

The Uncomfortable Mix of Seduction and Inexperience in Vocational Students' Decision-Making

Introduction

Following its recent expansion, it has been argued that UK Higher Education (HE) is becoming 'marketized' (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Molesworth, Scullion, Nixon, 2010) where many universities must compete to attract students. This apparent move from 'selection' to 'recruitment' (Foskett, 2010) foregrounds a consumer-like student decision-making process that may also raise concerns about how exactly students choose HE. For example, they may narrowly look for a return on their investment, rather than for the personal transformation that may come from higher-level study (Maringe, 2006; Calkins & Welki, 2006; The Guardian, 2008; Molesworth, Nixon, Scullion, 2009). Although the exact impact of greater choice and fees on the student-as-customer remains contentious (see Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Barnett, 2010) these changes invite a critical consideration of student decision-making and the role of Higher Education Institute (HEI) marketing.

Even if we must view Higher Education as something to be marketed, it seems clear that it is more like a service than a commodity and the literature suggests that choosing services is more difficult than choosing products (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989; Friedman & Smith, 1993; Crozier & McLean, 1997; Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2006). It may therefore be unreasonable to assume that students choosing a complex service for the first time may easily make rational and informed choices such that an effective market structure is produced – i.e. where the supply of courses meets the demands for skills that young people have researched and fully understood through an assessment of industry demand.

Of course there has also been debate about rationality in consumer choices in general (for example see Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Campbell, 1987; Bettman, Johnson & Payne, 1991). Yet despite this, the continued use of traditional models of decision-making has been justified for examining services by a range of authors (Gabbott & Hogg, 1994; Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2006) including explicitly for HE (Moogan, Baron & Harris, 1999; Moogan, Baron & Bainbridge, 2001; Maringe, 2006) and one result is a focus on *rational* aspects of student choice and on quantitative methods. This leaves a gap, so our aim in this paper is to consider in detail students' lived experiences of choosing a degree in order to inform an understanding of how HEIs might develop responsible marketing approaches.

Our focus is on vocational marketing and media courses as examples of 'educational services' that have grown in response to 'consumer demand' and is based on cohorts of mainly first generation students from a university in the South of England.

Decision-making for Services and Higher Education

From the services marketing literature four inter-linking themes emerge that may help us to understand the student experience of choice: heuristics and satisficing; feelings and emotional aspects of decision-making; attributes and tangible cues, and the importance of other people's advice.

Satisficing - where the first "acceptable" alternative is selected (Zeithaml, 1981:p188) - and heuristics are often used to reduce a large number of apparently similar options quickly. For example, UCAS (UK's Universities & Colleges Admissions Service) (2010) lists over 1500 marketing courses and nearly 2400 media courses from 168

HEIs – more than it might be reasonable to expect students to fully evaluate. From all this choice students need to select up to 5 options. Turley & LeBlanc's (1993) research suggests that consumers seem to narrow down their service choice early on and concentrate their evaluations on a small number and we might wonder if this is the process that students take. One consequence of the inability to make full evaluations is satisficing, and for HEI choice this may apply to some or most of the 5 'chosen'.

This might still seem rational; however feelings and emotional judgements are also noted as significant in service choice (Crozier & McLean, 1997; Oldfield & Baron, 2000) due to the difficulties in understanding 'rational' criteria, for example Crozier & McLean (1997) found that choices were made on the basis of what 'feels right', or what 'will do'. When choosing universities, James (2001) and Reay, Davies, David & Ball (2001) also note the importance of a feeling of 'fitting in'. So there is evidence to suggest an emotional basis for reducing options and choosing a degree.

When examining services, Turley & LeBlanc's research (1993) also found that a relatively small number of evaluative criteria were used, and previous research on university choice confirms the use of limited criteria such as location, league table ranking and reputation (Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Gatfield, Barker & Graham, 1999; James, 2001; Brooks, 2002; Briggs, 2006) as well as the course description. In the absence of information for more complex intangible, credence criteria, other cues are used (Crane & Clarke, 1988). In some service decisions, price can be a cue for quality for example (Zeithaml, 1981) but for UK HE where fees are capped and largely set at the maximum, this is less appropriate. Alternatively quality might be judged instead

by focussing on tangible elements of a service (Zeithaml, 1981). However, James (2001:p5) acknowledges a danger for education that open days and other communication can be “superficial” by focusing on the tangible (e.g. facilities or accommodation) because the most important elements of education cannot be viewed.

