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University course selection and services marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine university applicants' choice processes using Kotler's five stage consumer buying process with a particular emphasis on the final stage of the process namely that of the purchase decision.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on four focus groups with 22 students at one university in North-west England, post-enrolment.

Findings – Applicants' choice processes are complex and not evenly supported by university departments. Using concepts from the field of services marketing, the student choice process as candidates progress through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service system is critically interrogated. "Moments of truth" are seen to be critical in many students' decision to choose a specific university course. University personnel need to be mindful that the decision process is two way and takes place over an extended period of time.

Research limitations/implications – This research has been conducted with respondents drawn from just one university and at one point in time.

Practical implications – It is suggested that universities should refine and target their communications efforts, and pay close attention to the quality of the interactions with potential students throughout their relationship. In order to do this it is suggested that universities adopt a services marketing framework.

Originality/value – Key themes from services marketing concepts are suggested to inform the analysis of what is and what could be done to maintain and enhance the university-applicant relationship as it progresses.

Keywords Services marketing, Universities, Decision making, Consumer behaviour, England

Paper type Research paper

The decision about where to attend university is a difficult task for most high school pupils. It is a high involvement decision which often affects their future life path (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004, p. 160).

Introduction

UK universities are immersed in a competitive environment. Maringe (2006) underscores this point, stating that applicants no longer behave as passive consumers, a point reiterated in Wignall (2007). This is all taking place in a market in which the supply of higher education (HE) provision outstrips demand for university places, and in a market where the dynamics are complicated by the offer of a range of student financial packages. These market conditions are likely to intensify if, as predicted in the Department for Education and Skills (2004), the fee cap is lifted in 2009 and universities



are allowed to increase their tuition fees. The net result of the rising costs associated with attending university is that students now perceive themselves to be, and are perceived by universities as, “consumers” of HE (Wignall, 2007).

Therefore, the need to understand students’ decision-making processes in university degree choice and ensuring that students make the “right” decision is increasingly important (Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Dawes and Brown, 2003; Whitehead *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, given the increasing number of degree-awarding institutions (in excess of 150 offering a myriad of degree programmes), and the introduction of tuition fees (albeit means tested), applicants’ decision-making processes have become of interest to researchers, university recruiters and admissions tutors. This pressure is increased given the widespread publicity about burgeoning student debt (BBC, 2006) and government concerns about student retention. However, the intangible nature of the “product” being bought and consumed means that the choice tactics associated with low price, frequently consumed products cannot be applied to the extensive problem-solving processes central to a high involvement university degree choice. This intangibility suggests that an application of the principles of services marketing, advocated almost 30 years ago (Gronroos, 1978; Berry, 1980; Booms and Bitner, 1981), may be a fruitful avenue for universities to explore.

Despite there being financial support available, such as student loans, and means tested bursaries, a survey produced by NatWest Bank, reported that students graduating in 2006 had an average debt of over £13,200 (BBC, 2006). In addition, in a survey commissioned by UNITE four in ten students cited debt as one of the worst aspects of university life (MORI, 2006).

There are three segments of students that universities seek to recruit: school leavers, mature and international. This paper focuses on the largest and arguably most sustainable segment (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005), school leavers. This paper seeks to identify the stages through which school leavers pass during their decision-making process in their search for a suitable undergraduate university degree course, applying Moogan *et al.*’s (1999) approach to this consumer decision process. Finally, we present services marketing insights to inform the activities of UK universities in their recruitment processes.

Put simply, students begin the university information gathering process anything up to 18 months prior to enrolling at a university. The early stages may comprise visits to open days, talks by universities in schools and the general discussion of the topic in scheduled teaching/pastoral time in schools in year 12, i.e. age 16/17. At this time students may also be requesting prospectuses and course leaflets. Students can enter the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) system from the September when the students are in year 13, for the following October entry, i.e. 13 months on. Students make their application during the autumn/winter term and are made offers by universities on the basis of their predicted exam results, the results of which are published in mid-August. The UCAS system requires students to select up to five course choices – four if they wish to pursue dentistry, medicine or veterinary science. The cut-off date for entering the system is the middle of January; however applications for medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and Oxbridge close some three months earlier. By the end of March universities have dispatched all of their offers and rejections. From these, applicants must choose their “conditional” and “insurance” places by the end of April. The next key date for students is when the results are

announced in mid-August and in late September/early October the students arrive at their university.

