilitates customer-to-customer interactions, is more social in nature, and has impacted upon the decision making journey (Galan et al., 2015; Jones and Runyan 2016). Previous research within Higher Education (HE) not only lacks focus at the postgraduate level, but the growth of digital media does not appear to be considered within existing HE-specific decision making models. Moreover, with existing research suggesting that digital communications and social media have significantly affected decision making (Bolton et al., 2013; Darley et al., 2010), there is a gap in existing decision making studies relating to Higher Education in a digital era. Indeed Hemsley-Brown et al., (2006), state there is a lack of theoretical models within the context of HE. There is a need therefore within HE, to understand how the use of digital communications by Millennial postgraduate students might impact upon their course selection decision making, which highlights a gap this research will address. This provides an opportunity to make a potential theoretical contribution through the consideration of any potential new postgraduate model relating to student choice, and a potential practical contribution through the insight provided on the process relating to Millennial postgraduate students.

This leads to the **main research question**:
To what extent do existing decision making models adequately reflect the journey of prospective full-time postgraduate students in a contemporary media environment?

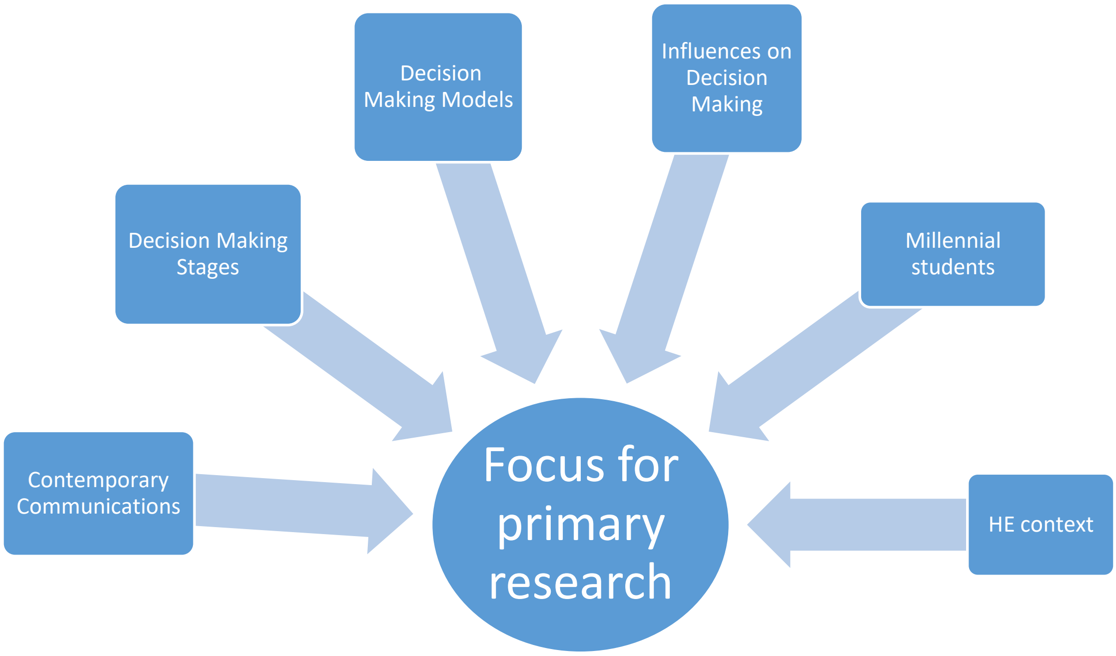
The **overall aim** of this research is:
To review and evaluate decision making models to establish the extent to which they adequately reflect the journey of prospective full-time postgraduate students in a contemporary media environment.

Research Objectives:

1. To critically review consumer decision making theory and explore developments in consumer decision making models.
2. To explore the relationship between Millennial postgraduate students, the contemporary media environment and consumer decision making models.
3. To explore the decision making journey of full-time postgraduate students from their early thoughts regarding postgraduate study through to arrival at their selected university.
4. To map journeys of these students in order to establish if any common patterns exist
5. To develop a framework that demonstrates journeys of potential postgraduate students and the role of contemporary communications within the process.

The main review of literature covers a number of themes identified as relevant to the research aim and objectives, identified in Figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1 Mapping the literature



Chapter two explores the context within which the research is set, that of postgraduate Higher Education and provides an overview of the key trends. Particular aspects relating to the marketisation of HE and the growing importance of image and reputation are covered in some detail. The second area of chapter two concerns students. Particular focus is on whether they should be considered as consumers, along with consideration of how they communicate and consume media as part of the millennial generation.

Consumer decision making has been a popular research area. Within Higher Education, student course selection decision making models have also been explored. **Chapter three** reviews this area in some depth, exploring how a variety of models have historically presented the approach as both rational and linear. More recently, a more continuous consumer decision journey presented as a circular approach has been seen, where consumers regularly interact with brands and each other. However, within Higher Education, models focusing on student decisions appear to be clinging to this traditional linear and rational approach, which presents an opportunity to explore what is happening within a Higher Education context and explore whether prospective full-time postgraduate students behave in this rational and linear way. This chapter will focus mainly on research objective 1, but will provide some insight for objective 2.

Chapter four provides a comprehensive review of each of the common stages evident in a variety of models discussed in chapter three. This provides some depth, detail and understanding of what is already known. Many previous research studies have focused on a narrow area or stage. In addition to these stages, consideration of a range of known influencers on decision making is reviewed. Finally, changes in contemporary communications around engagement and touch points is also considered. This area has received little attention within higher education literature. This chapter will focus mainly on research objective 2, but will provide some insight for objective 1.

The remaining parts of the thesis consist of:

Chapter five which presents the methodology for this thesis. This is focused around a discussion of the ontological perspective of social constructionism, epistemology of interpretivism, using an inductive research strategy. It also gives detail of the research methods adopted for this study of focus groups and interviews.

Chapter six reports the findings from both stages of primary research: stage 1 consisting of the seven focus groups, and stage 2 consisting of the nine interviews. Stage 1 of research will focus mainly on research objective 3, with stage 2 mainly focusing on research objective 4. Together they will provide insight to enable research objective 5 to be met.

Chapter seven provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings, considers how this relates to existing research, and leads to the presentation of a new framework, which relates to research objective 5.

Chapter eight concludes with a final overall discussion of the thesis, with a focus on the contribution to knowledge, a reflection on the research process, limitations and suggested further research.

Chapter two will now review the context for this research, Higher Education.

2. Higher Education and Postgraduate Millennial Students in a digital era

This chapter reviews the HE context for this research, with a focus on postgraduate trends. This includes a discussion regarding the marketisation of HE, whether students should be considered consumers, customers or clients, and consideration of the importance of image and reputation of HEIs. The final area explores the changing communications environment in a digital era, with a focus on Millennials.

2.1 Higher Education and Postgraduate Trends

Higher education contributes significantly to the UK economy, estimated at £39.9bn or 2.7% of GDP by Universities UK, which is four times more than agriculture (Lock, 2015). Over 400,000 people are employed at UK universities (Universities UK 2016). New graduates also created 4,600 new start-ups and over 18,500 full-time jobs. Furthermore, direct and indirect jobs, as a result of universities in the UK, are estimated at over 757,000. Moreover, a report commissioned by the National Union of Students during 2013 states that student expenditure supports around £80bn of the UK's economic output (Lock 2015). The UK higher education sector is therefore a highly lucrative and important part of the UK economy, and postgraduates are argued to be the major drivers of innovation and growth (Higher Education Commission, 2012), so they are a very important part of education.

In the academic year 2016-17, there were over 2.3 million students studying at a UK higher education institution, of which almost 1.77 million were at undergraduate level, and 551,595 were postgraduate. Although postgraduate student numbers fell slightly in 2015-16, the 2016-17 figure is 2.5% above the 2014-15 figure, showing some growth (Universities UK, 2016 2017,). Furthermore, 38% of all postgraduate students are from outside the UK, compared to just 14% at undergraduate level. Interestingly, 47% of postgraduate taught students (PGT[1]) undertake their study part-time, and these are mainly UK students (Universities UK 2017). Looking specifically at all PGT students for

[1] PGT refers to postgraduate students on a taught masters, rather than PGR which covers postgraduate research students (typically studying for a PhD or similar qualification)

2015-16, 64% of these were from the UK[2], 7% were from other EU countries, and 29% were International students (from outside the EU). However, international students accounted for 25 per cent of total income during 2014-15 (Morgan, 2016b), and as much as 54% of total postgraduate student numbers in some disciplines, such as Business and Administration (Universities UK 2014). This presents a number of issues, firstly, many postgraduate courses at UK universities are heavily reliant on international students to be viable (Universities UK, 2014), with Business and Administrative studies having 62% of students that are EU/International during 2012-13. Secondly, immigration regulations have continued to change, there has been some negative publicity associated with this, which may ultimately lead to a reduction in international students coming to the UK. Indeed, analysing current HESA figures for PGT for 2016-17 within Business & Administration, 52% are international students, 8% are other EU and 40% are UK students (UKCISA, 2018). However, further analysis reveals that the majority of these international/other EU students are at the prestigious 'redbrick[3]' universities (see Table 2.1), suggesting that image and reputation is much more important for these particular students.

The total number of students wishing to study abroad is set to double by 2020 and quoted at more than 7 million young people (Jump, 2013). Analysing the top 10 sending countries outside the EU, student numbers for the UK remain fairly static between 2013-14 to 2016-17 overall. However, looking at particular countries it is clear that there are significant increases in Chinese HE students in the UK, and that significant decreases have been seen for Nigerian and Indian HE students between 2013-14 to 2016-17.

Currently the transition rate from undergraduate to postgraduate study within one year at English HEIs remains fairly static at around 13% overall (HEFCE, 2013). Furthermore, of the 13% that go onto further study, 47% do so within the same institution, which highlights the importance of marketing to existing students by HEIs to aid retention. It is well known that it is less expensive to retain a customer than to find a new one

[2] UK students are usually referred to as Home students
[3] Redbrick universities were established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (as opposed to much older universities such as Oxford and Cambridge) www.collinsdictionary.com, however, today it is frequently used to distinguish between the older-type universities, and those that were formerly polytechnics (known as new universities). www.ukuni.net

(Guilbault, 2016). Furthermore, it is not yet fully clear what impact the relatively new £10,000 postgraduate loan has had on this progression. Although Grove (2017) states there has been a 22 per cent increase on the previous year, which is estimated at an additional 90,600 students. Previous increases in postgraduate student numbers since 1999, of 54 per cent, have mainly been due to a 200% increase in international postgraduate enrolments. With only an 18% increase in this period for home/other EU students (Higher Education Commission, 2012).

Table 2.1: Largest recruiters of students from outside the UK, studying at UK universities 2015-16 (HESA/UKCISA 2018)

Institution	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	Total
University College London	7,860	7,115	14,975
The University of Manchester	5,950	6,970	12,920
The University of Edinburgh	5,085	5,695	10,780
Coventry University	3,540	6,175	9,715
Kings College London	4,115	4,785	8,900
The University of Sheffield	4,595	3,930	8,525
Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	4,550	3,970	8,520
University of the Arts, London	2,035	6,425	8,460
The University of Warwick	4,520	3,920	8,440
The University of Oxford	5,760	2,300	8,060
The University of Glasgow	3,845	3,790	7,635
The University of Birmingham	4,670	2,945	7,615
City, University of London	4,320	3,180	7,500
The University of Liverpool	2,075	5,235	7,310
University of Nottingham	3,170	4,070	7,240
The University of Southampton	4,050	3,175	7,225
Cardiff University	3,285	3,825	7,110
London School of Economics and Political Science	4,635	2,280	6,915
The University of Leeds	3,825	2,760	6,585
Newcastle University	3,145	3,415	6,560

The UK HE qualification has international recognition, is seen as offering an excellent teaching and learning environment and British lecturers are seen at the forefront in their fields of expertise (Maringe and Carter, 2007). Moreover, England is seen as a far safer place than the USA to study and Australia has previously headlined for attacks on Indian students during 2009 (Jump, 2013). However, due to the challenging education market, universities in the UK will need to ensure that they market themselves well in order to influence potential students to study here rather than elsewhere. Whilst the UK is generally less reliant on overseas students than Australia is, it is interesting to note, not only which universities recruit most heavily outside of the UK, but also which are most reliant in this as a source of income, which is illustrated in Table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2: Universities most dependent on non-EU students (Morgan 2016b)

Institution		**Overseas income as % of total income**
1	University of London	37.0
2	University of Sunderland	34.8
3	London School of Economics	30.0
4	Heriot-Watt University	29.9
5	City University London	29.6
6	Royal College of Art	29.4
7	University of the Arts London	29.1
8	Coventry University	26.4
9	Soas, University of London	26.1
10	University of St Andrews	21.7

HEIs are now operating within a rapidly changing environment with, *inter alia,* deregulation and increased competition. Most recently, the UK vote to leave the EU is likely to further impact on higher education and creates uncertainty for universities in areas such as loss of EU funding and possible changes to systems/regulations for EU students wishing to study in the UK (Universities UK: 2016). Early indications are that EU students looking to study business subjects in the UK are searching less for courses in the UK, down by 9.8% for undergraduate and 10.2% for postgraduate. However, substantial increases are seen for the Republic of Ireland and Canada both at undergraduate and postgraduate level. HEIs can compete in a number of different areas: funding, reputation, research grants, research output and for students (Frolich and Stensaker, 2010). This has led to a great deal of debate regarding what many see as the marketisation of higher education (HE), as a result of this increased competition and a need to be more effective in student recruitment.

2.2 The marketisation of HE

Wedlin (2008) has stated that universities are more business-like than at any time in the past. This may be the result of a change in governance of the HE system and the resulting marketisation policies and market-type mechanisms introduced within many countries (Jongbloed, 2003). Young (2002: 79) states that in many countries marketisation is a *"compromise between privatisation, academic autonomy and state control"*. Dill (2003: 136) suggests it is *"freedom from all the shackles of government regulation"*. Baldwin and James (2000) suggest governments wish to enhance the quality of HE through introducing market forces. However, they question whether students will become informed consumers that make rational choices.

Moreover, it is suggested that the fairly recent introduction of Higher Education fees could result in *"greater consumerist behaviour by applicants"* and that *"value for money"* may become increasingly important as part of an applicants' decision making process (Maringe, 2006: 467; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010: 143). Furthermore, the abolition of student number controls means that more students are likely to migrate towards those universities offering a higher level of "quality", which may cause financial problems for some of the lower performing universities (Morgan 2016b). Indeed, the recent Government white paper to allow more private providers, who are likely to focus on low cost degrees at an institution that does not concern itself with high cost research, will increase competition. Maringe (2011:142) discussed the commoditisation of HE and states *"HE institutions become factories for the production of degrees which students can purchase using real money and their brains"*. Collini (2012) also discussed the building of mass higher education systems and higher education increasingly being viewed as a private good. In addition to private providers, the apprenticeship levy on large employers came into play from April 2017, creating partnerships between employers and HE institutions and this is likely to threaten the traditional HE model (Dawe, 2016). The ongoing changes in the HE market therefore presents many challenges and opportunities for universities (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003).

One such challenge/opportunity is the global trend of student mobility and use of the Internet, which have contributed to a rapidly evolving market of international education (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). International students are an important part of HE, with

£5.5 billion of income alone coming from international students (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006: 318) show where the research focus has been, as a result of the global marketisation of higher education: increased competition between institutions (nationally and internationally) and the problems presented as a result of this , funding issues and widening participation or social engagement. Soutar and Turner (2002) also highlight that this increase in competition and a highly marketised HE sector has led to more research regarding decision making in HE. Moreover, there is an assumption that this encouragement of market forces by governments wishing to enhance the quality of HE is based on students making informed and rational decisions regarding their choice of HE course and institution, and there is a lack of research to underpin this assumption (Baldwin and James, 2000). Furthermore, some state marketisation is happening from a desire to modernise the European education system (Vaughn, 2002). For example, Germany has gained more financial and organisational autonomy and only fairly recently introduced tuition fees. This drive is from the belief that market competition will make institutions more efficient and more responsive to their stakeholders. Moreover, there is a need to accommodate increasing numbers of students without compromising quality. Chasing enhanced rankings and better positions in league tables adds further pressures on universities. A number of sources have highlighted that universities are working hard to improve their rankings within league tables and that these rankings can have a negative effect on university policy (Bowden, 2000; Dill and Soo, 2005). University ranking could, for example, be improved by inflating grades or increasing entry points to courses (Vaughn, 2002). Dorweiler and Yakhou (1994) also suggest that as a result of this fierce competition for students and the revenue that they generate, HEIs are having to commit to continuous improvements in order to survive.

The marketisation of HE is not only taking place within the UK. For example, the United States have a highly marketised system, with tuition fees, strong competition between institutions, a focus on institutional rankings and league tables, and strong competition for research funds (Brown, 2011). Other major English speaking nations where there is evidence of marketisation and deregulation of universities includes: Canada; Australia; and New Zealand (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). There is also evidence of deregulatory policies in Japan; Russia; the former Eastern Bloc countries; Holland; Spain;

Israel; China; Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong Zimbabwe and South Africa (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). The UK system is quickly moving towards the American system, as are Australia, although competition for research funding is a more recent introduction (Vaughn, 2002). Similar situations can be seen with Canada, New Zealand and with many other European Union countries.

The rate at which each country moves towards a greater marketisation is strongly determined by Government. For example, Australia's previous Labor government's visa clampdown and financial requirements contributed to a fall in international students in the country (Jump, 2013). However, the more recently elected Liberal-National Coalition is set to change this, meaning competition from Australia is likely to increase. This has been seen most recently, when the Australian government published the National Strategy for International Education 2025, providing A$12 million (£6.08) million) of funding from 2016-17 (Morgan, 2016a). This has been provided to enable their market share of international students to grow substantially, at a time when there is increased competition. In additional to the United States and Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Germany are also focusing on attracting international students, with greater focus and emphasis on strategies to target. For the UK, this increased deregulation and marketisation in other countries, leads to much stronger competition between countries, at a time when many universities in the UK want to increase international students, especially at postgraduate level (Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

The UK's 2012 share of the international student market stood at 12.6%, behind the United States at 16.4%. Moreover, Germany (6.3%), France (6%), Australia (5.5%) and Canada (4.9%) all have reasonable market share of this group of students (Universities UK 2014). However, whilst the United States continues to increase its market share (currently at 19%), the UK has fallen to just 10% (Morgan, 2016a). Furthermore, the OECD stated that foreign students worldwide increased by almost 8% between 2010 and 2012, which suggests that the UK is becoming less attractive as a study destination. Moreover, there is nervousness in the UK sector regarding immigration policy for students outside the EU. The implications of the tightening of Tier 4 visa regulations[4]

[4] Students from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or Switzerland require a Tier 4 (General) student visa to study in the UK.

show that applications from International students are down (Morgan, 2012). There has been substantial negative publicity in this area suggesting that the UK does not welcome students from outside the EU, and other countries such as Australia are seen as having a more student-friendly visa system (Morgan 2016b). A number of universities also have ambitious expansion plans for international student numbers, and this has resulted in a highly competitive situation, with more places available than students. Some negative statistics are starting to emerge. This highlights the importance of conversion rates and additional marketing effort required to attract an estimated 1.6 million that study outside their home countries (Pimpa, 2003), generating £2.9 billion of the £8.3 billion total fees (Matthews, 2012). More recently, there is some evidence to suggest that the UK is loosening visa requirements for students from areas such as those within Asia (Times Higher Education 2018).

Table 2.3 (below) summarises the strategies that competitor countries use to attract students from overseas. However, new rivals are entering the market in some regions (China and Malaysia for East Asia and the Pacific; Egypt, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates for the Middle East) meaning some students are deciding to stay closer to home (Universities UK 2014). This has previously led to a 4% drop in students coming from India to the UK between 2010 and 2012 (Universities UK, 2014), and a further 26% drop between 2012-13 and 2016-17, at a time when India has a rapid increase in 15-24 year olds (UKCISA, 2018). This may be due in part to a lack of post-study work opportunities in the UK (or at least a perceived lack of opportunity). For example, the Home Office states the number of students granted an extension to stay in the UK to work has reduced from 48,875 in 2011, to 6,238 in 2013 (Universities UK 2014). However, a parliamentary group has been set up due to concerns regarding the UK losing international students (Morgan, 2016a), and it will be interesting to see what the UK Government plans to do to counteract initiatives such as those by the Australian government. Issues regarding the removal of international students from net migration targets need to be addressed, as do post-study work visas, in order for the UK to compete more effectively.

Table 2.3 Competitor countries' strategies to attract students (Universities UK, 2014)

Country	Detail
Canada	Government strategy for 2014 to attract 450,000+ international students by 2022.
Australia	Government introduced generous post-study work entitlements to encourage students to study there (entitled to switch onto a work-based visa for 2-4 years, depending upon level of qualification). Less evidence required for visa application also.
United States	Reform proposals to allow graduates qualifying in STEM[5] subjects to stay through 'stapling' a green card to qualification.
Germany	Government target to increase overall foreign student numbers from 300,000 in 2013 to 350,000 by 2020

With universities therefore facing increased pressure to retain or increase student numbers, many are relying on international students. Recent research suggests that one third of international students are recruited via agents (Havergal, 2015) with an estimated overall UK-wide outlay of £89.5 million for 2013-14. However, at some institutions the number recruited can be as high as two-thirds, with post-92 universities relying more heavily on agents. Fees paid to agents vary, and this is difficult information to obtain, however it is suggested that an average of £1,767 is paid per student during 2013-14 period, with the University of Sunderland spending £2.4 million during 2013-14 and a total of £9.5 million over a three-year period (Havergal, 2015). This highlights the complex nature of recruitment and the importance of understanding the role of agents within the postgraduate student decision making process. Furthermore, there is a need for HEIs to market themselves due to this increased competition, and to do this successfully, managers need to be aware of the decision making process of potential students, and how they search for information (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). However, Barrett (1996) voiced concern about marketisation of HE, the use of business terminology, and that increasingly HEIs were being seen as a business (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Furthermore, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006:319) state *"In some cases, opponents of the introduction of market forces in education believe that the business world morally contradicts the values of education; therefore, they would argue that educationalists ought to oppose any form of marketing in their institution"*.

[5] STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics

The challenging environment with which universities are now faced, enhances the need for greater understanding of what constitutes successful communications with a wide range of potential students. The aim being to gain a greater share of what appears to be a shrinking market due to a range of factors, including Government policy regarding Visa restrictions and student loans and student debt. With many universities more dependent upon International students to prop up their Home and EU numbers and to improve financial viability of postgraduate courses, understanding how potential students make decisions and how to build successful relationships with them is key to increasing postgraduate numbers. However, there are some conflicting viewpoints regarding how students should be perceived, which is discussed fully in the next section.

2.3 Students as consumers, customers or clients?

There is a well-established and continued debate regarding whether students should be viewed as a customer in higher education (Guilbault, 2016). Pitman (2000: 166) highlights the importance of this, *"how the consumer of the service is defined partly determines the view the university takes of the consumer and thus the service they provide them"*. This highlights a possible lack of customer orientation if they are not viewed as customers, emphasising the importance of a customer mind-set (Guilbault, 2016). Furthermore, it is suggested that students view themselves as customers, and expect to be treated so (Koris and Nokelainen, 2015).

The notion of students being considered customers has received some consideration, for example Conway et al., (1994: 31) highlight that *"students can be either considered as customers (with courses as the higher education products) or as products with the employers being the customers"*. This supports Kotler and Fox's (1985) earlier view, and Levitt (1980) who also viewed a university's offerings as products. Litten (1980) likens academic institutions to production functions and suggests that they certify the performance characteristics of their products (ie. Students). Belohav (1984) also suggests that they can be viewed as a manufacturing organisation and that the student is the final product. However, Conway et al., (1994: 33) state *"it should be remembered that the student is likely to influence the process and as such is not inanimate raw material merely going through a standard manufacturing process*". Their research suggests that the role of many educational institutions is one of *"producing a trained* *specialist and thus considered the student as a product of the education process*". Furthermore, Barnett's (2011) view is that the distinction is between whether students are consumers or customers. A consumer is one that consumes a service. Gibbs (2008) further discusses the student-as-consumer and highlights the issue of a student view that education can be bought in the same way as any other product or service. Therefore, this may lead to the commoditisation of HE, with lack of responsibility for learning from the student. However, it is argued that this is inappropriate, as students have to be fully engaged with learning, which the role of consumer denies.

> *"The student-as-customer, however, is different. For precisely as customer, the student is engaged. The student has a stake in his or her experience. What is open is the character of the stake that the student as customer has in his or her experience"*
>
> (Barnett, 2011: 45).

Indeed, Collini (2012: 9) states simply that "*university students study*" and develop "*the capacity to challenge or extend the received understanding of a particular topic*". Svensson and Wood (2007) also agree that it is unsuitable to refer to students as customers, as this suggests that the customer is always right. Although, some suggest that this *"need not negate the power relationship between students and academic staff"* (Angell et al., 2008: 239), and Guilbault (2016) suggests that the customer is always right is no longer universally accepted. Furthermore, having a focus on student satisfaction does not mean universities are giving away education and therefore students must receive high grades to be satisfied (Guilbault, 2016). However, with the introduction of fees, and the increasing amounts of data that students can base their choices on (for example, in the UK the National Student Satisfaction Survey at undergraduate level, and the Postgraduate Taught Experience survey at postgraduate level), all supports the idea of students as customers, making rational choices between numbers of competing providers. Availability of information on courses and building relationships with potential students is therefore likely to be increasingly important in helping students as customers to make these rational choices (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Furthermore, Cuthbert (2010) suggests that by thinking of students as customers is a result of taking marketing in higher education seriously (Guilbault, 2016).

Maringe (2011: 146) further complicates how we define students by introducing a third category of client. He states that in education, clients can be students or parents, and argues *"client relationships tend to be longer term, emergent, developmental and generally incremental."* Furthermore, he identifies customers as *"transaction based, the relationship tends to be transient"*(Maringe 2011: 147). With consumers as a *"rather nebulous association, but tends to be based on consumer appraisal of products or services"*. However, Ostrom et al., (2011) state that although HE has many customers and stakeholders (for example, future employers, government, society), students are the core customers.

During the 1990s HE was recognised as a service sector business and defined within services marketing (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Mazzarol (1998) emphasised the nature of services and the importance of building relationships with customers. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006: 319) highlight that education is "people based". Relationships are built using many different marketing communications tools, one of which is through the growing use of social media. However, negative or poor use of social media may damage the image and reputation of a brand, which is explored in the next section.

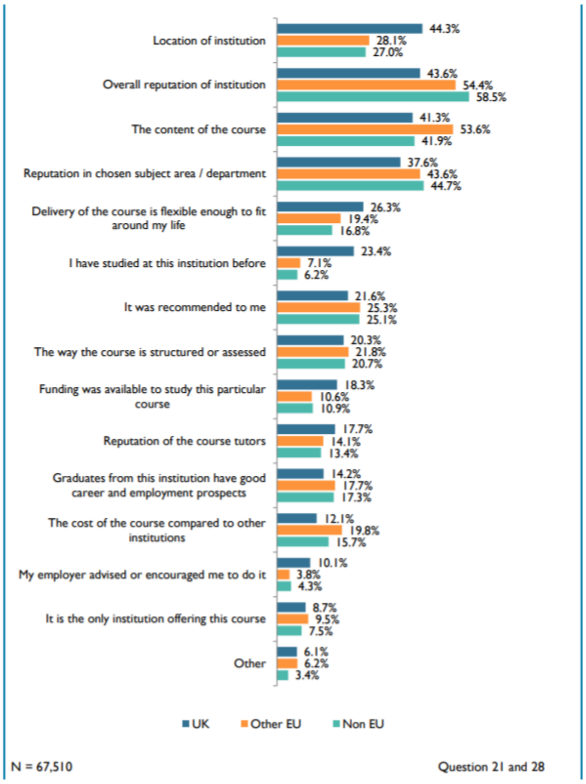
2.4 Image and reputation

During 2000-2003 the UK government backed a £5 million worldwide campaign to brand UK higher education and to attract international students to the UK. The campaign involved creating and improving positive perceptions of UK higher education and highlighted the role of the British Council offices throughout the world (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). Stamp (2004) suggests the increased interest in UK HE branding is a result of a number of factors: tuition fees, university league tables, increased competition and a need to differentiate, issues around brand perception.

Chapleo (2010) explores what makes a successful university brand. One of the most important factors he found was having a clear vision through a long term strategy and supportive and informed leadership regarding the building and managing of a successful brand. Branding within UK Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) has been a contentious issue with some arguing that image and reputation are more important than teaching quality (Mazzarol, 1998). It is suggested that university league tables are one of a number of factors driving the UK HE branding agenda (Stamp, 2004). Many academics support the view that institutional rankings and perceptions relating to areas such as academic quality/prestige are important for international students (Wilkins and Huisman, 2013). However, Mazzarol (1998) suggests there is little evidence available that suggests a link between university branding and league table ranking or perception. Furthermore, Temple (2006) states it is actually reputation management or public relations, rather than HE branding that takes place. Bunzel (2007) suggests there is an implicit assumption within universities that branding is an important area, but there is a lack of empirical proof that supports this proposition. However, the recent Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)[6] survey of over 67,000 students, clearly demonstrates that the overall reputation of the institution is the most important motivator to study at a particular institution, especially for students from outside the UK (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). Reputation in a chosen subject area/department, along with reputation of the course tutors was also considered important (see Figure 2.1 below). Moreover, the majority of international students in the UK are at redbrick/old universities (HESA/UKCISA 2018), which further supports the importance of reputation of an HEI when selecting where to study. However, it is important to note that Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) state that a high reputation is often linked to fewer students accepted onto a programme, and that more tangible aspects such as new facilities are considered less attractive. 'Old' universities that have far more applications than places, and therefore have a high rejection rate leads to an improved reputation and image. Furthermore, Oplatka (2002) warns against low status HEI's elevating their image through marketing, as it can lead to a contradiction between the image they wish to convey and their overall reputation in the market.

[6] *The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) is the only UK higher education sector-wide survey to gain insight from taught* ***postgraduate students*** *about their* ***learning and teaching experience. It has been described as the nearest equivalent to the undergraduate National Student Survey (NSS), but with greater focus on enhancement.***
See https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/institutions/surveys/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey for further details.

Figure 2.1: **Motivation to study by domicile (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014)**



A number of media-created university league tables exist in the UK. For example: The Financial Times issues a list of business schools; The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES); and The Times has the longest running and most respected annual league table, drawing on data from Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) scores run by the Quality Assurance Agency; data available through the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA); and the results of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The Daily Telegraph also publishes league tables, based only on TQA scores, and categorises universities in a similar way to the UK Football League, with a Premier Division, down to a Fourth Division (Shattock, 2010).

The use of league tables within higher education is problematic as *"higher education nor quality are simple, unitary or homogeneous in nature. These can hardly be said to contribute anything to the development of a quality culture"* (Tight, 2000: 41). For example, HEIs that focus on local, less well-qualified student markets, postgraduate education or international recruitment are likely to appear lower in the league tables than those elite universities whose main focus is on research. Furthermore, it is argued that league tables discourage diversity and encourage universities to play by the rules in order to increase their chances of success. League tables, online product ratings and online reviews are all said to take on a much larger role in the consumer decision making process (Moe and Trusov, 2011). However, the role they take within postgraduate decision making is unclear. Moreover, many other factors may affect postgraduate study and decisions regarding this by prospective students.

If university marketing is to be effective, a clear understanding is required of various student groups, how they make decisions regarding *inter alia* the country they select for higher educational study, their preferred institution and choice of course, along with information sources and people that help in making their decision. There has been substantial growth in digital marketing[7], especially social media[8] (Kemp, 2015), and the use of digital marketing is said to have some impact upon decision making behaviour of consumers (Solomon et al., 1999; Sinton and Puri 2014).

However, how that relationship is built is changing in what is termed this *"culture of participation"* where people freely interact with other people 24/7 (Tuten & Solomon 2013: 3). Communication has moved from asynchronous interaction (participants do not respond immediately e.g. email), to synchronous interaction (real-time communications with instant responses), especially with Millennials. This has also impact on interaction with organisations, with a level of expectation that communications will be more open, instant and less formal. However, it is unclear what this impact has been within higher education, especially relating to decision making of applicants. Potential applicants will be familiar, and may have actively participated with high profile social media campaigns that have targeted them. Outside of HE, brand owners are providing innovative, engaging campaigns. Within HE, however, little or no research exists relating to social media use throughout the HE decision making process.

2.5 The digital era and connected consumers

Customer-to-customer interactions through social media present significant challenges and opportunities for organisations (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Organisations have far

[7] Digital marketing refers to promoting products/services though areas such as computers and mobile forms of media. A comprehensive discussion of this is found in Chapter 4.

[8] Social media definitions vary, but it is often referred to as users creating and sharing content through online media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, Wikipedia, Twitter etc. A comprehensive discussion is found in Chapter 4.

less control of customer experiences, which are more social in nature, and with peer customers also influencing customer experiences. Moreover, Kozar and Hiller Connell (2013) observe a new type of student – the Millennial Generation graduate student, and stress the importance of understanding and responding effectively to the characteristics of this new group, in order to foster sustainable admissions and retention rates. Millennials are one generational cohort, and some suggest there is a strong correlation between when a person is born and their identity and behaviour as consumers (Solomon et al., 1999), although not everyone agrees (Zemke et al., 2000). Postgraduate students are mainly identified as being part of Generation Y (born after 1981), and part of a wider category of Millennials (born 1982-2004) (Moore, 2012), and are seen as highly digitally literate, having spent their entire lives in the digital age (Chrysochou et al., 2012; Eleftheriou-Smith, 2012; Smith, 2012; Bolton et al., 2013). As technologically savvy people, not only have they a need to interact with others, but they are more likely to prefer social media for those interactions (Kozar and Hiller-Connell, 2013; Bolton et al., 2013). Moreover, this suggests that as this group of people are generally used to communicating via social media platforms with a variety of brands, and therefore may also have a role to play in communications with prospective students throughout the decision making process. Millennials have unlimited access to information (Kozar and Hiller-Connell, 2013), and perceive digital as being fundamental to their lives (Donnison, 2010). Indeed, Sinton and Puri (2014) suggest that the more people connect to multiple devices, the more likely they are to reduce their level of use of more traditional media[9]. Furthermore, Pekala (2001) finds Millennials not only have a sense of immediacy or urgency, but they have a short attention span and also a predisposition to boredom. Therefore, Taylor (2006) recommends that technology be embraced in academic activities (Kozar and Hiller-Connell, 2013).

Digital and social media have therefore changed how consumers behave, for example, new ways of searching for, assessing, deciding and purchasing goods and services (Alves et al., 2016). Social media is a way of life for many digital natives[10], and as Tuten and Solomon (2013: 3) state, it is about *"a culture of participation*" and *"the ability to freely*

[9] Traditional media includes areas such as TV, radio, cinema, posters and direct mail. There is a comprehensive discussion of this in Chapter 4.

[10] Digital natives are those individuals that grew up in the digital age, as defined by Prensky (2001). This is the opposite of digital immigrants - individuals adapting to living in a digital age.

interact with other people, companies, and organizations". Moreover, with communications becoming more global, there is a need to consider cultural aspects and how this impacts upon decision making (Fong and Burton, 2008). Indeed, Graham (1981) states that research undertaken to develop specific consumer decision making models is usually undertaken within one, or a few Anglo type cultures, which may not be sufficiently robust to transfer to a wider range of cultures. Furthermore, Lemon and Verhoef (2016: 73) discuss the growing importance of engagement with customers and state:

> "*The digital and social media revolution has strengthened the importance of customer engagement behaviour, as customers become active coproducers of value or destroyers of value for firms*".

They discuss the importance of cocreation, social influence through word-of-mouth, and also customer referrals. However, Parsons and Maclaran (2009) suggest there is growing cynicism amongst consumers, with few viewing interactions with organisations as fulfilling relationships.

Worldwide there are a total of 3.01 billion active internet users (which is 42% of the total World population), with a total of 2.078 billion active social media accounts (29% penetration, note that these are not unique users) (Kemp, 2015). See Table 2.4.

Table 2.4: Key digital trends for selected countries & annual growth rates 2014-2015
Compiled from information provided by Kemp (2015)

Country	Population January 2015	Active Internet Users & growth	Active Social Media Accounts & growth	Mobile Connections & Subscriptions growth	Active Mobile Social Media Accounts & growth
Australia	23.7m	21.2m	13.6m	30.0m	12.0m
		+17%	+6%	+23%	+11%
Canada	35.7m	33.0m	20.0m	29.0m	16.2m
		+11%	+5%	+10%	+5%
China	1,367m	642m	629m	1,300m	506m
		+9%	+1%	+8%	+26%
Germany	80.8m	71.7m	28.0m	111.6m	24.0m
		+5%	0%	+4%	+9%
Malaysia	30.5m	20.1m	16.8m	41.8m	15.0m
		+5%	+8%	+1%	+15%
Nigeria	183.5m	70.3m	13.6m	138.0m	12.4m
		+26%	+21%	+21%	Not available
Poland	38.5m	25.7m	13.0m	56.5m	9.2m
		+3%	+8%	+11%	+28%
UK	64.1m	57.3m	38.0m	74.8m	32.0m
		+4%	+6%	-9%	+7%
USA	320m	280m	186m	329m	160m
		+10%	+4%	+0.4%	_4%

Within the UK there are 57.3 million active internet users (89% of the population), with 38.0 million active social media accounts (59% active social media accounts as a percentage of total population), strongly supporting the importance of communicating online and social media use. Worldwide, the average time spent daily on social media is 2.4 hours, but Argentina and the Philippines spend a massive 4.3 hours daily on social media, some way behind the UK average of 2.2 hours daily. Growth in active internet users throughout various regions and countries continues, as does mobile and social media use. However, there are significant differences not only in growth rates, but also in types of social platforms used to communicate (see Table 2.4 above and 2.5 below).

Table 2.5: Online and social media statistics for selected countries Compiled from information in We are Social (Kemp 2015)

Country	Top 5 social media platforms in order of usage (highest usage %)	Internet Penetration (IP); Daily usage of internet (PC/tablet) (DUPC); Daily usage of Internet via mobile phone (DUM)
Australia	Facebook (40%), Facebook messenger, Twitter, Google+, Skype	IP: 89% of population DUPC: 4 hours 03 minutes DUM: 1 hour 32 minutes
Canada	Facebook (47%), Twitter, Facebook Messenger, Pinterest	IP: 93% of population DUPC: 4 hours 37 minutes DUM: 1 hour 52 minutes
China	Wechat (30%), Sina Weibo, Qzone, Tencent Weibo, Youku	IP: 47% of population DUPC: 3 hours 52 minutes DUM: 2 hours 35 minutes
Germany	Facebook (28%), Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Skype, Twitter	IP: 89% of population DUPC: 3 hours 41 minutes DUM: 1 hour 52 minutes
Malaysia	Whatsapp (39%), Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Google+, Wechat	IP: 66% of population DUPC: 5 hours 04 minutes DUM: 3 hours 39 minutes
Nigeria	Not available	IP: 38% of population DUPC: not available DUM: not available
Poland	Facebook (35%), Google+, NK.PL, Twitter, Skype	IP: 67% of population DUPC: 4 hours 51 minutes DUM: 1 hour 49 minutes
UK	Facebook (43%), Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Whatsapp, Skype	IP: 89% of population DUPC: 3 hours 59 minutes DUM: 1 hour 52 minutes
USA	Facebook (42%), Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+	IP: 87% of population DUPC: 4 hours 55 minutes DUM: 2 hours 27 minutes

Furthermore, care needs to be taken in assuming that the Net Generation of students (i.e. Millennials) all adopt and use technology to the same level. Kennedy et al., (2010) suggest that variables other than age, for example, gender, socio-economic status, rurality and cultural background, all impact upon technology use by students.

Sinton and Puri (2014) identify four personas of the connected world, where four types of connected consumers are identified based upon high or low digital use, and high or low social media use:

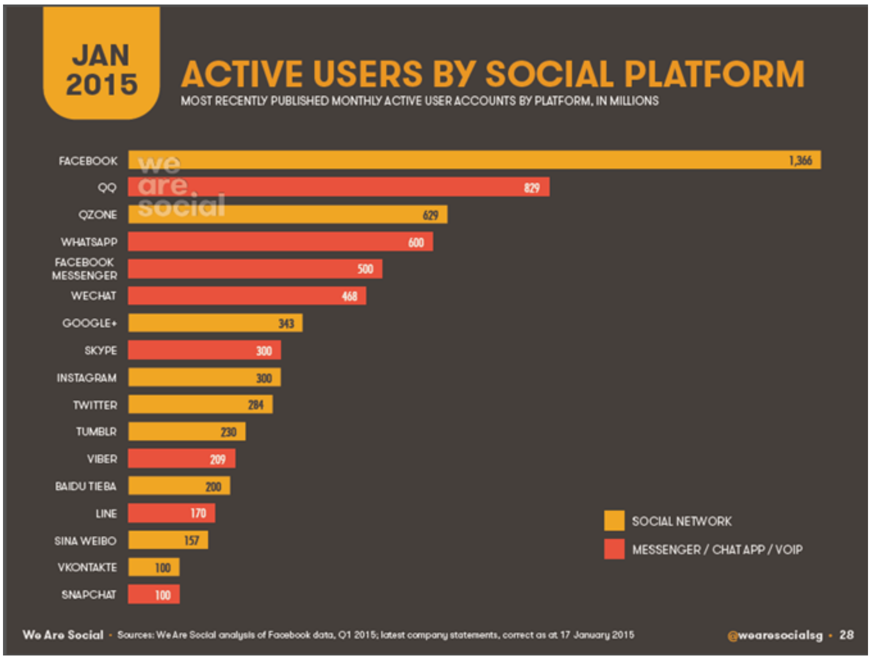
- Leaders: they 'live online', are constantly connected, and more vocal on social media
- Observers: technologically advanced, but value privacy, with lower use of social media and limited creation of online content.
- Connectors: their interactions online are primarily driven by social media, rather than interest in having the latest devices.
- Functionals: slower, more cautious/late adopters of technology, trying to keep up. Reluctant online shoppers, concern over security, low use of social media – adopted so they don't feel left out of family conversations

This highlights that Millennials are not one homogeneous group of people when considering how they behave online. A further study undertaken by Kennedy et al., (2010) identified four types of student technology users based upon: advanced mobile use, media sharing, creating and using media, gaming and standard web use. Whilst this research is useful in that it identifies differences relating to students, it is dated research, and does not specifically look at social media usage highlighted in the previous four personas by Sinton and Puri (2014). Other studies have highlighted internet users based upon demographic and attitudinal variables and suggest six distinct clusters (Christodoulides et al., 2012), and different kinds of adolescent online usage and shoppers were found by Hill et al., (2013), which further strengthens the discussion that not all digital users are the same.

There are many examples of successful, high profile social media campaigns, outside of HE, targeting Millennials. For example, Lynx generated £750,000 of additional revenue through their Facebook activity, with 16-24 year old males (May, 2012). Anne Summers with over 240,000 fans on Facebook and saw huge increases in traffic to their website to support their launch platform Sexyuncovered.com (Marketing, 2012). Testicular cancer charity Check One Two and their #FeelingNuts Twitter campaign, aimed at the under 30s was also hugely successful (Kimberley, 2014). The Refuge campaign, featuring popular video blogger Lauren Luke, with over 45,000 followers, has won numerous awards (BrandRepublic, 2013). However, it is only relatively recently research has been published regarding the use of websites and email for HE decision making (for example see Klassen, 2002; Gomes and Murphy, 2003). Little research has existed relating to social media use throughout the HE decision making process (Galan et al., 2015). However, some insight is starting to emerge more recently. For example, Vrontis et al., (2018) looks at social media use by Lebanese students during recruitment; Assimakopoulos et al., (2017) considers the use of Facebook for future recruitment activities. There has also been more attention to this area within education generally. For example, its use for educational purposes, rather than at the recruitment stage. Specific research includes the integration of virtual and physical learning environments (McCarthy, 2010), to improve university student involvement, student engagement and ultimately improve educational outcomes (Heiberger and Harper, 2008), the practical implications of incorporating e-learning and Facebook into pedagogy (Durkee et al., 2009), and using university social media to improve relationships between university and student (Fujita et al., 2017). It is not yet fully clear how social media can be effectively used to positively influence postgraduate student decision making, or how students are using it to inform their decision making.

Facebook is the most popular social network used Worldwide (See Figure 2.2 below), however, in China, its use is restricted, and other social sites are used. China has not only a huge population of internet users, but also out of the 199,160 international students on a taught postgraduate course in the UK during 2014-15, 89,540 of these were from China (UK Council for International Student Affairs 2016), meaning these are an important segment to understand.

Figure 2.2: Worldwide active users by social platform (Kemp 2015)



Moreover, decision making has traditionally been presented as a linear and rational process, where consumers start with a wider choice set and narrow this down. However, digital and social media may disrupt this traditional perspective and new ways of presenting this may be required. The focus of this study is therefore solely on understanding Millennial postgraduate students and their decision making process, providing a more current view that incorporates the communications role that digital now plays.

2.6 Summarising the context of this research

The marketisation of HE in the UK and worldwide has created many challenges. This has led to a range of changes in tuition fees, student number restrictions and then relaxation of any restrictions, increased competition, private providers, increased use of agents for international students and an increasing focus on rankings and league tables. Combined with Visa regulation changes, this has made the recruitment of more postgraduate students even more important to HEIs. As Sir David Bell, vice-chancellor of the University of Reading (and former permanent secretary at the Department for Education) stated:

> "*Universities need to raise their game in building their international and postgraduate profile, while diversifying their income through commercial activities and seeking finance from new sources*". (Morgan, 2014: 1).

Postgraduate students in particular are now an important and potential growth area and revenue stream for UK universities (Taylor, 2002), but they are becoming increasingly difficult to attract. Therefore, is it imperative that universities have an up-to-date view of how these important group of students make decisions in this highly digitally literate world that they now live in.

Moreover, the nature of communications has changed significantly in recent years (Kitchen, 1999; Tuten and Solomon, 2013); this suggests that the postgraduate students decision making process may have altered radically also. Postgraduate students are mainly categorised as Millennials and are connected consumers. The era in which a person is born can exert significant influence on not only their identity but also their behaviour as consumers (Solomon, 2009). Marketing spend has continued to increase on digital media (Tuten and Solomon, 2013), however at the same time there is growing cynicism amongst consumers towards marketing communications, as it is seen as being *"out of control"* (Sheth and Sisodia, 2005: 10). Some suggest this has led to consumers choosing when to tune into communications (Parsons and Maclaran, 2009), leading to them engaging with brands differently (Mix and Katzberg, 2015). Brands should therefore be providing inspiring content and stories, drawing consumers to the brand, rather than pushing out brand controlled messages (McCabe, 2015). However, much of this debate is taking place outside of HE, and further research is required to understand how this changing media consumption informs student decision making in choosing a postgraduate course to study. Many of the consumer decision making models were developed in an era of traditional communications and limited availability of information, and therefore research needs to be undertaken to understand whether decision making models need to change. There is a need for more research that explores any differences in consumer' behaviours in the contexts of more traditional bricks-and-mortar versus online outlets (Rajamma et al., 2007), and Darley et al (2010) state further research is needed into online consumer behaviour and the decision making process. Furthermore, much of the previous research within education has focused at undergraduate level, with no understanding of what is relevant, or any differences for postgraduate students. Indeed, Angell et al., (2008) highlight that not only have this segment had to self-fund their own study (although this changed in September 2016 with the availability of postgraduate loans); they require a higher level of contact with the university. Furthermore, increasing numbers of postgraduate students mean they are an important revenue stream to understand and should be studied in their own right (Taylor, 2002).

The main points from this chapter therefore, can be briefly summarised as follows:

- HEIs are facing increased competition and are seeking constant improvements to increase their rankings within league tables.
- Image and reputation is becoming more important.
- Postgraduate students are very important to HEIs in the UK, and a number of HEIs are heavily reliant upon them, especially revenue generating international students.
- Students are behaving more like consumers and seeking value for money.
- Postgraduate students are part of the millennial generation, highly digitally literate, and existing research suggests this may change their approach to decision making.

Chapter 3 will now review the history and development of consumer decision making, critique various general models, before considering decision making models within HE.

3. Decision Making Models

The main focus of this thesis concerns decision making, therefore a review of the development of both consumer decision making and decision making within HE is covered within this chapter. **Section one** reviews the development of general consumer decision making models that have informed current thinking: economic man, behavioural, psychology, cognitive and multi-phase/circular. This provides a comprehensive overview of how consumer decision making models have developed over time. **The second section** of this chapter, reviews HE decision making models and concludes by considering how these have progressed.

3.1 History, development and classification of decision making

There is a wide and considerable body of literature on decision making due to its extensive study over many years (Sadovykh et al., 2015). A decision can be defined as *"a specific commitment to action"* (Mintzberg et al., 1976). The Cambridge dictionary (2018: online) quite simply defines a decision as *"a choice you make about something after considering several options"*. Solomon (2009: 349) states a decision is *"composed of a series of stages that results in the selection of one product over competing options*". However, McGrew and Wilson (1982: 4) note differences between a 'decision' and 'decision making':

> *"For most of us a decision implies an act of choice between alternatives. A decision is the end state of a much more dynamic process which is labelled decision making... which consists of a series of linked stages of activity, and not simply a discrete action… the distinguishing characteristic of a decision, and decision making, is that it involved choice under conditions of uncertainty".*

Shepherd et al., (2014: 13) describe decision making as the *"entire process of choosing a course of action"*. Solomon (2009) states decision making is a central part of consumer behaviour and is about how we evaluate and choose products.

Consumer decision making sits within the broader area of consumer behaviour, with research dating back more than 90 years. Marketing research became increasingly important, especially in understanding consumer buyer motives and behaviour through various qualitative approaches. Mowen (1988) highlights that consumer behaviour research during the 1970s and early part of the 1980s focused mainly on the consumer decision-making process. Whilst Lemon and Verhoef (2016) identify the 1960s and 1970s as having important developments in customer buying behaviour process models.