All this suggests a key role for ‘other people’ in service choice both as information sources and to help form judgements about criteria (Crane and Clarke, 1988). The experiences of others become more important as they are felt to reduce the perceived risk (Zeithaml, 1981; Murray, 1991). Because it is difficult to get a feel for services, people rely on the experiences of other users (Friedman & Smith, 1993), particularly for professional services (Ettenson & Turner, 1997). Although Brook’s research (2003, 2004) shows the importance of parents and friends in HE choice we may note that these advisers may actually have little or no direct experience of the course or university.

Existing research might therefore suggest that prospective students – particularly first generation – may be easily overwhelmed by the amount of information available. Moogan & Baron (2003:p273) describe them as “often inexperiencedwith neither well-defined choice criteria nor any knowledge of the brands available.” This highlights the need for the institutions themselves to provide effective and possibly unbiased advice. Yet UK HE has been criticised for capitalising on this inexperience by focusing on the fun and lifestyle aspects of student life (Molesworth and Scullion, 2005; Haywood, Jenkins & Molesworth, 2010). This is not just a UK issue, Mazzarol (1998) refers to criticisms of Australian universities’ publicity materials as ‘glossy’ and ‘touristy’ and not encouraging students to engage with the process of choosing an

appropriate course. Kinnell (1998) refers to university promotion as tending to focus more on selling than informing, and; Gatfield *et al.* (1999); Moogan *et al.* (1999) and Briggs (2006) note the absence of key information such as teaching and assessment methods, and details of course modules. Moogan & Baron (2003:p274) refer to 'brochures' being written "at a ...level that is inappropriate and unclear" and Briggs (2006:p718) sees "a 'disconnect' between information supplied" and what potential students require. Such concerns have led to complaints that undergraduates are unclear about their educational choices, and don't know what to look for in HE (Winston, 1997; Baldwin & James, 2000).

It may therefore be difficult for students to understand how studying a subject at one university would be different to studying the same subject elsewhere (Baldwin & James, 2000), and we might expect there to be problems in getting the right match between student and institution (Kinnell, 1998; Baldwin & James, 2000). The result is that students may enter university either with unrealistic expectations (see Joseph, 1998), or without the 'complex expectations' (James, 2001: p3) that might ensure HE quality based on informed consumer choice.

Nevertheless we should not conclude that students have no process for selecting universities. Our aim here is therefore to consider student approaches and to then reflect on the role universities might play in choice-behaviours.

Methods

Much previous research on student choice adopts a quantitative methodology and has focused on Australia or USA, on non-traditional applicants (Reay *et al.*, 2001;

Connor, 2001; Ball, Reay & David, 2002), or on sources of information (Brooks, 2003; 2004). Yet other researchers (Ettenson & Turner, 1997; Lee & Marlow, 2003) have criticised quantitative methodologies for limiting respondents to identifying ‘single cues’ or attributes without allowing full exploration of experiences (Ettenson & Turner, 1997). Such positivist approaches can lead to assumptions that student choice is rational; so Brooks (2002:p221) criticises Moogan *et al.* (1999) for assuming “a rational model of decision-making” in student choice. We therefore use phenomenological methods based on interviews at a post-1992 university on the south coast of England that has recently increased its marketing efforts. The courses we focus on - marketing, journalism and media production - are described by the institution as for ‘new professions’ and this framing as ‘vocational’ may mean that they are perceived as ‘less-academic’ and thus as ‘soft’ subjects (see Luckhurst, 2006 for a discussion on this; also Paton, 2008). Our contribution is to provide insight into how such courses are chosen in the hope of unpacking some of the issues that service choice literature and previous studies on student choice have raised.

We draw from 21 depth interviews with new undergraduates. This was a sub-set of a larger qualitative study of student choice that included 58 students, but our focus here is on those that provided detailed stories about how they chose their degree. These students have all gained better than average ‘A’ level grades and are white, middle class, and from the south of England. Despite government initiatives to widen participation, according to UCAS data (2009) middle class, white students still represent the majority of those attending university. Very few of the students in these cohorts are international. Participants were interviewed by one of 3 researchers who would not be teaching them and interviews took place before much, if any, teaching

had taken place. Interviewing allowed students to direct the focus of the discussion. Consistent with Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, (1989; 1990), the focus was on students' 'lived-experience' of choice with broad open-ended questions based on them recounting their experiences (rather than attitudes or opinions) in as much detail as possible and deciding for themselves the areas and influences which were important to them. Data analysis was undertaken separately by 2 researchers and was consistent with Thompson et al. (1989; 1990) based on a detailed reading of the transcripts to identify global themes.

