The lack of systematic decision-making by Chinese students applying to UK MA programmes

Abstract

This study explores how Chinese students chose a university to study a taught Masters programme. It includes an examination of the criteria they use and the process they go through, focusing on the 'information search', and 'evaluation of alternatives' stages of decision-making. Qualitative individual interviews were undertaken with 10 Chinese students. Findings suggest that decision-making was not as rigorous as might be expected for such an apparently complex, high involvement 'service'. Reasons for this include: a lack of perceived risk; the amount and complexity of information to be processed, (particularly in a foreign language), and the use of agents and league tables as reassurance for the decision. There is also evidence of satisficing and evidence to support image-based processing. Tentative recommendations are made which focus on the need to achieve the right match between potential students and the chosen programme and institution by trying to increase student engagement with the decision-making process.

Key Words: education, Chinese, universities, decision-making

Introduction

Previous research on choice of university (for example, Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Mazzarol et al., 2000; Moogan et al. 2001; Brooks, 2002) focuses on undergraduates applying to home institutions. However, for new universities in the UK there has been a recent emphasis on attracting Masters students from overseas and this group are under-researched. This study starts to address this gap by considering Chinese students who are one of the largest overseas student groups and for whom existing understanding based on Western models of decision-making may not apply.
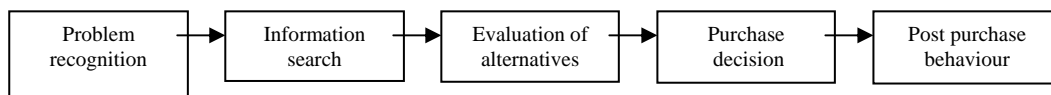
Higher Education has undergone significant recent changes including a reduction in government funding and an increase in student numbers. This has led to greater reliance by many universities on overseas (non-EU students). For new universities with limited access to research funding, revenue from overseas students is particularly important and although imminent changes to undergraduate funding may return emphasis to UK undergraduate applicants, it is likely that the overseas Masters market will remain significant. It is important that universities develop effective marketing to overseas students as they compete for overseas students, not just with each other, but also with other English-speaking providers, for example in Australia.

Much of the growth in overseas students has come from People's Republic of China (PRC) and India. The number of Chinese students studying for postgraduate taught programmes had trebled from 7311 (01/02) to 21,900 (03/04) (source British Council). However, early indications for 2004/5 indicated that recruitment of overseas (non-EU) students for undergraduate programmes is down 5.3% (UCAS figures in The Guardian, 17.2.05), including a drop of 25% in applicants from the PRC. Figures for postgraduate programmes would be expected to mirror these trends. The main reason seems to be changes in visa processing post-9.11, including an increase in visa charges (The Guardian, 17.2.05). It is also felt that the market in China is maturing. Although many institutions have benefited from growing Chinese applications in recent years, it seems that maintaining this level of applications may require better marketing and this will be at least partially dependent on a good understanding of how students choose an institution.

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The Decision-Making Process and Higher Education

Information-processing models of decision-making dominate consumer behaviour theory (Gabbott & Hogg, 1994; Crozier & McLean, 1997). Despite alternative perspectives emerging (Mowen, 1988), their continued use has been justified as a framework for examining decision-making for services by a range of authors (Gabbott & Hogg, 1994; Crozier & Mclean, 1997; Mitchell and Boustani, 1994; Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996) including explicitly for Higher Education by Moogan et al. (1999 and 2001). They have also been useful in examining the influences of culture on consumer behaviour (e.g., Gong, 2003; Malhotra and McCort, 2000). A commonly cited 5 stage decision-making framework is illustrated below (see figure 1)

Figure 1   Stages of Decision-Making

| Problem recognition | → | Information search | → | Evaluation of alternatives | → | Purchase decision | → | Post purchase behaviour |

Source: Kotler (2003:p204)