A model is described in simple terms as anything used to represent anything else (Buzzell, 1964). A model is said to perform one or more functions: heuristic, predictive, organising, measurement functions (Deutsch, 1952). Furthermore, Lye et al. (2015:218) states *"the purpose of the early consumer decision models was to illustrate conceptually an integrated decision model rather than develop a precise, comprehensive research roadmap"*.

Views regarding how to categorise decision making and models are varied, and to some extent dependent upon which field the study draws upon, for example see Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 Views regarding categorisation and models of decision making

Author (year)	**Field**	**Categories highlighted**
Bray (2013)	Psychology	Economic man, psychodynamic, behaviourist, cognitive, humanistic
Ivy (2010)	Management	Economic, sociological information processing models
Zellman et al. (2010)	Business and economics	Neoclassical decision making theory, bounded rationality theory and decision-making strategies based on theory
Lye et al. (2005)	Social Science	Normative, behavioural or naturalistic
Bettman et al. (1998)	Business Studies	Constructive view & information processing models
Mowen (1988)	Marketing	Decision making, experiential or behavioural perspective

Campbell and Level (1985) researching communications models state that it is useful to have viewpoints from a number of different disciplines to aid in understanding the process. However, Zinkhan (1992: 2) states that each model type *"implies a core description of human nature"*. Economic model of man (seen as rational in an environment of self-interest); information processing perspective (views consumers as problem solvers); behaviourist model (viewed through the process of reinforcement, punishment, extinction) ; consumerist model (consumers viewed as submissive to the promotional efforts of marketers); motivational model (focus on consumers' emotional reactions to advertising).

Much of the current consumer decision theory is based upon work from the 1960s (Lye et al., 2005). Two of the early models are still widely used (Howard/Howard and Sheth (1963; 1969) and Engel et al., (1968) in modified form), but the Nicosia (1966) model has not survived due to lack of modification. Mowen (1988) suggests that during the 1970s and 1980s that the research focus was on viewing decision making as a problem-solving activity involving a series of stages, leading to lack of focus on other important areas such as affect and the impact of the environment on purchasing. However as the complexity of consumer decision making is increasing, there is a need to understand whether current models adequately capture decisions in the modern complex world. There is now a vast range of choice for consumers (Lye et al., 2005) and the on-line environment has had a strong influence on consumer behaviour. Indeed, Leeflang et al., (2013) and Libai et al., (2010) suggest that there are significant challenges and opportunities for firms as a result of social media and customer-to-customer interactions (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Moreover, Lye et al., (2005: 222) suggest that *"the marketing literature has placed too much emphasis on the notion of the choice itself at the expense of an in-depth understanding of the series of decisions within the process",* and they suggest that a more flexible approach to decision making is required. Furthermore, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) highlight the importance of understanding both the firm and customer perspectives of the purchase journey. Moreover, the importance of understanding various customer touch points is highlighted in more recent research (Baxendale et al., 2015; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

This chapter therefore aims to review the progress of different types of consumer and HE decision making models and explore the communications context within which these models are set. Modern day communications operate on synchronous interaction, with real time communications and instant responses (Tuten and Solomon, 2013). This has led to a level of expectation that communications will be more open, instant and less formal, and a need to understand how this impacts upon the decision making process. Many of the older models were developed in an era of traditional communications and limited availability of information to inform those decisions. There has been an increased focus on the customer experience, as customers interact with organisations through a variety of touch points in multiple channels and media, leading to a more complex customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Moreover, two types of decision situations are widely accepted: high and low involvement, which affects how consumers process information and the complexity of the decision (Blackwell et al., 2006; Krugman, 1965). This is an important area to discuss, as it provides the context for understanding various types of models. Therefore, this will be explored next before moving onto specific decision making models.

3.2 Level of involvement and motivation

Krugman's seminal work (1965) suggests that consumers receive and process information differently depending upon whether they are involved in the situation. Blackwell et al., (2006) states that personal factors, product factors and situational factors also affect the degree of involvement. Zaichkowsky (1985) highlights that there is no agreement on how to define or measure the construct of involvement. Ratchford (1987: 25) reviews a range of literature in this area, and states that involvement is defined as *"personal relevance; amount of arousal, interests, or drive evoked by a particular stimulus; a person's activation level; and goal-directed arousal capacity"*. He concludes by stating in simple terms it is about the relevance and importance of the decision. Three types of involvement decisions are generally discussed: high involvement (or extended problem solving), low involvement (limited problem solving) (Galan et al., 2015; Blackwell et al., 2006), and habitual (or routine response) behaviour (Solomon 2009).

High involvement decisions or extended problem solving involves a higher degree of complexity, thought and involvement. Whereas low involvement decisions or limited problem solving involves a lower degree of complexity, and reduced time, resources, motivation and involvement (Hoyer 1984; Blackwell et al., 2006; Galan et al., 2015). Habitual decision making (or routine response behaviour) go through an almost automatic decision with no conscious effort (Solomon 2009). Traditional models of decision making and information processing normally focus on high-involvement conditions (Hoyer 1984). As Hoyer (1984: 822) states, *"the problem is that these models* *were developed to understand processes in situations which elicit a considerable degree of cognitive effort and commitment"*. Where high involvement conditions exist, information is processed and a deliberate choice is made. More information is searched for and more time is spent searching (Clarke and Belk, 1978). High involvement decisions therefore normally involves a more extensive search, a deliberate consideration of alternatives, a more complex choice, and the possibility of post purchase evaluation having emotional consequences (McCall et al., 2002). Selecting where to study is seen as a high-risk decision, high involvement and requiring extensive problem solving (Maringe and Carter, 2007).

Moreover, research into decisions taken under time pressure leads to hypervigilant decision making where a selective search takes place, with consideration of a limited number of alternatives, without extensive appraisal (Johnston et al., 1997). Therefore, not all high involvement decisions involve an extensive search, as in the case of time-pressured individuals. Furthermore, some consumers face information overload and a number of researchers suggest that consumers may therefore limit their attention to a subset of brands, known as a consideration set, which is then evaluated, suggesting a two-stage decision process (Murthi and Srinivasan, 1999; Gensch, 1987). Indeed Sharma and Nair (2017) state that where there is too much information available it can be overwhelming, it may lead to choices feeling similar, and what is known as choice overload. There is some evidence to suggest that this can lead to an increase in switching behaviour.

However, under low-involvement conditions, choices are made, but usually without any degree of awareness (Ratchford, 1987), with search and examination of alternatives being brief or automatic (McCall et al., 2002), or previous thought (Galan et al., 2015). Zaichkowsky (1985: 346) defines low involvement as *"1. A relative lack of active information seeking about brands; 2. Little comparison among product attributes; 3. Perception of similarity among different brands; 4. No special preference for a particular brand"*. Therefore, an assumption that consumers will actively search for information and use this information to make an informed choice in a rational, thinking way is incorrect for lower involvement decisions. It cannot be seen as a purely rational activity. This is an over simplification (Chisnall, 1997). Hoyer (1984) suggests we should question existing consumer decision models, and whether they accurately represent how decisions are made for a variety of decision types.

General consumer decision making models therefore need to either be flexible to deal with high and low involvement decisions (as with the FCB Grid (Vaughn 1980)), and hypervigilant decisions, or more than one model is required to cater for different types of decision making processes. Furthermore, there are a number of categorisations of consumers according to involvement, such as *"Brand switchers, information seekers, routine brand buyers and brand loyalists"* (Blythe, 2013). Moreover, it has been suggested that involvement levels can be increased through appealing to hedonic needs, use of celebrities to endorse brands, action and loud music and relationship development with consumers (Stewart and Furse, 1984).

To conclude, many of the existing decision making models relate to high involvement decisions. HE is a high involvement decision, seen as high-risk for many students, and requiring extensive problem solving (Davey, 2005; Maringe and Carter, 2007). However, previous assumptions need to be explored. For example, exploring how much thought prospective students put into their decision making, the level of searching for information, and whether it is in a rational way. For example, Galan et al., (2015) suggest that emotions also drive student's choices regarding HE.

3.3 Consumer decision making models

The majority of texts covering consumer behaviour include some type of model of the consumer decision process and include a) alternatives and therefore a choice, b) criteria to evaluate, c) a decision rule, and d) a need to seek information from external sources or from memory (Darley et al., 2010; Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979). This can clearly be seen also in Figure 3.1 when reviewing views of the cognitive perspective. According to Hansen (1976: 117) there are three relevant areas to choice: *"1. There must be two or more choice alternatives; 2. The choice alternatives must arouse a certain amount of conflict; 3. Cognitive processes aimed at reducing the conflict must occur."* However, how decisions are made, and the stages that are involved vary depending upon the perspective that is taken. A review of a variety of perspectives/developments will now follow, which will consider the economic model of man perspective, behavioural perspective, psychology perspective, cognitive perspective and multi-phase perspective:

3.3.1 The Economic model of man perspective

This is one of the earliest viewpoints regarding decision making, and many subsequent models incorporate elements of this into them. Economic man sees consumers as rational decision makers in an environment of self-interest (Zinkhan, 1992). Some refer to this as neoclassical theory (Lah and Susjan, 1999; Bennett, 2011). The term was originally known as homo oeconomicus in the early 19th century and enjoyed a degree of psychological complexity, but later in the 1880s, critics referred to economic man (Bennett, 2011). This economic man followed, as it was thought that homo oeconomicus was too complex for economics to analyse. The neoclassical economics of late 19th century, such as Mill[11], considered the human *"solely as a being who desires to possess wealth; who can work out rationally how best to obtain it."* (Mill (1836) cited by Bennett, 2011: 9). The fundamental assumption within neoclassical economics being that individuals will act rationally and on self-interest. Individuals will identify all attributes that affect the success of the choice, each attribute is given a rating of importance, and each choice is then evaluated on this attribute and assigned a value (Zellman et al., 2010). Chapman (1981) states these types of models are based upon a cost-benefit analysis. Bettman et al. (1998: 187) refer *to "a rational decision maker with well-defined preferences that do not depend on particular descriptions of the options or on the specific methods used to elicit those preferences"* and *"will maximise his or her received value and select accordingly"*. They refer to this as rational choice theory and state this has hugely contributed to the prediction of consumer decisions, however, *"it is incomplete and/or flawed as an approach for understanding how consumers actually make decisions"*. In order to behave rationally, consumers would need to be aware of all available options, be able to rate and process each available alternative, and select the optimum course of action (Bray, 2013; Bettman et al., 1998). Neoclassical decision theory is seen as unrealistic as humans do not have unlimited time or knowledge (Beach and Lipshitz, 1993). Information is more freely available today, through the vast array

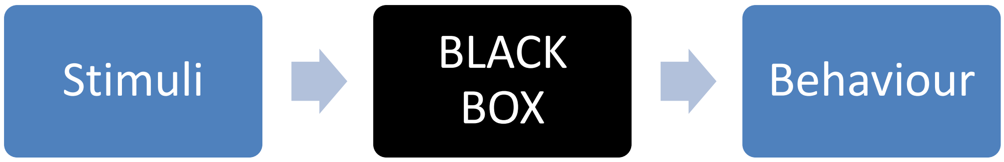
[11] J Mill (1836) 'On the definition of political economy and on the method of investigation proper to it', Essays on some unsettled questions of political economy, by John Stuart Mill, London, Longmans 1874, pp97-99

of online company websites, comparison sites, customer reviews etc. This means there is more information available than at any time previously, therefore it would be almost impossible for an individual to be aware of all available options. However, there is some evidence that younger consumers are able to process large amounts of information (Euromonitor International, 2011). Moreover, decision makers have limitations on their capacity to process information, choices may be contextualised, and contingent on a variety of factors (Bettman et al., 1998). The process and outcome of neoclassical decision making is often seen as sub-optimal (Zellman et al., 2010). Furthermore, this perspective assumes that decisions are undertaken in a rational manner, and there is considerable research (for example see Court et al., 2009; Hackley 2009; Hemsley-Brown 1999; Hindess 1988; Chisnall 1997; Newman 1977; Olshavsky and Granbois 1979) suggesting that this is not the case for a great many decisions. Indeed, even for high involvement decisions, consumers are unlikely to review all available options and act in a purely rational way (Hemsley-Brown 1999; Solomon 2002). Modern day communications focus more on building relationships between the brand owner and the consumer (Lemon and Verhoeaf 2016). This relationship is about building an emotional bond with the brand and therefore this suggests that decision making has moved away from being purely rational. The economic man models have been influential, as can be seen through logical and linear sets of steps included in many of the more recent models.

3.3.2 The behavioural perspective

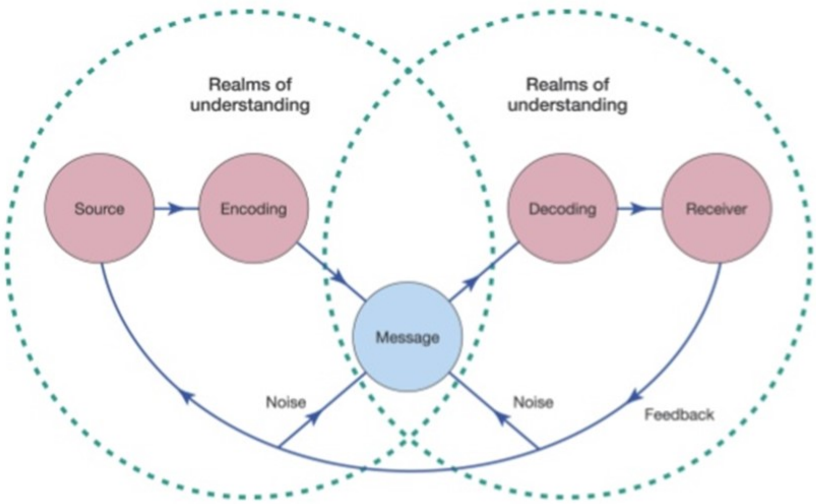
The behaviourist approach suggests that behaviour can be explained through external events, or factors that are external to the individual (Bray, 2013). One of the earliest consumer decision models was known as the "black box" model (see Figure 3.1) (Kotler et al., 2004: 244).

Figure 3.1: A simple black box type model (Author's own illustration)



These stimulus-response models are based on early communications research such as Ivan Pavlov, with a largely unconscious process known as classical conditioning (Egan, 2015). This is now part of what is known as the behavioural paradigm or perspective (Mowen, 1988; Egan, 2015). Models within this paradigm focus on stimuli or environmental cues or forces, rather than on any internal processes to explain consumer actions. It is argued that it is not essential to know, nor possible to study the complex nature of the human mind, and therefore models should focus on measuring behaviour that occurs as a result of various stimuli (Egan, 2015; Watzlawick et al., 1967). The most well-known example of a black box model within marketing communications is that by Schramm, Shannon and Weaver 1962 (Campbell and Level, 1985). This model concerns the evaluation of a transmission of information from source (e.g. an organisation), to receiver (e.g. a target audience), and considers appropriate encoding of messages (e.g. appropriate words, pictures, music) from the source and decoding of those messages by the receiver.

Figure 3.2 A linear model of communication, based on Schramm (1955) and Shannon and Weaver (1962)



Source: Fill (2009)

Black Box type models do not offer a process linked to the whole consumer decision process, but rather focus upon measuring behaviour as a result of a particular stimuli. Hackley (2009: 9) is highly critical of black box type models, stating *"they offer only a partial representation of the consumer, and one which, in its emphasis on consumer* *rationality, flies in the face of anthropological accounts of consumer motivations"*. Moreover, some have argued (for example Stewart 1994) that it does not adequately account for a range of responses to the same/similar stimuli to which a population is exposed (Bray 2013). With their focus on exogenous variables, they do not provide any understanding of the internal consumer decision process (the area within the black box) (Kotler et al., 2004). However, behaviourism research is still said to contribute to our understanding of human behaviour.

Black box type models have strongly influenced many aspects of marketing communications, as can be seen in the measures used to evaluate marketing communications campaigns. For example, the stimulus may be a one-week sales promotion, which leads to an early purchase decision to buy. Information can be gathered on the types of offers presented, and which offers lead to the most positive purchase decisions. Marketers therefore have valuable insight into which stimuli impact positively upon behaviour. However, what they do not illustrate is how these decisions are made, and why different groups of people respond to offers (stimuli) differently.

3.3.3 The psychology (or psychodynamic) perspective

An alternative paradigm comes from the area of psychology and is known as the Psychodynamic approach (Bray 2013). The work of Sigmund Freud is an early researcher within this tradition. The focus within this approach has been on *"biological drives, rather than individual cognition, or environmental stimuli"*, for which some are critical (Bray, 2013: 4), although models such as Hansen (1976) combine these areas within one model. Hardy-Vallee (2011: 203) suggests that within psychology the study of decision making is secondary (and mainly separate), stating *"psychology thus studies brains, behaviors (in humans and other animals) and psychological processes such as information processing, learning and development"*. Rational choice theory is seen as central, where predictive models of choice behaviour are built.

Choice is seen as a central topic within psychology (Elcoro et al., 2013), rather than the whole consumer decision making process within the field of marketing. Conflict, uncertainty, cognitive activity and psychological processes are observable and part of choice (Hansen, 1976). Bornholt et al. (2004: 211) refer to *"socio-ecological models of choice portray individuals negotiating pathways through sets of social contexts"*.

Psychologists refer to conflict situations, where individuals are faced with a degree of uncertainty and conflict, due to a need to make a choice. However, Hansen (1976: 117) states that consumer choice models within psychology come from a number of areas: *"social psychology, motivational psychology, environmental psychology and educational psychology"*. Furthermore, Hardy-Vallee (2011) is highly critical of rational choice theory (considered as part of a normative theory), where models of choice behaviour are developed. The subjects studied in these experiments focus on how decisions are made and the mechanisms relied on to choose. However, the 'framing' of a situation (the way a situation is represented), and consideration of loss, risk, and ambiguity-aversion is an important frequently missing aspect (Hardy-Vallee 2011; Kahneman, 2003; Camerer, 2000). Therefore, this rational choice theory is seen as ineffective in real-world settings (Hardy-Vallee 2011). The area of decision making and choice continues to be a popular research area within psychology (Elcoro et al., 2013), however, it is also now a central area within the marketing discipline, and also for multiple social science disciplines (Chakravarti et al., 2016). Alternative models have been developed both within and outside of psychology, based upon cognition.

3.3.4 The Cognitive perspective

An alternative and popular approach to decision making is what Egan (2014) refers to as the cognitive paradigm, with the focus on thought processes and decision making stages of activities. Both Ivy (2010) and Bettman et al. (1998) refer to information processing models that fit within the cognitive perspective, where individuals are viewed as an information processor. Lemon and Verhoef (2016), refer to customer buying behaviour process models, and state that they consider the entire process that the customer goes through. The roots of the cognitive perspective are partly derived from cognitive psychology (Bray 2013). Moreover, traditionally decision making within this paradigm has been viewed from a rational perspective, where consumers go through a series of stages (Solomon 2009): problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, product choice and outcomes. This is a widely accepted view of consumer decision making, as evidenced in recent marketing communications, consumer behaviour and marketing text books (Darley et al., 2010) (and see Table 3.2). Modern day literature therefore still appears to demonstrate elements of economic man: rational behaviour through a logical and linear set of steps and there continues to be discussion regarding how relevant and appropriate this is in today's communications environment.

These specific models consider the entire customer decision journey and allow the foundation for thinking holistically (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Egan (2015) states the cognitive paradigm has a focus on thought processes and decision making stages of activities. There are some limitations to this paradigm (1) consumers do not have full knowledge of all alternative products (known as the total set); (2) consumers are not aware of all the product line (known as the awareness set); (3) consumers reduce to a more manageable group (known as the evoked set).

Table 3.2: Cognitive perspective & views of consumer decision making stages

Solomon et al. (2016: 330)	Fill & Turnbull (2016: 91)	Smith & Zook (2011)	Egan (2015: 52)	Armstrong et al. (2015: 164)	Jobber (2004: 69)
Problem recognition	Problem recognition	Problem recognition	Problem recognition	Need Recognition	Need recognition/ problem awareness
Information search	Information search	Information search	Information search	Information search	Information search
Evaluation of alternatives	Evaluation of alternative solutions	Evaluation	Evaluation	Evaluation of alternatives	Evaluation of alternatives
Product choice	Purchase decision	Decision	Decision	Purchase decision	Purchase
Outcomes	Post purchase evaluation	Buy	Purchase	Post purchase behaviour	Post purchase evaluation of decision
		Post-purchase dissonance (dissatisfaction or satisfaction	Post-purchase evaluation		

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) state that flawed assumptions are made regarding the processes involved in the choice decision: (1) it assumes that individuals will maximise the benefit they will receive from their choice, however this may not be possible to establish in decisions that are more complex. (2) Choices are always made based on self-interest, i.e. selecting goods/services that meet their needs and wants at the lowest cost; however, consumers are not motivated by consistent and predictable patterns of motivations. (3) Choices are always made after an intensive period known as vigilant information collection[12], however the reality is to assume this is an impracticable or undesirable approach to take. (4) The whole process, including consideration of alternatives and choice will be rational, however most research does not support this view and it may not be possible to identify what the most rational choice is anyway. Indeed, Hindess (1988: 10) states *"human behaviour frequently departs from the canons of rationality, so that rational choice models are not realistic"*.

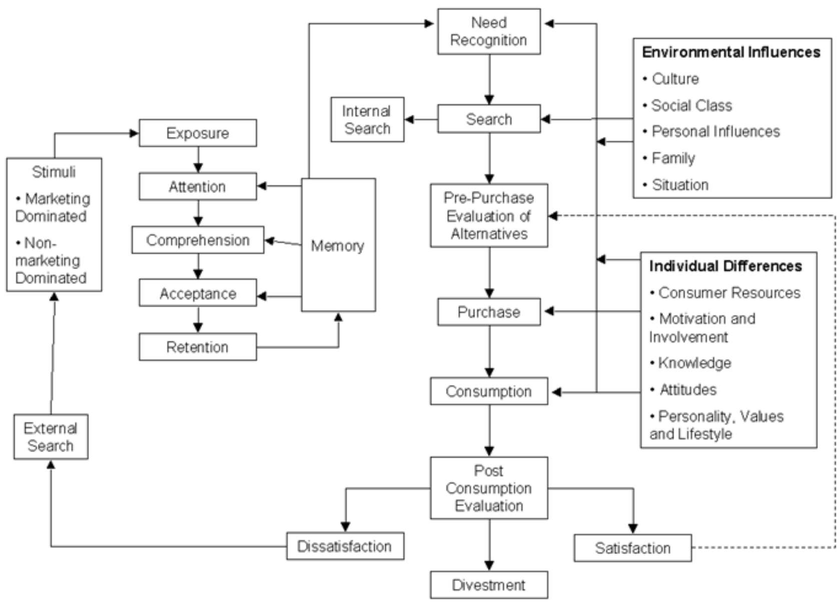
Based upon the original five problem solving stages suggested over 100 years ago by John Dewey (Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979; Darley et al., 2010), more complex models, such as that by Blackwell et al., (2001), have applied these five stages to consumer behaviour. The model considers a variety of environmental and individual factors that impact upon the decision making process (see Figure 3.3 below). This model was originally developed in 1968 by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, and has undergone a number of revisions (Darley et al., 2010). Moreover, the Blackwell et al. (2001) model also considers the vast array of information and messages to which consumers are exposed, with only a few messages retained, and therefore offers a link to marketing communications. At the heart of the Blackwell et al. (2001) model are seven decision stages (based upon the original five stages), and entry to the model is via recognition of a need. This is followed by a search for information (internally and externally), leading to an evaluation of alternatives, and purchase. Post purchase consumption and divestment are the final two stages. A number of environmental influences and individual differences are said to influence the process. The left hand side of the Blackwell et al. (2001) model links with what is commonly known as the hierarchy-of-effects models, which state that audiences respond to messages in a cognitive, affective, and conative sequence (Barry and Howard, 1990). Five stages are linked to the three components of attitude: cognition, affect and behaviour[13], and all three are considered important; however, their relative importance depends upon consumer's motivation

[12] Janice and Mann (1977) state vigilant information search consists of seven stages. This includes searching for a wide range of alternatives, weighing up costs/risks, searching extensively for new information/expert judgement, and re-examining decision as a result of this (cited by Foskett & Hemsley-Brown 2001).

[13] Cognition: relates to a thinking stage (memory, perception, judgement and reasoning); affective: relates to a feeling stage (moods, feelings, attitudes and emotions); conative: relates to a doing stage (behaviour involving positive action) (Egan 2015).

levels (Solomon, 2009). This particular model is therefore quite a detailed linear representation of consumer decision making that draws on a number of much researched areas. However, Darley et al. (2010: 95) state there is a need to develop a framework that provides *"an understanding of online consumer behaviour and the decision making process"*.

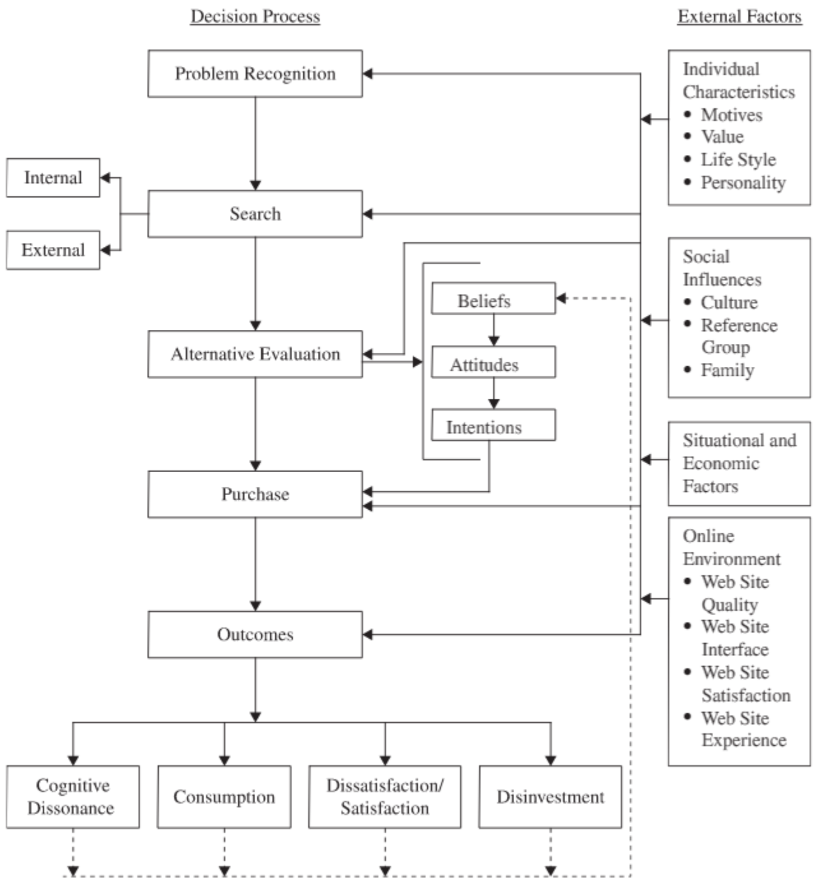
Figure 3.3: The Consumer Decision Process Model



Source: Blackwell et al., (2001)

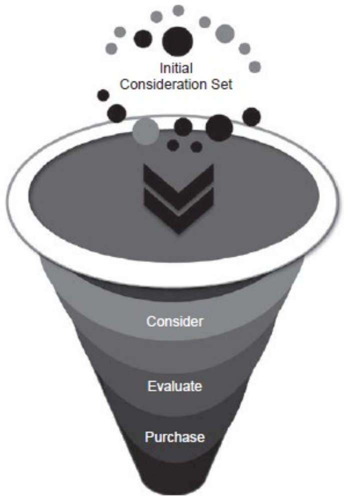
Darley et al. (2010) proposed a modified model of consumer behaviour and decision making to take into account the online environment. This model is adapted from the Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1978) model and the Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1986) model and incorporates the online environment on the right hand side (see Figure 3.4 below). This is a useful consideration; however, only four factors are considered (web site quality, web site interface, web site satisfaction and web site experience). This is only one aspect of the online environment, and this does not consider social media and areas such as ratings and review sites that are known to influence during the decision journey (Moe and Trusov, 2011). Moreover, a linear and rational approach is still adopted, and this may not be an accurate representation of how consumers now shop. This is discussed further under the multi-phase perspective.

Figure 3.4 A Modified model of online consumer behaviour and decision making (Darley et al. 2010)



The consumer decision making process has also been viewed as a purchase funnel, proposed by Lewis in 1903, and changed/adapted by a number of people (Vazquez et al., 2014). Most models of the purchase funnel involve three stages, with an awareness and purchase stage being constant, but the intermediate stages varying. For example, De Bryun & Lilien (2008) discuss awareness, interest and final decision; Vazquez et al. (2014) discuss awareness, evaluation, purchase and postpurchase experience, and Hudson & Hudson (2013) illustrate this as initial consideration set, consider, evaluate, purchase – as seen in Figure 3.5 below.

Figure 3.5: The traditional purchase funnel (Hudson & Hudson 2013).



The purchase funnel is a useful illustration within the development of models, as it assumes that consumers have an initial wide choice set which is then narrowed down. This may have been appropriate during its early conception in an era of modest availability of traditional marketing, with limited brand choice and limited availability of information. However, there is some research (for example Ley et al 2005; Lipshitz 1993; Court et al 2009; Hauser and Wernerfelt 1989; 1990; Roberts 1989; Roberts and Lattin 1991; Hudson and Hudson 2013) to suggest that modern day communications and the vast array of available information have changed the initial choice set. Consumers may not narrow down, but later increase their choice set from a very narrow initial choice set, or may make multiple decisions at the same time. These viewpoints are explored further in the next section.

3.3.5 Multi-phase perspective (or consumer decision journey)

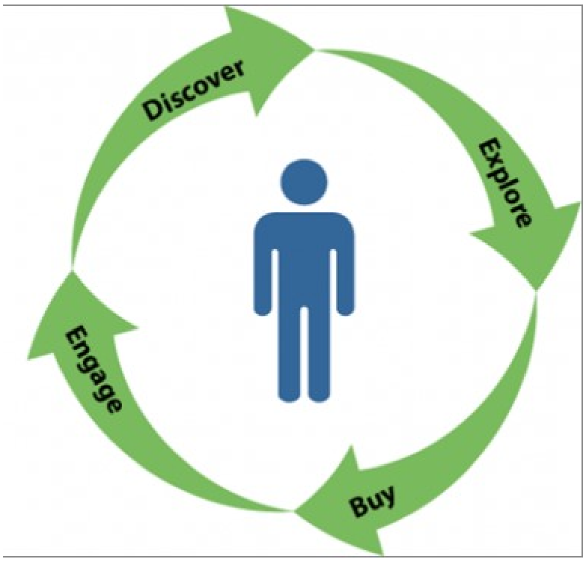
Consumer decision making process models continue to see the process as a linear approach, and this may not be an accurate representation of how decisions are made (Ley et al., 2005). However, these previous types of models provide the foundation for thinking holistically about the process that consumers go through (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The customer journey perspective is becoming increasingly popular, is closely linked to customer experience, and is a possible result from a need to manage and design touch points and service offerings to maximise the customer experience (Folstad and Kvale, 2018; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010). It therefore has a focus on interactions between service provider and customer, and presents an "engaging story" of this interaction (Folstad and Kvale, 2018). However, there is not always agreement on what constitutes a customer (Guilbault, 2016). Furthermore, although the customer journey is a widely used term (Folstad and Kvale, 2018), there does not appear to be a common understanding of what customer journeys are, nor what they are useful for. For example Folstad and Kvale (2018) identify that some see touchpoints as a central role (Meroni and Sangiorgi, 2011; Stickdorn and Schneider, 2010), others focus on events (Crosier and Handford, 2012), or service encounters (Tax et al., 2013), or link to customer loyalty (Nichita and Vulpoi, 2012). Within the area of marketing, the focus is on the consumer decision process from awareness to purchase, including becoming a loyal customer, using structured steps (Lee, 2010; Court et al., 2009; Buttle, 2003).

Lipshitz (1993) and Lye et al., (2005) were amongst the first to start developing alternatives to information processing models within the cognitive perspective. Lye et al., (2005: 219) discuss naturalistic decision theory and that both process and outcome are considered. Moreover, they state, *"it encompasses decision-making in changing conditions, using ambiguous information, with shifting goals and objectives*". Furthermore, they suggest that consumer decision making should be seen as decision waves, where multiple decisions are taken within a single decision process. This may involve more than one screening of decisions, where unsuitable alternatives are eliminated, and prior to comparing options or gathering information. This supports the view of Lipshitz (1993) who depicts decision making as a sequence of activities. This suggests a less-linear process, replacing stages with sequence of activities for multiple decisions within each single decision process. Forrester states (Nobel, 2010: online)

> *"The funnel portrays marketing as a conveyer belt with the job of delivering a continuous supply of customers to the business…. The customer moves linearly from awareness to loyalty, but in the customer life cycle, the journey never ends, as customers continually engage with brands and their peers and process new information and experiences"*.

The four stages suggested can be seen in Figure 3.6 below.

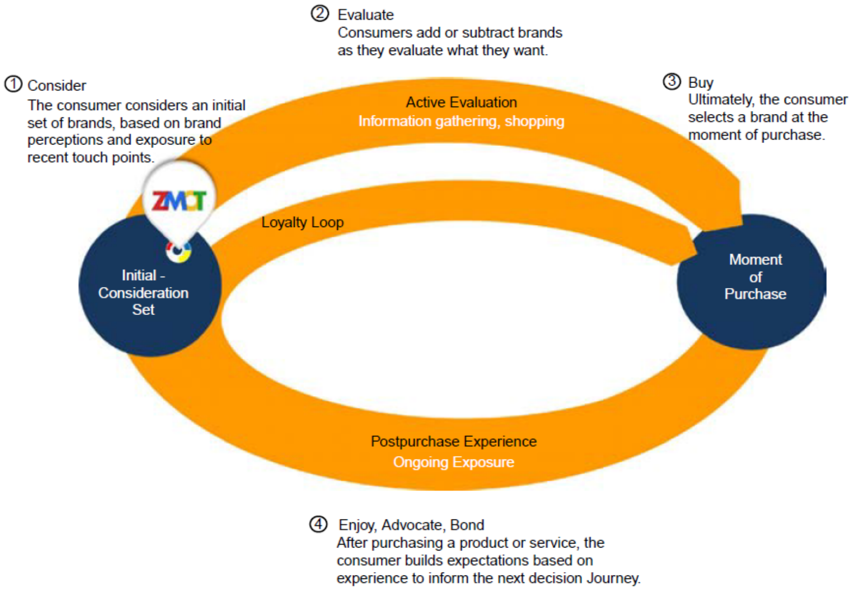
Figure 3.6: Customer Life Cycle by Forrester (Nobel 2010)



Court et al. (2009: 97) also question the linear process, although recognise that the traditional funnel metaphor is useful in that it allows marketers to focus on different aspects. However, they suggest this is a circular consumer decision journey and consists of four key stages: Initial consideration, active evaluation, closure/buy, postpurchase. Their research involved the purchase decisions of around 20,000 consumers, covering five industry types and three continents. The findings incorporate a more contemporary two-way level of communications, and suggest that the process is *"less linear and more complicated than the funnel suggests"* (Court et al., 2009: 96). The traditional purchase funnel not only suggests the process is linear but also that consumers narrow down brands from an initial consideration set. However, due to the plethora of media and brand choices to which consumers are exposed, there is a more narrow initial consideration set (as previous researchers such as Hauser and Wernerfelt (1989; 1990), Roberts (1989) and Roberts and Lattin (1991) have all previously suggested). Brands present at this initial stage are three times more likely to be purchased, however, more brands may be considered at the active evaluate stage as consumers search for information to help make their decision. Consumers actively "pull" information and this suggests that marketers should now focus efforts onto relevant consumer touch points (for example word of mouth or online information sites), rather than a purely push-style communication. They suggest *"…marketers need a more systematic way to satisfy* *customer demands and manage word-of-mouth"* (Court et al., 2009:96). Brand owners therefore should focus on consumer-driven marketing, interacting with consumers as they seek information, reviews or recommendations. For example, using tools that spot relevant online conversations and allow brands to post comments may influence online word-of-mouth. The customer decision journey is therefore *"the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touch points that makes up the customer experience"* (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016: 71).

Hudson and Hudson (2013) build upon the work by Court et al. (2009) and suggest social media is particularly important at the "evaluate" and "advocate" stages of the decision journey.

Figure 3.7: The four stages of the consumer decision journey (Based upon Court 2009 (Hudson and Hudson, 2013))

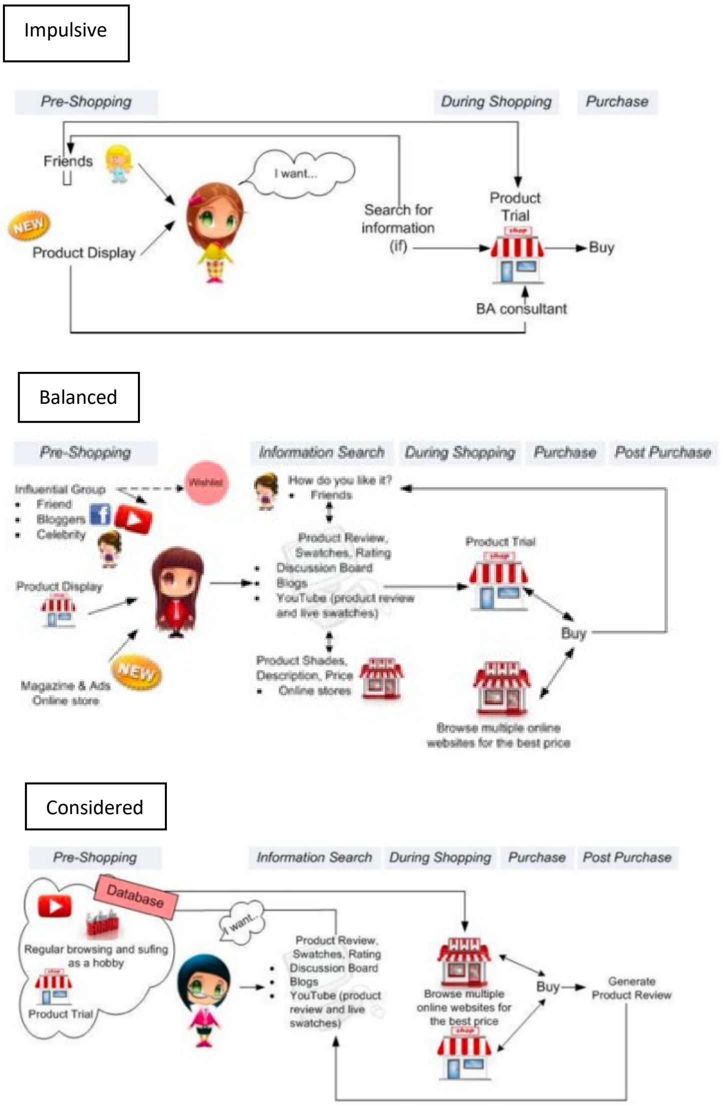


Hudson and Hudson (2013: 210) with their research at a number of music festivals, also suggest that the process is less systematic in approach and suggest a more contemporary approach where *"consumers add and subtract brands from a group under consideration during an extended evaluation stage"*. They also suggest that marketers have to compete for shoppers' attention in the online environment, and have therefore added Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) to illustrate this. ZMOT illustrates first exposure an individual has to a product or service online and through social media (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014; Lecinski, 2011). After purchase, *"they often enter into an open-*

ended relationship with the brand, sharing their experience with it online through social media" (Hudson and Hudson 2013: 210). Therefore, any future development of models should question whether linear models are still relevant in today's highly interactive communications culture.

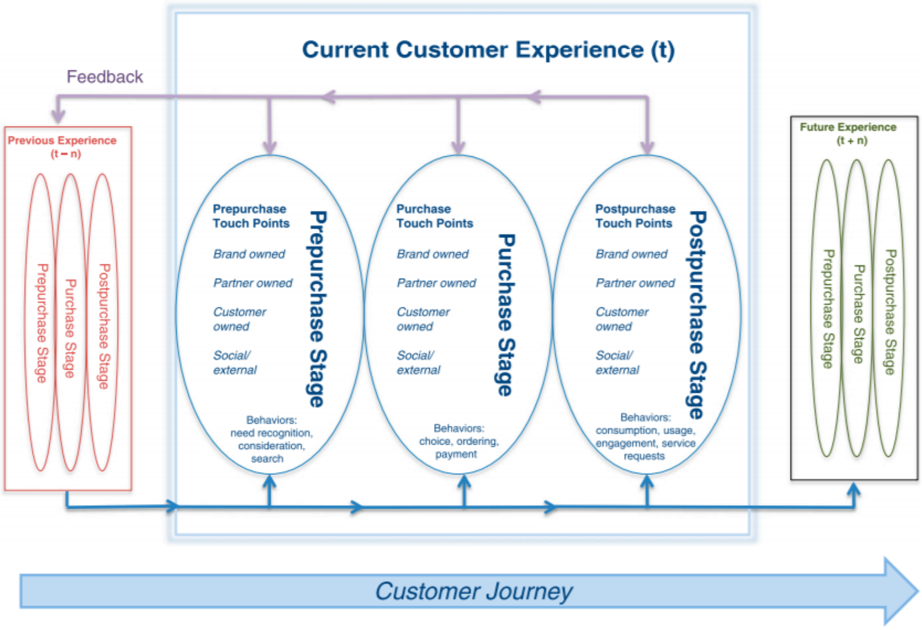
Consumer decision making has also been discussed and related specifically to shopping behaviour, where researchers refer to both customer journeys (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014) and path to purchase (PtP) frameworks (Jones and Runyan, 2016). Some argue that there are behavioural differences between shoppers and consumers (for example see Bell et al., 2010; Levy and Weitz, 2007). Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) identified three separate types of shopper journeys: impulsive journeys, balanced journeys and considered journeys for cosmetic shopping. Whilst the research involved a very small sample size, consisted of research diaries and interviews, the three shopper journeys illustrated in Figure 3.8 are useful as they demonstrate the importance of social media and influential groups within the process. Moreover, each journey represents differences regarding search activities and influencers within the process. Impulsive journeys involve less time searching for information, shoppers can feel overwhelmed by large amounts of data, and make impulsive or emotionally driven decisions. With balanced journeys reference groups are a key part (for example, friends, bloggers and celebrities), and involve an extended search for information for what is initially an emotion driven purchase intention. Considered journeys involve a pre-shopping stage, where information is gathered and then stored until a need or want is acted upon. It is within this type of journey that the ZMOT is said to be an important influencer. Furthermore, in addition to these models recognising the importance of online at the pre-search and information search stages, they also consider the post purchase stage and generation of product reviews. Therefore, these particular models consider emotional elements to the purchase decision process, and demonstrate more of a back and forth approach, rather than the traditional linear type models.

Figure 3.8 Shopper Journeys for cosmetics (Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014)



Lemon and Verhoeaf (2016) present their own conceptual model, known as the Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience (See Figure 3.9). This particular model consists of three key stages of prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase. Each of these three stages considers the importance of understanding various customer touch points:

Figure 3.9 Process model for customer journey and experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

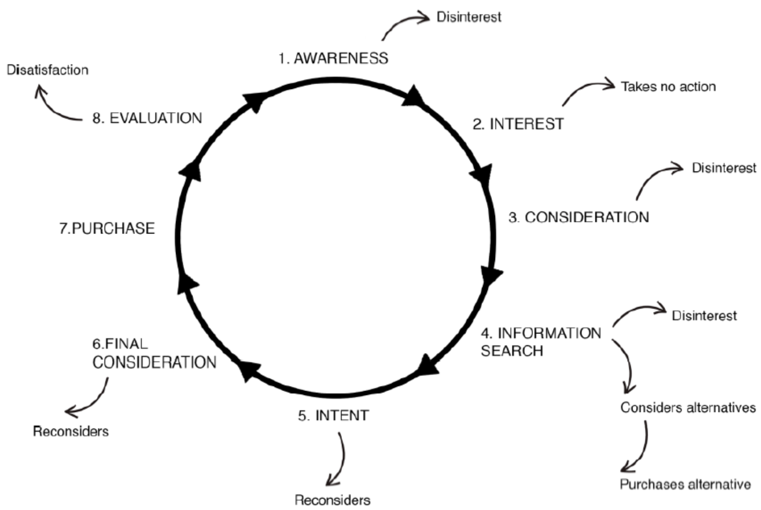


- At the Pre-purchase stage, need recognition, consideration and search are discussed, which seem compatible with earlier models which discuss problem recognition, information search and evaluation stages. This stage covers all aspects relating to a customer's interaction with a brand before a purchase transaction is made.
- The second stage of Purchase, considers choice, ordering and payment, which fits with decision stage on earlier models. This stage is said to cover all customer interactions with a brand and also the environment during the purchase event, and is stated as being the most temporally compressed of the stages. Furthermore, aspects such as marketing activities; the environment and atmospherics and service environment "clues" influence.
- The third stage is Postpurchase, which covers all customer interactions with a brand and its environment after the purchase is made, and therefore fits with the post purchase evaluation stage in previous models.

What is highlighted in the Lemon and Verhoef (2016) model is the importance of touchpoints at each of the stages. Touchpoints have been defined as *"an episode of direct or indirect contact with the brand"* (Baxendale et al., 2015: 236). This is a crucial area to consider, as touchpoints may be online or offline, and encompass a wide range, such as the brand owner, the retailer, peers and independent third parties. Therefore, this model recognises the importance of contemporary consumer decision making and the influence that a variety of touchpoints can have. However, this model has yet to be empirically tested.

An alternative customer journey model was developed by Scott et al., (2017), which is said to be more relevant in the digital age, to incorporate online and offline. This particular model appears to incorporate elements of the old AIDA model, which considers decision making from the sellers/marketers perspective, with further elements relating to traditional consumer decision process stages. The model is suggesting that a prospective consumer, interested in a fashion purchase, will start the process with initial awareness; develop to interest, then consideration, before an information search is undertaken. They base this assumption mainly on the research conducted by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) by stating that these consumers are in a pre-shopping stage, and therefore not actively searching for information. However, Scott et al. (2017) have yet to test their model, and fail to adequately justify the stages based on existing research. Furthermore, the model is stated to be a customer journey model, but fails to clearly identify customer touch points, which Rosenbaum et al., (2017) state is essential in order to improve the customer experience.

Figure 3.10: Customer Journey model. Source: Scott et al., (2017)



3.3.6 Discussion on consumer decision making models

Having reviewed the models, general consumer decision making (i.e. outside of HE) within the context of the digital era, has been widely researched, with new models that illustrate a more circular process, and a less rational/linear approach, as seen in Table 3.3 below. Models that are more recent focus on the customer journey (for example, Wolney and Charoensuksai (2014); Lemon and Verhoef 2016). They recognise the importance of consumer touch points, and influential groups within the process, such as bloggers, discussion boards, and product reviews. Furthermore, the Nobel (2010) and Hudson and Hudson (2013) models recognise the importance of engagement between brands and customers. Wolney and Charoensuksai (2014) and Court et al., (2009), recognise post purchase evaluation stage and its growing importance through generating product reviews. There appears to be a move away from elements of economic man from the early 1800s, with models illustrating less linearity and more of a back and forth approach.

Furthermore, it is not clear whether one model can be valid and represent the consumer decision journey in a variety of contexts, high and low involvement situations, with consumers that may undertake their searching for information in different ways. Indeed, research is needed to establish if all consumer decisions can be generalised even within a particular brand category when, for example, they appear to search for information in different ways. Numerous studies focus on specific products or decision situations. Kollat et al. (1970: 330) explore the extent to which generalisations can be made and state, *"in many cases it is not proper to generalise findings across products or decision situations. On the other hand, generalising as far as possible avoids researching consumer behaviour in unnecessarily minute detail"*. They highlight for example, the role that family members take varies across different products. Also, that information seeking and use of information sources varies across product types.

Authors	Stages identified					Comments
	Problem recognition	**Info search**	**Evaluation**	**Decision**	**Post purchase evaluation**	
Blackwell et al (2001)	X	X	X	X	X	• Adapted from original Engel et al. (1968) model • Rational & linear representation • Considers environmental influence & individual differences • No consideration of online
Court et al. (2009)			X	X	X	• Circular process • Highlights adding & subtracting of brands during process • Focus on consumer touch points • Individual parts of journey not clear
Nobel (2010)		X		X		• Circular process • Suggests "engage" as part of the journey, but is after "buy" stage • Difficult to fit suggested stages with traditional categories • No post purchase evaluation stage
Darley et al (2010)	X	X	X	X	X	• Adaptation of Blackwell et al model (i.e. Rational & linear) • Incorporates websites (but not social media) • Theoretical paper – not tested
Hudson & Hudson (2013)		X	X	X	X	• Circular model • Similar to Court (2009) model • Focus on music festivals is narrow • Participant observation method & analysis unclear
Wolny & Charoensuksai (2014)	X	X	X	X	X	• Circular model • Based on individual shopper journeys • Importance of online/ratings and emotional elements to purchase decision included • Small sample size of 16 respondents • Specific to shopper journeys for cosmetics only
Lemon & Verhoef (2016)	X	X	X	X	X	• Circular model • Considers consumer touch points at each stage • Conceptual only – not tested
Scott et al., (2017)		X	X	X	X	• Circular model • No touch points discussed • Conceptual only – not tested

Table 3.3 Review of a selection of decision making models

More recently, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) suggested more research was required to explore online decision making, and Haubl and Trifts (2000) state that the use of the Internet, especially social media has a major impact on the consumer decision making process. Hudson and Hudson (2013) highlight that the two stages of “evaluate” and “advocate” become more relevant due to high social media use by the target audience, and Wolney and Charoensuksai (2014) highlight the importance of generation of product reviews at the post purchase stage. Lemon and Verhoef (2016), take this further by identifying different types of touch points within their model, and further highlight their presence at each of the three key stages.