Findings

These students told us that going to university was 'taken for granted', even amongst first generation students, who formed the majority of our sample, and so the choice was only ever about *where* and *what* to study. They simply explained that 'everybody goes'. In our discussions tuition course fees were not mentioned as a factor in their decisions, perhaps due to the current similarity in fee levels (hence it does not influence choice of course or institution), or because for these affluent students the money was not a significant consideration.

Yet despite the certainty of further study, students seemed to have only a vague idea about what a degree is, what is involved in studying for it, or even what the jobs related to a degree actually entail. They were therefore both certain, and uninformed about HE study and this is perhaps a meta-theme that runs through our analysis. These students are not foolish choosers; they are often quite clear about what they want. Yet it also seems clear that what they want may be at odds with the service a university hopes to offer. For example, where individuals had some sense of the academic

demands of HE, they often rejected these - dismissing what might be considered core aspects of the service offering in favour of a focus on lifestyle and student experience - and in this respect we note caution in applying 'normal' services decision-making models right from the start of our analysis.

We now describe in detail the processes that these students recount, noting what they do and how they experience these things. We do this by considering three stages that capture their decision-making process. However, we present this not as a multi-stage model, but merely as a way to consider key themes related to their experiences.

Choosing a subject area

Our expectation was that choosing the subject of study would be an important and complex process, but this was not quite what we found. For some students there was little indication of prolonged or significant interest in the subject; rather choice was based on an examination of current preferences. Some students described specific people and even conversations as significant in fixing a subject as 'right' for them and therefore solving the problem of HE choice. For example Chloe talked about a conversation she had with her Art teacher at the time of choosing her advertising degree:

She said, 'have you ever thought about advertising?' (because I was always like, I was always looking at like Vogue, [...], and I would always be like browsing) 'Well I think you'd be really good in the ad world.' And I was like 'really?'

The point here is that students could pin the choice of degree to a specific conversation that led to them thinking ‘that will do’. These students don’t then go on to interrogate such possibilities, as we might expect for a high involvement decision, but instead accept that a choice has been made.

Although we might accept that vocational education may be chosen as a way to get into a specific career, some students indicated choice based on an ‘ideal’ view of themselves in the future extrapolated from seemingly transient preoccupations rather than a rational understanding of the job. Hayley provides an example of this construction and how it is linked to her current interests.

Well if I enjoy the media, there’s no reason why I can’t have a career in it. I think my dream job is to have a job on ‘Wish you Were Here’ because I love travelling And I’m pretty passionate about travelling, I’d love to travel and I’m quite talkative as well, and I actually thought I could get paid to do both

Hayley’s concern is for the ‘now’ not the future and she seems naive in her expectations of the employment choices a degree may offer.

For others a subject studied at ‘A’ level, or even just one part of a course, was an obvious source of subject and so career choice. Or part-time work or work placement may be used to construct a desire for a certain future. Again, what struck us was that many of these triggers for 3 years of study were seemingly based on quite limited experiences – for example something that happened at the time a degree course needed to be chosen. There was little extended research or reflection. Leanne provides

one such example as she tells us about the influence of her part-time work selling cosmetics on her decision to study marketing, but seems to make no effort to understand the differences between selling and marketing. Here choice also seems based on what she feels she already knows, not what she would like to become.

I loved feeling like I knew a lot about what I was selling. And so I think marketing, initially when it was mentioned, was appealing to me because I thought: Ah marketing, I love marketing the products that I sell to my customers at the moment, and it's a course that uses the skills that I've already developed.

Whilst this distinction would of course emerge during Leanne's studies, this may be too late should she find that marketing as a subject of study, or even as a profession, is not for her.

