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HIGHER EDUCATION CONSUMER CHOICE

Jane Hemsley-Brown and Izhar Oplatka

Higher Education Consumer Choice

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Introduction to Higher Education Consumer Behaviour

Abstract: *Greater understanding of the consumer's critical role in the marketing of any organisation has provided the impetus for conducting research on consumer behaviour, including research on higher education consumer choice. In this chapter the authors set out the research questions which are the focus of the book, evaluate definitions of consumer behaviour; discuss elements and phases of consumer behaviour and factors that influence consumer choice. This chapter provides an introduction to the topics covered in the book, and summarises aspects of the topic that are beyond the scope of this text, including branding, marketing communications and social media.*

Keywords: customer needs; customer value; definitions; phases of consumer behaviour

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A marketing perspective requires that organisations, including those in the higher education (HE) sector, should focus on "managing profitable customer relationships" (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy, 2014, p. 4) to produce value for customers. To this end, marketers are expected to understand potential customers' needs in order to provide them with products and services they will purchase and use for their own benefit. Based on these straightforward mutually beneficial transactions there are many parties that seek to discover what influences purchase decisions and consumption patterns (Peter & Olson, 2008), and how models can be developed to predict what customers will buy, and the impact of marketing strategies on consumer choice and behaviour.

The importance of satisfying customer needs and creating value may sound simple, but the process is a relatively complex one (Kotler et al., 2014). It requires the capability to understand the market place, define consumer needs and wants, design a customer-driven marketing strategy that identifies market segments with particular needs, position new products to meet these needs, devise marketing strategies to deliver product/service benefits, and evaluate these strategies for their effectiveness (Assael, 2004). To deliver value for customers requires the expertise to create superior value in comparison with competitors and to build profitable relationships with customers, which in turn becomes profitable for the company (Kotler et al., 2014) – or the HE institution. Building relationships with customers is a crucial element of delivering value. Underlying this strategic process is the importance of getting to know the customers and therefore obtaining and constantly updating information on consumer needs, consumer perceptions of new and existing products, services and brands, attitudes towards these brands, intention to buy, and post-purchasing behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Many organisations make the mistake of focusing on their product and service offerings instead of focusing on the customer, and getting closer to the customer. It is important, therefore, not to lose sight of their needs and to continue to create new benefits for customers (Kotler et al., 2014). To achieve these objectives, knowledge of all aspects of consumer behaviour and choice is essential.

The understanding of the consumer's critical role in the marketing of any organisation has provided the impetus for conducting research on consumer behaviour and its related concepts such as consumer research, market research, identification of personal characteristics, social and cultural influence, and antecedents to choice – the topics covered in this

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book. Scholars and researchers from the field of consumer behaviour usually ask the following questions, all of which are addressed in this text:

- What are the factors that pre-determine customer preferences and how can we predict the choice behaviour of consumers?
- What explanations might we offer for differences in consumer motives and goals by individuals based on gender, social class and culture, in different choice situations?
- What is the process consumers typically go through when making choices?
- What are the factors about institutions that influence HE consumer choice?
- What are the most important antecedents to choices in HE?

Following these and related questions the authors of this text seek to offer insights which might shed light on HE consumer choice behaviour and make a contribution to research in the field, as well as contributing towards the intelligence HE marketers need to design and deliver more effective target marketing for their institutions. The authors also seek to provide critical comments on the findings throughout the text, by raising ethical and moral issues related to the research findings.

The authors focus on specific aspects on HE consumer choice, particularly choice of institution (college or university), with some references to choice of major (e.g. Zafar, 2013; Moakler & Kim, 2014), and choice to enter HE or go directly into the labour market (e.g. McGregor, Thanki, & McKee, 2002). The previous research in the field of HE consumer choice behaviour is predominantly on the former (choice of institution or type of institution) and this is the main focus of the book; studies of choice of major tend to focus on differences in personal characteristics, which are more acute in terms of choice of major, and research on choice of entry to HE compared with direct entry to the labour market tends to focus on regional issues and social class. However, choice of institution or type of institution is the subject of research across a wide range of consumer behaviour issues, covers work in many geographical regions around the world, and studies a wide range of personal and institutional factors.

The next section presents a discussion of the definitions of consumer behaviour, followed by sections on elements and phases of consumer behaviour, how a person becomes a modern consumer, and what

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influences consumer choice? Finally, an outline of the topics covered in this book is presented.

What is consumer behaviour?

Many theories and models have been sourced from other disciplines and developed by marketing researchers when seeking to understand the nature and contexts of consumer behaviour (Peter & Olson, 2008; Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Kotler et al., 2014). Broadly speaking, consumer behaviour is a complex phenomenon and an eclectic field of study because it involves questions about whether, why, when, how, how often and for how long consumers will purchase, use, re-purchase and dispose of a product/service (Hoyer, MacInnis, & Peters, 2013). To illustrate the complex nature of consumer behaviour the following definitions are sourced from the marketing literature across almost 40 years:

> "Consumer behaviour is defined simply as pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase actions towards a commercial object" (McNeal, 2015, p. 10)
>
> "Consumer behaviour refers to the buying behaviour of final consumers – individuals and households that buy goods and services for personal consumption" (Kotler et al., 2014, p. 144)
>
> "Consumer behaviour involves the thoughts and feelings people experience and the actions they perform in consumption processes. It also includes all the things in the environment that influence these thoughts, feelings, and actions" (Peter & Olson, 2008, p. 5)
>
> "Consumer behaviour is defined as the behaviour that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs" (Schiffman, Kanuk, & Hansen, 2008, p. 4)
>
> "Consumer behaviour reflects the totality of consumers' decisions with respect to the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of goods, services, activities, experiences, people, and ideas (human) decision-making units [over time]" (Jacoby, 1976, p. 332)

These definitions cover a simple description of buying and who buys (Kotler et al., 2014), a summary of the stages of the consumer buying process (Schiffman et al., 2008; McNeal, 2015), a focus on the emotional aspects of behaviour including thoughts and feelings (Peter & Olson, 2008) and the combination of both the process and experiences (Jacoby, 1976).

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Therefore, the study of consumer behaviour explores the ways people perceive, learn, remember and feel in the context of acquiring and using products and services (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013), it may provide critical information to inform marketing managers seeking a better grasp of which factors influence consumers, how consumers make choices, and how they decide what to buy, as a basis for developing marketing strategies and tactics (Zurawicki, 2010; Hoyer et al., 2013). When marketers gain insights into what potential consumers and clients value they are able to develop, communicate, and deliver appropriate goods and services to meet the needs of different audiences. HE marketers, policymakers and legislators also need knowledge of consumer behaviour in order to respond to the demand for higher education adequately and balance demand with supply. Many successful HE institutions have also recognised the importance of focusing on consumers and have developed sophisticated approaches and gathered detailed data from which to develop effective marketing strategies. The next section examines two approaches to studying consumer behaviour.

Elements and phases of consumer behaviour

The traditional approach to consumer behaviour is based on theories and methods from cognitive, social and behavioural psychology and sociology. According to Assael (2004) there are two broad approaches to the study of consumer behaviour. First a *managerial* approach, which views consumer behaviour as an applied social science and is studied as a basis for devising marketing strategies. This approach is micro and cognitive in essence because it emphasises the individual consumers' attitudes, perceptions, lifestyle, and demographic characteristics (see Chapter 2). A macro environment (e.g., reference groups, the family, culture etc.) is also studied in order to map influence on the individual consumers (see Chapter 3). The second, a *holistic* approach, views consumer behaviour as a pure social science and considers it to be a legitimate focus of inquiry in and of itself without necessarily being applied to marketing. It is more macro in its orientation because it tends to focus more on the broad nature of the consumption experience than on purchasing process, stressing the cultural context of consumption (Assael, 2004). The content of this book tends to follow the first model: the managerial approach and a critical summery at the end of each chapter focuses on

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the challenges, ethical and moral, for managers in terms of applying the consumer behaviour theory and research identified in each section.

Hoyer et al. (2013) also propose a model of consumer behaviour based on the work of Jacoby (1976) who defined consumer behaviour as reflecting the totality of decisions (whether, what, why, how, when, where, how much, how often, how long), about the consumption (acquisition, usage, disposition), of an offering (products, services, activities, experiences, people, ideas) by decision-making units (information gatherer, influencer, decider, purchaser, user) over time (hours, days, weeks, months, and years). This model is somewhat ambitious and comprehensive to use as a basis for analysis in this text, first because of the breadth of the definition, and second, because of the demands upon primary research in the HE field to support all aspects of the model. However, some aspects of this model are used for analysis in this text for example, information gathering is discussed in Chapters 1 and 4. Broadly speaking, consumer behaviour involves decision-making, acquisition, and post-purchase behaviour (Hoyer et al., 2013). Similar models have been presented by other authors (see Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Kotler et al., 2014) in an attempt to capture not only the making of the decision or reaching a choice, but the stimulus to make a decision, searching behaviour and post-purchase behaviour (see Chapter 4).

How a person becomes a modern consumer

How do we learn to be consumers? How do we learn to behave as consumers in the modern world? It is important to stress that in the decision-making process a wide range of experiences and characteristics impact on the process and the outcome, in addition to specific factors which are the focus of a research study. For example, the study might examine gender or racial differences, or geographical location of choosers, but these cannot be totally isolated from the life experience of the respondents. McNeal (2015) claims that consumer behaviour is developing from the day we are born and he modelled consumer development in a series of stages based on age.

Observation (0–6 months) – a baby moves from reflexes to voluntary movements towards foods, people, comfort objects and play objects that satisfy his/her needs. The senses lead a baby in the direction of commercial objects. At the age of around three months a baby visits

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the marketplace and can observe, smell, hear, feel and even tastes the attributes of the marketplace.

Requesting/Seeking (6–24 months) – This stage consists of two sub-stages – pre-language (6–14 months) during which infants have not yet developed talking or walking abilities but trips to the marketplace continue, and some of the pleasure-giving items are provided by a parent in this commercial setting, thus bonding baby with the buying place. The post-language sub-stage (15–24 months) signals the "mine" or "my bunny" and the presence of many products at home. A baby learns to connect between toys in pictures and the same toys at home.

Selecting/Taking (24–48) – Highly developed motor skills, muscles and memory now encourage the child to take what is his but also to take what is not his by reacting, grabbing, taking (from the refrigerator, classmate in the nursery, mum, etc.). His articulation of brand names, store names, and TV programmes built around commercial companies.

Co-Purchase (48–72 months) – The child now senses that all those commercial objects in her room came from commercial sources and that they require money. Thus, on the next store visit the child askes to buy it "with my money" which impresses mum enough to test it. The child has now stored in mind the consuming process. Mum helps her to purchase the desired object that is taken home and put in the child's room.

Independent Purchase (72–100 months) – Over the next years the child makes a number of co-purchases with mum and dad at many stores. He learned that all the good things came from the store and that he needs money to obtain them. So, as part of his claim for independence, he seeks permission to buy on his own.

Therefore, when a child grows up and becomes an adult, his or her consumer behaviour will be influenced by many internal and external factors which cannot be fully identified during the consumer socialisation stages. These subtleties are also beyond the characteristics and experiences which might be the focus of any particular study. Many studies are localised, some even focus on a particular institution, or a particular course programme, and in this respect the findings from studies of HE consumer choice are only infrequently generalisable to other populations, particularly internationally. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) warn that studies on consumer choice that rely on a sample from

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a single university, especially convenience samples, need to be regarded with scepticism because they reveal more about the students in that institution than they do about choice more widely.

What influences consumer choice behaviour?

Rapid changes in the market environment have led researchers to analyze more comprehensively the factors that influence consumer choice behaviour (Assael, 2004), particularly the marketisation of HE across the globe (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Lowrie & Hemsley-Brown, 2013). Researchers routinely explore changing consumers' attitudes and perceptions which influence the process of decision-making and attitudes to offerings in the market (McNeal, 2015), but this has only become essential in HE research over the last few decades. In the HE sector, changes in the political climate in many countries has contributed to greater interest in consumer behaviour, particularly the move towards a market economy in many countries that were formerly planned economies (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Three broad influences common to HE consumer choice and the wider consumer choice field are discussed here: individual needs and perceptions, external environment, branding and marketing communications.

The individual needs/perceptions

Individual consumers' needs and perceptions of product and service features, and attitudes towards alternatives in the market influence consumer choice considerably – that is, competition in the market changes consumers' needs and perceptions. The time when a purchase is made is also important. Consumers may think in terms of whether it is "time for me" or "time for others" and whether acquiring or using a product is planned or spontaneous (Cote, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2004). For example many products are purchased just in time for their use, especially products that are seasonal, and behavioural factors are important variables in market segmentation (Kotler et al., 2014). Some consumers plan ahead, whilst others buy when the season demands it. Timing – *when* students make choices – is an important aspect of HE consumer choice behaviour, which is not widely researched, although research in this aspect of the topic is not covered in this text as it is beyond the scope of the book.

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Consumer researchers have also studied the powerful role that emotions play in consumer behaviour (e.g. Johnson & Stewart, 2005). Positive and negative emotions (e.g., hope, fear, regret, guilt, embarrassment) and moods can affect how consumers' think, the choice they make, how they feel after making a decision, what they remember, and how much they enjoy the buying experience (De Mello, MacInnis, & Stewart, 2007). Evidence also suggests that consumers often use products to regulate their feelings (Hoyer et al., 2013). As far as service organisations such as HE institutions are concerned, researchers have also studied how service employees' emotions can affect consumers' emotions outside of their awareness (Hoyer et al., 2013). There are some studies which cover emotional aspects of choice-making, particularly using qualitative methods; however, emotional aspects are not covered in any depth in this text. In light of these factors, though, the consumer choice process is not necessarily an economically rational one, and feelings, emotions and other factors can strongly influence a final choice, sometimes resulting in a final decision which is less than optimal. (Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Menon, 2004) (See Chapter 1).

The external environment

Consumer choices do not take place in a vacuum; choosers are surrounded by a wide range of influences in their environment that prompt them to consider certain options and reject others. The consumer environment refers to everything external to the consumer that influences the decision and provides the context for the decision. These factors include, for example, social stimuli, culture, social class, reference groups and families (Peter & Olson, 2008), globalisation, competition, economic, political and technological factors (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Kotler et al., 2014). These factors are explored in Chapter 1. The chapter covers the context and the background to HE consumer choice research, and the rationale for consumer choice research: globalisation, internationalisation, supply and demand, competition, information searching and marketing communications. The rationale for HE consumer research covers: quality and diversity, finance and fees, choice factors and models, diversity and inequality. These factors are also taken forward to Chapter 4 where consumer behaviour models are presented, in particular the Black Box model which covers the environment in which decisions take place (see Chapters 4 and 5).

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Branding and marketing communications

When consumers make a purchase decision they take into consideration the brand image of the product/service as it is portrayed in the media, the perceived quality of the product reflected in marketing communications, and even the countries of origin of the brands (Peter & Olson, 2008; Schiffman et al., 2008). The subject of branding in HE is a substantial one (see e.g. Heslop & Nadeau, 2010; Chapleo, 2011; Clayton, Cavanagh, & Hettche, 2012; Bock, Poole, & Joseph, 2014), and although institutional branding influences consumer choices the topic of branding is beyond the scope of this text.

In recent years, the scope of the consumer environment has further increased due to the establishment of virtual social networks, electronic media and telecommunication systems that facilitate rapid delivery of information among a huge number of potential consumers (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.). Hence, consumers are increasingly interconnected through various forms of social networks (Wuyts, Dekimpe, Gijsbrechts, & Pieters, 2010) where they can exchange information about anything (e.g., an academic programme, HE institution), their impression of a particular product, or a marketing message they have been exposed to. This phenomenon has extended the significance of word-of-mouth (WOM) (Wuyts et al., 2010) far beyond the original local sharing of experiences between friends and family – originally defined as "some type of communication between two or more connected customers or potential customers". Such communication can now take the form of verbal, face-to-face communication or other means, including e-mail, telephone, cell-phone-based text messages, blogs, instant messaging, social network application software (Bonfrer, 2010, p. 307). The topic of marketing communications, including social media marketing and other developments in marketing is beyond the scope of this text, despite the significance of these developments. Some aspects of information searching and use of marketing information is included in Chapter 4, when examining organisational factors. These sources are included because the focus of the research cited is very closely aligned with the objectives for this text.

Summary

This pivot book is an opportunity for the authors to write a comprehensive critical examination of research on HE consumer choice behaviour

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both in the UK and internationally (wherever studies are available). The text enables the authors to offer critical analysis of the current research in the field and go beyond the descriptive enumeration of the papers collected and topics covered (as literature reviews often provide (e.g. Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; 2015)). The benefits of delimiting the content are, first there is an audience for this kind of text among students and other scholars of higher education consumer behaviour and choice, and there is a paucity of this kind of focused text in the field that is well-organised, highly focused, structured and comprehensive. The current texts in the field available for scholars are single journal papers with a unique focus, edited books which frequently have little coherence across chapters (and are difficult to pin-point in searches), and much of the research on which the studies are based tends to use small samples, a wide range of (often very localised) settings and limited variables. This text, with the longer word count, and support from Palgrave Macmillan, enables the authors to scrutinise the prior research in detail with a critical approach using themes which emerge from the articles and reports. The analysis enabled the authors to present the findings in detail and draw up theoretical models and research models for future studies, as well and providing strong evidence for where research is needed in the future, and how research studies might be designed. We are confident that this text will be an exciting find for students and scholars seeking to conduct research on consumer choice, and consumer behaviour in higher education markets.

The next chapter (Chapter 1) covers the background and context of research in HE consumer choice, and the rationale for conducting such research. This is followed by Chapter 2 which focuses on personal factors influencing consumer choices in HE, and Chapter 3 covering group aspects of consumer behaviour. Chapter 4 covers key theoretical models of the consumer choice process and organisational factors that influence HE choice. The final chapter (Chapter 5) provides a conclusion and includes models of consumer behaviour and choice. At the end of each chapter is a critical summary of the issues which emerged in the chapter.

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1

Context and Concepts of Higher Education Consumer Choice

Abstract: *The first chapter presents basic theories and concepts of higher education (HE) consumer choice behaviour, elaborates on the context of consumer behaviour and choice in higher education, and discusses the rational underpinning research on higher education choice. The section on the context of higher education covers concepts such as choice, globalisation, internationalisation, student mobility, and supply and demand (first section). The rationale for research on HE consumer choice is analysed in the second section, and the theoretical and practical justification for understanding the relationships between a wide variety of variables associated with students' choice and decision-making are highlighted.*

Keywords: competition; diversity; globalisation; internationalisation; supply and demand

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The context of higher education choice behaviour

There has been a paradigm shift in the governance of higher education (HE) across the world in the last two decades following relaxation of government control coupled with a shift towards marketisation (Jongbloed, 2003) and a reduction in government regulations in some former communist countries (Dill, 2003; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). As a result of these significant changes, the expectation among students that they have a wide choice about where to study has been increasingly taken for granted. At the same time, HE institutions are facing increasingly complex challenges such as substantial local and global competition, changes in funding regimes and greater emphasis on graduate employability, which demand a greater understanding of the reasons for the choices prospective students make when applying to a university (Simoes & Soares, 2010). As a consequence, HE institutions need to operate in a competitive market, a stark change compared to the past.

The paradigm shift towards marketised HE inevitably generates considerable research in the field of HE consumer choice to enable researchers further to understand choice processes, factors or antecedents to choice of institution and course programme, and factors which influence university attendance *per se*. Authors of texts on consumer choice of HE, however, rely on a range of themes to provide a rationale for focusing on consumer behaviour in HE in their research. Analysis of a substantial number of articles and texts in the field of HE consumer choice by the authors of this book identified the following contextual themes: globalisation; internationalisation; policy change and student mobility; supply and demand issues, including changes in student numbers, recruitment and social change; and market competition, including marketing, access to information and communications. These concepts are elaborated upon in the following sub-sections.

Globalisation context

Although some authors observe that there are no coherent theories of globalisation and internationalisation in HE (Maringe, 2010), there are many definitions of both concepts, including definitions which apply to HE. However, clear definitions are not easy to find and the concepts of globalisation and internationalisation are frequently used together

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as though there they were “two sides of the same coin” (Maringe, 2010, p. 1). Globalisation is the worldwide integration of economies over recent decades (King, 2014), and emerged through the victory of liberal capitalism as the dominant economic model. Globalisation is also viewed as the increasing collaboration between nations through economic, business and trade activities alongside the progressing alignment of political, social, cultural and ideological aspects of life across different countries (Maringe, 2010).

Perhaps the clearest definitions of globalisation are found in the writing of Steger and James (2013, p. 19) who argue that globalisation incorporates both the “global spread and intensification of social relations across the world”, and more “subjective changes” such as shared “meanings and understandings”. They claim that the “ideology of globalisation pervades social life” just about everywhere in the world (p.19). The march of globalisation has frequently been used by authors to justify the need for research on choice of HE institution, particular choice of institution for students seeking to study outside their home countries. Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2010) argue that in the HE arena, elements of globalisation are widespread and multifaceted and the HE market is now well established worldwide, particularly in the major English speaking countries: Canada, USA, Australia and the UK (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Dill, 2003; Taylor, 2003).

The process of the globalisation of HE is “accompanied by a process of marketisation, because universities have to compete for students and resources by adopting market-like ideologies and diversity policies” (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2010, p. 65). This is the context and setting for research and articles by many of those who conduct research in HE consumer choice. As a result of the social, political and economic forces of globalisation the number of students seeking to study across country borders has increased exponentially over the last half century (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011), and this has resulted in universities in some parts of the world, particularly the USA, Canada, UK and Australia (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), making themselves attractive destinations for international students and developing partnerships with other universities to develop their global reach (Abu Bakar & Abdu Talib, 2013). For example, authors claim that the globalisation of HE is largely based on increasing student mobility, which has seen significant growth in the last forty years (Beine, Noel, & Ragot, 2014). Shanka, Quintal and Taylor (2005) for example, in their article on factors influencing international

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students' choice of destination countries, provide a comprehensive list of statistics and a table of international student numbers from ten different countries to provide the context for their research study. They argue that overwhelming demand for HE comes from Asia, and claim that between 2000 and 2025 demand for HE in Australia is set to increase nine-fold (Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2005). The reason for the increasing pressure within universities to recruit international students, however, is not simply globalisation, although this phenomenon is undoubtedly important. Authors have observed that the drive to recruit international students in increasing numbers is also based on the reduction in public funding in some western countries, such as the US, UK, Canada and Australia (Shanka et al., 2005; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), that forces HE institutions to rely on tuition fees more than in the past.