Literature

It has been noted that “[r]esearch into Higher Education choice has not been extensive, and has been stimulated principally where institutional need to understand the process has become important” (Foskett and Helmsley-Brown, 2001, p. 151).

Building on the research published by Moogan *et al.* (1999) the UCAS application cycle is discussed in accordance with their use of the stages of Kotler’s (1997) classic decision-making process model. Moogan *et al.* (1999) conducted research using a longitudinal study of 19 sixth-form students (i.e. year 13) who participated in a series of focus groups and completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed around Kotler’s (1997) sequential stages consumer buying process decision model from problem recognition through information search to evaluation of alternatives and purchase decision.

Various types of consumer purchase decision can be classified as being arranged along a continuum, with habitual decision-making at one end and extended problem solving at the other, where the purchase is usually more expensive and/or has longer lasting ramifications (Solomon, 2006). In this latter category are what have been termed high involvement purchase decisions. Involvement can be viewed as “the motivation to process information” (Solomon, 2006, p. 129) and is often defined in consumer research as being of either a low or a high state (Blackwell *et al.*, 2006). Low involvement (habitual decision-making) occurs when an individual processes information in a passive, involuntary way due to the low personal relevance and perceived risk associated with the purchase. High involvement (extended problem solving) usually occurs when an individual is motivated to seek out information in order to reduce levels of perceived risk. Clearly the variety of decision influences (e.g. fees and costs of living, career prospects, post-university debt and institutional reputation) all conspire to emphasise the fact that university choice is a high involvement decision with a significant level of perceived risk (Briggs, 2006). However, what appears to have been ignored to date in this literature is the fact that this purchase is in effect of an intangible nature with candidates purchasing a service. Indeed, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) highlight the lack of theoretical models applied to the HE context and we attempt to address this as we apply these ideas to the course selection process in particular.

What has been shown, however, in this research area is that three variables are consistently rated as being the most important to prospective students are course, location and reputation (Moogan *et al.*, 1999, 2001; Price *et al.*, 2003). Although the course is often cited as the most important reason for choosing a university (Price *et al.*, 2003; Maringe, 2006; Whitehead *et al.*, 2006), the academic reputation of either the university or the subject also plays an important role in decision making (Moogan *et al.*, 2001; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Briggs, 2006; Maringe, 2006; MORI, 2006). Other factors growing in importance include the state of the regional job market, and the costs of living with students now tending to avoid London in particular (Maringe, 2006).

The reduction of perceived risk is an important element of the high involvement decision-making process, especially if a buyer has limited or no understanding of the purchase about to be made. While risk can be perceived to be high for expensive goods,

it is often claimed that “[...] services have a higher perceived risk of purchase than goods [...]” (Bateson and Hoffman, 1999, p. 30) due to their intangible, inseparable, perishable and heterogeneous nature (Dibb *et al.*, 1994) a point reiterated by Moogan *et al.* (1999).

Moogan *et al.* (1999) reported that prospective students’ choices were influenced by the clarity and quality of printed materials received, interactions with staff (in person at open days and over the phone), university location and course content. This was further confirmed in a similar pre-enrolment study by Veloutsou *et al.* (2005).

Moogan *et al.* (1999) applied Kotler’s (1997) five stage model: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase evaluation to evaluate the decision-making process during the university application process. We now summarise Moogan’s work to provide the context for our research findings.

Stage 1. Problem recognition

Once students have identified a university course as their next goal the “problem” recognised is that of making the “best” possible choice that will allow them to achieve certain, sometimes disparate, goals. Moogan *et al.* (1999) identified these goals as being of both a personal (e.g. meeting friends, independence) and/or intellectual benefit (e.g. increased knowledge, intended career and/or well-paid job).