In addition, students are quite open and honest about their desire to undertake a degree in order to 'have fun' and in particular this may include rejection of academic content that is seen as difficult and not part of what they imagine undertaking a degree course might be about. So for example Lucy, who chose a media production course, explained:

I'm not majorly academic. I will write an essay if I have..., I will read if I have to read, but it's not something that I strive to do[...] You have to work, its hard, but if you just do it when you get given it then most of the year, you get to run round with the cameras and have fun"

So courses may be chosen for what they *don't* have, as much as for what they do. For example, for these students anything related to science or maths may be rejected. More than this, choice is based on an 'idealised' version of a subject. So rather than consider the specific content of a course, students simply assume that a course will consist of only those things they like doing. This may be more of a problem where, as in these cases, students have not had the benefit of studying a similar subject prior to HE.

Overall, the understanding of subjects chosen was surprisingly limited: sales is equated to marketing; TV presenting to journalism; making ads to producing campaigns. There is little evidence of systematic or rational search for an appropriate degree subject, but rather an internal search of existing preferences to find subjects and then possibly careers which 'seem like fun'. Despite the emphasis in many of these stories on a doing a degree to get a job, we heard no accounts of students exploring reports of skills shortages. So on the one hand students claim to want study that leads to employment, but on the other hand they don't explore what expertise is needed by employers. More worryingly, it seemed that students assumed that the existence of the course meant that there was a demand for graduates in the subject.

Creating a shortlist of institutions

Students may already have a subject in mind before they consider institutions, although this may be modified or refined by looking through a prospectus (where a desire for English becomes journalism and then multi-media journalism, or marketing becomes advertising, for example). A typical pattern is to seek more information on

the universities that offer the course. Published league tables seem to act as a ‘quick’ measure of the quality of a university to reduce the search, but here students may consider employers’ views of the table rather than the detail of the results themselves.

Leanne explains:

“They rank the league table. So I looked at that. Any unis that were falling towards the lower end I sort of just scratched out because I was again thinking from an employer’s point of view. What’s an employer going to think of the uni that I studied at?”

So the league table may simply be taken as a measure of employability, and a way to quickly narrow choices. At this stage, students are looking for ‘easy’ reasons to eliminate universities from their choice. For example Alice explains her use of websites:

So if you can’t find something you’re looking for on the website you just think, ‘oh well forget it, we’ll look at the next one’. Because you know you want to try and find out quickly what university you want to go to.

Students also have expectations of being ‘sold to’ by universities’ marketing material: *“they didn’t really sell it as well”*, Chloe says of one she rejects. And again we noted that students frequently look for fun and enjoyment, often referred to as ‘the experience’: *“they don’t advertise [it] as much fun, I don’t think. It didn’t seem as fun to go to the uni. It seemed a little bit more, not pompous, but along those lines,”*

Leanne explains.

We see the simplicity of the rules they use and these include criteria based on what seem to be very conservative ideas about themselves. In particular location serves an important role in eliminating options, so Duncan describes how he dismisses northern universities:

“I’m not being snobby or upper class but I don’t generally like up North. I’m not a very northern person, there’s something that seems to be about up North that sort of scares me a little bit and makes me a bit insecure”

And Nicola describes how she filters out some universities:

There were some unis where I just like ‘No, I don’t want to go there’..... because I put down something like Northampton which we just didn’t bother visiting because we knew in our minds that I wouldn’t pick that. Because my parents were like, ‘No you wouldn’t like Northampton. It’s a bit of a kind of nothing place’.

This tendency to defer to others as a way of reducing choice will be examined later, but we note the way in which an abundance of choice at this stage means that it is easy and even desirable to eliminate options for quite superficial reasons, related to: league table position, (but not the detail behind it); navigation or content of websites (but in terms of the university’s ‘sales pitch’, not course content), or location (but without actually visiting, and potentially rejecting whole parts of the country as ‘not for me’).

Final decisions

Students then seek to draw up a final shortlist and it may only be at this point that they look more closely at the course and take part in open day visits. This seems to represent the most ‘intense’ part of the decision-making and may result in strong emotions.

What we might consider to be the basis of ‘rational’ choice may only be significant once the options have been narrowed significantly; however we noted that students may be happy to leave much of the information gathering and analysis to others, especially parents. For example Joanne notes the role of her father who accompanied her to the interview and asked about employment and drop out rates and who also provided the ‘rational’ input into the decision:

Well basically he made lots and lots of league tables and combining together in a spreadsheet [...] So the university timetables, he linked them together, cross referenced them ...and which is high, which is lowest and he printed out like reviews from like The Guardian... summarised each university.[...] I guess he was far more pro-active than I was.”