Pasternak (2005) cites globalisation as one of the economic processes which affects western democracies and which has had an impact on HE. Her argument is that globalisation impacts on perceptions of the quality and level of knowledge required to be successful in the labour market. She argues that although prior to such widespread globalisation universities were able to enjoy substantial independence from social and economic pressures – particularly economic pressure – universities are now subject to market forces and expected to produce outcomes which contribute to greater growth in the economy and more tangible outcomes for students, particularly improved employment outcomes. Thus globalisation and privatisation result in student-consumers in the new HE market-place. Pasternak (2005, p. 191) argues that widespread globalisation has led to "knowledge becoming a private good, rather than a public good", which raises questions about "both costs and benefits to the individual" and therefore research is needed to examine choice factors in HE decisions. These factors play a key role in the internationalisation of HE worldwide.

Internationalisation

Knight (1999, p. 14) provides a clear distinction between globalisation and internationalisation for HE. She points out that globalisation affects each country in a different way depending upon its "culture, history, traditions and priorities"; globalisation refers to the "flow of technology, knowledge, people, values and ideas across country borders". In contrast, internationalisation in HE is defined by Knight (1999, p. 14) as "one of the ways the country responds to globalisation yet, at the same time

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respects the individuality of nations". In this way it is clear that the two concepts are closely linked although the relationship continues to be debated (Ennew, 2012). More specifically in the case of HE there are four approaches to internationalisation, according to Knight (1999), on the basis of: activities, such as student and staff exchange and international students, competencies, such as developing new values, attitudes skills and knowledge, for example language skills, ethos changes including promoting a more international culture on campuses, and process changes which demand alignment of policies and procedures.

Authors of research articles on HE consumer behaviour most frequently use internationalisation as the rationale for conducting research on international student choice of destination. Chen's (2008) research focuses on understanding how internationalisation and international marketing influence international students to choose to study in Canada. The background and context to the study focuses on the shift from viewing international students as a type of "foreign aid" (2008, p. 2) to more recent approaches to recruitment of international students based on increasing marketisation and more aggressive marketing.

Articles using internationalisation as the basis for research frequently also provide background data on the numbers of students crossing borders, particularly from east to west, and the financial benefits to the destination countries of this mobility (Kemp & Madden, 1998; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; Chen, 2008; Park, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). Chen (2008) focuses on the revenue generated by attracting international students to English speaking countries including the USA, UK, Australia and Canada, and the economic benefits this has for universities in these countries. However, she also points out the benefits to a university of integrating students inside and outside the classroom, and to raising the institution's international profile. Nonetheless, internationalisation is provided as background and context for research on international students' choice behaviour when choosing a Canadian university and the author concludes that both internationalisation and marketing act in combination in this context.

International students

Australia is also an increasingly popular destination for international students. In a research by Kemp and Madden (1998) the background and context to the paper reports on the substantial increase in the number of students studying abroad over sixty years ago compared with foreign

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student enrolments at the time of the research. The authors also report the reasons provided by international students for their desire to study outside their home country; this context is relied upon for their study on Taiwanese and Indonesian students' choice behaviour when choosing to study in Australia. A similar approach to presenting context and background data is used by the authors Maringe and Carter (2007), Park (2009) and Wilkins and Huisman (2011). Park (2009) sets out worldwide figures for student mobility across the world since 1975 and provides predictions for 2025, with a focus on Korean students and their most popular destination countries. The data are used to justify the research question which focuses on reasons why Korean students choose to study outside their home country (reasons such as, academic excellence and improving second language proficiency). Maringe and Carter (2007) also use international student numbers to set the context for research conducted in Africa: internationalisation is used as a context for research on the choice behaviour of students migrating to English speaking countries. A study that focuses on branch campuses abroad (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011) also uses figures showing the exponential growth in students travelling abroad, and research on *outgoing* UK students (Brooks & Waters, 2009) relies on providing international student mobility numbers more widely as the context for the study. There is clear evidence to show that the internationalisation of HE is increasing dramatically all around the world.

The challenge for researchers is identifying pertinent figures to underpin their research and to identify statistics which are sufficiently up-to-date for the relevant countries, to provide a useful context and background for the study. Many authors use a single figure to indicate growth in numbers but fail to provide details such as the types of student by programme or the mobility of students within regions as opposed to mobility from Asian to Anglophone countries, for example. Differences between subject majors are also important with some disciplines such as FAME subjects (finance, accounting, management and economics) in addition to all engineering subjects – which have grown significantly since 2009 compared to other subject areas (TopUniversities.com, 2014). Trends show that in the last five years although the main four English speaking countries remain most popular they are losing dominance, Germany is gaining increasing prominence and is now the fourth most popular destination country (1st is USA, 2nd is UK, 3rd is Canada, 4th is Germany, and 5th is Australia) (TopUniversities.com, 2014).

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The top ten countries of origin for international students studying in the UK have changed significantly since 2000, but this is often not reflected in the data provided by authors to justify research on HE consumer choice. In 2000, the top three source countries were Greece (13.1%), Ireland (6.4%) and Germany (6%), but by 2010 this had changed to China (14.1%), India (9.7%) and Nigeria (4.2%) (HM Government (UK), 2013). The largest source country worldwide for graduate/postgraduate programmes, by far, is China – Chinese students represent about one in six of all international students, a total of 723,000 in 2011. One in four of mobile Chinese students study in the US (UWN, 2014). The second largest source country worldwide is India, with 223,000 or 5.2% of the overseas market (UWN, 2014). These numbers are changing year by year, for example the number of incoming Indian students to the UK has recently seen a downward change due to government regulation and border controls. It is therefore crucial for authors of articles to ensure that up-to-date figures are used because the global picture changes rapidly.

There are some variations in the background and context provided to support consumer behaviour research which focuses on other internationalisation factors, apart from the growth in international student numbers and international student mobility. These include policy and political change, immigration issues, cultural factors, exports and geographic travel factors. It is perhaps not surprising that the Bologna Agreement (Bennett & Kottasz, 2011) has been used to justify research on international student mobility, and in particular choice of degree, and significant changes in some European universities to meet the convergence requirements in Europe (Lopez-Bonilla, Barrera Barrera, & Rodriguez Serrano, 2012). In many ways, given the opportunities that degree convergence provided through the Bologna Declaration (1999) it is perhaps surprising that more articles have not cited this change as a key basis for conducting research on HE choice in Europe. Politically focused papers, however, such as Parker and Jary (1995) speculate on the consequences of HE change in the UK and conclude that political change and new funding arrangements have transformed the organisation of HE which has increased the power of management and reduced the autonomy of academics. Conceptual papers and opinion pieces also focus on political concerns when debating the shortcomings and limitations of a market-driven approach to HE choice and increasing privatisation of HE (e.g. Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2010; Hemsley-Brown, 2011;

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Lowrie & Hemsley-Brown, 2011). Among these concerns are a possible decrease in the quality of teaching and learning, the challenge of less-than-competent candidates, and the commercialisation of diplomas, and dealing with plagiarism.

A number of authors (Hagy & Staniec, 2002; Griffin, del Pilar, McIntosh, & Griffin, 2012) also focus their research on the HE choices of an immigrant population, and therefore the background and context to these studies concentrate on the increasing numbers of immigrants, particularly to the US. Others are more concerned with cultural factors of internationalisation and provide a background and context which sets out the definitions of culture and cultural values and, in particular, for example, the substantial differences between Chinese culture and the Confucian value system (Chung, Holdsworth, Li, & Fam, 2009). These cultural values are viewed as key to research on the consumer behaviour of some students because the values affecting HE choice may differ significantly in some areas such as family values, obedience, power and tradition (Schwartz & Ros, 1996). Many authors view internationalisation as a form of export (Abu Bakar & Abdu Talib, 2013; Kemp & Madden, 1998) or as a form of travel and tourism, and use these topics as the background and context to research on choice in HE (Bornholt, Gientzotis, & Cooney, 2004; Angell, Heffernan, & Megicks, 2008; Sá, Amado Tavares, Justino, & Amaral, 2011).

Supply and demand context

Research on HE consumer choice is often based on arguments seeking to demonstrate that student demand is rising or falling based on a variety of geographical, political and economic changes. There are arguments on both sides – that student numbers are increasing or decreasing – and the variation is often due to geographical location and changes in the funding of HE in some countries (see for example, Imenda & Kongolo, 2002; Imenda, Kongolo, & Grewal, 2004; Lang, 2009; Padlee, Kamaruddin, & Baharun, 2010; Horstschräer, 2012; Jung, 2013). More specifically this theme relates to the context of changes in public funding and accountability (Bratti, 2002; Horstschräer, 2012), and different types of economy across the world (Hung, Chung, & Ho, 2000; Sojkin, Bartkowiak, & Skuza, 2012).

The topics covered by authors as background and context to research in consumer behaviour in HE cover the following sub-headings within supply and demand: student numbers (Kemp & Madden, 1998; Leslie,

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2003; Drewes & Michael, 2006; Niculescu, 2006; Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh, & Barry, 2012), in particular, growth in numbers (Leslie, 2003; Niculescu, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007), expansion (McGregor, Thanki, & McKee, 2002) and a fall in student recruitment, including changes in birth rates and an aging population (Imenda & Kongolo, 2002; Imenda et al., 2004; Briggs & Wilson, 2007). Supply and demand as a social change issue (Harker, Slade, & Harker, 2001; Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008; Sojkin et al., 2012) and how this affects participation in HE (Whitehead, Raffan, & Deaney, 2006), public funding (Bratti, 2002; Horstschräer, 2012) and accountability (Bratti, 2002) are also key topics underpinning research on choice of HE.

In terms of arguments related to the increase in student numbers, whilst this change can be due to increasing birth rates, changes in legislation can also have a strong impact. Leslie (2003) argues that there are two reasons why student demand (numbers) increased at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century. First, HE in the UK expanded rapidly between 1983 and 1994 when there was a growth of 67% of full-time undergraduates – principally between the ages 18–21 and a further increase of 6% during 1996–1997 and 2000–2001 (p.330). There are two main reasons for these increases: 1) the compulsory school leaving age had been increased requiring all students to take exams prior to leaving school, thus improving the level of qualifications young people achieved and 2) the government set targets to increase participation in HE to include half of the age cohort attending university before they reached the age of 30. Against this background, therefore, applications to HE were increasing rapidly and researchers argue that a situation of high demand places more emphasis on marketing, and on the need to understand student choice.

In Poland (Sojkin et al., 2012) following a rapid transformation of political, economic and social systems, demand for HE increased substantially and resulted in re-organisation of the education system and high demand for HE. In just fifteen years the number of HE institutions increased fourfold, and the number of students increased by almost 500%. But, Poland is now facing a dramatic and sustained fall in demand for HE, largely based on a fall in birth rates. Since 2006 there has been a steady decline in student numbers in Poland (Sojkin et al., 2012). After rising to a peak of 1,953,800 in 2005–2006, the number of students decreased to 1,900,000 in 2009 and is expected to decrease further in 2015 and 2020 (Sojkin et al., 2012, p.566). A decline in birth rates coincides with recent rapid

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increases in the supply of university places in the country. Demographic forecasts for Poland indicated that in 2010 the population aged between 19 and 24 decreased to 3.4 million from that of 3.9 million in 2002, and the population of this age groups will further decrease to 2.8 million in 2015 and 2.3 million in 2020 (Sojkin et al., 2012, p. 566). This example is just one summary of how a fall in numbers is occurring in some countries and is stimulating interest in research in HE choice.

Typically, however, it is the challenges of rising student demand, and falling birth rates, together with changes in legislation, political climate and economic circumstances which lead authors to pose research questions about choice of HE, choice of institution and choice of study destination in a competitive climate. Political and legislative change can have a dramatic impact on demand for places, and give universities little advanced intelligence to make changes to recruitment and programme policies. These factors, therefore, place all universities in a competitive context whereby they are competing not only with universities with a similar ethos and history in their own countries, but can find themselves competing with overseas universities for international students, and in some cases competing with overseas universities for home students – in a context where their home student numbers are falling (Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2005).

Context of competition

Research on HE consumer choice is frequently based on awareness of increasing competition, both nationally and internationally. Abu Bakar and Abdu Talib (2013) claim that the most intense competition is among the English speaking destinations, US, UK, Canada and Australia, but the competition to study in one of the Anglophone countries is putting competitive pressure on the institutions in students' home countries, such as China, India, Thailand and Greece, particularly in terms of access to top universities. They now compete with many HE institutions in other parts of the world.

Oplatka (2009) explains the basis of competition in HE: he notes the decline in governments and the state from the role in funding knowledge, which has resulted in increased competition among HE providers. The argument that universities operate in a competitive environment is often used to make the straightforward argument that research is needed to find out more about university choice (e.g. Dawes & Brown, 2002; Brown, Varley, & Pal, 2009). At a national level in a number of

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regions (e.g. eastern Europe and Asia) expansion, diversification and growing competition have been identified as the main forces driving the marketisation of HE (Maringe, 2006), and it is on the basis of enhanced marketisation of HE in countries around the world that research needs to focus on examining choice, the reasons for choice, and the process of choosing a university. In the US, for example (see Padlee et al., 2010), changes in demographics, globalisation, economic restructuring and information technology are putting pressure on institutions and enhancing the competition between them.

These changes have intensified competition and led institutions to make substantial changes and become more like businesses. "As the competition among institutions intensifies, they increasingly behave as corporations by adopting a more business-like stance and engaging in professional marketing activities" (Veloutsou et al., 2005, p. 279). Institutions also increase international partnerships, develop branch campuses, and forms of transnational education which mean they are competing not only with other home universities for students but also with universities worldwide (Padlee et al., 2010).

Key arguments based on increasing competition in HE rely on concerns about poor quality information (Griffin et al., 2012); the need for improved information, and information-searching capabilities (Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2004; Veloutsou et al., 2005); and information source preferences (Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008). Linked to these topics authors have also focused on types of decision-making: economic rationality and rate of return (Whitehead et al., 2006; Menon, Saiti, & Socratous, 2007; Padlee et al., 2010), and human capital theory (Oosterbeek, Groot, & Hartog, 1992).

The context of research is also linked more directly to the need for research on marketing, promotion and marketing communications (Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Zain, Tahir Jan, & Ibrahim, 2013), market positioning (Holdsworth & Nind, 2005), targeting (Griffin et al., 2012) and word-of-mouth (WOM) (Bornholt et al., 2004). The subject of information searching and whether searches are rational is the focus of the next sub-section.

Information searching and rationality

Griffin et al. (2012) base their qualitative research on concerns about black students from immigrant populations in the US, and in particular noted their very poor access to information about attending college.

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They argue that college-educated parents generally have more access to information about college and are better able to help their children, therefore in a highly competitive environment disadvantaged students are less able to identify and access the information they need to make difficult choices. In particular these students are not making decisions early enough. They argue that this is a challenge for all under-represented groups but particularly for black immigrants, who might not have parents who gained college education in the US.

Information sources, however, can be categorised in a number of ways, and in the introduction to a paper by Veloutsou et al., (2005) they explain that information can be categorised on the basis of how much it is controlled by others. Students potentially have access to controllable sources which include the brochures and other promotional material produced by universities and made available to students through a variety of formal processes, such as application procedures in schools and careers service provision. Non-controllable sources are described by the authors as more informal and include advice provided by any number of others such as friends and family – but also by media such as news, magazines and the internet (which is partly controllable and dependent upon the website resources). However, increasing competition between universities and access to sufficient and relevant information to make choices are concerns for those considered least able to access information: under-represented groups, such as socially disadvantaged students (Veloutsou et al., 2004). Few concerns are raised about the majority of students seeking to make choices about university – the emphasis is very much upon the increasing volume of information available (Veloutsou et al., 2004) as competition increases, and whether more disadvantaged students have sufficient access.

Research on information-searching behaviour comes under considerable criticism, however, when it is based on the assumption that information searching is carried out as a rational decision-making process. Menon (2004) and Menon et al. (2007) draw attention to the limitations of the economic-rational model of human behaviour – on which they claim research about information searching is often based. They entreat authors to apply caution with respect to the assumption of rationality in the explanation of human behaviour in education choice. The background and context to their research pleads with authors to challenge the key "assumptions of the economic approach, such as the supposition that consumers always seek to behave rationally" as they point out that

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"rational decision-making based on complete and accurate knowledge of individual needs and wants, available products in the market, and the ability to compare their strengths and weaknesses is considered all but unobtainable in the real world" (Menon, 2004, p. 269). More importantly, the arguments about rationality are not necessarily contentious among choice researchers – some research on HE consumer choice disregards the notion of partial- or non-rationality, and is conducted as though the researchers are seeking a rational process as the goal of their research. Authors also lament the lack of student rationality in a study that seeks to identify key choice factors, for example (Abu Bakar & Abdu Talib, 2013) complaints that students fail to take all factors into account and blame the lack of time. Yet, given the limitations of the rational decision-making model, it is unsurprising that students fail to take into account or calculate the impact of every factor influencing their HE choice.

Menon (2004, p. 269) introduces her research by reminding readers that according to the findings of research from the field of psychology, "consumer decisions are seldom the result of purely rational deliberation based on a stable set of preferences". Nonetheless, there are research articles on information searching which, by omission or through rationale, are conducted with an assumption that the decision-process of student choosers is a rational one. For example, research conducted by Maringe (2006) on the factors students consider important when choosing where to study set the research in the context of a buyer behaviour model developed in the 1980s, which includes pre-search behaviour, search behaviour, application and choice decision. Maringe (2006) sought to establish whether student choice of university is more utilitarian in the recent climate of competition: a greater focus on potential earnings and employability following graduation. This assumption – the link between choice and potential earnings – is so prevalent in political press that it needed to be tested. He concluded that earnings prospects are not a particularly important factor in the choice of a specific university, which indicates perhaps that the decision is not entirely a rational one, but nonetheless, students were much more utilitarian in their decisions which were no longer based on interest and love of the subject. It is important to observe here that not all students are the same – different subject majors and disciplines can be chosen for different reasons: business and management are more utilitarian compared with, for example, music and literature.

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Marketing and marketing communications

This final sub-section on the context of consumer behaviour in HE is marketing communications and the importance the current marketing communications universities carry out to inform and attract new students. “Most educational institutions now recognise the need to market themselves” in what is for universities an increasingly competitive environment, “reductions in university funds and the introduction of new government-backed marketing campaigns to increase the number of international students, further highlights the growing importance of marketing, advertising and promotion of educational institutions” (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006, p. 318). Many papers take the need for marketing as a given, and seek therefore to focus on one specific aspect of marketing for their research. For example, a paper by Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008) is largely focused on identifying different segments in the market, but provides background and context summarising the changes in marketing and marketing communications and the need for universities to meet the new information needs of students. Marketing communications are rarely used to provide a context for research but frequently provide a purpose – for example, research which seeks to offer recommendations for marketing or marketing communications. Good examples are papers by Gatfield and co-authors (Gatfield, Barker, & Graham, 1999; Gatfield & Chen, 2006). In Gatfield and Chen (2006) the authors test the theory of planned behaviour and use the findings to provide guidance to Australian, UK and US universities on more effective marketing communications. In Gatfield et al. (1999) they set the context of the research in terms of the marketing communications available to international students, and seek to measure the effectiveness of international advertising and promotional material. The rationale is that new forms of communications such as digital communications require market segmentation and better targeting to understand the information preferences of different groups of students. The second section covers the rationale for research in HE choice that prior researchers have used to justify their research.

The rationale for research in higher education consumer choice

Authors focusing on a rationale for research in consumer choice in HE gave the following arguments for conducting such research: quality and

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diversity in HE, including institutional image, performance and reputation; financial issues including fee income, student debt and future earnings; the commitment to constructing theoretical models of choice, incorporating values, aspirations and lifestyle factors; career choice issues including labour markets and employability and finally, exploring demographic factors such as social class, gender and race.

Quality and diversity

The rationale for conducting research on HE consumer choice is often based on concerns about the variations in quality, the impact of diversity on students and choice of institution. One author who focuses specifically on quality as a rationale for conducting choice research is Horstschräer (2012, p. 1162). The possibility that "high-ability students use different university quality indicators as a source of information" compared with less able students, and whether "some quality dimensions are more important in choice than others" is the basis for the research because, she argues, "university rankings and indicators of excellence may provide valuable information for the decisions of prospective students". Her rationale is that it is very important that prospective students apply for the universities that "fit them best in order to maximise human capital production and to minimise drop-outs". For Horstschräer's research, the rationale, which focuses on quality, is based on the assumption of rational decision-making – which students will seek to maximise in their decisions, however the results support her assumptions for the sample of students included in the study.

Davies and Guppy (1997) conducted research on the influence of student backgrounds, particular socio-economic-status, and on the choices young people made about universities and colleges. Their concern is that universities and colleges, including the departments and faculties within institutions – vary considerably in terms of quality and prestige. These differences impact on students from poorer social backgrounds, who tend to achieve lower academic qualifications and have fewer resources. The students are less likely to attend the prestige institutions and departments. The rationale for the research is therefore based on concern about equal access to higher quality institutions, particularly Ivy League institutions. These concerns are also reflected in the rationale provided by the UK author Hemsley-Brown (2015, p. 398) for research on choice of prestige university. She argues that "despite substantial prior research on higher education choice", prestigious or "top universities in the UK continue to stand accused of favouring socio-economically advantaged students, to the detriment of those from poorer backgrounds". The research findings show that other factors such as achievement and schooling contribute to the differences, and justify the need to further explore HE choice.

A straightforward rationale for choice research based on diversity is provided by Dawes and Brown (2004) and Maringe (2006), who both highlight the increasingly diverse nature of HE in the UK and the impact of this diversity upon the choice process. This notion is expanded upon by Niculescu (2006) who focuses on strategic positioning of HE. The rationale for his research is based on the argument that competition in HE is increasing and as a result universities are becoming more aggressive in their marketing in order to secure students. He goes on to argue that in order to secure sustainable competitive advantage, universities need to be clearly differentiated from one another in the market, and that market positioning is a useful tool to differentiate one institution from another. This rationale supports marketing positioning of universities and departments, and provides evidence that many disciplines are seeking to serve the same segments. Other studies also focus on market positioning as a way of differentiating universities from one another. Differentiation can be based on stronger identity (Zimbroff, 2005) and organisational image (Baker & Brown, 2007; Pampaloni, 2010), and is viewed as a key reason for conducting consumer behaviour research. Social identity theory, a related concept, is used as the basis for the rationale for research on choice by Zimbroff (2005). Social identity is the individual's perception that s/he belongs to certain social groups (p.818). The argument she puts forward is that disadvantaged students who expect to find an "identity-threatening environment" in a university – which does not match their perceived identity – may abstain from looking at any college options, even choices which they would find acceptable. The rationale for the research is therefore based on exploring the link between social identity theory and types of student choosers.