As the focus of this research is in HE, it is now pertinent to review specific research within this sector regarding decision making models.

3.4 Decision Making Models within Higher Education

The previous section explored the history and development of consumer decision making. Various paradigms were explored and models appear to have moved from linear, rational approaches, towards a multi-phase/circular perspective. Previously highlighted in Chapter 2 was the debate regarding students as customers, with Koris and Nokelainen (2015) highlighting that students do view themselves as customers, and expect to be treated so. However, a separate stream of literature has developed regarding course selection decision making within HE. This section now explores the development of course selection decision making models in order to establish whether research within the HE context has developed to incorporate a changing communications environment.

3.4.1 Student Decision Making Models

Research into decision making relating to student choice became popular during the late 1970s and early 1980s with the focus on the USA (Veloutsou et al., 2005). Research has expanded into other countries such as Africa, Australia, Denmark, Spain, UK and overseas students generally. Chapman (1981), Krampf and Heinlein (1981), Hooley and Lynch (1981) and later Moogan et al. (1999) were recognised as some of the first to link the theory of buying behaviour to education.

Ivy (2010) states that there are three types of models to explain students' decision making regarding their choice of HE institution:

Economic models are based upon a cost-benefit analysis, where prospective students take into account costs related to their studies and compare against the financial benefits expected on graduation (Chapman, 1981).

Sociological models consider issues such as family background, academic ability, motivation and personal goals (for example see Kotler and Fox, 1995).

Information processing models combine aspects of the previous two categories and consider both the decision and the processes (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987)

Vrontis et al. (2004) supports this view and used similar terms to define student choice models: economic models, status-attainment models and combined models. Hossler et al. (1987) suggest that models that combine the first two types provide more explanatory powers. Generally models within HE tend to focus on what is known as the cognitive perspective (Egan, 2014) or alternatively known as information processing models (Ivy, 201; Bettman et al., 1998). Maringe (2006) applies the general stages to education, which are detailed in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4: Student decision model for HE.

Stage	Detail
Pre-search behaviour	Early, passive thoughts regarding HE study. Universities needs to maintain an institutional presence in passive minds of choosers
Search behaviour	Applicants already have a short-list of universities. They start to use a variety of sources to provide information to assist in decision making process. University needs to maximise information opportunities
Application stage	Applicant submits their application to the universities. Universities needs to deal with application quickly, and develop 'keep warm' activities.
Choice decision	Applicant accepts one or more offers. Universities need to build a psychological bond and maintain dialogue with applicant to become preferred choice.
Registration	Applicant registers on the course and turns-up to study. Some may leave within the first few days due to early negative post purchase feelings.

Based upon stages provided by Maringe (2006)

The model above closely identifies with the general consumer decision making process discussed previously, although the importance of post purchase evaluation is not evident in this particular model and it is a very rational perspective of the process. However, what the Maringe (2006) model adds to the discussion is perception of a longer time element, through the pre-search behaviour, prior to search behaviour.

Many authors when researching student decision making simply refer to generic models such as the ones by Kotler (1997; 2003), Engel et al., (1968), or Blackwell et al.,(2006). However, many adapt to suit the HE environment, but a number fail to see the importance of post purchase evaluation, as can be seen in Table 3.5 below. Post purchase evaluation is likely to have an increased role in today's highly interactive communications culture, where more open, instant and less formal communications take place 24/7 (Tuten and Solomon, 2013).

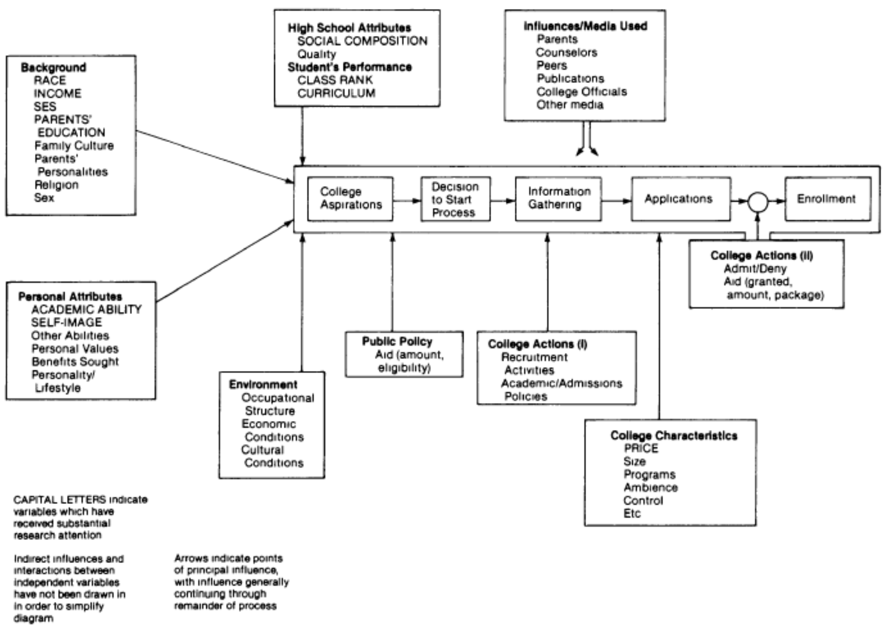
Table 3.5: Views of HE decision making stages

Author(s)	Stages identified
Brown, Varley, Pal (2009)	Problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision
Maringe (2006)	Pre-search behaviour, search behaviour, application stage, choice decision, registration
Vrontis, Thrassou, Melanthiou (2004)	Need recognition, info search, alternatives evaluation, purchase & consumption, post-consumption evaluation
Foskett and Hemsley-Brown(2001)	Entering the game, scanning the options, focusing the choice, shortlisting, prioritising and preferencing, conversion and decision-taking
Kotler and Fox (1985)	Need arousal, information gathering, decision evaluation, decision execution, post decision assessment
Litten (1982)	College aspirations, decision to start process, information gathering, applications, enrolment
Perun (1981)	Desire to attend, decision (plans) to attend, investigation of institutions, applications for admission, admission, enrolment
Kotler (1976)	Decision to attend, information seeking and receiving, specific college inquiries, application, admission(s), college choice, registration

The student decision making model by Maringe (2006), in Table 3.4 and a number of other models in Table 3.5 (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001; Litten 1982; Perun 1981; Kotler 1976), fail to recognise the importance of post-purchase evaluation. Many positive or negative comments can be posted on online social media sites, which are likely to influence future students, as previously suggested by the Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) model. Maringe's model is a rather simplistic representation as it does not include a variety of environmental and individual factors that may impact upon how individuals evaluate their choice during the process, as proposed by the Blackwell et al., (2001) in Figure 3.3. Moreover, decision making is still represented as a linear process and does not consider the changing nature of communications nor recognise more contemporary mainstream decision making models that now represent decision making as a more circular model.

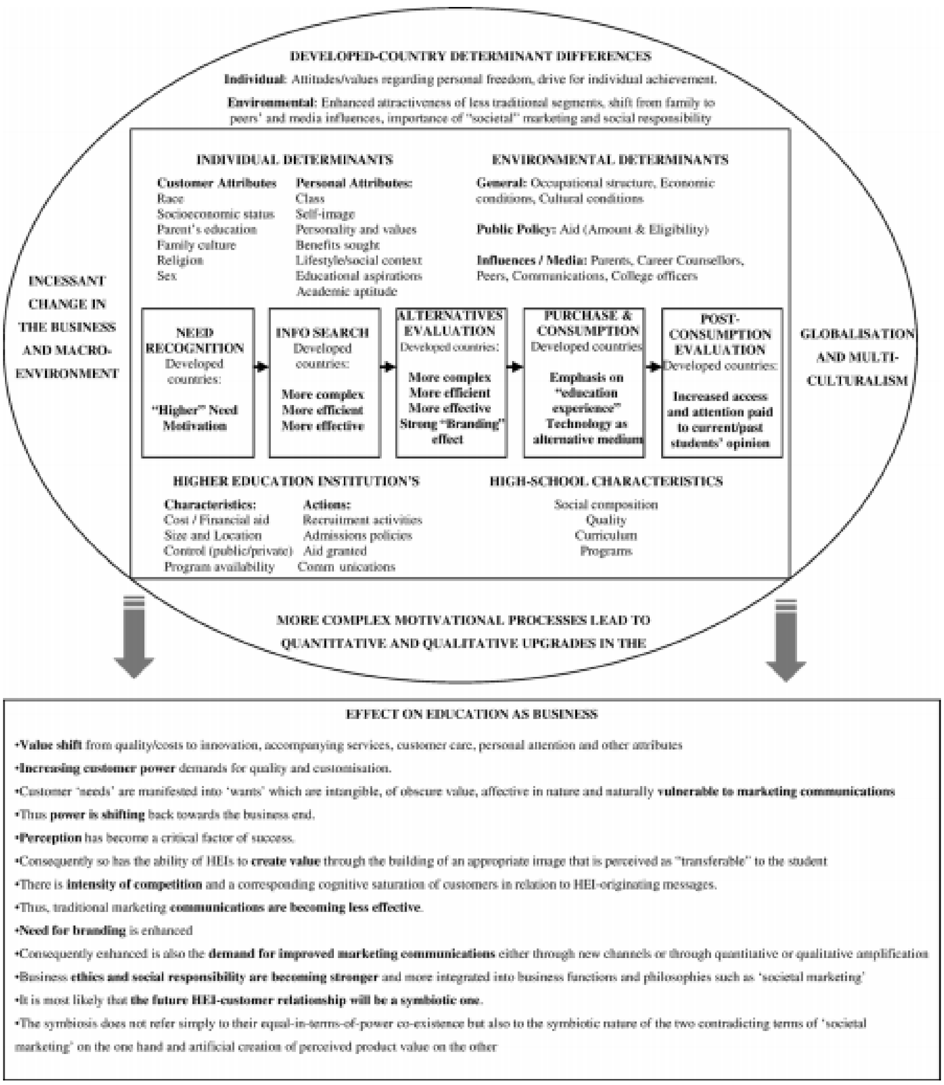
A number of models devised for HE decision making, do however consider not just the stages, but also other factors that impact upon it. For example, Litten (1982) highlights high school attributes/student's performance, influences/media used, college characteristics/actions, public policy, environmental, background, personal attitudes, and environmental as important factors that impact upon the decision making process, but fails to identify any post purchase evaluation stage. Moreover, this model was developed in a pre-internet era, and does not reflect any social media use, as seen in mainstream consumer models. The model also suggests a rational and linear approach to decision making and this may not be necessarily true.

Figure 3.11: An expanded model of the college selection process (Litten 1982)



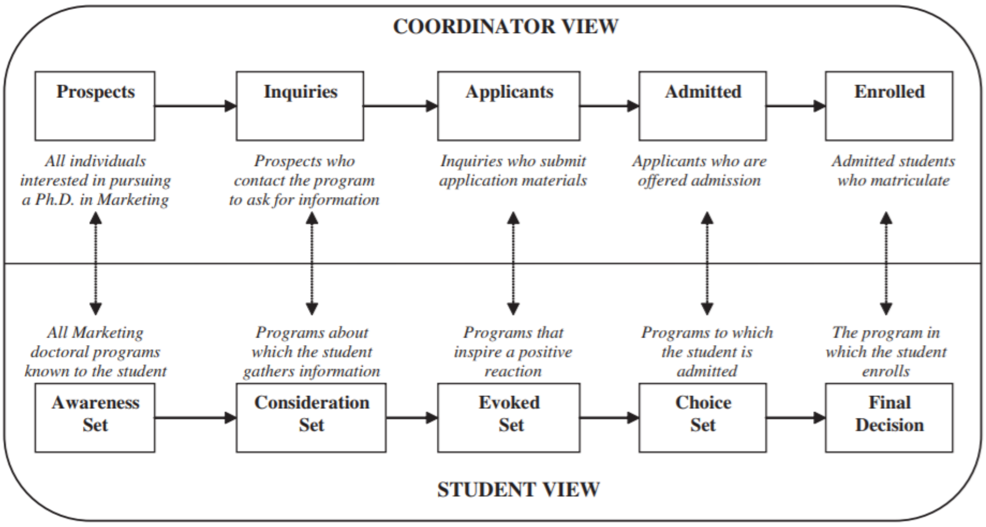
Vrontis et al., (2004) create a complex model and identify individual determinants, environmental determinants, high-school characteristics, HE institutions characteristics and actions specifically, but also focus on the wider environment and developed country differences, multi-culturalism, and the business and macro environment. The authors also highlight that this model is only applicable to developed countries and establish a link between the decision making process and factors that affect it, with the effect on education as business. However, it does not consider the post purchase evaluation stage, nor the influence of agents for international students, or consider that multiple decisions may be taken within a single decision process and as Lipshitz (1993), who views it *"as a sequence of activities"*. Whilst a post purchase evaluation stage is evident within the Vrontis et al., (2004) model, and a number of influences are evident within it, the central stages suggest a linear and rational approach. For example, after a decision has been made, there is no suggestion that any further information is searched for, and that at a later stage a change to this decision may take place.

Figure 3.12: A contemporary higher education student-choice model for developed countries (Vrontis et al. 2004)



Davis and McCarthy (2005), which considers both a student and coordinator view (see Figure 3.13), present a further model. This particular model appears to be based more on the psychodynamic perspective, with a focus on consumers reducing alternatives to a manageable number to facilitate choice. Rather than a focus on the student journey and various touch points, the coordinator view appears to link closely with the sales funnel that identifies the buying process that a company leads potential customers through. However, Strauss and Neal (2015) state that the sales funnel should be renamed a sales circle, as digital media means that prospects and customers have lots of information when they enter the buying cycle, they enter at various points, which impacts on the role of marketing/sales, giving increased power to prospective customers. What this particular model does highlight is considering the decision process from both a student and an HEI perspective; however, this does not go as far as considering various touch points as with the Lemon and Verhoef (2016) model.

Figure 3.13: Matching recruiting activities with student decision making (Davis and McCarthy 2005)



Finally, the work by Brown et al., (2009) utilises existing linear-type decision making stages within their research. Whilst providing some qualitative insight into university selection, the research does not really add anything new to the process, nor question whether the stages are still appropriate. However, there is some discussion regarding 'moments of truth' or 'critical incidents', and the importance of having positive experiences with students' first interactions with universities. Evidence of an increasing consumerist approach was also found.

3.4.2 Discussion regarding student decision making models

A number of HE models have been reviewed, however, there appears to be a lack of research in this area in recent years within the context of HE. Table 3.6 presents a summary of each of the HE specific models. Most models appear to cover the main stages, with post purchase evaluation missing from many, and a lack of development in models is seen. A linear and rational approach appears to be a key component of all HE specific models.

As previously discussed, there has been some criticisms of thinking of decision making as a purely rational activity. For example, Chisnall (1997) suggests this is an over simplification. Solomon (2002) suggests that perhaps young people lack patience and discipline to act in such a rational way and chance factors may play a role. However, Davey (2005: 2) states, *"for such a high involvement complex purchase as selecting a university, it might be reasonable to assume that some extended decision processes occur"*. Moreover, Maringe and Carter (2007) argue that Davey's viewpoint should be used as a counter argument for critics of rational decision making within the HE sector. However, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1995: 33) found that *"decisions were only partly rational, being also influenced by feelings and emotions"*, and argue that decision making does not follow a linear sequence and suggest that decision making is both subjective and objective. Furthermore, Hemsley-Brown (1999) develops a model that suggests choice consists of both rational and irrational or random elements, and that it is a much more complex process.

Within mainstream decision making, models appear to be changing to demonstrate a less systematic approach, and a more circular, continuous process. This appears to have not been considered with the HE environment. Models appear to represent decision making as a purely rational process and as Hackley (2009: 10) states *"marketing processes may not necessarily be captured by the typical models and concepts of the managerial marketing studies curriculum"* and is highly critical of theory development stating *"a tendency to cling uncritically to outdated concepts of limited value"*. Furthermore, he emphasises that different organisational contexts may mean that typical models are not always appropriate within a particular context.

Table 3.6: Views of HE decision making stages II

Authors	Stages identified					Comments
	Problem recognition	**Info Search**	**Evaluation**	**Decision**	**Post purchase evaluation**	
Brown, Varley & Pal (2009)	X	X	X	X		• Generic & linear model – not made relevant to HE • Nothing new • No post purchase evaluation stage • Small sample size: 22 first year undergraduate students in 4 focus groups at one 'red brick' university in North of England
Maringe (2006)	X	X	X	X		• Linear model • Stages made relevant to HE • No post purchase evaluation stage • Nothing new
Maringe & Carter (2007)	X	X	X	X	X	• Linear model • Identifies a range of key influencers in the process • Stages made relevant to HE • Focus group limited to 28 African students at two UK universities (plus two student and two staff in-depth interviews • Undergraduate focus only
Davis & McCarthy (2005)		X		X		• Linear model • Student and coordinator view presented • Made relevant to HE • Surveys 106 MBA students and 240 PhD students, plus 23 coordinators of PhD programmes
Vrontis, Thrassou & Melanthiou (2004)	X	X	X	X	X	• Comprehensive linear model • Post purchase evaluation stage is evident • Theoretical paper (not tested) • Based on HE in developed countries, not just postgraduate
Foskett & Hemsley-Brown (2001)	X	X	X	X		• Linear model • Stages made relevant to HE • Highlights importance of shortlisting • No post purchase evaluation stage
Kotler and Fox (1985)	X	X	X	X	X	• Linear Model • Highlights post decision assessment as being important • Not made specific to HE (as previous Kotler (1976) model was)
Litten (1982)	X	X	X	X		• Linear model • Highlights college aspirations as being important • No post purchase evaluation stage
Perun (1981)	X	X	X			• Linear model • Similar to earlier Kotler (1976) model • Nothing new • No post purchase evaluation stage
Kotler (1976)	X	X	X	X		• Early linear model • Made relevant to HE • No post purchase evaluation stage

Moreover, within mainstream decision making it is also suggested that the typical consumer may not now start with a narrow choice set, but may start with a more narrow initial consideration set. More brands may be considered at a later stage to help make their decision and that this presents opportunities for engagement. As Hudson and Hudson (2013: 210) state, *"consumers add and subtract brands from a group under consideration during an extended evaluation stage"*. Marketers also now need to compete for attention in the online environment and people share their experiences with a brand online through social media.

If research continues to ask questions around existing models, without exploring alternatives, then findings will relate to these existing linear ways of representing decision making, and 'new' research will simply just support or modify existing models. Moreover, with an ever-increasing scepticism by consumers of marketing activities, consideration is needed to whether consumers can really be managed, and whether it is possible to develop a model that truly represents how the majority of decisions are made.

3.5 Conclusion to decision making

There seems to be some agreement that high involvement situations involve a number of stages to consumer decision making – generally accepted to be problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, decision and post-purchase evaluation. More complex models, such as that presented by Blackwell et al., (2001), also suggest a range of environmental influences and individual differences that impact upon how decisions are made, along with consideration of information and messages to which consumers are exposed. Evidence is also seen of the influences and differences within some of the HE models (for example Litten 1982 and Vrontis et al 2004). However, criticisms of these types of models are that they assume consumers go through their decision making in a logical and rational manner, without any time pressures, and they are based upon Anglo cultures. Graham (1981) questions whether consumer decision making models are suitable for use with all types of cultures. Moreover, these models assume there is an extended type of search and evaluation that takes place and they may not consider a more contemporary two-way level of communication, where a more narrow initial consideration set is considered. Existing models may therefore need to be reviewed within HE regarding whether this linear approach is an appropriate representation of how decisions are made.

Furthermore, it is important to understand the target audience, how they seek to interact with an organisation, and how they seek information to help them with their decision. For example, different generational cohorts approach to communications may be somewhat different (Bolton et al., 2013). EWOM at the post purchase evaluation stage is likely to have an increased role in today's unrestricted online environment. Within mainstream literature, models have developed to incorporate the online environment and are presented as a more circular approach, for example models presented by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014), Court et al (2009), Hudson and Hudson (2013) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016). There has also been an increased interest in plotting consumer decision journeys. Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) highlight the importance of product reviews through social media that are important within the information search stage. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) highlight a variety of touch points, which include many online and customer initiated touch points. However, the literature within HE does not appear to have considered the online environment in a comprehensive way and any possible impact upon existing HE decision making models is not considered, which highlights a gap in existing research.

Finally, it is highlighted that information seeking behaviour, use of information sources, the role of family members etc., varies depending upon the product/service, suggesting that consumer decision making models are most useful when adapted to a particular situation or context, such as, for example, Higher Education. However, whilst there have been a number of models outside of HE that are context specific (for example Hudson and Hudson (2013) for music festivals; Wolny and Charoensuksai (2004) for shoppers), there does not appear to be any recent HE models.

To conclude, contemporary two-way communications are taking place in an ever-increasing connected world. The younger generations especially expect to engage with brands differently to previous generational cohorts. Peer-to-peer interactions are able to influence others in their purchase decisions (Sashi, 2012; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Digital media is said to have transformed how marketing is undertaken (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2012) and therefore this is an important area to understand as it clearly impacts upon consumer decision making and therefore also likely for student decision making.

The main points from this chapter therefore, can be briefly summarised as follows:

- There is a wide range of decision making models available.
- Models outside of HE have developed more recently from the cognitive perspective to a more circular/continuous representation of decision making or customer journey.
- Models outside of HE highlight the importance of engagement activities during the process, including highlighting various touchpoints.
- HE models appear to illustrate the process as rational and linear, whereas models outside of HE have changed considerably.
- There is a lack of focus upon how contemporary communications may influence the process within HE.
- Engagement and touch points are not present in HE models.
- Whilst there are common steps outside and within HE, there is a lack of consideration of whether a narrow initial choice set, with further choices added later, within university course selection decision is taking place.
- The importance of post purchase evaluation is recognised in models outside of HE, but very few include this stage within HE specific models.

This chapter reviewed a variety of models, and within many of these models, common stages or other important aspects are found. A great deal of research has taken place, considering specific stages or based upon other aspects shown within various models. The next chapter will now focus upon more narrowly focused research, to provide a clearer understanding of stages or other aspects shown within various models. However, it is not assumed that all stages/aspects covered here are or are not relevant to HE models, but that further in-depth understanding was required before primary research commenced.

4. Decision Making: stages and influences

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive review of various decision making perspectives and models. Although the review highlighted that there appeared to be a lack of progress on models within HE, a number of common stages were evident, which are now covered in some depth within the first section of this chapter. The focus will be around the context of HE for this discussion, however other consumption contexts are explored in the literature where appropriate. This chapter will therefore provide some real insight into existing research at each common stage, in addition to other important areas. As stated at the end of Chapter 3, it is not assumed that all stages/aspects covered here are or are not relevant to HE models, but merely that further in-depth understanding was required before primary research commenced.

This chapter is focused around the pre-search/problem recognition stage, information seeking behaviour/information search stage, application/decision stage, and post purchase evaluation stage. The second part of this chapter considers influences that affect these decisions and is focused around two key areas. The first concerns what is commonly known as "influential others" such as friends and family, and the second concerns the area of engagement and touch points, which is lacking attention within an HE context. Both areas are extremely important in today's contemporary media environment that a typical Millennial student experiences on a daily basis.

4.1. Decision Making Stages

4.1.1 Problem recognition

Problem recognition starts when *"consumers realize that they have an unfulfilled need"* (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2008: 12), or have a desire for something new (Galan et al., 2015). General consumer decision models (such as the Engel, Kollat and Blackwell model 1978 and later related versions) often refer to problem recognition as the first stage; however, Maringe (2006) refers to this within an HE context as pre-search behaviour. There appears to be a lack of focus on research at the initial stage, with much more focus at the search stage and use of information sources. Darley et al. (2010) for example, reviewed all major mainstream marketing and consumer behaviour journals between 2001 and 2008 and did not find one single empirical study with a focus on the problem recognition stage. However, numerous studies have taken place regarding aspirations for HE study (for example see Connor et al., (1999), Foskett and Hesketh (1995; 1996), Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001; 2006); Kozar and Connell (2013)). Moreover, these studies tend to focus on HE study generally, with few focusing at postgraduate level, such as for example Kozar and Connell (2013) relating to postgraduate fashion students, although Kallio, (1995), and Webb (1993) focus on postgraduate students but regarding information searching/criteria. What is known from an annual UK based postgraduate survey of over 66,000 responses is what motivates postgraduate study. In order of importance, these motivations consist of: to progress on their current career path, to improve current career prospects, for personal interest, to enable progression to a higher level such as PhD, as a requirement to enter a particular profession, to change career and to meet requirements of their current job (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). What does not appear to be well researched is how far in advance students start to think about postgraduate study, in order to determine when the process commences with the pre-search stage. Indeed Gronroos (1997) points out how difficult it is to determine when a service begins, with Cubillo et al., (2006) stating that it starts in HE when the HEI is first contacted. Moreover, Galan et al., (2015) explored how the problem recognition stage can be triggered through social media, for example, an advert for study popping up on a potential students social media account. However, their research into postgraduate students' decision making found no students using social media in the problem recognition stage, and talks with friends and/or acquaintances had greatest impact on thinking about postgraduate study.

Also relevant to the discussion, especially for high involvement decisions such as education, is the impact of perceived risk. There are many studies exploring perceived risk and its impact on consumer behaviour (Tan, 1999; Simões and Soares, 2010), resulting in many classifications of the various types of risk, with no agreement on what these are. However, within HE, Moogan et al., (1999: 222) note many students are "*afraid of making the wrong decision*". Maringe and Carter (2007: 468) highlight financial risk and the *"huge direct costs and the fear of being unable to meet course requirements up to programme completion"*. Research needs to explore what types of perceived risk postgraduate students experience and what actions they take to reduce the level of perceived risk. This may be more challenging for non-UK students who are usually unable to visit universities. It is also suggested that those with higher levels of perceived risk may search for more information (Choi and Lee, 2003), and WOM has also been found to play a key role to help reduce risk (Mazzarol et al., 2007; Sweeney et al., 2008). Information search is therefore a key stage in all consumer decision models, as seen in the previous chapter. Alternatively, it may be that if the level of risk is perceived as being too high, that an intermediary is used to help in the decision process, such as an agent. This can present a real issue for universities, as they may be unable to contact the prospective student directly if only agent contact details are given. Maringe and Carter (2007) exploring influences on African students found that informal agencies within their own country were very important, along with the British Council and embassies. They also found that any family members that had previously studied in England were also very influential within the decision process. Perceived levels of risk may therefore impact upon how a potential student progresses from pre-search behaviour, such as whether an intermediary such as an educational agent is used, which countries are considered, and what type of universities are searched for, as the following illustrates.

Table 4.1: Types of risk applied to university & course selection in HE

Type of Risk	Explanation	Example for HE
Physical risk	Risk of injury from studying	Is it a safe country to study in? Is the university in a safe area? How are non-UK students accepted by locals/staff? Is it in a new building?
Financial risk	Risk of losing or wasting money	How much should I pay? Is it a good investment? Will I get a job in this area afterwards? How much is living accommodation/cost of living? Can I get a part-time job? Can I work afterwards in this country/area?
Performance risk	Risk of course not being as originally expected	Is the course as I thought it would be from the information I read? Is it a good course? Is it interesting and relevant? Are the teaching staff knowledgeable? What support services are there (library, language support, study skills, careers advice)?
Psychosocial risk	The fear of looking foolish or disapproval by family/ friends.	Does the course/university have a good reputation? Will friends, family, potential employers be impressed? Will I pass?

Risk categories compiled from Cunningham (1967) and Blythe (2013)

Once these early thoughts start to progress and a prospective student starts to actively think about a search for information, they move onto the next stage (Blackwell et al., 2001; Maringe, 2006).

4.1.2 Information Seeking Behaviour and information search

Information seeking has been defined as the *"need to consult various sources prior to making a purchasing decision"* (Moutinho, 1987: 12). This may consist of an internal search (information stored in memory), or an external search (seeking new information) (Galan et al., 2015). Research by Darley et al,. (2010) did not find any previous empirical research relating to internal search over a 7-year period, whereas external search has seen a great deal of empirical research, with at least 24 studies found over the same period. Internal search concerns use of memory or previous experiences, whereas external search concerns collecting new information (Simões and Soares, 2010; Blackwell et al., 2006).

Where services are involved (such as with education), there are higher levels of intangibility associated with this type of decision, with an associated higher level of risk (Cubillo et al., 2006; Maringe and Carter, 2007). Furthermore, higher involvement decisions generally have a higher level of perceived risk (Simões and Soares, 2010). Consumers compensate for this by increasing their level of knowledge through a higher degree of searching for information (Moutinho, 1987; Mourali et al., 2005; Choi and Lee, 2003). Applicant's need to find adequate information to ensure their decision is well informed (Briggs and Wilson, 2007). Moreover, any information considered will be judged as to its usefulness, relevance and believability (cognitive domain) and also its attractiveness and likeability (affective domain) (Moutinho, 1987). Moreover, Moutinho (1987: 15) suggests that consumers use information: *"(1) To evaluate alternatives in making a choice; (2) to reinforce past choices as a rationalisation process; (3) to resolve conflict between buying and postponing; (4) to remind when to buy; and (5) to acquire knowledge for epistemic purposes."* As previously discussed, it is also used to reduce levels of risk (Choi and Lee, 2003). Brooks (2010) identifies three main sources of information: social networks (e.g. friends, family), educational institutions (e.g. role played by teachers in schools and colleges), and written information (e.g. university prospectus, open days/visits).

There has been a substantial amount of research relating to the amount of search activity a consumer is engaged in (Furse et al., 1984; Darley et al., 2010). A number of relevant factors have been highlighted, for example: product knowledge, experience, satisfaction rates, individual differences, situational variables. Moreover, much of the older existing research looking at search strategies undertaken by consumers relates to high cost durables (Furse et al., 1984). Some older studies even disagree about the assumption that prepurchase behaviour actually occurs (for example see Olshavsky and Granbois (1979), Newman (1977), Granbois (1977)). However, Ursic (1980) suggests that due to use of memory to recall, rather than observation, consumers are likely to under estimate the amount of search that took place. More recently Darley et al., (2010) found that there was an increased interest in decisions concerning online shopping, but that almost half of empirical research involved using student samples, and almost three quarters used survey methodology. Moreover, Galan et al., (2015) state that there is more information available than ever before to facilitate information searching, and Jaffe (2010) and Galan et al., (2015) explore how search has changed, with more use of social media platforms and how the sharing of content and ideas has influenced the purchase decision.

Some research indicates that there are differing patterns in how consumers search for information. For example, Usher et al. (2010), researching applicants to Higher Education courses, proposed a fourfold typology. This was based upon types of decision path (conventional or unconventional), and intensity of information usage (how many sources accessed): Cruisers (conventional decision path, low level information usage); Perusers (conventional decision path, high level information usage); Snoozers (unconventional decision path, low level information usage); Choosers (unconventional decision path, high-level information usage). In their analysis of individual search strategies for new car buyers, Furse et al., (1984) identified six distinctive groups based upon external information search patterns, suggesting that within other contexts individuals do not approach information search as one homogeneous group. They identified a low search group (below average search on all factors); a purchase-pal-assisted group (least experienced, therefore involve another more experienced person); a high-search group (above average on a range of factors); a retail-shopper (with heavy involvement of a range of people); a moderate search group (the largest group with moderate activity on all search factors). More recent research by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) explored shopper journeys for cosmetics. This research identified three distinct shopper journeys (previously discussed in Chapter 2), demonstrating three very different patterns of searching for information both at the pre-shopping stage and information search stage. This suggests there is a need to contextualise any research that considers identifying patterns of consumer search behaviour.

Recent research also suggests that the online environment takes on a much larger role in the consumer decision process and as a source for information (Moe and Trusov, 2011; Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014). For example, with online product rating and reviews, where many more consumers are contributing their opinions and potential buyers increasingly rely on this source of information to help them make a decision. The decision making models presented by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) refer to a range of online information sources such as product reviews, ratings, and blogs that are sought during the customer shopping journey. Darley et al., (2010) discuss the importance of the online environment and focus on websites, and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) refer to a variety of touch points. Moreover, there now exists many online sites that simplify not only the search for information, but also undertake some of the processing of the information presented. For example, online sites such as Moneysupermarket.com and Booking.com allow consumers to easily search through a vast range of providers for car insurance and accommodation respectively.

When considering searching for information within HE, a short list has already been made, and a variety of sources is used to help in the decision making process (Maringe, 2006). Whilst some students can visit universities at open days where they may speak to staff, have a tour of the building, and get a ‘feel’ for the university environment, they are unable to ‘test drive’ their future HE course (Moogan et al., 1999: 213). University open days also allow additional detailed information on specific courses to be obtained. Moogan et al (1999: 222) note *“the open-days’ organisation, structure and personnel created the biggest impressions”*. Overseas students however may collect information at educational fairs in their home country (Patton, 2000). In addition, university brochures may be used at various stages of the decision making process, and are a crucial form of information in the early search stage (Harket et al., 2001; Veloutsou et al., 2005). However, this more conventional source of information is seen as having very little influence in the final decision (Newell et al., 1996). Veloutsou et al., (2004: 164) highlight the top three themes university students collect information on as: *"perceived university's offering and reputation, the opportunities to develop a healthy social activity and the ability to find suitable accommodation"*. A full list of information required can be seen in Table 4.2, shown ranked in order of importance. Further research by Briggs and Wilson (2007) also identified the main sources of information that influenced student choice. The top five they identified were Prospectus, Open day, Word-of-mouth, Website and League tables. They also found that the university website was becoming increasingly important, and Veloutsou et al., (2005) state one reason for this is that geographically remote students can access it. Furthermore, research has indicated that at undergraduate level students typically refer to five different sources of information about HE, with open days, university prospectuses and online (especially university and UCAS websites) being the most frequently cited (Usher et al., 2010), which contradicts some of the earlier information by Newell et al., (1996).

Bennet (2006) however, highlights that more traditional promotional tools such as the university web site, the prospectus and a variety of other written material is seen as either inadequate, misleading or untrustworthy and therefore not seen as a significant influencer in their decision making. The most recent PTES survey also demonstrates that around 20 per cent of students have either a neutral or negative impression regarding the information provided by the university being both sufficient and accurate (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). Some students also question the reliability of university websites, as is borne out by the most recent PTES survey (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). Web site adaptation may also need consideration, adapting to various cultural requirements received a positive response (Singh et al., 2006). Also relevant to this discussion is that situational and individual differences may influence the information search undertaken (Punj and Stewart, 1983). Maringe and Carter (2007) suggest that African students claim to not have sufficient information at various parts of the decision making process. Furthermore, other research suggests that Asian consumers have a different cognitive style for decision making (Usunier and Lee, 2005). For example, Chinese consumers relying more heavily on personal sources of information (Doran, 2002). They are also more likely to be information seekers than information givers (Fong and Burton, 2008). This suggests a possible need to meet different cultural requirements regarding information required. Further research by Veloutsou et al.,

(2005) suggests that higher performing students (identified from UCAS entry points) are more likely to engage with universities and ask questions, and Brooks (2010) suggests that the factors that influence older students are likely to be different and they draw on a different range of factors to make their decision.

Table 4.2: Information required by university candidates (Veloutsou et al. 2004: 165)

1. Content of specific course	13. Title of the degree awarded	25. Shopping in the area
2. University's reputation	14. Existence of private flats nearby	26. Development of business contacts when studying
3. Department's reputation	15. Opportunities to study abroad	27. University's age
4. University campus	16. computer facilities	28. Male/female ration in the university
5. Night life in the city	17. Safety in campus	29. Degree classification structure
6. Course as a learning experience	18. Companies recruiting the department's graduates	30. Opportunity to find part-time jobs
7. Activities in the university	19. Friendliness of people living in the area	31. Library facilities
8. Accommodation provided by the university	20. Contact with the lecturers	32. Opportunity to find summer jobs
9. University unions	21. Size of the area	33. Activities nearby
10. Percentage of graduates gaining employment within 1 year	22. Transport in the area	34. Weather in the area
11. Cost of living in the area	23. Safety in the area	35. Contact with counselling services
12. Average earning of the graduate	24. Local sights and activities	36. Contact with doctors through the university

Most of the research relating to information sources used and related areas such as perceived reliability tend to be for decisions at undergraduate level. One might argue that at postgraduate level students are more experienced in this decision process, having previously gone through the process at undergraduate level. Indeed, experience may lead to decisions becoming more automatic, or being replaced by cognitive shortcuts (for example using fewer attributes) requiring less attention and thereby becoming more closely associated with heuristics (Punj and Stewart, 1983). Furthermore, prospective students may decide to undertake their postgraduate study in a different country, which may again present a different approach to their decision process and use of information. Moreover, older studies considering information sources may be far less relevant today due to the increasing use of on-line sources, which may completely change the mix of sources used (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014; Tuten and Solomon, 2013). The importance of different information sources is therefore subject to change (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). For example, Bowden (2000) suggested that league tables published in many of the quality newspapers and magazines are increasingly likely to have a greater influence. Increasingly the internet is used to provide information, which is sometimes controllable (e.g. the university's web site), but is often outside university's control in other on-line places and may be inaccurate (Veloutsou et al., 2005). Therefore, up-to-date research is required to understand what impact digital and social media are having on the use of information sources and to also explore what digital and social media sources students think are attractive, likeable, useful, relevant and believable (Brooks, 2010).

An application and/or decision stage is present in many of the existing models (for example, Maringe (2006); Vrontis et al., (2004); Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001)). This will now be considered.

4.1.3 Application and Final Decision

This section will review existing research relating to application and/or decision. When students submit their applications to their selected institutions, a quick response, and developing "keep warm" activities will gain an advantage (Sargeant, 1999). Students may submit multiple applications and may accept multiple offers, therefore it is important to maintain dialogue and make a psychological bond between both parties (Maringe, 2006). The more traditional approach of "one size fits all concept" to HE recruitment marketing may not be the best approach.

At the final decision stage there is a vast amount of research covering the choice factors used to select their preferred university and the focus of this is at either undergraduate level, postgraduate level, or international level (Simões and Soares, 2010). Furthermore, studies looking at choice factors consider either narrower or wider ranges of choice factors. Examples of various choice factors highlighted in previous studies can be seen in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Choice factors highlighted in a selection of previous studies

Research study	Choice factors highlighted in study
Ahmad and Hussain (2017)	Learning environment, cost issues, institutional reputation, personal development, recommendation, socio-cultural proximity, government initiatives
Soilemetzidis et al., (2014)	Location of the institution, overall reputation of the institution, content of the course, reputation in chosen subject area/department.
Simoes & Soares (2010)	Geographical proximity, academic reputation, guidance, current students' influence, family influence
Maringe (2006)	Programme (e.g. course/structure), price (e.g. fees, cost of living, availability of work), Promotion (e.g. academic research, publicity about university), People (e.g. alumni, graduate profiles, tutor credentials), Prospectus (e.g. university prospectus and information), Prominence (e.g. university and staff reputation, website), Place (e.g. accommodation, facilities, racial diversity, class sizes)
Foskett et al., (2006)	Availability of part-time work
Worthington & Higgs (2004)	Course reputation and the location of the HEI
Soutar and Turner (2002)	Course suitability, academic reputation, job prospects, quality of teaching, campus atmosphere, type of university, distance from home, family opinion, ability to transfer and friends
Mazzarol and Soutar (2002)	An institution's reputation for quality, an institution's links or alliances with other institutions familiar to the student, an institution's reputation for having high-quality staff, an institution's alumni base and-word-of-mouth referral process, the number of students enrolled at the institution, whether an institution is willing to recognise students' qualifications
Webb (1993)	Academic reputation, accreditation, evening classes, programs, potential degree marketability, part-time programs, completion time, proximity, costs, faculty contact time, location, library size, reputation in the community, parking, and placement reputation
Krone (1981)	Career prospects
Leister and Menzel (1976); Wright and Kriewal (1980)	Location and the size of the institution

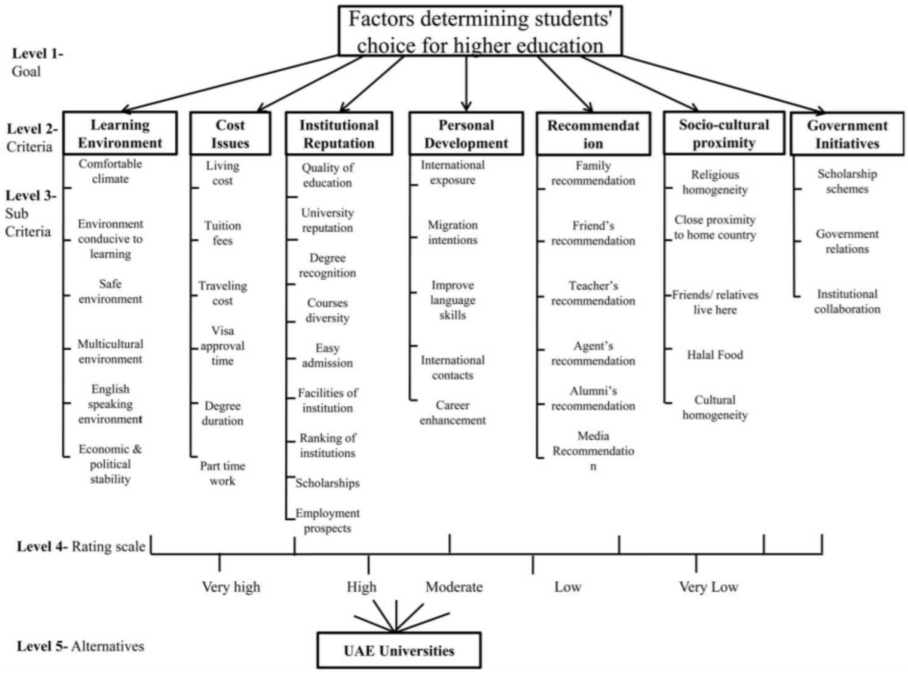
Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) undertook a comprehensive review of literature covering university choice factors in published work between 1992 and 2013. They state that the HE market is not homogenous and that a single list of choice factors for all students is unlikely. Furthermore, they identify studies are often based on one institution, or one subject area, and that caution should be used when considering these results. There are also few studies at postgraduate level relating to choice factors.

Moreover, they identify a need for further research relating to international students' choice of university outside of their home country, especially to identify differences relating to the process of choice.

Sheng (2015: 227) researching undergraduate education choices in China found that social class impacted upon university degree programme choice, especially when combined with gender differences. *"Social class leads working-class students to make less gender-stereotypical choices than students of the middle-class origin"*. Working-class parents made higher education decisions for their children (female or male) based upon which subjects provided the best job opportunities. Furthermore, middle-class parents displayed more preference for females to undertake courses that would be in keeping with Chinese traditional femininity (softness, obedience and sexual subordination), and for males, Chinese masculinity (independent, higher-level academic degree and have a successful career). However, previous research undertaken during the 1970s suggests lower class students are more traditional regarding typical sex related roles than higher class adolescents (for example see Angrist, Michelson and Penna (1977); Bayer (1975); Osmond and Martin (1975). Therefore, class and culture may be a contributory factor in choice, which is supported by the Blackwell et al., (2001) model as an environmental influence. The attributes or criteria that students select a university by might therefore vary in different countries (Soutar and Turner, 2002). This can clearly be seen in the research by Soilemetzidis et al. (2014), with non-UK students seeing the reputation of the institution and course being more important than for UK students. This supports research by Briggs and Wilson (2007) who found that league tables were more important in decision making for students at pre-1992 universities, compared to those students at post-1992 universities. Other differences were also found that suggest overall importance of various criteria varies between students at pre and post-92 universities. Postgraduate students however mentioned the importance of their research supervisors in influencing them about which institution to study at (Maringe and Carter, 2007). Moreover, graduate level student perception of the reputations of teaching staff (for example number of staff who are PhD holders, professorial title, academics' public profiles) may influence their decision (Cubillo et al., 2006; Ivy, 2001). This supports earlier work highlighting the importance of perceived educational standards and reputation (Borjas, 1994; Price et al., 2003), and also the latest PTES results (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014).

Ahmad and Hussain (2015) undertook research into choice factors relating to international students studying in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This is seen as a complex process, with personal and situational factors influencing, but not all were viewed with equal importance. The learning environment, cost issues and institutional reputation were the top three ranking factors, and social-cultural proximity and government initiatives the least important. Whilst this research is focused on the UAE, it provides a useful classification of different choice factors.

Figure 4.1: International student choice factors for UAE (Ahmad and Hussain, 2017)



Once students have made their final decision, based upon relevant choice criteria, some models indicate that they will then move onto the final stage of post-purchase evaluation, although a number of models within HE do not include this stage.

4.1.4 Post-purchase evaluation

Post-purchase evaluation concerns consumers experiencing either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their choice (Blackwell et al., 2006: 83). Satisfaction is *"when* *consumers' expectations are matched by perceived performance"*, and dissatisfaction *"when experiences and performance fall short of expectations"*. For example, within the education sector, student expectations are usually formed before their arrival at university (Hill, 1995). A feeling of regret is experienced when consumers feel they have made an incorrect choice (Landman, 1987). Landman (1993) defines regret as *"A more or less painful judgment and state of feeling sorry for misfortunes, limitations, losses, shortcomings, transgressions, or mistakes"*. It is said that regret leads to an assessment of whether the circumstances of a situation can be changed, which then leads to coping strategies (Bui et al., 2011). Blythe (2013) and Blackwell et al., (2001) refer to post purchase dissonance, where there is conflict between the information received and expectation of something being good, and the reality from new information (the purchase not being good) causing tension. Research also indicates that switching, complaining and negative word of mouth all are outcomes for less-than-satisfied customers. However, subsequent purchase decisions are likely to become easier if a consumer is highly satisfied (Blackwell et al., 2006). Moreover, emotions are understood to play an important role during evaluation. Establishing the extent of an individuals' satisfaction level is therefore important, as less than happy customers may decide to communicate this through word of mouth (WOM) or electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

The term WOM is perhaps recognised as one of the oldest forms of marketing communication (Ennew et al., 2000), and describes verbal communications between groups of people. It is defined by Arndt (1967: 188) as *"oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product or a service offered for sale"*. WOM is recognised as influencing consumer decision making in either a positive or a negative way (Wang, 2011). In the past this *"perceived non-commercial communicator"* has sometimes involved a high-profile person paid to talk about a particular brand. Customers' buying behaviours and attitudes may therefore be manipulated through marketers' use of eWOM and the anonymity the internet environment may bring (Dellarocas, 2006). Historically, WOM has been recognised as one of the most influential sources (Breazeale, 2008; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002), however traditional WOM communications are limited and only effective within the network boundaries. Through the Internet, comments can now be transmitted and read by anyone, and therefore eWOM has a key role to play in today's consumer purchase decisions (Chan and Ngai, 2011). EWOM has been defined as *"any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet"* (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004: 39). In recent years, there has been a huge growth in eWOM, which can be found in many different channels, for example, blogs, Facebook, discussion forums, and web sites (Chan and Ngai, 2011).

Previous research on WOM has demonstrated that having customers with high levels of satisfaction results in the spreading of positive word-of-mouth advertising (Singh and Pandya, 1991). Research also indicates that eWOM has much higher credibility, empathy and relevance to customers than other on-line marketer-created sources of information (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Katz and Lazerfield, 1955) and therefore can be a very powerful tool to use. Furthermore, culture may be an important aspect to consider, for example, Chinese consumers are more highly influenced by positive e-WOM than UK consumers (Christodoulides et al., 2012). Moreover, unsatisfied customers are likely to express their disappointment with a minimum of nine other individuals, with thirteen percent communicating to more than twenty individuals (Walker, 1995). This research was conducted in an era where the World Wide Web was in its infancy, social media did not yet exist, and it is unrealistic in a contemporary media environment that only thirteen to twenty individuals might see e-WOM.

Research relating to how organisations might assess their service quality is wide and considerable. The most popular service quality measurement instruments include SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988), SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), and EP (Teas, 1993). Within HE HEdPERF has been developed (Angell et al., 2008), and outside HE, e-service frameworks have been developed to deal with online service quality such as WebQual (Loiacono et al 2002), eTailQ (Wolfinbarger and Gilly 2003), and SITEQUAL (You and Donthu 2001) (cited by Dennis et al., 2009). These models will not be discussed further as they are outside the scope of this research study, however it is important to note that a variety of service quality measurement instruments do exist, including specialist HE-type measurement instruments. These models would be useful to researchers with an in-depth focus at the post-purchase evaluation stage.

Existing research in the area of e-WOM has been addressed in top level marketing journals in only the last ten years (Breazeale, 2008), and covers a number of themes. A number of studies have considered the motives behind posting (For example see Okazaki, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2006), including the relationship between satisfaction and desire to recommend (Selnes, 1993; Shemwell et al., 1998; Soderlund, 1998). Another theme of research has concerned e-WOM's impact and influence on purchase decisions. E-WOM is seen as more effective than other marketing communications tools (Cheung et al., 2008). It has higher credibility, empathy and relevance (Bickart and Schindler, 2001), positive reviews have positive influence on product choices (Huang and Chen, 2006), purchase intentions can be influenced by both quality and quantity of reviews (Park et al., 2007; Liu, 2006), and some are now exploring how to measure e-WOM effectiveness (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Dwyer, 2007; Ferguson, 2008). Moreover, dissatisfied consumers have a much stronger tendency to not only tell others about their bad experience, but to exaggerate it (Sjodin, 2007). Wang (2011) highlights a lack of research in this area. Furthermore, there is evidence that culture and social class also impacts upon WOM activity, for example Ngai et al. (2007) found that in researching complaint behaviour amongst Asians, that educated people tend not to complain publicly, but preferred a more private complaints action as they did not want to "lose face" in public. Collectivist cultures[14] were found to rely more heavily on WOM recommendations from members of the in-group (for example, family, peer group etc.) (Lim et al., 2004).

