



University and course choice

Implications for positioning, recruitment and marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – Higher education environments have become increasingly competitive and institutions have to compete for students in the recruitment markets. With the introduction of student fees, it is hypothesised that potential applicants to HE will increasingly become consumerist. The research upon which this paper was based was aimed at finding out the factors students consider important in their decision making related to choice of university and courses of study.

Design/methodology/approach – Five sixth form schools and colleges in the Southampton University Partnership Scheme participated in the study. Three hundred and eighty seven students (186 male and 201 female) voluntarily participated. The study involved a survey questionnaire based on a 10 point Likert scale and included 35 university choice factors which students were to rank accordingly. It also included 10 items similarly ranked to identify factors influencing university subject or course choice. Simple descriptive statistics were used to identify the factors students consider most important in their choice and decision making.

Findings – Two key signals have been identified. First is that, students seem to be adopting a consumerist approach to their HE decision making. The importance attached to labour market motives in terms of employment and career prospects significantly outweigh those related to pursuing HE on the basis of subject interest and a love for the subject. Second is that as a result of this, students consider programme and price related issues as more important than other elements of universities marketing mix.

Research limitations/implications – There are no claims for generalisability of findings from this research on account of the small sample of participants and the use of convenience sampling employed in the study. However, the findings generally support what is already known about factors influencing university choice and go beyond to show signals of change within the undergraduate recruitment market.

Practical implications – The findings have implications for university positioning in a diversifying recruitment market, and for a reconsideration of marketing and recruitment strategy at institutional levels.

Originality/value – The paper identifies signals of a changing undergraduate recruitment market and notes the implication this has on recruitment and marketing activities for institutions intending to position or reposition themselves in the highly competitive markets.

Keywords Universities, Recruitment, Marketing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The HE environments in most developing countries have become competitive and institutions increasingly have to compete for students in the recruitment markets (James *et al.*, 1999). A useful way to gain understanding of these recruitment markets is to have a clear grasp of the choice and decision making processes of intending applicants. There is however an insufficient research basis upon which we can build that understanding. This paper aims specifically at answering a deceptively simple



question: what are the factors that influence sixth form pupils in England to choose a university and the courses they intend to study?

The paper argues that knowing the reasons applicants choose universities and courses of study is central to developing institutional positioning in an increasingly competitive HE environment. Hirsch (1976) has argued that HE has become a positional good in which some institutions and degrees they offer are seen, in the eyes of students, parents and employers as offering better social status and lifetime opportunities than others. In addition, the recently announced introduction of student fees in HE may result in greater consumerist behaviour by applicants were the issue of “value for money” may begin to become a big part of applicants’ decision making.

The paper thus begins with a brief reflection of the theoretical constructs of choice and decision making in HE, institutional positioning, and summarises available empirical evidence in the field of choice in HE. It then explores the research methods used to collect data. The findings of the research are then presented followed by a discussion of implications at both operational and strategic marketing levels in universities seeking to position themselves securely in the competitive recruitment markets of HE.

Theoretical constructs

Choice and decision making in HE is an area of growing research interest primarily because HE has been transformed from a domesticated, centrally funded non marketised entity to a highly marketised and competitive environment (Soutar and Turner, 2002). On a global scale, this transformation has been driven by world economies which have tended to embrace the idea of the market forces (Mazzarol, 1999). At country or national levels, expansion, diversification and growing competition have been identified as the “overarching forces” driving the marketisation of HE (Smith *et al.*, 1995). In expanded systems of HE, in which institutions are increasingly being required to shed off the “spending model” and developing business models which demonstrate “balanced corporate books” (Clarke, 2003), and in which there is a huge diversity of HE products developed to cater for an increasingly diverse HE market, students now have a wide range of options from which to choose and have to undertake complex decisions in order to make the right choices.