When analysing the factors that had influenced the decision of students to attend HE, Moogan and Baron (2003) found that earnings capacity was ranked in first position in terms of priorities while social life was found to be the least influential, other than for high achieving students who emphasised that the social aspects of university were of interest to them. Further research by Whitehead *et al.* (2006, p. 14) into the decisions of students applying to Cambridge University identified three clusters, reflecting different types of motivation which may influence students’ decisions:

- (1) Anticipating enjoying student life and the challenges of academic study.
- (2) Going into HE to train for a particular career, which is often combined with studying for a new subject. This factor would seem to represent the motives of those who are choosing, one could hypothesise, to study subjects such as law, medicine, etc.
- (3) Responding to encouragement to go into HE in the absence of any clear alternative option.

This stage therefore can generate a set of questions in the applicant’s mind and stimulate the need for more information.

Stage 2. Information search

In Moogan *et al.*’s (1999) study, they reported that information was gained from word of mouth, parents and friends and was used to test out what universities offered in terms of the educational and social benefits, a point reiterated in Veloutsou *et al.*’s study (2005). There is also agreement (Dawes and Brown, 2003; Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005) about the importance and reliability of prospectuses in shaping decisions and, further, that these are more important than league tables (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005).

Moogan *et al.* (1999) found that the initial information searching activity of prospective students included evaluations of course, content, location, reputation and entrance requirements, although later research conducted by Moogan and Baron (2003) found that while course content was considered to be of prime importance as the starting point, this factor was followed closely by reputation and then location.

When examining the information requirements of final year (year 13) students, Veloutsou *et al.* (2005) found that the top three themes about which students collected information were: the perceived university's offering and reputation, the opportunities to develop a social life and accommodation. More specific information requirements were: local infrastructure; local social life; career prospects; the university's infrastructure; the university's social life; business contacts (the opportunity to find summer and part-time work); the university's reputation (university and department); and, course studied and campus.

These various information requirements took around three months to fulfil (Moogan and Baron, 2003). There is however a lack of agreement across the research as to the importance of various information sources. For instance, Moogan and Baron (2003) reported that students ranked prospectuses in first position whilst Veloutsou *et al.* (2005) found that open days were perceived as the most reliable source of information, with the prospectus coming in close second place. These findings contrast with Maringe (2006) who reported that the limited influence the prospectus had, "was an indictment on institutions which spend huge sums in advertisements and promotional activities to lure students to their institutions" (Maringe, 2006, p. 474). Furthermore, Briggs (2006) found information supplied by universities to be only the ninth most important out of ten factors[1] that would influence decision making.

Although students are increasingly turning to league tables to determine the ranking and quality of a university, Bowden (2000) found the range of methodologies and variables utilised by the various producers (*The Times*, *The Times Good University Guide Book*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, etc.) negated their benefits to potential students as they do not provide key information to assist them with making an informed choice about where to study. Often students' perceptions of universities are more important than their league table positioning (Briggs, 2006).

As already mentioned open days are cited as being invaluable to both the information search and decision-making process (Moogan *et al.*, 1999). Importantly, it was noted that while dealing with students' enquiries in a prompt and efficient manner was found to be disproportionately influential and therefore a worthwhile activity for universities to develop (McGrath and Millen, 2003).

Stage 3. Evaluation of alternatives

The number of places on some degree programmes are limited and/or the qualifications demanded are high(er). Such factors will have a bearing on the evaluation of alternatives. As Moogan *et al.* (1999) reported, 69 per cent of applicants spent up to two months evaluating alternatives. Their respondents found it a difficult process given the large numbers of university-level degree courses on offer, the concomitant volume of literature to assess, the lack of assistance and their lack of experience in the choice process, points reiterated by Briggs (2006). The deciding factors when narrowing the choice to just two (as required by the UCAS process) were

location (33 per cent), course content (30 per cent), grade requirements (12 per cent) and facilities (11 per cent).