None of the students we spoke to described undertaking such activity for themselves. Instead they found other ways to make sense of their shortened lists. Some aspects of decision-making expressed seemed consistent with recognised decision-making heuristics, for example a low risk strategy being to avoid both the top and bottom range goods on offer. Here a similar judgement is made about academic standing.

These students may reject ‘top’ universities as being ‘too academic’ and also dismiss low ranking institutions as being too desperate to recruit, often based on A level results required. James describes this judgement

“It felt like a good sturdy offer and anything below that was kind of - it was indicative of the course - there was one of them, it was BBC and I kind of assumed that if they only need a C, you know, the intelligence level is not going to be as high.....”

Employment rates also emerged as an important cue for students to judge the course quality. However these were often sourced from the university’s own communication rather than from more independent sources. Finally, when an institution is visited, the appearance of the buildings and facilities seemed to be taken as an indication of course quality. Lucy describes her impressions:

“When we saw it while it was still being kind of refurbished [sic] and they were telling us all the stuff that was going in. It was absolutely mind-blowing the amount of money and equipment.”

Aspects of the course such as approaches to teaching, profiles of academic staff, or the key skills that might be gained, and in many cases even the detail of course content were not discussed by these students. What seemed clear is that they struggled to identify satisfactory criteria that would allow them to be certain of their choices and so relied on a limited set of ‘cues’ and/or the results of parents’ research.

Even at this late stage of the decision-making process some students demonstrated a surprising lack of concern for the importance of the decision, for example by dismissing the need to visit universities. James confessed:

I'd kind of left it a little bit late in all honesty and then I didn't have time to [visit], because I'm quite busy with my various extra things that I do on the side, so I didn't really have time to visit too many.

Students may quickly decide on a course and university from their short-list and then simply seek information that confirms this choice – often from the institution itself. Hayley illustrates this:

I didn't do research as such, it was more, they made it kind of obvious they had a good reputation, because it kept coming up on UCAS as doing all the media courses. And I suppose you do look on the website a bit, I didn't do any in-depth research. And the stuff they give you as well had all the different facts about this award and that award.

Even though UCAS asks for 5 options students may have no intention of going to these alternatives. They hadn't visited them and they were there simply to make up the numbers. Joanne was typical in explaining that: *'I really only put the other universities down just to fill the other places. I don't think I would have gone to any of the other universities to tell you the truth'*.

The students that we spoke to frequently highlighted the importance of the open day as central to making the final decision; however some visited just one university and were happy to be ‘sold to’ on the day. We were surprised at how trusting students were that universities were providing impartial information. It is clear that just as students want promotional material to ‘sell’ them a course, they want to be ‘seduced’ at open days. Emma explains:

“Well when I was here they said it was like the best media school in the UK and that just rang alarm bells. I thought, Well I want to be in Media, it’s the best one in the UK. You can’t go wrong! And they’re not going to lie about it, they have to, it’s obviously all above board.”

Not only did we find that students were often quick to make a decision (and relieved to have done so), but we also found that feelings and emotions were heavily relied on. So at open days perceptions of staff might inform choice. Joanne describes being put off during one visit:

“[the] lecturers were horrible....Yeah just at the open day, from what I gathered from the lecture, they weren’t very helpful at all....., they just stood at the front, did the lecture and then they were like ‘Right goodbye’. They didn’t seem friendly.”

Again, the picture is of inexperienced choosers lacking in ability to analyse the complexity of information and instead satisficing based on often peripheral information.

Students' accounts of choice often included references to how they felt about an institution and what they were looking for was a sense that they 'fitted in' and could easily cope with the course. This suggests conservatism in choice where risks are to be avoided. For example Chloe told us: *"I felt, it was almost. It wasn't a home from home, but I felt comfortable, I thought, you know when you can see yourself somewhere."*

These feelings were important. They were used as a way of confirming a choice after a visit, thus eliminating the need for further information search or evaluation. The rational work on league tables undertaken by parents often seemed to leave the students free to focus more on their feelings. Alice tells us about talking with her mother:

"I told her, you know, I really didn't like the atmosphere here and she understood and everything. So I mean obviously it's to do with the feel of the place."