Choice is an iterative concept (Foskett, 1999) which is clearly a complex and multifactorial process involving a wide range of influences that bear upon a decision. Early structural models (Gambetta (1996), Roberts (1984) and Ryrle (1981) explain choice in the context of institutional, economic and cultural constraints imposed upon choosers whose decisions can be predicted along socio-economic, cultural and ethnic lines. Such models have been used to predict and explain participation and progression of students into HE. The central argument here is that choice is not a rational process. Economic models of choice such as those developed by Becker (1975) have been developed to counter this argument and are based on assumptions that students make rational choices based on precise or imprecise calculations of the relative rates of returns associated with participating in HE. A third group of models are based on the importance of personality and subjective judgment in the decision-making process. Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) for example have argued that “choice is a rational process that is constrained by a realistic perception of opportunities and shaped by individual

personality” (Payne, 2003, p. 13). Hemsley-Brown (1999) has endorsed this view in her study in which she concluded that while pupils often give utilitarian reasons for making choices, these were usually filtered through layers of preconceptions emanating from influences in family background, culture and life history. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) have developed an integrated model which brings together elements of these three models in which they argue that while choice is never a completely rational action, it is nonetheless not irrational or random and involves three broad elements of the context of choice, the key choice influencers and the choosers themselves into a complex dynamic in which decision making becomes a reflexive process. In this paper, choice will be defined as an expression of preferences that exist at a particular moment of the decision-making cycle of the student.

Decision making is broadly seen as a problem solving process undertaken by applicants in the process of making choices. Models of decision making have been developed around what is commonly called the purchase behaviour of consumers. Purchase behaviour is generally seen as encompassing a series of stages including need arousal, information search and evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and the post purchase feeling (Kotler, 2003). Chapman (1986) was amongst the first to apply buying behaviour theory to education suggesting that in selecting an institution or subject of study, students and their parents will pass through a number of uniquely definable stages. The stages include.

Pre-search behaviour

This stage involves early thoughts about their future where students passively register the existence of information about HE to which they are exposed. Crucially, institutions need to capitalise on this early decision making as some of the lasting attitudes and views are often developed during this stage. Maintaining an institutional presence in the passive minds of choosers may be a useful strategic option for institutions seeking to develop their recruitment markets.

Search behaviour

At this stage, applicants have already made a short list of potential providers and begin using a variety of sources of information to make up their minds while looking for data relating to a wide range of decision criteria. The key for institutions here is to know when this happens among groups of students and to maximise information opportunities to facilitate the search process.

Application stage

Students at this stage submit their applications to the selected institutions. Dealing with applications as swiftly as possible, and developing strategies to keep applicants “warm” during the time between an offer and registration are considered the vital marketing activities related to this stage. “In a market . . . those that are seen to provide a high standard of customer care and respond quickly to communications will undoubtedly gain an advantage” (Sargeant, 1999, p. 221).

Choice decision

This marks the acceptance of the offer by the student. Because acceptance are often non contractual in education, students tend to make multiple offers. Institutions which

maintain dialogue with those it has offered places help to seal a psychological bond between the applicant and the institution.

Registration

Finally the applicant turns up for registration, but often some turn the offer down after a few days in the institution. This equates with the early post purchase feelings applicants often have at the time of committing themselves to the institution. Many universities put up exciting fresher's weeks with a variety of support services marketing to the needs of students as far as possible.

Clearly a sound grasp of the above ideas is a necessary first step in developing a recruitment strategy that allows the institution to compete favourably in the recruitment market. Seeking to know the reasons students choose the institution provides a solid foundation for building this understanding and for positioning the institution strongly in the competitive recruitment market.

Positioning the institution

Consumers in HE now exist in positional market, where institutions compete for the best students while the applicants compete for the most preferred institutions. No institution can be excellent at everything, nor can any single institution pander to needs of all applicants. Universities in this environment need to play to their strengths or situate themselves around aspects for which they can become excellent. Dibb (1997) has defined positioning as:

The process of designing an image and value so that customers within target segments understand what the company or brand stands for in relation to its competitors (in Wilson and Gilligan, 2002, p. 302).