However, despite its wide use information processing-based decision-making is not without critics. Chisnall (1997) sees the sequential approach as an oversimplification and Olshavsky and Gradbois (1979:97) conclude that "for many purchases a decision process never occurs", not even the first time. The main criticism of this sort of model is that the consumer is not "rational" (Kamarck, 1983 in Chisnall, 1997:210). Bettman et al. (1991) argue for the "more realistic…bounded rationality" approach which acknowledges that consumers frequently have limited processing ability. Solomon (2002) further recognises that consumers use a variety of strategies, including the "experiential perspective" (p257), where responses are more affective and subjective than rational and include, "a wide spectrum of feelings, motives and emotions." Park and Mittal (1985:p210). An experiential approach is further explored by Holbrook and Hisrchmann (1982), however, they add that this might supplement the information-processing route, not replace it. Hoyer and MacInnis (2001) also examine how cognitive and affective processing can be used together.

A further criticism of decision-making models stems from a lack of clear empirical evidence to support them (Crozier & Mclean, 1997; Chisnall, 1997). Olshavsky & Granbois (1979) comment that what research there is, probably overstates the extent of a decision process. Nevertheless, for such a high involvement, complex 'purchase' as selecting a university, it might be reasonable to assume that some extended decision process occurs. This is supported by Mitchell and Boustani (1994) who state that such models are most pertinent for complex, high-risk decision-making. Solomon (2002) also suggests that extended problem solving (EPS) is closely linked to traditional decision-making models. EPS leads to a desire to collect extensive information and to carefully evaluate alternatives. Moogan et al. (1999) describe Higher Education search as EPS and their research further validates this framework by demonstrating that the first 3 stages of it were followed.

Within the decision-making framework, it is proposed to focus on 2 stages: 'information search' and 'evaluation of alternatives' and apply them to Higher Education. This is because it is at these stages that an understanding of the student decision-making process would help universities to achieve a better match between university marketing efforts and applicant decision-making. At the 'Need Recognition' stage, the focus may be more about persuading students to pursue further academic study rather than employment. Whilst institutions can have some limited influence here, the main focus of their marketing efforts assumes that a decision to engage with further study has already been taken. Focusing on these 2 stages allows for an

examination of how attributes are chosen, alternatives compared against them and of the complex processes by which choices are formed.

It is relatively recently that service marketing has been considered a discrete discipline with distinct characteristics which may necessitate different marketing approaches (Ettenson & Turner, 1997; Friedman & Smith, 1993; Hartman and Lindgren Jr., 1993) to take account of different consumer evaluation processes (Zeithaml, 1981). Differences between types of services have been noted and can be significant (Ettenson & Turner, 1997). Education is a particular type of professional, non-profit, people-based service, which is a one-off purchase, "high in criticality" (Ostram and Iacobucci, 1995:p20). Its intangibility and experiential (credence) qualities increase risk and uncertainty as experiential qualities are hard to evaluate pre-purchase (Gabbot & Hogg, 1994) as they can't be tried or observed (Murray, 1991). These qualities are, however, of great significance. This intangibility can lead to institutions focusing on the tangible in their communications, which may not help students to make informed decisions (Baldwin & James, 2000; James, 2001). Ostram and Iacobucci (1995) hypothesise that credence services are riskier because consumers lack confidence in making judgements about them.

Research on services decision-making highlights the difficulties in first identifying and then processing criteria. Lee & Marlowe (2003) note that attributes can differ in their meaning amongst respondents and that strategies for processing attributes may be more subjective, rely more on heuristics or use a range of decision rules. Crozier & Mclean (1997) and Oldfield & Baron (2000) support this, finding that judgments about services could be subjective or emotional and Ettenson & Turner, (1997) identify that strategies vary according to the type of service. Over the long university application process, Moogan et al. (2001) found that the relative importance of criteria changed and that their meaning evolved. Moogan et al.'s (1999 & 2001) longitudinal studies are rare examples of research into decision-making processes for students. Although a longitudinal approach was not an option for this study, this suggests the need for a qualitative approach which might allow the 'story' of the decision-making process in all its complexity to unfold.