Visits also focus students' attention on the appearance and layout of the university. For example, some students described a worry of feeling 'lost in a big city'. For many it was important to find somewhere 'safe', and again this meant somewhere familiar. For some this included seeing 'people like me' at open days – white and middle class – but this may be framed as concerns about places where people are 'different from me'.

Several students explained their rather conservative choices based on the idea of 'balance'. This seems to be a strategy for avoiding risk where a choice needs to be made without full understanding of options. Students expressed a fear of a course being too difficult, or a fear of being away from home, but balance this against the need for the right experience (not living at home) and the right qualification (one that will get them a job). This happens in the context of some students having no strong desire for a particular area of study and here it was clear that they chose only reluctantly and even then experienced some angst over their decision. Hayley illustrates the strong emotions this produces:

“Yeah I suppose it was a feeling yeah.....I mean with the course I’m taking a risk, because some people were born knowing what they wanted to do, and I’ve never had that luxury. I’ve never known what I wanted to do, but I think I’ve made the right choice. I hope I have anyway. So I think a feeling is the best way to describe it.”

Students may feel excitement at the prospect of going to university and most we spoke to seemed happy with their choice, but for some this is mixed with a realisation of the implications of their choice that may produce fear. Students taking vocational subjects may recognise that the decision has implications beyond the three years of study. David illustrated this further angst:

I mean I must admit when I was choosing my courses I was a bit panicky about them...Yes, it was all very daunting....and like I say, I didn’t know what I wanted to do, because I was still at the point where I thought you do a

degree, that's what you get your job in and so, you know, this is going to be your life from now on.

Here then we have students with limited experience struggling to account for the decision they have made. The result is often a highly emotional account, mixed with excitement and anticipation, yet for some also daunting. Although students often desire fun and a 'dream' job as a result of taking a course, they may also 'play it safe' when it comes to the course and institution they choose, deferring some responsibility to others and avoiding courses or location that seem unfamiliar or difficult.

Discussion

There may be reason to be disturbed by these accounts. What might be assumed, or hoped to be a highly rational decision is revealed in the experiences of these students to be less so. Or perhaps more generously we might note how students may allow others to make the rational evaluations whilst they rely on their feelings. In these accounts we therefore see students deferring to teachers and parents in particular. Of course this *may* be particular to this group of middle class students whose parents take an increasingly active role in their lives - so-called 'helicopter parents' - (Coughlan, 2008; Fearn & Marcus, 2008; Fearn, 2010) resulting in them being less independent in general.

Students may also expect to be 'sold' to by universities. This is a consumer-like response to choice - a belief that 'to sell' is the purpose of the prospectus, websites and open days - and this supports earlier criticisms of publicity materials (Mazzarol, 1998). As might be expected given a lack of experience in choosing HE, students also

attempt to reduce the possibility of future regret by ‘balancing’ the perceived fears and opportunities related to degree study. This produces conservatism in choice where extremes (of location or of academic difficulty) are avoided.

We heard lots of stories referring to a ‘safe’ choice. These students seemed to favour the familiar (for example ‘people like me’), and to avoid subjects perceived as difficult (instead focusing on ‘things I’m good at’). This echoes work by Reay et al. (2001: p865) who also noted that for ‘privileged’ students ‘low risk universities’ where they see people like them - their “intellectual and social peers,” - are preferred, and Ball et al. (2002) who note that although white students don’t explicitly refer to ethnic mix, they do consider social class or the desirability of similar “intelligence and interests” of other students when choosing HE (p349). So students are actively avoiding aspects of choice that they don’t understand and looking for choices that are psychologically comfortable. Yet degree study might hope to challenge these things.

Whilst the role of feelings in service decision-making, including HE, is already documented, it is perhaps surprising to note the extent to which this occurs for at least some students. This starts with the initial subject choice that may be based on an ideal future job related to current and possibly rather shallow interests. We note that decisions are therefore not based on any substantial understanding of what a job might entail, nor on a detailed understanding of the subject itself. For example they may be based on a desire to present on TV rather than an interest in the complex techniques of camerawork or media theory, or based on marketing-as-personal-selling rather than a desire to understand strategic marketing plans or critiques of consumer culture. Whilst students may of course have these assumptions challenged during their studies, a

concern is that they may end up studying a subject that doesn't really interest them, or which they don't really have the skills or abilities to succeed in, with the inevitable consequence of an instrumental approach, or withdrawal from the course.