Positioning thus involves three elements of developing an institutional brand or image, deciding on the market segments to serve and developing a communication strategy that accentuates the institutional capability to deliver to this market. Understanding choice and decision making of applicants feeds into this institutional positioning strategy through a clear identification of both the reasons for purchase behaviour of applicants.

Following is a review of available empirical evidence in this area of research.

Research evidence in HE choice and decision making

Broadly, there are three levels at which choice and decision-making research in HE has been conducted. First is the global level, which shows why students choose to study abroad. Second is a national level where students' choice of university is the main focus. The third level which has received relatively little attention is the choice of courses of study.

On a global level, student migration and study abroad has become a multi billion pound business matched by huge investment especially among western countries. Zimmerman *et al.* (2000) has identified "push and pull" factors which operate along the students' decision-making process in the international market. Others such as Dreher and Poutvaara (2005) have suggested that economic and cultural forces play an important role in shaping the international students migration markets. Overall, push factors tend to be related to existing barriers to educational attainment in countries of

origin, lack of career opportunities, deteriorating economic standards for example in Zimbabwe and South Africa (Bhorat *et al.*, 2002), dissatisfaction with the political situation including political violence and loss of confidence in the ability of governments to improve living conditions (Dzvimbo, 2003). Pull factors that attract students to specific countries in the developed world include: economic prospects including future employment, safe political and study environments, perceived high educational standards in host countries, the high quality of teaching, opportunities for part time work, opportunities for accessing funding, opportunities for state assisted funding for family members and opportunities for post graduate study (Borjas, 1994).

Choice of HE institution within countries has been a subject of substantial research. In Australia, for example James *et al.* (1999) have found that: field of study preferences; course and institutional reputations, course entry scores; easy access to home and institutional characteristics in that order exert significant influence on applicants' choice of institution. Overall, costs incurred have usually not been a strong influence in applicants' decisions and choice of university. While confirming the above, research in England has added further dimensions. For example, applicants to undergraduate programmes in England consider the teaching reputation of universities as more important than their research profiles (Price *et al.*, 2003). In addition, as a result of the newly introduced HE fees in England, there seems to be greater propensity for students to consider more carefully economic factors such as job opportunities to supplement their incomes, accommodation costs and family home proximity as a fall back in times of distress and financial difficulty (Foskett *et al.*, 2006). This may suggest factors influencing university choice could be turned upside down now that financial considerations are going to be more important to students.

Course of study decisions tend to be closely related to institutional choice decisions. Research in this area has identified a range of factors influencing course preference including: belief that school results will allow entry to the course; the reputation of the course among employers; graduate satisfaction from the course; graduate employment rates from the course; the quality of teaching in the course; approaches to teaching, learning and assessment on the course including opportunities for flexible study (very important to mature students and single parents especially) (James *et al.*, 1999).

Methodological issues

Aim and objectives of the research

The overall aim of the research was to explore the factors which sixth form pupils in England considered important in their choice of university and courses of study. In order to operationalise this broad aim, the study identified the following as its key objectives:

- to uncover the relative importance attached to the factors influencing university and course choice by sixth form students; and
- to investigate the possible implications of the findings to university positioning, marketing and recruitment strategies.

Research population and samples

Because the study was self funded and intended as a pilot for a more encompassing research across schools in England, the size of its population and samples including its overall scope were limited. Sixth form schools were limited to those in the University of

Southampton PGCE secondary partnership programme in the Hampshire County. There are 30 institutions offering sixth form studies including FE colleges and sixth form schools. All of them are mixed sex except one in Southampton. The sample of participating institutions was limited to those institutions in our partnership. This facilitated access and the administration of instruments during normal TP visits. Five of these institutions agreed to participate in the study. There were 465 sixth form students in these five institutions. Of these, 387 comprising 186 male and 201 female students took part in the survey. Thus, a convenience sample of (83 per cent) was achieved for this research.