There were some differences reported between students' attitudes towards pre-and-post 1992 universities, with older universities perceived as offering a better quality education that would lead to improved employment prospects (Ivy and Naudé, 1999; Moogan and Baron, 2003). Additionally, for those universities where research reputation was cited as being significant (Briggs, 2006), students did not rate teaching, library facilities or accommodation as being of importance (Price *et al.*, 2003).

The pressure to evaluate alternatives causes students additional anxiety as they find organising and prioritising data difficult, due to the uncertainty of their grades (Moogan *et al.*, 1999). Students also cite anxieties with regard to settling into university life, worrying about making the wrong choice and compromising their future (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

As a result of these issues students often continue their information search once the UCAS form has been submitted (Moogan *et al.*, 1999). Although students may have a favourite in terms of the university they aspire to study at, achieving the entrance requirements appears to be a dominant factor in causing them to re-appraise their choices and change their minds (Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Moogan and Baron, 2003). Thus, it would appear that in some cases there is a "balancing act" for students at the application stage, between the course content, teaching methodologies, believing that they would fit in and worrying about making the grade for entry (Whitehead *et al.*, 2006).

Stage 4. Purchase decision

As discussed above, whilst a potential student may have formed an intention to attend one particular university, there are several factors that may intervene to change the final decision. There is, however, a paucity of research that has been able to identify and explore these factors. What evidence does exist identifies course content as the most important of three criteria in determining which university to apply to (Moogan *et al.*, 2001) and also explores the ways in which applicants reduce their choice set from six to two with location becoming the more important criteria. This would infer that once students have decided which subject they wish to study, wider aspects of the student experience become more influential in the decision-making process (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

Summary of debate

There is some level of agreement about the search tactics, timing and priorities of school-leavers, but also considerable confusion about which sources of information have the greatest influence. Nonetheless, in the work by Moogan *et al.* (1999, 2001) and in her later work Moogan and Baron (2003), there is evidence for the efficacy for the use of Kotler's model applied to decision-making in HE. Problem recognition is stimulated by the perceived need to choose a university and subsequently gives rise to an information search. This is the process that young people work through when attempting to find information to inform their decision making, and includes gathering prospectuses and attending open days. With particular reference to perceived risk, this information search often continues throughout the application process informing the evaluation of alternatives. However, it is at this stage that

research conducted by Moogan *et al.* (1999, 2001) and Moogan and Baron (2003) ceases to be insightful.

There is some agreement that university degree choices are complex and involve extended problem solving. Moreover, Briggs (2006, pp. 717-8) concluded (in the context of Scottish universities) that her research highlighted the need for a more comprehensive understanding of student choice. A common theme overall appears to be that students aiming for universities that are perceived to have better reputations, namely Oxbridge and the “red bricks”, will engage in greater levels of search and use different criteria. There is less work evident that details the extent to which candidates aiming for different courses exhibit different choice behaviours. In this regard, our study addresses this in that we carried out the research once applicants had made their choice and were *in situ* at their university, i.e. thereby accommodating the final stage of Kotler’s model – the purchase decision. To this end, this research seeks to meet this challenge and argues for the viability of a flexible services marketing approach, in managing the dynamics of the university-applicant interface.

Methodology

The research was carried out in October 2006 and is focussed on exploring the views of students within the first few weeks of their arrival at a “red-brick” university in north west England. There were over 4,000 first year students eligible for this research. In order to recruit to the focus groups an “all student email” was sent out, asking for volunteers to participate in a research study. The following criteria were used:

- students to be domiciled in England and eligible to pay full fees;
- students to be first year undergraduates; and
- all participants to have applied for entry in 2006 (i.e. not arrived as a deferred entrant).