Finally, as this research is seeking to examine consumer decision-making in the context of Chinese students, consideration needs to be given to aspects of their culture which may impact on decision-making. Some of the main Chinese cultural traits which differ from Western ones include: the importance of 'face' (and face saving) (Kim et al., 1998; Tse et al., 1988); past time orientation (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; Gong, 2003; Malhotra & McCort, 2001); and a quest for harmony and fatalism (Tse at al., 1988). Some of these traits derive from the fact that the Chinese are a 'high context' culture, whereas the UK and the USA are lower context (Doole & Lowe, 2004). Others derive from their collectivism which manifests itself in conformity to group norms and the importance of other people's opinions with a need to "balance personal desires with group demands" (Malhotra & McCort, 2001:241). As a result the Chinese are apparently more hierarchical and respectful of authority (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; Gong, 2003). The concept of 'face' is linked to this, as it emphasises meeting others' expectations rather than doing as one would like (Gong, 2003). Thorelli (1985:p13) notes that the PRC respondents in his study were "neither innovators nor opinion leaders" and he puts this down to "risk avoidance and caution." Gong (2003) examined secondary data to apply Chinese characteristics to the decision-making process, mainly for consumer goods and identified the Chinese as prudent, careful purchasers who shop around before making a decision, which could mean that for such an important 'purchase' as university course, a detailed and extended search would be expected. Gong identified the particular importance of internal search – especially of previous experiences (past orientation), including those of others. This suggests that significance

is given to Word-of-Mouth (WOM) advice, personal sources of insight and collective decision-making (Thorelli, 1985; Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; Malhotra & McCort, 2000), and of non-personal 'official' media which may be seen as authoritative. Gong (2003) hypothesises that to minimise social risk, products are ultimately chosen which are similar to those used by reference groups. Overall then it seems likely that decision-making for Chinese students may be significantly different than for Western students, justifying a specific focus on this group.

Research Method
Quantitative methods dominate decision-making research (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989; Crozier & McLean, 1997; Friedman & Smith, 1993) and may be preferred by positivist writers who aim to produce measurable results or predictions of behaviours. But several researchers (Ettenson & Turner, 1997; Lee and Marlowe, 2003) have criticised quantitative methodologies that limit respondents to identifying 'single cues' or attributes without allowing full exploration of behaviours (Ettenson & Turner, 1997). The aim of this investigation is to explore how Chinese students choose taught Masters programmes at new UK universities. Specifically it is hoped to examine the evaluative criteria they use and to critically examine the decision-making process which they go through, focusing on their information search and evaluation of alternatives and attempting to achieve an "understanding of human behaviour" rather than to predict it (Bryman, 2001:p13). It also aims to understand perceptions, expectations and experiences from the point of view of the respondents in order to understand the bases for their attitudes. Qualitative methods can allow this scope for detailed discussion (Gordon & Langmaid, 1988).

Ten Chinese postgraduate students (one from Hong Kong) were recruited from a post-1992 university in the South of the UK, based on convenience. Convenience samples, including the use of students for ease of access, have been successfully used by many authors including: Gomes & Murphy (2003) and Ostram & Iacobucci (1995). Respondents had IELT scores of 7 or equivalent and had not previously studied in the UK at undergraduate level, although half of them were already in the UK when they made the decisions reported on here.. Recruitment and interviews took place at the start of the academic year after the decision to study was completed (i.e. on enrolment), but before respondents were exposed to teaching and assessment. Respondents did not know the interviewer.