Data collection and instruments

The principal data instrument was a questionnaire developed around factors known to influence applicants' choice (James *et al.*, 1999; Price *et al.*, 2003). Participants were required to rank 35 factors on a scale of 1 -10 to show the importance they attached to each of them. Ranking a factor as 1 meant that it was considered least important while ranking it 10 meant it was extremely important to the applicant. The factors were grouped into seven categories following Ivy (2001) 7Ps for HE markets. The categories were: place; prominence; prospectus; people; promotion; price and programme factors. This way it was possible to estimate inter and intra-group relationships between the factors. For course choices, 10 factors including interest in subject; institutional and course prestige; employment prospects; and advice from teachers and parents among others, were ranked in the same way. Simple descriptive statistics based on mean, standard deviation and variance were used to estimate differences in the importance attached to the factors. In addition, participants were asked to identify additional factors they had considered in the choice of university and courses not covered in the questionnaires. The questionnaires also solicited biographical information of participants including their sex; age; ethnic origin; subjects studied currently; intended courses and the main reasons for choosing them; parent's academic qualifications; name of selected university and two reasons why university education is important to them.

The findings of the study

Profile of the survey respondents

The sample was biased towards females as one of the participating schools was a single sex girls' school (Table I). In the other schools there was an almost equal gender balance. A very small percentage of respondents are from ethnic minority groups, with most coming from other EU countries, Jamaica and Africa. The sample was evenly balanced in terms of age, with a very small proportion of students in sixth form above 18 years.

Gender (per cent)	Ethnic origin	Age
48 male	10 per cent ethnic minority and 90 per cent British White	17-18 and 2 per cent above 18
52 female	6 per cent ethnic minority and 94 per cent British White	17-18 and 1 per cent above 18

Table I.
Gender, ethnic and age
profile of respondents

Intended fields of study

Field of study intentions generate interesting patterns among this sample of applicants (Table II).

First, there are subjects that maintain a strong gender dichotomy in HE. According to the field of study preferences of this sample, only 1 female applicant indicated she wanted to pursue studies in architecture/building. Similarly, of those who indicated interest in engineering courses, only 6 per cent were females. Economics also remains a strongly male dominated field of HE study. On the other hand, female interest is significantly higher in medical/health studies, while interest in computing studies appears to be relatively evenly spread across the gender divide. Although numbers are small, there is evidence that students are showing interest in combinations of subjects that hitherto were seen as distinctly different by combining subjects such as media studies and arts or science subjects (Foskett *et al.*, 2004).

Relative importance of factors influencing subject choice

Following previous research (Price *et al.*, 2003; Ivy, 2002; James *et al.*, 1999), participants were asked to rank ten factors on scores ranging from 1 to 10 to indicate the extent to which they considered those factors as being important in their choice of subjects of study. For analysis purposes, scores between 7 and 10 were aggregated to indicate very strong influence. Scores between 4 and 6 were aggregated to indicate moderate influence while scores between 1 and 3 were aggregated to indicate weak influence. A mean score was calculated for each aggregate score. Using these mean scores for each factor, clearly career considerations have the greatest impact on

Intended field of study	Samples indicating this choice Numbers	Percent	Gender composition
Architecture/building and planning	9	3	2 per cent female and 98 per cent male
Arts and humanities	53	14	68 per cent female and 32 per cent male
Business and administration	67	18	51 per cent female and 49 per cent male
Economics	11	3	22 per cent female and 78 per cent male
Social science	19	5	62 per cent female and 38 per cent male
Engineering and surveying	36	10	6 per cent female and 94 per cent male
Computing	54	14	42 per cent female and 52 per cent male
Medicine and Health studies	52	14	74 per cent female and 26 per cent male
Law and legal studies	19	5	38 per cent female and 62 per cent male
Veterinary science	9	3	58 per cent female and 42 per cent male
Media study	24		
Science	29	8	41 per cent female and 59 per cent male
Other unique combinations			These included combinations like law and computing; science and media; engineering and computing; Arts and
	4	1	Media studies

Table II.
Field of study choices by gender

students' choice of subject of study at university. All respondents indicated that this factor had a strong or moderate influence on their choice of subject (Table III).