Finance and fees

Changes in home fees and the lucrative income derived from the payment of international fees are often used as the rationale for conducting research on consumer behaviour and choice in HE. Although exact figures for income generated by international students is hard to find, many authors argue that overseas students make a

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significant contribution to the revenues of American and British universities and therefore also to the US and UK economies (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). For example, Abu Bakar and Abdu Talib (2013) point out that over 20% of the students studying in Australian HE institutions are overseas students, and the total tuition fees amount to $1.45 billion, and the most recent figures quoted by authors (from 2004) indicate "the UK higher education sector generated £4 billion revenue a year in the global marketplace, which represents about 40% of the total achieved" by the sector (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011, p. 64). The figures provided by Wilkins and Huisman (2011) are quoted by a number of authors and originate in a Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) report (Conlon, Litchfield, & Sadlier, 2011, p. 210), which estimates the "loss of income to the UK based on implementation of tuition fees in the 2012/13 academic year". The report claims that "in 2014/15, there would be a £339 million difference (reduction) between the best estimate and the estimate that incorporates the policy change. The gap widens to £672 million by 2019/20 and £844 million by 2024/25" (p.210). The rationale for research based on these findings is both that the income from overseas students studying in the UK is substantial, and justifies research on consumer behaviour in this context, and also that the introduction of fees and changes to immigration is likely to have a serious impact over the next ten years. Both perspectives indicate the need for further research on the links between income, fees and ethnic origin.

The reduction in funding by governments and changes in the way funding is awarded to universities in an increasingly competitive HE environment are frequently cited as a rationale for research (e.g. Veloutsou et al., 2005). In the UK the changes in fee arrangements in recent years have provided a rationale for researchers to focus on the factors influencing student choice of university since the top-up fees were introduced in England (e.g. Briggs, 2006). Fees of up to £9000 per annum were announced in 2010 for the entry to English universities in 2012-2013 (Dunnett et al., 2012). The fee changes in the UK encouraged researchers to determine the impact of the new fees on students' choice of university, especially on disadvantaged students due their fear of debt (Callender & Jackson, 2008); and to explore price elasticity and utility modelling in the HE sector in the UK (McGregor et al., 2002; Carter & Curry, 2011), Canada (e.g. Dooley, Payne, & Rob, 2012) and Germany (e.g. Horstschräer, 2012).

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Choice factors and models

Although it is an ambitious task, many authors have provided a clear rationale for seeking to identify which factors influence choice of university, despite the likelihood that the number of factors is substantial and that different segments and markets will be sensitive to different combinations of factors. For example, survey research by Pampaloni (2010) aimed to establish which interpersonal and informational resources influence students making choices, which characteristics of institutions are most consistently desired by students, and how institutions raise the awareness of potential students in terms of these issues. This list of research questions is very broad and ambitiously comprehensive in terms of one single study, but it gives a summary of some of the key questions researchers seek to answer in terms of significant choice factors for student-consumers of HE. The rationale is similar in these studies: the pressing need to identify the factors that influence choice.

A study by Shanka et al. (2005) takes a similar approach by seeking to establish which factors from a list of variables such as "safety", "quality", "proximity to home", "family recommendation", "cost of living" and "friends" are the most important when a sample group of students chose their institution. These types of study are relatively common and differ in terms of which factors are included. The results and conclusions vary widely depending upon the sample for the study and the number of source institutions the respondents are attending, but the quest to find the definitive list remains strong. More focused studies concentrate on a particular variable, for example: course preferences (Holdsworth & Nind, 2005; Gormley & Murphy, 2006; Lopez-Bonilla et al., 2012), facilities (Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003), lifestyle (Domino, Libraire, Lutwiller, Superczunski, & Tian, 2006; Oplatka & Tevel, 2006; Whitehead et al., 2006), values (Bornholt et al., 2004; Oplatka & Tevel, 2006; Chung, Holdsworth, Li, & Fam, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Abu Bakar & Abdu Talib, 2013), aspirations (Harker et al., 2001; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001) and peer influence (Mastekaasa & Smeby, 2008). Studies also cover extrinsic choice factors associated with consumer behaviour in HE, including prioritising career choice (Imenda et al., 2004; Whitehead et al., 2006; Ozdemir & Hacifazlioglu, 2008; Kettley & Whitehead, 2012; Jung, 2013) and employability (Brooks & Waters, 2009).

A small number of research studies seek to identify stages in the process of decision-making, for example Maringe (2006) explains the rational

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process of purchase behaviour stages (pre-purchase behaviour, search behaviour, application stage, choice decision, and registration) based on the well-established theoretical decision-making models found in commercial settings. The research itself, however, is not based on process but on factors influencing the choice, such as intrinsic factors (e.g. love of the subject) and extrinsic factors (e.g. career aspirations). Menon et al. (2007, p. 706) are some of the few researchers who argue that there are "grounds for caution with respect to the adoption of the rationality assumption in the explanation of human behaviour in [higher] education" choice. They point out that in the fields of consumer psychology and in education research there is strong evidence to demonstrate that the choice process students work through when making choices in education settings "is not fully consistent with the version of rationality postulate by advanced neoclassical economists" (Menon et al., 2007, p. 708), nonetheless these authors claim that many researchers in the education field continue to design research about choice on the underlying assumption that the choices are rational, relying on models that have underlying assumptions of rationality (adopted from the economics discipline).

Demographics – inequality

There is a substantial body of research, particularly in the UK and the US, that relies on concerns about inequality of access to HE as the basis for research. The rationale for this type of research is based on the need to examine the barriers some groups face in entering HE in terms of race and social class. There are also concerns about gender differences and differences in family history, particularly in the case of choice of programme and choice of prestige institutions. For example the focus of social factors research is on access and equity of resources (Bornholt et al., 2004) and authors are seeking to establish where there are differences in access based on demographic factors alone. This rationale is particularly appropriate for studies using secondary data, because many existing datasets provide demographic information (but little attitudinal information) for statistical modelling (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Bratti, 2002; Gormley & Murphy, 2006). Concerns about race, gender and socio-economic status are all central to understanding the choices of students who are the first in their family to attend college. The rationale for this kind of study is based on the high drop-out rates for students in this category (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008), but provides insights into student choice based on the combined disadvantage of race and socio-economic status, in addition to (in some cases) gender differences.

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There are very few studies which provide a rationale for focusing entirely on gender differences, although Mastekaasa and Smeby (2008) acknowledge that programmes like nursing, education and social work are female-dominated and there are also strongly male-dominated enclaves like engineering – but their study was concerned with how early or late male and female students make choices decisions and whether drop-out rates differ, therefore the rationale was focused on concerns about reducing drop-out.

An important rationale for many studies is concern about the disadvantage that some students experience due to lower social class origins coupled with low economic status. A recent paper using a large dataset is an example of this approach (Hemsley-Brown, 2015). It provides a rationale based on the accusation that prestige universities tend to favour socially and economically advantageous students over disadvantaged applicants, and questions whether the basis for this inequality is grade difference, schooling or other factors. This topic is also explored in research by Baker and Brown (2007) who claim that the UK HE system is deeply divided in terms of privilege and prestige and they question how far these images of prestige and privilege influence student choice, particular choices made by disadvantaged students.

Concerns about racial differences – particularly but not exclusively in the USA, are also used as a rationale for choice research in the context of HE decision-making behaviour (e.g. Reay et al., 2001; Hagy & Staniec, 2002; Yingui, 2009; Buser, Niederle, & Oosterbeek, 2014). Imenda and Kongolo (2002) raise concerns about the differences in the choices of black and white South African students; and Patitu (2000) explores why African American students attend different institutions from their white American counterparts.

Finally there are studies that use generational differences in choice of HE as the rationale for examining HE consumer choice. These cover the influence of parents (Domino et al., 2006; Siegfried & Getz, 2006; Ozdemir & Hacifazlioglu, 2008), and the decisions made by first generation HE students (Cho et al., 2008) and mature students (Oplatka & Tevel, 2006).

Critical summary

Several critical insights have emerged when analysing the contexts and rationales provided by authors of articles on the HE consumer choice.

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These insights need to be raised because the arguments for conducting HE consumer behaviour research are very convincing but there are further issues, opposing arguments, which need to be considered.

First, while interinstitutional competition might lead to improvements in institutional and sector performance, efficiency and effectiveness, there are also potential negative consequences of competition for HE more widely, such as a gradual lowering of academic entry requirements, pressure on institutions to continue to raise the number and grades awarded, pressure to accept students who are privately funded but who only meet minimum requirements, and so on. These counter-arguments raise a number of questions: to what extent should policymakers and governments place limits on competition in the HE sector? What are the ethical challenges of marketisation and globalisation in HE? How should university academics and managers balance the need to attract large numbers of students on one hand, with the need to retain and raise high academic standards on the other? Are these two issues – attracting students and raising standards – incompatible?

Second, globalisation and internationalisation have led, thus far, to the movement of students from east to west, from developed and developing countries to developed countries, mainly English speaking nations (this is also changing, with some European countries, such as Germany, for example, teaching degree programmes in English). It is also worth considering the future and long term impact of migration from east to west for HE purposes, particularly the impact on developing countries, many of which are still relatively poor, suffering economic distress and political unrest. Also, what are the implications of student outgoing mobility on local culture? What price do the source countries pay for the exit of their best young people to overseas universities in terms of local politics, national culture and social changes? To what extent can source country universities develop a strong research knowledge base, when so many young people from the elite groups prefer to study overseas? Are there good examples of ways a developing country gains from outgoing student mobility?

Third, the destination countries (most are English speaking developed countries) have developed a new type of export in the form of branch campuses, transnational education (TNE) that considerably improves the Anglophone institution's financial income and international reputation. Some branch campuses are in direct competition with the top institutions in a developing country, e.g. the Ningbo campus of Nottingham

University. However, academics and managers in universities face a universal-vs-local dilemma: are they committed to teaching universal knowledge rather than local knowledge (i.e. international knowledge rather than Anglophone knowledge)? Are TNE arrangements sustainable for both the countries? Is internationalisation a process of greater Americanisation?

Fourth, the financial gains accrued by HE systems in developed countries in contrast to the financial loses of HE systems in the developing world, particularly in African and East Asia – indicate a shift of wealth from developing countries to developed countries: a further exploitation of the developing world by the developed world. Student mobility has become another way to transfer capital from the developing countries to the developed world, and in turn, to further weaken the HE systems in the developing countries. This phenomenon is in stark contrast to the purported relief and support that developed countries seek to provide to developing countries in other areas, e.g. health and environment. On the other hand, it could be argued that this generation has an opportunity to accumulate substantial intellectual capital that will allow them to gain graduate employment in their own country or elsewhere in the world. The question is whether graduates will return to their countries of origin, and whether young people will gain sufficient valuable knowledge and skills to help improve and strengthen their home countries.

Finally, HE consumer choice is based on the student's right to choose where to study and relies on good sources of information such as brochures, websites, open days, social media sites and other forms of promotion. But – particularly at a distance – prospective students' ability to gain a good grasp of the services offered by a specific institution can be limited. Education is necessarily a widely variable service and relies on good relationships with the people involved; therefore, HE marketers tend to highlight the external (e.g. rankings) and positive aspects of the institution rather than the central and core activity of the teaching-learning processes taking place in its departments. This is much more difficult to convey to potential students, especially at a distance. An analysis of patterns of consumer behaviour among students from immigrant communities, for example for those whose families are less likely to provide them with sufficient practical knowledge about HE, show that first generation students find it especially difficult to make a choice to attend a prestige institution; they are more comfortable in an institution with a population of students from the same cultural background.

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To sum up, the literature about HE consumer choice reveals, explicitly and implicitly, the complexity of interinstitutional competition which impacts on the choice process in the sector, and points to the gainers and the losers in the context of globalisation and internationalisation; the winners are currently developed countries, global corporations, universities in Anglophone countries, governments, and professors in the winning universities. In contrast, the losers in the long term could be the developing countries and their local cultural heritage, universities in Africa and East Asia, and many international students who study overseas but find very little relevance to their culture and their lives.

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2
Personal Influences on Consumer Behaviour

Abstract: *The second chapter analyses the personal influences on higher education consumer choice, by covering demographics – gender and age, family, income, educational background and lifestyle. The first section covers influences on consumer behaviour based on theoretical models and the meaning of segmentation (the ways a potential market is divided into distinctive groups of consumers with common characteristics and needs). Next, research on the major personal factors affecting consumer behaviour in HE are analysed in detail, with references to empirical findings on each topic. A critical discussion raises ethical issues and the need for further research.*

Keywords: demographics; lifestyle; segmentation

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Influences on consumer behaviour

An important question for marketers is: which factors impact on students' higher education choices? Do personal factors determine student decisions, and if so, is research able to predict the decisions different types of students will make based on demographics factors such as their sex, income, age, family background, income, or lifestyle? Theoretical models that seek to identify the influences on buyer behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2003) incorporate categories based on demographics or personal factors. These factors influence consumer behaviour, although the marketer has little or no control over them – nonetheless these important influences need to be taken into account (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013) in predicting decision-making behaviour. Four categories of characteristics are presented in the model: cultural, social, personal and psychological. Personal factors include: age, occupation, life cycle, economic, lifestyle, personality and self-concept. Based on prior research evidence, the factors for consumer behaviour in HE adapted by the authors are: gender/sex, age, family, prior education, income and lifestyle. Kotler and Armstrong (2013) also identify social factors which they list as reference groups, family, and roles and status (these topics will be covered in Chapter 3). Cultural characteristics include culture, sub-culture and social class (see Chapter 3). The psychological characteristics of the consumer are also listed in Kotler and Armstrong's model and include: motivation, perception, learning, beliefs and attitudes (this topic is beyond the scope of this book).

People make different choices throughout their lifetime, and at different life stages they will have different personal circumstances which can lead to different priorities. Factors such as age, gender, lifestyle, income, social status, geography and culture are known to influence the process consumers go through to make choices. For this reason marketers have established the strategy of market segmentation which benefits the customer as well and the marketer. These segments are closely linked to the models which set out the characteristics of buyer behaviour.

Market segmentation

Market segmentation is a method of dividing the potential market into distinct groups of consumers with common characteristics and needs

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(Schiffman, Kanuk, & Hansen, 2008). This strategy is based on findings from research and marketing experience, which indicates that not all consumers are alike, they can be grouped by a range of characteristics which identify them as similar in terms of the decisions they make, and in some cases in the way they make decisions. The strategy of segmentation allows marketers to avoid attempting to attract the attention of everyone, but enables them to rely on the key characteristics and preferences of one or more groups to target their communications. The categories or bases used for segmentation are close to the different factors researchers have identified in terms of consumer behaviour. Different segments behave differently. However, a segmentation strategy is not as well developed in the higher education sector and can also lead to ethical issues when social status, income and other demographic variables are used to analyse the behaviour and decision-making of students from different religious and ethnic groups.

The core bases for segmentation are well-established: geographic, demographic, psychographic and behavioural (Kotler & Armstrong, 2003). Geographic segmentation requires the market to be divided into segments based on location because when people live in the same country, region or local area they have, to some extent, the same needs. In higher education geographical segmentation, though, is highly relevant for some categories of target students who, for example, are unable or unwilling to travel outside their local area to study. Some segments such as international students are also identified by their home country because they often share similar characteristics and expectations.

Demographic characteristics such as age, sex, income, (prior) occupation or (previous) education are also a very common method of segmentation. The differences between age groups – young 18-year-old students and more mature (over-25 year old) students – are clear and although sex is not often used as a segmentation variable by institutions, there are gender differences in terms of subject of study (e.g. nursing and engineering, which are predominantly female and male dominated respectively). Psychographic segmentation is based on psychology research (Schiffman et al., 2008) and covers variables such as personality, motivation, learning and focuses on the measurement of attitudes, opinions and beliefs. This segmentation base also includes socio-cultural segmentation such as family life-cycle differences, socio-economic class or social status, and cultural differences.

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There is strong evidence to indicate that consumers vary considerably in the choices they make based on these factors, and in higher education research socio-economic status has been the subject of much endeavour (Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008). Finally, segments are identified based on behaviour factors, such as usage-situations, level of consumption and patterns of consumption – for example students on part-time programmes or short programmes are likely to behave differently from other students seeking longer or full-time study. For example, many midlife female students in Israel participate in part-time academic programmes due to their need to work full-time jobs and take care of their children (Oplatka & Tevel, 2006).

Personal characteristics

Research on consumer behaviour in higher education markets covers gender/sex differences and age differences in terms of the choices students make. Parents' education and income, entry qualifications and lifestyle have also been topics of previous studies. Figure 2.1 is a model showing the characteristics influencing higher education consumer choice based on findings from research in the field.

The following sub-sections report more specifically on each personal characteristic (the next chapter reports on social and cultural characteristics).

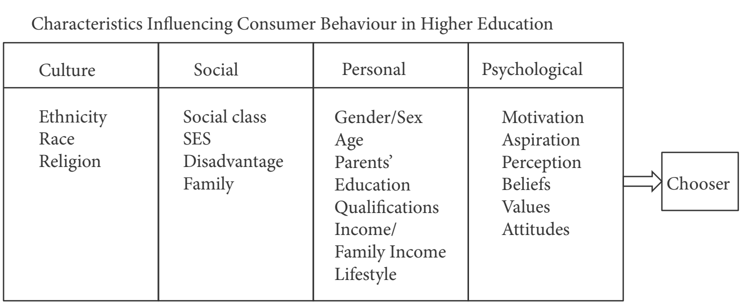

FIGURE 2.1 *Characteristics influencing consumer behaviour in higher education*
Source: The authors – adapted from Kotler and Armstrong, 2013.

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Gender/sex

Gender segmentation has long been established as a way of differentiating products in a market, particularly in terms of clothing, toiletries and magazines (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). However, sex roles have blurred somewhat in recent years and gender is no longer an accurate way of distinguishing consumers in many product categories (Schiffman et al., 2008). Much of this change has come about because men and women increasingly perceive that they have the same opportunities, and there are almost no barriers to them making the same choices, but there is still some evidence that males and females differ in the way they make consumer decisions, and the reasons behind their choices (Schiffman et al., 2008).

Gender differences in terms of higher education choices are extremely complex, and there is no single explanation for the continuing differences between males and females in relation to the choices they make in terms of institution or subject discipline (e.g. Zafar, 2013). The sex of a buyer or chooser has been the subject of considerable interest in higher education choice research (e.g. Cho et al., 2008; Mastekaasa & Smeby, 2008), although this factor is not typically included in theoretical models in business research (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). For some authors reporting on the gender balance of the sample and any differences between sub-samples is a matter of routine, particularly for survey research using statistical analysis. Most authors (at least in Anglo-American societies) tend to report the gender balance of the sample they used for their study, but typically do not report any differences between gender groups in terms of the choices they made, or the process of choice of institution.

There are many studies that report differences between gender groups in terms of their subject choices (Zafar, 2013; Buser, Niederle, & Oosterbeek, 2014; Gemici & Wiswall, 2014). Zafar (2013), for instance, found that among recipients of bachelor's degrees in the US 13% of women majored in education compared to only 4% of men. There are also several studies that support the finding that women are significantly less likely than men to graduate with a major in science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) (Buser et al., 2014; Moakler & Kim, 2014). Only 2% of women in the US majored in engineering in 2000 compared to 12% of men (Zafar, 2013).

Gemicic and Wiswall (2014) also found that women are about two-thirds as likely as men to earn a degree in a science or business field.

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Although women have now reversed the gender gap in attainment of bachelor's degrees, the study found that a significant reason for the underrepresentation of women in STEM subjects is lower expected returns to these subject disciplines for women (Ball, 2012). According to Buser et al., (2014) over 30% of this gender gap can be explained by gender differences in confidence. Research results by Moakler and Kim (2014) indicate that both academic confidence and mathematics confidence are important in making a choice of STEM as a major.

The academic performance of girls, particularly grades in mathematics, now match that of boys, but boys choose substantially more prestigious academic tracks than girls (Buser et al., 2014). The rapid rise in college attainment for women has reached the point where women are now more likely than men to graduate from college (Gemici & Wiswall, 2014), but boys are also more risk-seeking than girls (Buser et al., 2014) and this leads to some continuing differences between gender groups. Research reveals, for example, that rises in tuition costs decrease the proportion of women with a college degree and change their college major choice considerably, but has a smaller effect on the proportion of men with a college degree (Gemici & Wiswall, 2014).

Likewise, research on gender differences and choices has revealed a number of factors which contribute to this gender gap in terms of expected outcomes from higher education (Moakler & Kim, 2014). In terms of expected outcomes males and females have similar preferences regarding outcomes at college, but differ in their perceptions and expectations in the workplace. Female students were less likely to develop outcome expectations towards a STEM career and STEM subject choice (Moakler & Kim, 2014). For outcomes in the workplace, non-financial outcomes are valued much more by females than males (Zafar, 2013).

Four papers which focus specifically on differences between the sexes in terms of choice factors are worth reporting in more detail: research concerning first and second generation students (Cho et al., 2008), parental influence (and drop-out) in the context of male/female dominated programmes (Mastekaasa & Smeby, 2008), gender differences in subject choice and type of college attend (Davies & Guppy, 1997), and gender differences in choice of top universities (Hemsley-Brown, 2015).

The work of Cho et al. (2008) sought the answers to two basic questions – what psychosocial, institutional and personal factors affect students' choice of institution, and how do these change across different generations, gender, racial and SES groups. The sample for their study

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was large – 1339 students – but the gender balance was skewed with 74% female and only 26% male. They found no gender differences between first and second generation students, but female students were much more affected by the costs of going to college and whether financial aid was available, compared with male students (see also Drewes & Michael, 2006). Females were also concerned about the value of college to their future opportunities, more concerned about safety, and sensitive to social climate and friends on campus. Cho et al. (2008) note the decline in male student applications during the period of the study, and therefore since this decline could have been related to financial concerns by male students, the findings need to be viewed with caution. The study also focused on first-generation students and students from different racial origins, therefore gender is studied as part of this complete mix.

From a different stance, Mastekaasa and Smeby (2008) studied gender segregation and examined both recruitment and choice, and drop-out rates. The study has limited generalisability due to the sample, which is taken from Norwegian universities and colleges. The researchers generally found no differences between gender groups in terms of encouragement from friends and from their mother or father for their choices. However, they did find that fathers provided more encouragement in terms of studying a male-dominated course, which is important for both male and female students. They noted also that gender-typical choices tend to be made at an earlier age than non-traditional choices. In terms of drop-out, there were no differences between gender groups on male-dominated programmes, but for female dominated programmes the drop-out is significantly lower.