Focus groups have been preferred in some previous studies (Lee & Marlow, 2003; Pimpa, 2003; Moogan et al., 1999; Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989) because they can encourage discussion, but due to their educational and cultural background, Chinese students may not be familiar with group discussions and this could reduce participation. Malhotra et al. (1996:p14) support this view: "In some cultures, such as in the Middle or Far East people are hesitant to discuss their feelings in a group setting. In these cases, in-depth interviews should be used." This method is also supported by Gomes & Murphy (2003), Kinnell (1998), Moogan et al. (1999) and Mazzarol (1998) in an educational context. However in this case individual interviews produced some problems. Despite the high reported IELT scores there was some lack of clarity and in responses due to poor English. The interviewer attempted to probe and clarify apparent contradictions and four interviews were followed up by emails in an attempt to resolve them. Chisnall (1992) refers to bias which can occur due to difficulty in expression, or giving answers they think might please the interviewer. This is likely to be a particular concern for Chinese students who are hierarchical and more respectful of authority (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; Gong, 2003) and thus likely to be more sensitive to the power relationship between student and researcher. Whilst sensitivity to these issues can help to minimize them (and students were very open about their reasons for their choice of courses) it was felt that spoken English was the more significant problem in these interviews.

Findings

For such a high-risk decision, it might be expected that a complex and detailed decision making process would be followed. However for many of these Chinese students this turned out not to be the case. There was less reported experience of risk than expected as agents and league tables provided reassurance. Incomplete, biased information which was difficult to process, particularly in a foreign language, also seemed to limit information search and evaluation. The result is evidence of satisficing and of emotional and image based processing, although it was also clear that there is a range of different personal experiences rather than one clear pattern for decision-making in this context.

Information Search Behaviour

Moogan et al.'s. (1999) research on education found perceived risk a concern, as did Thorelli's (1985) research on PRC consumers, particularly social risk. Despite this, few respondents here identified risk during the decision-making process. One explanation for this lack of risk could be that whereas Thorelli (1985) & Hofstede, (1980, in Malhotra & McCort, 2000) both link increased perceived risk to lower economic status, the Chinese students able to study in the UK are more affluent than average. Also helping to reduce risk are agents who confirm choices and rankings/reputation from independent sources. Respondents may well be limiting their cognitive strain, as although they may realise that choice is complex, they report the use of league tables and agents as a reassurance to justify their decisions.

With regard to agents, Pimpa (2003) found that they have less influence on postgraduates than undergraduates, but here they were widely used although opinions of them were often negative and their lack of objectivity was recognised, "*Just charge me a lot*" (6), "*not good, not very responsible*" (3). Their role varied including confirming choices: "*make sure the information I get from the Internet is right*" (1), thus providing reassurance; providing detailed advice on different courses; and help with the application and visa. The latter is of growing importance due to increased security since 9/11 and this may now be an key reason why they are used.

Personal sources are identified as important in reducing risk (Murray, 1991), particularly for professional services, and certainly they were valued as trustworthy by the respondents who used them, acting as further reassurance:

> "*.. a lot of English people told me the reputation of BU & I think they are reliable*" (4); "*we don't know the Western thing that much and if my friend can recommend me something about the UK, then I just believe*" (5)

In one case a respondent felt that his friends had persuaded him to choose a particular university. However for most of the students in this sample friends were unable to give advice about specific courses or universities. Although the influence of family members in collectivist cultures is highlighted by Thorelli, (1985); Gomes & Murphy, (2003) and Mazzarol & Soutar, (2002) this was also not found in this smaple. Respondents claimed that this was because their parents knew little about the UK:

> "*I make the decision myself, by myself. Because my family member they don't know, they know nothing about the subject. They don't know English.*" (8)

However, one student felt the influence of friends and family who queried her decision after it was made, leading her to doubt her choice:

> *"We Chinese always take care about what other people's think so that's important. In China when you have made some decision, all the people round you they want to say something about your decision."* (2)

This was the only example of social risk, however and it was not sufficient to make this student change her mind.