A total of 22 students participated in four focus groups, conducted in a semi-structured format. A topic guide was developed around the UCAS application cycle in the context of the Kotler model. The group brainstormed their recollection of the factors that influenced their decision making around the stages of the UCAS application cycle; these were then written up on flip-chart paper and put on the walls for the group members to refer to. Each focus group session was recorded and subsequently transcribed. Data were inductively interpreted using narrative analysis with groups of appropriate data assigned to the headings developed in the topic guide.

Findings

Our research confirmed many of the findings of others (e.g. entrance requirements as a barrier/filtering mechanism, location, reputation and financial considerations), as identified most prominently by Moogan’s work (Moogan *et al.*, 1999, 2001; Moogan and Baron, 2003). However, it is at specific points in the decision-making cycle, in particular the later stages that we provide new insights. However, before turning to these we summarise our findings relating to the entire process. References to verbatim responses from students are presented anonymously detailing the title of course, enrolled on and their originating (i.e. home) location.

Problem recognition stage

Whilst many students recalled that they were imbued with the expectation that university was almost a “rite of passage” those with a specific career in mind, had no real alternative to going to university due to professional requirements, e.g. medicine, or because of a perceived “glass ceiling” for non-graduates. Again with our research, and worth reiterating here, is how the applicants use language more redolent of consumerist approaches to problem solving and therefore at this stage begin extensive information search regarding alternative destinations and their merits/demerits.

Information search

Students’ key information requirements were centred on four main factors namely course and entrance requirements, reputation, location and various financial considerations. Many students used entrance requirements as a proxy for reputation. Further, in an effort to make the set of courses and universities more manageable, candidates adopted a risk reduction strategy involving choosing universities where a mix of aspirational and achievable offers were available.

In addition financial considerations come to the fore at this stage as one respondent opined:

If you’re shelling out three grand a year then I think it’s like, increasingly important to shop around [...] It’s the same amount no matter where you go, so you want to go to the best (Communications and Business Studies, Lancaster).

The notion of “shopping around” alluded to in the above point about the consumerist stance is met through a process of information searching. Students also sought out detail regarding the city and cost of living through independent city guides such as www.itchycity.co.uk/

The key sources of information for students came from a variety of sources most notably the internet:

I think I got most of what I needed from the web site (English, North Wales).

In our study, students also cited the prospectus as being particularly influential during the early stages of the decision-making process as it was used to gain a feel for the institution and as a way of short listing institutions to visit for an open day.

The main reasons given for attending university-wide open days were: for the students to experience the journey; to gauge the distance from their home; to gain an overall impression of the university; to see the city; and, to decide whether or not to apply to an institution.

League tables were used by students during the early stages of the decision-making process, although contradictions between *The Times* and *The Guardian* league tables (Bowden, 2000) were highlighted by a number of students. Additionally, students commented on how helpful their teachers had been throughout the process.

Evaluation of alternatives

Once students have gathered their information an extended process of cross-referencing data from various sources such as prospectuses, subject brochures, league tables and web sites was undertaken in order to limit their choices to two as required by the UCAS system. The process of alternative evaluation was shown to be undertaken in markedly different ways dependent on the student’s desired course

and/or career orientation. It was notable that certain students valued certain sources more than others and that this was often linked to the nature of their chosen subject and its status in terms of entry requirements, reputation, competition for places, facilities and career prospects. For instance, whilst league tables were used by some students:

That's when I used the League tables, to narrow it down to six [...] (Physics with Medical Applications, Rhyl).

For potential medics, their search for information exceeded the "normal" process because entry requirements were very similar across all the universities. These students therefore sought information, and judged institutions, on other criteria, such as whether or not they asked for the biomedical admissions test and if they used problem-based learning or traditional teaching methods.

Consistent with the findings of Moogan *et al.* (2001), the course was cited by the majority of students as being the most important factor that would influence their decision making:

Yeah, I mean top priority was the course [...] (Combined Honours Arts, Cheshire).

But, as the students looked in more detail at the course they sought additional information regarding modular content, teaching style and assessment came to the fore. In order to limit the time taken to assess the mass of information one type of short cut used by students was the perceived achievability of the grades required for the courses under scrutiny.