Chan and Ngai (2011) reviewed 94 research papers on the area of e-WOM, over a ten-year period. They conclude that the area is likely to receive an increase in academic and managerial attention. There is a lack of research on e-WOM in less developed and transitional economies (for example China and India); there is a need to determine the impact of e-WOM on customers' perceptions and preferences; and the threats and

[14] Hofstede et al., (1988; 1991; 2001) developed the most widely used cultural framework with four dimensions originally put forward (later adding a fifth): Individualism/collectivism, power distance, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long/short-term orientation. Collectivist cultures focus on the needs and goals of the whole group, rather than each individual. Group relationships therefore play a central role in an individuals identity.

challenges to practitioners need to be explored further. There are also few studies that incorporate either a qualitative approach, or a mixed methods approach (Chan and Ngai, 2011). Furthermore, Christodoulides et al,. *(2012)* also highlight the small number of studies in the area of online consumer decision making and e-WOM, especially in a cross-national setting, which is highly relevant to the education sector. For example, belonging to a brand community, has been shown to increase the amount of positive e-WOM. Positive e-WOM is likely to impact positively (and be more credible and therefore influential) on future customers throughout the decision making process. Furthermore, when services are involved, for example in the education sector, it is more difficult to establish quality levels prior to purchase. Services are intangible, therefore, consumers seek to reduce their level of risk prior to purchase through seeking further information. This may involve searching for any e-WOM to help in making their choice.

The changing nature of HE in the UK and worldwide, especially changes to tuition fees and increased competition mean that it is important to find out if a student is satisfied with their decision. As previously discussed, less than happy customers are likely to communicate this through WOM to a minimum of nine other individuals, with some communicating this to more than twenty individuals (Walker, 1995). Moreover, the use of the Internet and social media to transmit their dissatisfaction are not limited by the previous boundaries of WOM, and therefore negative comments can be read by anyone anywhere. Therefore, measuring the quality of a student's higher education experience is increasingly important.

Significant research has taken place regarding WOM and e-WOM within a wide variety of contexts, including services. However, within the HE environment, this area appears to not be well researched. Many of the decision making models devised for HE do not consider a post-purchase evaluation stage, but finish with enrolment (for example see (Brown et al., 2009; Maringe, 2006; Litten, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). The limited studies that do exist in this area, such as Abdullah (2006), Paswan and Ganesha (2009) and Sultan and Wong (2011) fail to link an evaluation of use of that educational service to their propensity to verbally discuss this through WOM or e-WOM (Chang et al., 2013). Relationships with educational providers tend to be longer-term, where as other services are often a very brief interaction. Therefore, it is suggested that potential users of education are more likely to engage in verbal behaviour, and this increases the credibility of any verbal communications such as e-WOM.

What is unclear is the extent to which students refer to WOM/e-WOM, and whether they actively seek it out. Moreover, it is not known how often students write positive or negative reviews of their university and/or course, other than via official student feedback such as the National Student Survey for undergraduate students and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey for postgraduate students. Clearly positive WOM/e-WOM is a very powerful tool, and negative WOM/e-WOM may cause significant damage. Therefore, this area needs to be explored further in the context of the higher education decision making process.

Each of the popular stages in decision making models have now been considered in some depth, one further key area that a number of models highlight impacts upon decisions, relates to key influences, which will now be explored.

4.2 Key influencers on Millennials during decision making

With the changing media landscape, digital and social media use has not only allowed online information searching to take place, but can facilitate learning about the experiences others have of a particular product or brand (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015). Moreover, Millennials, whilst they do not necessarily all use technology in exactly the same way (Sinton and Puri, 2014; Christodoulides et al., 2012), digital is fundamental to their lives (Donnison, 2010). Therefore, older studies considering the role of influencers may not accurately reflect the current ease with which an individual can draw on the experience of others online, although they do provide useful information regarding the variety of people that influence during the decision process.

The influence of “significant others” such as friends, classmates, family and teachers in the decision process has been well documented, and a positive recommendation is one of the most important factors for choice of a service (Cubillo et al., 2006). Riggs and Lewis (1980), Chapman (1981) and Fuller et al. (1982) were among the first to explore this area. Chapman (1981: 494) suggests that friends closely influence their HE choice, however does recognise that some studies have rated parents as having a greater impact. Veloutsou (2005) suggests that there is some debate in this area and that perhaps family and friends are now less important, as suggested by Harket et al., (2001) and Soutar and Turner (2002). However, one fairly recent study regarding undergraduate students at English universities suggested that friends, family and teachers did play an important part (Usher et al., 2010). Simões and Soares (2010) also found teachers, current and former students were important for guidance, along with friends/acquaintances through social networks. Furthermore, Vrontis et al., (2018) looked at international students' decision making and found that almost half of the students found out about their course through either friends or family. Kaur and Singh (2016) considered international students studying in Malaysia and similarly found recommendation was an important factor within the decision making process at both country level and institution level. Soutar and Turner (2002) found in their research of undergraduates in Australian universities that course suitability was far more important than friends going to the same university were. However, there was a strong parental influence for undergraduates. Research by Veloutsou (2005) on Australian undergraduate students found friends and family rated at 7% and 8% respectively for relative importance. Although Vaughn et al., (1978) suggests that friends do play an active role and are a credible information source, but they are not that influential at the final decision stage. For overseas applicants it is likely that "significant others" are still playing a key role (Patton, 2000), and students from working class backgrounds were found to rely more heavily on support from schools and colleges (Hemsley-Brown, 1999).

More recently, Vrontis et al., (2018) found that family influenced over 38 per cent of students, and a friend influenced over 36 per cent. Within this digital era, "friends" may have a much wider definition, with people connected to many hundreds of "friends" through social media sites such as Facebook. Therefore, researching the student view of who are classed as "friends/significant others", and whether they have any influence on their decision-making is an area needing further research, as currently there are many conflicting studies. Furthermore, Simões and Soares (2010) suggest the importance of liaison between a university and former students may be beneficial for recruitment activities. Indeed, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggest the use of alumni as a valuable source of referral for universities.

Finally, one area that appears to be lacking in research in HE relates to the increasing use of agents by overseas students relating to the student decision process for course selection. Educational agents have been defined as *"a third-party entity who is paid to assist a student to find, apply to and/or prepare for college"* (Hagedorn and Zhang, 2010: 186). There is some research that considers the issues around use of agents for student recruitment, which suggests *inter alia* variation in how universities manage this relationship, and also issues relating to communications, effectiveness, ethics, quality and performance for example (Huang et al., 2016). Whilst the management of agents for student recruitment is outside the scope of this study, it is important to note that there appears to be a number of issues relating to high turnover of staff in agents, a focus on profit, sending poorly qualified applications through, amongst other areas highlighted. This is worrying, as a large number of students appear to be influenced by agents. Moreover, no decision making models have been found that consider agents as an influential factor within the decision process. However, as Havergal (2015) found, 36.5% of overseas students are recruited via agents, suggesting that this group of people have a key influential role to play within the decision making process. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) however, found that the agents' recommendation was important to a range of international students, but that the importance of the agent varied depending upon country. For example, students from Indonesia were much more likely to value an agents' recommendation compared to students from India or China. Indonesian students also relied more heavily on the influence of friends and family studying in a particular country. Thai students were the subject of another study regarding agents' influence, which found that information provided from agents was more in-depth and more influential than that provided by family or friends (Pimpa, 2003). Agents provided information relating to climate, location of country/city, quality of academic courses/university, part-time employment, accommodation and travelling arrangements. Moreover, agents were found to be persuasive regarding overseas study (for example, using tuition-fee reductions), and students were found to visit agents a number of times. However, because education is intangible and therefore difficult to measure prior to commencement of a course of study, a large number of Thai students rely on both information and recommendation from agents, in order to ensure the correct choice is made. Hagedorn and Zhang (2010) in researching the use of educational agents in China found that almost 70 per cent of Chinese students that intended to study abroad were using or planning to use an agent to assist with their application. Lack of knowledge of the application process, visa application process, and foreign institutions were the main reasons for this, along with a perception they would be more likely to be accepted. However, lack of trust in agents, agents costs and having confidence in their ability (or help from relatives/friends) were all reasons why agents were not used. Furthermore, some prospective students saw completing application forms as a frustrating procedure, and direct applicants expected to be able to contact personnel at the foreign institution for assistance.

It is clear that there are a range of people that influence prospective students during their decision making journey regarding HE study, and therefore this is an important area to consider in any future research. Furthermore, in addition to this area, engagement with universities and various touch points are also of importance, which will now be considered.

4.3 The marketing environment and marketing communications

In the last twenty years or so the marketing environment and the marketing communications landscape has seen enormous change, with developments in communications and information technology (Kitchen, 2005; Kitchen and Proctor, 2015). This has led to the emergence of new channels, an explosion of new media, leading to shifting media usage patterns by consumers (Batra and Keller, 2016). The high rate of adoption of the Internet and subsequent rise in the use of social media has taken place Worldwide (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015), leading to the Internet being seen as a key source of information (Simoes and Soares 2010). Furthermore, customers are able to engage with brand owners online (Kitchen and Proctor 2015). Moreover, the Internet has allowed a world of virtual reality where consumers are able to not only search for information regarding products and brands, but can learn about what other consumers think about them. Furthermore, social media has allowed interactions through different online formats such as discussion forums and blogs, where they can share ideas. Through these various forms of online communities, consumers are able to find what is seen as more objective sources of information to inform them in their purchase decision making (Kozinets, 2002; Voinea and Filip, 2011). Therefore, understanding how the various marketing communication tools influence buyers' purchase decisions is a key area to understand by both practitioners and marketing researchers (Barry and Howard, 1990). A number of the more recent models, discussed in chapter 3, suggest an engage element and/or discuss touch points, and this appears to be closely linked to the social media phenomenon (Constantinides and Stagno, 2012). For example, Nobel (2010) suggests an engage stage in a circular model; Court et al., (2009), and Hudson and Hudson (2013) suggest an enjoy, advocate and bond stage; and both Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) focus on the importance of touch points. However, Galan et al., (2015) highlight a lack of research regarding the use of social media during the decision making process of prospective postgraduate students, although more recent research by Vrontis et al., (2018) clearly demonstrates that Millennial students do use social media to assist them in searching for course information. Simoes and Soares (2010) also found students seek advice from social networks. However, students do still depend on more traditional media sources also (Vrontis et al., 2018).

The main traditional tools of marketing communications are identified as advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and personal selling (Hughes and Fill, 2007). In order to communicate with a target audience appropriate media need selecting to carry a message. Media (or medium) refers to *"anything that conveys a message"* (Chaffey et al., 2009: 28). Various categories are used to describe different types of media. For example, Batra and Keller (2016) discuss new and old media. Kumar et al., (2016) refer to traditional media as being offline; Valos et al., (2017: 21) refer to traditional communications as *"one-way communication such as television, radio, direct mail, outdoor billboards, newspapers, magazines, newsletters and other print publications"*. Kumar et al., (2017) give examples of traditional marketing as television advertising, product sampling and in-store promotions. Interestingly, Valos et al., (2017) highlight that whilst direct mail and telemarketing do allow this two-way element, this is not in the same technologically sophisticated way that social media is, therefore keeping these within the traditional media classification. Smith (2012: 86) defines digital as *"the practice of promoting products and services using digital distribution channels* *via computers, mobile phones, smart phones, or other digital devices*". Chaffey et al. (2009) highlight that content and interaction is via a range of online communication tools or media channels, for example: websites, search engines, e-mail, text messaging, blogs, feeds, podcasts and social media. However, Vrontis et al., (2018) found that students only used social media for additional information, relying mainly on more traditional sources to assist in university course decisions. As both traditional and digital media appear to be important to the decision making process, a review of the developments in use of communications is now considered, with specific focus on engagement with brands and various touch points.

Marketing communications concerns creating and sustaining a dialogue through the use of various tools and media, where individuals share meaning (Fill, 2009). The traditional role of marketing communications of persuading customers to buy, is as Kitchen (2005: 2) states, *"rather old-line, traditional thinking"*. A good creative idea executed across multiple media is highly desirable. However, Sheth and Rajendra (2005: 12), state that marketing needs to change from being about *"using every trick in its bag to make customers behave in the company's best interests"*. Indeed, old style 'push[15]' communications, used over the last 50 years or so, are seen as less effective (Schultz et al., 2012), as it is seen by consumers as the brand owner trying to sell to them, whereas the more contemporary 'pull'[16] style communications involves building relationships through creative content that consumers want to engage with and share. When considering digital communications, three specific types of media have been defined: paid media, owned media and earned media (Srinivasan et al., 2016; Cuthill, 2013). Paid media refers to paid promotional placements (for example paid for online display ads). Owned media refers to promotional assets (for example company website, chat room or an app). Earned media is brand-related customer engagement (for example, Facebook likes, shares, comments). Moreover, there remains many organisations and marketing agencies that still fail to have an integrated approach to the use of communications tools, and have a silo mentality. When considering integrated approaches, research suggests that the use of both TV and print media can influence positively on sales (Naik and Raman, 2003), and combining online and radio advertising

[15] Called 'push' because the brand owner is pushing out communications to consumers
[16] Called 'pull' because the consumer wants to engage and pulls information from the brand owner

was also positive (Voorveld, 2011). However, less use of traditional media was seen by consumers who had heavy use of computers for information (Lin et al., 2013), and use of the internet has generally resulted in lower use of print, radio and TV (Woo et al., 2014). Surprisingly though, access to the internet via mobile was found to increase the use of TV (Woo et al., 2014). However, integrated approaches should be considered more from the strategic use of specific types of online media, with paid advertising used to drive traffic to owned media (such as a university web site), which is then used to generate earned media (Cuthill, 2013). The importance of marketers being creative and having an ability to connect to their target audience is also highlighted. Furthermore, Internet users are likely to consist of those influential Early Adopters[17] who have an ability to persuade others to buy. Moreover, marketing spend on digital media has continued to increase (Warc, 2015; Busby et al., 2010).

Social media offers organisations opportunities to strengthen their customer relationships, by using richer media that has a far greater reach (Thackeray et al., 2008). It encourages customers to engage with their brand and encourages interaction with each other. Customers therefore add value to this interaction through generating content and the potential to influence others in their purchase decisions through peer-to-peer interactions (Sashi, 2012). This can strengthen brand equity[18] and lead to an increase in customer lifetime value (Bolton et al., 2013). However, creating a social media strategy may be challenging for organisations, as it requires a change in mindset for the company that wishes to exploit it. This may involve the company giving up some control to allow effective communication with customers. Within an educational setting, one study highlights how improved relationships can be built between staff and students through the use of social media (Berg et al., 2007), and Sturgeon and Walker (2009) suggest that the most effective faculty members are those who create informal relationships with their students through social media. Moreover, universities can use social media sites to drive traffic to their own official website (Vrontis et al., 2018). In

[17] Early Adopters: Everett Rogers, in 1983 stated that innovators (those most likely to buy new products) can be classified into four categories. Early adopters are the first of these and are amongst the first people to buy a new product, shortly after its introduction

[18] Brand equity has many different definitions, and there is confusion over how to measure it. One definition is "It is the consumers' sense of added value that will lead to a preference for a particular brand", and there are likely to be positive financial consequences to this (Elliott and Percy 2007: 81-82)

their research, they found students wanted universities to create blogs and forums relating to specific university courses and educational topic areas, also to use photo and video for course information, university facilities and activities, and suggested they would appreciate universities advertising in blogs and social networks. They also expected universities to provide information on work opportunities through social media. Facebook was by far the most popular social media site discussed by students in their research, with Instagram starting to gain in popularity. Lemon and Verhoef (2016: 73) discuss how *"the digital and social media revolution has strengthened the importance of customer engagement behaviour, as customers become active coproducers of value or destroyers of value for firms"*. Developments such as cocreation[19], and word of mouth have empowered customers to engage more with organisations.

4.4 Engagement and customer touch points

Student engagement within HE is a popular research area (Kahu, 2013). Kahu (2013) suggests four dominant research perspectives that relate to this area: the behavioural perspective (linking engagement with student behaviour and teaching practice); the psychological perspective (suggesting engagement is a psycho-social process that combines behaviour, cognition, emotion and conation aspects); the socio-cultural perspective (the impact of the broader social context, e.g. why students become engaged or alienated at university); and the holistic perspective ('engagement encompasses the perceptions, expectations and experiences of being a student and the construction of being a student' (Bryson et al., 2009: 1). However, outside of HE, in general customer journey/customer experience literature, customer engagement has been defined as *"the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiates"* (Van Doorn et al., 2010: 253). Customer engagement is generally seen as a component of customer experience by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). Indeed, Folstad and Kvale (2018) found the vast majority of papers they reviewed (40 in total)

[19] There is a lack of consensus on the meaning of cocreation, but when discussed in relation to customer engagement, it concerns joint creation between customers and brand owners regarding areas such as creation/design of products (or coproducers), joint interactions, i.e. a form of customer engagement (Dong and Sivakumar (2017)

linked customer journeys to customer experience. Four components of customer engagement have been identified (Kumar et al., 2010): customer purchasing behaviour; customer referral behaviour, customer influencer behaviour, and customer knowledge behaviour. Therefore, customer engagement concerns the various touch points along the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). These various touch points become part of the overall customer experience, from prepurchase to postpurchase.

A touchpoint has been defined as *"an episode of direct or indirect contact with the brand"* (Baxendale et al., 2015: 236). Types of touch points have been identified as: brand owner touchpoints, retailer touchpoints and third party touchpoints by Baxendale et al., (2015); or as brand owned, partner owned, customer owned and social/external by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). Therefore, some of these touchpoints are not under an organisations control. Organisations need to identify which are the most critical touch points for customers and then determine how these can be influenced. The objective would be to improve the customer experience (Steen et al., 2011). Baxendale et al., (2015) suggest that an evaluation of a customer encounter with a touchpoint should take place immediately after the encounter, rather than retrospectively in surveys, as time may lead to inaccurate recall. Furthermore, they argue that most of the existing research has a focus on specific parts of the customer journey, rather than providing a more holistic view of all touchpoints. For example, although online data can be easily captured automatically (Trusov et al., 2009), Word of Mouth (WOM) peer-to-peer touchpoints are excluded (Baxendale et al., 2015).

Considering touch points as part of the customer journey, previous studies cover this as part of several other topics, or relate to service design or management, or report on service based case studies such as an amusement park, or to improve customers' experiences (Folstad (2018). Moreover, this discussion is taking place outside of HE. There appears to be a lack of studies regarding how to apply this to the HE context to analyse touch points during the student decision journey. Previous studies have highlighted different ways to identify touch points outside of HE, however no evidence was found in the existing literature of HE-relevant touch points. HE-specific categories have therefore been constructed by drawing upon the work of Lemon and Verhoeaf

(2016) and Baxendale et al., (2015), and are identified as: brand owned, partner and social/external.

Brand owned: Both Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and Baxendale et al., (2015) discuss brand owned touch points. Lemon and Verhoef (2016: 76) define these as "customer interactions during the experience that are designed and managed by the firm and under the firm's control." This can include brand advertising (Baxendale et al., 2015), websites, loyalty programmes and any brand-controlled elements of the marketing mix (e.g. service, price, sales force) (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Stamp (2004) suggested there has been an increased interest in UK HE branding, closely linked to tuition fees, university league tables, increased competition and a need to differentiate issues around brand perception. Some say it is more important than teaching quality (Mazzarol, 1998). The university website is known to be important during the decision process (for example see Veloutsou et al.,(2005); Briggs and Wilson (2007); Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). Loyalty programmes relating to HE would cover areas such as discounts for continued study at the same HEI and also scholarships. The importance of course fees/cost aspects have been well researched for HE (for example see Ahmad and Hussain 2017; Maringe 2006; Webb 1993), and the importance of satisfaction and loyalty by graduates is highlighted by Toledo and Martinez (2018). The importance of scholarships was researched by Reed and Hurd (2014). University open days are also seen as important (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Moogan et al., 1999; Usher et al., 2010), and are a brand owned event. A university prospectus/brochure is also an important aspect (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Harket et al., 2001; Usher et al., 2010; Veloutsou et al., 2005). University controlled social media pages could also be considered within this category, and can be used to drive traffic to university websites (Vrontis et al., 2018), or to improve relationships between staff and students (Berg et al., 2007).

Partner: Lemon and Verhoef (2016: 77) identify these are "jointly designed, managed, or controlled by the firm and one or more of its partners." Baxendale et al., (2015) discuss retail touchpoints and refer to retailer advertising and in-store communications. In considering what relevant partner owned touchpoints might relate to HE, a number of possible partners have been highlighted, however these are not directly under the control of the HEI in the way that Lemon and Verhoef (2016) suggest. Agents could be considered to be partners, and are defined as "a third-party entity who is paid to assist a student to find, apply to and/or prepare for college" (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010: 186), and have been found to be important during the decision journey (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010; Havergal, 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003). Accreditations and links with professional bodies could also be considered to be partners. Accreditations such as AACSB emphasise top quality education to students, parents and employers (Hou et al., 2015). Accreditations can ensure standards of quality are maintained, and also can be used to attract students. HEIs with links to professional bodies may be perceived as better at preparing graduates for the job market (Frank et al., 2012). Furthermore, marketing activities undertaken at country level by Government, or the British Council to improve positive perceptions of UK Higher education may also influence decisions (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Lastly Government policy relating to visa regulations may impact upon the attractiveness of a particular country for HE study (Morgan, 2012; Morgan, 2016a; Universities UK, 2016), so Government could be considered as a partner.

Social/external: This covers the role of others such as other customers, peer influences, independent information sources (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Baxendale et al., (2015) refer to third party touchpoints and include word-of-mouth (WOM), peer observation and traditional earned media within this. League tables are seen to influence student choice (Bowden, 2000; Briggs & Wilson, 2007), and are partly constructed from past student experiences. Friends, family and existing students/alumni are also well-documented as having a role within the decision process (Simões & Soares, 2010; Usher et al., 2010; Vrontis et al., 2018). Earned media is brand-related customer engagement and includes comments, shares, likes on social media (Cuthill, 2013; Srinivasan et al., 2016).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed in some depth each of the common stages within many of the decision making models. Student decision making regarding choice of university/course has been a very popular research area. However much of the research focus has been at undergraduate level (Constantinides and Stagno 2011) and there are a lack of studies focusing not only on postgraduate students (Galan et al., 2015), but also decision making using on-line content (Darley et al., 2010). With social media continuing to grow in importance (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015), there is limited knowledge regarding its impact on the various purchase decision stages, especially in an educational context at postgraduate level (Galan et al., 2015). Furthermore, eWOM at the post purchase evaluation stage is likely to have an increased role in today's unrestricted online environment, where comments can be read by anyone (Chan and Ngai, 2011).

Existing research has highlighted a number of useful areas still needing to be explored further regarding postgraduate student's decision making. An understanding of when an individual starts the decision making process and what motivates them is important to know, especially as there is a lack of research in this area (Darley et al. 2010). Linked to this area is exploring the types of risk students experience and understanding how this might impact upon their decision journey. Consideration also needs to be given to the initial choice set, how wide this tends to be, and as with mainstream decisions, whether a more narrower initial set is considered with more choices added later (as suggested by Court et al., (2009); Ley et al., (2005) etc.). This is an important aspect, as models outside of HE suggest this narrower initial choice set, however, this discussion has not received attention within HE course selection decision making models. There is also significant research in the area of criteria used to make choice, but students are not one homogeneous group, and therefore a single set of choice criteria for all students is probably not possible (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015). Finally, at the post-purchase evaluation stage, greater understanding of the impact existing WOM/eWOM may have upon prospective students within the decision making process in this era of contemporary communications is needed.

The other area considered within this chapter relates to influences. Over a third of overseas students are recruited via agents (Havergal 2015), yet agents do not appear to be considered within the HE decision making models, however they do appear to be a significant influencer within the process (Mazzarol and Soutar, (2002). There is, however, limited existing research in this area. A wide variety of other people are also involved in assisting prospective students select their HE institution and course, however, there is conflicting information regarding what influence they have (for example see Vrontis et al., (2018); Veloutsou (2005); or Harket et al., (2001) or Soutar and Turner (2002)).

Finally, there is a need to increase our understanding of relevant decision making stages and the decision making process due to contemporary two-way communications taking place in an ever-increasing connected world. Millennials especially, expect to engage with brands differently to previous generational cohorts (Vrontis et al., 2018), have access to more information than previous students (Galan et al., 2015) and also use what is seen as more objective sources of information to inform them in their purchase decision making (Kozinets, 2001; Voinea and Filip, 2011). Peer-to-peer interactions are able to influence others in their purchase decisions (Sashi, 2012). This therefore suggests there is a gap in current literature that re-evaluates this area, considers how Millennial prospective postgraduate students make decisions for HE study, what information they use and what influences them during this process. Three HE-relevant touch point categories were suggested, based upon existing touch point categories, but adjusted for the HE context.

The main points from literature reviewed in this chapter therefore, can be briefly summarised as follows:

- There are a lack of studies with a focus at postgraduate level relating to decision making for course selection.
- It is unclear whether Millennial postgraduate students start with a wide initial consideration set, and narrow down, thereby suggesting a more linear approach.
- There is substantial existing research regarding information searching behaviour and criteria used to make decisions, however it is not clear what impact digital and social media have on this process.
- Conflicting research exists relating to influencers and the role they play within the process, and agents receive little research attention.
- There are a lack of studies relating to post purchase evaluation and the role of WOM and especially e-WOM for postgraduate course selection decision making

- Engagement and touch points as an area are only discussed outside of HE, although there is limited reference to the use of digital and social media use relating to course selection
- Three HE-relevant touch point categories were suggested.

4.6 Development of themes for primary research

Fisher (2010) highlights there are two possibilities for developing a framework for research: early on within the research process for those researchers undertaking a more structured approach, or towards the end of the research, the latter is the approach taken here. Therefore, themes have been developed to guide the primary research, but without preliminary conceptual thoughts about what may be discovered. It is important to note that the critical review of models in chapter three, and discussion of stages/themes within models in chapter four, highlighted that whilst there is substantial existing research within HE around most of the stages/themes within existing HE models, the gap concerns the approach/use of stages/themes by Millennials in a contemporary media environment. The approach was not to assume that stages/themes were or were not relevant, but to consider them as a possible part of their course selection decision process.

Two stages of research were undertaken, and the following themes were used to guide stage one (focus groups):

- Early thoughts (pre-search behaviour): an understanding of why they start to think about postgraduate study, and how far in advance.
- Information searching behaviour: exploring their approach to searching for information.
- Application: their approach to this.
- Decision: understanding how they approach making a decision.
- Post purchase evaluation: views about their decision, and any use of WOM/eWOM
- Linear and rational: an understanding of how they progress to making a decision
- Influencers: understanding the role any influencers might have
- Online/social media: understanding the role of a more contemporary media environment within decision making

Stage two of research (interviews) involved one further theme that was highlighted during models published after the initial literature review stage:

- Engagement: exploring any engagement activities during their decision journey

The next chapter considers the methodology adopted for the research within this thesis.

5. Methodology

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have explored a range of themes, relevant to the aim of this thesis. This can be summarised as follows:

- The context of this study, postgraduate higher education, has seen a number of developments in recent years. Marketisation of the HE sector is resulting in students behaving more like consumers (Wedlin, 2008; Jongbloed, 2003; Maringe, 2006; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). As competition increases between universities (Dorweiler and Yakhou, 1994), postgraduate students are now an important and potential growth area and revenue stream (Taylor 2002). However, as the UK is starting to be seen as a less attractive study destination (Universities UK, 2014), competition for students is therefore likely to increase further. In order to maximise opportunities to attract students, universities need an up-to-date view of how these students make decisions regarding where to study for postgraduate courses, and most previous studies do not focus at postgraduate level.
- Mainstream literature, regarding consumer decision making models, has suggested that linear models are less appropriate in a contemporary media environment (For example see Lipshitz, 1993; Nobel, 2010; Court et al., 2009; Hudson and Hudson, 2013; Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014). More recent mainstream models, suggest a more continuous consumer decision journey, where consumers regularly interact with brands and each other. Within HE however, more recent research and models have not explored this more circular continuous approach to decisions and decision making has continued to be illustrated as a linear/rational approach (See Figures 3.10, 3.11, 3.12 and 3.13 in Chapter 3 for examples of this), which presents an opportunity to explore what is currently happening in HE today.
- The nature of communications has changed considerably in recent years, especially for Millennials, which most full-time postgraduate students are. For example, see Chrysochou, (2012); Eleftheriou-Smith, (2012); Smith, (2012); Bolton, (2013). Existing research suggests that digital communications and social media have significantly affected decision making (Darley et al., 2010; Bolton et al., 2013),

suggesting that there is a gap in existing decision making studies relating to the context of HE.

The aim of this thesis is to:

Review and evaluate decision making models to establish the extent to which they adequately reflect the journey of prospective full-time postgraduate students in a contemporary media environment.

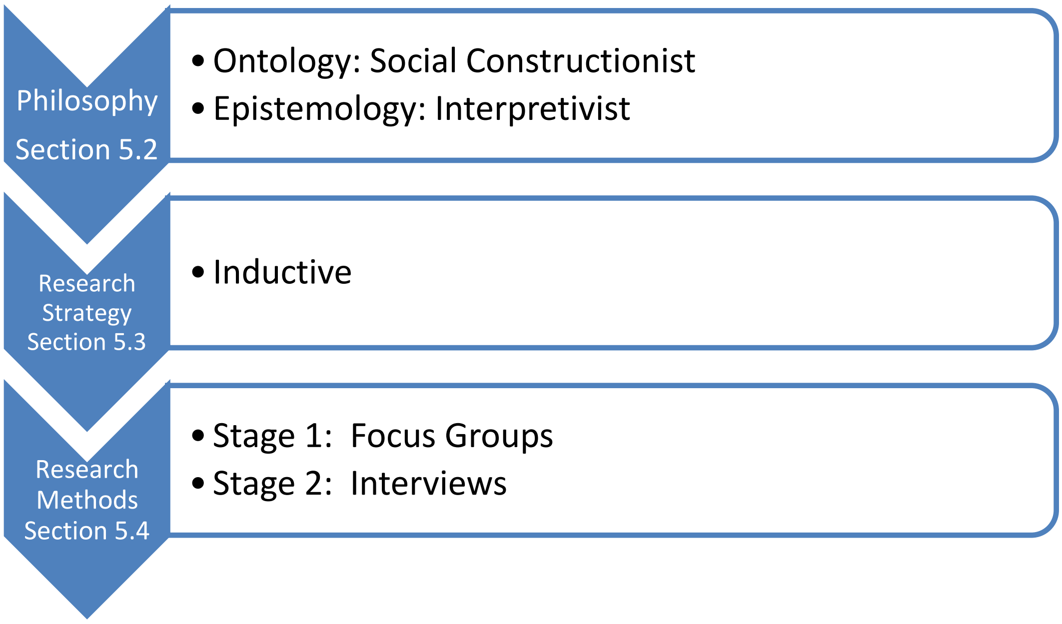
From the aim, specific objectives emerged, and appropriate research developed as shown below.

Table 5.1: Objectives and associated research approach

Objectives	Research approach adopted
1. *To critically review consumer decision making theory and explore developments in consumer decision making models*	Reviewed through secondary research
2. *To explore the relationship between Millennial postgraduate students, the contemporary media environment and consumer decision making models*	Reviewed through secondary research – leading to development of themes, and also through primary research
3. *To explore the decision making journey of full-time postgraduate students from their early thoughts regarding postgraduate study through to arrival at their selected university*	Primary research: early focus groups and later interviews
4. *To map journeys of these students in order to establish if any common patterns exist*	Primary research: interviews
5. *To develop a framework that demonstrates journeys of potential postgraduate students and the role of contemporary communications within the process*	Framework developed after literature review and primary research

This chapter explores the methodological approach upon which the research is undertaken and appropriate for the aim and objectives. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the sections, covering philosophy; research strategy; and research methods. Within the research methods section, sampling, analysis and ethics are also covered.

Figure 5.1: Summary of the research process for this thesis (authors own diagram)



Fisher (2010) states, it is important that a researcher is fully aware of various methodological arguments that exist. Researchers have differing views of the world and the nature of reality. For example, *"whether human subjectivity is recognised or ignored"*, or *"whether what is being research is thought to have an objective existence (realism) or focuses on the subjective meanings that individuals and societies use to make sense of their world (nominalism)"* (Fisher 2010: 16).

Easterby-Smith *et al.*(2002: 3) point out "*… it is unwise to conduct research without an awareness of the philosophical and political issues."* However, there is a lack of agreement within the social science texts and research literature regarding terminology used, with some contradiction or confusion (Crotty, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Furthermore, Easterby-Smith et al., (2015) state that although debates are central to the continued development of philosophy, they often either ignore the existence of alternative approaches, or denigrate them, rather than accepting that research problems often require a mix of more than one tradition.

Contradictions are presented in two areas within social science research: firstly, the terminology and levels used to construct the research process (for example, whether there are five or four levels, and what these levels are); and secondly, the terminology and definitions used of various epistemological and ontological positions. For example, Crotty (1998) highlights epistemology as consisting of objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism. However, Easterby-Smith et al., (2002) highlight positivism, relativism and social constructionism. Furthermore, both Bryman and Bell (2007) and Fisher (2010) see constructionism as part of ontology, rather than an epistemological position.

Crotty (1998) describes the research process being broken down into four key elements (see Figure 5.2 for an explanation of terms): epistemology; theoretical perspective; methodology; and methods. Saunders *et al.,* (2016) detail six levels, Easterby-Smith et al., (2015) describe four key elements, and there is some similarity to Crotty (1998) in three of their four elements. Finally, Johnson and Duberley, (2000) provide no clarification or description of the process, but do provide explanation of a number of terms used within some of the key elements or levels. An appropriate research process was constructed based upon a hybrid of the processes described, in order to meet the objectives for this study, seen previously in Table 5.1.

Table 5.2: Explanation of the Key Elements of the Research Process

Element	**Explanation**
Philosophy	Concerns different views regarding the way in which knowledge is developed and judged as being acceptable.
Ontology	Assumptions that we make about the nature of reality
Epistemology	The theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology. A general set of assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world.
Theoretical perspective	The philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria
Research approach	Links to philosophy, and whether the research strategy involves developing a theory, or testing the hypothesis.
Methodology	The strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes
Time horizons	The time period involved for the research.
Methods/Data collection methods	The techniques/procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis

Constructed from Crotty (1998) and Easterby-Smith *et al*. (2015), Saunders *et al.* (2016)

5.2 The philosophy of research design

Philosophical views can be broken down into two distinct, but related areas: ontology and epistemology. Collier (1994: 137) argues that the first consideration should relate to ontology *"knowledge exists as an aspect of our being in the world, and before we can know how we know, we need to have some idea how we interact with that world in such a way as to acquire knowledge of it".* Ontology will, therefore be considered first.

5.2.1 Ontology

The ontological assumptions that a researcher makes about the nature of reality is an important area to consider. Crotty (1998: 10) argues that ontology and epistemology tend to emerge together, and many writers struggle to keep the two separate. Perhaps this is the result of writers not being clear on the meanings of ontology and epistemology. Easterby-Smith et al. (2015: 47) state that ontology concerns "*philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality*". Crotty (1998: 10) defines as *"Ontology is the study of being, each theoretical perspective embodies a certain way of understanding what is (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding what it means to know (epistemology)".*

The objectivist position. When considering viewpoints regarding different ontological perspectives, some researchers believe *that "… reality (is) composed of discrete elements whose nature can be known and categorised"* and that *"natural and social sciences measure independent facts about a single apprehensible reality"* (Perry et al., 1999: 16). This represents the objectivist position, and *"implies that social phenomena and the categories that we use in everyday discourse have an existence that is independent or separate from actors"*, for example *"an organization has a reality that is external to the individuals who inhabit it"* (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 21). Szmigin and Foxall (2000) in clarifying, state simply that the objectivist researcher believes that knowledge is discovered (rather than constructed), and Bryman and Bell (2007) state that objectivism is based on the belief that there is a reality and that reality is external to social actors. This approach to ontology has been rejected for this research study, as the researcher believes in the importance of subjective reports of events and that these reports can be interpreted on many levels, as believed by the social constructionist approach (Hackley, 1998). The social constructionist approach, adopted in this research, will now be explored.

The constuctionist position. Constructionism involves constructing meaning as researchers engage in the world they are interpreting (Devins and Gold, 2002). Also referred to as constructivism (Bryman and Bell, 2007), and social constructionism, as views are socially constructed (Hackley, 1998). However, Easterby-Smith et al., (2015) refer to nominalism and discuss how people define and experience things differently, that there is no 'truth' and that social reality is created (referring to postmodernist researchers such as Cooper and Burrell (1988) and Cunliffe, 2001)). They state *"There is no truth. Facts are all human creations"* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015: 50). Nominalism therefore, appears to be similar to constructionism. The term 'social constructionism' is derived mainly from the work of Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), Berger and Luckman (1967), Watzlawick (1984) and Shotter (1993) (Crotty 1998; Easterby-Smith et al. 2002). Developed by philosophers during the last half century, and seen as more relevant within the social sciences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002).

Constructionism is seen as being in a constant state of revision and involves social interaction. Furthermore, researchers within this paradigm are more concerned about increasing their understanding of various structures and functions, rather than some reality regarding causal relationships (Hackley, 1998). It allows for a richness of understanding and interpretation. Moreover, the social constructionist approach not only takes subjective reports of events, but also allows those reports to be interpreted on many levels. Saunders et al. (2003: 84) state that, *"People may place many different interpretations on the situations in which they find themselves"*. This involves the construction of particular accounts of what the world is like (Edley, 2001). However, it is the role of the researcher to construct a version of events from an infinite array of possible alternative versions. Therefore, the researcher selects a version of events that allows meaning to be constructed. Meaning is therefore constructed, rather than discovered (Crotty, 1998). This approach places high value on making sense of qualitative data through developing interpretive skills, the sensitivity of the researcher, and the richness and integrity of how what is meant, is presented from a range of possible alternative versions (Hackley, 1998). Postmodernists however, might argue that none of the accounts are more worthy of attention over others, whereas social constructionists would say that some accounts better capture the reality than others

(Harre, 2002). However, Shotter (1993) states that meanings are unlikely to remain constant and new meanings may emerge leading to a new or revised version of reality. The key features are summarised below.

Table 5.3: Key features of social constructionism

• **The focus is not on gathering facts and measuring how often certain patterns occur, but considering a variety of constructions and meanings that people place upon their experiences (Saunders et al. 2002: 30)**
• **"The view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998: 42)**
• **Meaning is constructed, not discovered, by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998: 43)**
• **"People may place many different interpretations on the situations in which they find themselves" (Saunders et al.2003:84)**
• **There is no absolute 'true' or 'valid' interpretation, but useful interpretations (Crotty 1998: 47), and therefore provides for a variety of truths and facts about a reality (Gergen, 1994).**
• **"Meanings are unlikely to remain constant since, as a consequence of our participation in different relationships, versions of reality are always open to further or revised specification" (Devins and Gold, 2002: 112, citing Shotter 1993)**
• **"No object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object" (Crotty, 1998: 45)**
• **Allows new issues and ideas to be considered as they emerge (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015)**

Constructionism's' main strengths for the researcher are *"in their ability to look at how change processes over time, to understand people's meanings, to adjust to new issues and ideas as they emerge, and to contribute to the evolution of new theories"* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002:42). With constructionism meaning is constructed out of something (i.e. the object). Therefore, constructionism involves constructing meaning as researchers engage in the world they are interpreting. The truth is therefore neither 'objective' nor 'subjective', but constructed and influenced by the researchers' culture, experience and understanding of the world. Indeed, there is no objective truth, and *"meaning is not discovered, but constructed…. there is no meaning without a mind"* (Crotty, 1998: 8-9).

The researcher in social constructionist research. The influence of the researcher on the whole research process is therefore an important consideration. The researcher conducting this particular study has been a lecturer/senior lecturer within higher education for over 20 years, and very much involved in recruitment, especially at postgraduate level, giving advice to students, as part of a course leadership role. Over this period, the experience has influenced the researchers' understanding of the world of recruitment and students experiences of both the recruitment process and during their course. Moreover, many of these students came from a variety of countries, and therefore, the researcher has gained extensive knowledge regarding cultural differences between students. Furthermore, not only has the researcher worked full-time in industry within a range of organisations, but also within two different educational establishments, has been involved with numerous other institutions in external examiner roles and has therefore experienced different organisational cultures. This range of experience has had an impact upon the researcher. As Hackley (1998: 129) states:

> *"The social constructionist researcher cannot justify airbrushing him or herself out of the picture but neither can they discard as neutral their own influence on the interview…. The interaction between the researcher and the interviewees is a significant feature of the construction of meanings within the interview setting"*.

This research therefore takes the ontology of social constructionism, as it is this authors' belief that *"meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices"* (Crotty, 1998: 42). Of equal importance is to preserve the quality of research subjects' experiences (Hackley, 1998).

Within the area of marketing, Hackley (1998:130) states, *"rigorous and effective theory building in marketing must be founded on a reflexive understanding of how meaning is constructed in the social world in order to be meaningful in and to the social world of marketing"*. The area of marketing communications, and consumer decision making has focused previously on linear models that represent the more traditional positivist paradigm (Hackley, 1998; Goulding, 1999). An analysis of research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* over a 10 year period (1980-1990) by Hirschmann in 1993, revealed the dominance of positivist, quantitative models that were used to construct and test consumer behaviour theories (Goulding 1999). However, since this time, alternative approaches, which Goulding (1999: 860) refers to as part of the "post-positivist movement" have been growing in numbers, which acknowledges an often irrational or unpredictable nature of consumer behaviour"

> *"The benefits of social constructionism in moving marketing researchers closer to a meaningful engagement with the social world of marketing meanings is clear. Rigorous and effective theory building in marketing must be founded on a reflexive understanding of how meaning is constructed in the social world in order to be meaningful in and to the social world of marketing"*.

This research will therefore add to the limited existing number of studies of this nature.

5.2.2 Epistemology

The second area of equal importance to consider under philosophy is that of epistemology, which has been defined as "*the branch of philosophy concerned with the study of the criteria by which we determine (i.e. know) what does and does not constitute warranted or valid knowledge"* (Gill and Johnson, 2002: 226). *"Everyone adheres to some theory about what constitutes warranted knowledge – a set of epistemological commitments which provide us with criteria for distinguishing between reliable and unreliable knowledge"* (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 5). Crotty (1998: 8) states that it is *"...a way of looking at the world and making sense of it"*, or simply *"how we know what we know"* and Easterby-Smith et al., (2015: 47) suggest it is *"a general set of assumptions about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world".* Bryman and Bell (2011) state that the main focus is on whether social scientists should use the same principles and procedures that researchers of the natural sciences follow. Aronowitz and Ausch (2000) categorise differences between natural and social science phenomena in support of a different approach for social science research.

There are various epistemological approaches, however, various writers in this area cause confusion, as there is no agreement on what these are. Bryman and Bell (2007), for example, discuss the two opposing epistemological approaches of positivism and interpretivism. They also refer to realism and critical realism, hermeneutics and phenomenology. Saunders et al., (2003) refer to positivism, realism and interpretivism. Furthermore, confusingly, Crotty (1998) refers to objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism as forms of epistemology, rather than ontology. A similar approach is seen with Easterby-Smith et al., (2015), as they highlight strong positivism/positivism, constructionism/strong constructionism as the main epistemologies. The following main types of epistemology will be explored further within this section as they present the two main contrasting viewpoints, along with a more central position: positivism, realism/critical realism, and interpretivism.

<u>Positivism</u> is strongly associated with natural science research. This approach suggests that objective methods are used, and that these are based on observed facts, rather than inferred subjectivity (Easterby-Smith, 2015). Early researchers in this area included the French philosopher Auguste Comte, and also Wittgenstein. The main features of this approach concern generating hypotheses that are tested in a value free objective manner (Bryman and Bell 2007). As Goulding (1999: 861) states *"there are strictly formalised procedures for establishing and testing hypotheses"*, involving *"a focus on observables, a rejection of the metaphysical and the collection of data where outcomes are a direct product of a quantified process"*. The researcher and subject should be kept separate to ensure the results are accurate and repeatable (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). The focus is also on replication and generalisability of findings (Hjorland, 2005; Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). Furthermore, researchers believe that a single unchanging reality exists beyond the human mind (Hjorland, 2005; Szmigin and Foxall, 2000- citing Ozsanne and Hudson 1989)). The researcher must be independent (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015), as the belief is this will result in accurate and repeatable results that can be generalised (Szmigin and Foxall. 2000). Large sample sizes are selected randomly, used to test previously generated hypotheses, to demonstrate causality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). This epistemological approach has been rejected, it does not fit with a social constructionists ontology, and the researcher believes the "reality" that matters the most is that subjectively experienced in the consumers mind (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000).

<u>Realism</u> (and to a lesser extent critical realism), also closely follow a more positivist approach and both believe that there is an external reality *"there is a reality that is separate from our descriptions of it"* (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 17). Sayer (1992: 5) states that *"the world exists independently of our knowledge of it"*. Critical realism highlights the need to discover hidden or not readily observable structures and objects, which have

powers and liabilities capable of generating events (Sayer 1992; Bhaskar, 1989). Critical Realism first became known in Britain during the 1970s through the work of Rom Harre and Roy Bhasker, along with many others such as Keat; Benton; Archer; Sayer; Layder and Collier (Sayer 2000: 4; Wilkgren, 2005: 12). Critical realism can be portrayed as half way between positivism and constructionism (Easterby-Smith et al. (2015): they use the term constructionism rather than interpretivism). They hold a belief that causality exists, and therefore strongly associate with positivism and objectivism. However, there is a move from prediction to that of explanation, with a focus on underlying 'causal tendencies' or powers, rather than purely cause and effect relations (Wilkgren, 2005; Perry et al., 1999; Bhaskar, 1978: 20). These approaches do not fit within the social constructionism ontology, nor the aim and objectives adopted for this study and are more appropriate to natural science. Therefore, are also rejected as an epistemological approach.

<u>Interpretivism</u> is an alternative approach that *"reflects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action"* (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 17). Fisher (2010) highlights that the focus is on meanings and interpretations *"the interpretivist forms structures out of interpretations. These are used to explore how people's sense of their world both influences, and is influenced by, that of others"* (Fisher, 2010:58). The role of researcher is therefore to create debate and conversation regarding a particular research area and then map various views and positions that people have regarding this. Moreover, individuals are said to have different viewpoints because of the context within which the questions are asked. Therefore, people's accounts of how they make sense of the world are particularly important within this approach as they allow structures and processes to be identified, which will be context based. *"Processes are not linear and sequential; rather they are 'complex and dynamic' "* (Fisher, 2010: 60). The researcher should ensure that they do not have premature closure on any assumption(s) made, and that they do not exclude other "truths" or "realities" that could be presented (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000: 191). The researcher is therefore inseparable from the reality being studied, and knowledge is through a person's lived experience (Hjorland, 2005).

The interpretivist approach fits extremely well with the social constructionism ontology, is highly relevant to the objectives for the study as the interpretivist approach is about seeking understanding (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000), and is therefore the approach that has been adopted within this thesis. Indeed, the researcher believes that it is of utmost importance to understand students' experiences in their own terms, to understand each individuals' 'reality', and to accurately reflect a range of individuals' realities as they engage with the world. As Goulding (1999: 860) states, the post-positivist movement (as Venkatesh 1992 refers to) *"acknowledges the social, complex, often irrational and sometimes unpredictable nature of consumer behaviour."* Moreover, the interpretivist approach tries to map out a range of somewhat complex views and positions held by each individual (Fisher, 2010). As students are extremely diverse, especially at postgraduate level, their experiences and understanding of 'reality' may differ therefore. Furthermore, in the area of consumer behaviour, qualitative research has increasingly become a mainstream approach, including that of interpretivism and phenomenology (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008).

There are some barriers however, to researchers undertaking a more qualitative approach, under the epistemological position of interpretivism, and this concerns the questioning of the soundness of the research design (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). Positivists are concerned with internal and external validity, and with reliability and objectivity. However, the interpretivist researcher transferring these positivist tests within a non-positivist arena, in order to convince readers that the research is worth paying attention to, should be considered. One study (by Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993) focused on the writing practices of ethnographers, in order to determine what made their accounts convincing to their audience, and these insights can assist interpretivist consumer researchers to make their arguments convincing and worth paying attention to.

The three areas of authenticity, plausibility and criticality can be seen in Table 5.4 below, and these areas have been considered at each stage of the research process.

Table 5.4: Analytical framework of Golden-Biddle and Locke's 1993 study (Hogg and Maclaran 2008: 133)

	Explanation	In this research
Authenticity	Convincing the readers that: The interpretation is drawn from the data The researcher has "been present in the field and grasped how members understood their world"	Researcher is heavily involved in postgraduate recruitment. Full transcripts were undertaken for all primary research, and quotes accurately reflect the context in which they were stated
Plausibility	Accounting for as much of the information as possible, so that there is some degree of well argued "fit" between the information (or data), and the explanation offered to account for the interpretation offered of the data	Transcripts have been read multiple times in order to ensure accounts accurately present views offered by respondents. Alternative interpretations are however possible
Criticality	Incorporates reflexivity "carving out room to reflect, provoking the recognition and examination of differences, and enabling readers to imagine new possibilities"	Reflection has taken place after stage 1 of research, after stage 2 of research, and also some time later in order to see if alternative meanings are possible

These areas are considered further within the research strategy and methodology sections that now follow.

5.3 Research Strategies

Two approaches to research have been identified: deduction and induction (Saunders and Lewis, 2012; Bryman and Bell, 2011). However, more recently abduction has been more widely discussed as a third approach (Saunders et al., 2016). The key differences between are clearly presented in Table 5.5. With induction and abduction, Kovocs and Spens (2005) argue that empirical observations happen prior to the development of any theoretical framework. In fact, they suggest that there is no theoretical framework at all for an inductive process. With deductive research, the starting point is always from a theoretical framework, where hypotheses or propositions are developed prior to empirical research. Bryman and Bell (2007) state that an inductive approach will entail "a modicum of deduction" and similarly a deductive approach will have some element of induction.