If risk was not an issue, intangibility was. Web sites (which were the primary source of information for these students) and prospectuses focus on a mixture of factual information and image building (Kinnell, 1998) and there was a lack of detailed information about the courses for many respondents:

> *"If you can provide more detailed information about it then it would be easier to help people to choose."(3); "I know the course name from the web site...but I have no idea about what Corporate Strategy we learn from this unit" (2).; "What's interactive marketing? I mean marketing's interactive isn't it? I was very confused." (5).*

But despite a lack of clarity about the courses, there was less active information seeking (direct contact with institutions) to compensate than might be expected. For example, respondent 2 found only four courses in her initial search and was confused about one of these, yet she still did not contact the university concerned for more information. In most cases confusion over courses simply resulted in students dismissing them, or to non-course factors being used to make choices (i.e. location). Baldwin & James, (2000) and Winston, (1997) have suggested that undergraduates were insufficiently clear about their education choices partly due to a lack of focus by some institutions on education's "non-observable qualities" (James, 2001:p5). This is borne out here with respondents noting the lack of information on: courses, assessment, how good the tutors are, employment rates, accommodation, living costs and facilities. The absence of information is significant, particularly about the course, as students here used the information available, rather than seeking more, thus making their decisions less effective.

The amount of search reportedly carried out by respondents varied, as did the number of courses considered:

> *"I do a lot of research...It took me a long time to decide which one that I wanted."* (5); *"...because I was working...actually I didn't spend a lot of time on the search process, just in the evening."*(7)

But in line with Moogan et al.'s research (1999) most of this sample spent less than 2 months searching. Reasons given in the literature for a lack of extended search for services include the greater effort needed both to access and process lots of complex information and respondents frequently referred to the large amount of information:

> *"... it was hard work and surfing on the Internet is hard to... It's so many things you have to look for..."(9); "A lot of information for choosing...Because you know every university have their catalogue and course folders and things like that."* (6)

Other respondents were glad to have been able to narrow their choice down "*When I finally decide the 3 to choose, ..., I found that quite a relief*" (7). This echoes Moogan et al.'s (1999) findings that the process is complex and that the large amounts of information easily lead to information overload (Baldwin & James, 2000; Moogan et al., 2001), exacerbated in this case by the fact that respondents were searching in a foreign language and dealing with abstract

academic terms. This could explain why at times the process seemed less rigorous than might be expected, with students satisficing to reduce cognitive strain. In summary, although respondents found it easy to access considerable information, there were issues of completeness and objectivity, and at times information was confusing and complex:

> "*to get surface information is easy. But if you want to know deeper things, it is not so easy.…whether information I've got is true or not. ..I can't judge."* (2)

Evaluations of alternatives
The main attributes used to make choices were the course itself, the reputation of the institution and faculty, and aspects of the institution itself, especially location. The importance of league tables in particular was confirmed. *"In China ranking is so important"* (2). Although many of these students saw a distinction between the university ranking and that of the course or faculty, they highlighted that in China friends and family don't appreciate this:

> "*Chinese take the overall ranking quite seriously*, [whereas] *native English …take the course rank more seriously."* (9)

Gabbott & Hogg (1994) note that people find it difficult to know which attributes to use in decision-making and then to make comparisons using them and this seemed to be the case here. Most of these students cited the course as the first point of evaluation *"first thing...make a decision about which course I take."* (1) but highlighted a problem of lack of course information:

> "*What is the course really like?…..They say teaching quality is the rate maybe 5, maybe 4, but how can you tell until you get on the course?….Assignments. Academic reading and academic writing, what's it like?"* (5)

The result was that some students seemed to use simple cues as surrogates for more complex criteria as suggested by Crane & Clarke, (1988). Reputation as a cue for quality was one of the most important criteria here and was judged by measures such as: independent web sites; league tables; examples of student work, and student prizes. Other cues varied by student. For one teaching quality was inferred from a personal meeting with an administrator. A different student wouldn't consider courses with low IELT scores because "*it means the quality of your classmates is not so good*" (9). Another felt that a cue for the university's attitude towards overseas students was the presence of overseas students on the campus. One respondent also used the views of English people (WOM), an example of personal referral which Crane & Clarke's (1988) research found to be important for evaluating experiential criteria.