Work by Davies and Guppy (1997) used a sample of 1821 high school students who attended four-year college in the US. They found significant differences between gender groups which tend to disadvantage the female students. Males entered more prestigious colleges, and gained more lucrative occupations on graduation. This placed female students at a double disadvantage which, the researchers explain, is partly due to the lower status of female dominated fields such as education and nursing. This study is, however, almost twenty years old and the possible changes taking place to achieve greater balance during that period are not accounted for. Campaigns to encourage more girls to study science and engineering, for example, can often impact these results over time. The disadvantage of longitudinal studies is that data are often old by the time the results are published. Concerns about gender differences

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in terms of taking-up of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) are well-established. A study in 2006 found nothing to contradict this concern. Porter and Umbach (2006) find clear evidence in their study of three cohorts of students from a liberal arts college in the US that females were significantly more likely than males to choose interdisciplinary and social science majors over science majors.

More recent research by Hemsley-Brown (2015) is based on a survey sample of 10,723 undergraduates attending 140 UK universities. The profile of the respondents reveals that 4249 (39.6%) are male and 6474 (60.4%) are female. The gender balance is slightly skewed towards females compared with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2012) statistics for 2009–2010, where 57.5% of undergraduates are female and 42.5% are male. The findings show that there are no differences between male and female students: females are equally likely to attend a Russell Group institution when compared with males. This finding is in conflict with much earlier research in the US which found that females were less likely to attend prestigious institutions. However, the author observes that "although there are no differences between students in terms of entry and gender – female students in the sample have higher entry grades and this is not translated into an advantage in terms of entry to a Russell Group university" (p.417).

To sum up the sex/gender factor, the research evidence is likely to show that there are gender differences in terms of choice of institution, choice of prestigious institution and choice of subject major, but research findings date quickly and therefore statements about the gender divide need to be made on the most recent findings available.

Age

"People change the goods and services they buy over their lifetimes" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013, p. 168) and for this reason age has always been a key factor in segmenting markets in the commercial sector. Consumers experience many life-stage changes throughout their lives (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy, 2014) and many businesses have carved out a niche market by concentrating specifically on one age group for the goods and services they offer (Schiffman et al., 2008). For example, many producers of baby toys use different messages in their adverts aimed to attract young parents and grandparents, addressing to each age group in ways suitable to their distinctive needs and lifestyle.

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Overwhelmingly, studies of higher education choice tend to focus exclusively on school-leaver choosers and therefore age is not a variable that is generally explored in the context of higher education consumer choice. There has been surprisingly little research carried out on understanding the choices and profiles of more mature students, or comparing them with younger people, and older students have a very different profile from students pursuing degree programme immediately following high school (Frazier, Young, & Fuller, 2012). What this means in practice is that the insights on choice in higher education are largely drawn from research on a single age segment – those between 18 and 25. In addition, mature students do not comprise a homogenous group, they also belong in a variety of different segments based on age, sex, ethnicity and whether they wish to study full- or part-time (Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004). However, there has been some research to establish the choice factors of different age segments, and age linked to mode of study.

Harker et al. (2001) collected data from 407 mature students and 246 school leavers to compare the factors influencing their choices. Findings from the study showed that mature students are more likely to select a university near to home, more likely to use a wide variety of sources to make choices; and more likely to select a post-1992 university, rather than an old or pre-1992 institution, compared with school leavers. These choices are based on lifestyle in addition to age, since the lifestyles of many people over 25, for example, include making choices based on a lifestyle totally independent of their parents (unlike many younger students).

In a study by Connor and Dewson (2001) which focused on social class and higher education, the results revealed that students studying part-time in the UK were older: almost 90% of part-time students were 21 or older, and 50% were aged 32 or older, compared with the vast majority of full-time students (80%) who were under 21 years of age whilst studying for a first degree. Older students are also more likely to have entered university with vocational qualifications, rather than more academic qualifications such as "A" levels, and more likely to have previously studied at further education college rather than a 6th form college or a school. In a study by Hemsley-Brown (2015) of over 10,000 students, those attending top universities were more likely to be aged 18–19 and have higher entry qualifications compared with those aged 20 or older who have statistically lower qualifications than the younger group.

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Mature students are typically more concerned about the costs of higher education than younger students (Connor & Dewson, 2001). Mature students also often experience emotional and financial burdens which can impact on their decision to enter education, and their choices are often highly constrained (Osborne et al., 2004). Callender and Jackson (2008), however, found that part-timers (more of whom are mature students) and full-timers have similar motivation to enter higher education, they both want career benefits and to improve their position in the labour market. This finding is supported by more recent research (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010) which reveals that the most common reason for mature students to (re)enter higher education is to train for a specific career (61.5%) – gaining a qualification is the third most common reason (53.8%). Marandet and Wainwright's (2010) results contrast with earlier work by Reay et al. (2002), who claimed that mature students are more likely to be motivated by the love of learning for its own sake rather than more pragmatic reasons, although it is younger students who most value the *experience* of going to university, in addition to the outcome benefits (Callender & Jackson, 2008). For almost two-thirds of respondents (63.1%) in Marandet and Wainwright's (2010) study, proximity to home was the reason for choosing to study at a specific university, which contrasts with Reay et al.'s (2002) study, where respondents cited the importance of academic reputation (60%) as their reason for a choice. Mature students do not, however, comprise a homogenous group. Age, sex and ethnicity and whether they wish to study full- or part-time help to distinguish sub-groups which could reasonably have different priorities when making choices. The sample size and the design of the research study – quantitative survey or qualitative interviews – can also contribute to differences in the results and conclusions.

Whereas most previous studies of mature students tend to categorise anyone over the age of 21 as a mature student, the work of Oplatka and Tevel (2006) focuses on women learners in midlife: aged 43–53. The researchers point out, however, that mature female students are not a homogenous group and analysis of their choices and experiences needs to take into account other factors, such as gender, marital status and actual age (there may be a difference between a mature student of 21 and a mature student aged 41). The findings from this research reveal that women in midlife appear to "perceive higher education as a way through which they can express their renewed autonomy or their personal emancipation at this life stage" (p.70). Furthermore, the results from this study

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show that major processes experienced by women at this stage, such as a search for self-fulfilment and individual change, are related explicitly to the women's decision to enrol in an higher education institution. Likewise, the benefits of HE are constructed in terms of reframing identity, well-being, self-growth and the like, rather than extrinsic motives. Thus, higher education is perceived as a place to find personal fulfilment in older age. One might speculate that these desires are comparable with those of younger students who at the age of 18 view going to university as a way of pursuing their own independence from their families. Other factors such as dependants, marital and employment status, family tradition and past educational experience may all help to define matters for consideration when deciding to change status and life style to become a student (Osborne et al., 2004).

Family and educational background

Researchers, sociologists, psychologists and marketers tend to rely on the concept of family life cycle as a way of describing the stages most families progress through from early development with a new born through to grandchildren and often great-grandchildren (Schiffman et al., 2008). The notion of a family life cycle remains an attractive one for defining segments in the market, even though families have become much more diverse and far less traditional. There has been an explosion of births outside a traditional family arrangement, particularly in the west, and an increase in the break-up of families through divorce (Schiffman et al., 2008) . However, at any particular stage when individuals need to make choices, the family setting and family cycle is still taken into account and provides some indicators for choices.

Some research has identified family background as an independent influence on university choice and if the variable "family background" includes socio-economic-status, then there is considerable research which focuses on choice and SES (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; Cho et al., 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Hemsley-Brown, 2015). Families with high socio-economic-status are very familiar with how and when to engage with their child's high school about the college choice process (Baker, 2014). (See the section on SES in the next chapter).

There is also a strong relationship between parental educational levels and the likelihood of their progeny entering higher education (Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2009; Yingui, 2009). In a study by Wilks and Wilson (2012) more than 80% of parents with degree level qualifications had

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aspirations for their sons and daughters to go to university. The underlying explanation for the strength of this relationship relates to factors such as career expectations, role models, information resources and levels of encouragement that are transmitted as cultural capital (Wilks & Wilson, 2012), and can also be attributed to the passing on of genes to some extent where the brightest parents are more likely – but not necessarily – likely to produce bright offspring.

There is very little research that focuses on parental educational background but in a study by Siegfried and Getz (2006) secondary data analysis shows that the children of professors make very different choices from other similarly advantaged, but non-academic, young people. The authors argue that parental education influences college choices – parents with a degree or higher are more than twice as likely to send their child to a research university or a selective liberal arts college. This outcome is also likely to be partly due to familiarity with a university setting, which the children of faculty would grow up with – they would find attending university far less daunting compared with other students. Regarding academic achievement, research shows that people with higher test scores are more likely to invest in education and to attend higher performing colleges – but to a great extent it is to be expected that those with the best scores would attend the best institutions due to the entry criteria (see Hemsley-Brown, 2015).

Research also consistently shows that students who are the first in their families to attend university (as opposed to students whose parents/grandparents are graduates) are likely to be from lower social class groups and are less knowledgeable about entry to college, they tend to be less well-prepared by their schools and these factors have a strong influence on how they make their choices and which college they choose (Cho et al., 2008). A first-generation university student is influenced by different factors compared with non-first generation applicants when making choices, but this is also linked to differences in social class, racial group, financial circumstances and access to information, the process is complex and not based on a single factor such as family circumstances.

There is an additional factor which student choosers bring to the choice arena, which is not a consideration in other choice settings: the entry qualifications that applicants hold when they apply to university or college. Entry qualifications can be a barrier or a spur to choosing particular institutions or types of institutions. Can we make the simple assumption that those with higher qualifications attend the higher ranked

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institutions and those with lower qualifications are attending lesser institutions? A number of papers have explored factors associated with prior qualifications or entry qualifications and choice of college (Leslie, 2003; Pasternak, 2005; Callender & Jackson, 2008; Hemsley-Brown, 2015). Leslie (2003) for example used secondary data from the University College Admissions Service in Britain to track the decisions against entry qualifications of all applicants between 1996 and 2001 (2,330,227 applicants). Key results show that: specific subjects, rather than general subjects, attract more highly qualified students, e.g. chemical engineering compared with general engineering. Medicine, dentistry and veterinary science attract some of the most able students. However, nursing is ranked lowest, despite also being categorised as a medical or caring profession – attracting some of the lowest qualified students. Pure subjects such as maths or physics also attract highly qualified students compared with applied subjects, such as computing. In the social sciences the differences are marked and possibly historical – newer subjects attracting lesser qualified students. For example law and economics attract highly qualified students, whereas business ranks low, with financial management alone attracting the higher qualified. These results however, lack any contextual or qualitative underpinning data to provide explanations and we are left to speculate whether perhaps this is a self-fulfilling prophecy – that because it is widely expected that students who enter medicine or dentistry have higher qualifications, on those with high qualifications will apply.

Finally, there is some further insight provided by a more recent study based on multiple regression analysis to predict the profiles of students most likely to be attending the top UK institutions (highly ranked Russell Group institutions). The findings from "binary logistic regression shows that prior schooling (private schooling) and high entry grades are the best predictors of attendance at Russell Group universities in the UK. Black students are underrepresented in Russell group universities, but notably – their entry scores are significantly lower" (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 418).

Income

An individual's economic situation, particularly their income or their family income, will affect choices of products and services (Kotler et al., 2014). In the commercial sector this leads to companies producing goods which are cheaper with lower quality and a focus on good value, more for less, and a pay-less message. In higher education there has been great concern about the notion of income affecting choices and many researchers try to fight a battle to reduce this affect (e.g. Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Reay et al., 2002), although income is strongly linked to social class and it is often difficult to separate the two variables.

Family income is often studied as a factor of SES, and a number of studies have explored the influence of the cost of education against the measurable outcomes, particularly choice of the type of institution (Holdsworth & Nind, 2005; Pasternak, 2005; Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008). One study provides some of the best evidence in terms of family income as a demographic variable: Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008) set out to determine whether sub-groups exist within the student recruitment market in South Africa using a sample of 716 students from 19 schools. Following cluster analysis they identify sub-groups which are based to some extent on family income. One sub-group comes from wealthy homes and is "predominantly white or coloured, English speaking and attended the most advantages schools in the region" (Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008, p. 321). These students were more inclined to choose a university rather than a technikon[1] and focused on social factors and employability.

A second sub-group is from less-affluent background but share the same aspirations – although financial constraints limit their choices to some extent, including attending the most affluent schools. These students tended to focus on more factors when choosing an institution including facilities, career prospects and cost. Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008, p. 314) define a profile for these two sub-groups of students which demonstrates a clear difference in the choice factors they use, on the basis of the family income group to which they belong.

Strong evidence is provided in the study conducted in the US using secondary data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY) (Kinsler & Pavan, 2011) to examine how family income influenced initial attendance and graduation from college. The researchers found positive significant effects on choice of higher quality colleges based on family income. The limitations of the study, however, as with many secondary data studies is that the data were from 1979–1997 and it is always easy to challenge such findings on the basis that such stark income differences can change over time. The researchers note also that since family income is a strong predictor of both the quality of the college chosen and attendance at college, it is not surprising that data also reveal the positive impact of family income on the likelihood of attending a top-quartile college, for both high ability students and average students (Kinsler & Pavan, 2011).

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In summary, high income families are more likely to send their children to high performing, higher quality colleges, regardless of whether that child has high ability or average ability. The high income factor, however, is part of a more complex picture whereby social class, social confidence and social values also contribute to young people's choices.

Lifestyle

The combination of different personal factors and social factors leads to people being categorised by lifestyle, rather than individual variables (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Lifestyle captures something more about individuals than just their social class or age and therefore in the commercial world of marketing there has been a considerable shift towards lifestyle segmentation rather than reliance on single variables. The notion of lifestyle in the higher education consumer behaviour field is far less developed, but there is one study which sought to identify sub-groups based on a combination of variables, rather than relying on personal demographics.

The study by Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008) argued that "sub-groups exist within the student recruitment market" that require separate and targeting "persuasive messages" (p.316). They argued that different sub-groups in their study rely on different lifestyle factors. For example the sub-groups they named "Have lots" and "University Lifers" rely on information about courses, whereas the sub-group "Little Direction" need information about sport, and "New Lifers" were interested in student life (Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008). These sub-groups should be treated as separate segments in the HE market with different characteristics and needs. A single institution, however prestigious, might not meet the requirements of all segments. The argument that choice factors often differ for different segments of students is further supported by Harker et al. (2001) who further indicate that the characteristics of the institutions are not important for all types of students – choosers differ in the importance they give to different factors, depending upon a range of lifestyle characteristics and demographic factors.

Critical summary

The concept and process of segmentation underlying the empirical research into personal factors affecting HE consumer choice raises

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serious ethical and moral dilemmas for HE marketers, resulting in negative implications for students aspiring to gain academic degrees, and for governments and HE institutions across the world.

First, HE is considered to serve the common good and is beyond narrow financial benefits of institutions. "Universities produce both private goods (i.e. education, employability)" but also "public goods (research outputs; a better educated workforce; and social benefits for society)" (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 123). If HE is a public good, then the issue of segmentation for marketing purposes raises the question of whether educational institutions (as opposed to business enterprises) should prioritise the targeting of specific groups of prospective students, in preference over other groups, based on gender, age or lifestyle – and yet this is a well-established marketing approach in the business sector.

Second, the finding that gender/sex continues to play a key role in HE consumer choice behaviour – even after so many years of the apparent blurring of gender differences/gaps through gender equality legislation in the developed world, and social changes that strengthened feminist ideologies both in the developed and developing world – is very frustrating for young people, and for those engaged with HE at all levels. In this sense, evidence indicating that women are still more likely to be in low status disciplines and study in less prestigious institutions compared with their male counterparts, raises concerns about the success of the attempts governments and other entities have made to improve women's representation in HE. For example, have governments and other interested parties done enough to facilitate and encourage young women to choose STEM subjects rather than education and social sciences? Have governments striven to put in place legislation to remove social and cultural barriers faced by women who aspire to join high status fields in HE? What have governments done to support women to balance family obligations and their aspirations to study for high status professions, including those that are still predominantly male oriented? Given the findings about gender and HE consumer choice presented in this chapter, questions need to be asked about the moral implications of gender gaps in HE in the 21st century. Further research also needs to continue to monitor changes and improvements so that the evidence is up-to-date, and more insights are provided to measure the impact of interventions that can make a difference.

Third, as far as the age of consumers in HE is concerned, given the conjecture that HE is a basic human right regardless of age (and of other

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demographic variables) the findings about mature students in HE raises some concerns. It seems likely that a mature learner (over 25) will expect to enrol in part-time studies in an HE institution close to home, due to commitments to other spheres of life such as marital or partnership commitments, raising children, and part-time or even full-time employment. This leads to reflections about the commitment of governments to mature students: how can governments and other agencies facilitate access to HE in adulthood? Should governments and government agencies promote adult learning, e.g. through social marketing campaigns, more aggressively? Can universities ignore the special characteristics of older age groups? Are universities' websites attractive to adult learners as well as to the young? It is likely that the continuing denial of the particular characteristics of adult learners will not only prevent many of them applying to study at an HE institution, but will also impede the intellectual growth of many more adults. This may lead to the moral dilemma of producing programmes and marketing channels suitable to mature learners at the expense of the major segment of HE – the 18–21 age group – who have quite different personal characteristics from those of the older generation, but still need HE as a means of personal and professional growth that will improve their life chances and career opportunities.

Fourth, the evidence shows that young people from high income families are more effective and efficient in the HE choice process, and that they make different choices, particularly about entry to so called prestigious institutions. Based on these findings, to what extent does the current research on HE consumer choice provide university marketers with sufficient quality information and tools to improve the task of attracting student from families on lower incomes? After all, it is a moral obligation for both researchers and policymakers to facilitate entry into HE for those whose career aspirations are more limited, not because of inferior intellectual abilities or qualifications, but due to their low income and family background. Thus, since family income is a strong predictor of both the quality of the college/university chosen and attendance at college, it is time to research what schools, colleges, researchers, academics, and other education entities are doing to encourage students from low income families to apply for a top-quartile college or high status professions. The research should offer more evidence of successful ways of developing high academic expectations and aspirations among HE choosers from these kinds of families. This type of research could provide career counsellors,

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teachers and families with better information when providing support for prospective first-generation college students.

Finally, more studies are needed worldwide on the impact of "lifestyle" upon HE choice decisions; the HE sector lacks sufficient knowledge about recent social changes that have led people to adopt new lifestyles and concomitantly to develop new constructions of HE. Lifestyle is a complex mix of characteristics, values and beliefs that goes beyond individual personal characteristics and has the potential to provide greater insights into HE consumer choice behaviour than studies of age, gender and family background alone. Lifestyle research might therefore be the next generation of research in the field of HE consumer choice.

Note

1 A technikon was an institution in pre-2004 South Africa when there was a division between universities and technikons (polytechnics) as well between institutions servicing particular racial and language groupings. The South African university system has now been re-organised.

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3
Group Aspects of Consumer Behaviour

Abstract: *The third chapter focuses on group aspects of consumer behaviour and introduces the social context of decision-making by examining social class categories. The social and cultural influences on higher education consumer choice are analysed based on prior research in HE consumer choice, and, based on the model presented in Chapter 2, include: social characteristics including social class, social disadvantage, socio-economic-status (SES) and cultural characteristics, comprising ethnicity and race, immigration factors, religious affiliation and international students. The final section provides a critical summary and raises issues about equality and equal opportunity, moral and ethical dilemmas, and multiculturalism.*

Keywords: culture; disadvantage; ethnicity; inequality; social class

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Social context of decision-making

People rarely make choices as isolated individuals without any reference to the decisions others have made (O'Shaughnessy, 2013). When making decisions, most people tend to want their judgements and choices validated or supported by people they associate with or those whose opinions they value, on the basis that "one million people can't be wrong" (O'Shaughnessy, 2013 p.327). In relation to HE, Baker (2014) notes that students often hope to attend an institution that has students much like themselves, and Hemsley-Brown (1999 p.89) further confirms that students want to go to colleges where they believe there are "people like me" – or people like "I aspire to be".

Group aspects of consumer behaviour cover social class differences and social class groups, cultural differences, and racial and religious differences which impact on consumer choices, all of which are outlined in the previous chapter on relation to consumer behaviour and HE consumer choice. Social factors include social status and roles and small group or reference group influences. Culture and race also have a deep and broad influence on consumer behaviour and shared value systems influence many life experiences and situations in addition to HE choices (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy, 2014). It is worth noting again that social class and family background are not separate from culture, ethnicity and race, and together with personal and family income they combine and interact to influence consumer behaviour in a variety of ways, resulting in some groups gaining what seems to be a disproportionate share of advantages at the expense of other groups. The disadvantages certain background factors produce and which seem to be difficult to erase in the allocation of public sector resources is one of the most prolific areas of research in consumer behaviour in HE. Research on social factors, therefore, frequently focuses on disadvantages and the concerns associated with the choices – or lack of choices – that those in disadvantaged groups experience. More specifically, there is considerable research devoted to exploring why (socially and economically) disadvantaged students fail to take advantage of HE *per se*, why such students have limited success in gaining access to prestigious institutions, and why disadvantaged students make different choices from those with greater economic, social and cultural advantages. The following sections, therefore, examine the ways that people are categorised on the basis of social factors, followed by an examination of cultural, racial and religious differences.

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Social class categories

Most societies have some form of social class structure that orders or ranks the population on the basis of their shared values, interests and behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). The UK's social structure tends to be largely based on income and other divisions such as health, access to technology, literacy, mobility (e.g. car ownership) and leisure-time/work balance (Gilbert, 2003). These social categories also include those who are retired from work as well as socially disadvantaged groups. However, lack of time, poor mobility, limited access to technology and lack of money have a serious impact of the choices of some people (Gilbert, 2003), including choice to participate in HE or severe restrictions on choices for those who aspire to HE. The main socio-economic categories or class divisions used for consumer behaviour purposes in the UK is based on the British National Readership Survey (Ipsos Media CT, 2009) system which classifies householders into six groups (A,B,C^1,C^2,D & E) by the occupation of the main wage earner: A) high managerial/professional (4%), B) intermediate managerial/administrative (23%), C^1) supervisory, clerical (29%), C^2) skilled manual workers (21%), D) semi-skilled/unskilled manual workers (15%), E) state pensioners, unemployed (8%).

In the US there is a similar classification system derived from research by social scientists which identifies seven American social classes using income, occupations, education and wealth (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013): upper class (3%), middle class (44%), working class (38%), and lower class (15%). In the case of both these systems social class is not a single factor but is determined by several factors such as income, occupation, educational level, wealth and other variables, for this reason it is unsurprising that social class and income are linked, and aspiration to gain educational qualifications is likely also to be directly linked to social class and the way people are classified into these groupings. Educational achievement and aspiration variables are inherent in determining the social class of an individual or family.

Definitions of class structure, however, differ from one country to another, for example a further organised class system is the Indian caste system that determines a person's rank, despite the official claim that the system is diminishing if not non-existent (de Mooij, 2004). In Asia where cultures are collectivist (see Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture in de Mooij, 2004, pp. 33–35) a "relatively small number of families" often "control corporate assets". The poorer the country is the more likely it is

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that the control of the assets is held by a small number of families (de Mooij, 2004). In contrast, in the developed world many class distinctions are becoming irrelevant with increased wealth but there remains concern about the continuing inequalities within some countries (de Mooij, 2004). In all countries social divisions are gradually blurring, but these differences are likely to continue to affect the choices people make about everything, including HE.