Subsequently, as candidates shortened their consideration set of potential university destinations, the experiences at university open days further informed their decisions:

If they (the visit days) were badly organised it just annoyed me, so that got rid of three (Civil Engineering, Tamworth).

Open days also provided candidates with an opportunity to test out the availability of facilities. It was taken for granted that living accommodation, library and information technology facilities would be of a good standard yet for other students additional facilities were also important (Price *et al.*, 2003). Specialised and modern facilities and equipment for students taking engineering or science courses might be regarded as "order winners" (Slack *et al.*, 2007, p. 69) and indicative of institutions' committing investment to these key areas. As one respondent noted:

I'm doing Biology where you're going to spend most of the week in the lab so, facilities, they were a big deal for me (Biological Sciences, Liverpool).

Another issue for students in this study was location. A number argued that they had deliberately applied to universities based in the main northern cities as they were thought to be cheaper to live in than those in the south.

While course and reputation as determining factors were important and congruent with the findings of Moogan *et al.* (2001), it was interesting to note that during later stages of the evaluation process that reputation was no longer expressed as an important factor; rather, it had been used during earlier stages, to reinforce students' beliefs about which universities were highly ranked (Duncan and Olshavsky, 1982) and to assist with limiting the final choice set of universities (Solomon, 2006).

Although the availability of financial support was not perceived to be important at the information search stage, it did have an impact on the decision-making behaviour of engineering and science students because of their awareness of the availability of scholarships within those subject areas:

I looked it up and saw that as one of the things. Mine was based on my A-Level results, so it already gave me some target to go to, because if you know you are going to get a few thousand pounds for getting a better result it makes you put a little bit extra effort in (Astrophysics, Southend).

The approach taken by the medical students confirmed the findings of Moogan and Baron (2003) in that “high performing students” deal more efficiently with complex information. As one retorted:

The first thing I did was make a list of all the universities that actually did medicine, which restricted the number to about 25. Next, I looked at which ones required the B.M.A.T. test for entry, that was about 5 of them and I only wanted to pick one from that group in case I messed it up. Then I looked at the teaching style of each of them and I kinda chose a mixture. And I looked at statistics, like the amount of people that applied per place, the league tables, the required grades and all of that helped me to decide which universities to apply to (Medicine, Cambridge).

While our findings are consistent with previous research, there appears to be a number of different evaluation strategies adopted by students where choice criteria are given a different weighting by different types of consumers. For instance, facilities matter more to engineers and scientists. On examining the decision-making criteria for highly competitive courses, such as medicine and veterinary science, students appear to segment their options not only on the basis of various attributes outlined above but also on their assessment of the risks involved in the application process (Currim and Sarin, 1983). Here, uncertain outcomes are not simply dependent on the achievement of entry grades, but also on the results of an additional test and/or interview.

Purchase decision

Once the students had heard back from all their universities, it was time to decide who would be their firm and insurance choice. Three new factors influenced the final decision-making processes: post-application visit day experience(s), responses from universities and the role of scholarships and bursaries (mitigating the fees).

Our research supports the findings of Moogan *et al.* (1999) who cited the importance of the post-application visit days. However, there does seem to be some contradictory evidence on the efficacy of visit days (McGrath, 2002). The way the day was organised and the ability to meet tutors and current students had a huge impact on the students, giving them a clear sense of which institutions they wanted to attend as the three following quotes illustrate:

I think talking to students that were here was really nice on open days [...] that was the one thing that kind of sold it (English, North Wales).

[...] they (the lecturers) were just so enthusiastic and like they just sort of wanted to know about you and how you felt about them and they just made you feel really welcome (Geology and Physical Geography, Manchester).

Yeah, I think that those were the days that decided where you went because if the lecturers were really annoying or just stupid or whatever, or if they impressed you, you took that view away with you (Psychology, Nottingham).