Table 5.5: Deduction, induction and abduction (Saunders et al., 2016)

	Deduction	**Induction**	**Abduction**
Logic	In a deductive inference, when the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true	In an inductive inference, known premises are used to generate untested conclusions	In an abductive inference, known premises are used to generate testable conclusions
Generalisability	Generalising from the general to the specific	Generalising from the specific to the general	Generalising from the interactions between specific and the general
Use of data	Data collection is used to evaluate propositions or hypotheses related to an existing theory	Data collection is used to explore phenomenon, identify themes and patterns and create a conceptual framework	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, locate these in a conceptual framework and test this through subsequent data collection and so forth
Theory	Theory falsification or verification	Theory generation and building	Theory generation or modification incorporating existing theory where appropriate, to build new theory or modify existing theory

<u>Deduction.</u> This concerns explaining causal relationships between variables and is strongly associated with a positivist philosophy (Saunders & Lewis 2012). It involves the development of hypotheses, which are then tested through primary research (Bryman and Bell, 2011). It is therefore not compatible within a social constructionism/interpretivist philosophy and has been rejected as a research strategy.

<u>Abduction.</u> The abductive approach examines existing phenomena from a new perspective in order to provide new insight (Kovacs and Spens, 2005). Taylor et al., (2002) discuss theory building and data collection simultaneously, implying a learning loop, similar to action research and also case study research (Kovacs and Spens, 2005). However, Kohli, (2017) suggests that the abductive approach means different things to different researchers, depending upon the context, and that there is no clear definition or clear research process. Rennemo and Asvoll, (2014) when researching abduction state *"we fail to immediately achieve a satisfactory understanding and explanation of*

the phenomenon". Thomas (2010: 577), states that abduction provides *"..ways of analysing complexity that may not provide watertight guarantees of success in providing for explanation or prediction but are unpretentious in their assumptions of fallibility and provisionality"* and also differentiate from common induction which involves "inference to the best explanation" (Thomas 2010: 576). Moreover, Van Maanen et al., (2007) state that it is possible to combine more than one approach, and that deduction and/or induction can complement abduction. Bruscaglioni (2016) discusses grounded theory as being compatible with abduction; Thomas (2010) explores case study in relation to abduction; and Saunders et al. (2016: 148) state *that "an abductive approach moves back and forth, in effect combining deduction and induction"*, which suggests all research methodologies are a possibility. The abductive approach appears to therefore suggest that a mixed methods approach is adopted, which is not relevant to this research. Moreover, the abductive approach has been rejected. It is less compatible with the selected ontology and epistemology for this thesis

<u>Induction.</u> This involves observing patterns and repeated occurrences in order to gain an understanding of meanings attached to them. It also emphasises the importance of the research context, rather than a focus upon the ability to generalise a theory across a range of contexts. As Gummesson (2005: 322) states *"Inductive research lets reality tell its story on its own terms and not in the terms of extant theory"*. Furthermore, Gummesson states *"Progressively my mindset has adopted a view of life, including both marketing methodology and theory, can be seen as networks of relationships within which interaction takes place. Instead of searching for strict and partial causality, I search for the understanding of a systemic whole, a context, with individual and complex patterns of interactive relationships."* Researcher involvement is therefore of the upmost importance. This approach therefore appears to be compatible with the aim and objectives of the research, and is the approach adopted in this thesis. Whilst the research considers stages within the decision making process, this research considers the whole process and looks for patterns that emerge from the focus groups and interviews. Furthermore, interaction or engagement and relationships are at the heart of this study.

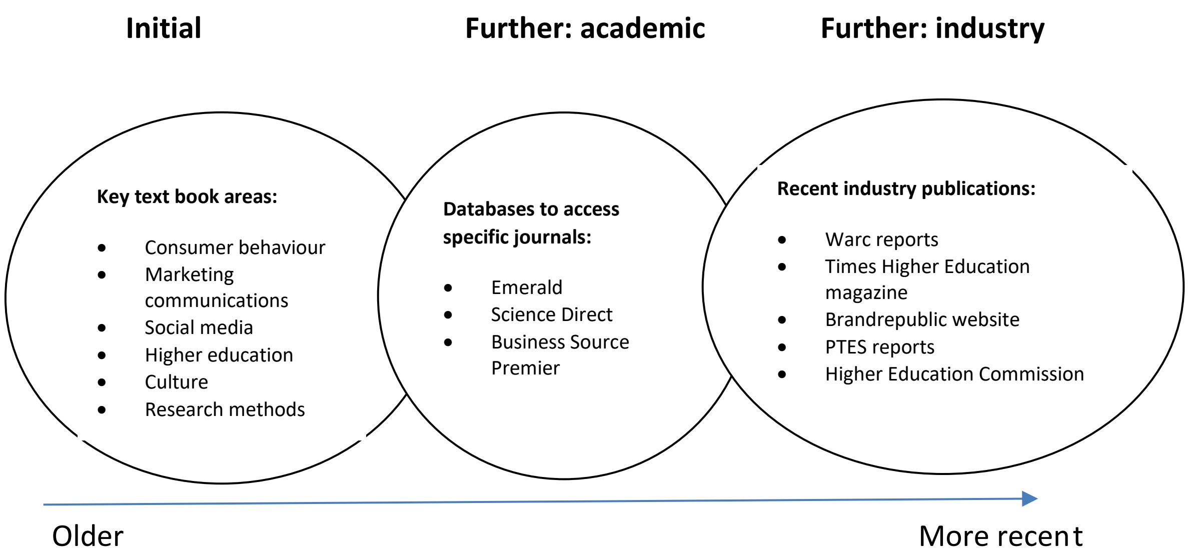
5.4 Research Methods

5.4.1 Secondary Research

Gill and Johnson (2002: 25) highlight the importance of secondary research and state that *"It justifies any new research through a coherent critique of what has gone before and demonstrates why new research is both timely and important".*

Saunders *et al*., (2003) propose three different categories of literature resources: primary, secondary and tertiary, however, this has been adapted to suit those sources used within this thesis, highlighted within Figure 5.2. A range of relevant academic textbooks was used initially in order to quickly read around the research area and establish existing theories. A wide variety of journals were searched for through a number of key databases such as Emerald, including the *Journal of Marketing*, *European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Consumer Research,* the *International Journal of Educational Management and Studies in Higher Education*. Industry sources provided very up-to-date information, such as *World Advertising Research Reports (Warc)*, Universities UK and PTES reports, and industry publications such as those on the brandrepublic.co.uk website and HE publications such as The Times Higher Education magazine provided insight into the background and current trends/issues relating to marketing communications and higher education. Information from these sources was systematically stored in database form using *EndNote*, the bibliographic software.

Figure 5.2: Literature sources used (adapted from Saunders et al. 2003)



Searching for secondary research consisted of two distinct, but connected stages:

<u>Stage 1.</u> A preliminary search was conducted initially in order to assist in the generation of ideas, to refine the research area and identify gaps in current knowledge. The literature themes for this stage consisted of looking at the development of consumer decision making models and stages, and decision making within HE. Additional literature review areas included an examination of the context of HE, Millennials and students, and the contemporary communications environment. This provided themes for developing the structure of the first stage of primary research (focus groups).

<u>Stage 2.</u> The results of the first stage of primary research, and the initial literature review, informed a further in-depth and more comprehensive critical review of the literature. This included further searching to enhance and update the initial areas. It also ensured that all relevant models were reviewed, and included more contemporary views covering customer journeys and touch points, some of which had not been published when the initial literature review took place. This enhanced literature review informed the second stage of research (individual interviews), and allowed individual student decision journeys to be explored.

5.4.2 Primary Research: Stage 1 - Focus Groups

The first stage of primary research involved focus groups. Bryman and Bell (2007: 503) refer to a focus group as:

> *"… a form of group interview in which: there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator): there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic: and the accent is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning."*

This definition highlights the fact that meaning is constructed. Gibbs (1997: 1) refers to focus groups as *"A group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment upon, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research"*. This definition highlights the importance of the sample selected having personal experience of the topic area under discussion. Moreover, the role of the researcher is to create debate and conversation regarding the research area, in order to map various views and positions (Fisher, 2010)

Focus groups are strongly associated with qualitative research, are a well-established and highly recognised method and have become more widespread in recent years (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Stokes and Bergin, 2006). Stokes and Bergin (2006) suggest within industry this may be due to the fact focus groups can be quicker, cost less, are observable by clients and easier to analyse than other methods. Originally, focus groups were purely a face-to-face method of research, however in recent years online focus groups have become more common as they can reduce travel time and costs. However, with this research study the focus groups were purely face-to-face. Focus groups can generate significant amounts of relevant data, allows the researcher to understand why people feel the way they do, allows people within the group to agree or disagree with others within their focus group, and allows the researcher to make sense of phenomenon and construct meanings around it. Stokes and Bergin (2006) explore the work by Zikmund (1997) and Gibbs (1997), and suggests the following advantages of focus groups:

Table 5.6: Advantages of focus groups (Stokes and Bergin, 2006)

1. Synergy: a wider range of information is generated than from in-depth interviews
2. Snowballing: respondents ideas can generate further areas for discussion
3. Serendipity: ideas can be generated by chance
4. Stimulation: the group process can assist more views being brought out
5. Security: less pressure on the individual to answer a particular question, so respondents more likely to be honest and open
6. Spontaneity: people more likely to respond when they have a strong viewpoint
7. Specialisation: experienced moderator can interview far more people in a given session
8. Structure: topics can be reintroduced within a session more easily
9. Speed: quicker than individual interviews
10. Scrutiny: can be observed by others if required
11. Saliency: groups can help to understand why a particular topic area is important

However, there are a number of issues relating to focus groups: Firstly, the researcher needs to be experienced in order to control and direct the group, whilst relinquishing some control to allow issues to rise to the surface (Bryman and Bell 2007). The researcher in this instance had previous experience in this area, so this was not an issue. Secondly, some researchers view focus groups as a weaker method of research (usually those that support the survey approach under a positivist philosophy). This may be because surveys allow a greater degree of replication and generalisability (Goulding, 1999), and often use what some consider to be superior probability sampling methods and a much larger sample size. Indeed, it cannot be expected that seven focus groups, of between five to eight people in each, can represent the views of a total population of postgraduate students. Even if multiple focus groups have taken place, these are unlikely to represent the whole of a population.

However, those that are critical of focus groups are missing the point of what role they play. Qualitative research needs to be rigorous in that samples selected must be representative of the population under study. However, their role is not to be generalisable to other contexts outside that which is the focus of a particular study. Nor is it to find causality between two or more variables, which is the role of quantitative techniques (Gummesson, 2005). The role of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth understanding within that particular context (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Quantitative studies, by their very nature, cannot provide this. Quantitative studies seek to demonstrate how many people for example agree or disagree with a particular viewpoint. They do not seek to explore why that is. This is the role and strength of qualitative studies. Neither qualitative nor quantitative studies are 'better'. Both have their designated roles and both allow theory to move forward, whether that be to understand the complex nature of a particular area, or to establish causality between variables (Gummesson, 2005).

The focus groups for stage one were conducted over a two-year period, involving two different cohorts of postgraduate students. A structure and range of topic areas were drafted prior to undertaking the sessions in order for the researcher to feel prepared around the topic area. These topic areas arose out of an early review of literature and allowed the researcher to explore some of the themes in some detail, in order to inform a more in-depth review of the literature, and to feed into stage 2 of the research. Specifically, an understanding of how Millennial students approach selection of their postgraduate course was the focus. An understanding of their attitudes to and use of digital media was also sought, along with an understanding of each of the stages of the decision making process, and any influences. These areas were developed because there were gaps identified in the literature relating to postgraduate students decision making, a lack of focus on millennial students and the changing media landscape. The preparation sheets used for the focus groups can be seen in Appendix A. These were a guide, rather than a set of structured questions.

Each focus group was recorded using a digital recorder, to allow a full transcription of each to be made. As Bryman and Bell (2007) state, this allows the researcher to focus on conducting the focus group, rather than writing down what people actually say, which could be disruptive and time consuming. A full transcription of each focus group allowed a full analysis to take place and to consider not only what people were saying, but also their choice of language, and interactions with each other. It also allowed transcripts to be read and re-read, to allow reflection on different possible interpretations of the data. This allowed the data to be condensed and analysed in an appropriate way. The focus groups allowed some early real insight regarding students and their decisions regarding postgraduate study. They were also useful in providing further direction for the enhanced literature review that followed. One of the drawbacks of the focus groups was however, that it was impossible to plot each individual journey for each person within the focus group, which is why interviews were selected for the second stage of research.

5.4.3 Primary Research Stage 2: Interviews

Interviews are one of the most widely used research methods (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Webb (1995: 121) defines the individual depth interview as *"…an unstructured personal interview which uses extensive probing to get a single respondent to talk freely and to express detailed beliefs and feelings on a topic"*. Stokes and Bergin (2006) highlight that interviews are good for discussion of sensitive or personal topics, have greater control over respondent selection, and provide greater depth and comprehensiveness of information discussed. However, one criticism of interviews over focus groups is that interviews lack the group interaction aspect.

Interviews can take many forms, but normally involve one respondent at once, although group interviews do exist. Structured interviews are most frequently used in survey research and involves a standardised approach where each respondent is asked the same range of questions, are more commonly associated with more positivist approaches to research, and therefore this has been rejected. The other extreme is the unstructured interview, where the researcher may have a range of topics that are to be covered, but has not constructed questions around these topics prior to the interview taking place. A third type of semi-structured interview combines these two methods. The researcher will have a list of topics to be explored, and a range of questions are used as an interview guide, but each interview is flexible to allow topics to be covered in an appropriate way, and to allow adaptation based upon comments made by each specific respondent.

An unstructured approach was adopted at the second stage of primary research, mainly because the researcher wanted to explore the individual journey of each student, and did not want to assume that students approach this in any particular direction. Pre-prepared themes/questions may have sent the discussion in a particular area, so this needed to be avoided as much as possible. The researcher therefore only provided initial direction by asking them to discuss from their early thoughts of postgraduate study, through to actual arrival at their selected university. A large sheet of paper was used, this allowed a rough plot of areas the students discussed, and allowed questions to be asked about each of these areas throughout, and towards the final stages, in order to clarify and explore in greater depth.

A number of advantages of using this particular method have been identified. Firstly, in the previous focus group stage, it was difficult to get an in-depth view of the topic areas from each individual. Probing specific points relating to an individual student needed to be sometimes restricted in order for the range of topic areas to be covered within the timescales set. Therefore, interviews have allowed a more in-depth individual probing to take place. Furthermore, for some students, talking openly within a group situation was more difficult (for example, students from certain cultures/countries), and even with good interviewing skills to make these students feel more comfortable, they did not always contribute to the same level. Individual interviews allow this to be overcome, providing the interviewer is sensitive, gentle and open, and has the ability to make the respondent feel able to talk openly and willingly about the topic under consideration. Interviews also allowed some of the points raised in the focus groups to be explored much further and in some degree of depth.

5.4.4 Sampling methods

Sampling is an extremely important area for any study. Good quality primary research can be problematic if it is does not represent the population of interest (Saunders et al., 2016). The term population can be defined as *"the universe of units from which a sample is to be selected"* (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 716). Whereas a sample is *"the segment of the population that is selected for research. It is a subset of the population"* (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 718) Most studies are unable to involve every single person of the population of interest for a variety of reasons (e.g. time, money, availability, willingness to participate etc.), and therefore decisions have to be made about who should be included in the study. There are two main sampling methods available: probability and non-probability sampling designs (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

Probability sampling. This is where each member of the population have equal chance of selection. It draws on a sampling frame,*" the listing of all units in the population from which the sample will be selected"* (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 176)), and uses a random method to select the sample, *"each unit in the population has a known chance of being selected"* (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 176). This is normally associated with quantitative methods such as survey, where a range of statistical tests are utilised. Positivist researchers argue that this method allows data collected to be replicated and generalised (Goulding, 1999), and suggest this method is superior, as can be seen by the top marketing journals being dominated by quantitative research methods (Hackley, 2009: 112). This approach was rejected, as it was not appropriate for an inductive research strategy, was not helpful for the aims and objectives of this research study, and would have been problematic to implement.

Non-probability sampling. This means it is not possible to state the probability of any member of the population being selected for a study. Samples are selected based upon an element of subjective judgement (Saunders et al., 2016). This therefore means it can be harder to make claims about the sample selected being representative of a larger group. However, with the interpretivist approach the researcher is interested in selecting a sample of those that have lived the experience (Goulding, 2005). The context is postgraduate higher education, involving full-time students, who have already made decisions regarding where to study. By selecting those with prior experience in this area, patterns and repeated occurrences can be seen, in order to gain a greater depth of understanding. Non-probability sampling methods have been used for both stages of research, utilising the judgemental/purposive sampling method. Purposive/judgemental sampling, is where participants are selected based upon their eligibility to meet certain criteria (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015). Purposive/judgemental sampling was highly appropriate for this study as it ensured that those taking part in the focus groups and interviews represented the international nature of postgraduate students: full-time postgraduate students, and represent home, EU and international students, both male and female. Regarding sample size, guidance is ambiguous and there are no specific rules (Saunders et al., 2016). Many recommend continuing until data saturation is reached, where little or no new information is found by continuing further, as was the case with this research study.

<u>The focus groups.</u> The sample involved students at one English university, in the North West. The university was a post-92 university, and therefore does not necessarily represent students' at all English universities. Those selected were in the Business School Marketing area, as this has a diverse range of students from many countries in the World. A total of 51 participants took part in the seven focus groups: 21 (41%) were home students; 14 (27%) were EU students, and 16 (32%) were international students. This broadly reflects the UK taught[20] postgraduate student population, which consists of 63% UK, 7.4% EU, and 29% International (Universities UK, 2016). Although no specific guidance is given on focus group minimum amounts to be conducted by Saunders et al., (2012), this number of 7 focus groups, or 51 participants, is considerably above those recommended for other types of qualitative research (See Saunders et al., (2012: 297), with ranges from 4-36 for various types of qualitative studies). Furthermore, similarities and patterns were being seen towards the end of the seven groups.

[20] Taught postgraduate students exclude those on a research degree such as a PhD

Further details are presented in Table 5.7 below

Table 5.7: Details of sample for focus groups

Focus Group	Size	Male/Female	Home (H), European Union (EU), or International (I)
1	8	M = 1 F = 7	H = 0 EU = 3 I = 5
2	8	M = 3 F = 5	H = 3 EU = 2 I = 3
3	5	M = 1 F = 4	H = 2 EU = 1 I = 2
4	7	M =3 F = 4	H = 5 EU = 1 I = 1
5	9	M = 4 F = 5	H = 5 EU = 2 I = 2
6	8	M = 1 F = 7	H = 3 EU = 2 I = 3
7	6	M = 2 F = 4	H = 3 EU = 3 I = 0

<u>The interview stage.</u> This was similar to the focus group selection in that purposeful /judgemental sampling was used for selection. Again, students were selected within the Business School Marketing area at the same university as for the focus groups, although a different cohort was used. The sample selected throughout involved only those that had lived the experience, as suggested by Goulding (2005). The sample size was determined by continuing until sufficient rich accounts were found, to allow meanings and structures to be constructed. In total, the number of interviews conducted was nine.

Details can be found in Table 5.8 below:

Table 5.8: Details of sample for Interviews

Interview	Male (M)/ Female (F)	Home (H), other European country (EU) or International (I) student
1	M	I
2	M	EU
3	F	H
4	F	H
5	F	EU
6	M	H
7	F	H
8	F	I
9	M	I

5.4.5 Analysis of primary data

The analysis of qualitative data requires a clear explanation regarding how it was analysed, the conclusions that were reached, with clear illustration of the process of transforming raw data into meaningful conclusions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2002). The approach taken will very much depend upon the philosophical position adopted by the researcher. Saunders *et al*., (2003) provide a number of dimensions of qualitative analysis: less structured to more structured; interpretivist to procedural; and inductive to deductive. Easterby-Smith et al., (2002) identify two methods of analysis for qualitative data, based upon a positivist and social constructionist perspective: content analysis and grounded analysis. The main distinctions between these two methods are illustrated in Table 5.9 below.

Table 5.9: Qualitative data analysis: content versus grounded methods

Content analysis	Grounded analysis
Searching for content (prior hypotheses)	Understanding of context and time
Fragmented	Holistic
Objective	Subjective: faithful to views of respondents
More deductive	More inductive
Aims for clarity and unity	Preserves ambiguity and contradiction

Source: Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002: 118)

Content analysis. The work of Miles and Huberman (1994) is strongly associated with content analysis, which proposes a proceduralised process and offers a degree of quantification to the process. Variations within the method of content analysis can be seen through the work of Silverman (2011) on *Conversation Analysis*; Fairclough (2005) on *Critical Discourse Analysis*; and through Yin's (2003) *Case Study Research* book. Content analysis is strongly associated with a more deductive or positivist approach to research and therefore this method of analysis is considered less appropriate to both the philosophical stance taken by the researcher here, and the overall objectives for this particular research.

Grounded analysis. This became popular through the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), where the focus is on the method of process. Since this earlier work, both Glaser and Strauss have developed their own individual methods of analysis. Glaser (1978; 1992; 1998) advocating a more flexible approach which involves theory emerging from the data, whilst Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) moved towards a more rigid approach of putting data into categories, with increased prescription and elaboration (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Glaser (1992) was highly critical of the approach taken more recently by Strauss, stating that it was far too rigid and uncompromising. Researchers need to therefore be clear if using a grounded approach, which particular method they are following.

The phenomenological approach. Meanwhile, Goulding (2005: 303) provides a process based upon Colaizzi (1978) regarding seven steps for analysing data from a phenomenological approach. These steps highlight the importance of *"extracting significant statements",* highlights that *"recurrent meaningful themes are clustered"*, and the importance of the researcher to *"integrate the resulting themes into a rich description of the phenomenon under study"*. Moreover, the importance of finding an "essential structure" in order to explain behaviour and also that the researcher may finally need to undertake some further research *"to cross check interpretation*" is highlighted. This particular process is extremely useful, as it remains focused on qualitative statements being in context, and reminds the researcher of the importance of checking that their interpretation is the most appropriate one to present.

Approach in this research. The following figure details the process adopted for the analysis of the exploratory qualitative research and the in-depth interviews, draws upon the advice specifically of Goulding (2005), and Colaizzi (1978). Analysis of the interviews consisted of a number of stages.

Table 5.10 Process of data analysis for primary research in this thesis (based upon Goulding (2005) and Colaizzi (1978)).

Stage	Explanation for this research
1. Collecting the data	Each focus group and interview was audio recorded, and then transcribed.
2. Familiarisation of data	The transcripts were read and re-read. Each transcript was considered separately in order to fully understand, and to get a feeling for the ideas presented.
3. Initial reflection	An initial reflection on the content of each transcript took place. Focus groups and interviews were scheduled over a period of time, which allowed for points raised by earlier respondents to be incorporated and explored in the later focus groups and interviews.
4. Reflection	This involved re-reading the transcripts and trying to make sense from the wealth of data and to attempt to formulate meanings. The data were considered in relation to existing knowledge, whether areas had been explored sufficiently within the interviews to provide insight and specific responses to each area discussed. A more holistic reflection took place between the focus group research and the interviews.
5. Recurrent meaningful themes	These were established from the participants' stories. Initially, the data from each transcript were classified into meaningful themes (Appendix H). As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), themes emerged from the data, and were also based upon terms used in existing theory and literature.
6. Rereading transcripts	Once themes had been constructed, each transcript was then reread and appropriate significant statements were extracted for each theme, in order to provide a thick description of the phenomenon under study. This was a manual process initially, consisting of coding up in the margins of each typed transcript in pencil to highlight into which theme each statement fitted. These were then input into an Excel spreadsheet, to allow sorting of statements by theme.
7. Reflection	The established themes were reconsidered in order to provide an essential structure that offers explanation of the behaviour. In addition to this, the theme of engagement arose during the interview stage and enhanced literature review, meaning the focus groups were re-analysed regarding this theme.

5.4.6 Ethical considerations

Ethics concerns the principles that guide the moral behaviour of people (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Within research there may be many ethical dilemmas, especially within the area of science. However, research undertaken within business and management areas does not normally put people's lives at risk, as can be the case regarding science.

Ethical considerations normally concern researchers protecting the interests of the research subjects (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Areas covered are those such as not treating people unfairly, not causing harm, rights to privacy and freely given informed consent (Fisher 2010). Easterby-Smith et al., (2015) highlight ten key principles in research ethics, which can be seen in Table 5.11 below. Principles one to six concern the protection of the research subjects, whilst the final four concern protecting the integrity of the research community.

Table 5.11: Key principles in research ethics (adapted from Easterby-Smith et al. (2015:122)

	Key Principle	In this research
1	Ensuring that no harm comes to participants	The topic area is not sensitive, and participants self-select
2	Respecting the dignity of research participants	Views of the respondents were respected at all times
3	Ensuring a fully informed consent of research participants	Consent form completed by each participant (see Appendix D)
4	Protecting the privacy of research participants	All transcripts have been anonymised
5	Ensuring the confidentiality of research data	All data held on university secure storage areas, which are password protected. Hard copies are kept in a locked room
6	Protecting the anonymity of individuals or organisation	Transcripts are anonymised. University student names are not disclosed
7	Avoiding deception about the nature or aims of the research	The aims of the research were clearly given to all respondents prior and at the beginning of each focus group or interview
8	Declaration of affiliations funding sources and conflicts of interest	As a member of staff at the university some of the students were at, I ensured that no undue pressure was put onto students to participate
9	Honesty and transparency in communicating about the research	Full transcripts were produced, analysis is an honest reflection of what was discussed by respondents
10	Avoidance of any misleading or false reporting of research findings	Quotes have not been taken out of context. Several reflections have taken place to ensure that the findings presented, accurately reflect the views of the respondents

The university procedures regarding ethical approval have also been followed, see Table 5.12 for a summary of documentation.

Table 5.12: Ethical procedure and forms completed

Form	What this demonstrates	Where this can be found
Ethics checklist	To establish if there are any risks, hazards or ethical issues	See Appendix B
Respondent consent form/participant information sheet	Each respondent was required to complete this form so they were aware of their rights, aware of what the research was about, how it would be used and assured of their anonymity	Blank form which was completed by each respondent in Appendix C
Research Insurance checklist form	To ensure researchers are covered by the university insurance in case of any negligence as a result of research carried out	See Appendix D
Risk assessment form	To establish if there are any risks that need to be considered	See Appendix E
Ethical approval form	Students are considered as vulnerable people when research involves academics, and therefore approval is required from the ethics committee. This was granted before primary research was undertaken	See Appendix F
Draft notice for volunteers for research	To ensure it does not put undue pressure on students to participate or misinform	See Appendix G

Qualitative research, where the sample size is likely to be fairly small, issues surrounding the preservation of the anonymity of the respondents are of the greatest importance (Akaah, 1997). Care has therefore been taken to ensure that respondent anonymity has been preserved. All respondents were advised at the start of the focus groups and interviews that names would not be revealed. All respondents also agreed to the focus groups and interviews being recorded. Respondents were also made aware of how the research would be used: for academic publication in journals, PhD thesis, and at academic conferences.

<u>Ethical procedures and forms in this research.</u> Where students are used within research there are also additional ethical considerations relating to a right to privacy and that

undue pressure should not be put upon a student to participate in the research. This is even more important where pressure comes from a student's course leader or unit leader. Care was taken to ensure that pressure was not put upon any students participating in this research. The university ethical framework was followed, including completion of the documentation highlighted in Figure 5.12 above. Freely given, informed consent therefore took place at each stage of the research. Each respondent completed a consent form.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter identified the decisions taken regarding methodological choices relating to this thesis and discussed ethical considerations. A summary of the main points are presented below:

- An ontological philosophical approach of social constructionism was adopted for this thesis. This allowed meanings to be constructed from the research, and allowed for the construction of a new framework.
- The interpretivist epistemology adopted in this thesis allowed focus on meanings and interpretations, and the plotting of different viewpoints.
- The research strategy of induction allowed for empirical work to happen prior to the development of a framework.
- Questions for the focus groups were developed from themes presented around the literature review.
- There were many ethical considerations, and various forms were completed, attached in the appendices.
- The unstructured interviews were informed by the focus groups and enhanced literature review, centred around student journeys.
- The non-probability sampling method of judgemental/purposive, consisted of 51 participants for the focus groups, and 9 participants for the interviews.
- Analysis from the transcripts centred around meaningful themes.
- Reflection took place at various points, and led to the development of the engagement theme within the new framework.

The findings from both stages of research will now be presented in Chapter 6.

6. Primary Research: Findings from focus groups and interviews

This chapter reports the results from both stages of research:

- Stage one, which consisted of seven focus groups/a total of fifty respondents;
- Stage two, which consisted of nine unstructured interviews.

Considering the previously discussed research objectives (RO), these have been met in the following ways:

- RO3 To explore the decision making journey of full-time postgraduate students from their early thoughts regarding postgraduate study through to arrival at their selected university – stage one and stage two contributed towards this.
- RO4 To map journeys of these students in order to establish if any common patterns exist – stage two allowed the mapping of individual journeys.
- RO5 To develop a framework that demonstrates journeys of potential postgraduate students and the role of contemporary communications within the process – stage one and stage two contributed towards this.

As previously mentioned, all respondents were registered on a full-time one-year marketing-related master’s course. The interviews involved a different cohort of students to the focus groups. The results, presented around a number of appropriate themes, lead to the presentation of a new framework. Although the findings are reported around these themes, the findings from the focus groups and the interviews are reported separate within each theme, in order to preserve the additional rich insight gained from each interview. Furthermore, tables have been used, where necessary, to either illustrate a large range of quotations, or to provide an overview of the approaches to a particular theme.

The themes that the structure of the findings is formed around are as follows:

- Analysis of respondents;
- Early thoughts/pre-search behaviour;
- Information searching;
- Application;
- Decision;
- Post purchase evaluation;
- Influence of others;
- Consumer decision making models;
- Engagement;
- The whole student journey.

Each theme will now be discussed in relation to the primary research findings.

6.1 Analysis of respondents

Focus Groups. Respondents were selected for the focus groups to represent the population of interest, postgraduate students. All students were registered on one-year marketing-related courses. Table 6.1 clearly shows that the views of a wide range of students were sought, with a total of 25 countries, and 4 continents covered within this initial study: 21 were home students, 14 were other EU students (from 12 countries), and 16 were international students (from 12 countries outside of the EU). Worthy of note is that the sample included a student that had previously studied at the same HEI at undergraduate level, a non-UK student (Romanian) that had previously studied at another UK university at undergraduate level (Coventry), and an international student (Singapore) that had previously studied in a different country (Australia) rather than their home country at undergraduate level. This clearly indicates the sample is reflective of the diverse experiences of postgraduate students.

Table 6.1: Analysis of respondents from the focus groups

Focus Group Number	Sex: F = female M = Male	Home (H), European Union (EU), or International (I)	Country
FG1	F	I	Thailand
	M	I	Korea
	F	EU	Greece
	F	EU	Germany
	F		Malta
	F	I	Mexico
	F	I	Japan
	F	I	Singapore
FG2	M	EU	Latvia
	F	H	UK
	M	H	UK
	M	EU	Cyprus
	M	I	India
	M	H	UK
	M	H	UK
	F	I	Barbados
FG3	F	H	UK
	F	EU	Spain
	F	H	UK
	M	I	Taiwan
	F	I	Malaysia
FG4	F	EU	Hungary
	M	H	UK
	M	I	USA
	M	H	UK
	F	H	UK
	F	H	UK
	F	EU	Czech Republic
FG5	F	H	UK
	F	EU	Ireland
	M	EU	France
	F	H	UK
	F	I	Vietnam
	F	EU	Spain
	M	H	UK
	M	H	UK
	M	H	UK
FG6	F	I	India
	F	I	Canada
	F	EU	Romania
	F	I	USA
	M	EU	Italy
	F	H	UK
	F	H	UK
	F	H	UK
FG7	F	H	UK
	F	H	UK
	F	EU	Germany
	M	EU	UK
	M	H	UK
	F	EU	France

Interviews. Respondents for the interviews were selected to represent the population of interest, full-time postgraduate students. Table 6.2 clearly shows that the views of a wide range of students were sought, with four home students, two students were other EU students, and three were international students. Also important to note, was that one student had previously studied at the same university at undergraduate level, and two had previously studied at another university in the area. The sample selected reflects the general postgraduate student population of home, other European Union and International students, and also of those postgraduate students studying at this particular northern-based UK university. Also worth noting, are the wide range of courses that students studied at undergraduate level, and the age of some of the students. For example, respondent 6 was a mature student that had worked full-time for a few years in a fairly senior position, respondent 9 had worked for 2 years, and respondent 3 had worked full-time prior to commencing her undergraduate degree. Respondent 5 was a little older and married. All those selected were Millennials, registered on one-year postgraduate marketing-related courses, and therefore had experienced the whole decision process fairly recently, so this should result in accurate recall of the process.

Table 6.2: Analysis of respondents from the interviews

Respondent	Male(M) or Female (F)	Undergraduate qualification	Where studied undergraduate
1	M	Marketing	Bangladesh
2	M	International Business & Management	Germany
3	F	Journalism & English Literature	UK (Staffordshire University)
4	F	Fashion Photography & Styling	UK (Salford University)
5	F	Cultural Events Management	Italy
6	M	Criminology	UK (Manchester Metropolitan University)
7	F	PR/Journalism	UK (Salford University)
8	F	Politics & International Relations	Uzbekistan
9	M	Chemistry/Business & Management	Myanmar

6.2 Early thoughts/Pre search behaviour (Problem recognition stage)

Time period. Respondents were asked about when they had started to think about postgraduate study and courses. The focus groups revealed that the majority of responses fitted into one to two years before the course started. Illustrative quotations for each of these time periods are presented in Table 6.3. Two responses suggested three to four years prior to starting. There were some last-minute decisions however, with five students indicating time periods nine months before, down to just one month prior to starting. Some of the reasons given can be seen below. A number of students also discussed they had worked for a period after graduation, but had decided that they needed a master's qualification either to progress into something better, or to change their specialisation.

Table 6.3: Thoughts about postgraduate study from the focus groups

Over 1 year before	2 – 12 months before	Up to 1 month before
"For me it was a decision even before I started my undergraduate course because I wanted to be here doing this. I even thought about Manchester. I have always had passion for English people…. Because of the game on Commodore 64 when I was young… the only game I had was about Manchester United…. I was really young, about 8." FG6	*"Probably 9 months prior to enrolment that I realised that I wanted to re-sharpen or re-train certain skills, but it was closer towards the enrolment time that I knew exactly what it was that I wanted to pursue" FG2*	*"Less than a month before the course started…..I finished my degree, looked for a job, didn't have much success and thought how am I going to increase my success of doing what I want to do" FG2*
"I did my undergraduate in IT, I thought when I graduated I would do the same sort of thing, but after working in it, I decided I didn't." FG5 *"Same for me, I was working in industry with a lot of designers and decided it wasn't what I wanted to do" FG5*	*"It was towards the end of my degree" FG7*	*"I think it was a thought about how the job situation was going and I only came to apply only a month, not even a month before, it was on the open day for next year I came down" FG4*
"In India, the future of the child is decided before she is born. If you are doing a degree in Engineering, you have to do your Masters as well. To change this I have done my Communications masters, and now taken up the Advertising option here" FG6	*"Mine was more like retraining, because I trained as a teacher and then I taught for a year, last year and then when I finished my first year I just decided that I wanted a career change, so I decided to retrain" FG7*	*"I always thought I would do a masters course, but I didn't really like apply for it until a couple of weeks before the course started…. I didn't pass and then I passed, tried to look for a job and stuff and couldn't get a job, and then I thought I needed to do something". FG2*
"I knew straight away that I wanted to do postgraduate, but I needed some work experience first" FG5		*"One month before I started… because I was working, had some health issues and decided I would study" FG5*

For the interviews, all respondents except one started thinking about postgraduate over a year prior to starting.

Table 6.4: Time period from the interviews when early thoughts commenced

Time Period	**I1**	**I2**	**I3**	**I4**	**I5**	**I6**	**I7**	**I8**	**I9**
Over 1 year before	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Over 1 month – under 1 year before									
Up to 1 month before							X		

Reasons for pre-search stage commencing were also analysed in the interviews, in order to see what range of reasons were given. A higher level qualification to stand out was the most popular reason given, and most responses had a job-related focus, which was also seen in the focus groups. Therefore, this suggests that this should be an important theme within any course promotional material

Table 6.5: Reasons for wanting to study at postgraduate level from the interviews

Reason	**I1**	**I2**	**I3**	**I4**	**I5**	**I6**	**I7**	**I8**	**I9**
No Job					X		X		
Pressure to get married							X		
Develop academic skills		X						X	
Something new								X	
Higher level qualification to stand out		X	X	X		X			X
Increase promotion prospects						X			
Entry to a particular career	X				X				
To meet international people		X							

The qualitative quotations from each of the nine respondents from the interviews at pre-search stage can be seen in Table 6.6. The benefits of the UK having a strong reputation for HE study can also be seen here with International students, who appear to be drawn due to this aspect. Cultural aspects are also discussed relating to pressure to get married if they do not have a job, and how a higher level qualification in the UK reflected on their parents. Overall though, the main common response was job-related.

Table 6.6 Relevant illustrative quotes at pre-search stage from the Interviews

Respondent	Quotes
1 (Bangladesh)	*"I think it was back in 2015 (thinking about pg). I started my undergraduate in 2012, it was my third year, I was studying marketing. I had a teacher in marketing, he was a very good teacher, and he studied in the UK. I told him I want to be a teacher. He studied at the University of Hull, and if I want to be a teacher, in my country it is very difficult to get a good qualification from a masters' degree."*
2 (Germany)	*"I thought about it when I started with my final year dissertation… friends and family, they said I should think about doing postgraduate study". "I want to extend my knowledge was the main reason".*
3 (UK)	*"During my second year (thinking about pg study)…I was interested in a higher level of study, and was interested in public relations."* *"When the postgraduate loan came out I started thinking more seriously."* *"I did a PR module (at ug), I was really interested in PR".*
4 (UK)	*"I did fashion photography, but a lot of my dissertation was about how it was marketed. So that is how I started thinking about postgraduate study". "I started thinking about it during the Summer, after I graduated… late August".* *"The Summer was quite complicated, I had family in hospital … it took me a while to get my head around thinking about things like that".*
5 (Italy)	*"I used to work in my field, in theatre, but there wasn't enough work in the field, so I thought another kind of qualification could help me find a better job". "I realise that after I can work in the theatre through marketing and communications… it would be a good compromise".* *"3-4 months before I came here (started to think about it)… because I know I needed a level of English before I started"*
6 (UK)	*"I wanted to get qualifications to progress my career".* *"I went under 3 restructures within 18 months".* *"They were looking for level 7 qualifications as the next step or for better pay, I think that was probably one of the reasons why I chose to come back and study my masters".* *"Because I had been out of education for so long I wanted to do something for myself in terms of my own learning and progression".*
7 (UK)	*"When I finished my undergraduate degree I honestly did not know what I wanted to do, so for me I decided last minute".* *"I couldn't' get a job.. All my other friends have got jobs… under pressure to get married".* *"I saw this as an opportunity to become more educated,… I saw it as a positive… it's not my time yet to have that dream job".*
8 (Uzbekistan)	*"In my country it is difficult to leave your family"* *"It was a difficult choice for me, because it was a matter of money"* *"I spoke to my tutors from my university and they told me if I go and study abroad that I will be really professional, it will be really good for my CV and for my job application. So it will add value to my career".*
9 (Myanmar)	*"I just want to study abroad, especially in the UK, maybe because we were a British colony here 60 years ago".* *"Only very few students are going abroad, so it is like a good reputation for my parents".*

6.3 Information search

This section considers how prospective students actually became aware of the university, and also how they searched for information.

<u>How they became aware of the university.</u> Respondents were asked about how they became aware of the university, and a number of students were already aware due to

either living within the area, or having some previous connection with the university. Other students had made their mind up to study in the area of Manchester, so they searched to find out what universities were available. Destination is therefore an important aspect:

> *"I start to say OK I want to go to England and I just look at the map and I had my mind set on Manchester. I can't say why and then I started looking through the courses and I played around with a few ideas and I thought OK I'm going to do this and I'm going to do it in Manchester and nowhere else" FG4*
>
> *"I decided to come to this city, I came here and researched for what I can do" FG5*
>
> *"I wanted to stay at home and searched in Manchester" FG5*

The remaining responses centred about the university being known by family and friends/personal recommendation, through another organisation and through searching.

Table 6.7: How students became aware of the university – from the focus groups

Category	Example quotes
Connected to u/g degree	*"I was here at undergraduate level" FG2* *"It was one of the universities I applied to on my undergraduate course" FG4*
Live in area	*"It was just down the road from me and I obviously heard about how good the uni. is, compared to say Salford, in terms of the results you get, and it was quite a popular uni." FG7* *"I am from Chester, so I am aware of the university" FG4*
General searching online	*"Through a website… find a UK university… MMU was at the top" FG2* *"I was expecting to do something in Canada….then I put Advertising Masters and this came up, through some third party search engine. I have family here." FG6*
Through another organisation	*"My agent recommended the UK and MMU" FG5* *"I started searching on courses accredited by the CIM" FG5* *"I have completed an international foundation course in Manchester, there were adverts for MMU, they gave us a tour, so then I thought of coming here" FG7*
By personal recommendation	*"The teacher recommended to go to MMU" FG1* *"My friend told me she's studying here and told me to come here" FG2* *"My friends have been studying in the Uni of Manchester and they didn't have an interesting course and they knew about this uni" FG2* *"I did some work experience at Christmas and they were all off this course… it is one of the better places" FG4* *"My brother and sister they study here, so I just come here" FG1*

Clearly, professional bodies and links with them are important for some students, and this is further illustrated when looking at where students generally searched for further information. Agents also seem to be a key part in generating awareness for some international students. Agents can therefore be seen as a key influencer for some students, and this is explored further in the influencers section.

The focus groups revealed that prospective students searched for reviews online, considered university rankings and/or reviews, but also that traditional open days are still important for some.

Table 6.8: Where students searched for information – from the focus groups

Category	***Relevant quote***
Rankings, Website	*"I only look for some information, like the rankings from the internet and explore the website of the Uni." FG3*
Information sent to student	*"Even before I applied, even if I was just like interested, or just asked for something, they sent me so much information, but with MMU, when I got the information it was about the whole university, not about the course or the faculty I would be in. With other universities I got information about the faculty and the actual course, past students, and what they have said about it, and there is so much more information given than this university" FG2*
Open Evening	*"You obviously do your research and coming to the open evening is part of that, and looking at the kind of investment that is going into MMU and your links with industry were part of that. What previous students say, for me they are not going to be an accurate gage."FG2*
Reviews	*"I looked at a couple of reviews and what they had said, some were quite old like 2008, but some were like five-star ratings. A couple were like really bad value for money and stuff, but it was generally positive" FG5* *"I looked on, I think it was called Student Barometer, for a recommendation, because I was quite undecided of where to come" FG7*
Google	*"I just did a Google of Manchester/Salford, and a lot of people preferred MMU to Salford, so that was like a positive thing" FG5*

Positive reviews appear to be important for some students, and this may be linked to the level of risk associated with this type of decision.

The transcripts from the interviews were analysed in order to see how much information each respondent searched for. A wide range of search behaviour was seen with respondent 1 searching extensively, and respondent 7 only considering the university website. However, respondent 7 applied very late, within one month of the course starting (see Table 6.4), which may have restricted information searching activity.

Table 6.9: Information searching – from the interviews

	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9
University website	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
University rank		X						X	
Google course names		X		X					
Open day						X			
Social media comments					X	X			X
University open day event – outside UK					X	X			X
The complete university guide									X
University Facebook page									X
Student forum	X				X				
Visa requirements	X								
Language requirements	X	X							
Accreditations	X		X			X			
Length of course	X								
Tuition fees	X	X	X						
Quality of staff in department	X								
Availability of a scholarship	X								
Location of university	X	X							
Availability of internships	X								

Relevant quotes were also extracted from the interview transcripts regarding information searching, and this can be seen in Table 6.10 (below). Respondents 2 (Germany), 3 (UK) and 8 (Uzbekistan) all implied a more structured approach to their information searching utilising lists and shortlists. The website appeared to be the most important place to obtain information, and the interviews provided some insight into what was searched for. For example, Interviewee 1 was interested in looking at how well qualified/ experienced staff were, including level of publications. Interviewee 4 was more interested in looking at the content of each course,

Table 6.10 Information searching – information from interviews by respondent

Interview	Quotes
1 **(Bangladesh)**	*"I was looking at the website and the quality of the teachers/staffs… Personal experience and their PhDs, if they were experienced. I was searching for the scholarship thing, and the location as well."* *"MMU is quite good in Internet, like the student review and the teachers are highly reputable. With MMU I can actually check the website and published paper list, the staff are highly publishable. And the good thing in the website I can actually check who is taking the module and see the experience and expertise".* *"I considered Australia and the UK, because in the USA the requirements are higher, I need to do the GMAT test. So I didn't apply to the USA because of the GMAT thing, and the visa are quite high there."*
2 **(Germany)**	*"Because I studied International Business and Management, I looked at HRM and International Trade."* *"I just searched courses, marketing and general and communications, those general words"* *"America and Australia (considered), but they were just too far when I did my research, and the cost was much too high".* *"In Europe, and then in Germany, what is not too far away from family… I looked at countries speaking German, then English, then Spanish"* *"I didn't want to have too many, so I more or less focused on just 10".* *"I think it was 4 countries: Austria, Britain, Spain, and the Netherlands. It was like which cities do I like in these countries."* *"I did another list, of 4 or 5 and I tried to figure out what are the cons and the pros, I just started with the UK because I love the country, I have family here. I just wrote down these 3 or 4 bullet points, and it was clear for me I would go to the UK".*
3 **(UK)**	*"I started looking for accredited courses, because that is important. I did some work within admissions and as a student ambassador, and UCAS fairs and recruiting. It is what you tell people to make sure they are making the smart choice."* *"I came up with a list, and the final list was 4 universities."*
4 **(UK)**	*"I started to look for something in Manchester, because I wanted to stay at home".* *"I actually typed into Google MA Marketing courses in Manchester".* *"I printed off each brief from every course, and compared them, from the websites".* *"I didn't look for any comments".* *"It was MMU, Salford, University of Manchester, and Edge Hill".*
5 **(Italy)**	*"Online, I focused on the subject. I started to write the main university in Italy, and also the prices. I looked in Milan, because I know there are a lot of businesses and a lot of universities as well".* *"When I looked at MMU I wasn't sure about project management, marketing, marketing communications, marketing tourism".* *"I research for such a long time, in Italy, here. When you find something you like, you fall in love. You stop the research when you find something that is right for you".*
6 **(UK)**	*"I was looking at university websites…. Looking at doing a Management masters"* *"What I was looking at first of all was CIM accredited courses and professional courses".* *"I looked at the Oxford College of Marketing, Cambridge, where it needed to be flexible around my work… online programmes as well with the University of Liverpool… and local universities across Greater Manchester".* *"I picked up on quite a lot of social media advertising initially… looking back on it, more influential than what I realised".*

	"I was looking at the university websites, subsequently subscribing to course information, looking at Facebook pages for the Business School, what was going on and the types of courses". *"I was predominantly looking at marketing, marketing comms. Looked at some digital marketing as well, and public relations".*
7 **(UK)**	*I Looked online. I looked at Salford but realised they weren't doing a PR postgrad course. They were a bit cheaper.* *"I was looking at the website, and I also spoke to people on the phone from MMU"*
8 **(Uzbekistan)**	*"I looked at European websites, American and UK and compared them". "I went to the website that shows the rank of the universities. It was the Complete University Guide" …….. "It was a shortlist of just 10"* *"I did research on where to live, and I did research for international students, for example is there any international support officer".* *"I researched about the facilities, career options, the course, how the course is presented, disciplines within the course….. I went to the site… if it wasn't well designed it didn't interest me."*
9 **(Myanmar)**	*"I think I checked the Australian universities, but their masters is 2 years, so I decided not to, so just think about the UK".* *"I was just looking at the title of the course… searching on project management… also looking for international business & management, and entrepreneurship".* *"I do more research than before, because I work at an education consultant company and I have a lot of interaction with universities in the UK" (for 2017 application).* *"Complete university Guide, and I also check university Facebook page about how they feel about the university, and also What Uni".*

It was clear that although there were many very different approaches to searching for information, the majority did take some time to search for information.

6.4 Application (evaluation stage)

Two areas were considered; application pattern and experience of the application process. Application pattern relates to exploring the number of applications and the location of these. Experience relates to each respondents' evaluation of the application process, and consideration of positives and negatives associated with this.

<u>Application patterns.</u> The number of universities that students applied to varied considerably. In the focus groups some just applied to one university, others a few, at the higher end eight was the largest number discussed by one student, and fifteen to twenty by another student. Typically, most were up to three or four and it was found that applicants could be split into five different categories based upon their types and patterns of application, by considering the number of applications and their location:

- Multiple countries – multiple applications (>1) to more than one country
- Country – multiple applications (>1) within one country
- Regional – multiple applications (>1), but focused on a particular region within a country
- City – multiple applications (>1), but all focused around a particular city
- Single – only one application, but may include more than one course.

From the respondents in the focus groups application pattern examples are seen in Table 6.11 below.

Table 6.11: Applications by category – focus groups

Multiple country	*"I applied to one in England and two in Germany" FG4* *"I applied to quite a few in America, but then decided that I wanted to stay in England" FG4*
Country	*"I applied to three universities – one in Cornwall, one in Southampton, and here" FG6* *"I applied to Leeds Met, I think Glasgow, but I chose the Manchester one" FG1*
Regional	*"I applied for two courses in Chester and two at MMU" FG6* *"They (the agent) gave me eight universities around Manchester and I applied to two" FG1*
City	*"I applied to three: University of Manchester, MMU and Salford" FG1*
Single	*"I only applied here, mostly because I saw the qualification and knew I would get in! I figured if I exceeded what was asked it wouldn't be a problem. I considered another school in Scotland, but I preferred England." FG6* *"My agency and my company have a close relationship with this university, so I didn't apply anywhere else" FG5* *"I applied to one course at one university, and because they responded so quickly, I didn't apply elsewhere" FG5*

In addition to the number of universities applied to, it is interesting to note the range of countries, destinations within countries, and areas. Some students did not appear to have made their mind up about which country they wanted to study in, others clearly knew the country, but had not focused on a particular location, whilst others were more targeted and their choices were regional.