Research on social factors influencing consumer behaviour in HE

Research in the social group aspects of consumer behaviour in HE is well established and arguments for conducting research in HE consumer choice are based on issues related to: social change (Harker, Slade, & Harker, 2001; Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008; Sojkin, Bartkowiak, & Skuza, 2012; Sojkin, Bartkowiak, & Skuza, 2015), social class factors (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; Bornholt, Gientzotis, & Cooney, 2004; Baker & Brown, 2007; Ambler, 2008; Ozdemir & Hacifazlioglu, 2008; Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh, & Barry, 2012; Kettley & Whitehead, 2012) and socio-economic-status (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Harker et al., 2001; Imenda & Kongolo, 2002; Coates & Adnett, 2003; Zimbroff, 2005; Whitehead, Raffan, & Deaney, 2006; Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013; Jung, 2013; Abu Bakar & Abdu Talib, 2013; Hemsley-Brown, 2015).

In the UK “Despite substantial prior research on HE choice, top universities (...) continue to stand accused of favouring socio-economically advantaged students, to the detriment of those from poorer backgrounds” (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 398). This concern has been raised by a number of papers over a period of twenty years, although more recent widening access initiatives in the UK and incentives to provide funding to attract young people from lower social class groups is leading to changes in the composition of student populations in HE; students who were in the past considered to belong to a minority group, are increasingly becoming the norm in most UK universities (Macdonald & Stratta, 2001). These initiatives serve to stimulate further research in the field of HE choice, but with a new emphasis on widening participation (WP) and student experience, including concerns about student retention and attrition rates (Ishitani, 2006).

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Authors of papers who raise concerns related to social class (e.g. Reay et al., 2001; Connor & Dewson, 2001; Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Callender & Jackson, 2008; Johansson & Hojer, 2012; Kettley & Whitehead, 2012) reveal the considerable differences in the ways students from different social class groups make a choice; authors also focus on disadvantage (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Johansson & Hojer, 2012; Wilks & Wilson, 2012) and socio-economic-status (SES) (Macdonald & Stratta, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2004; Chowdry et al., 2013; Hemsley-Brown, 2015). (See the previous chapter which includes income and family background). The following sub-sections focus on social class and inequality, social disadvantage and socio-economic-status.

Social class and inequality

A comprehensive report carried out by Connor and Dewson (2001), on behalf of the Department for Education and Employment in the UK, provides an analysis and summary of factors which affect the decision to participate in HE by those from lower social class groups. The authors concluded that – in 2001 – the problem of lower engagement by those from lower social class groups is exacerbated by the wider issue of inequality in society. They argue that although those from lower social class groups in the UK take a much wider range of issues into account when making choices, one key difference for this group is their focus on career prospects, improved job security and higher earnings.

Ball et al. (2002) further argue that the status or rank of a university chosen by an applicant is strongly linked to their social class and ethnicity and, therefore, also to the type of school they previously attended. The authors suggest therefore that patterns of social class decisions take place throughout an individual's life, not just at the point of making a decision about university. Ball et al. (2002) observe that both middle class and working class people are constrained in the choices they make: "It is taken for granted by these choosers that certain sorts of institutions and courses will be populated by certain sorts of students" (p.60). Social class, therefore, is an important aspect of the underlying reasons for choice, for all students, not just for students from the high and the low social class groups (Ball et al., 2002). Criticism of the work of Ball and co-authors is based on their reliance on the socio-logical theories proposed by Bourdieu. (Social class is a fundamental factor in much of Bourdieu's research and was particularly popular in the 1990s.) Criticism of this type of research was put forward by Kettley and Whitehead (2012,

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p.. 493) who argue that Ball et al. (2002) analyse data from "an atypical sample and deploy a dichotomous narrative of class (disadvantaged, and everyone else) whereas class is more subtly categorised than simply working class, or not working class". The authors state that this kind of approach "exaggerates any class-related differences in the higher education choice process", and therefore, such research "is more likely to confirm the Bourdieusian thesis". "Participants' habitus is strongly influenced by culture, prestige, and the value parents place on education". These factors have a strong influence on college choice very early in the process, in addition to balancing prestige with financial considerations (Griffin, del Pilar, McIntosh, & Griffin, 2012, p. 96).

Counter to some of the research findings by Ball et al. (2002), Kettley and Whitehead (2012, p. 493) further claim that in their own national survey of Year 12 students in the UK, "paternal occupation is a poor predictor of intended participation in higher education" – and yet paternal occupation is the basis for social class categorisation. In their study, Kettley and Whitehead (2012, p. 494) test the hypothesis and findings of Ball et al. (2002), namely, "that class-related differences in students' psycho-social judgements reproduce hierarchies in higher education". They find a number of discrepancies with the claims made by Ball et al. (2002). First, students intending to participate in HE express common psychosocial judgements irrespective of their social class or gender. Second, there was little evidence among working class students of negative parental attitudes to university, as is often implied by Bourdieu. The parents of working class students who intended to apply to HE were largely supportive of these aspirations. The differences for working class students is that their parents have little or no personal experience of HE, but this does not necessarily translate into a negative view of HE. Finally, the quantitative study (Kettley & Whitehead, 2012) found no evidence to support the claim that these students were struggling with the problem of not fitting-in or that university was not for them. Whilst qualitative studies can raise these issues – because individual respondents mention these factors – this is not supported by results from a larger sample of students.

The work of Reay, Davies, David and Ball (2001) also mentions a range of constraints that are specifically prevalent in working class choices and absent from the choices of more privileged students: material constraints, localisation, part-time working, grades, and psychological state, including risk and a feeling "out of place". The research highlights

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that material constraints (lack of funds and resources) often result in more disadvantaged students confining themselves to areas local to their homes. This is confirmed by research in the US where Perna and Titus (2004) also found that students from lower social groups leaving high school are less likely than high school students from higher social groups to enrol in an out-of state institution. Reay et al. (2001) also note that working class young people are more likely to be working part-time, compared with their middle class counterparts (who were not working in the labour market at all) – a factor that constrains the choices they make about university. They argue that this can affect the grades they need for university, and therefore, further constrains the choices they are able to make – they are excluded from attending more prestigious institutions based on their grades.

A further factor which the study identifies as a constraint on working class aspirants is their psychological state. They can be more sensitive to the risks of attending university – risks both of failure and risks financially than their more middle class counterparts. Finally the team highlight what Bourdieu labels "objective limits" (p.864) in terms of their choices – they can lack self-confidence. Working class students, they argue, faced with attending a more prestigious institution will question their right to attend, viewing themselves as out-of-place in comparison with the middle class students. All these factors, which are related to their social class origins, are found by Reay et al. (2001) to impact on choice of university for these students. Their work highlights the complexity of these differences, and also shows that the factors influencing choice do not necessarily have a direct impact, for example, the prevalence of part-time working can have an influence on time spent studying, which in turn can influence final scores, and further limits the choices these students make about institutions. Whereas, part-time working alone seems to have little influence on choice; it may have an indirect influence.

Although the work of Callender and Jackson (2008) focuses on fees and finance – the social class of the students strongly features in the findings. Their study seeks to establish whether concerns about the costs of gaining an university degree is greater among students from lower social class families compared to those from the middle and upper classes. The quantitative findings support the qualitative findings report by Reay et al. (2001) – that social class is an important factor in these decisions. Two out of three students from lower income families said

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they were considering applying to a university closer to their parental home in order to save money; this compares with two out of five from higher social class groups. However, the study combines social class and family income (which are normally closely related but not necessarily – it is possible, although rarer, to be wealthy and working class, or less well-off but middle class). Callender and Jackson (2008, p. 416) also reported that "lower-income groups were slightly more fearful of debt than those in the middle and upper classes. Equally, they were more likely to rate the costs of going to university higher than the benefits". This suggests that lower income groups were more sceptical about the benefits of HE and were less likely to consider participating. In further support of the work of Reay et al. (2001) the authors found that "those who were more negative about the experience of university were more likely to look for a university in an area with relatively good opportunities for term-time employment" (p.421). (See Chapter 2 for a summary of income and HE consumer choice.)

Many studies which focus on concerns about equality of opportunity for those from lower social groups concentrate on factors other than entry scores. McGregor et al. (2002), however, note that the A level scores of students from the highest social group tend to have higher grades compared with those from other social groups. This finding gives some indication that those from higher social groups are more likely to be qualified to attend higher ranked or more prestigious institutions than those from lower social groups, who, on the whole gain lower A level grades. There is still an element of choice, but those from lower social groups are less likely to be qualified to apply to higher ranked institutions. The concern for HE consumer choice research, however, is that those with higher qualifications from lower social groups are not necessarily seeking to attend higher ranked institutions, despite having gained the high entry grades.

Social disadvantage

Some authors of research on social factors concentrate on social disadvantage (e.g. Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). Much research is also based in the UK as opposed to elsewhere in the world (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Forsyth and Furlong's (2003) UK publication attempts to provide a comprehensive examination of all aspects of social disadvantage in terms of HE access and choice. They examine students' experiences of HE as well as the destinations of disadvantaged school leavers. Forsyth and Furlong cover lifestyle, career paths and financial issues, and they attempt in their final analysis to identify the key barriers to HE for disadvantaged groups – i.e. those from lower social class groups. The authors further confirm, however, that disadvantaged students who did achieve the qualification required for HE entry were more likely to enrol at less prestigious universities compared with so called advantaged students. They also summarise some key areas where disadvantaged students are also unable to match the achievements of more advantaged students: higher drop-out rates on courses, less likely to complete their course and progress onto a higher degree, or changed their course completely. Disadvantaged students were also more likely to be mature students, that is, they spent time in the labour market prior to entering HE, which matches with a finding that disadvantaged students were less likely, compared with other students, to achieve the scores they needed to enter HE following school. It appears from this report and other publications also that judgements about normal HE consumer behaviour are based on a specific pattern of entering HE immediately following school, with A level scores (or equivalent) rather than other – for example vocational – qualifications. Taking another route, rather than direct from high school, is considered less successful and less prestigious, although concerns about higher attrition rates are clearly a justifiable concern.

Although studies of disadvantage are commonly based in the UK, where there is considerable and justifiable concern about inequality in HE, research on this topic has been carried out elsewhere. For example, Wilks and Wilson (2012) focus on participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia. Disadvantage is often associated with living in rural areas, and the study by Wilks and Wilson (2012) has used a sample of 143 children living in a rural region in north-west Australia. The findings from the qualitative study further confirms the claims of other researchers (e.g. Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Siegfried & Getz, 2006) that parents who attended university or are in professional occupations tend to encourage their offspring to go to university – whereas, blue-collar worker parents (categorised as belonging to a lower social group) who did not attend university are less likely to do so – not unlikely, but less likely (see previous chapter). The authors fail to identify the key challenges to encouraging more disadvantaged students to actually make the choice to go to university, although they further highlight the practical barriers these students face, due to financial constraints,

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leaving family and friends, and the reluctance to move far from home (discussed in Chapter 2).

Socio-economic status (SES)

The term socio-economic status, or SES, is frequently used by researchers to incorporate both the social class values of groups of people and also family income. SES is often based on a wide range of variables, such as mothers' and fathers' educational attainment, occupations, family income, (Siegfried & Getz, 2006) and the number of selected lifestyle factors, e.g. newspaper preferences and home ownership. SES is viewed as a more accurate measure than income alone because the level of education achieved by parents is a powerful influence on the likelihood of their child attending university or completing a degree programme. Given the way in which SES is calculated perhaps we should not be so surprised that those from low SES groups are less likely to attend college. The classification system itself means that parents who did not go to college are categorised as low SES. This expected link is confirmed by research, for example the finding that students from first-generation immigrant families (many of whom are seeking greater opportunities in their adopted country) are more likely to be from a low SES groups (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008). (Low SES is calculated on the basis of parents' lack of HE.)

More recent research (Chowdry et al., 2013) shows that there continues to be wide differences in HE participation rates for different SES groups, particularly in terms of attendance at prestigious universities, but the authors found this gap is much narrower when prior educational achievement is accounted for. They argue that "poor achievement in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates among pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry to higher education" (p.431). Much earlier research also suggested that students from low SES groups in the UK are more likely to be attending the newer "post-1992" institutions – that is, universities with much lower prestige (Connor, Burton, Pollard, & Regan, 1999) and that, they claim, degrees from less prestigious institutions achieve lower returns in the labour market. These findings are further supported by findings from recent research carried out by Hemsley-Brown (2015) (with a sample of 10,723 respondents from the UK). Hemsley-Brown (2015, p. 414) summarises the findings on the basis of chi square and t-test pre-tests, by stating that "a student attending a

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Russell Group institution is more likely to: belong to the ABC1 social group, have grown up in a family with professional/senior management parents, have been educated at a private school, have not been classified as a widening participation entrant, and have parents who are graduates". To a certain extent these are also the variables that are relied upon to classify a family's SES. She notes that "four key variables are strong predictors for attending a prestigious (Russell Group) institution: private schooling, high entry scores, age (under-19) and non-widening participation status (high SES), predict the likelihood of attending a top university in 70% of cases" (p.418). Widening participation is an indicator of low SES because it is based on UK postcodes and access to funding for HE. "The home postcodes are matched against the POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) database, which is used by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for scoring students for widening-access funding. A coding of 2 applies to those in the 20% of wards (postcodes) least likely to attend HE and a score of 1 to the next 20%" (p.418). The respondents in the study were coded as widening participation funded or not-funded. The coding itself, therefore, is based on the likelihood of attending, or not attending, HE. The author goes on to point out that although WP students are less likely to attend the top institutions, "their entry scores are significantly lower – lower on average than the scores needed to gain entry" (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 398). Results from the study confirmed that students attending Russell Group universities had "significantly higher entry scores compared with those attending other universities" (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 398), but this is unsurprising given the much higher scores required to be offered a place during the application process. The concern, therefore, is that students from low SES families are less likely to gain the scores they need to apply to top institutions through their schooling prior to applying to HE.

The evidence from the UK is conflicting when examining the differences between SES groups for participation in HE more generally. Evidence from 2002 shows "that net of educational attainment a number of factors – gender and social background variables – influenced the likelihood of a young person entering HE and participating on a degree level course" (Gayle, Berridge, Davies, & Vernon Gayle, 2002, p. 5). Similarly, qualitative work (e.g. Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002) consistently raises concerns about the inequalities in terms of HE entry.

Research findings carried out in the 2013, however, conclude that potential barriers to entry to HE, such as low family income or a lack

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of funding, do *not* feature in shaping lower SES students' decisions to participate in HE (author emphasis, Chowdry et al., 2013). "Poor achievement in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates among pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry to HE" (p.431).

It is worth considering whether the chronological date of the study, the form of measurement used for social status/SES, the method used for the study, and whether student scores and entry scores are taken into account could influence the outcome and conclusions of research. The article in the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* (Chowdry et al., 2013) based on detailed analysis of statistics from cohorts of English students' test scores aged 11, 14, 16, and 18, concludes that:

> Pupils from lower SES backgrounds are much less likely to participate in HE than pupils from higher SES backgrounds. However, our findings suggest that this socio-economic difference in university participation does not emerge at the point of entry to HE. In other words, the socio-economic difference in HE participation does not arise simply because lower SES pupils face the same choices at 18 years of age but choose not to go to university or are prevented from doing so. Instead, it comes about largely because lower SES pupils do not achieve as highly in secondary school as their more advantaged counterparts, confirming the general trend in the literature that socio-economic differences emerge relatively early in individuals' lives. (p.454)

Cultural factors

Cultural characteristics differentiate countries and are based on differences in "self, communications, languages, food, feeding habits, values, norms beliefs, attitudes, work habits, and practices" (de Mooij, 2004, pp. 30–31). Culture is also one of the most basic underlying causes for needs and wants associated with consumer behaviour, defined by Kotler et al. (2014, p. 146) as the "set of basic values, perceptions, wants and behaviours learned by a member of society" based on group membership and sub-culture such as nationality, religion, racial groups and geographical regions.

Sub-cultures are also quite distinctive in pre-determining the decisions of those who belong to them, and do not relate specifically to cultural origins. However, they are not mutually exclusive, an individual can be part of more than one group, e.g. both a music festival enthusiast and an environmentalist, or a music festival enthusiast from a specific

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geographical+ region or racial group (Kotler et al., 2014). These subgroups are particularly important for market segmentation purposes.

There are two almost opposing viewpoints in terms of cultural differences, especially within country borders. There are those who advocate cultural unification or the assimilation of all minorities into one dominant culture. This view is based on the importance of minimising cultural conflict which, it is argued, can be achieved by imposing a set of cultural values and norms (O'Shaughnessy, 2013). This is a harsh approach in reality, despite its aims, and could be considered racist in that individual cultures are dismissed in favour of the values and beliefs of one culture. In contrast there are also those who champion cultural pluralism on the grounds that cultural diversity fosters cultural richness (O'Shaughnessy, 2013). However, despite the intentions, under the banner of multiculturalism, there is the possibility that "each minority group continues along its own path without any integration", which can be damaging when there is frequently "a need to get a whole nation working together" (O'Shaughnessy, 2013, p. 442). Texts on multiculturalism in education often raise concerns about the challenges for those from ethnic backgrounds when it comes to being treated equally alongside the white population in the west. In light of this challenge, many studies concentrate on the difficulties that ethnic minority groups encounter when seeking to enter the most prestigious institutions in the HE sector.

Ethnicity and race

A study using a large sample of first year students at 140 UK universities focused on differences between white and non-white students with respect to entry into the top Russell Group institutions (non-white includes all groups that do not describe themselves as white, e.g. black, mixed race, Asian and Asian sub-groups such as Thai, Chinese, Indian etc.) (Hemsley-Brown, 2015). The non-white students were further self-identified as both broad (e.g. Asian) cultural groups and more specific sub-groups (e.g. Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Thai etc. or black African, black British, etc.). The results in the quantitative survey study are somewhat unexpectedly counterintuitive – and indicate that although "white students have higher entry scores than non-whites, *non-whites* are attending the more prestigious Russell Group universities in disproportionately favourable numbers" (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 417). The differences for each of the major Asian sub-groups are encouraging suggesting a degree of parity: "Asian students overall are more likely to be

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attending Russell Group universities than their non-Asian counterparts in the sample, but there is no difference in their entry scores compared with non-Asians and even though Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani students have lower mean entry scores than others, there is no difference in terms of the likelihood of them attending a Russell Group university" (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 417).

The author examines the data in more detail by conducting tests using sub-groups to try to identify which sub-groups are the key to these findings: which sub-groups are attending Russell Group universities in unexpectedly high numbers? The conclusions, based on the statistical tests, show that

> Chinese students in the sample have significantly higher entry grades than non-Chinese respondents and on that basis are more likely to be attending a Russell Group university; whereas for black students in the study the situation is the reverse: black students have lower entry scores compared with non-black students and they are significantly less likely to be attending a Russell Group university. (Hemsley-Brown, 2015, p. 417)

These insights from the data, however, need to be viewed with some contextual information. Russell Group universities are frequently those with medical schools where first, the entry scores are exceptionally high compared with other subjects at the same universities, and secondly, it is worth speculating that the subject of medicine might be disproportionally attractive to Asian students compared with other non-white groups, which could account for the high numbers in this type of university – there is some evidence to support this speculation.

The findings reported above, however, should not be unexpected because participation in HE is higher among non-whites. Modood and Tariq (2006) claim that the likelihood of whites entering HE is only 38% and this is much lower than ethnic minorities – lower than every separate minority group, and compares with a participation rate of 83% amongst Asians. The authors provide a further explanation stating that non-whites are very unevenly distributed across subject disciplines. "Ethnic minority groups are disproportionally represented in medicine and health-related subjects, law and business, engineering and ICT, but are under-represented in the pure sciences and the humanities". Therefore, this imbalance is likely to impact on some types of universities because they offer different specialisms and "not all disciplines can truly claim to be multi-ethnic" (Modood & Tariq, 2006, p. 248).

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It would be quite inappropriate and inaccurate, however, to treat non-whites as a single group. Participation in HE by different ethnic minority groups has raised concerns both in the US and the UK, and has focused principally on ethnic minority students from poorer backgrounds, particularly black immigrant students in the US (e.g. Griffin et al., 2012), and in the UK, those from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including black young people (e.g. Ivy, 2010).

Griffin et al. (2012) report the findings from qualitative research with a sample of 23 black immigrants enrolled at a selective public university in the USA. The study focuses on how an individual's habitus influences the predisposition, search and institutional choice stages of the college choice process. Through analysis of in-depth interview data the researchers found that contrary to prior research, the black immigrants in the study placed high value on education, indicating that education was the key to success. However, the cost of HE in the US can be high and varied despite the substantial opportunities for gaining scholarships. Some respondents indicated that success in education was success for the whole family not just for the individual. This view, together with their commitment, translated into a determination to attend college for these young people. This also leads to a desire and recognition that attending a prestigious institution is a goal for both the students themselves and for their families. However, the researchers note that this belief does not necessarily translate to the participants actually applying to a prestigious institution – these students made little headway in identifying which institutions were prestigious. Their preference was for private black colleges – rather than institutions considered prestigious more widely. The costs associated with attending some prestigious institutions, however, tended to supersede the prestige, for example without a full scholarship some of these students could not consider the Ivy League institutions. These findings suggest therefore that family attitudes and values are not the key barriers to attending prestige institutions – these are firm goals for black immigrants, but other factors, particularly cost, override their goals during the process of making a choice.

In a study of subject discipline choices by Yingui (2009) striking differences were identified between different racial groups. The researchers noted the high representation of black students in technical/life/health fields, and the evidence that white students were twice as likely as black students to choose social science and education. The researchers also focus on SES in addition to race and gender, and the results suggest

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that SES has a more powerful influence on choice of major than other factors, although clearly a combination of race, SES and gender results in striking differences between groups. The challenge for researchers in terms of racial differences is to take account of the differences between ethnic groups as well as between white groups and ethnic groups combined. As research shows (Hemsley-Brown, 2015) significant differences between white and non-white students can be due to one or more specific ethnic group(s) within the broader non-white group or ethnic group.

Findings from a research study in the UK by Ivy (2010) further reveals that family influence varies by ethnicity – although there is a possibility that the tendency to admit to family influence also varies: some students are more prepared to admit their family influenced their decision. The influence of family was most important for Pakistani and African students making choices in the study (Ivy, 2010), but for other ethnic groups the influence of family was claimed to be unimportant. Afro-Caribbean students were more likely to indicate that a career was a strong motivator for university choice, whilst Asian-Indian students were more likely to agree that social factors influenced their application to university. Overall Ivy's (2010) research results identified differences between the ethnic groups in terms of motivating factors for university application. There is further support for these findings from Cho et al. (2008) based on a study conducted in the US, "all African American students and Latino and Asian first-generation students viewed parental input in their college choice process as more important than their peers of other races" (p.101), however, these sample students were first-generation immigrants.