During this stage students were influenced by the people with whom they came into contact, not only the academic staff but also other existing students. Visit days were seen as important by the students as they provided an opportunity to talk to lecturers and to assess the “character” of the institution and the extent to which they might fit in. Once again, students displayed a consumerist approach to deciding on attendance, stating that universities needed to offer more than just a brief interview to justify the expense and time spent travelling to them.

As the students discussed university responses to their UCAS application, the general opinion seemed to be that it was surprising to receive an immediate response but it was frustrating if they had to wait too long:

I waited ages, I think my form just got lost in the bottom of a big pile and this one was my favourite [...] and then I heard from them, very late in the day, by which point my opinion had changed (Electronics, Sheffield).

This removal of an option that was previously held in the “choice set” may in part be because this lack of contact lead to perceived psychological distance from the university and therefore heightened the perceived risk associated with this choice.

Several students raised the importance of being kept informed of the application process by universities; for example being told that their application had been received and being given an indication of when they would next hear from the university. The students were looking for the reassurance and concomitant risk reduction that this kind of communication provided:

Yeah, if you keep receiving letters and stuff from them, you feel that they're really talking to you (Astro Physics, Southend).

However, the significance of the receipt of the initial offer was by far the most important communication that students received from universities. All the students agreed that the excitement and relief associated with this communication had often led then to accept this initial offer as their first choice:

I think the first letter you get, you think, “Oh finally” [...] you get used to the idea of going to where your first letter came from, you know, you start to imagine what it will be like to be there (Medicine, Portsmouth).

I think it's a real psychological boost getting, you know, an offer, because then you can start talking with some degree of confidence, that if you do well in your exams, you'll be going there (Communication and Business Studies, Lancaster).

[...] and we got our offers on posh yellow parchment, and it was like, wow, we'd had photocopied stuff from other unis but this, I stuck it on my bedroom wall [...] (Veterinary Science, Lincolnshire).

This rationale is consistent with Simonson (1992) as the students wanted to overcome the possibility of making the wrong decision, and sought to reduce levels of perceived risk by favouring the university that they felt “wanted” them. Subsequent on-going dialogue was also praised by students, the greater their familiarity with the university, the greater the assurance that they had made the right decision (Bell and Bucklin, 1999).

Cost of living became a final differentiator for students who had received offers from all their choices and was found to be influential in choosing northern rather than southern cities:

[...] the stress of living in London, what with the rent [...] and then when I realised that it's a bit cheaper to live here than other cities, it was just the final bonus (Materials Engineering, Brighton).

It was agreed that for those students seeking to attain a scholarship, the prospect of gaining a financial reward had been an incentive to work harder at their A-levels and this did influence their final choice of university:

Yeah, the two I put down, they were both offering scholarships but one was twice as much and for the whole duration, so yeah, it did make a difference, I tried not to let it influence my decision but inevitably it did because it makes a big difference (Geology, Hertfordshire).

Those in receipt of means-tested bursaries discussed whether or not the bursary had influenced their final conditional firm and insurance choices. The majority view seemed to be that the difference between the bursaries offered by various universities had not been enough to influence their final decision. For a few students however, the amount of the bursary did help them to make their final choice between two institutions:

It was when I was looking at the two, literally to compare them that I did start to think actually it is going to make quite a difference to me (History, Shropshire).

Conclusions

The research demonstrates that school leavers' decision processes are complex and therefore universities should both recognise and respond to these needs in the context of their institutional and subject/discipline settings. We offer three main findings, namely: typologies concerned with variations in supply and demand for places; insights into student/consumer choice processes; and, the need for universities to apply services marketing principles and flexible targeting in their recruitment strategies.

First, it could be argued that at least two main university types are becoming prevalent. There are those that aggressively recruit via a more overt sales and marketing approach, and those that select due to the high demand. However, it is suggested here that there are also "hybrid" cases, where a university may have a particular specialism or reputational factor that makes them selective within a predominantly recruitment-focussed setting. Furthermore, even in universities where demand exceeds supply (as is generally the case in our study) student choice processes vary according to subject/discipline, prior knowledge, information available, and perceived status (of the institution and the targeted profession).