Satisficing may also take place. This is perhaps an understandable reaction to the large number of courses which may be perceived as similar (Moogan *et al.*, 1999). Thus in some cases decisions were made on the basis of 'first impressions', other people's views, and on information sourced from the universities themselves. Where courses are discussed with parents and friends, we note that they may have had no direct experience of the service, thus other peripheral aspects such as location frame the advice. Alternative choices may end up being there to 'make up the numbers', echoing Turley & LeBlanc's (1993) research. We note, for example that many UCAS choices aren't even visited. They are not 'real' choices, but simply filling in the form.

The result of all this is that universities may be caught between their need to recruit effectively in order to guarantee funding and their obligations to recruit responsibly. Assumptions that students have chosen rationally – that they fully understand the courses they have applied for – may be unfounded. For vocational universities there is also a difficult issue of academic standards. Students openly talk of preference for 'less-academic' degrees. If universities were to put more emphasis on the academic side of university life, this could be seen as negative by their 'customers' (as described in these accounts). They may of course attract students with different motivations, but we might assume that here the market is long saturated and in marketing terms such a rejection of the desires of your core market in favour of a more competitive one would make little sense.

So does this mean that universities are right to allow students to make choices based on non-academic and even superficial factors? In this case, is the customer to be seen as 'always right'? Or are HEIs colluding with inexperienced student-choosers by appearing to provide 'easy' options that may speak to teenage daydreams rather than challenging prospective students-customers to consider the sort of personal transformation and intellectual development that a degree may preferably be about? Are we therefore left with a gap between what is promoted and what may be actually experienced, with students choosing courses that they think will be easy and fun only to find the reality, and their future job prospects, to be quite different. At the heart of this problem is the fact that much of what we might assume to be core to a degree offering seems missing from both the decision-making process and the information provided to students. We wonder if there are other services that experience and overcome such obvious contradictions, or if such an observation might make us wary of translating service marketing approaches to this sector.

We may be left with a narrative of decision-making that is unlike those established for either products or services and this is perhaps the most significant point of reflection for HE marketers – to simply 'borrow' from established marketing practice may be inappropriate, or worse, may be an act of unreflective reconfiguration of what a degree 'means' in the broader sense. Perhaps the worst outcome is that the 'service' offered by a university may come to reflect that which is promoted and then chosen – 'easy', 'fun' even, but ultimately unchallenging and superficial; stripped of the values that the institution first took to the 'market' (see Paton, 2009; Garner, 2009; Brockes, 2003).

Conclusions

So how might inexperienced student-choosers be encouraged to engage more critically with the HE decision-making process? Briggs (2006:p718) talks of the need for information which might lead to a “better ‘connect’ between student and institution/course”, but detailed information was largely dismissed by these students in favour of simpler criteria and those most relevant to their need to make a secure decision. In any case there is no set of standards for marketing university courses and there perhaps remains a need for one that ensures that HEIs take full responsibility for helping inexperienced choosers make this important decision - one that forces institutions to resist the seductive approaches that many have recently adopted (Haywood, Jenkins & Molesworth, 2010). Yet we note that seduction may be ‘good’ marketing in that HEIs are addressing exactly what ‘consumers’ seem to crave and in a competitive marketplace failure to meet consumer wants may be punished by consumer rejection. Here then, we need to take careful note of where the metaphor of the university-as-service provider should end. Following its logic the HE service may be made safer through attractive, yet unchallenging courses and through segmentation of student target audiences (for example by class) that may reduce the complexity and rigour of degrees, and their potential to transform individuals. Of course we don’t know the degree to which similar processes take place for non-vocational subjects and older institutions and this might be the subject of further study – our data may capture a broader student sentiment when it comes to degree and career choice, or may be restricted to this group. Further study could also consider whether students really are becoming less independent and more reliant on others to make decisions for them and consider the impact of this on universities’ marketing approaches.

Finally, we also note that the nuances of the decision-making process described here (for example where apparently peripheral aspects become core, and where there is a division of labour in complex decisions) may apply in other contexts and therefore invite broader reflection on how services may be chosen.