Crozier and McLean's (1997) research shows variation by respondent over what exactly attributes mean. An example of this here is that several students referred to the 'course structure' as important, but when asked what this meant, one suggested it referred to content and another linked it to reading lists. This could be due to English difficulties, or it could be that respondents have a list of attributes that they have been told are important, or see frequently cited, without fully understanding them. Difficulties in English could, of course, be another reason why students found information particularly complex to process, so were more likely to use cues or to focus on attributes that they understood, i.e. location.

Moogan et al.'s (2001) findings that the meaning of criteria changed over the application process were also partially found here. 'Location' initially meant which part of the UK the institution was in. When narrowing down initial choices, location was often used, with one

respondent discarding a university from his evoked set because it was in London *"that's not a good environment for study, too crowded and noisy, I think."* (6). Later, the campus itself would be considered.

Personal contact with the university even by those based in the UK was limited. One respondent visited twice, but only <u>after </u>he'd chosen. For those who did visit (four in total), priorities varied, but the opportunity to talk to staff to find out more about the realities of studying, was not exploited by this sample. This could be because students were comfortable with their decisions and once the decision had been made the visits merely served to reinforce it. Of those based in China, none had any personal contact with the university, by telephone, (relying on email instead) and none claimed to want this, citing cost and concern over spoken English.

Issues relating to the processing of attributes were also revealed. When faced with a large number of courses most respondents narrowed them down quickly by ranking: *"the rankings not good then I won't consider it..I pick up like the top 10"* (1), others avoided the top 10 assuming that the 'top' institutions would be too difficult to get a place in. Many also eliminated those in London or the north, or those with low IELT scores. For many then, simple (noncompensatory) rules were used to narrow choice.

In the majority of cases, it was difficult to get a clear sense of further, more detailed processing. One respondent when asked if she prioritised her attributes said, *"I think of them all together."* (10). Other students saw 2 attributes as equally important *"convenience and ranking similarly important"*. In many cases attributes were either limited or vague or both. However some did make fairly detailed comparisons. One compared the course, the subject, ranking and then a bundle of factors to do with the university *"history, practical, reputation, guest lectures and staff working in industry."* (1). Another had some detailed conversations with a college tutor, then visited to get more details, then thought about the subjects and career options. Another compared the environment, equipment and facilities between three universities.

Despite the importance of the course to respondents, with a few exceptions, there seemed little detailed comparisons of choices available. Even where students attempted to obtain detail there were problems; a failure to collect and process course details led to a final decision being made on non-course factors:

> *"I tried to find the different courses which are more suitable for me. Because almost all the universities they design courses differently…*[but]*…because at the time I couldn't get some details about the course and what subjects…. I think to be honest, both of the universities are ok for me. And I've chosen BU just because I've been here. For me it's convenient."* (4)

Whilst Moogan et al.'s research (2001) does show that location becomes the most important criterion as the decision process progresses, this was after a much more detailed analysis of the course by their respondents than was found with this sample. This could be because the evoked sets were small and the courses within them perceived as possessing similar attributes, so that peripheral differences were used to sway the decision, another example of satisficing.

Was There a Rigorous Decision-Making Process?
These findings suggest that many Chinese applicants to Masters courses at new UK universities may not go through rigorous and systematic decision-making, despite the apparent importance of the decision. Although there was an identifiable, if simple, process for most respondents, and

some had a clearer, more consistent sense of the stages, criteria and sources, others barely had a process at all:

> *"I don't have a clear attempt to make my choice. Just things come up with me then I just do it naturally."* (10); *"...actually I have no idea about what the course is about and what will be the facilities, so I just chose one at random... I just really choose randomly"* (7).