Second, it is at this point that we offer an alternative "take" on the recruitment process bearing in mind our research findings and those of previous researchers. In terms of classic marketing activity the role of "promotion", via marketing communications, takes on more than simply a one-way process but becomes a form of relationship maintenance throughout the UCAS process. Many respondents utilise the internet for their information search and therefore it is imperative that institutions ensure that their web pages are current. This ensures that the information is more up to

date than that found in hard-copy prospectuses, which have all of the attendant problems related to long publishing lead times. In addition, constant management of the public face of the institution will allow refinement and flexibility of targeted communications. Further opportunities to build and maintain relationships with applicants comes through the rapid deployment of new communications technologies such as social networking and mobile phone texts to name but two.

Third, and moving beyond Kotler's model outlined in this study, it can be seen that these consumers are considering the purchase of a high involvement service package, the implications of which may have long lasting ramifications in terms of their future careers. Yet the "product package" is in effect a relatively intangible bundle of services in which production and consumption are simultaneous and the outcomes can be uncertain. So the classic 4Ps (product, place, promotion and place) of marketing are bolstered by the additional 3Ps of physical evidence (e.g. prospectuses, built environment, research facilities), people (e.g. contact personnel – be it in person or over the telephone; and the presence and approachability of academics at open days), and process (e.g. speed of responses to student enquires, university confirmation via the UCAS system). In particular, these additional "Ps" were evidenced by the strength of responses related to the efficacy of open/visit days whereby consumers were able to test out their perceptions of a university, its facilities and personnel including staff and existing students. Interviewees rated institutions highly when their applications were responded to in a professional and timely manner. Indeed, some respondents reported that they had favoured their first offer. This may be regarded as part of a risk reduction strategy or be related to the on-going involvement that a student will have with the university of their choice. In an increasingly competitive market place, the added value of delivering good customer service throughout the application process will assist universities in differentiating their offer from that of their competitors. We propose that the notion of "moments of truth" (or critical incidents) where applicants have a series of first encounters with a different person in the university may take on an increasingly important significance. In such a competitive market this may become the norm or, in marketing parlance, an "order qualifier" where all institutions bolster their efforts in this direction, in terms of, for example, training front-line staff and student ambassadors. Subsequently, activities to develop "order winners", i.e. those factors that positively distinguish one university from another, will take on a new importance[2].

Students pursuing different types of academic courses with different imagined resultant career paths search in markedly different ways and have a range of varying priorities. However, it is clear that the course is the single most important reason given for choosing a university and this research has proven that information search needs, evaluation of alternatives criteria and purchase decision behaviour, varies from subject area to subject area. Nonetheless, internal institutional mixed messages can occur often due to adopting a "one-size fits all" marketing strategy to achieve internal economies when a more targeted approach would be more beneficial. In contrast to the imagined cost advantages of adopting a university-wide marketing communications strategy, a tailored (i.e. local, departmental, discipline/subject) approach may reduce the possibilities of poor choices being made thereby delivering financial efficiency in terms of increased retention rates. Thus, it seems clear that universities should strive to

target their communications at specific student segments and could include the development of individual subject area prospectuses.

What has clearly emerged from our research is evidence of the increasingly consumerist approach that young people are adopting to their choice processes. These consumerist behaviours must therefore be matched by universities adopting more overt marketing and services marketing tactics throughout the UCAS process. The need to adopt more sensitive marketing approaches is likely to become more critical in an environment where the numbers of universities and other degree awarding institutions are increasing.

Notes

1. The other nine factors were (in order of importance): academic reputation, distance from home, location, own perception, graduate employment, social life nearby, entry requirements, teaching reputation, quality of faculty and research reputation.
2. It should be acknowledged here that there are commercial organisations undertaking commissioned work for universities, assisting them in their in their services marketing activities and student recruitment in particular (www.heist.co.uk).

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Further reading

Foskett, N., Dyke, M. and Maringe, F. (2008), "The influence of the school in the decision to participate in learning post-16", *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 37-61.

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