One applicant explained their thinking behind their multiple applications:

> *"At that point I was undecided where to go, I applied one year in advance and I thought when I had finished, I had more time to go more in-depth in the research process. I narrowed it down at that point, but I couldn't really pin-point which one to go to……It was all-over the UK, it was the in the South, even in Scotland, in Edinburgh, all over the UK" FG7*

Others explained why they made a single application:

"It's location for me" FG7

"It's quite easy to get to for me by train, and just with it having a Business School really, I just thought of the one" FG7

Application patterns from the interviews were also analysed. The transcripts revealed that many more options were considered, before narrowing down for application, as seen in Table 6.12 below. Whilst five of those interviewed had considered universities in different countries, only one of those interviewed actually put in applications to multiple countries. As seen with the focus groups, many have not decided on which country or region within a country they want to study at, and even at the application stage, a number of locations are still being considered by some. However, at the searching stage, as all were considering more than one HEI, this highlights the importance of appropriate information being available, and that any engagement is a positive experience.

Table 6.12: Universities considered and applied to – from the interviews

	I1	**I2**	**I3**	**I4**	**I5**	**I6**	**I7**	**I8**	**I9**
Consideration Set									
Multiple countries	X	X			X			X	X
Country			X						
Regional				X		X			
City							X		
Single									
Application									
Multiple countries	X								
Country								X	X
Regional		X							
City									
Single			X	X	X	X	X		

The interview transcripts provided further insight into application patterns, and highlights the range of HEIs being considered. The interviews also provided further information regarding the types of countries and universities being considered. Furthermore, final decisions regarding which subject area was to be selected had not been made by all, with interview respondents 6 and 9 yet to decide at the application stage (see Table 6.13 below).

Table 6.13 Applications – quote from interviews

Interview	**Quotes**
1 **(Bangladesh)**	*"I only apply UK and Australia as well. I guess it was January 2017, I finished study September 2016, and I worked for 7-8 months".*
2 **(Germany)**	*"I put in 2 applications, both in the UK, one was here in Manchester, the other was in Leeds".* *"I would accept both of them yes".*
3 **(UK)**	*"I suppose working at open days you can kind of tell when the lecturers are just trying to talk up the course, but they were genuinely interested in what they could do for the students. That was like, I don't need to look anywhere else. I came in the September of my third year and applied by the Christmas. I was just like get it out of the way and get it done."*
4 **(UK)**	*"One course, at MMU".* *"I have applied late… late August/September time".*
5 **(Italy)**	*"Just one course at MMU, in April*
6 **(UK)**	*"Actually applying I was quite hesitant up until around February/March, when I made my decision to do it really. When it came to submitting the application it was quite late, it was around July, before starting in September. I didn't think there was a lot of urgency".* *"I was looking at doing a Management masters, and when I submitted my application I think it even said Management on it… but then I realised that I wanted to be a specialist in Marketing".* *"Just to MMU" "I got offers for both (courses)"*
7 **(UK)**	*"I literally applied the last week before we weren't allowed to apply anymore"* *"The Salford course had been cancelled so I just went straight to MMU. What if the spaces are full? If I don't get in, what am I going to do?"*
8 **(Uzbekistan)**	*"Cardiff ….. Manchester"* *"Cardiff university was much easier (to put in an application)".*
9 **(Myanmar)**	*"I planned to come here for 2015, but my visa was refused".* *"I chose Manchester Metropolitan University, at the same time (as University of Huddersfield), so I just came here again in 2017".* *"I got an offer from University of Huddersfield and MMU as well".* *"I apply in 2017 to around 15 universities and got around 10 offers from those"* *"I got offer from Westminster in London, also Sheffield Hallam, Roehampton, Glasgow, Caledonian, Oxford Brooke…. Some marketing management, some international marketing".*

Application experience. Students in the focus groups were asked about their experience of the application process and some pertinent points were discussed. These can be categorised as positive and negative experiences. During the focus groups, it became clear that there were many negative experiences. Most negative experiences were focused around delays in acknowledgement of applications, lack of communication during the application process, length of time taken to receive an offer, and issues regarding negative experiences when they contacted the University for an update.

Some of these negative experiences resulted in applicants looking elsewhere, as the following quote illustrates. This demonstrates the importance of a quick response to applicants.

> *"I must say it took a long time to get my acceptance, because I got really nervous and that's why I applied to another university, and I got a response straight away" FG1*

Negative experiences can be seen in Table 6.14 below, and most negative experiences related to time aspects. Admissions were perceived as not responding as quickly as applicants expected them to.

Table 6.14: Negative experiences: focus groups

" I applied really early, April/May and hadn't heard anything back by the beginning of September, so I was panicking. So I had to contact the tutors to see what was going on. It might have got lost" FG4
"I think I ended up getting on the course because of (course leader name) actually because the admissions team they didn't get back to me. I rang them several times, but then I had a word with (course leader name) and she sorted it for me" FG4
"Mine was quite negative unfortunately. I applied quite late, it had been two months and I hadn't heard anything. I called up and they said they had received it, but hadn't registered it through….. I still didn't hear anything back. Then (course leader name) got in touch and I had an interview…. Then when I came for enrolment week they hadn't actually processed my offer, so I couldn't enrol with everyone else. I didn't have a student card for about a week. I wasn't on the system, so I couldn't access my timetable or find anything out….." FG6
"(programme leader name), I contact her, she was really quick getting back to me, but then the administrators weren't quick at all" FG4
"The process was really slow, I had to keep sending emails to say I was still alive (laughing), it was only after the pre-sessional course that finished on the 7th September that they would look for accommodation. It was starting in 13 days, and there was nothing and I sent emails to everyone in Manchester. They sent me an email saying there was just one left in Victoria Halls - I only got it 2 days before the course (started)" FG6
"I applied I guess in the month of January, and got a reply back about four and a half months later (sounds of shock/disbelief). I was ready to go to the University of Hull, I had given the payments and everything." FG6
"I was always emailing direct@mmu.ac.uk, felt like it wasn't a person, it was automated and they never get back to me. I had to pester them quite a bit" FG4
"I think it was nearly two months, because I see my friend apply to (name) university and theirs was just two weeks" FG3
"They did send me an email saying they had received my application, but they never sent me anything until I actually got a letter in the post. I was expecting an email as well, and that was about a month or two" FG2
"I was given a different person each time (in admissions), so I had to keep repeating the story and stuff" FG6

There were few positive experiences through the central admissions area, conversely involvement of Programme Leaders appeared to improve their experience. However, not many students had approached their Programme Leaders concerning any delay. Again, most positive responses related to time, which highlights the importance of a quick response throughout the application process.

Table 6.15: Positive experiences – focus groups

"I was just given the same guy" FG6
"I was really surprised by how fast I got a response" FG5
" I applied one week before induction…. because I had already gotten accepted at two others, but then I discovered this one and the course was better. I asked them to tell me if I was getting accepted so I knew what to tell the other guys. The answer came in three days!" FG6
"It was so quick, that's all I remember" FG3
"When I first rung up I was told I was too late, but then I found your (course leader) contact information on the website and after that the whole process was incredibly simple. Thank you for that!" FG5
"It was really quick and smooth" FG7
"I had contact from the course leader, via emails, it was quite helpful. They answered all the questions, and they gave you the information you needed beforehand" FG7

In the interviews, one respondent, waited patiently for an answer from admissions, which could be seen as a negative situation. This negative situation appeared to be turned round to a positive, due to the quick response from the Recruitment and Engagement Manager in the Business School.

> *"It was ok, I got the thank you for your application and then I waited a while. Can't remember how long, but I called (name of postgraduate recruitment & engagement manager in the Business School) in the postgrad, because I hadn't had an answer. I think it had been about 8 weeks maybe, and he was like oh you should have had an answer by now, and then the next day it came through*." Interview 3

There appeared to be less negative experiences regarding the admissions process for the interviews, than with the previous focus groups, and there were some positives relating to a quick response by two of the respondents. This is worth noting, as the interviews involved a later cohort of students, suggesting some improvement has been made here. However, there still appeared to be a number of negative experiences of the application process from the interviews, as the following illustrates.

> *"I didn't actually get an email for a few days, and I was worried". Interview 4*
>
> *"I was calling every week. I just wanted an update on my application, for me it was really stressful. I had really bad anxiety".* Interview 7
>
> *"Cardiff University was much easier (to put in an application)… There was a problem with the website. I had lost all my information and I had to start again (during online application process for MMU)".* Interview 8

Response times to late applicants, such as interview respondent 7, who applied within 1 month before the course commenced, appear to be perceived as too slow.

6.5 Decision

This research explored factors that were important to students, to see if any new areas appeared, and to see what emerged specifically for just postgraduate students (as opposed to undergraduate). In the focus groups a variety of factors were selected including: price, course content, location of Manchester, a new building, quick response, reputation, opportunities for internships/work placements, accredited by a professional body and the practical nature of course. One student mentioned they had been on a taster course run by the course leader and that was why they had come to the course. Price, course content and location were the most frequently mentioned factors. See Table 6.16 below.

The applied nature of the course was also important, and in existing research, this may be covered within the area of content of the course. The analysis of the focus group transcripts have been themed under appropriate criteria of: course, cost, reputation and ranking, staff, location, facilities, and employability.

Table 6.16: Criteria important to postgraduate students for final decision – focus groups

Criteria	*Sample quotes that relate to specified criteria*
Course	*"Manchester Business School was really academic and not practical. Maybe it had a higher standing in tables and things, but this was what appealed to me, this course" FG4*
	"I was looking at what units they have" FG4
	"The course is up to date" FG5
	"I just liked the course structure of Creative Advertising" FG6
	"For me I check the module descriptions and the IBP unit did it for me as I didn't have work experience, and don't think the other universities had that" FG5 (explaining about the live client brief)
	"This was the first university that I looked at and I was like oh that looks great and then forgot about it and then looked at a zillion others. Then came back to this one because I just couldn't find anything else to beat it, but I actually didn't want to stay in Manchester!" FG3
	"In Canada there is no masters in advertising…. there was no other course like it" FG6
	"The variety and depth of each unit added extra strings to my bow, which would have helped when I got a job" FG5
	"…And also found it really descriptive the information about the course and it really inspired and really intrigued me" FG6
	"Mine was course content. I looked at pretty much every Marketing course in Europe and in the UK, and even courses at Manchester Uni, and I was looking at courses in Germany as well because you can do MA courses over there for free and they are taught in English…. But there was no creative element to it and I thought that the modules and structure of this course were better than or more accessible than any of the others." FG3
Cost	*"Living in London costs a lot more" FG4*
	"For me I didn't want to go to London, it was crazy expensive and other courses cost twice as much" FG4
	"Price was a big issue" FG5
	" … and also the price. Going to school in the US is insane! FG6
	"It is the same cost to come here…in Canada it is a two year course. So two years in Canada was equivalent to doing one year here" FG6
Reputation & Ranking	*"I think when I was looking on Wikipedia it says that Manchester Business School is one of the best one's in the World, and in The Times Ranking it was like just below Harvard and Cambridge and stuff, but I think for that course in particular in comparison to this one, where you have more vocational skills and more value for money" FG7*
	"The strength of the degree. If you do get a degree from here it is well recognised" FG7
	"Honestly, I didn't look at the ranking because I thought I would do something that I really want to do. I don't want to do it just for the name of it" FG4
Staff	*"I was looking at what units they have and also the person at the open day/evening and I talked to (programme leader name) and she seemed very nice" FG4*
	"What I really like on the MMU Website is you can actually see the staff teaching the course. Other uni's don't do that and you have to write and ask them, because it is interesting to see what the teachers are doing, their background and articles" FG7
Location	*"I wanted somewhere I could commute to" FG6*
	"Apart from London, Manchester is probably one of the biggest cities (for advertising), and it's really vibrant as well" FG6
	"Manchester has a big music scene, bigger than Cincinnati" FG6
	"When I was looking, when I was 18, I picked about what was best about the course, and it's ranking, but when it gets down to it and when you go to the campus and see what it is like, it's a personal thing. You have to live somewhere for 3 years, you have to know it's the right place to live. It's more like a personal connection" FG7
Facilities	*"The really new building" FG5*
	"…and the building. All the things together" FG4
Employability	*"Good job prospects afterwards for me was a consideration" FG7*
	"I found more interest in Manchester as I think more opportunities for marketing" FG3
	"The variety and depth of each unit added extra strings to my bow, which would have helped when I got a job" FG5

What was really surprising to see from the focus groups when looking at course content was the comparisons being made between courses not only in the UK, but in various other countries. For example, lack of availability of a Masters in Advertising in Canada was mentioned (FG6), and a lack of creative type courses in Germany (FG3). Time aspects were also useful to note, for example two years to study a master level qualification in Canada (FG6) and the same in Australia (Interview 1 – see Table 6.18 below). Time aspects were also considered in relation to costs, as a 1-year master-level course was more cost efficient, when comparing with a 2-year course in their home country (FG6).

Regarding the applied nature of the courses, the vocational nature of the course was mentioned as an important aspect (FG7). Furthermore, the attractiveness of the live client brief unit (where students work directly with a client) was also mentioned as being important (FG5).

The importance of links with professional bodies and/or accreditations was discussed in one of the focus groups, but also in a number of the interviews:

> *"My criteria for the three I applied to was that they were all accredited, Greenwich, Manchester Uni and this one. FG4*

Furthermore, Interviewee 1 also highlighted the importance of professional bodies and accreditations (see Table 6.18 below), mentioning both the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB). Interviewee 6 also mentioned CIM accredited courses were important. Interviewee 3 mentioned the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) as important.

The interviews provided further insight regarding decision making and criteria that informed their choice, in order to determine how much thought went into each respondents' decision. Table 6.17 provides an overview of a range of criteria each interviewee mentioned. Respondent 8 considered many more aspects than any of the other interviewees, and respondent 4 did not appear to consider very much when making their decision. Tuition fees were mentioned by 8 out of the 9 interviewees.

Table 6.17: Criteria mentioned when selecting course – interviews

Criteria	**I1**	**I2**	**I3**	**I4**	**I5**	**I6**	**I7**	**I8**	**I9**
University rank	X							X	
Course/units			X			X		X	
Tuition fees	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Student accommodation								X	
Entry requirements	X			X			X	X	X
Facilities								X	
Career options								X	
How course presented								X	
University website design								X	
Living costs		X	X					X	X
Practical nature of course			X		X	X		X	
Support for students available							X	X	
Length of course	X								
Mode of attendance									
Reputation of university	X						X		X
Convenient to commute to			X	X	X	X			
Accredited by professional body	X		X			X			X
Experience at undergraduate level						X			
Links to alumni						X			
Links to business						X			
Reputation of city	X								X
Family living near		X	X						
Like location		X							
Can speak language		X							
Scholarship available	X								
Visa requirements	X								
Interested staff			X						
Liked campus			X						

The interviews provided further quotations and insight into how they had made their decision. Respondent 9 had a particularly difficult time due to refusal of a Visa for 2015-16 entry, eventually being accepted for 2017-18 entry. The quotations in Table 6.18 provided significant insight into a range of areas that would be useful to consider in future marketing activities.

Table 6.18: Making an informed decision - interviews

Interview	Quote
1 (Bangladesh)	*"Australia and UK there are only IELTS. I didn't go for Australia, because they are like 2 years of masters. I wanted to apply for a PhD, and some of the universities in the UK have AACSB and CIM accredited. Manchester in the UK is a city and a very popular location, and for internships, Manchester is a very good place." "It was tough for me, I was aiming for Essex, but I didn't get a scholarship from Essex, and I was offered a scholarship from MMU and Hull. So I choose MMU because of the location".*
2 (Germany)	*"It was a mixture of rankings, what other people had said, my own thoughts, how I feel about the country, how I feel about the culture". "There were 2 big reasons, one was the cost reason, the other was the family, because I have a lot of family here, more than in Leeds". "I decided in May 2017, it was more or less a fast decision then, I wanted to start with my preparations for the year abroad".*
3 (UK)	*"Location was an important one". "I could have gone to the University of Manchester, but I liked this course and this campus". "I looked up on their website (CIPR) and it had a link to all their accredited courses"*
4 (UK)	*"The reason I did pick marketing communications was because I had studied it for a year previously, so hopefully that would give me a boost in learning stuff".*
5 (Italy)	*"I enjoyed so much the life in Manchester, so I said maybe I can do the masters here, more value and at the same time I can better my English" "When you find something you like, you fall in love. You stop the research when you find something that is right for you".*
6 (UK)	*"The first thing was cost, if I am honest". "What I was looking at first of all was CIM accredited courses" "One of the main factors was the course itself, and I think the links they had with alumni, and links with businesses that the university and business school worked with." "I made the decision after I submitted (re marketing)" "The only reason why I chose MMU in the end was because it was local to where I live". "Because of my age I wanted to go where I was familiar with as well".*
7 (UK)	*"I do know that MMU is a good university. I know people that have studied here".*
8 (Uzbekistan)	*"Manchester Metropolitan University offers more practical courses than Manchester University" "I was looking at prices, tuition fees, student accommodation, location, is there any international support officer …. I made a table in Excel… the content of the course was engaging and there was a description of what trips… it was easy to decide"*
9 (Myanmar)	*"The University of Huddersfield is where most of the students from Myanmar go. I don't want to study where there are lots of students from my country". "I want to study in a reputable city. If I mention I study in Manchester, because of Manchester United, they know Manchester." "If I go study in Chester, the city if very small, there's not going to be very much opportunity compared to studying in a very big city. The final choice was definitely to go to London or Manchester, but London is very expensive". "My visa was refused (again), so I have to sit for IELTS again, or choose another university, so I choose to Huddersfield again, but they stop the project management course due to the shortage of the student. My plan for study abroad was cancelled". "I decided to go and work, I was working as a marketing manager, I feel like I need to apply to that course specifically, so I just decided to study for marketing for 2017". "Sheffield Hallam are discounting £4,000 off, so Sheffield is just £10,000, but here I have to pay £13,500… MMU are more based on the practical and on the live client project, and a lot of chance to go to the internship, and to study the professional diploma. Most other universities don't offer that sort of thing." "If I go to the University of Manchester, it is like very expensive, like £20,000 or something… and their course is based on curriculum, theory".*

Also worth noting in both the focus groups and interviews were place related aspects. These covered areas such as reputation of the city, or simply familiarity or liking of the city, the convenience of commuting to the university, or linked to the employment opportunities presented. Some of the cost aspects were also place related, such as Manchester being less expensive than London (I9; FG4)

6.6 Post purchase evaluation

Two areas were explored relating to post purchase evaluation: satisfaction levels for their chosen course/university, and whether any WOM/e-WOM had taken place since their arrival.

<u>Establishing the level of satisfaction</u>. In the focus groups, a number of students expressed their views regarding how happy they were with their course. Whilst many negative comments were received regarding the application process, comments regarding their experience on the course were generally very positive, as the following examples illustrate:

> *"I am totally happy with my course, probably one of the best decisions I have ever made" FG5*
>
> *"It has exceeded my expectations to be honest" FG5,*
>
> *"I am also very happy because we have had a lot of guest lecturers already, and a lot of former students, and they kind of really shared what you can do after finishing the course" FG7*
>
> *"English is not my first language, so it is quite difficult, but I don't regret coming" FG5*

In the interviews, again everyone appeared happy overall with their choice, although there was some discussion that could be viewed as less than positive regarding the weather, language, difficulty of postgraduate study and different education systems (Table 6.19).

A number of positives in the interviews related to people, either being friendly (I1), polite (I2), or professional (I3) (Table 6.19).

Table 6.19 Post purchase evaluation comments – interviews

Interview	Quote
1 (Bangladesh)	*"I think it is a good decision for me to decide to come here. People here are very friendly."*
2 (Germany)	*"I just thought about it in the first two weeks whether it was right or wrong, but there were so many positive things. The accommodation, the people are very polite there, the university itself. The first week was a bit tough, but was good to get into the studies. I don't regret it to be honest, that I chose Manchester".*
3 (UK)	*"I've not had doubts about the course, the course is fantastic. It's quite stressful doing a postgraduate qualification and doing group work with people straight away, who I had never met before and that was like a big challenge for me."* *"You recruit professional people to the course, so it's useful for networking, it breeds professionalism, whereas some universities it is very casual at postgrad (level)".*
4 (UK)	*"I am always being asked at work how much I am enjoying the course. I say to everyone I am enjoying the course".*
5 (Italy)	*"Just one negative thought that it was too big for me, it is not only the education system but the language".* *"It is good".*
6 (UK)	*"I have not heard of many negative comments about anyone's experience... I think it is what people thought it would be"*
7 (UK)	*"I think I have (made right decision), it is a lot of hard work, don't get me wrong. If anything it has really taught me how to be more organised because before I never used to be organised I used to just go with the flow"*
8 (Uzbekistan)	*"I think I made the right decision. I like my course and I like my Uni".*
9 (Myanmar)	*"Sometimes I feel I made the right decision, but sometimes not, because of the weather. And the first term I don't feel the value of the money, because the way I study before it is quite different."* *"I don't regret it at all".*

Overall, the majority of comments were of a positive nature in both the focus groups and the interviews.

<u>Word-of-mouth/E-word-of-mouth.</u> Quite a number of the focus group students had participated in WOM/e-WOM since arriving on their course. This has been categorised into Tradition WOM (using traditional off-line media); e-WOM Twitter; e-WOM Facebook; e-WOM blog; e-WOM Foursquare; e-WOM other (Table 6.20). Interesting to note was the range of people that would view these comments: students at their previous university; tutors at previous university, and general social media posts that would reach a very wide range of people connected to each individual posting comments.

Table 6.20: WOM/eWOM activity undertaken by students – focus groups

Category	Example quotes
Traditional WOM	*"Back home, where I come from, the university…. I have told them about the uni, and recommended it" FG2* *"I have spoken to my old tutors" FG2* *"I have spoken to the undergraduates that went on placement year, and say come here" FG2*
e-WOM Twitter	*"I have Tweeted a lot of things I have been doing in classes and things" FG4* *"I have used Twitter a few times to talk about the course" FG2*
e-WOM Facebook	*"I've updated my profile to show I am studying at MMU, that's all" FG5* *"The only thing I have done is my Facebook profile saying that I am starting in this university" FG3* *"I have posted Facebook status and things about how the course is going" FG4*
e-WOM blog	*"I've done a blog post about postgraduate courses at MMU" FG5*
e-WOM Foursquare	*"I have taken a picture of my class and posted it on Foursquare and posted content on that link… and the view from the postgraduate common room" FG7*
e-WOM other	*"I have posted about the building. I have posted a link to MMU explaining a lot of it and stuff and a picture" FG2* *"I just wrote personal messages to people who are interested in here and I told them how I found the university and actually one guy said he would consider coming here because he thought it sounded really good" FG4*

Within the focus groups there appears to be a large number of e-WOM postings taking place, along with more traditional WOM. Furthermore, in the interviews, a wide range of WOM/e-WOM had taken place, although two respondents had not yet discussed their course experience with anyone (Table 6.21). However, there were many common patterns relating to WOM/e-WOM between the focus groups and interviews.

Table 6.21: WOM/e-WOM at post purchase evaluation stage – interviews

	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9
None undertaken						X	X		
Provided advice to friends					X			X	
Not yet, but intends doing so									X
Discussed with staff at previous UG place of study	X	X	X					X	
Discussed with students still at UG place of study		X	X						
Comments on social media			X		X				
Discussed with work colleagues				X					

The interviews provided further insight regarding WOM/e-WOM, as seen in Table 6.22 below. It was interesting to see the type of information discussed, such as campus photographs.

Table 6.22 WOM/e-WOM comments from the interviews

Interview	Comment
1 (Bangladesh)	*"Yes all my teachers are coming to me… they know I am here… they check my profile and like my page".* *"I haven't written anything online, not yet".*
2 (Germany)	*"I just informed my family and my professor as well, and I just informed the next students who came after me, because I want to help them as well".*
3 (UK)	*"I've Tweeted some, I've spoken to a couple of the undergrads that are doing journalism on my old course* *I have spoken to people and said have a look at this.* *In welcome week I was Tweeting pictures of the campus and stuff. Snapchat, I have got friends in I took a picture of the university of Manchester, and they said it looked like Hogwarts, and I said well I don't go there."* *"One of the directors of admissions at Staffs, her daughter came here….. I said the Business School is fantastic… the staff are really friendly."* *"You recruit professional people to the course, so it's useful for networking, it breeds professionalism, whereas some universities it is very casual at postgrad".*
4 (UK)	*"I am always being asked at work how much I am enjoying the course. I say to everyone I am enjoying the course".* *"It's all been offline I have communicated with people….. I am not a big social media person to be honest".*
5 (Italy)	*"A few months ago I spoke with this lady. She is thinking of doing her masters, she has IELTS now and I was speaking about my experience here and I said you can have a different kind of experience between MMU and University of Manchester, and also the different type of approach, and links with business and I say you can manage with the language and the subject and she say ok I try".*
7 (UK)	*"I do blog and I wanted to wait until I get to the end, so I can share my experience of what I thought about the course, whether it was worth it or not."*
8 (Uzbekistan)	*"After I left my country a lot of people became interested in how I did, and then I also gave some advice"*
9 (Myanmar)	*"I have a plan to share about it, but I don't have enough time".*

This section has demonstrated that the majority of students participate in some form of WOM/e-WOM. This is important to establish as existing students may then act as an influencer with other students as they progress on their decision journey regarding course selection for a later academic year.

6.7 Influencers

The role of people was explored and how they influenced the respondents during their decisions. Influencers is part of a wider category of influences, however, the focus of this research was on influencers (i.e people) and their role within the whole decision process. A number of people online and offline influenced students throughout the decision process. From the focus groups, these influencers can be categorised into three main groups: past and existing students; family and friends; and those involved with education. There was substantial evidence to suggest that these three groups played an important role during the decision process (See Table 6.23).

Table 6.23: Student influencers – focus groups

Past & existing students	Family and friends	Within education /professional bodies
"I would rather talk to past students than talk to tutors, because from the students perspective it is more real" FG2	*"My brother convinced me of this course" FG5*	*"The person at the open day/evening, and I talked to (course leader name) and she seemed nice" FG4*
"When I applied, I came to the interview, and talked to some of the students working on their projects" FG2	*"A lot of friends were positive about Manchester" FG5*	*"The teacher recommended to go to MMU" FG1*
"My friend, she is Japanese, she went to MMU. She told me if you want to go to England you can try my university. She said nice things about it" FG6	*"My parents are very supportive and they have also heard good things about Manchester. I went to Chester for my degree, and it is quite a small city. They thought Manchester would be broadening my horizons" FG6*	*"Because I was interested in graphic advertising, they (college) said MMU" FG2*
"After talking to my friend who studied here last year I definitely decided to come here" FG5	*"I showed my friend the course itinerary and he said go for it" FG5*	*"My agent recommended the UK and MMU"* FG5
"I was looking in forums" FG3	*"After talking to my friend who studied here last year, I definitely decided to come here" FG5*	*"I also talked to German PR bodies, where they had heard of certain universities" FG7*
"Student Room forum, that is where (I looked) before coming here"	*"My friends suggestion I change to here, I was surely going to Edinburgh" FG2*	
"Just going through like seeing how like great reviews the university has" FG2	*"My friends have been studying in the Uni of Manchester and they didn't have an interesting course and they knew about this uni". FG2*	
"I asked a few people who had been here, and they said it was quite good" FG7		
"I think I found it through a website Whatuni or something. It's like a UK find a university and you kind of look for the course you want to do and they will recommend. MMU was the top, a reviewed one" FG2	*"My brother and sister they study here, so I just came here" FG1*	

However, one student explained about comments found online:

> *"Those comments on those sites aren't always dead reliable, and for me (course leader name) offered to put me in touch with former students, and this was more helpful because a recommendation was no help because some said "oh it is really great", others said "it was so horrible", so you can't really believe." FG7*

The transcripts from the interviews were analysed in order to determine how many different types of influencers each respondent referred to. Respondent 1 and 8 sought advice the most (Table 6.24 below), and looking at previous Tables 6.9/6.10, respondent 1 also sought a lot of information to support this decision. Both respondent 1 and 8 put in multiple applications (Table 6.12) either within multiple countries, or throughout the UK.

Table 6.24: Who had influenced them in the decision – interviews

Influencer	**I1**	**I2**	**I3**	**I4**	**I5**	**I6**	**I7**	**I8**	**I9**
Family friends previously studied postgraduate						**X**	**X**		**X**
Friends previously studied at destination		**X**						**X**	
Tutors from UG course	**X**	**X**	**X**					**X**	
Family member lives in country	**X**							**X**	
Family member(s) view regarding course						**X**		**X**	
Influential community group								**X**	
Parent(s)				**X**		**X**			
Past student(s) (unknown)	**X**	**X**			**X**	**X**			**X**
Partner/husband/wife					**X**			**X**	
University representative (international)									**X**
English conversational class people					**X**				
Friends previously studies at the university	**X**								
Family previously studies abroad	**X**								
Agent	**X**								

Past students, and previous undergraduate tutors appeared to influence students the most.

Some of the detailed quotes behind this analysis can be seen in Figure 6.25 below. Respondent 4 appeared to not be using influencers to assist in her decision regarding which university/course, although there was some influence regarding working and postgraduate study.

Table 6.25 Information on who had influenced them - interviews

Interview	Quote
1 (Bangladesh)	"I know someone in my own country, she studied law here and she said in law this school is quite good. I went to the universities MMU official agent in my country, and I met with them." "All of my family members are educated; some of them have studied overseas. My brother-in-law in Australia. Two of my cousins are working, as doctors in Essex, so they say you should come to the UK, it is a very nice place and a very good place to study. My father, he always wanted me to go to the UK. "
2 (Germany)	"I asked a lot of professors for their recommendations". "They told me I should research online and ask other people, other students what they think about it". "I talked with my family". "I asked my family and friends what they think about it… they said I should google how the rankings are and compare then. Also I should ask the previous students who went there, take their experience and what they think about it, how hard it was for them". "Family was a big factor as well. I have family in Great Britain, especially near Manchester." "I asked previous students and my professor, because they already studied here. I asked them all and they said London is too busy, everyone is rushing too much and Manchester was a good balance of everything, very international, very kind, very polite people".
3 (UK)	"He (undergraduate respected lecturer) asked where, and I said MMU and Public Relations and he said, oh that's a very good course, and that was ok, it's got the seal of approval from someone." "One of my journalism lecturers used to be in the comms team at Manchester Police and she was like, oh yes the city is great and this happens."
4 (UK)	"I have worked with people at Next who have worked full-time after their degree for a while, then gone back and done a masters". "I didn't ask for any advice or anything like that… I don't really listen to what other people say. I make a decision for myself". "If I read a comment and someone wasn't nice about the university, how would I know they just didn't like something there? It is biased, you can't judge things on that, you have to experience it yourself". "Obviously I asked Mum and Dad because they know me better".
5 (Italy)	"I asked a lot of students that I met here in Manchester, foreign students. Most of them studied in the University of Manchester and said it was very very theoretical. Then I search other students that had studied here (MMU). "I met people in different situations, some through the library, some through my teacher, the others through this conversation group" "I just inform my parents, but they didn't really agree.. oh so you have left your husband for a year, well for him it is fine, he wants me to do this". "I asked the manager about the university if I wanted to do marketing and she spoke about the difference between MMU and the University of Manchester. And she say maybe MMU is better for me, because University of Manchester is more theory." "I was speaking to someone over the Summer, and she was doing project management, and for her there was too much theory. I told her about the course and being practical and she said it was the best one". "I asked some of my friends between marketing and marketing communications and say can you give me some advice".
6 (UK)	"I spoke to all of my family, my mum, my nan, all of my sisters, my partner at the time, friends, everyone. They were really supportive". "What I did do was speak to people that had been on masters programmes at various institutions I was looking at." "I did look online, in terms of social media, Facebook and Facebook reviews and stuff like that…. There were a few comments from students that were currently studying that made me question as to whether I would want to go there, hence that I didn't".

7 (UK)	"I come from an African background, and my parents have really high expectations for me" "I do know that MMU is a good university. I know people that have studied here". "I hear a lot of positive things from MMU" I just wanted to ask people to make sure I would be ready, because there is no point in going into something if you don't feel 100% about it. "It's a point of trust with other universities, just because I don't know anybody that goes there".
8 (Uzbekistan)	"My family of course, because my parents give me money for my study". "We have consulting groups in my country and they consult about study abroad…. They advised me to go to Manchester after London… they said in Manchester it would be more convenient for me because of living costs". "When I talk to one of my friends who used to study at Manchester University he told me that it is more academic than practical". "I have friends in Manchester who are from my country… they told me that Manchester is a good city to live, especially for students". "My sister, she lives in London and she said that she will support me".
9 (Myanmar)	"My sister, she suggest I go to Singapore, because she studies in Singapore, and the Visa is very easy compared to the UK. I didn't consider, because there are a lot of Myanmar people, it won't be unique". "I talk with alumni from that university" "Most people suggest I go to the university of Manchester"

It appears that the majority of respondents draw on a range of influencers to assist in making decisions, with UK, other EU country, or International students all drawing on them.

6.8 Consumer decision making process

This section analysed the transcripts for the focus groups and interviews for any evidence relating to whether the approach was linear or not, and any evidence of emotion aspects of the decision.

<u>Linear approach to decision making</u>

There was some limited evidence from the empirical findings that suggested the process in HE was not necessarily linear.

> *"I applied one week before induction… because I had already gotten accepted at two others, but then I discovered this one and the course was better. I asked them to tell me if I was getting accepted so I knew what to tell the other guys. The answer came in three days!" FG6*
>
> *"My friends suggestion I change to here. I was surely going to Edinburgh" FG2"*
>
> *"…it took a long time to get my acceptance, I got really nervous and that is why I applied to another university" FG1*

Also, in the interviews, respondent 5 (from Italy) undertook a comprehensive analysis or courses in Italy, before deciding to later widen the search to universities in the UK, with a focus on Manchester. Respondent 6 (from the UK) also added a further course, after submitting their application

> *"I was looking at doing a Management masters, and when I submitted by application I think it even said Management on it… but then I realised I want to be a specialist in Marketing".* Interview 6

Respondent 7 (from the UK) had also initially looked to apply to Salford, where they had previously studied, but had to switch to MMU after the postgraduate PR course was cancelled.

Respondent 9 (from Myanmar) had a more complex journey after having their Visa refused in 2015, after applying to the University of Huddersfield and MMU. However, in their 2017 application, they applied for more.

> *"I apply in 2017 to around 15 universities and got around 10 offers from those"*
> Interview 9

This suggest that some students had already made a decision regarding their narrow choice set, although they later added further choices to this initial choice set. This implies a more circular process is relevant to cater for these types of decision journeys, which will be considered further in the discussion section.

Rational versus emotional approach to decision making

Within this research, there was some limited evidence that emotional aspects influence decisions.

> *"For me it was a decision even before I started my undergraduate course because I wanted to be here doing this. I even thought about Manchester. I have always had passion for English people… because of the game on Commodore 64 when I was young… the only game I had was about Manchester United… I was really young, about 8" FG6*

> *"I start to say OK I want to go to England and I just look at the map and I had my mind set on Manchester, I can't say why. And then I started looking through the courses and I played around with a few idea and I thought OK I'm going to do this and I'm going to do it in Manchester and nowhere else" FG4*

This second quote highlights how country image and city image may influence the decision process.

This was further supported in the interviews, respondent 2 (from Germany) stated:

> *"I just started with the UK because I love the country"* Interview 2

Respondent 5 (from Italy) also suggested a more emotional decision to their course selection:

> *"When you find something you like, you fall in love. You stop the research when you find something that is right for you"* Interview 5

Respondent 6 (from the UK), who had previously studied at MMU, suggested an emotional link based upon their previous experience.

> *"I had such a good experience when I was at MMU, I think that was a big factor for me being drawn back to the university itself".* Interview 6

It is important to identify if decision making contains any emotional aspects, the consequences of which are explored in the discussion section in Chapter 7.

6.9 Engagement.

This section covers a range of engagement activities. Firstly considering the course specific social media groups, secondly looking at a range of engagement activities relating to staff, and thirdly, an overall analysis of touch point activity.

<u>Use of social media.</u> All the students in each of the focus groups and interviews had access to a pre-course specific Facebook page, run by each of the Programme Leaders. In the focus groups, many positive comments regarding this aspect were seen, as illustrated by the quotes selected below in Table 6.26. Comments regarding the Facebook group appeared to relate to two main areas. One area regarding students being able to see/connect with other students, which may therefore reduce anxiety regarding starting a new university and/or course. The other regarding an ability to connect with the Course Leader, and the related convenience/appearance of being more approachable.

Table 6.26: Views regarding course-specific Facebook group – positive (focus groups)

"I think it is a good idea, it shows the tutor cares about the students, because you are posting things that are interesting. My friend is studying also at MMU and I asked do you have a Facebook group, and she say no, so I think it is really useful because we are aware of everything" FG5
"It is a bit intimidating coming to a new Uni, and when you get an invite to join a group, it wasn't just about marketing. You posted some stuff about what you were doing in the Summer, it was very informal. It really relaxed you, so when you came in you felt like you already knew you almost. If I had any problems I felt like I could really approach you. I didn't worry at all." FG5
"Nice to do an introduction to see who else would be in the course before you start" FG2
"What I really like at the beginning of the course we are all asked to introduce ourselves, even before we were at MMU, and it gave you a relief what your fellow students are like, with not being from the UK, it was kind of nice to see with whom I was going to study" FG7
"I really like the Facebook (group). In my country the lecturer never uses social media to connect with the students" FG5
"Once I knew we were accepted and saw yes OK I belong to this group, it was nice to have this Facebook, because it was a good way to communicate with you, because we didn't have classes" FG1

The last quote above illustrates that students might not want to belong to a group until they definitely know they are going to be accepted onto a course, suggesting that this type of group is not suitable for building relationships with students prior to their offer.

Not all responses were as positive regarding use of the Facebook group (Table 6.27) due to privacy concerns and how other students might perceive them.

Table 6.27: Views regarding course-specific Facebook group – less-than positive (focus groups)

"Before anyone meets you, people might look through your Facebook pictures and have the wrong impression of you…. Not that I post anything there bad (laughing). They might assume you are a certain type of personality from your pictures or whatever" FG5
"I don't know if interacting with people on Facebook before you have met them is always a good idea though, just because you might have some assumptions about them just by the photo" FG4
"I haven't been that present on Facebook because, I don't know, I want to keep it private, I don't want to get that involved" FG5
"It was really difficult when I got the Facebook group invite. I didn't know what to do. I asked my friend (who had been here previously), and she say do it, it is going to be really useful" FG5

Not all students had been actively involved in the Facebook group to the same level, as can be seen in the comments below:

> *"I am not a member yet!" FG7*
>
> *"I don't think I have had anything that is relevant, so haven't posted" FG5*
>
> *"I've not posted, but I have commented*." FG5

Furthermore, there were a couple of comments regarding their experiences or knowledge of other institutions:

> *"Previously we were just left on our own, we weren't invited to visit (a social media group)" FG5*
>
> *"My friend is a graphic design lecturer and I see what she posts on Instagram. She posts pictures of students when presenting, or if they have had a guest in or something, or you can see them picking up sketch books, she interacts a lot with them" FG5*

One student also mentioned Twitter:

> *"I did check out the MMU PR blog, which I saw wasn't updated that regularly and I think I followed (staff member name) on Twitter as well. So I guess it is always interesting to see a Twitter account over here, a professor, to see what personality they have and what sorts of things they are talking about, what conferences they are at" FG4*

Using social media as part of recruitment of students to courses was explored and whether it should be used. Most people had joined the course Facebook page, but no-one seemed to know about the general Facebook page for all International students at MMU.

> "*It is so quick and takes away all the waiting times for email, and going for a job they will check your social media activity, so it is getting you into good practice of being professional as well as social on the site*" FG5
>
> "*I think something like LinkedIn is really appropriate*" FG5
>
> "*I think it would be really interesting to have a look at the profiles of former students*" FG7
>
> "*Maybe you could focus on employment maybe and profiles of what people have gone on to do* " FG4

<u>Engagement with university staff</u> was also analysed in the interviews, to see what was common between the respondents. Respondent 6 appeared to engage the most. Table 6.28 highlighted that respondent 6 put a single application in, although they did consider other universities.

Table 6.28: Engagement activities – interviews

	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9
University admissions staff via telephone			X			X	X		
Course leader via email					X			X	
Course Facebook page						X	X	X	
Open day staff			X			X			
University admission staff via email	X			X		X			
University open day – other country									X
University representative (international)									X
Course leader in person					X				
Course leader by telephone					X				

Looking at the transcripts from the interviews, a range of comments were made regarding the experience that students had as they engaged with the university (Table 6.29). Overall, engagement experiences appeared to be generally positive, although respondents 4 and 9 suggested their experience could be improved. Furthermore, respondents 1, 2 and 4 did not appear to have any contact with their Course Leader prior to arrival either through an open day, Facebook page or by other methods.

Table 6.29 Engagement experience - interviews

Interview	Quote
1 (Bangladesh)	*"I got frequent mail from the universities. I was checking somewhere and I found that there is a Facebook group."* *"I think I got an email, it was written that there is this Facebook group to join".*
2 (Germany)	*"I have not got a lot of contact with the staff here, but with the previous students, that was all to be honest."*
3 (UK)	*"If I had come here and not liked it, I would have looked at others. But I came here and it just felt very good and very efficient. The course content was fantastic, the lecturers knew it all, and it was like well they care about this course, they care about the business school and that is more important."(discussing open day visit)*
4 (UK)	*"I didn't actually get an email for a few days, and I was worried".* *"I work with someone who went to do a course at Manchester University and he'd been telling me in work how he'd got his confirmation through, and I'm thinking I've not heard anything yet".* *"I got an email through saying that induction day had started. And I was thinking, what I've missed the first day of induction? I was panicking…. It was a bit of miscommunication". "I was told I was starting the course the week after induction, but it was the week before".*
5 (Italy)	*"One open day here at MMU, and I remember you (course leader).*
6 (UK)	*"I had such a good experience when I was at MMU, I think that was a big factor for me being drawn back to the university itself".*

	"I attended a postgraduate open evening as well… The University of Salford was the only other open day that I went to… I think that was a big influence in terms of being back on university campus". *"MMU had a really good explanation about what the course actually was, as opposed to some of the institutions I was looking at."* *"They were really good at ringing up & getting back to me when I asked for more information about timetables and what days, and how many hours a week etc. MMU were one of the first to be corresponding with queries I had through admissions really as well".* *"The response was really good to be honest, the level of service was good as well… it was very quick, I didn't have any complaints about it".* *"I was nosey person to see what the students you were going to be studying with looked like. It became more real from being added into the community" (Facebook invite).*
7 **(UK)**	*"I spoke to people on the phone from MMU, they were quite helpful. I was calling every week… I just wanted an update on my application… for me it was really stressful, I had really bad anxiety"*
8 **(Uzbekistan)**	*"I spoke to (name of course leader), my course leader and she sent me some emails"* *"There was a problem with the website… I had lost all my information and I had to start again (during online application process for MMU)"* *"She (course leader) made a post that someone should write something about themselves and then students introduce themselves. It was really good yeah, it made me interested, I made friends" (talking about course Facebook page).*
9 **(Myanmar)**	*"I met with one of the representatives of the University of Huddersfield, she requested that I apply for one of the postgraduate (courses). So I just did it, in 2015".* *"The application process was better in 2015 compared to 2017, because I still remember one of the guys, he always makes a response to me, from international department, and he made it very easy at the time".* *"I just feel that MMU needs to make more effort to interact with more international students".* *"It was very simple, approximately 10-15 working days, because I have got the previous offer from MMU. It was easy for them to make an offer for another course".*

Plotting touch points on the student decision journey. Previous studies have highlighted different ways to identify touch points. HE relevant touchpoint categories constructed in the literature review were used to present the analysis: brand owned, partner and social/external.

Looking at each of the interview transcripts, and drawing upon the above three categories, an analysis of touch points for each of the nine respondents was undertaken. Having a comprehensive list of touch points, together with an understanding of how important each touch point is, and the qualitative comments from the interviews and focus groups, provides a comprehensive picture to assist in highlighting any improvement required by the service provider (i.e. The university).

The stages included for the analysis are below, informed by the work of Lemon and Verhoef (2016), and highlight a prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase stage:

- Pre – this covers pre-search and searching for information
- App – this covers application and decision
- PPE – this is post purchase evaluation, and includes any WOM/e-WOM undertaken.

This is consistent with a range of prior research that suggests a more manageable approach to plotting journeys from using three key stages (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Table 6.30 arranges the touch point analysis by stage and touch point category.
Table 6.31 arranges the analysis by respondent and touch point category.

Brand Owned. The importance of the website was very clearly highlighted at both pre-search/information search, and at application/decision stage due to the online application process. However, respondents 2,4,5,8 and 9 also discussed their initial searching online using key search word terms (for example a course name such as marketing, or marketing communications). This highlights the importance of paid search results, and/or investing time optimising online content for natural search results (i.e. results that appear high on the search results list that have not been paid for), through search engine optimisation (SEO). Only three people attended an open day (respondents 3, 4 and 6), and it no surprise that these were UK students. However, one local UK student did not attend an open day (respondent 7), but this was probably due to a very late application during the month before the course commenced. Respondents 3,4,5,7 and 8 also had either additional contact through a telephone call or contact with a member of staff from the University (for example, a course leader or, admissions). Finally, one respondent mentioned how online advertising had influenced them, and two spoke of social media use.

Partner. Respondents 1, 3, 6 and 9, mentioned accreditation and professional body links as being important. Therefore, HEI's need to ensure they are clear about these links on their website, as all students are searching for information here. In addition, maintaining these relationships, and links from professional bodies to specific HEIs is likely to be important. Some students may search for relevant accreditations and professional bodies first, for example, identifying which institutions are accredited. Highlighting those HEIs should check websites of these various bodies to ensure that they are listed, and that any links are working correctly to send traffic to the specific HEI website page. Links to external organisations can also improve appearance in the natural search results. Furthermore, two respondents mentioned recruitment fairs, whilst three respondents mentioned place related aspects. Respondents 1, 8 and 9 mentioned the visa application process; these three International students required approval of a visa before they could enter the UK to study. Students cannot apply for a Visa until they have an unconditional offer, and have a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) letter from their future university. The introduction and publicity surrounding postgraduate loans was an important factor for respondents 3, 6 and 7.

Social/external. Family and friends played an important role for all but one of the respondents. Most due to experiences they had of either postgraduate study, or experience at various institutions and/or cities/regions/countries. Connecting with alumni was also important to 7 out of the 9 respondents. HEIs therefore, may want to consider how to facilitate this, and also facilitate connecting with current students, which was important to respondents 1, 5 and 6. Furthermore, use of ranking/review sites was important to all students with the exception of respondent 3. The role that undergraduate lecturers played regarding HEIs to study at, or cities/regions/countries was a surprise. Respondents 1 – 5 all used this resource, whilst respondents 1, 2, 3 and 9 all discussed their experience at their new HEI with a previous lecturer, thus informing potential future students. Furthermore, two respondents (3 and 9) had used social media to discuss their experience. Social/external touch points are outside the control of HEIs, but it is helpful to understand generally what is being said by the variety of influential external people.

Table 6.30 Touch point analysis from interviews (collated by stage and touch point category).

		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
Touch point	Detail	Pre	Pre	Pre	Pre	Pre	Pre	Pre	Pre	Pre	**App**	**App**	**App**	**App**	**App**	**App**	**App**	**App**	**App**	PPE	PPE	PPE	PPE	PPE	PPE	PPE	PPE	PPE
Brand Owned	Website	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X									
	Email						X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X					
	Open Day			X	X											X												
	Telephone call						X	X									X											
	Scholarship	X									X																	
	Search engine results		X		X	X			X	X																		
	University staff												X					X					X				X	
	Social media									X															X			X
	Advertising online						X																					
Partner	Agents	X								X	X								X									
	Government Visa										X							X	X									
	Government Loans			X			X	X								X												
	HEA PTES Survey																											
	Accreditations & professional body link	X		X			X			X									X									
	Recruitment fair			X						X																		
	Place related		X				X			X																		
Social/ external	Alumni	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X						X	X	X									
	Current students	X				X	X																					
	Friends		X		X	X		X	X	X						X		X	X				X	X			X	
	Family	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X				X		X			X			X				
	Ranking & Review sites	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X												X				
	UG lecturers	X	X	X		X							X							X	X	X					X	
	Students at previous institution																				X	X						
	Social media																					X						X

Table 6.31 Touch point analysis from interviews (collated by respondent and touch point category)

		1			**2**			**3**			**4**			**5**			**6**			**7**			**8**			**9**		
Touch point	Detail	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE	Pre	App	PPE
Brand Owned	Website	X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X	
	Email		X			X			X			X	X		X		X	X			X			X			X	
	Open Day							X			X							X										
	Telephone call																X			X	X							
	Scholarship	X	X																									
	Search engine results				X						X			X									X			X		
	University staff								X				X											X	X			
	Social media																		X							X		X
	Advertising online																X											
Partner	Agents	X	X																							X	X	
	Government Visa		X																					X			X	
	Government Loans							X									X	X		X								
	HEA PTES Survey																											
	Accreditations & professional body link	X						X									X									X	X	
	Recruitment fair							X																		X		
	Place related				X												X									X		
Social/ external	Alumni	X	X		X									X			X			X	X		X	X		X	X	
	Current students	X												X			X											
	Friends				X						X		X	X		X		X		X			X	X	X	X	X	
	Family	X	X		X	X	X				X			X		X		X		X			X	X		X		
	Ranking & Review sites	X	X		X	X		X						X		X	X						X			X		
	UG lecturers	X		X	X		X	X	X	X				X											X			
	Students at previous institution						X			X																		
	Social media									X																		X

6.10 Whole student journeys.

Most of the previous sections have reported results by each stage/theme. However, one of the main strengths of the interviews, was not only the rich accounts provided of these stages/themes, but the ability to look at the whole student journey and provide a more holistic in-depth understanding of how each of the nine respondents approached it. This section therefore provides only a few new quotations in the discussion of each respondent. The summary overview for each of the respondents, highlights important aspects of each individual student journey.