Two other students accepted their first offer, without continuing their deliberations:

> *"When [institution name] reply my application...I have already paid a deposit to BU. I think that's the reason why I chose BU."* (10)

Many authors (Doole & Lowe, 2004; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2001; Tse et al., 1988) emphasise that the rational, logical approach to decision-making favoured by Western models may be less applicable to the different cognitive styles in Asia. The Chinese valuing of more emotional elements in decision-making might explain why parts of the decision were made for emotional or image based reasons. Judgments about services are also often more subjective than models developed for the purchase of goods suggest (Crozier & Maclean, 1997). This seems to be supported here, as many respondents talk about their '*impressions*' or '*feelings*', some of which were created by visits. One respondent talks about *"the whole atmosphere...when you stepped into the door you can feel"* (5). A student who was unable to visit would've liked to have done to see the students and get an impression of them *"I believe if I see somebody in the first sight and I don't like, I will not like them, that's a sixth sense you know"* (2). Hoyer and MacInnis (2001) discuss how cognitive and affective processing can be used together, with decision rules used to narrow down the initial choice and then imagery or emotion used to make the final decision. This seems to be the case with some respondents here.

Another possible reason for a lack of systematic process was that for some respondents choosing was just hard work; one finding it all boring and tiresome, *"maybe I'm just too lazy."* (3) Another simplified her search by saying *"I don't have any reason <u>not</u> to choose this university"* (1). It could also be that a UK Masters to take back to China is a means to an end, so that the actual course itself is less important than we might imagine. Where courses and institutions are not well known in China, from the point of social status, choosing between them may not matter, as respondents will not be subject to the scrutiny of a social group who have little knowledge of their chosen course. This may reduce reference to the social group in decision-making.

Conclusions
Although we might assume that the decision to study at an overseas institution would be the result of rigorous decision-making this was not the case for most of these students. Higher Education has a high degree of intangibility; this is exacerbated by the large amount of complex information which is not presented by institutions in any standardised way, making detailed comparisons difficult, particularly in a foreign language. The decision-making reported here also seems to suggest that rational decision-making models place insufficient emphasis on both the experiential perspective and any environmental or contextual factors, such as here the lack of accountability to social groups. Perhaps too, such models over emphasise the cognitive efforts people are prepared to make even for complex decisions.

The information search was less extended than expected, with reputation and agents used as reassurance. Personal sources, although highly valued, were found to be useful for information

on the environment rather than their knowledge of specific courses and perhaps this too encouraged a focus on the environment.

With regard to evaluative criteria, the attributes used by these students were in line with previous research, but it was not always clear that students knew what they meant or rigorously applied them. There was a lack of really detailed comparison between courses due to the difficulty in both obtaining and processing information. It may also be that the motivation was limited to acquiring a UK Masters, rather than the 'right' one. There is some evidence of students not knowing what it is they don't know and thus what to look for (Baldwin and James, 2000). Again, one result is that criteria such as location were then used to make choices instead.

Improving an institution's overseas marketing is complex, particularly given the constraints of universities' resources and the difficulty of focusing significant budget on one national group (or indeed of over-recruiting from one country which is also problematic). These findings might suggest 'short cuts' to attracting Chinese students (fast turnaround of offers, an emphasis on location and institutional status, etc). But the focus of marketing should be on getting the right match between student and institution, (Kinnell, 1998; Baldwin & James, 2000) not on recruiting students per se. A tension therefore exists between the need to maintain overseas student numbers and the ethics of recruiting responsibly. To achieve this, applicants need to be encouraged to engage more fully with the information available and become more active in seeking it out and processing it. Universities might help them by providing information which communicates the full experience of studying a Masters and of the commitment and involvement needed; including articulating how studying a course at a specific institution would be different to studying it elsewhere (Baldwin and James, 2000). The process of increasing student engagement might include:

- More detailed course and institutional information including about the actual course experience and preferably in a form that might allow easier comparison.
- A checklist of what to find out for each institution/course could also be produced to encourage more comparisons between institutions (Baldwin & James, 2000)
- Country specific web sites could deal with issues pertinent to different cultural groups and have relevant testimonials, covering life on and off campus. They could include information on teaching styles/assessment, workloads and the amount of study involved and contact details of previous and current students (including employment details where appropriate).
- Sample unit guides could be posted to show indicative content and assessment, including sample lectures and even samples of student work.
- Efforts to increase accessibility to course content by using less academic jargon. As some of the information students wanted was available, it might be assumed that they couldn't actually understand it.

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