Kotler and Fox (1985) also claim that families, regardless of cultural factors, influence the process that students follow when making decisions about university and about institutions. Although theorists such as Kotler and Fox (1985) claim that in general, family background has a great impact on student choices – family background is not the same as the family itself asserting an influence on a decision. The previous sections have discussed the influence of social status and social class on choices and expectations and this incorporates the notion of family background. However, the extent to which a family has a direct influence on the choice process is unclear: first because applicants may not be aware of the influence, second, because they may not admit to it, and third because parents – family members – may or may not claim to offer

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advice, but parental expectations are shared at an early age and have an indirect influence over a long period.

Immigration factors

Researchers studying racial and ethnic differences in terms of university choice highlight the importance of examining the HE choices of students from first-generation immigrants, compared with second and third, and later generations. "Students are classified as first-generation immigrants if they were foreign-born and at least one of their parents is foreign-born" (Hagy & Staniec, 2002, p. 384). For example, a US study across generations within an immigrant group (Hagy & Staniec, 2002) found that first-generation immigrant children who have graduated from high school are significantly more likely than their native-born (US) counterparts to enrol in all institutional types except private four-year colleges, with Asian immigrants more likely to attend public four-year schools. This indicates that the main difference between first-generation immigrants and others is their tendency to eschew private colleges and rely almost exclusively on public colleges. Hagy and Staniec (2002) highlight the diminishing effect of immigration status as second and third generations select colleges, by the third generation, race has no effect on college choice (p.390). These researchers, however, were examining exclusively the *types* of institutions chosen by the respondents.

Cho et al. (2008) also studied first-generation immigrants, but they collected data from a sample of 1539 freshmen on a range of experiences in three domains: factors that influence participants' college choices, participants' high school experiences, and participants' college experiences. Their findings indicate that with the exception of Asian students, all other immigrant groups viewed financial assistance, the ethnic make-up or mix of the campus, the community and the ethnic mix as more important factors in their choice, when compared with indigenous groups of students. The African Americans particularly favoured colleges where there would be a good ethnic mix of students and wished to avoid finding themselves in a small minority.

Religious affiliation

A number of researchers have specifically focused on the differences in choices made by young people from specific religious groups (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Arar, 2011; Oplatka & Lapidot, 2012; Arar & Oplatka, 2013;

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Arar, Masry-Harzalla, & Haj-Yehia, 2013; Arar, 2014), there is often no account taken of the religious affiliation of young people in most studies carried out in Europe and the US. However, there are studies which focus particularly on Muslim students.

Work by Oplatka and Lapidot (2012) focuses on the plight of Muslim women graduate students in Israel (who are studying in a country which is predominantly Jewish – Jews (6 million) and non-Jews (1.5 million)). The authors note the importance of a positive attitude to HE study, the support of families, including husbands, the importance of high schools on the decision to study, the drive for learning, a strong positive self-image, and the importance of a student community. The study focuses on the drivers for women Muslim students to study in Israeli universities, rather than focusing on the choice of institutions. Interestingly, Muslim female students in masters' programmes in Israeli universities admitted their father (rather than the mother) had an enormous influence upon their decision to study both undergraduate and graduate programmes and to overcome many social and cultural barriers on their way (Oplatka & Lapidot, 2012).

There is also a body of work by Arar and colleagues (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Arar, 2011; Arar & Oplatka, 2013; Arar et al., 2013; Arar, 2014) which focuses on Muslim women who study in universities outside their home countries. The researchers found that these women encountered difficulties both from their homes and from the campus society that are not encountered by Muslim women who study in their country of origin. One study for example explored reasons for increases in the number of Palestinian Arabs from Israel (PAI) studying at colleges and universities in Jordan. The attractiveness of studying in Jordan is based on the finding that this gets around the strict admission requirements of the Israeli universities. There are a relatively small number of universities in Israel and they are high ranking and demand high entry qualifications. For Muslim students from Israel, Jordan is also viewed as an environment very similar in culture, language and religion, so it is a good match. The move to study in countries where the Muslim faith is also central to the culture is viewed as a welcome solution, particularly for parents who are concerned about sending their child to a western country. The sense of security experienced by Muslim students in Jordanian Muslim/Arab universities comes from Islamic values which are central to these institutions and the way they operate (Arar, 2011). Muslim students in countries like Jordan or Iran are still obliged strictly

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to obey religious laws and traditions, they cannot contravene norms, and this is understandably viewed as very satisfactory for most Muslim families. Prior research indicates that many parents would be understandably concerned that a foreign western culture would change the women students' lifestyle and values (Ahmad, 2001 cited by Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2010).

International students

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) observe the relatively limited number of studies regarding international students' choice of university, when studying outside their home country considering the global market in HE, and the extent of migration from Asia to the west for study purposes. They note some studies in this area, including studies that take into account choices by international students, but they argue that more research is needed to compare the differences among students in terms of the process of choice and differences in their choice of destination countries. Searches by the current authors resulted in a number of papers which deal with choice to study overseas in relation to study in a number of specific destination countries.

A study by Maringe and Carter (2007) set out to establish the reasons why 28 African students studying in two universities in England chose to go to the UK for their degree studies. The key factor the authors identify is the desire to gain a truly international experience, but also a bid to escape poverty in their home countries, escape political instability and seek greater opportunities overseas. The study has a small sample which limits generalisability even in terms of study in the UK and African students, but the "escape" issues are revealing. Attractive features of overseas study from their perspective include the high reputation and quality of English education, the easy application process, and the excellent teaching and learning experience.

A more recent study which focuses on the UK was conducted with a Brazilian sample of 117 students (Foster, 2014). Further issues arise in the study suggesting that improving language skills in English is an attractive feature of study in the UK, but both cost and family ties are key barriers to studying overseas for Brazilian students. These two studies are not easily comparable, however, since the first study (Maringe & Carter, 2007) used a sample of students already in the UK, and the second (Foster, 2014) asked speculative questions of students who had not made a decision to study abroad.

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There are a number of studies which focus on Thai students' choice to study in Australia (Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2005; Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Jackling & Keneley, 2009; Abubakar, Shanka, & Muuka, 2010). In common with the study by Foster (2014) one of the key issues which emerged as a priority is the importance of the family on decisions, including the support of family in making a decision to go overseas to study, the financial aspects of studying overseas the word-of-mouth from family and friends who have studied overseas in the past (Gatfield & Chen, 2006).

Two studies examined why diverse samples of international students chose to study in a particular country: Canada (Chen, 2008) and Malaysia (Padlee, Kamaruddin, & Baharun, 2010). International students choosing to study in Canada are not price sensitive, according to Chen (2008), but are strongly influenced by the promotional efforts of Canadian universities. Padlee et al., (2010) presented a sample of 565 international students with a list of forty eight choice factors and concluded that six factors have a strong influence on international students' HE choices: quality of the learning environment, influencers, customer focus, costs, facilities, socialisation and location. It seems clear even from this short summary that studies of international HE consumer choice are difficult to compare because the samples vary considerably, the types of factors included in the study vary, the samples and the countries of origin and destinations vary widely and there is insufficient data at this stage to make comparisons about the influence of a range of factors on choice.

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) observed that it is unrealistic to expect a single list of choice factors to emerge which provides a definitive answer to indicate why students choose a university; it seems clear also that whist international students are a separate market segment from home students, they are also segmented based on other variables such as demographics, lifestyle, behaviour etc., and seeking to identify why students from any one nationality choose to study outside their home country is similarly not going to provide definitive answers. Nonetheless, studies from a number of countries do provide a richer picture in terms of factors which influence student HE consumer choice for those studying outside their home countries.

Finally, there are also a number of related research topics in terms of international factors in HE consumer behaviour which also take into account choice related to reasons for choosing branch campuses (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011) and US students'

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reasons for choosing to study abroad programmes (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). These types of study focus on reasons for studying overseas, but there are also a large number of papers that focus on choice of university by students *within* their home countries, on the basis that considerable research has already been conducted in the UK, Australia and the USA, and different nationality groups might use different choice criteria. Recent examples of this type of research include: a study of choice factors for Vietnamese students studying in universities in Vietnam (Ngoc Dao & Thorpe, 2015), determinants of HE choice in Poland (Sojkin et al., 2015) and in Lithuania (Alonderiene & Klimavičiene, 2013).

Critical summary

The discussion on group aspects of HE consumer choice introduces the cultural and social factors affecting this kind of behaviour and exposes the reader to concepts such as social class, disadvantage, ethnicity, religious affiliation, immigration and international study. But, at the same time the discussion of these factors challenges recent trends in HE and raises some moral and ethical dilemmas. In this sense, students' desire to study where they believe there are people like themselves reveals a story of disintegration and alienation in the HE systems of multicultural societies, and raises the question of what policymakers and HE institutions could do to obviate the concentration of students in colleges and universities on the basis of race, religion and ethnicity.

First, despite many research studies pointing to the key role of race and ethnicity in HE consumer choice, including studies that expose concerns about disadvantaged students failing to take advantage of HE *per se*, it is very frustrating to learn that students from under-privileged communities still have limited success in gaining access to prestigious institutions and occupations. Does this mean that the basic nature of every human being is to seek those who are similar to him/herself and shun those who appear to be different? Do we have to conclude that no matter how many reforms promoting equality and equal opportunities are introduced, one's social origins will always influence the HE consumer choice process and outcome?

Conversely, segmentation for marketing purposes raises the question of whether an educational institution (as opposed to business

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enterprise) should prioritise the targeting of specific groups of prospective students, in preference over other groups, based on gender, age, lifestyle, social class, culture or any other characteristics, even disadvantage, and yet this is a well-established marketing approach in the business sector. The question is, on this basis, is it realistic to expect that the ultimate objective would be that all institutions would achieve a balance of students by gender, age, ethnicity, social class, and culture etc.? That there would be no differences between institutions – old and new, high- and low-ranked, science or arts oriented, east and west – in terms of the proportions of students they attract from each of these key groups, and their final student population? The well-establish knowledge and practice of market segmentation, targeting and positioning suggests that this utopia is perhaps an idealistic journey, but not a realistic destination.

Second, social classes have been classified, among other things, according to the main wage earner in many countries – usually the father of the prospective student. Given the great impact of social class both on HE marketing and consumer behaviour, is it just and fair to measure SES by means of external outputs? For example, history has repeatedly shown evidence of great artists whose bank account was zero but whose cultural wealth was very high – the divisions between social class groups are changing year on year – is it time for new social groups to be devised? There are those with high incomes but low cultural wealth and those with low incomes and high cultural wealth. There is also the issue – raised in this chapter – that higher education achievement is often used to categorise people into higher or lower social class groups, and so it is unsurprising that families from the lower class groups are reluctant to participate in HE.

Third, since social class (and associated variables, such as income, family and parental education) are strong predictors of entering the top colleges/universities, choice to attend college, and continuing attendance at college, it is time to ask what schools, researchers, academics, and other education agencies have done to monitor students from low SES families and identify what works in terms of these students applying for a top-quartile colleges or entering a high status profession. The evidence is clear, solutions are still very unclear. Time and again this question has been posed, and time and again the findings are returned with the same concerns about the fate of disadvantaged students. Research is needed on impact – the evidence of antecedents is clear enough already.

Fourth, given the many constraints faced by disadvantaged students, and especially those related to their family origins, one may wonder to what extent governments are responsible for the training and support of parents in the complex choice process. Does research tell us how to decrease potential negative influences of parents from minority groups upon their child's HE choice? It seems that current policies focus over-much on the financial resources that constrain access to HE and ignore cultural and social constrains such as negative attitudes of families towards some subject disciplines, or their belief that the sons and particularly daughters should study close to home.

Fifth, compulsory education has great impact upon HE choosers, not only by preparing them for the later stages of education but also by preparing them for adult lives and increasing their self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Yet education reforms seldom encompass pre-school education, primary and secondary education and HE together, thereby making the transfer from schools to HE institutions easier and provide prospective students with tools and skills needed for effective HE (and career) choice decisions. Specifically, a comprehensive education policy could help disadvantaged students cope with many constraints in the HE choice process and avert their voluntary choice of local colleges which might decrease their career options and life success. Interventions need to begin early in the education process.

Finally, is it timely to study the key to the success of Chinese and Asian students enrolling at prestigious universities (mainly in the US)? What is the impact of the Chinese culture on universities throughout the world, but particularly in Anglophone countries such as the US, UK and Australia? How do Asian families overcome ethnic barriers to HE with such success? How is a pro-HE stance created in immigrant families?

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4

Organisational Factors Influencing Higher Education Consumer Choice

Abstract: *This chapter presents consumer choice models and discusses the influence of marketing on the choice process and institutional strengths, as factors in choice-making. It opens with a short debate about three models of consumer behaviour; two are general models relevant to all sectors while the final draws on HE consumer choice and marketing. In the next section, the authors discuss the meaning of marketing communications in general and of HE in particular. The content of the chapter seeks to extend knowledge about choice factors such as quality and reputation, the characteristics of the institutions, geographical location, outcomes and benefits of HE, and price sensitivity. Critical comments and discussion about the organisational factors of HE choice are provided as a summary.*

Keywords: employability; geographical location; information sources; market environment; pricing; reputation

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on consumer choice models, the influence of marketing on the choice process, and institutional strengths as factors in choice-making. Much research on higher education consumer choice has concentrated on characteristics of institutions which might determine the choices students make about a college or university, a course programme or a mode of study. However, there is only a limited body of work on the HE consumer behaviour process itself and dynamic theoretical models which illustrate the stages applicants go through when they choose a college or university, although some of the generic models of the consumer choice process have some relevance. The significance of institutional marketing and marketing communications on the final choices applicants make is also discussed in the context of research findings, followed by an examination of the importance of specific institutional factors (e.g. reputation, quality, facilities, and location).

Consumer choice models

There are two common models used in consumer behaviour theory which are very familiar to scholars of business sector consumer choice research: the Black Box model and the Stimulus Response model (Kotler & Armstrong, 2003; Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy, 2014). A third model, the HE choice model, has been adapted from these models for use in HE consumer choice (Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). There are also more complex models which aim to plot the consumer behaviour process, such as the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model, and the Sheth's family model of consumer choice behaviour (Gilbert, 2003), but analysis of these models is beyond the scope of this text.

The Black Box model (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013) of the consumer choice process is probably one of the most familiar in marketing contexts and comprises three boxes side by side, on the assumption that the process begins in the left-hand box. The first stage of the process is the market environment, or context in which the decision-making takes place. These factors are well-established influences on consumer choice and include: market stimuli or the prompt that encourages a buyer to embark on a purchase, for example in the case of HE, the stimulus which

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prompts a student to begin the choice process, such as an intervention like high school careers activities, a new item or an event. The market environment box also includes the 4Ps (product, price, promotion, place) which are key to making decisions about products and services and prompt choosers to consider the relative offerings (for example course programmes), the costs (student fees), the information available, and the geographical location of the college. Further issues in this box relate to the economic, social, technological and cultural environment. In the case of a business environment this would often be examined using a series of situation analysis tools such as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) or PEST[EL] (political, economic, social and technological [environmental and legal]), however, HE choice is an individual or perhaps a family decision and any market environmental influences are perhaps more subconscious and personal, therefore are not usually identified using such tools. For this reason, the Black Box model is less relevant to the HE choice process and choices made by individuals, particular decisions such as choice of college, where the choice process falls below economic rationality (Menon, Saiti, & Socratous, 2007).

The second box of the Black Box choice model provides a list of key factors for this stage and the first is "buyer characteristics", which are key aspects of the process (these were examined in more detail in the previous two chapters). However, this stage also lists "buyer's decision-making processes" as a key part of the model. The model therefore is somewhat unhelpful in providing any further details about how the process of making a decision works at an individual level, both for generic consumer decisions and also for decisions about colleges and universities. It is this box which gives the model its name, Black Box, because the psychological processes are going on at this stage and are therefore hidden – in a black box. For marketers, the important aspects of decision-making are the context (the first box) and the outcomes (the final box). The black box itself, for consumer behaviour research, is arguably the main limitation of this popular theoretical model, because no insights are provided about *how* a decision is reached. For example, this model does not offer any insights about the point in time when a chooser decides to apply for a specific college or university rather than choose other HE institutions, or about the thinking processes the chooser goes through to reach the final decision.

The final box defines the buyers' responses on the basis that marketers are interested in what consumer do following their decision. The topics

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listed in the final box are, first buying attitudes and preferences, because this information provides key knowledge and intelligence about what people buy and their attitudes towards the purchase, for example choosing a top academic institution, based on their highly favourable attitude towards institutions with the best reputation and identity in the market. Further outcomes are based on purchase behaviour, what they choose, when, where and how much they choose (Kotler & Armstrong, 2003). The behavioural aspects of choices are important to marketers because they provide the intelligence needed to understand the what, when and how aspects of the purchases.

The second well-known and widely published consumer behaviour model is the Stimulus Response, Buyer Decision Process model (Kotler & Armstrong, 2003; Kotler et al., 2014), which is a linear model setting out the stages a chooser works through from recognising a need through to making a purchase and reflecting on the purchase (post-purchase). The simplicity of this model is part of its appeal and popularity, and for some types of purchases the model reflects the stages quite accurately. The model is a linear series of five boxes or cells namely: "need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, post-purchase evaluation" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013, p. 176). For example, the first box represents the buyer's acknowledgement of the necessity to make a purchase to meet a need – for example, the recognition that to pursue a career in management the student needs to study for a master's degree, e.g. MBA, and therefore she recognises the need to search for suitable programmes and universities/colleges. In simple terms this means that the next stage is to carry out an information search. (Realistically, an applicant might not search throughout the world for all business and management programmes, but might place her own limits on the search e.g. within her own country, or only in the US.) Following an information search, however extensive that is, the next stage is to evaluate alternatives by drawing up a shortlist and weighing up the pros and cons of each option. For example, after listing the accredited MBA programmes within her own country the applicant might then consider the quality, price, location and reputation of the programmes. The penultimate stage is the decision. In the case of most purchases the buyer can make that choice without constraints except perhaps cost, but for a college choice there are other constraints such as entry qualifications and availability of college places which might limit the choice. Finally the post-decision evaluation is an important part of this process because it contributes

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to word-of-mouth, and justification for the decision. Hemsley-Brown (1999) found that in a study of post-sixteen college choice, this stage was relied upon to enable the student to persuade themselves that they had made a good choice. Therefore in addition to contributing to word-of-mouth, the reflections on choices at this stage help the chooser to be more positive about their final decision.

There are some limitations and critical issues which relate to this appealing but simple model. First, not all choosers go through a specific need recognition stage – it is possible that some students have known since an early age that they intend to go to university or four-year college and therefore, this stage could take place very early. Also some applicants have already decided – whether wisely to not – that they intend to study at a particular college for a particular degree programme, and therefore this process does not fit with the process model stages. Information searching can also be limited, especially when a student has made a decision about a destination from other sources (e.g. from family or friends). Information searching can be comprehensive and systematic, or it can be cursory and only focused on the intended choice. Information searching implies that the choice is rational and "makes assumptions about the level of rigorous and comprehensive deliberation which constitutes decision-making behaviour in a culture of markets and choice" (Hemsley-Brown, 1999, p. 92), however, researchers have frequently reported from primary research evidence that the process of education choice-making is less than rational (Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Menon et al., 2007). The next sub-section examines an adapted model, based on the Stimulus Response model, in the context of HE.

The third model is based on the five step model described in the previous section. Vrontis et al. (2007) set out a model of HE choice for developed countries. The researchers adapt each stage to match the context of HE and they provide a comprehensive and insightful extension to the model covering individual determinants (personal attributes), environmental determinants (general, public, media), HE characteristics and actions, and high school characteristics. The authors set the model in the context of globalisation and multiculturalism, and changes in the macro-environment. In this respect the model, in addition to taking account of the consumer choice process of HE students more specifically, also incorporates the relevant elements of the Black Box model for this context. The model is highly relevant to the HE sector and is constructed based on comprehensive analysis of earlier process models

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of consumer behaviour. Nonetheless, whilst this adapted model and the original Stimulus Response model have limitations, they do reflect broadly the process consumers typically work through to make purchase decisions. There are variations and extensions to these models which provide further mapping of what most consumers do, but on the whole the models are not attempting to show how all consumers make choices, they provide an outline of a typical process.

The next section examines the importance of marketing communications to the HE choice process.

Marketing communications and consumer choice

In Chapter 1, the background and contexts, and the rationales provided by previous authors in the field were categorised, summarised and analysed. One of the key topics included in the background and contexts section is marketing and marketing communications. Previous authors argue that owing to the free market context of HE and the increasing market competition between universities, it is important to identify choice factors so that marketing and marketing communications can be improved and the most important information is identified. There is a key difference, however, between drivers for choice and the information students seek when making decisions, the latter provides useful intelligence about institutions. For example two research papers (Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2004; Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2005) report on the information sources used by high school students in the UK. They report on the availability, credibility and value of the sources and conclude that overall the reputation of the institution and the department were key information students in the study were seeking, along with information about potential careers opportunities following graduation.

Greater market intelligence can provide support for target marketing and improve not only the quality of students applying to the institution (Pentina & Neeley, 2007), but subsequently the quality of the institution itself (through improved rankings). Therefore, a knowledge of which factors associated with the institution are particularly attractive to students, e.g. sport facilities, IT facilities, geographical location etc., provide valuable information to inform and improve future marketing communications such as websites, brochures and open days (Pentina & Neeley, 2007).

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For example, Al-Hawary and Batayenh (2010) conducted a study on the impact of marketing communication tools on non-Jordanian students who chose to study at Jordanian public universities. They concluded, not unexpectedly, that websites (in Arabic) are the key to the choices of these students, who are searching for information and making their decisions outside Jordan. Gatfield, Barker and Graham (1999) also studied the impact of marketing communications in the context of international students applying to Australian universities. Their research identified a gap between the needs of the students and the information provided by the universities in their marketing communications, particularly brochures and print resources. However, the research was conducted in 1999 before online materials were so widely available, and so the findings must be treated with great caution. The availability of online resources over the last fifteen years is likely to have gradually closed the gap in terms of meeting the information needs of international students.