From the above, it is clear that:

- Career opportunities associated with HE study closely followed by realistic consideration of ability and performances in the subjects currently under study exert the greatest influence on subjects students choose to study at university. Mean aggregate percentages for those who indicated that these factors were either a strong or moderate influence were 100 per cent for career influence and 97 per cent for ability and performance in the subject. Thus, students choose subjects they intend doing at university primarily on consideration of future job opportunities and on the basis of their assessed ability in those subjects.
- Teacher influence and interest in the subjects are the third and fourth most powerful influence on choices of university courses by students. The mean aggregate percent influence for those who considered these to be a strong or moderate influence was 95 and 93 per cent, respectively.
- Interestingly, not many students choose courses because they are perceived to be easy. This may suggest that students are anticipating a challenge from the experience of HE rather than a casual "walk in the park". Only a minority 30 per cent consider this to be a strong or moderate influence. Of these, more male students than females seem to be looking for an easy passage through HE.
- Among the external influences, teachers are considered the strongest factor in students' decisions regarding choice of course, while parents are the least important. This agrees with Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) who found that parental influence on schooling decisions seems to wane as the children become older. It also shows that secondary teachers could be universities' greatest allies in helping students decision making about HE study.
- Formal career guidance in schools is considered of much less value in students' HE decision making, especially by boys. This also is in line with Foskett *et al.* (2004) who found that students were more likely to be influenced by factors other than schools' career services in their post 16 decision-making.

Factors	Very strong influence		Moderate influence		Weak influence	
	Male (per cent)	Female (per cent)	Male (per cent)	Female (per cent)	Male (per cent)	Female (per cent)
Interest in subject	58	60	36	32	6	8
Course prestige	38	33	49	32	13	35
Performance in subject	82	76	16	20	2	4
Career opportunities	84	82	16	18	0	0
Staff profile	36	34	38	46	16	20
Easy course to do	11	9	14	26	75	65
Friends on course	28	32	25	37	47	31
Advice from teachers	59	64	37	30	4	6
Advice from parents	12	24	25	38	63	38
Advice from careers	24	33	27	38	49	29

Table III.
Relative importance of
factors influencing
subject choice

- Based on mean aggregate percentages, the relative importance of the above factors can be shown in Figure 1.

Factors influencing university choice

Following Ivy (2002), sixth form students were asked to rank on a 1-10 scale the importance of 30 factors to their decision making in choosing a university. The thirty factors were classified into 7 categories and mean scores and standard deviations for each category were computed. Results are summarised in Table IV.

The relative strength of these factors in the decision making of students’ choice of institution is shown graphically in Figure 2.

Programme, price, place and prominence factors seemed to be the most important in determining students’ choice of university for their HE study. Broadly, this confirms Ivy’s work on students’ choice of MBA programmes, although some differences in the prioritisation of elements within the broad factors were noted. The following points can be noted:

- Taking 5.5 as the mid point on a ten point Likert scale, three of the seven factors had a mean score lower than this mid point. It can be assumed that promotion, people and prospectus elements do not have a great influence on the choices students make about where to study for their HE. This is an indictment on institutions which spend huge sums in advertisements and promotion activities to lure students to their institutions. However, this does not mean that such activities should be discontinued, but that a refocusing of strategy to reflect the real concern of applicants could help institutions reposition themselves in the recruitment market.
- Among elements included in Programme factors, field of study and details of course, information appear to exert the greatest influence on university choice.
- Price elements which had the greatest impact on university choice included considerations students give to regional economic job market issues such as availability of part time work and general costs of living. The tendency to avoid London and the preference shown for institutions up north suggest that these factors were uppermost in students’ decision-making frameworks.
- Issues of institutional prominence maintain fairly a high profile in students’ decision-making. Of critical importance is the overall reputation of the institution and staff credentials. Students however seem to be less influenced by press reviews and institutional web site information in the university choice decisions.