Respondent 1 was from Bangladesh, and had studied marketing at undergraduate level in Bangladesh. This respondent was interested in universities that had accredited links to professional bodies; one reason was they believed this improved the quality of the course. This was important to them as they may consider progressing to PhD at some point in the future. Cost factors were important also, especially the availability of a scholarship. They researched widely throughout many countries, and family appeared to influence the decision to a large degree.

Highlighted here is the importance of the type of information required on the website relating to accreditations, and staff. The PTES survey highlights that the reputation of a university is seen as more important for international students, and information such as accreditations and staff research activity etc., may be seen as informing the reputation of a university.

Table 6.32: Respondent 1

Stage/ Criteria	Quotes from Respondent 1 (Bangladesh)
Pre-search	*"I think it was back in 2015 (thinking about pg). I started my undergraduate in 2012, it was my third year, I was studying marketing. I had a teacher in marketing, he was a very good teacher, and he studied in the UK. I told him I want to be a teacher. He studied at the University of Hull, and if I want to be a teacher, in my country it is very difficult to get a good qualification from a masters' degree."*
Information search	*"I was looking at the website and the quality of the teachers/staffs… Personal experience and their PhDs, if they were experienced. I was searching for the scholarship thing, and the location as well."* *"MMU is quite good in Internet, like the student review and the teachers are highly reputable. With MMU I can actually check the website and published paper list, the staff are highly publishable. And the good thing in the website I can actually check who is taking the module and see the experience and expertise".* *"I considered Australia and the UK, because in the USA the requirements are higher, I need to do the GMAT test. So I didn't apply to the USA because of the GMAT thing, and the visa are quite high there."*
Engage	*"I got frequent mail from the universities. I was checking somewhere and I found that there is a Facebook group."* *"I think I got an email, it was written that there is this Facebook group to join".*
Application	*"I only apply UK and Australia as well. I guess it was January 2017, I finished study September 2016, and I worked for 7-8 months".*
Final Decision	*"Australia and UK there are only IELTS. I didn't go for Australia, because they are like 2 years of masters. I wanted to apply for a PhD, and some of the universities in the UK have AACSB and CIM accredited. Manchester in the UK is a city and a very popular location, and for internships, Manchester is a very good place."* *"It was tough for me, I was aiming for Essex, but I didn't get a scholarship from Essex, and I was offered a scholarship from MMU and Hull. So I choose MMU because of the location".*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"I think it is a good decision for me to decide to come here. People here are very friendly."*
Influencers	*"I know someone in my own country, she studied law here and she said in law this school is quite good.* *I went to the universities MMU official agent in my country, and I met with them."* *"All of my family members are educated; some of them have studied overseas. My brother-in-law in Australia. Two of my cousins are working, as doctors in Essex, so they say you should come to the UK, it is a very nice place and a very good place to study. My father, he always wanted me to go to the UK. "*

Respondent 2. This particular respondent had studied International Business and Management in Germany. His approach to the selection of the course appeared to be more from his experience of a place as a tourist. In addition, family in the area appeared to play a big part in this decision. Although rankings were mentioned, there did not appear to be any evidence of him searching for this. When asked about the process and their approach, respondent 2 said *"I didn't want to make it too complex, and didn't want to spend too much time on the research".* They did not appear to interact with staff at MMU prior to arrival, and did not appear to pay attention to rankings, but focused more on what past students, friends, and professors said. See Table 6.33.

Table 6.33: Respondent 2

Stage/ Criteria	Quotes from Respondent 2 (Germany)
Pre-search	*"I thought about it when I started with my final year dissertation… friends and family, they said I should think about doing postgraduate study". "I want to extend my knowledge was the main reason".*
Information search	*"Because I studied International Business and Management, I looked at HRM and International Trade."* *"I just searched courses, marketing and general and communications, those general words"* *"America and Australia (considered), but they were just too far when I did my research, and the cost was much too high".* *"In Europe, and then in Germany, what is not too far away from family… I looked at countries speaking German, then English, then Spanish"* *"I didn't want to have too many, so I more or less focused on just 10".* *"I think it was 4 countries: Austria, Britain, Spain, and the Netherlands. It was like which cities do I like in these countries."* *"I did another list, of 4 or 5 and I tried to figure out what are the cons and the pros, I just started with the UK because I love the country, I have family here. I just wrote down these 3 or 4 bullet points, and it was clear for me it would go to the UK".*
Engage	*"I have not got a lot of contact with the staff here, but with the previous students, that was all to be honest."*
Application	*"I put in 2 applications, both in the UK, one was here in Manchester, the other was in Leeds".* *"I would accept both of them yes".*
Final Decision	*"It was a mixture of rankings, what other people had said, my own thoughts, how I feel about the country, how I feel about the culture".* *"There were 2 big reasons, one was the cost reason, the other was the family, because I have a lot of family here, more than in Leeds".* *"I decided in May 2017, it was more or less a fast decision then, I wanted to start with my preparations for the year abroad".*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"I just thought about it in the first two weeks whether it was right or wrong, but there were so many positive things. The accommodation, the people are very polite there, the university itself. The first week was a bit tough, but was good to get into the studies. I don't regret it to be honest, that I chose Manchester".* *"I just informed my family and my professor as well, and I just informed the next students who came after me, because I want to help them as well".*
Influencers	*"I asked a lot of professors for their recommendations".* *"They told me I should research online and ask other people, other students what they think about it".* *"I talked with my family".* *"I asked my family and friends what they think about it… they said I should google how the rankings are and compare then. Also I should ask the previous students who went there, take their experience and what they think about it, how hard it was for them".* *"Family was a big factor as well. I have family in Great Britain, especially near Manchester."* *"I asked previous students and my professor, because they already studied here. I asked them all and they said London is too busy, everyone is rushing too much and Manchester was a good balance of everything, very international, very kind, very polite people".*

Respondent 3 was from the UK and had studied Journalism and English Literature at undergraduate level at Staffordshire University. She was a mature student as she had delayed commencement of her undergraduate degree. See Table 6.34 below.

Table 6.34: Respondent 3

Stage/ Criteria	Quotes from Respondent 3 (UK)
Pre-search	*"During my second year (thinking about pg study)…I was interested in a higher level of study, and was interested in public relations."* *"When the postgraduate loan came out I started thinking more seriously."* *"I did a PR module (at ug), I was really interested in PR".*
Information search	*"I started looking for accredited courses, because that is important. I did some work within admissions and as a student ambassador, and UCAS fairs and recruiting. It is what you tell people to make sure they are making the smart choice."* *"I came up with a list, and the final list was 4 universities."*
Engage	*"If I had come here and not liked it, I would have looked at others. But I came here and it just felt very good and very efficient. The course content was fantastic, the lecturers knew it all, and it was like well they care about this course, they care about the business school and that is more important."*
Application	*"I suppose working at open days you can kind of tell when the lecturers are just trying to talk up the course, but they were genuinely interested in what they could do for the students. That was like, I don't need to look anywhere else. I came in the September of my third year and applied by the Christmas. I was just like get it out of the way and get it done."* *"It was ok, I got the thank you for your application and then I waited a while. Can't remember how long, but I called (name of postgraduate recruitment & engagement manager in the Business School) in the postgrad, because I hadn't had an answer, I think it had been about 8 weeks maybe, and he was like oh you should have had an answer by now, and then the next day it came through."*
Final Decision	*"Location was an important one".* *"I could have gone to the University of Manchester, but I liked this course and this campus".*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"I've not had doubts about the course, the course is fantastic. It's quite stressful doing a postgraduate qualification and doing group work with people straight away, who I had never met before and that was like a big challenge for me."* *"I've Tweeted some, I've spoken to a couple of the undergrads that are doing journalism on my old course* *I have spoken to people and said have a look at this.* *In welcome week I was Tweeting pictures of the campus and stuff. Snapchat, I have got friends in I took a picture of the university of Manchester, and they said it looked like Hogwarts, and I said well I don't go there."* *"One of the directors of admissions at Staffs, her daughter came here….. I said the Business School is fantastic… the staff are really friendly."* *"You recruit professional people to the course, so it's useful for networking, it breeds professionalism, whereas some universities it is very casual at postgrad".*
Influencers	*"He (undergraduate respected lecturer) asked where, and I said MMU and Public Relations and he said, oh that's a very good course, and that was ok, it's got the seal of approval from someone."* *"One of my journalism lecturers used to be in the comms team at Manchester Police and she was like, oh yes the city is great and this happens."*

This respondent appeared knowledgeable about the process, due to her experience within recruitment and admissions at another university. Furthermore, there was also evidence of the experience of open day visits at undergraduate level influencing a postgraduate level decision. *"I went to an open day at Keel, and I thought I don't like it here. I would rather have a more casual relaxed atmosphere".* Keel had therefore not been a consideration for postgraduate. There was also an issue regarding response times from admissions for getting her offer through. The recruitment and engagement manager in the Business School appeared to deal with this issue immediately, when he became aware, but this demonstrates that there are continuing issues within admissions regarding delays responding with offer letters. Moreover, in the previous focus groups one student had put an application in elsewhere due to delays in receiving a response, which highlights how important it is to get the system working correctly.

<u>Respondent 4</u> had previously studied fashion photography at the University of Salford, she was also working at Next, and wanted to find a local commutable relevant course, as she still lived at home. However, Edge Hill was a consideration due to her father working in the area. This respondent was quite young at 21, and had never left home to study. During her third year, she had undertaken a level 3 foundation course, with the Chartered Institute of Marketing, in order to determine if this was where she wanted to focus in future. However, she was a very late applicant, due to family health issues over the summer months, and a house move also. An issue regarding the induction date not being clear in the offer pack she received was highlighted. This respondent did not consider this decision to be as big as for undergraduate "*the fact the masters was only for 1 year, it didn't make me as serious as I was about the undergraduate one, because it was a long thing for undergraduate and I was only 17/18 at the time*". Highlighting that for postgraduate, she was more mature and wiser. See Table 6.35.

Table 6.35: Respondent 4

Stage/ Criteria	Quotes from Respondent 4 (UK)
Pre-search	*"I did fashion photography, but a lot of my dissertation was about how it was marketed. So that is how I started thinking about postgraduate study". "I started thinking about it during the Summer, after I graduated… late August".* *"The Summer was quite complicated, I had family in hospital … it took me a while to get my head around thinking about things like that".*
Information search	*"I started to look for something in Manchester, because I wanted to stay at home".* *"I actually typed into Google MA Marketing courses in Manchester".* *"I printed off each brief from every course, and compared them, from the websites".* *"I didn't look for any comments".* *"It was MMU, Salford, University of Manchester, and Edge Hill".*
Engage	*"I didn't actually get an email for a few days, and I was worried".* *"I work with someone who went to do a course at Manchester University and he'd been telling me in work how he'd got his confirmation through, and I'm thinking I've not heard anything yet".* *"I got an email through saying that induction day had started. And I was thinking, what I've missed the first day of induction? I was panicking…. It was a bit of miscommunication". "I was told I was starting the course the week after induction, but it was the week before".*
Application	*"One course, at MMU".* *"I have applied late… late August/September time".*
Final Decision	*"The reason I did pick marketing communications was because I had studied it for a year previously, so hopefully that would give me a boost in learning stuff".*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"I am always being asked at work how much I am enjoying the course. I say to everyone I am enjoying the course".* *"It's all been offline I have communicated with people….. I am not a big social media person to be honest".*
Influencers	*"I have worked with people at Next who have worked full-time after their degree for a while, then gone back and done a masters".* *"I didn't ask for any advice or anything like that… I don't really listen to what other people say. I make a decision for myself".* *"If I read a comment and someone wasn't nice about the university, how would I know they just didn't like something there? It is biased, you can't judge things on that, you have to experience it yourself".* *"Obviously I asked Mum and Dad because they know me better".*

Respondent 5, another mature student, who was married, had studied Management and Cultural Events in Italy, followed by language classes in the UK (Manchester) in the year prior to commencement of her postgraduate course. Although this respondent had searched many universities in Italy, she could not find a good university, with good links to business, nor evidence of most students employed afterwards. Furthermore, this respondents stated that even basic postgraduate courses could cost as much as EU14,000 in Italy, making Italy a less attractive place to study for her. This particular respondent searched extensively, and was very heavily influenced by a very wide range of people. There was also evidence of this being quite an emotional decision, when referring to the open day visit at MMU she said *"I go and see if I could get the feeling",* *"when you find something you like, you fall in love"*. Although this respondent considered universities in both Italy and the UK, there was only one application.

Table 6.36: Respondent 5

Stage/ Criteria	**Quotes from Respondent 5 (Italy)**
Pre-search	*"I used to work in my field, in theatre, but there wasn't enough work in the field, so I thought another kind of qualification could help me find a better job". "I realise that after I can work in the theatre through marketing and communications… it would be a good compromise".* *"3-4 months before I came here… because I know I needed a level of English before I started"*
Information search	*"Online, I focused on the subject. I started to write the main university in Italy, and also the prices. I looked in Milan, because I know there are a lot of businesses and a lot of universities as well".* *"When I looked at MMU I wasn't sure about project management, marketing, marketing communications, marketing tourism".* *"I research for such a long time, in Italy, here. When you find something you like, you fall in love. You stop the research when you find something that is right for you".*
Engage	*"One open day here at MMU, and I remember you (course leader).*
Application	*"Just one course at MMU, in April" "It was very quick, 1 week or 2 weeks"*
Final Decision	*"I enjoyed so much the life in Manchester, so I said maybe I can do the masters here, more value and at the same time I can better my English"*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"Just one negative thought that it was too big for me, it is not only the education system but the language". "It is good".* *"A few months ago I spoke with this lady. She is thinking of doing her masters, she has IELTS now and I was speaking about my experience here and I said you can have a different kind of experience between MMU and University of Manchester, and also the different type of approach, and links with business and I say you can manage with the language and the subject and she say ok I try".*
Influencers	*"I asked a lot of students that I met here in Manchester, foreign students. Most of them studied in the University of Manchester and said it was very very theoretical. Then I search other students that had studied here (MMU).* *"I met people in different situations, some through the library, some through my teacher, the others through this conversation group"* *"I just inform my parents, but they didn't really agree.. oh so you have left your husband for a year, well for him it is fine, he wants me to do this".* *"I asked the manager about the university if I wanted to do marketing and she spoke about the difference between MMU and the University of Manchester. And she say maybe MMU is better for me, because University of Manchester is more theory. "* *"I was speaking to someone over the Summer, and she was doing project management, and for her there was too much theory. I told her about the course and being practical and she said it was the best one".* *"I asked some of my friends between marketing and marketing communications and say can you give me some advice".*

Respondent 6 was a mature student, having undertaken his undergraduate qualification some years previously, graduating in 2011 at the same university. He had worked full-time for a number of years in a marketing role within another university, but did not have a marketing qualification. "*Having been a marketing manager for an FE college, I didn't have my level 7 qualification*". He also highlighted that his good experience at undergraduate level really influenced the way he was drawn back to study at MMU.

Table 6.37: Respondent 6

Stage/ Criteria	Quotes from Respondent 6 (UK)
Pre-search	*"I wanted to get qualifications to progress my career".* *"I went under 3 restructures within 18 months".* *"They were looking for level 7 qualifications as the next step or for better pay, I think that was probably one of the reasons why I chose to come back and study my masters".* *"Because I had been out of education for so long I wanted to do something for myself in terms of my own learning and progression".*
Information Search	*"I was looking at university websites…. Looking at doing a Management masters"* *"What I was looking at first of all was CIM accredited courses and professional courses".* *"I looked at the Oxford College of Marketing, Cambridge, where it needed to be flexible around my work… online programmes as well with the University of Liverpool… and local universities across Greater Manchester".* *"I picked up on quite a lot of social media advertising initially… looking back on it, more influential than what I realised".* *"I was looking at the university websites, subsequently subscribing to course information, looking at Facebook pages for the Business School, what was going on and the types of courses".* *"I was predominantly looking at marketing, marketing comms. Looked at some digital marketing as well, and public relations".*
Engage	*"I had such a good experience when I was at MMU, I think that was a big factor for me being drawn back to the university itself".* *"I attended a postgraduate open evening as well… The University of Salford was the only other open day that I went to… I think that was a big influence in terms of being back on university campus".* *"MMU had a really good explanation about what the course actually was, as opposed to some of the institutions I was looking at."* *"They were really good at ringing up & getting back to me when I asked for more information about timetables and what days, and how many hours a week etc. MMU were one of the first to be corresponding with queries I had through admissions really as well".* *"The response was really good to be honest, the level of service was good as well… it was very quick, I didn't have any complaints about it".* *"I was nosey person to see what the students you were going to be studying with looked like. It became more real from being added into the community" (Facebook invite).*
Application	*"Actually applying I was quite hesitant up until around February/March, when I made my decision to do it really. When it came to submitting the application it was quite late, it was around July, before starting in September. I didn't think there was a lot of urgency".* *"I was looking at doing a Management masters, and when I submitted my application I think it even said Management on it… but then I realised that I wanted to be a specialist in Marketing". "Just to MMU" "I got offers for both (courses)" "It was really quick"*
Final Decision	*"The first thing was cost, if I am honest".* *"I made the decision after I submitted (re marketing)"* *"The only reason why I chose MMU in the end was because it was local to where I live".* *"Because of my age I wanted to go where I was familiar with as well".*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"I have not heard of many negative comments about anyone's experience... I think it is what people thought it would be"*
Influencers	*"I spoke to all of my family, my mum, my nan, all of my sisters, my partner at the time, friends, everyone. They were really supportive".* *"What I did do was speak to people that had been on masters programmes at various institutions I was looking at."* *"I did look online, in terms of social media, Facebook and Facebook reviews and stuff like that…. There were a few comments from students that were currently studying that made me question as to whether I would want to go there, hence that I didn't".*

Respondent 7 was a UK student, however she was from an African family background (and spent her early childhood years in Africa), and felt some degree of pressure to achieve, either through securing a good job, or through further study. This respondent had a part-time job at the House of Fraser, but stated *"it's not a job I want to work in"*. She only considered two local universities in the area in which she lived, and did not appear to search extensively or really consider her decision in any great depth, and certainly not to the extent of respondent 8 from Central Asia, or respondent 5 that was heavily influenced by others. This respondent applied very late, and was therefore quite anxious as the whole process took around 4 weeks. *"I got to the point where I thought I haven't got in then."* See Table 6.38 below.

Table 6.38: Respondent 7

Stage/ Criteria	Quotes from Respondent 7 (UK)
Pre-search	*When I finished my undergraduate degree I honestly did not know what I wanted to do, so for me I decided last minute. I couldn't' get a job.. All my other friends have got jobs… under pressure to get married. "I saw this as an opportunity to become more educated,… I saw it as a positive… it's not my time yet to have that dream job".*
Information search	*I Looked online. I looked at Salford but realised they weren't doing a PR postgrad course. They were a bit cheaper. "I was looking at the website, and I also spoke to people on the phone from MMU"*
Engage	*I spoke to people on the phone from MMU, they were quite helpful. I was calling every week… I just wanted an update on my application… for me it was really stressful, I had really bad anxiety"*
Application	*"I literally applied the last week before we weren't allowed to apply anymore" The Salford course had been cancelled so I just went straight to MMU. What if the spaces are full? If I don't get in, what am I going to do?*
Final Decision	*"I do know that MMU is a good university. I know people that have studied here". "As soon as I got my offer (name of course leader) found me on Facebook."*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*It made me feel really happy (Facebook invite). It made me feel I had made the right choice. It just felt really welcoming. It broke the ice really for the first day when you get to meet everyone. "I do blog and I wanted to wait until I get to the end, so I can share my experience of what I thought about the course, whether it was worth it or not."*
Influencers	*"I come from an African background, and my parents have really high expectations for me" "I do know that MMU is a good university. I know people that have studied here". "I hear a lot of positive things from MMU" I just wanted to ask people to make sure I would be ready, because there is no point in going into something if you don't feel 100% about it. "It's a point of trust with other universities, just because I don't know anybody that goes there".*

Respondent 8 had undertaken an International Relations qualification in Uzbekistan. After travelling around during the summer throughout Europe (Germany, Austria, Czech Republic), she explored how politics and public relations were taught in different universities, and compared different education systems. However, as an international student, she expressed her concern about making friends. *"The only thing I was worried about was how to make friends, how to present myself, because I am not from the UK. I went to the students' office and they gave me a guide for international students, and I could see from that guide what I should do".* See Table 6.39 below.

Table 6.39: Respondent 8

Stage/ Criteria	**Quotes from Respondent 8 (Uzbekistan – Central Asia)**
Pre-search	*"In my country it is difficult to leave your family"* *"It was a difficult choice for me, because it was a matter of money"* *"I spoke to my tutors from my university and they told me if I go and study abroad that I will be really professional, it will be really good for my CV and for my job application. So it will add value to my career".*
Information search	*"I looked at European websites, American and UK and compared them". "I went to the website that shows the rank of the universities. It was the Complete University Guide" …….. "It was a shortlist of just 10"* *"I did research on where to live, and I did research for international students, for example is there any international support officer".* *"I researched about the facilities, career options, the course, how the course is presented, disciplines within the course….. I went to the site… if it wasn't well designed it didn't interest me."*
Engage	*"I spoke to (name of course leader), my course leader and she sent me some emails"* *"There was a problem with the website… I had lost all my information and I had to start again (during online application process for MMU)"* *"She (course leader) made a post that someone should write something about themselves and then students introduce themselves. It was really good yeah, it made me interested, I made friends" (talking about course Facebook page).*
Application	*"Cardiff ….. Manchester"* *"Cardiff university was much easier (to put in an application)".*
Final Decision	*"Manchester Metropolitan University offers more practical courses than Manchester University"* *"I was looking at prices, tuition fees, student accommodation, location, is there any international support officer …. I made a table in Excel… the content of the course was engaging and there was a description of what trips… it was easy to decide"*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"I think I made the right decision. I like my course and I like my Uni".* *"After I left my country a lot of people became interested in how I did, and then I also gave some advice"*
Influencers	*"My family of course, because my parents give me money for my study".* *"We have consulting groups in my country and they consult about study abroad…. They advised me to go to Manchester after London… they said in Manchester it would be more convenient for me because of living costs".* *"When I talk to one of my friends who used to study at Manchester University he told me that it is more academic than practical".* *"I have friends in Manchester who are from my country… they told me that Manchester is a good city to live, especially for students".* *"My sister, she lives in London and she said that she will support me".*

Respondent 9 experienced quite a difficult journey due to issues regarding the UK visa. He originally applied for 2015 entry in project management, but due to rejection of his visa, then worked for a period of time, in a marketing role. He again applied for 2017 entry, but this time for a marketing related course. The original 2015 application was through an agent, stating *"I don't know how to do the process, especially for fees, and to be honest I was not confident to do everything on my own".* However, due to maturity/ experience in the sector, his 2017 application was direct. See Table 6.40 below.

Table 6.40: Respondent 9

Stage/ Criteria	***Quotes from Respondent 9 (Myanmar)***
Pre-search	*"I just want to study abroad, especially in the UK, maybe because we were a British colony here 60 years ago".* *"Only very few students are going abroad, so it is like a good reputation for my parents".*
Information search	*"I think I checked the Australian universities, but their masters is 2 years, so I decided not to, so just think about the UK".* *"I was just looking at the title of the course… searching on project management… also looking for international business & management, and entrepreneurship".* *"I do more research than before, because I work at an education consultant company and I have a lot of interaction with universities in the UK" (for 2017 application).* *"Complete university Guide, and I also check university Facebook page about how they feel about the university, and also What Uni".*
Engage	*"I met with one of the representatives of the University of Huddersfield, she requested that I apply for one of the postgraduate (courses). So I just did it, in 2015".* *"The application process was better in 2015 compared to 2017, because I still remember one of the guys, he always makes a response to me, from international department, and he made it very easy at the time".* *"I just feel that MMU needs to make more effort to interact with more international students".* *"It was very simple, approximately 10-15 working days, because I have got the previous offer from MMU. It was easy for them to make an offer for another course".*
Application	*"I planned to come here for 2015, but my visa was refused".* *"I chose Manchester Metropolitan University, at the same time (as University of Huddersfield), so I just came here again in 2017".* *"I got an offer from University of Huddersfield and MMU as well".* *I apply in 2017 to around 15 universities and got around 10 offers from those"* *I got offer from Westminster in London, also Sheffield Hallam, Roehampton, Glasgow, Caledonian, Oxford Brooke…. Some marketing management, some international marketing".*
Final Decision	*"The University of Huddersfield is where most of the students from Myanmar go. I don't want to study where there are lots of students from my country".* *"I want to study in a reputable city. If I mention I study in Manchester, because of Manchester United, they know Manchester."* *"If I go study in Chester, the city if very small, there's not going to be very much opportunity compared to studying in a very big city. The final choice was definitely to go to London or Manchester, but London is very expensive".* *"My visa was refused (again), so I have to sit for IELTS again, or choose another university, so I choose to Huddersfield again, but they stop the project management course due to the shortage of the student. My plan for study abroad was cancelled".* *"I decided to go and work, I was working as a marketing manager, I feel like I need to apply to that course specifically, so I just decided to study for marketing for 2017".*

	"Sheffield Hallam are discounting £4,000 off, so Sheffield is just £10,000, but here I have to pay £13,500… MMU are more based on the practical and on the live client project, and a lot of chance to go to the internship, and to study the professional diploma. Most other universities don't offer that sort of thing." *"If I go to the University of Manchester, it is like very expensive, like £20,000 or something… and their course is based on curriculum, theory".*
Post Purchase Evaluation	*"Sometimes I feel I made the right decision, but sometimes not, because of the weather. And the first term I don't feel the value of the money… because the way I study before it is quite different…. I don't regret it at all".*
Influencers	*"My sister, she suggest I go to Singapore, because she studies in Singapore, and the Visa is very easy compared to the UK. I didn't consider, because there are a lot of Myanmar people, it won't be unique".* *"I talk with alumni from that university"* *"Most people suggest I go to the university of Manchester"*

The individual student journeys have provided in-depth insight into how each student approaches their course selection decision making. Whilst many common aspects to their approach can be seen, each journey had a degree of uniqueness to it. This may relate to a more back and forward approach to some aspect of their decision journey, or to the level and type of information searching undertaken, or how much they drew on influencers to assist in making their decision, for example.

6.11 Summary of chapter findings

The findings from the focus groups and the interviews have been presented in this chapter, and the main points coming from this can be summarised as follows:

- Thoughts regarding postgraduate study for most students commence one to two years prior to a course starting. However, periods were seen of up to five years prior, down to one month prior.
- Job related factors were the most common reason for starting postgraduate study.
- Students became aware of the university in a number of ways: connected to undergraduate degree; live in the area; general searching online; through another organisation; by personal recommendation. Destination awareness also linked into this.
- A wide range of information searching took place, with a variety of patterns seen.
- Application categories were established of: multiple country; country; regional; city; and single. These can also be applied to the consideration set.
- Analysis of the application experiences within focus groups and interviews revealed a large number of negative experiences, and few positives.

- A wide range of criteria were used to inform decisions, with price, course content and location the most frequently mentioned.
- Post purchase evaluation and WOM/e-WOM revealed six category types: traditional WOM; e-WOM Twitter; e-WOM Facebook; e-WOM blog; e-WOM Foursquare; e-WOM other.
- Influencers appeared to play a key role in decisions, and three types were established: past and existing students; family and friends; those within education/professional bodies.
- Course Facebook groups were generally seen as positive, however, there were some concerns expressed regarding these.
- Engagement activities undertaken by each interview respondent provided insight into the range and amount.
- Touch point categories specific for HE were established from the primary research: brand owned, partner, social/external. These were linked to three key stages of Pre (pre-search/information search); app (application and decision); PPE (post purchase evaluation and WOM/e-WOM).
- Limited evidence was found that decision making contained emotional elements
- The process was not necessarily linear for all respondents, with a small number adding additional universities and/or courses after their initial consideration.

Chapter 7 will now discuss the findings, consider the findings in relation to existing literature, and present a new framework.

7. Discussion of findings and framework development

This chapter follows on from the comprehensive reporting of the findings in the previous Chapter 6. The discussion is focused around the previous themes/stages presented, before considering new findings from this research, and develops a new framework.

The discussion will centre on the following aspects:

- Early thoughts/pre-search
- Information search
- Application stage
- Decision
- Post-purchase evaluation
- Influencers
- Pre-purchase evaluation
- Decision making process
- Engagement and touchpoints

From the discussion around these key areas, a new framework is developed.

7.1 Early thoughts/pre-search

Many of the existing models refer to either a problem recognition stage (Blackwell et al., 2001; Darley et al., 2010), pre-shopping stage (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014) or in HE a pre-search behaviour stage (Maringe, 2006). Darley et al (2010) stated there is generally a lack of research at the initial stage. However, within HE whilst there are a number of studies regarding aspirations for HE study (For example see Soilemetzidis et al., 2014; Foskett et al., 2006), what was not clear was the time element involved and when students started to consider postgraduate study. This area is important to consider, as decisions taken under time pressure are known to follow different patterns to those that are not subject to the same time pressures (Johnston et al., 1997). This research highlighted that the majority of responses started thinking about postgraduate study one to two years before the course started, but highlighted some started searching as early as up to four years prior. A number of last-minute decisions, up to one month prior to starting, were seen, both in the focus groups and in the interviews. Only one respondent (respondent 7 from the UK) in the interviews actually applied in the last month. However, there is evidence to suggest that, in line with Johnston et al., (1997) that this did affect their information searching behaviour. They only considered the university website in their search activity. Furthermore, they only put in one application (although two HEIs were considered), and only discussed one influencer. However, when considering the other interview respondents, who all starting to think about postgraduate study over a year before they started, quite a range of different search patterns can be seen (see Table 6.5). This therefore suggests, that whilst a very late consideration/application for postgraduate study may limit the ability to search for information, seek views from a range of influencers, those that have more time available due to a much earlier start to their search, do not necessarily decide to undertake a really comprehensive search, or seek a wide range of views.

Regarding the reasons for considering postgraduate study, there are few existing studies available, especially regarding postgraduate students, as highlighted in Chapter 4. The annual PTES survey highlights the most important motivations for postgraduate study are career/ job related (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). In the research for this thesis, most responses were job-related factors (see Table 6.6). The impact of this can be seen in later sections (see Table 6.12), for example, the importance of the course content, reference to the practical nature, the live client brief unit, vocational skills, accreditations by professional bodies, and internships. This therefore is an important area to discuss in any course material presented online or offline. Furthermore, some respondents stated they had disregarded a university that had either a better reputation and/or was higher in a league table, because they did not want to pursue a very theoretical course. This again highlights the importance of the practical nature of the various marketing-related courses offered.

One final area to consider is relating to what Galan et al., (2015) researched regarding problem recognition stage and whether this can be triggered through social media. There was no evidence to suggest social media was influential at this early stage, which was what Galan et al., (2015) also found. Family, friends, undergraduate tutors and experience on undergraduate courses, along with career-related aspects all appeared to influence their thoughts at this early stage. The availability of a postgraduate loan (previously not available), was also commented upon by a small number of respondents, meaning that postgraduate study was now something they could consider.

7.2 Information search

Information search is an important aspect that informs decision-making. It is contained in all existing general and HE-specific models that were reviewed in Chapter 3 (see Table 3.2 and Table 3.5). Two separate but related areas were considered as part of the information search, firstly, how prospective students became aware of the university, and secondly looking at how they searched for information.

Regarding how they became aware of the university, responses were categorised and related to six areas: connected to their undergraduate degree search experience; they lived in the area; general searching online; through another organisation (such as an agent; professional body or study centre); or by personal recommendation. A number of respondents became aware of the university through being referred by family, friends and teachers. This supports the findings from Vrontis et al., (2018) that over half of international students found out in this way. In addition, the destination was also linked to how some students became aware. Many appeared aware of the city of Manchester, or football clubs in Manchester, and therefore started their search activities based upon the location. Indeed, the secondary research undertaken in Chapter 2 relating to image and reputation highlighted the £5 million worldwide campaign to attract students to the UK (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). In addition to this, outside of HE, organisations such as Visit Britain are spending large amounts of money on international marketing campaigns and raising awareness of Britain (Visit Britain 2018). During 2017 they targeted 22 different countries, in 14 different languages, and some of this linked to football, which is likely to highlight Manchester due to the strong football clubs in the area. Moreover, Soilemetzidis et al., (2014), reporting on the PTES survey, suggest that location is the most important aspect within the process.

For high involvement decisions, information searching becomes more important, with more time spent on this (Clarke and Belk, 1978). As previously highlighted, HE is a high involvement decision (Davey, 2005), and existing HE decision making models all suggest that a search for information takes place, and that a range of criteria are used to assist in making a selection. Considerable research has taken place relating to information searching behaviour, as highlighted in Chapter 4 (Section 4.1.2). There is an established body of literature relating to differing search patterns, within HE and outside of HE (for example see Usher et al., (2010) relating to HE patterns). The primary research undertaken for this thesis highlighted differing levels of information searching behaviour (for example see Table 6.5), however, this research was more concerned with providing some real insight into the process of searching. For example, whilst it was noted that from the interviews respondent 1 undertook the highest amount of searching, and as with all the interviewees used the university website, considering how they used the website provided some really useful insight. Respondent 1 found information relating to who was teaching each of the units, and was then able to check out their qualifications, experience and research through the website. The detailed information on the website was mentioned by a number of those searching for information, as was accreditations/links with professional bodies. This highlights the importance of the right information being available on university websites, and that universities should be checking with their students what specifically they find useful.

In mainstream decision making literature, there is some evidence that the types of searching that takes place has changed. For example, Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014), highlight areas such as discussion boards, blogs, You Tube reviews and product reviews all being extensively used. This area was explored in the focus groups and this demonstrated that prospective students searched for reviews online, considered university rankings, some explored various student forums and discussion groups, but also that traditional open days are still important for some. This area is considered further under the touch point analysis discussion.

7.3 Application stage.

In a number of the existing HE specific models an application stage is present (see Maringe 2006; Litten, 1982; Perun 1981; Kotler 1976). Previous research has identified that some students do submit multiple applications and accept multiple offers (Maringe, 2006). This is followed by a choice or decision stage, which suggests that when students put in their application(s) they have not yet made a choice, i.e. a notional or speculative application. This can clearly be seen with interview respondent 9 (from Myanmar) that applied for 15 universities and received offers from 10. This stage is therefore similar to the evaluation stage in models such as Blackwell et al. (2001).

The primary research for this thesis identified five different categories based upon types and patterns of application, relating to geographical location and number of applications:

- multiple countries – multiple applications to more than one country
- Country – multiple applications (>1) within one country
- Regional – multiple applications (>1), but focused on a particular region within a country
- City – multiple applications (>1), but all focused around a particular city
- Single – only one application

The same categories can also be applied to those universities within their consideration set. Interesting to note in the interviews, was that whilst most considered a range of universities (either within a specific country, region or within multiple countries), at the application stage the interviews revealed all had narrowed down their selection, with over half putting in just a single application. Universities however, should not be passive at this stage. Sargeant (1999) highlights the importance of "keep warm" activities, and Maringe (2006) the importance of dialogue and building a psychological bond between both parties. For those with a single application, it is important that they receive regular updates regarding their application to ensure they do not submit any further applications, as seen with one person from the focus groups.

7.4 Decision

There is a comprehensive range of previous studies regarding choice factors at the decision stage (see Table 4.3), with a focus at either undergraduate level, postgraduate level, or international level (Simoes and Soares, 2010). A single list of choice factors for all students is unlikely (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015). In the research for this thesis, price, course content and location were the most frequently mentioned factors. In the section relating to early-thoughts regarding postgraduate study, many discussed job-related factors, and this can be seen in the criteria that are important to their choice for some, such as the practical nature, accreditations with professional bodies and links to business. What was apparent though, was that although there were some common elements, how different each individual decision was. The purpose of this research was to gain a more in-depth understanding of decisions and individual journeys, rather than produce another list of choice factors. The fact that there are so many choice factors used makes it difficult for HEIs to select the correct range of key messages they are to use in course and university promotion. However, the research does highlight that these messages should be adapted to suit the main criteria important to their particular students. For example in this case, job-related factors within the course content, cost of living in Manchester compared to London, price related factors such as a one-year master's programme (rather than two years in Australia or Canada), and benefits of studying in Manchester (opportunities for internships and live client briefs, and the attractions of Manchester as a city).

7.5 Post-Purchase Evaluation

Most of the existing HE models do not include a post-purchase evaluation stage, as discussed in Chapter 3, where out of ten models reviewed, only three had a post-purchase evaluation stage (Maringe and Carter 2007; Vrontis et al., 2004; Kotler and Fox 1985). At this stage, students will experience either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their choice (Blackwell et al. 2006), and may feel an element of regret if they feel it is the incorrect choice (Landman, 1987), and develop coping strategies (Bui et al., 2011). Moreover, expectations may have formed prior to their arrival at the HEI (Hill 1995). It is important to understand the level of satisfaction, as this may result in either positive or negative WOM/e-WOM, and this is more likely to be online (Moe and Trusov 2011), especially when considering Millennial postgraduate students who perceive digital and social media as being fundamental to their lives (Donnison, 2010; Kozar and Hiller-Connell, 2013; Kemp 2015).

The analysis of the focus groups and interviews revealed that generally students were very happy with their choice, even when considering (as some pointed out) the weather, language issues, difficulty of postgraduate study and different education systems. As one interview respondent (Interview 6 from the UK) states *"I think it is what people thought it would be"*, demonstrating the importance of course promotional material being an accurate reflection of the reality. The focus groups highlighted a number of categories that students used for WOM/e-WOM: traditional WOM; and e-WOM Twitter; e-WOM Facebook; e-WOM blog; e-WOM Foursquare; e-WOM other, and found a large amount of e-WOM taking place. Positive e-WOM is likely to benefit the HEI, however, any negative e-WOM, that by its very nature is likely to be widely read, could cause potential harm to the recruitment of future students. HEIs do therefore need to ensure they are scanning for any negative e-WOM.

Within the interviews, comments were categorised by the types of people they reached: friends; undergraduate staff at a previous institution; work colleagues; students at a previous place of study, and comments on social media. The importance of firstly evaluating their experience early on in the programme, and focusing on improving any negative areas is clear, as their experience is likely to be widely shared. Indeed, in the section on influencers, the strong role a range of people take in influencing them during the decision making process is very apparent.

7.6 Influencers

Influencers on decision making has been widely debated, especially relating to the importance of family and friends within the process (Veloutsou 2005). There are differing viewpoints regarding the influence they have (for example see Vaughn et al., (1978); Harket et al., (2001); Soutar and Turner (2002); Usher et al., (2010); Vrontis et al., (2016), Kaur and Singh (2016)). Teachers, current and former students have also been discussed (Simoes and Soares 2010), and the role of agents is also well documented (Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Pimpa (2003); Hagerdorn and Zhang (2010).

As previously discussed, agents are an important group of people as 36.5% of overseas students are recruited in this way (Havergal 2015), and almost 70 per cent of Chines students use agents (Hagerdorn and Zhang 2010). However, surprisingly agents do not appear in HE specific course selection decision making models as an influencer. The primary research for this thesis identified that agents were influential for many of the international students, however not all international students were found to use agents. If the student appeared confident in the process, and/or could draw on the expertise of someone (e.g. family member or friend already experiencing the process), then they appeared to not use agents. Furthermore, whilst there was evidence that agents recommended certain countries and universities, the relationship between the prospective student, the agent and how and why certain recommendations are made is not clear. As the nature of this study was about understanding the whole decision journey, it was not possible to explore in-depth the relationship between student, agent and recommendations. However, it is possible to state that they do need including as an influencer within decision models.

Family, friends, current and past students appeared to influence widely, not only specific courses and universities, but also cities and countries. They are also likely to be viewed as credible sources of information (Christodoulides et al., 2012). They appeared to provide advice regarding a variety of areas such as living costs in various cities, general information regarding cities, their experience of studying in a particular university and/or course and/or country, and advice regarding entry requirements (e.g. Visa, course entry tests etc.). It is difficult to establish just how much this influence affected their searching and final decision, but there is some evidence. Interview respondent 9 (from Myanmar) ignored friends that had suggested he should go to the University of Manchester. Interview respondent 8 (from Uzbekistan) however, did listen to a consulting group in her own country that said Manchester would be a better city than London due to living costs. Interview respondent 5 (from Italy), listened to a wide variety of influencers who all suggested the University of Manchester would be too theoretical. Undergraduate lecturers, professional bodies and online discussion groups all appeared to influence.

The focus groups provided evidence of a wide range of influences, and the interviews provided depth and detail regarding specific influences for each interview respondent. Generally, non-UK students appeared to use influencers slightly more overall than UK students, although some exceptions were found. This *may* be linked to a higher level of perceived risk experienced by these students, as WOM is known to play a key role in helping to reduce risk (Mazzarol et al., 2007). However, when considering online comments by unknown individuals, not everyone found these credible influences. In the focus groups, one respondent referring to a range of negative and positive recommendations meaning it was difficult to form an opinion. In the interviews, respondent 4 (from the UK) suggested that online views might be biased, and was not something they could rely on as being an accurate reflection.

7.7 Pre-purchase evaluation

Post-purchase evaluation, already discussed in this chapter, is an important stage, and WOM/e-WOM can be a highly credible source of information (Christodoulides et al., 2012). However, it became apparent during the focus groups especially, that there were many negative comments or experiences during their decision journey, and especially at the application stage. The negative comments related to lack of communication with applicants, during the application process, and regarding delays in acceptance onto a course. However, negative comments were also made regarding problems with the online application system, poor impression of specific HEIs websites, unclear start dates etc. Indeed, one applicant in focus group 1 applied to another university due to delays in processing their application. A very late applicant in the interviews (7 from the UK), thought they had not been accepted onto the course, when they had not heard anything after around 4 weeks. This therefore highlights the importance of undertaking a pre-purchase evaluation stage, i.e. gaining understanding of what the negatives and positives were regarding the various touch points that they experienced, of which the application process would be a major part. With the post-purchase evaluation stage, the concern is regarding negative WOM or e-WOM. However, with pre-purchase evaluation, applicants or potential applicants may go elsewhere if they do not have a good experience.

7.8 Decision making process

In Chapter 3, a comprehensive review of the decision making process models, both outside and within HE, took place. This revealed that although decision making models outside of HE had moved forward to accommodate a contemporary media environment, with a focus on engagement and touch points, within HE, decision making was still illustrated as a linear set of steps. This suggested that prospective students would start with a wide choice set, and then narrow down in a very structured way through common stages. The primary research within this thesis highlighted a number of prospective students did not approach course selection decision making in this way. Some started with a more narrow choice set and added further choices later prior to application, others put in applications and then added further choices at a later date. This suggests that existing models need to be able to reflect this type of approach. There was also a number of emotional aspects identified, in both the focus groups and interviews, that influenced decisions. Emotional aspects are associated with driving student choice regarding HE course selection decision making (Galan et al., (2015).

Furthermore, existing HE models do not have any focus upon any form of engagement and/or touch point within them, now common within more recent mainstream models, such as Lemon and Verhoef (2016), Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014), Nobel (2010), and Court (2009). Moreover, Millennial students are identified as technically savvy people, not only have they a need to interact with others, but they are more likely to prefer social media for those interactions (Kozsar and Hiller-Connel 2013; Bolton et al., 2013). The primary research revealed that a substantial amount of engagement activity took place, whether this be through course specific Facebook pages, attendance at open days, emails and/or telephone calls to university staff, or simply looking through the website prior to application. The course Facebook page was generally well received with many positive comments, however, there were a small number of students that had not wanted to participate prior to arrival, due to assumptions that might be made. Furthermore, some students were less active, and either were not a member, or had not posted anything. These students may fit with the Observers category identified by Puri (2014), which identifies them as technologically advanced, but value privacy, have a lower use of social media and limited creation of online content. This is important to note, so that assumptions are not made that every Millennial student wants to be social online.

7.9 Engagement and touch points

The nine interviews allowed for specific touch points on individual journeys to be constructed (see Tables 6.27 and 6.28). However, due to a lack of previously identified

HE-specific touch point categories, the Lemon and Verhoef (2016), and Baxendale et al. 2015) models were used as a starting point, and adapted to suit the HE environment. From the categories identified in these models, and utilising the touch points identified in the focus groups and interviews, three relevant HE-specific categories were constructed: brand owned, partner and social/external. In order for a manageable approach to be taken, three stages were identified as Pre (covering pre-search and information search); App (application and decision), and PPE (post purchase evaluation leading to WOM/e-WOM), as suggested by Lemon and Verhoeaf (2016). This provided a comprehensive overview of touch points used at each of the three stages, and for HEIs to consider.

7.10 Development of the framework

The ontological approach of social constructionism central to this research study, means that the transcripts have been used to construct meaning, make sense from the data and therefore this leads to the construction of a framework, which will now be discussed.

From the secondary research and primary research, a framework was developed, that better illustrated contemporary PGHE course selection decisions.

The framework contains a variety of constructs, which will now be justified:

1. Early thoughts/Pre-search behaviour (problem recognition stage) : Models outside of HE discuss a problem recognition stage (e.g. Blackwell et al 2001), or pre-shopping stage (Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014), or pre-search stage for HE (Maringe 2006). Although there are few studies with a focus on this area, within HE, aspirations for study have been researched (e.g. Soilemetzidis et al., 2014; Foskett et al., 2006). Furthermore, Maringe (2006) explains within the HE context this concerns early, passive thoughts regarding HE study, and the importance of maintaining an institutional presence with potential students. The primary research found that this was an important stage, and also explored reasons why students started to think about postgraduate study. This research

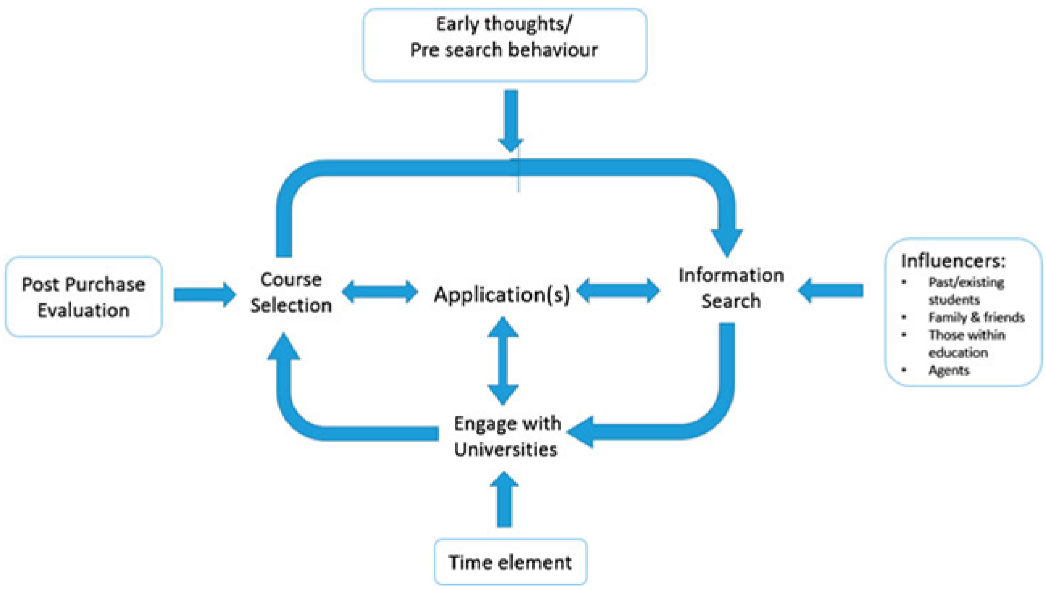
also found a huge variety of time periods regarding when these early thoughts commenced.

2. Information search: there is substantial research relating to the importance of this both within HE and outside, and all previous models contain this as either a stage or part of the process. It is suggested that different search patterns may exist (Usher et al. 2010; Furst et al. 1984). The online environment takes on a much larger role (Moe and Trusov 2011); consumers now continually engage with brands and look for new information (Nobel 2010), rather than previously where information was used to evaluate a wide initial choice set and then narrow down as suggested by Lewis in 1903 (Vazquez et al 2014). The primary research found that online reviews, university rankings, connecting with other students online (existing/past) were all undertaken by Millennial students. Also, checking staff blogs and Twitter activity was mentioned. Information search is, therefore shown as an ongoing process until a final decision is made.
3. Application(s) (Evaluation stage) – In a number of the existing HE models an application stage is present (See Litten 1982, Maringe 2006). Students are known to put in multiple applications and accept multiple offers (Maringe 2006), which suggests they have not yet made a choice. This stage appears therefore similar to the evaluation stage in models such as Blackwell et al. (2001), or Court et al. (2009). This primary research highlighted that there were five different application patterns based upon total number submitted and the location of those universities. Furthermore, the importance of understanding whether the application experience was positive or not was highlighted. A negative application experience may mean further searches for information and/or applications, and therefore may impact upon the final decision.
4. Decision – at some point in the process a final decision is made based upon attributes or criteria students use to select their university and course (Soutar and Turner 2002). These criteria used vary between different students (Soilemetzidis et al. 2014), so it is important to understand which are used when looking at each decision journey. In the focus groups a wide range of criteria were found in the decision journey, with availability of internships and links to professional bodies and/or accreditations not previously covered in the literature. Again, a negative application experience may impact upon final

decision. It was also interesting to note that a Twitter account by a member of the teaching staff actually influenced their perception of the credibility of the course. Moreover, it was clear that Place really influenced some students.