It is important for researchers to continue to be aware of an important purpose of marketing communications: the messages used in advertising and other forms of communication provide students with reasons for their choices which they use to justify their decision to others. Two empirical studies, both by Hemsley-Brown (1999; 2012) reinforce this assertion. Post-hoc justification, or reasons given to justify the choice after the decision has been made, tend to hide the underlying reasons for the choice (Hemsley-Brown, 1999). Hemsley-Brown (1999) cites Chisnall (1995) who points out the importance of marketing feedback which means that marketing messages flow in two directions, from the marketer to the customer, and from the customer back to the marketer. More specifically, the messages the marketing communications convey to the audience are quoted back again when consumers are asked for reasons why they made their choices. In the 1999 study, respondents quoted the marketing messages when explaining to the researcher why they had chosen the institution. A more recent study of international students' reasons for choosing an English university confirms this phenomenon (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). When asked why they had chosen their target university, respondents in the study quoted specific nouns, adjectives and phrases in their personal statements – the exact same phrases that were posted on the British Council website and the website of their target university at the time they made their applications. (The study is based on analysis of data from personal statements,

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TABLE 4.1 *Summary of organisational factors influencing HE consumer choice*

Factors	Authors	Categories	Countries
Marketing communications	Chisnall, 1995; Gatfield, Barker, & Graham, 1999; Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2004; Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2005; Al-Hawary & Batayenh, 2010; Hemsley-Brown, 2012	Information sources	Australia, Jordan, UK
Direct sources Media sources Social sources	Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008	Information sources	South Africa
Rationality	Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Menon, 2004	Information searching	Cyprus, UK
Reputation, public image and quality	Mazzarol, 1998; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Imenda & Kongolo, 2002; Imenda, Kongolo, & Grewal, 2004; Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Daily, Farewell, & Kumar, 2010; Horstschräer, 2012; Alonderiene & Klimaviciene, 2013; Hemsley-Brown, 2014	Reputation and quality	Australian, Lithuania, South Africa, UK
Administrative efficiency and registration processes	Imenda et al., 2004	Characteristics of institutions	South Africa
Class size	Drewes & Michael, 2006	Characteristics of institutions	Canada
Course programme and content	Imenda et al., 2004; Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008; Hemsley-Brown, 2014	Characteristics of institutions	South Africa, UK
Facilities	Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003; Imenda et al., 2004; Hemsley-Brown, 2014	Characteristics of institutions	South Africa, UK
Geographical location	Harker, Slade, & Harker, 2001; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Callender & Jackson, 2008; Sá, Amado Tavares, Justino, & Amaral, 2011; Hemsley-Brown, 2014	Geographical location	Australia, Portugal, UK
Career/job prospects/ employability	Soutar & Turner, 2002; Imenda et al., 2004; Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008; Hemsley-Brown, 2014	Outcomes and benefits	Australia, South Africa, UK
Prospective earnings	Oosterbeek, Groot, & Hartog, 1992; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Hemsley-Brown, 2014	Outcomes and benefits	The Netherlands, UK
Social benefits	Callender & Jackson, 2008; Hemsley-Brown, 2014	Outcomes and benefits	UK
Fees and costs	Pasternak, 2005; Holdsworth & Nind, 2005; Callender & Jackson, 2008; Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh, & Barry, 2012; Gemici & Wiswall, 2014	Price sensitivity	Israel, New Zealand, UK, USA

Source: The authors, based on Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015.

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for applicants to masters programmes for 2005–2006 and 2008–2009, and analysis of website information).

In the case of both the studies summarised above, there is evidence that applicants to colleges and universities rely on the information provided in marketing communications to support their choices, both as a way of explaining and justifying their choice to others after the choice has been made, but also as a way of explaining and justifying an application to a chosen institution. In other words, a chooser's ability to be fully aware of her choice decision is questionable, leaving researchers and marketers with many uncertainties about the "black box" in HE choice process. The tendency for consumers to internalise marketing communications messages needs to be acknowledged in the context of studies designed to identify students' reasons for choosing institutions, and preferences for information to support their choices. The next section examines the factors students consider important when choosing an institution and these factors are summarised in Table 4.1

Choice factors based on results from previous studies

In a recently published literature review (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015, p. 264) the authors assert that "there are no factors or characteristics of universities which drive the choices of all students" although "academic reputation is the highest ranked factor" in a number of previous studies. The authors of this book have categorised papers on choice factors into a number of categories which are examined in the following sub-sections: information sources, quality and reputation, characteristics of institutions, including facilities, geographical location, outcomes and benefits and price sensitivity. See also a recent article by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) which explores these factors in a critical review of literature.

Information sources

The purpose of the study by Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008) conducted in South Africa was to find out whether sub-groups exist within the HE market which could be targeted with different marketing messages to suit their information needs. The researchers identified three broad types of sources: direct sources, media and social sources. Direct sources are those originating in the institution, media sources are print,

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digital and outdoor sources such as advertisements. Social sources are from people the student interacts with such as friends and family. For the purposes of the study they focused on information about course content, student experience, employability, quality of sport and financial or costs aspects. The researchers were able to identify five sub-groups based on their preferences for these sources and the different types of information the sub-groups need, indicating that the market is segmented and different sub-groups have different information needs. Whilst all applicants consulted all three types of sources, they gave priority to different sources and they also gave priority to different aspects of the choice, e.g. sub-group 1 gave priority to direct sources, and were focused on information about employability. These findings further indicate that there is no definitive answer to what students focus on in their search behaviour, or one best source of information.

Menon's (2004) study carried out with 120 students attending three universities in Cyprus focuses on information searching. She concludes that information search behaviour among students making a choice of HE institution is "less than what we would expect under traditional economic theory" (p.279). On this basis she notes that information searching is not necessarily more rigorous for decisions that are more important – in this case a decision about one's future. Hemsley-Brown (1999) found that at the early stage of the decision process students relied on information from friends and family before they began to search for information from other sources. Therefore, she observed, students had already formed a view about the kind of institution they were prepared to consider well before they started any kind of formal search behaviour. Students in the 1999 study who searched more widely were then faced with a more complex choice, by weighing up the pros and cons of different options. Far from being a more satisfactory experience to make a rational choice, these students "exaggerated or bolstered the positive attributes of the college they eventually chose" because the choice was a "compromise" and having made their choice they were reluctant to revisit the options again (Hemsley-Brown, 1999, p. 279).

Nonetheless, although information searching behaviour is a key issue for HE consumer choice research, it must be emphasised that the information searching about course and institutions may not be a rigorous search, and in many cases is not an economically rational search. The decision might be a less-than-satisfactory compromise or an emotionally

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driven choice, in common with many other consumer choices. Different segments of students deal with information searching in different ways.

Quality and reputation

A number of studies focus on the importance of reputation and quality in the content of HE choice (Mazzarol, 1998; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Daily, Farewell, & Kumar, 2010; Horstschräer, 2012; Alonderiene & Klimaviciene, 2013). Reputation is a form of social identity and is an intangible resource, which conveys the quality of an organisation and its ability to meet expectations (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). A number of studies mention the importance of reputation for students making choices (Mazzarol, 1998; Daily et al., 2010) but often fail to give further details of the concept, leaving the reader to make assumptions about the meaning. One study focuses on research reputation but finds little effect in terms of university choice factors, especially for female students (Horstschräer, 2012).

A number of studies identify reputation as the top factor in students' choice of HE institution. For example Briggs and Wilson (2007) found consistently that the reputation of the institution was the top ranked factor in HE choice for the 651 undergraduate respondents in a study conducted in Scotland (UK). Soutar and Turner (2002) identified academic reputation and teaching quality as important determinants of college preference using conjoint analysis and a sample of 259 Australian high schools students. Two research studies conducted in South Africa (Imenda & Kongolo, 2002; Imenda, Kongolo, & Grewal, 2004) support this finding, but the authors reported that it is students applying to top rated universities with a good public image that cite reputation as an important factor in their choice. This finding is further supported by results from a study using a large sample of British undergraduate students. The results show that the reputation of the institution was significantly more important for students choosing more prestigious (Russell Group) universities (Hemsley-Brown, 2014).

In conclusion it seems there is clear evidence that academic reputation is a key factor in HE consumer choice, but there are indications that this might be more important for those choosing prestigious institutions. This corroborates findings on the perceptions of Israeli university academics towards HE marketing. Academics considered high quality teaching and fruitful research as an academic's major contribution to the marketing of the higher education institution (Oplatka, 2009).

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Characteristics of institutions

Characteristics of institutions were identified by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) based on a review of literature on consumer choice in HE. These include: administrative efficiency (Imenda et al., 2004), class size (Drewes & Michael, 2006), course content (Bonnema & van der Weldt, 2008), entrance standards (Callender & Jackson, 2008), physical/visual appearance, teaching staff, quick response to application (Imenda et al., 2004), research success (Drewes & Michael, 2006), and type of university (Harker, Slade, & Harker, 2001; Hemsley-Brown, 2014; Hemsley-Brown, 2015). Characteristics of institutions are usually included in studies that provide students with a short or long list of possible choice factors to respond to. For example, a study by Hemsley-Brown (2014) set out to test whether students from distinct university types, or segments in Britain, use a different set of choice factors for their decisions; and to identify the different factors for each group. The respondents were asked to select from 27 variables to indicate which factors influenced their choice of HE institution. One of the highest ranked characteristic (ranked 6) was course programme – which is surprising low given the importance of subject studied when applying to university (see also Soutar & Turner, 2002). More important factors related to love of their subject, careers and job opportunities (Hemsley-Brown, 2014).

A study based in Canada (Drewes & Michael, 2006) relied on application data from high schools students applying to 17 universities in Ontario. Two factors were noted by the researchers in terms of the choices these respondents made: counter-intuitively, universities with a higher research profile are less likely to be chosen by respondents, that is, universities with better research performance are regarded as being less attractive to applicants. The researchers speculate that this might be due to applicants assuming that with such a high research profile, the academics are less able to focus on teaching however, the link could be spurious. They also found that higher ranking is associated with smaller class sizes which is important for female applicants, but not for males. Applicants overall in this study favoured universities that were close to their homes, offered more on scholarships for higher levels of non-academic student services.

The programme of study offered by the institution is important for most students (Imenda et al., 2004), although in some cases it is possible they believe that their subject is offered in most institutions (e.g. business

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management), in which case they may view the subject choice as less important. The quality of staff (actual or perceived), teaching and facilities were also found to be positive determinants in attracting students (Imenda et al., 2004).

Facilities have been a subject of a specific study (Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003) but are often included in broader studies of characteristics of institutions which are important in HE consumer choice. Price et al. (2003, p. 219) claim that in their study "all questions relating to learning and teaching facilities, especially library facilities and the availability of computers receive high ratings for importance throughout". However, least important variables were "location", "housing facilities", "social/cultural/entertainment activities", "athletic facilities" and "dining facilities" (p.214). The finding that housing or accommodation facilities are less important is supported by another study (Hemsley-Brown, 2014) where "accommodation" was rated lowest in the rank order at 0.3% of students. Respondents in the study (n=10,723) also awarded low ratings to other facilities related factors, making them the least important factors: "campus and buildings" (3.6% of sample) and "facilities and resources" (3% of sample). Respondents tended to give higher priority to outcomes and benefits such as career and employability related factors, reputation and subject discipline.

Geographical location

Research on the importance of location tends to focus on whether students study close to home or move elsewhere for HE. The results vary for different countries, depending upon the tradition of moving away from home or staying near home in the country of study, but for some students, geographic factors, the location of the college or university – particularly how far away it is from their home (parental home) – is an important choice factor. Harker et al.'s (2001) study comparing school leavers and mature students' choice to study at a "new" university in Australia found that a surprising 41% of school leavers cited "live and study at home" as a key reason why they chose a new university. This compares with 27% of mature students. These findings are supported by findings from Portugal (Sá, Amado Tavares, Justino, & Amaral, 2011) where 55% of students are living at home, and in Italy and Spain the number is higher (73% and 64% respectively). Sá et al. (2011) observe that whether students live at home while they study or not is a financial decision, but is also determined by links with the local community ties,

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aspirations and expectations. They concluded that students in Portugal from advantaged cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to choose a university education, and they are also less likely to choose to leave home. They also concluded that older and students who work locally usually preferred a polytechnic programme than a university programme, and they were less mobile, which tended to result in them living at home while they studied. This is of course in the context of a high living-at-home population of students in Portugal.

According to Forsyth and Furlong (2003), in a study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, disadvantaged students in the UK are more likely to opt for institutions closer to home, and the reasons are based on the extra costs of studying away from home, aversion to debt, and less concern about applying to a prestigious institution, and greater emphasis on getting a job. More recent research supports the finding that students choose to study close to home through fear of debt (Callender & Jackson, 2008). This is supported by recent study (Hemsley-Brown, 2014) which found that "location" was the fourth most important factor for students attending Alliance Group universities (vocationally focused, lower ranked universities in the UK, where over 50% of students are studying STEM subjects). Therefore, it seems that the tendency to study close to home is closely linked to social, economic and work-related factors, in addition to the traditional patterns of study in different countries.

Outcomes and benefits

According to a recent literature review on HE consumer choice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015), outcomes and benefits are high on the list of important factors when students choose colleges and universities. Outcomes and benefits include career prospects and post-degree employability – including anticipated earnings, experiential benefits, and social benefits. In a study by Hemsley-Brown (2014) career prospects and graduate employment all featured in the top ten most important factors in university choice, although there are differences between types of university the students were attending and students attending newer universities citing career related factors highest. This finding is supported by earlier work in South Africa where students choosing to attend the more vocationally focused technikons, rather than more academic universities, cited career related factors as important reasons for their choice of institution (Imenda et al., 2004).

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Turner (1998; cited by Soutar & Turner, 2002) reported that undergraduates studying business in Australia cited future job prospects as an important factor in their choice of university. The respondents argued that gaining a degree qualification was an important step towards securing a good job at the end of their studies. Results by Soutar and Turner (2002) from 259 high school students in western Australia further confirms the centrality of this factor. Further evidence for the importance of this factor in choice is provided by Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008) who use factor analysis to identify five key factors for their study. They argue that employability is an important aspect of the long-term outcomes of HE. They claim that students reflect on their capability for finding a job following graduation and whether their college will support them in finding employment post-graduation. In a recent UK study (Hemsley-Brown, 2014) whether their choice of university would lead to a well-paid job was high on the list of important factors for students choosing all types of university ranking 7th overall.

The question of whether a decision to attend a particular college or university influences earnings prospects, and whether potential earning prospects might influence choice of particular type of institution is of considerable interest, particularly from the point of view of variation in tuition fees (Oosterbeek, Groot, & Hartog, 1992). However, research in the Netherlands reveals that earnings prospects are not a particularly important factor in choice of university, and differences in other respects such as social class, subject choice, motivation, and the educational level achieved by parents have a greater influence (Oosterbeek et al., 1992). This view is contradicted by findings from a study in the UK (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000) where results show that the quality of high school affects the choice of university, which in turn influences earnings post-graduation. They conclude therefore that graduate earnings are influenced by choice of college, although they do not report findings on whether choice of college is influenced by a desire to maximise earnings. These studies are now somewhat old, however, and so the results need to be treated with caution due to the substantial changes in participation in HE since 1992.

Perception of the social benefits of attending university also influences the choices people make about choice of institution. Perceiving social benefits of attending university changes the way applicants make choices – they are more prepared to consider more options if they value the social benefits (Callender & Jackson, 2008). Attitudes to social benefits

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are linked to concerns about debt and financial concerns – those who are focused on debt and costs are less likely to accept the social benefits of going to university, and are also less likely to study far from home (Callender & Jackson, 2008). This findings is also supported by findings reported more recently (Hemsley-Brown, 2014): social life was ranked higher on the lists of students attending Russell Group (academic, more highly ranked, research universities) than other universities. Social life and social benefits are quite different in meaning (the former is a more immediate experience and the latter is considered long-term) but nonetheless, neither is very common in terms of factors students consider important when choosing a university.

Price sensitivity

There has been an increase in interest in the impact of tuition fees, and rising tuition fees on HE choices, not only in terms of choice of institution, but also choice to go into employment rather than study. Findings suggest that these changes can affect students based on personal factors, particularly gender and family income. Gemici and Wiswall (2014) in the USA studied the effect of higher tuition fees on the overall number of college graduates using National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG) data. They found that the number of college graduates decreased as tuition fees increased, but they also found this impacted on women students more than men; women also had a greater tendency to change their major but there was a smaller effect on the number of men who studied for a college degree. A study in Canada (Dooley, Payne, & Rob, 2012) also examined the impact of rising costs associated with studying arts and science programmes. They found that higher fees are associated with a rise in the ratio of well qualified students from wealthy backgrounds, and middle incomes backgrounds, however the ratio of students from lower income backgrounds was reduced. This effect was less for engineering and business, than for arts and science programmes.

Two studies, one in Israel (Pasternak, 2005) and one in New Zealand (Holdsworth & Nind, 2005) focused on the cost benefits of attending college. Pasternak (2005) based her study on the notion that a student's choice to enter HE is based on a process of weighing up the costs of HE against the benefits or outcomes of HE. She also argues that the cost-benefit decision influences choice of institution as well as expectations following their studies, and these assumptions are supported by her research results. Pasternak (2005) provides some explanation by stating

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that perhaps the high fees tend to generate high expectations about the benefits such as the quality of teaching and the outcomes such as career opportunities.

A study conducted in New Zealand (Holdsworth & Nind, 2005) found that high school students had little knowledge of the costs of going to college, and they had no awareness of the concept of costs against the value of their degree. However, Holdsworth and Nind (2005) found that students preferred to attend an institution where fees were equal to or higher than other options rather than select a lower cost option. Students were more focused on features other than cost, such as degree programmes and campus accommodation rather than longer term issues such as employability.

Two studies in the UK (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh, & Barry, 2012) found close links with attitudes to costs and fees, family background and income, and HE choice. Thus, Dunnett et al. (2012) found that students from backgrounds where no family members have previously attend university perceive higher fees more negatively because they can see few benefits for the higher cost. In common with other studies (e.g. Holdsworth & Nind, 2005) they argue that although fees do impact on choice of university there are other much more important factors such as the reputation of the university. They do note, however, that girls are more prepared to accept that something which has a lower cost might be good value for money, whereas boys were less likely to accept this notion.

Interestingly, Callender and Jackson (2008) in the UK carried out a study, not on fees or costs but on fear of debt. They concluded that fear of debt does not influence either the choice of qualification or the subject major. However, fear of debt does lead to some students making decisions about staying in the family home whilst at university, applying to universities in regions where the cost of living is lower, and applying to universities where there are term-time employment opportunities. As a result this can lead to students who have a higher fear of debt applying to less prestigious universities and students in this category are more likely to view the cost of studying in HE as a debt as opposed to an investment in their future.

Variations in choice factors by market segments

This chapter sought to map the factors which influence HE consumer choice from a number of perspectives, for a range of countries, and a

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variety of types of institution based on prior studies. However, despite this, there is no definitive list of influential factors in terms of choosing a university, nor would these factors influence every student if researchers were able to identify and map them – different types of students by age, gender, programme choice, family background, lifestyle etc., are influenced in different ways by a variety of factors, including the marketing efforts and websites of individual universities (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). There is no conclusive evidence that a single characteristic of institutions drives the choices of all students, although academic reputation is the highest ranked factor in a study conducted in the UK (Briggs & Wilson, 2007) and Veloutsou et al. (2004) argue that the most important factors are reputation and courses. The top factors for all students in a study by Hemsley-Brown (2014) was "love of the subject" which is not generally a factor institutions and researchers are interested in exploring.

Authors of prior research often argue that student choice is neither economically rational nor linear, but is influenced by numerous situational and contextual factors such as information availability, academic achievement and school experience (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). However, researchers constantly seek to find out which factors students, as a mass audience, use to choose an institution. There are two principal problems with this approach; first studies using quantitative survey type methods tend to have an underlying assumption the such decisions are rational, despite evidence to the contrary (e.g. Menon, 2004), and secondly, constantly seeking to identify the factors students use to make choices assumes that there is an elusive single list of predictors for all students. In all other fields of consumer activity marketing, academics and practitioners are fully committed to the notion of segments, targeting and market positioning (Kotler et al., 2014). However, with some exceptions (Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp, 2010), the higher education market is often viewed as a mass market (Pârvu & Ipate, 2012) rather than a segmented market.

The higher education sector is a mass system but within the mass market, there are undoubtedly segments with different needs and preferences. Institutions find a market position and seek to meet these needs in competition with other providers – in a similar way to other markets. Furthermore, marketers usually address consumer heterogeneity by grouping consumers into segments consisting of those consumers having relatively similar product or service needs' (Tuma & Decker, 2013, p. 2).

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Different types of universities operate in different market segments, and the student audience has different needs and expectations: a one-size-fits-all mass market approach is unlikely to provide the insights needed to move HE consumer choice research onwards and upwards. When such a list is provided – Table 4.1 in this chapter – then it can mask the variations and segments in the market and needs to be treated with caution.

Critical summary

Following analysis of the findings about the impact of institutional characteristics upon HE choice, several evocative and ethical dilemmas emerge. Firstly, assuming that a detailed knowledge of the psychological processes of what is going on in the "black box" could be determined – i.e., learning exactly *how* prospective students make their final decisions – there is no guarantee that HE marketers would be ethically and morally responsible in how they utilise this knowledge, to avoid over-manipulating the choice process. It is likely that this knowledge would enable marketers to bias the student's authentic wants and propensities towards making ill-matched choices for their needs.

Secondly, and arising from the first quandary, is the question "who benefits" from the research on HE consumer behaviour? The HE marketers? The owners of private universities? The students? The public? Others? When this question is probed more intensely, we could speculate that some stakeholders might use this knowledge for their own gains, such as marketing the HE institution based on what students imagine they want rather than what they really need. In this way, the institutions might attract students because of extrinsic, non-academic aspects (e.g., sport facilities, IT facilities, luxury accommodation) and students might realise their error too late during their studies in the institution to address the problem (e.g. that luxury accommodation costs are not affordable). Thus, in this light the conjecture that it is important to identify choice factors in order to ameliorate marketing and marketing communications is questionable.

Thirdly, given the increasing use of websites and newspaper adverts in the marketing of HE institutions, some ethical concerns merit attention; can academic institutions advertise any message, even one that is embedded with sexism or racism, for example? How far do institutions

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need to represent the racial mix of the institution accurately when they post images in their advertising? Is it more responsible to over-represent people of colour than to under-represent them? What are the moral boundaries underlying HE marketing? Are there any ethical limitations that every institution ought to adhere to?

Fourthly, as "reputation" has been identified as one of the main factors affecting HE choice, it is important to bear in mind that highly prestigious institutions (in terms of reputation) benefit more from this finding, but top institutions still need to prove their effectiveness in meeting the needs of their students in terms of a wide range of other student needs. Yet, there is always the risk that this type of institution will take students for granted and due to their high reputation will strive, first and foremost, to do the best for the sake of the institution and its managers/academics, and their research, rather than for the sake of the students. Reputation is gained through a range of factors, not only research output, but enhancing the student experience.