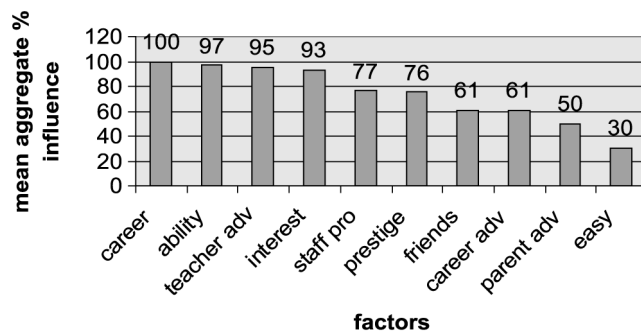


Figure 1.
Relative importance of factors influencing course choice

Factors and key constituent elements	Mean	SD
Programme (field of study, courses, majors, course structure and degree organisation)	7.8	0.93
Price (fees, flexibility in payment, effort needed to qualify, opportunities sacrificed, distance from home, transport and living costs, opportunities for part time work)	7.5	0.92
Promotion (advertising in local and national press, publicity about academic research, publicity about teaching excellence, electronic media and marketing communications)	4.8	0.96
People (gender composition, tutors credentials, alumni and personal contacts, graduate profiles)	4.5	0.91
Prospectus (the university prospectus, programme booklets)	4.6	0.94
Prominence (institutional reputation, staff reputation, press reviews by national news papers, institutional websites, league tables)	6.1	0.91
Place (campus accommodation, degree credits, facilities, racial diversity, residential requirements, class sizes)	6.2	0.93

Table IV.
Mean scores for university choice factors

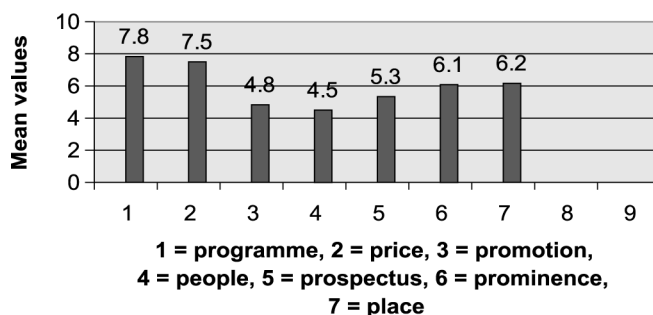


Figure 2.
Mean scores for university choice factors

Discussion and implications

Sample size and the convenience sampling strategy employed place considerable limits on the generalisability of the findings of this research. Further, the data obtained could have been subjected to quantitative analysis using inferential statistical tools to investigate gender and ethnic differences in the choice processes of sixth form pupils. Nevertheless, using simple descriptive statistics, the findings broadly confirm what is already known about choice of university. There are however some important messages identified in this research which need highlighting.

Dynamics of the HE recruitment market

Broadly, the HE undergraduate recruitment market reflects a gender balance between male and female applicants. A relatively small proportion of this market comprises of a sizeable population of ethnic minority applicants which itself is reflective of broader changes in population dynamics of the country. This has implications for senior

managers and student recruiters for developing market segmentation strategies that recognise this growing diversity of the HE recruitment market. Perhaps, the traditional approaches to recruitment which were based on “a one size fits all concept” (Maringe 2006) need to give way to approaches which recognise not only the increasing diversity of the market but also the greater involvement of applicants in the choice processes resulting from the inevitable competitive HE environment.