5. Post purchase evaluation – Unhappy customers write far more about their experience (Walker 1995). However, consumers are now encouraged to write reviews, of both positive and negative experiences, through sites such as Tripadvisor.com and online ratings and reviews have recently taken on a much larger role in the consumer decision process (More and Trusov 2011). Moreover, for postgraduate students there are many online ratings and reviews (for example the PTES survey, university forums etc). The online environment has made it much easier to post and read reviews. The focus groups highlighted that whilst traditional WOM is still taking place, there is a wide variety of e-WOM such as Twitter, Facebook, forums, blogs et. Which suggests that existing/past students' WOM/e-WOM acts increasingly as an influencer for future students during their decision making.

Figure 7.1: Framework



The framework identified in Figure 7.1 above is illustrated as a circular rather than a linear process, as research outside of PGHE suggest consumers do not now start with a wide initial choice set (Court et al., 2009), but add and subtract brands (Hudson and

Hudson, 2013). There are four new attributes that have been identified in the research of PG student course selection, which will now be discussed.

6. <u>Circular</u> – All existing HE models are linear (See Table 3.6), and there is increasing evidence to suggest that this does not accurately reflect behaviour by Millennials (for example see Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014, or Lemon and Verhoef 2016). The results from this study also suggest that the process is not necessarily linear for all students, with some found to be adding further universities/courses at a later date.

7. <u>Influencers</u> – Whilst not part of the stages, this is an important consideration. A wide range of people are known to influence decisions regarding HE choice including friends, family and teachers (Usher et al., 2010), universities (Veloutsou et al., 2005), ratings and reviews made by past users (Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014). With 36.5% of overseas students recruited via agents, this suggests that agents may also have a key influential role for some students (Havergal 2015). The focus groups and interviews demonstrated the significant influence from past/existing students, family/friends and those within education. Agents have not previously been included within models as an influencer, but clearly were present in the decision making stages.

8. <u>Engage with universities</u> – Previous models within HE have not explicitly included engage until a final stage. However, purchase of a high involvement service is likely to mean that engaging with the university will help in decision making and ultimately a choice. Millennials are always connected and more communicative than previous generations and they continually engage with brands and their peers regarding their decision (Hall et al., 2017), whilst Nobel (2010) included an engage stage within their customer life cycle model. It became apparent in this research that although many students had a positive experience, there were many that had an experience that can be described as less than positive. What was clear from this primary research was that the experience students received whilst engaging with universities influenced them not only in their decision, but also in their application pattern. This will lead to pre-purchase evaluation, and if

less than ideal, a possible further information search and/or application, as seen from this primary research. It is therefore essential that HEIs seek feedback on this important part of the PG student customer journey.

9. Time Element - A time element has been included as previous research has suggested that those who undertake decisions with limited time available have different patterns of behaviour (Johnston et al., 1997). Hall et al., (2017) also found differences in consumer decision behaviour relating to time. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to factor in the time element for applicants that commence their journey earlier or later. The focus groups suggested one to two years prior to the course starting was common to start considering postgraduate study, although four years, down to one month prior were also seen. A time element therefore is essential to explore, to see if different patterns of behaviour are seen on individual journeys. Also, time seems an issue if a university fails to respond with reassuring information during the application process.

7.11 Further discussion on the framework presented

Considering each of the nine respondent journeys, and the framework presented above (Figure 6.1), the following comments are now possible:

Widening initial consideration set

Respondent 5, initially searched for courses in Italy, and then increased her consideration set and searched for further courses in the UK (Manchester), before any applications were submitted. This can easily be represented in the framework, as two separate but related searches, under the information search stage.

Widening choice after application

Respondent 6, initially was interested in a Management masters qualification, and indeed put this in his original application, however, after further consideration and searching, added a further title of Marketing to his existing application. This journey can also be illustrated in the existing framework (Figure 6.1), as the student went to application stage, then back to information search stage, followed by adding a further course to their existing application. The bi-directional arrows between application and information search stage cover this scenario

Furthermore, in the focus groups, a number of respondents discussed submitting applications and then adding further applications at a later date, which can also be accommodated in the model through the bi-directional arrows, and circular framework.

<u>Further applications in a different academic year</u>

Respondent 9, had quite a complex journey. Initially he applied through an agent to the University of Huddersfield, however due to Visa issues, was unable to attend that year. He subsequently searched further, felt confident regarding the process, and later put in another application for study the following year. However, this time his application was direct. Again, this type of journey can be accommodated within the existing framework in Figure 6.1, similar to respondent 6, as he went back to information search stage, before submitting further applications (with a time delay for the following academic year).

Although many of the respondents had a straightforward journey, without any real back-and-forth between stages, the above journeys do illustrate the importance of the framework being circular, with bi-directional arrows, rather than a simple linear process.

7.12 Conclusion and summary of key points

To conclude the discussion of the primary research findings, the following points summarise this chapter:

- Late entry to early thoughts stage (up to one month before) may restrict their level of searching and influence of others
- Those who consider postgraduate study at least a year before appear to have a range of different search patterns (extensive to restricted searching), and a range of use of influencers (extensive to few).
- Six categories were established of how students became aware of the university: connected to undergraduate degree search; live in area; general searching online; through another organisation; by personal recommendation; destination related.

- Five application patterns were established in this research, and these patterns can also be used for the consideration set: multiple countries; country; regional; city; single.
- Adapt messages used in course and university promotion to the criteria most important to postgraduate students at that university.
- Wide ranges of known influencers were referred to, especially by non-UK students, and they appeared to provide advice on a wide range of areas.
- Although post-purchase evaluation is missing as a stage from most of the HE decision models, this research found it to be a very important stage, especially due to the extensive use of WOM/e-WOM.
- Some students did not see as credible or accurate, unknown potential influencers through online comments in discussion groups etc.
- The importance of pre-search evaluation was highlighted
- A new framework was constructed, circular in nature, with bi-directional arrows, incorporating a number of constructs: early thoughts; information search; application; decision; post-purchase evaluation; influencers, engagement and time.

8. Conclusion

This final chapter summarises the thesis in relation to the original stated aims and objectives, summarises the main contributions to knowledge, reflects on the whole research journey during the PhD, and discusses future research.

8.1 Summary of the thesis and consideration of aims and objectives

The aim of this thesis was *to review and evaluate decision making models, to establish the extent to which they adequately reflect the journey of prospective full-time postgraduate students in a contemporary media environment*. The research demonstrated that current HE models, whilst they provide useful relevant criteria/stages, they do not adequately reflect all millennial postgraduate students journeys. Further discussion of this will now follow around each specific objective.

Objective 1 was *to critically review consumer decision making theory and explore developments in consumer decision making models*. The literature review in chapter 3 revealed that there were a wide range of consumer decision making models outside and within HE. Outside of HE, more recent models had progressed to a more circular/less linear approach, whilst within HE, a purely linear approach was still evident. Chapter 4 reviewed the common areas within many of the models, and reviewed more contemporary areas such as engagement and touchpoints.

Objective 2 was *to explore the relationship between the contemporary media environment and consumer decision making models*. The literature review revealed that the contemporary media environment had seen huge changes, with an increased focus by Millennials on digital and social media, which highlighted the importance of engagement and touchpoints. However, the discussion of engagement and touchpoints is lacking focus within HE literature. The primary research highlighted how Millennial postgraduate students use a range of online sources throughout the decision process, but not to the exclusion of traditional sources. Moreover, whilst influencers were important, those unknown through social media/digital appeared less influential. The post purchase evaluation stage appeared increasingly important due to a large amount of e-WOM taking place. Finally, a number of postgraduate students started with a narrow consideration set, that was later added to, which several researchers have linked to the contemporary media environment (for example see Court et al. 2009; Hudson and Hudson 2013).

Objective 3 was *to explore the decision making journey of full-time postgraduate students from their early thoughts regarding postgraduate study through to arrival at their selected university.* The primary research provided detailed insight into this area through the focus groups and the interviews allowed nine customer journeys to be clearly mapped. Qualitative quotations provided details at each key stage within their journey, whilst the mapping of touchpoints provided further insight regarding their engagement experience. Time elements, information searching behaviour, application patterns, influencers, and engagement activities were all analysed for each of the interview respondents, providing rich accounts of each journey.

Objective 4 was *to map journeys of these students in order to establish if any common patterns existed*. The interviews revealed that whilst the stages/criteria highlighted were relevant to postgraduate students, there were many different approaches. Use of bi-directional arrows within the new framework, allowed for these different approaches. Five different application patterns were categorised, and influencers were categorised into three groups. Furthermore, price, course content and location were the most frequently cited criteria used to make decisions. Finally, the touchpoint analysis revealed patterns relating to the three new HE-relevant touch point categories.

Objective 5 was *to develop a framework that demonstrates journeys of potential postgraduate students and the role of contemporary communications within this*. A new circular framework was developed from the secondary and primary research that appears to better illustrate the Millennial student journey. A new construct of engage was added, not previously part of HE models. Agents were added as part of a number of influencers. Post purchase evaluation, lacking in many HE models, was added as the primary research reveals this was an important stage in a contemporary media environment. A time element was added, as the primary research highlighted varying patterns regarding this. Finally, bi-directional arrows within the circular framework meant all journeys could be accommodated from the interviews. This new framework has now been published in a 3* CABS ranked journal.

8.2 Contributions to Knowledge

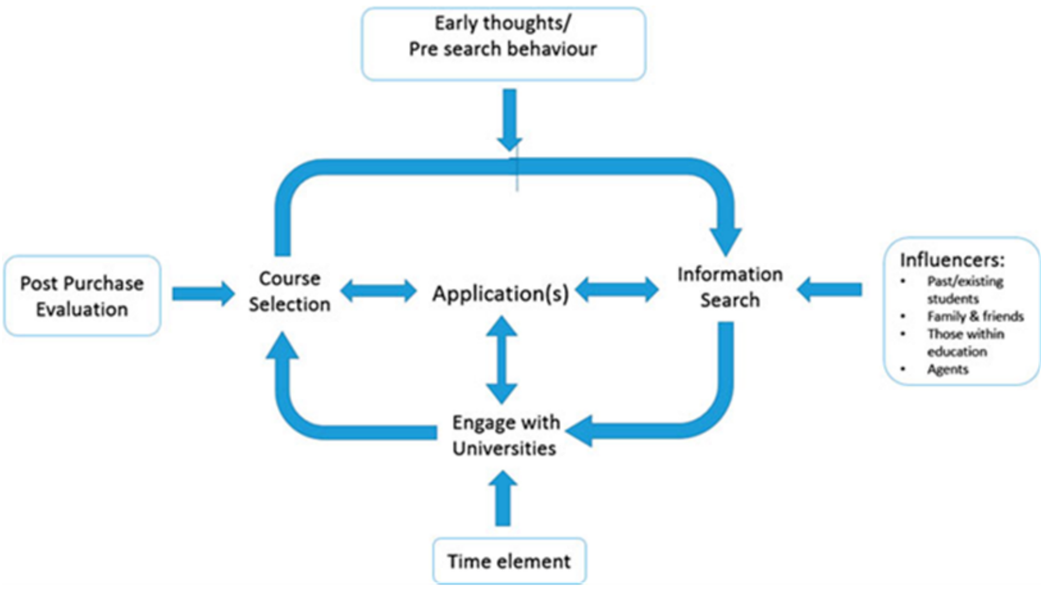
The contribution to knowledge within this thesis can be summarised as follows:

- A theoretical contribution regarding a new circular decision making model for the millennial student course selection process in a digital era.
- A theoretical contribution regarding categorisation of application patterns (multiple country; country, regional, city, single), and for the consideration set.
- A theoretical contribution, regarding touch points. Three HE specific categories have been compiled, with detail regarding the type of touch point under each category.
- A practical contribution through providing insight for university staff involved in recruitment activities, and postgraduate course leaders
- A research contribution through providing insight into developing a customer journey mapping process within HE

8.2.1 New circular decision making model.

This suggested a move away from a purely linear process to a circular process, which better illustrates behaviour by Millennial students. The model also highlights the importance of engagement during the process, gaining in importance due to digital and social media use (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). It illustrates a back-and-forth approach between stages that some students undertake, through the bi-directional arrows within the model. Four categories of influencers are highlighted within the model, including agents, which have been missing previously. Post purchase evaluation is a key aspect of the process for millennial students, and was missing from most of the HE specific models discussed in Chapter 3. Finally, a time element has been added. This highlights varying time patterns regarding when the process commences, and feeds into the information searching ability.

Figure 8.1 New framework for Postgraduate course selection decision making by millennial students.



8.2.2 Application patterns and consideration set.

It has previously been highlighted that students may put in multiple applications (Maringe 2006). However, this research identified five different application patterns relating to prospective postgraduate students. This can also be related to the consideration set. This is an important area, as it may be useful for HEIs to consider within their marketing programmes benefits regarding the region or country, not just the course. Moreover, it links with partners in the touchpoint analysis section, where it may be beneficial to consider at country level (or even city level) what destination marketing is taking place. The application categories constructed from this research are as follows:

Table 8.1: Application pattern categories developed

Category	Detail
Multiple countries	Multiple applications to more than one country
Country	Multiple applications within one country
Regional	Multiple applications, but focused on a particular region with a country
City	Multiple applications, but all focused around a particular city
Single	Only one application

8.2.3 Developing HE-specific touch point categories

Touch points have only relatively recently started to gain attention within academic journals outside of HE, mainly due to what Lemon and Verhoef (2016: 73) refer to as *"the digital and social media revolution".* Drawing upon existing secondary research, and this primary research, a further contribution to knowledge concerns three HE-specific touch point categories: brand owned; partner; social/external, which have been plotted for each individual journey at the three key stages of pre-search/search; application/decision; and post purchase evaluation including WOM/eWOM. This provides a comprehensive picture to assist in highlighting any improvement required by the service provider, in this instance an HEI, but also country level marketing undertaken to attract visitors to a country, and/or country level educational marketing undertaken by government bodies.

8.2.4 Providing insight for university staff involved in recruitment activities, and postgraduate course leaders

A practical contribution to knowledge regarding university staff involved in recruitment activities and postgraduate course leaders also results from this work. Future events are planned to disseminate key insight to course leaders, internal marketing staff and recruitment staff. As a course leader, this research has already provided very useful insight into the process, and is informing future marketing of programmes. Furthermore, any publications resulting from this thesis may be read by recruitment and admissions staff, and other postgraduate course leaders.

8.2.5 Customer journey mapping process insight within HE.

Customer journey mapping allows an organisation to understand the customer experience, although there is still confusion regarding how to do this (Rosenbaum 2017; Folstad and Kvale 2018). There are a limited number of customer journey maps available outside of HE (for example Lemon and Verhoef (2016); Baxendale et al. (2015); Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014). However, these are frequently focused on consumers and retail (such as Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014), or are quantitative studies (Baxendale et al., 2015), or conceptual (Folstad and Kvale 2018). The research for this thesis provided insight into how to undertake qualitative research in order to map customer journeys in HE with postgraduate students. The results of the mapping need to be useful for HEIs, and allow an understanding of the customer experience, thereby enabling HEIs to improve the customer experience. Of course, there is a great deal of debate regarding whether students are consumers/customers in the true sense of this definition (see chapter 2 for a discussion in this area). Whatever viewpoint is held, it is very clear that students are behaving more like consumers/customers, and that HEIs need to maximise positive experiences, to ensure positive future WOM/e-WOM.

Detailed quotations from the focus groups and interviews have been provided around each key stage/criteria, allowing real insight. Furthermore, from this insight, touch point analysis can take place, providing HEIs with a list of areas that need to be evaluated from a customer experience perspective. Other HEIs should now be able to replicate this study, to provide insight into student experiences within their own HEI. This should include experiences of the application process, i.e. a pre-purchase evaluation.

8.3 Reflecting on the research process

Reflexivity in the area of social sciences has a number of meanings (Bryman and Bell, 2007), and Johnson and Duberley (2000) suggest this is linked to the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher that determine how they approach their research. Bryman and Bell (2007: 700) state

> *"Business researchers should reflect on the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate and try to be aware of how personal idiosyncrasies and implicit assumptions, affect their approach to study"*.

Furthermore, Jill and Johnson (2002: quoting work from Schon, 1983) highlight how managers, who are also part-time students on Doctoral programmes, are well equipped to reflect upon their own organisations, and indeed do so as part of their everyday role. As a programme leader for two postgraduate programmes, reflection was the starting point for this PhD topic area. In reviewing postgraduate student experience of induction, comments regarding the application process were often made, highlighting a lack of understanding of this area. Indeed, it was negative experiences that created the formation of the course Facebook groups, which have been in existence for the last eleven years, and at that time were considered quite unique.

Reflecting upon the research process, Easterby-Smith et al. (2002: 53) point out, within a constructionist viewpoint validity, reliability and generalisability have certain specific meanings. This is now considered in relation to the research conducted for this thesis.

Validity: *"Does the study clearly gain access to the experiences of those in the research setting?"*(Easterby-Smith et al., 2002: 53). The sample selected, whilst relatively small, consisting of 59 postgraduate students in total, it represented only those that have lived the experience. All students were registered on a marketing-related postgraduate course, and the research clearly provides valuable insights.

Reliability: *"Is there transparency in how sense was made from the raw data?"* (Easterby-Smith et al. 2002: 53). All data were analysed using generally accepted methods to ensure the data was not taken out of context, and various viewpoints held are presented. Care was taken when extracting quotations from the transcripts, to ensure they accurately reflected viewpoints. However, the author acknowledges that alternative interpretations of the data are possible, and that the view presented is one of many possibilities.

Generalisability: *"Do the concepts and constructs derived from this study have any relevance to other settings?"* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002: 53). This research is less concerned with generalisability. The main strength of interpretivist and social constructionist research is in its ability to present various accounts within a particular context. The context provides the rich data. However, a possible limitation of this research is that only marketing-related students were selected, they were at one post-92 university, Manchester Metropolitan University. There are, therefore, likely to be some differences if a similar study was to take place elsewhere. Indeed, it is in the recommendations for further research that different university types, students on different courses, and in less well known locations could be considered.

Reflecting upon the review of literature for this thesis, a number of decisions were made regarding themes included. Firstly, the area of national culture (popularised by Hofstede 1980), initially a separate theme within the literature, was subsequently incorporated within other areas, hence a much reduced focus. Discussions relating national culture to contemporary communications have emerged more recently, under the theme of digital culture, and could have received some focus within this thesis. Emergent discussions centre around the limits and validity of using traditional cross-cultural frameworks (such as that developed by Hofstede 1980) in a digital era (Lichy and Stokes 2018). The increasing use of online communications, together with the cross-border movement of people, highlights geographical boundaries that traditional cultural frameworks refer to, are perhaps outdated within the context of online consumer behaviour. Online communications may decrease cultural and national identities and increasingly lead to more culturally homogenous online groups, with common values, irrespective of race, class or family origin. (Lichy and Stokes 2018; Gooderham and Nordhaug 2002; Rafalow 2018).

Emerging discussions around digital culture also focus on new ways of segmenting, based on Generational Cohort Theory, seen as a key influencer in how individuals behave online. Although the review of literature did include reference to generational cohorts, highlighting postgraduate students as mainly from Generation Y/Millennials, and included an overview of how they consume media, it did not explicitly link this to a discussion around the emergent theme of digital culture. Furthermore, the thesis highlighted some of the ongoing discussion regarding Millennials not being one homogeneous group for online behaviour, with studies such as Sinton and Puri (2014), Christodoulides et al., (2012), and Hill et al.,(2013) all identifying sub-groups for Millennial online behaviour. Moreover, Qui and Loader (2016), highlight other emergent themes relating to digital culture, including alternative business models (such as the use of crowdsourcing), political dimensions (such as the ability of online media to facilitate more diverse opinions, including use by protesters), and the 'dark web', involving illegal practices (for example drug dealing). Therefore, a limitation regarding the themes within the literature is that the two areas of national culture and contemporary digital user behaviour were not discussed as an emergent theme of digital culture.

Reflecting upon the methodological approaches used within this thesis, more conventional research techniques of focus groups and unstructured interviews were utilised. These methods are common within social science (Matteucci 2013), however a number of researchers have suggested more visual research techniques should be used, such as photo elicitation or rich picture, which can capture perceptions or experiences, and provide an alternative to verbal-only methods (Padgett et al., 2013; Bell et al., 2019). Photo elicitation can be seen as an adaptation of projective research methods, which are generally uncommon in business and management research (Bryman and Bell 2007). Photo elicitation interviewing (PEI) involves the use of photographs during a research interview, and can evoke feelings, emotions, memories and thoughts, creative thinking, and problem solving (Bryman and Bell 2007; Matteucci 2013). Harris and Guillemin (2012) suggest PEI allows additional insights to those that might be gained from verbal-only methods, and therefore may have provided additional insight regarding the more emotional/non-linear aspects of this research study, relating to how course selection decisions are made. Similarly rich picture technique (RP) may be used as a way of capturing data about a complex situation, is seen to work best within the context of small groups, and the method has been used in a wide variety of contexts (Bell et al., 2019). This method frequently involves a physical picture drawn by a variety of respondents to encourage discussion and debate.

Reflecting upon the interviews, I used words and diagrams on paper to illustrate what each interviewee discussed during the unstructured interviews. These visual representations were then used as prompts to further explore in some depth aspects raised. However, rich picture could have allowed interviewees to illustrate their own journeys, or the participants could have developed a complete picture during the focus groups. Therefore, my overall reflection is that as a researcher I should consider a wider range of research methods to complement more traditional, widely accepted and used approaches.

On a personal note, reflecting upon the journey of the PhD as an individual will also be considered. I initially commenced this PhD journey in 2002, with a topic relating to merchandising decision making. However, after an award of Master of Research in 2004, changes in personal circumstances resulted in a withdrawal from study. A new PhD began in 2013, with a topic more related to my specialist teaching area and programme leadership responsibilities. It has been a very wise selection, as there appears to be a gap regarding applying customer journeys to HE. Customer journeys and touch points appear to not only be lacking focus within the HE context, but also appear to not be linked to the decision making process. Moreover, this research has been extremely useful to me as a programme leader.

The PhD journey, as many others have discussed with me, has been difficult, with periods of doubt regarding whether I was capable, doubts about my writing style, research ability, ability to find a gap, or contribute to knowledge. Moreover, combining a demanding job as a programme leader, with responsibilities also for many units, has meant time management has been very important. Responsibilities outside of work compounded the situation. A publication in a 2* journal during 2017 improved my writing style, and a massive boost to confidence was received when a 3* journal accepted work relating to the literature review and results from the first stage of research. Again, this also helped in developing my writing style further, and also made me realise that my research has some credibility. The push to complete this thesis in the last few months has, however, been quite stressful, but well worth sacrifices in time dedicated to this. Furthermore, it would not have been possible without allocated time given within my departmental workload model.

During the PhD journey, in addition to a number of **conference papers** being presented in this area (Academy of Marketing conference, International Conference on Contemporary Marketing Issues), the **two publications** connected to this research are:

<u>Paper 1</u>: Hall, A., Towers, N., Shaw, D., (2017) "Understanding how Millennial shoppers decide what to buy: Digitally connected unseen journeys", *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 45(5). This paper explored developments with Millennials and how they consume media and approach decisions within retail.

<u>Paper 2</u>: Towers, A., & Towers, N. (2018) "Re-evaluating the postgraduate students' course selection decision making process in the digital era", *Studies in Higher Education*, Online 5th December. This paper presents the results from the literature review and stage one of primary research. It covers a critical review of the decision making process

models/customer journeys, presents the results from the focus groups, and from this research develops a framework.

8.4 Recommendations for Further Research

The focus of this research was at postgraduate level, with marketing-related students, and one post-92 university. This research provides real insight into the decision making process of these students, including mapping their student journeys and touch points. The intention was to provide detailed in-depth analysis, and did not focus on whether these results were transferrable to other postgraduate students, at other institutions, on different programme types. Therefore, further research should be conducted which could address the narrow and focused sample for this research. This would consider a wide range of different universities, and consider students on a range of programmes. Furthermore, the importance of the location of the university was clear, and therefore, researching students at universities that are not in high-profile destinations, or renowned for football success etc., would provide further insight into why students select these universities.

The second suggested area for further research concerns the touch points highlighted in stage two of the research. The literature review, and the results from the primary research, have highlighted a variety of touch points used by students on their decision journey. A further quantitative study could now take place, with a large sample size, to establish use of these various touch points, and evaluation of them. For example, a series of questions surrounding their experience of the website and whether all the information they required was contained within it, or whether an open day was useful and if there were further areas that needed to be developed.

The third suggested area for further research surrounds pre-purchase evaluation. HEIs should have a clear understanding of any issues encountered by students as they progress from early thoughts through to arriving for induction. Research could focus around developing questions to be used by HEIs in order to evaluate their experience of the application process, to ensure that any negative experiences are improved for future students.

Further research to explore the role of agents, during this process would also be useful. This might include exploring relationships between HEIs and agents, in addition to more in-depth research understanding the role agents have within the process of course selection by postgraduate students.

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Questions preparation

- Ask everyone to check their mobile is on silent
- Explain that this focus group is part of a series of focus groups looking into student use of IT, and relating this to the application process to university course at postgraduate level
- Explain about confidentiality and ethics paperwork
- Explain that the focus group will last for no more than 1 hour
- Ask that only one person speaks at once

General

Ask them to state their first name and which country they studied in for their degree, and which country they are from (if different)

University and course choice

I now want to explore how you selected this university course, and also the role of IT within this.

Early stages

1. When did they know they wanted to do pg study? E.g. year before, 3 months before???
2. How did they become aware of MMU? PROBE: Direct or through an agent? Searching online? Friends and family tell them about it? Saw advert or prospectus? A talk was given at their previous institution?

Application stage

I want to discuss now applying to university and particular courses

1. How many different universities did you apply to? Why was is (if so) that you applied to more than one? If not from the UK – probe on country selection also
2. Did you feel that when you put your application in that you got a quick response? Did this influence you in selecting your university? Explore how they felt about the response – e.g. was it personal, or just a standard reply, is that important to them? Was it an electronic response?

Choice factors

I want to now explore how you made your decision regarding which university and course to select.

1. What factors were important to you when making your decision? Explore: type of course, entry points/English requirements, price, attractiveness of location, accommodation, interaction with university staff, family/friends/teachers influence, reputation/league tables, visa requirements, language taught in.
2. When did you actually decide which was your preferred university? Did you accept multiple offers? Why?

3. How positive do they now feel about the choice they made?

Use of social media

I want to now explore what role you think social media could play in the process of university selection.

1. Find out what they thought when they were first invited to join Facebook group. (Probe any Chinese students that don't have access)
2. Did this group influence them in any way in their decision to come to MMU?
3. Explore how active they are – do they post new topic areas? Do they 'like' comments, do they post links etc?
4. Explore any benefits/negatives they feel from being part of the closed Facebook group
5. Explore how active they are in the group – why.

6. I am interested firstly to know whether you actually explored what was being written about certain universities on-line, for example in a discussion group or a chat area, or Facebook etc. Probe on different ones used in different countries.

7. How do you think we could use social media in recruitment of postgraduate students? Explore whether Facebook course page is a good idea or not. Explore how they would like to be communicated with and what this could be about. Explore whether this communication should be once you have applied, or whether before this. Explore whether they want to chat with existing students on-line.

8. How do our competitors use social media? Have you been invited to join anything by a university that you applied to?

9. Have any of you posted anything about your course on social media sites since joining this course?

Thank everyone for their time and honest opinions.

APPENDIX B: ETHICS CHECKLIST FORM

ETHICS CHECKLIST

This checklist must be completed **before** commencement of **any** research project. This includes projects undertaken by **staff and by students as part of a UG, PGT or PGR programme**. Please attach a Risk Assessment.

Manchester Metropolitan University

Please also refer to the University's Academic Ethics Procedures; Standard Operating Procedures and the University's Guidelines on Good Research Practice

Full name and title of applicant:	Angela Hall
University Telephone Number:	0161 247 3991
University Email address:	a.hall@mmu.ac.uk
Status: All staff and students involved in research are strongly encouraged to complete the Research Integrity Training which is available via the Staff and Research Student Moodle areas	Undergraduate Student ☐ Postgraduate Student: Taught ☐ Postgraduate Student: Research ☑ Staff ☑
Department/School/Other Unit:	Marketing, Research & Tourism/Business School
Programme of study (if applicable):	PhD
Name of DoS/Supervisor/Line manager:	Dr Peter Betts/Professor Tony Conway
Project Title:	Consumer decision making for full-time postgraduate students in a contemporary media environment
Start & End date (cannot be retrospective):	November - March 2017-18
Number of participants (if applicable):	20+
Funding Source:	

Brief description of research project activities (300 words max):

This stage of research aims to undertake in-depth interviews with existing postgraduate students. A small number of students will be on my own two postgraduate programmes (MSc Marketing & MSc Marketing (Communications)), other students will be on other courses at MMU, and others will be outside MMU

	YES	NO
Does the project involve NHS patients or resources? If 'yes' please note that your project may need NHS National Research Ethics Service (NRES) approval. Be aware that research carried out in a NHS trust also requires governance approval. Click here to find out if your research requires NRES approval Click here to visit the National Research Ethics Service website To find out more about Governance Approval in the NHS click here	☐	☑
Does the project require NRES approval?	☐	☑
If yes, has approval been granted by NRES? Attach copy of letter of approval. Approval cannot be granted without a copy of the letter.	☐	☐

NB Question 2 should only be answered if you have answered YES to Question 1. All other questions are mandatory.	YES	NO
1. Are you are gathering data from people?	☑	☐
For information on why you need informed consent from your participants please click here		
2. If you are gathering data from people, have you:	☐	☐
a. attached a participant information sheet explaining your approach to their involvement in your research and maintaining confidentiality of their data?	☑	☐
b. attached a consent form? (not required for questionnaires)	☑	☐
Click here to see an example of a participant information sheet and consent form		
3. Are you gathering data from secondary sources such as websites, archive material, and research datasets?	☐	☑
Click here to find out what ethical issues may exist with secondary data		
4. Have you read the guidance on data protection issues?	☑	☐
a. Have you considered and addressed data protection issues – relating to storing and disposing of data?	☑	☐
b. Is this in an auditable form? (can you trace use of the data from collection to disposal)	☑	☐
5. Have you read the guidance on appropriate research and consent procedures for participants who may be perceived to be vulnerable?	☑	☐
a. Does your study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, people with learning disabilities, your own students)?	☑	☐
6. Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited (e.g. students at school, members of self-help group, nursing home residents)?	☐	☑
Click for an example of a PIS and information about gatekeepers		
7. Will the study involve the use of participants' images or sensitive data (e.g. participants personal details stored electronically, image capture techniques)?	☐	☑
Click here for guidance on images and sensitive data		
8. Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use)?	☐	☑
Click here for an advisory distress protocol		
9. Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety in participants or those associated with the research, however unlikely you think that risk is?	☐	☑
Click here to read about how to deal with stress and anxiety caused by research procedures		
10. Will blood or tissue samples be obtained from participants?	☐	☑
Click here to read how the Human Tissue Act might affect your work		
11. Is your research governed by the Ionising Radiation (Medical Exposure) Regulations (IRMER) 2000?	☐	☑
Click here to learn more about IRMER		
12. Are drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to be administered to the study participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?	☐	☑
Click here to read about how participants need to be warned of potential risks in this kind of research		
13. Is pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study? Please attach the pain assessment tool you will be using.	☐	☑

study and what do about it.		
14. Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing or does it include a physical intervention?	☐	☑
Click here to discover what constitutes a physical intervention and here to read how any prolonged or repetitive testing needs to managed for participant wellbeing and safety		
15. Will participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and informed consent? If yes, please include a justification.	☐	☑
Click here to read about situations where research may be carried out without informed consent		
16. Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?	☐	☑
Click here to read guidance on payment for participants		
17. Is there an existing relationship between the researcher(s) and the participant(s) that needs to be considered? For instance, a lecturer researching his/her students, or a manager interviewing her/his staff?	☑	☐
Click here to read guidance on how existing power relationships need to be dealt with in research procedures		
18. Have you undertaken Risk Assessments for each of the procedures that you are undertaking?	☑	☐
19. Is any of the research activity taking place outside of the UK?	☐	☑
20. Does your research fit into any of the following security sensitive categories: • commissioned by the military • commissioned under an EU security call • involve the acquisition of security clearances • concerns terrorist or extreme groups If Yes, please complete a Security Sensitive Information Form	☐	☑

I understand that if granted, this approval will apply to the current project protocol and timeframe stated. If there are any changes I will be required to review the ethical consideration(s) and this will include completion of a 'Request for Amendment' form.

☑ have attached a Risk Assessment
☑ have attached an Insurance Checklist

If the applicant has answered **YES** to **ANY** of the questions 5a – **17** then they must complete the MMU Application for Ethical Approval.

Signature of Applicant: ____________________ Date: 1/11/17 (DD/MM/YY)

***Independent Approval** for the above project is (please check the appropriate box):*
Granted
☐ I confirm that there are no ethical issues requiring further consideration and the project can commence.

Not Granted
☐ I confirm that there are ethical issues requiring further consideration and will refer the project protocol to the Faculty Research Group Officer.

Signature: ____________________ Date: __________ (DD/MM/YY)

Print Name: ____________________ Position: __________
Approver: Independent Scrutiniser for UG and PG Taught/ PGRs RD1 Scrutiniser/ Faculty Head of Ethics for staff.

APPENDIX C: RESPONDENT CONSENT FORMS

reference FREG2017ACA0017 and Amended date 24/1/2017

Manchester Metropolitan University

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Name of researcher: Angela Hall / Staff number: 01900278 Department: Marketing, Retail & Tourism / Building: Business School Tel: 0161 247 3991 / email: a.hall@mmu.ac.uk

Title of research: exploring how students decide which university and course to select for postgraduate study

Invitation to take part in a research study

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study, which is part of research for my PhD. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

The purpose of this study is:

- To explore the decision journey of postgraduate students from early thoughts of postgraduate study through to arrival at your selected university
- To map the student journey and ask questions about each part of it in order to have an in-depth understanding of various decisions and influences upon them

The findings from the study will be published only in academic journals, academic conferences, and as part of a PhD qualification. Individuals from the study will not be personally identified in any way.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You are a full-time postgraduate student, and therefore eligible to take part in this study. I am interested in obtaining the views of a wide range of students: of any gender, ethnic and cultural background. Students on different courses, and at different universities are also selected as part of the sample. There will be at least 20 students selected for interviews.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide. I will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which I will give to you. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be taking part in just one interview, which is likely to last for around an hour. I will book at room at the University, or an alternative convenient and safe public location, to allow this to happen, and for there not to be background noise. During the interview I will be asking you questions around the topic area detailed above, and exploring with you a range of areas around your decision to come to postgraduate study.

I will sound record the interview, which allows me to transcribe it. I will not use your name in the interview recording or transcript, so you will not be personally identifiable.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will be giving up an hour of your time. I cannot promise this, but I would hope you would not feel uncomfortable with the questions being asked.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I cannot promise the study will help you with your studies, however you will have some insight into how to undertake primary research. This may be helpful when you progress to your own dissertation. Moreover, you will be helping me, as a part-time PhD student, to complete my own research and publish.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a complaint about the researcher, or research experience, you can contact my Director of Studies, Dr Peter Betts, Department of Marketing, Retail & Tourism, email peter.betts@mmu.ac.uk

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your confidentiality will be safeguarded during and after the study, inline with the Data Protection Act:

- A sound recording will be made, which will not personally identify you
- A transcript of studies will be held, which will not personally identify you
- The sound recording and transcript will be held on a secure university server, with password protection
- A master list identifying participants to the research will be held on a password protected computer accessed only by the researcher
- Hard copies will be held in a locked office, accessed only by the researcher

What happens if I withdraw from this study?

If you withdraw from the study I will destroy all information relating to your interviews, even if you are not identifiable.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The research will be used for the PhD thesis, for academic conferences, and for academic journal articles that may be published. Individuals will not be identified in any of the work. Direct, but anonymised quotes may be used from your interview in research articles and in the PhD thesis. The data will be kept for no longer than 5 years, after which time it will be destroyed.

Who is organising or sponsoring the research?

Manchester Metropolitan University is sponsoring the researcher as part of a PhD

For further information/contact details: Angela Hall a.hall@mmu.ac.uk / 0161 247 3991 reference FREG2017ACA0017 and Amended date 24/1/2017

CONSENT FORM.

PROJECT NAME: PhD Research – exploring postgraduate student decision journeys

Participant identification code for this project: __________ PLEASE INITIAL BOX

1. I confirm that I understand the purpose of the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the interview procedure
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reasons
3. I agree to the interview being sound recorded and understand that I will remain anonymous
4. I give/do not give permission for my interview recording/transcript to be archived as part of this research project, making it available to future researchers (delete as appropriate)
5. I agree to take part in the above study
6. I understand that at my request a transcript of my interview can be made available to me

Name of participant _______________________ Date: ____________Signature____________________

WRITE IN CAPITALS

Researcher: **Angela Hall** Date:_____________ Signature___________________

Once signed, you will receive a copy of your signed and dated consent form/information sheet

APPENDIX D: INSURANCE CHECKLIST FORM

Overview

Manchester Metropolitan University holds insurance policies to cover claims for negligence arising from the conduct of the institution's normal business. This includes research undertaken by undergraduate and postgraduate students as part of their academic qualification as well as research carried out by staff.

If you are an undergraduate student, postgraduate student or staff researcher at the institution, you must complete all relevant sections of the checklist on the following pages to identify whether your application requires referral to the university's Insurance Officer.

Completing and submitting the checklist will ensure that your research study has appropriate insurance cover in place **before** it begins. Please submit your completed Research Insurance Checklist along with your Ethics Checklist and/or Application for Ethical Approval to your Faculty Research Officer.

Referral to the Insurance Officer

If your research falls into any of the categories listed in Section 2 and/or Section 3 of the checklist, the Faculty Research Officer will send the following information to the Insurance Officer at insurance1@mmu.ac.uk:

- Insurance Checklist
- Ethics Checklist and/or Application for Ethical Approval Form
- Participant Information Sheet(s) (if applicable)
- Participant Consent Form(s) (if applicable)
- Risk Assessment

The Insurance Officer will liaise with the insurers to gain approval. Please note some types of research may require additional insurance, which may incur an additional cost to the Faculty.

Research studies must not commence until insurance and all other relevant authorisations and/or approvals are given.

Travel Insurance

Manchester Metropolitan University has a policy to provide worldwide travel insurance for members of staff and students travelling in connection with their course or on an approved University trip. This includes travel undertaken in connection with undertaking a research study. You must complete the online travel insurance form to register for travel insurance and should do this at least two weeks before your departure date.

Please visit the Financial and Legal webpage for details.

High Risk Countries

Please visit the AIG Travel Guard website to identify whether the overall rating for the country you are travelling to is 'High Risk' or more severe. Please contact your Faculty Research Officer for guidance on accessing the relevant information on the website.

ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS

Lead Investigator Name (Title/Forename/Surname) **Angela Hall**

Contact Email Address **a.hall@mmu.ac.uk**

Full Title of the Research **explore the decision making journey of full-time postgraduate students regarding selecting their university**

SECTION 1 – TECHNIQUES, TESTING AND INTERVENTIONS

Does your research study involve:

☐ **Physically invasive techniques?**

This refers to any test in which the skin of the participant is broken or an implement is inserted into any opening of the human body (e.g. eyes, ears, nose, mouth, lungs, stomach, rectum, vagina and urethra) or involves the taking of body samples such as saliva, hair, urine, faeces, sputum, skin, nails, or taking biopsies of any form for any purpose, or any form of scanning such as DEXA scans, Ultrasound scans, MRI, fMRI, CT, or PET scanning.

☐ **Ingestion of food stuffs or drugs?**

This refers to the consumption of any substance which may impact on psychological or physical state. Substances may include but are not limited to food, beverages or drugs.

☐ **Physical testing?**

This refers to any test in which a participant must perform an action resulting in the use of any muscle of the body and/or involves the use of scanning procedures, eye-trackers, mounted body cameras, sensors or electrodes, or the taking of swabs from any cavity of the body, respiratory challenge testing or recording of peak flows, EEG, ECG, Exercise ECG, Treadmill work.

☐ **Psychological intervention?**

This refers to any test which purposely alters the mood of the participant or involves administering personality inventories, or any other form of psychological test.

OR

✓ **I confirm that my research does not fall into any of the above categories *(please go straight to Section 3)***

SECTION 2 – CLINICAL TRIALS INSURANCE

Please complete this section only if you ticked one of the boxes in Section 1.

Does your research study involve:

☐ **Pregnant persons as participants with procedures other than blood samples being taken from them?**

☐ **Children aged five or under with procedures other than blood samples being taken from them?**

☐ **Activities being undertaken by the lead investigator or any other member of the study team in a country outside of the UK? *If 'Yes', please refer to the 'Travel Insurance' guidance on Page 1 of this form.***

OR

✓ **I confirm that my research does not fall into any of the above categories**

SECTION 3 – OTHER HAZARDS

Does your research study involve:

☐ **Working with Hepatitis, Human T-Cell Lymphotropic Virus Type iii (HTLV iii), or Lymphadenopathy Associated Virus (LAV) or the mutants, derivatives or variations thereof or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) or any syndrome or condition of a similar kind?**

☐ **Working with Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE), Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) or new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (nvCJD)?**

☐ **Working in hazardous areas or high risk countries? *Please refer to the 'High Risk Countries' guidance on Page 1 of this form.***

☐ **Working with hazardous substances outside of a controlled environment?**

☐ **Working with persons with a history of violence, substance abuse or a criminal record?**

OR

I confirm that my research does not fall into any of the above categories

APPENDIX E: RISK ASSESSMENT FORM

Manchester Metropolitan University

RISK ASSESSMENT

FACULTY/DEPARTMENT Business School/Marketing, Retail & Tourism	**BUILDING** Business School, All Saints

1) ACTIVITY
Research activity - interviews with students, in a university building

2) PERSONS AT RISK
None

3A) HAZARDS
None

3B) Hazard Rating Low ☐ Med ☐ High ☐

4A) RISK CONTROL METHODS
n/a

4B) Hazard Rating with control methods Low ☐ Med ☐ High ☐

5) FURTHER ACTION REQUIRED
none

NAME AND TITLE OF ASSESSOR Angela Hall	**SIGNATURE**	**DATE** 1/11/17
		REVIEW DATE
SIGNATURE OF DEAN/HEAD OF DEPT.		**DATE**
		REVIEW DATE

APPENDIX F: APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL FORM

Application Number_______________
Date Received

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL
reference FREG2017ACA0017 and Amended date 24/1/2017

Manchester Metropolitan University

Introduction
All university activity must be reviewed for ethical approval. In particular, all undergraduate, postgraduate and staff research work, projects and taught programmes must obtain approval from the Academic Ethics committee.

Application Procedure
The form should be completed legibly (preferably typed) and, so far as possible, in a way which would enable a layperson to understand the aims and methods of the research. Every relevant section should be completed. Applicants should also include a copy of any proposed advert, information sheet, consent form and, if relevant, any questionnaire being used. The Principal Investigator should sign the application form. Supporting documents, together with one copy of the full protocol should be sent to the Faculty/Campus Research Group Officer.

Your application will require external ethical approval by an NHS Research Ethics Committee if your research involves staff, patients or premises of the NHS (see guidance notes)

Work with children and vulnerable adults
You will be required to have an Enhanced CRB Disclosure, if your work involves children or vulnerable adults.

The Academic Ethics Committee will respond as soon as possible, and where appropriate, will operate a process of expedited review.

Applications that require approval by an NHS Research Ethics Committee or a Criminal Disclosure will take longer.

1. Details of Applicants	
1.1. Name of applicant (Principal Investigator): Angela Hall	
Telephone Number: 0161 247 3991	
Email address: a.hall@mmu.ac.uk	
Status:	Postgraduate Student (Taught or Research) p/t PhD student Staff: Senior Lecturer
Department/School/Other Unit: Marketing, Retail & Tourism, Business School	
Programme of study (if applicable): p/t PhD	
Name of supervisor/Line manager: Peter Betts	
1.2. Co-Workers and their role in the project: (e.g. students, external collaborators, etc)	

Page 1 of 4
Version 2 September 2015

Name:	Name:
Telephone Number:	Telephone Number:
Role:	Role:
Email Address:	Email Address:

2. Details of the Project
2.1. Title:
2.2. Description of the Project: (please outline the background and the purpose of the research project, 250 words max)
2.3. Describe what type of study this is (e.g. qualitative or quantitative; also indicate how the data will be collected and analysed). Additional sheets may be attached.
2.4. Are you going to use a questionnaire? NO
2.5. Start Date / Duration of project:
2.6. Location of where the project and data collection will take place:
2.7. Nature/Source of funding
2.8. Are there any regulatory requirements? YES (Provide details, e.g. from professional bodies) NO

3. Details of Participants
3.1. How many?
3.2. Age:
3.3. Sex:
3.4. How will they be recruited? (Attach a copy of any proposed advertisement)
3.5. Status of participants: (e.g. students, public, colleagues, children, hospital patients, prisoners, including young offenders, participants with mental illness or learning difficulties.)
3.6. Inclusion and exclusion from the project: (indicate the criteria to be applied).

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Application Number_______________
Date Received_______________

3.7. Payment to volunteers: (indicate any sums to be paid to volunteers).

3.8. Study information:
Have you provided a study information sheet for the participants?
YES (Please attach a copy)
NO

3.9. Consent:
(A written consent form for the study participants MUST be provided in all cases, unless the research is a questionnaire.)
Have you produced a written consent form for the participants to sign for your records?
YES (Please attach a copy)
NO

4. Risks and Hazards

4.1. Are there any risks to the researcher and/or participants?
(Give details of the procedures and processes to be undertaken, e.g., if the researcher is a lone-worker.)

4.2. State precautions to minimise the risks and possible adverse events:

4.3. What discomfort (physical or psychological) danger or interference with normal activities might be suffered by the researcher and/or participant(s)? State precautions which will be taken to minimise them:

5. Ethical Issues

5.1. Please describe any ethical issues raised and how you intend to address these:

6. Safeguards/Procedural Compliance

6.1. Confidentiality:
6.1.1. Indicate what steps will be taken to safeguard the confidentiality of participant records. If the data is to be computerised, it will be necessary to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.
6.1.2. If you are intending to make any kind of audio or visual recordings of the participants, please answer the following questions:
6.1.2.1. How long will the recordings be retained and how will they be stored?
6.1.2.2. How will they be destroyed at the end of the project?
6.1.2.3. What further use, if any, do you intend to make of the recordings?

6.2. The Human Tissue Act
The Human Tissue Act came into force in November 2004, and requires appropriate consent for, and regulates the removal, storage and use of all human tissue.

6.2.1. Does your project involve taking tissue samples, e.g., blood, urine, hair etc., from human subjects?

APPENDIX 2

Application Number_______________
Date Received_______________

YES
NO
6.2.2. Will this be discarded when the project is terminated?
YES
NO

If NO – Explain how the samples will be placed into a tissue bank under the Human Tissue Act regulations:

6.3. Notification of Adverse Events (e.g., negative reaction, counsellor, etc):
(Indicate precautions taken to avoid adverse reactions.)

Please state the processes/procedures in place to respond to possible adverse reactions.

In the case of clinical research, you will need to abide by specific guidance. This may include notification to GP and ethics committee. Please seek guidance for up to date advice, e.g., see the NRES website at http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Angela Hall	Date 24.11.17
SIGNATURE OF FACULTY'S HEAD OF ETHICS:	Date:

Checklist of attachments needed:
1. Participant consent form
2. Participant information sheet
3. Full protocol
4. Advertising details
5. NHS Approval Letter (where appropriate)
6. Other evidence of ethical approval (e.g., another University Ethics Committee approval)

APPENDIX G

reference FREG2017ACA0017 and Amended date 24/1/2017

DRAFT NOTICE FOR STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

Postgraduate students - can you help with my research study?

I am exploring how students decide which university and course to select for postgraduate study. I am a Senior Lecturer at MMU, and also studying part-time for my PhD. Interviews will take place to suit your availability.

What's in it for you? I can't pay you to take part (sorry!), but if you have to undertake research for a project or dissertation, then having experience does help when it is your turn to carry it out.

How long will it take? It shouldn't take more than an hour of your time

How do I volunteer to do this? Please contact Angela Hall: a.hall@mmu.ac.uk 0161 247 3991 or come to my drop ins room 6.30 in the Business School, Monday 3-4pm & Tuesday 9-10am.

(for Facebook postings: or private message me/respond to this posting)

Further information about the research study

This will consist of an interview with myself, which will be audio recorded (with your permission). It will take place ideally on-site at MMU in a meeting room, or at an alternative, convenient public place. You will have the right to withdraw at any time, and for your recording, and any later transcript to be destroyed. All information will be confidential, your name will not be revealed, and all quotes will be anonymised. I will use the quotes from the interviews in my PhD, and for academic publication. If I have taught you/and/or are your Programme Leader, please do not feel under any pressure to participate in this study!

APPENDIX H

Themes used for analysis

Analysis of respondents

Early thoughts:

Time period

Reasons

Information search:

How they became aware

Where searched for information

Application(s):

Application pattern

Application experience

Decision:

Criteria used (course, cost, reputation/ranking, staff, location, facilities, employability)

Post Purchase evaluation:

Wom/e-WOM (traditional; social media: Twitter, Facebook, blog, Foursquare, other online; advice to friends, UG staff at previous institutions; work colleagues; Students at UG place of study, not yet).

Influencers:

Post & existing students; family & friends; within education/professional bodies

Approach to decision making

Linear; non-linear

Rational; emotional

Engagement

Use of social media; views of course Facebook pages; engagement with universities; engagement experience

Touch points: brand owned; partner owned; social/external

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