Fifthly, and arising from the previous issue, an over-emphasis in many HE institutions on new and state-of-the-art facilities and buildings, and the prominence of cutting-edge architecture and an arresting visual appearance could serve to disguise and conceal academic weaknesses (i.e., poor teaching capabilities, limited student support, or out-dated programmes). Additionally, given the salient role of "word-of-mouth" communication in the HE choice process, universities could use this communication to build an image of an exciting institution without revealing, for example, the many difficulties their students from ethnic and or socially disadvantaged communities might face.

Finally, the concluding message of this chapter is that governments, through government policies, are responsible for providing support for both disadvantaged parents and their children (i.e., prospective students) for the HE choice process. In this sense, parents from low SES communities are less likely to have attended universities and colleges and, subsequently, are less able to provide their children with the knowledge and encouragement necessary to grasp the full meaning of HE and the employment and earnings advantages it can bring. Therefore, special programmes, targeted at parents and prospective students from disadvantaged communities, could be available to elucidate some facts about the importance of choosing HE institutions based on career aspirations and outcomes, for example, rather than focusing on expensively produced brochures or prize winning architecture and luxury accommodation

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suites. Furthermore, as many parents from these communities are less likely to grasp the importance of HE for the future of their children, more attention by public agencies should perhaps be given to the exposure of these parents to the HE experience and its many benefits.

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Conclusion: Modelling Higher Education Consumer Choice

Abstract: *The final chapter sums up the major points discussed in the book, and associates the major models of consumer behaviour developed in the business literature with the area of HE consumer choice. The chapter begins with the rationale for studying HE choice and connects it with the "black box" model, while indicating its relevance to HE institutions. Special attention is given to the authors' proposed model for conducting research aimed at testing the importance of a range of antecedents of HE choice, based on the evidence and analysis set out in previous chapters. The chapter ends with an analysis of the concept and process of market segmentation that is central to HE consumer choice, and with final critical insights into the meaning of HE consumer behaviour and the research on HE choice in the future.*

Keywords: group factors; organisational factors; personal factors; segmentation; theoretical model

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Introduction

As a conclusion to this text, in this chapter the authors present theoretical models developed from the analysis of HE consumer choice research which emerge from the previous four chapters. First, the insights provided through analysis of background, context and rational for HE consumer choice research are utilised to provide two Stimulus Response models of HE consumer behaviour (Figures c.1 and c.2) which relate specifically to HE, but which are based on the adaptation of two well-established consumer behaviour models. Second, an HE consumer choice research model is presented (Figure c.3) and expanded upon (Figure c.4) which utilises the results of prior research in the HE field, and provides a visual map of the potential relationships or associations between key variables in the study of HE consumer choice of institution. In the basic and expanded research models the dependent variable is type of institution chosen: e.g. old or new university, polytechnic or university, technikon or university, two-year college or four-year college, Ivy league or not Ivy league, home or outside home country, etc.

These models are presented under the following sub-headings: background and rationale for HE consumer choice, HE consumer choice process model, HE consumer choice research model, and market segmentation. The final section is a critical summary of the chapter.

Background and rationale for HE consumer choice research

In the first chapter, as a starting point for investigating HE consumer choice, the background and context to research in the field was analysed and critically reviewed based on the background, context and rationales provided by previous authors of articles on this topic. This analysis provides a strong basis for reconstructing a consumer behaviour model that incorporates these insights. The topics identified as providing justification for conducting research in HE consumer choice include: globalisation, internationalisation, policy change and student mobility; supply and demand issues, including changes in student numbers, recruitment and social change; and market competition, including marketing, access to information and communications. Prior authors have used these topics to introduce their research and to argue for more research in the field to provide

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insights for the benefit of research knowledge creation and to provide insight and recommendations for marketers. The substantial change in the market environment in which HE operates requires a constant stream of information, data and knowledge to inform marketing and to provide greater understanding of consumer choice factors and decisions made by student choosers. The topics identified in Chapter 1, therefore, provide a good evidence-based starting point for revisiting the market environment stimuli which influence HE consumer choice behaviour.

The consumer behaviour Black Box model (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy, 2014) (Chapter 4) provides a well-established model of the stimuli that enter the black box where consumer decision-making takes place, and therefore an adapted version of this model to match the requirements of the HE consumer behaviour context is presented in Figure c.1.

The stimuli listed in the first box of the model cover the environment, in this case, the HE market environment. Replacing the list of environment stimuli from the original Black Box model are factors which emerge from the review of prior research presented in this text, with some stimuli retained from the original model.

First, globalisation is an important feature of the environment in this new model, because choices are now taking place in a global context, which has resulted in the opening up of new markets and increasing student mobility. Globalisation is linked also to internationalisation which defines the way different cultures respond to increasing globalisation, through opening up borders or universities working in partnership with other HE providers. Supply and demand also feature in the environment box, because changes in supply and demand are linked to changes in funding and recruitment in different countries around the globe. These

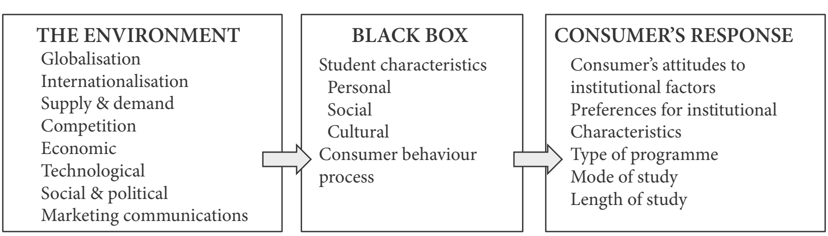

FIGURE C.1 *The higher education consumer behaviour Black Box model*

Source: The authors, based on Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy (2014).

pressures are different from one country to another (see Chapter 3) with a focus on in-bound international students to Anglophone countries, and managing a rise or fall in birth rates, together with changes in legislation and political climate in many countries, particularly developing countries. These factors contribute towards increasing competition between institutions to recruit the best students worldwide, which is also included in the list. Finally, economic, social and technological factors are included in the original Black Box model (see previous chapter), and marketing communications is an adaptation of promotion which is also in the original model, but are stimuli which relate specifically to HE consumer choice.

In the second part of the model, student characteristics and the consumer behaviour process are listed, which take place within the black box itself. Both these elements of the model are discussed in previous chapters. Student characteristics are: personal, social and cultural and are analysed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3; the consumer behaviour process is examined in Chapter 4, but for the purposes of this model this process takes place inside the black box and is therefore not articulated – it is a hidden process in this model.

The final box is the student consumer's response, and similar to the original Black Box model this final stage covers the consumer's attitudes to HE and to characteristics and features of HE as well as student-consumers' preferences. These are new responses – not reflected in the original Black Box model – but are based on the analysis of institutional characteristics discussed in the previous chapter. One aspect of HE consumer choice which is not accounted for in the Black Box model is searching behaviour, and the selection of a preferred option. (The weaknesses of the Black Box model were summarised in the previous chapter.) The Black Box model, however, is for managers of consumer behaviour and marketing rather than a model for the choosers – it provides insight into the contextual influences on the choice, and outlines the possible responses of the chooser. The following section discusses the Stimulus Response model which deals with the search process aspects of HE consumer choice.

HE consumer choice process model

The second model which has considerable relevance for HE consumer choice is the Stimulus Response model (Vrontis, Thrassou, &

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Melanthiou, 2007; Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; El Nemar & Vrontis, 2014; Kotler et al., 2014). The process of buying is a long one, and is much more than the "purchase" decision itself (Kotler et al., 2014). The model (explained in Chapter 4) has five stages, but there is no suggestion that buyers should always complete all the stages. For HE consumer choice behaviour a revised and adapted Stimulus Response model is presented in Figure c.2.

The first stage in this model is the recognition by the potential student applicant of the need to make a decision or choice about HE, choosing a subject major, or choosing a college, or university (need to make an HE choice). This can be in response to outside stimuli, such as teachers, family, personal ambitions and aspirations and perhaps in the context of the stimuli shown in the Black Box model for HE. Perhaps an event such as an open day or HE awareness event provides a stimulus. Once the chooser has recognised this need, then she might search for and collect more information, or perhaps pay more attention to other stimuli such as brochures and websites to find out more about HE in general or programmes and institutions more specifically. These sources can be more formal but also personal such as friends and family. At the next stage the chooser begins to narrow down the choices to arrive at a short-list of alternatives. This can be a formal process such as the need to find a maximum of five universities for a formal application procedure, or the need to limit the number of visits to campuses. For some this is a quick process because of the search approach or because of an early decision, for others is might be a challenging task.

The "choice of HE" stage in the process is a significant one for choosers of colleges and universities and that point is often not reached until the student has gained entry after securing the required grades. Whereas with other choices the purchase itself might be a quick process, for HE it can take up to a year or more for that stage to be completed – or it could happen in one day following a late application. For consumer behaviourists and marketers, that is not the end of the process – the final stage is a critical one. The post-hoc justification (Hemsley-Brown, 1999) stage

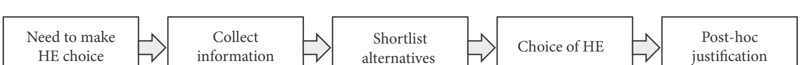

FIGURE C.2 *The Stimulus Response model of HE consumer behaviour process*
Source: Hemsley-Brown (1999); Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, & Piercy (2014)

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provides powerful justification for the chooser herself so that she is satisfied with her choice, whether it was the first option or a less favoured one. This stage helps to resolve any cognitive dissonance (Kotler et al., 2014) caused by having to reach a compromise. The post-hoc justification stage in the process is important for marketing communications because good word-of-mouth is important, and if the final choice does not meet expectations this can have a disastrous impact for the institution. Hemsley-Brown (1999) explains that when choosers reassure themselves about making a good choice of college, they often exaggerate some aspects of the institution to boost their confidence in the decision, and this contributes towards biased information – both positive and negative information about the college. Student choosers also use the marketing information offered by the institution to provide the justification they need to boost their confidence in the choice they have made (Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

It is important to stress that HE consumer choice decisions are frequently not economically rational decisions, and many students will not go through a comprehensive search for information and evaluate their search findings. For example, a student might wish to follow the choice of a sibling, or a friend, or the preferences made by her family at an early stage – such as going to her father's *alma mater*, or to a specific Ivy League institution, without conducting a full search. Therefore, this model is a guide and students might repeat searches and evaluation stages, or miss them out altogether (Kotler et al., 2014).

HE consumer choice research model

The third model is a proposed model devised by the authors of this book for conducting research to test the importance of a range of antecedents of HE choice, based on the evidence and analyses set out in previous chapters. This model reflects the overall conclusion that personal characteristics (Chapter 2) and group characteristics (Chapter 3) shape attitudes to institutional characteristics (Chapter 4) (See also Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). These characteristics and attitudes are indicative of, and contribute to, a full range of segments in the HE market, and they are therefore associated with, or relate to, the likelihood of choosing particular types of institution. This proposed model is presented in Figure c.3.

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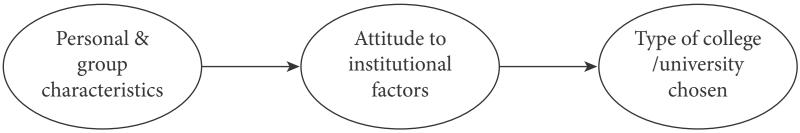

FIGURE C.3 *The Simple Research model of HE consumer choice of institution*
Source: The authors.

The model shows that personal characteristics and group characteristics are the starting point for the research model.

Personal characteristics are not in the control of marketers, and yet they influence choices quite powerfully, as shown in prior research. These factors, it is proposed, have an influence or are associated with attitudes to institutional factors, which are shown in the second part of the model. The outcome variable in this case is type of institution since much of the research has focused on variations of this factor. The types of institution have typically been prestigious institutions in prior research, but the range could be based on ranking, mission, location or even size variables. So, the proposed model for testing predicts that personal and group characteristics are related to attitudes to institutional characteristics, and attitudes to institutional characteristics are related to the outcome, which is a choice of a type of institution. (Some research has also been conducted which focuses on choosing to study in HE or not to progress to HE, as an outcome or dependent variable.)

In order to operationalise the Simple Research model of HE consumer choice of institution, this model has been expanded in Figure c.4

Personal and group characteristics of consumers

A critical analysis of the literature presented by the authors in Chapter 2 reveals people make different choices throughout their lifetime, and at different life stages they will have different personal circumstances which can lead to different priorities. Factors such as gender, age, lifestyle, income, social status, geographical and cultural factors are known to influence the choices consumers make and the process they go through to make choices. These variables are the basis of market segmentation, and they have a powerful impact on

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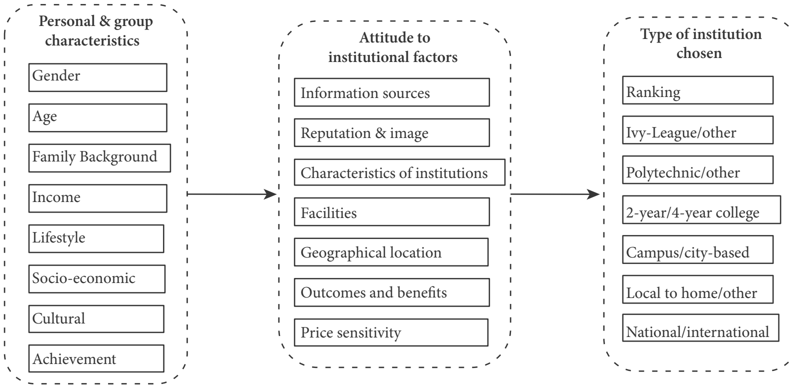

FIGURE C.4 *The Research model of HE consumer choice of institution*
Source: The authors.

attitudes to a range of products and services, including HE. The factors included in the model are first, gender, which influences attitudes to some aspects of HE, which in turn can influence the overall choice of institution. Findings show that age is a particularly differentiating variable in terms of attitudes to institutional factors, and to choice of institution overall, for example age can influence choice of the location of an institution as well as choice of study mode. Other variables included in the model are family background, including whether parents are graduates, and family income, and lifestyle factors. Group factors, which are very powerful, especially socio-economic-status, and culture, impact on attitudes to institutional characteristics quite markedly in some cases, and result in students from different social backgrounds and cultural groups making very different choices of HE. There is considerable concern expressed by some researchers about the different choices made by lower socio-economic groups, and first generation immigrant groups, particularly in terms of choice of more prestigious institutions. The final variable is achievement, which covers the broader issue of entry qualifications and school achievement prior to HE. This was expressed quite forcefully by some authors (e.g. Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013), and is arguably a key antecedent to attitudes to institutional factors and also to final choice of institution. The model is intended to illustrate a proposed relationship between these variables and the variables

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listed in the next part of the model, institutional variables (which are discussed in the next section).

Institutional influences on HE consumer choice

The variables listed in the second part of the model are based on the headings used to categorise organisational influences in the previous chapter where the extant literature was examined. These are attitudes to information sources (types such as web-based, open days, brochures etc.); reputation and image; characteristics of institutions including research profile, programmes and facilities; geographic location including close to home, distance from home and overseas; outcomes and benefits, particularly job related issues such as likelihood of employment, career opportunities and expected earnings; finally price sensitivity which relates particularly to fees but also to cost of living in the local area.

The evidence in terms of how far these variables directly influence HE consumer choice is varied, and to some extent these have not been widely tested – in some cases perhaps they were the subject of only one or two studies. Research on these factors is by no means comprehensive or consistent. Some papers which focused on specific variables such as facilities (Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003) also concluded that positive attitudes to facilities is not a key determinant of college choice compared with other variables such as reputation and career opportunities. Therefore the likelihood of a positive relationship between the variables listed is relatively low, except for perhaps reputation and career related variables, but nonetheless this approach could potentially provide a much more structured and evidence-based view of different segments in the HE market in relation to different types of institutions. Each of the variables in this part of the model needs to be tested to establish whether there is a relationship with the variables in the first part of the model.

Market segmentation in HE

Finally, following the presentation of models for HE consumer behaviour which seek to model the context of HE consumer choice, the HE consumer choice process, and a research model for testing antecedents

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to HE consumer choice decisions, it is important to return to the topic of market segmentation. Market segmentation is central to HE consumer choice. Segmentation and targeting emerges, time and again, as an explanation for the wide differences between students in terms of the choices they make, and the wide variety of institutions which are available. One reason for the differences in students' choices is that the HE market is not homogenous – it is divided into segments of students with different values, needs, expectations and preferences.

Some support is provided for this claim based on, for example, the concerns expressed by many authors about the limited number of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who gain access to top institutions (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). More specifically Hemsley-Brown (2015) confirms this argument based on results from a large study in the UK. Following Binary Logistic Regression modelling, she found that four key variables are strong predictors for attending a prestigious (Russell Group) university: private "schooling", high "entry scores, age (under-19) and non-widening participation status" (non-disadvantaged), "predict the likelihood of attending a Russell Group university in 70% of cases" (p.398). This demonstrates that a specific profile or segment of the market is attracted to, and gains entry to, this type of university. Aside, for a moment, from concerns we might raise about equal access – this does support the notion of market segments with specific needs and profiles, within the HE sector, and institutions that have a particular mission and remit to meet the needs of some kinds of students. Specific types of universities and colleges are attractive to different segments in the market. For a public sector good such as education, this phenomenon continues to raise equity concerns, but it is nonetheless the way a market operates. Hemsley-Brown (2011, p. 122) observes that "despite pressure for the HE system to be more inclusive, a free market approach exacerbates the inequalities that consumers bring to the market". To change this would require a totally different form of resource allocation, not unlike a command economy "where both prices and quantities are controlled by the state" (Brown, 2011, p. 11).

In a market, a targeted marketing strategy can work effectively to ensure that the needs of a narrow or wider range of segments are identified and met – through offering a range of programmes, facilities and other benefits to meet their needs. Seeking to ensure that all types of

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institutions have access to, or attract, an equal or proportional share of all students without bias in terms of their profile is simply against the way a market works. But, a target marketing strategy could support that aim if different segments in the market are identified and matched with a variety of institutional factors and benefits with a portfolio of offerings to a number of segments.

Finally, the argument that the HE market is segmented creates and dilemma for educators. Many authors who focus on personal characteristics and HE consumer choice raise deep concerns about access to high quality HE for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and argue for equal access for everyone regardless of social status, culture, ethnicity, race or religious affiliation. Universities and colleges are therefore faced with a substantial task in finding markets which cut across the cultural and social divide. Perhaps expecting students to come from all socio-economic backgrounds and cultures in any one institution, or on any one programme, is a very high ideal, but institutions can and do seek to create a variety of forms of delivery, types of programmes, subject majors and locations of deliver to try and capture the interest of a wider group of students. To target the high quality group of mature students might require a different approach, different marketing communications and marketing messages, as well as different study approaches, with more emphasis on careers, mode of study and payment options, compared with a programme offered to a more traditional group of young post-high school students. Continuing to question why the student mix in any institution is not broad and balanced across all demographic groups seems to be a naïve question, however morally responsible it might seem to be. It denies the obvious existence of segments in the HE market which almost everyone is fully aware of in the commercial sector. Everyone knows the segments exist, yet there is an urgent need to use that knowledge together with insights on HE consumer choice behaviour to create a more balanced and equitable market in HE, through more sophisticated segmentation and targeting.

Critical summary

The final chapter sums up the wealth of empirical findings gained from the substantial research on HE choice and sets the stage for the further

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development of research in the field of HE consumer choice behaviour. Following critical appraisal these findings evoke some further reflections about the nature of the field of HE consumer choice behaviour and about areas of study that need further investigation in the future.

First, every field of study needs an academic legitimacy that will allow it to be taught and studied in an HE institution. A debate about this legitimacy leads us to mull over the scholarly identity and boundaries of any field of study. In this sense, one may question the distinctive nature of the HE consumer choice behaviour field, claiming that the essentials and practices of consumer behaviour are commonly found in a wide range of different organisations and occupational sectors. To contradict this incorrect view (in the authors' opinion) it is necessary to demonstrate the distinctive features of HE institutions and the HE sector in terms of purposes, structures, work processes and the like. In the authors' view, HE is different from other sectors, even other public sectors, in terms of its technology (instruction, research), careers, work-day, activities and so forth. This legitimates the establishment of a distinctive field of consumer behaviour named HE consumer behaviour.

Yet, what would be the purposes of establishing this research as a distinctive field? Oplatka (2010) analysed the field of educational administration and proposed six legacies the field leaves behind after several decades of scholarly and empirical activities. Using the typology of legacies may support the task of probing into desirable future directions of HE consumer choice behaviour. Thus, the first legacy – empirical – encourages researchers to extend their areas of study in order to better understand choice factors, contextual determinants, and decision-making processes among prospective students. For example, the current research has paid very scant attention to school leavers who decided not to apply for any HE institution; what are the factors affecting young people who have passed the final school exams (e.g. GCSE) successfully to choose a non-academic pathway to a career? What can be learned from their decision about HE choice and decision-making? In contrast, the research offers almost nothing about those who have decided to study a particular subject many years before they applied entry into HE, i.e., those whose HE choice process was very short because they had already made a solid decision about the department (and sometimes, the university) they would like to attend without considering other options at the time of their application.

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The second legacy – the practical – relates to applied knowledge produced in any field of study for the use of the field practitioners. Thus, assuming that HE consumer choice research is intended to guide HE marketers who are engaged in attracting and recruiting students to their university/college, and to prospective students who are engaged in the HE choice process, researchers should develop applied knowledge that will help the practitioners and the students to solve problems effectively, and equip them with "how-to-do-it" models and tools. For example, one of the future purposes of HE consumer choice behaviour research could be to equip prospective students of all ages with a path model that will help them make an effective choice decision based on many personal and institutional characteristics.

The third legacy – the evaluative – refers to researchers' evaluative analyses of policymaking, reforms and government legislation. In this sense, researchers could evaluate the influence of new policies in HE upon the process of HE choice in terms of efficiency, moral consequences, social gaps and so on. They might ask whether a certain reform increases or decreases the opportunities for disadvantaged students to choose prestigious universities and to what extent a new policy promises to improve the information available for those living in poor communities.

The fourth legacy – training – refers to the utility of the knowledge produced in the field for the training of HE marketers and prospective students. This knowledge might be used to train prospective students, for example, whose parents have never studied in HE institutions to better choose their academic department and institution. It could also be used by trainers of future HE marketers to acquaintance them with the complexity of choosing HE institutions and the many variables affecting this process.

While the fifth legacy – ideological – is of little relevance to the field of HE consumer choice behaviour, the final one – critical – has been used to analyse the current research on HE choice throughout this book. This refers to the adoption of critical points of view towards phenomena related to HE choice such as inequality, injustice, inequity and other social and emotional biases embedded in the HE choice process and HE policies. The reader is encouraged to adopt this view when studying, analysing and researching HE consumer choice behaviour, or applying the principles from the findings from research in the field.

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