Equally, while participation by gender in different HE fields of study is fairly evenly distributed, there are areas which have remained strongly male or female dominated. Female participation in engineering and economics fields remains low. However, females have a significant dominance in the medical and health studies field. This has implications for institutions which intend to position themselves more prominently in these fields of study in terms of deconstructing the boundaries between subject areas and developing equity in the distribution of opportunity for greater equality in participation across the gender lines.

Female and male students appear to have significantly different responses to the key sources of advice about HE study. Parents, teachers and careers guidance provide the formal platform for advice to students about HE choices and decisions. However, male students consider all three sources as relatively unimportant to their decision making compared to their female counterparts. Reasons for this difference are unclear, but could be related to the fact that at this stage, boys generally desire to demonstrate greater independence in decision making than girls who are more concerned with building and strengthening relationships which help them survive in what they may perceive as a male dominated environment (Foskett *et al.*, 2004).

Utilitarianism as a dominant driver of HE choice

The three top reasons students choose courses and subjects of study are no longer related to intrinsic motives of interest and love for the subjects of study. Selection of subjects of study shows greater sensitivity towards anticipated benefits as reflected in a keenness to align HE study to potential career paths. It may suggest that students are no longer passive choosers, but are becoming increasingly involved in calculating anticipated rates of returns to the investment they put into HE study (Hesketh, 1999). This may be due to the increasing focus on education funding for which students are soon to become more responsible for than in the past. Implications arising from this could include the need for universities to re-examine their strategic missions to encompass student expectations in the employment and job markets both during and after qualifying. One university in the South has repositioned itself as “a University for Jobs (2006)” and anecdotal evidence suggests that they have turned themselves from being a recruiting institution to a selecting university in the last few years. Its headline message for new applicants is summed up as follows: “It (the university) offers a unique combination of high academic standards and employment success ...” The need to demonstrate employment rates from different subjects becomes a key strategy designed, not only to help students’ decision making, but to act as a powerful promotional tool which addresses real and current student motives for engaging with HE.

Mixed subjects combinations

Although the proportion of students indicating an intention to study unique subject combinations is relatively lower than those choosing the traditional subject,

opportunities exist for universities which may seek to position themselves in developing subject study combinations reflecting the diversity of contemporary careers. Career development in the work place today places great emphasis on specialisation. One student told us that she wanted to become a science journalist and was hoping to study for a degree in science and media studies offered in one of the universities. Positioning the university in such new areas will certainly be attractive to an apparently growing student recruitment market.

Need to review university promotional tools and messages

The fact that students do not consider traditional university promotional tools such as the websites, prospectuses and other written material as playing a significant role in their choice and decision making may suggest a range of things. It could be that they find the information provided through these channels as inadequate or misleading (Ivy, 2002); it may be that students just do not find these sources as trustworthy for their decision making (Bennet, 2006); it could also be that the internet is assumed to be widely available to everyone when in fact many pupils, especially from disadvantaged communities either have limited, or unreliable or intermittent access to the internet. This suggests that universities may need to consider other ways for promoting themselves to the recruitment market. One university in the South has developed a student ambassador programme in which every applicant is paired to a trained current student who helps to answer any questions the applicant may have from the moment of inquiry to registration. Bennet (2006) has indicated that as a result of this initiative, the university has increased its applicant retention capacity four fold in the last two years. Equally, university promotional messages need to lay emphasis on issues students find most important to them and not issues universities think are most important to students. This research has found that students do not place equal emphasis to the 7P s and due consideration must be given to this in developing institutional information and marketing strategies.

In conclusion, the HE environment has become increasingly competitive and this research has demonstrated that applicants to HE are no longer passive consumers in this environment. Applicants are becoming discerning choosers in the HE marketplace. Signals for change in the choice behaviour of applicants can be clearly seen in an increasing focus towards return to investment decisions, a focus on university as preparation for careers and not as a place to pursue the love for scholarship. Equally the emphasis students show for programme and price related information as being indispensable for their decision making signals this growing consumerism in HE choice. Universities seeking to reposition themselves in this changing HE environment need to demonstrate sensitivity to these developments.

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