



**The information search of Taiwanese students  
within the decision-making of business Master's degrees  
in Taiwan and in the UK**

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## Abstract

This study investigated Taiwanese students' information search regarding their application choices for business Master's degrees in Taiwan. Taiwanese students studying in Taiwan and Taiwanese students studying in the UK in this study were used to contrast the similarities and differences between the information search of home-based and international students.

In the literature review, previous studies on information search were discussed, and a conceptual framework was presented to indicate the stages of students' decision-making and possible external information sources that students might use. As the majority of research was conducted amongst Western English-speaking home-based students, the importance of investigating how information sources could be used differently by Taiwanese applicants was emphasised.

The study employed qualitative data collection of focus group discussions, observations and interviews to investigate how participants used information sources to find the information they needed in making Master's choices. Different types of universities in Taiwan and in the UK were sampled to explore students' choice criteria. Template Analysis was used to analyse the data.

The findings suggested that the TW group had more internal information which reduced the level of their external search. On the other hand, the UK group as international students needed more external information as a result of lacking internal information. This study also found Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and educational agents were influential to Taiwanese participants' Master's decision-making. Also, middle range universities are often selected by the UK group, while parental influences were limited to both the TW and the UK group.

As current students and alumni were found in this study to be particularly influential regarding applicants' Master's choices, higher education institutions (HEI) should also look after current students when trying to market courses to potential students.



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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.0 Chapter overview

This chapter introduces the global demand of international higher education (HE) and the importance of the Asian market. As Taiwan and the UK are selected in this study, this chapter also focuses on the situation and issues facing the international HE sectors in Taiwan and the UK, including such the factors that encourage studying overseas. Following this, the significance of this study will be discussed as well as the proposal of several initial research questions to be considered in this study. The chapter will conclude with an outline characterising the overall structure of this thesis.

## 1.1 The global demand of international HE

The number of students studying in universities outside their home countries has grown rapidly in recent years. For example, whilst there were an estimated 1.8 million international students studying abroad in 2001, this number rose to 2.5 million in 2006 (Bohm *et al.*, 2002). The growth in international HE is forecasted to continue to rise in the next two decades. The number of international students is forecasted to be 5.8 million by 2020 (British Council, 2007) while the UK could have over 800,000 HE students, and with more overseas postgraduate than undergraduate students studying in the UK (British Council, 2004). In addition, by 2025, the global demand is forecasted to increase to 7.2 million international students (IDP Education Australia, 2002).

The most popular host countries for international HE are the USA (22%), the UK (12%), Germany (10%), France (10%), and Australia (7%) (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2007), and previous studies (Bruch and Barty, 1998; Davis, 1996; Cummings, 1993) identify several reasons for international students opting to study abroad including the opportunity to improve foreign language skills and gain international experiences required in their career. Moreover, meeting new people and making international contacts (Bourke, 2000) were also highlighted. Other factors that encourage students' mobility more so than ever before include reduced costs and increased comforts and speed associated with international travel, and more scholarships or exchange schemes being made available (Davis, 1996; Bruch and Barty, 1998).



From a broader perspective, McMahon (1992) and more recently, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggest the international flow of students results from a combination of 'push and pull' factors. On the one hand, push factors within students' home country encourage the students' decision to undertake international study. In contrast, pull factors within a host country include those features that make the destination relatively attractive to international students (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

In general, push factors from students' home countries include the level of economic wealth, the degree of involvement of the country in the world economy, the priority placed on education by the government of the home country, and the availability of educational opportunities in that country (McMahon, 1992). On the other hand, pull factors from students' host countries include the economic link between home and host countries, the availability of scholarships from host countries, as well as the political and cultural links between the home and host countries (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992).

Generally, the direction of international student flows in international HE originates from developing countries in the southern to the rich countries of the northern hemisphere. In terms of push factors, some governments from industrialised countries recognise the need to provide their students with international awareness and experience in order for them to compete in the global economy (Cummings, 1993). Countries in South East Asia, such as Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore could be the best examples to illustrate how strongly some governments have encouraged their students to study abroad (Scott, 1998).

In the Asian-Pacific region, some newly industrialising countries have seen increased presence of middle-class families who can afford the costs of international HE. However, local provision of university-level education is often inadequate to meet this growing demand (Maslen, 1998). As those high-growth developing countries in the Asian-Pacific region cannot educate everyone at home, they are sending increasing numbers of students to study overseas. Consequently, Asia has become the main geographical area for foreign universities to recruit international students.



Asia, particularly India and China, is expected to be the main source of international students by 2010 (British Council, 2004). It has also been suggested that by 2025, Asia will possibly represent 70% of total global international HE demand (IDP Education Australia, 2002). As Asia plays a significant role in the international HE market, it is important to understand how students from the Asian-Pacific region select British universities. Therefore, the UK, as one of the main host countries for international HE, can leverage and sustain competitive advantage within the global international HE market.

Since the market of international HE is rapidly growing, competition within the market has also intensified. Hence, universities from the main host countries increasingly operate much the same as corporations by adopting a more business-like stand and engaging strategically in professional marketing activities (Jarvis, 2000).

This study focuses on Taiwanese students, who study in Taiwan and in the UK, to contribute to our understanding of students' behaviour related to their HE information search and decision-making. Next, the HE situations in Taiwan and in the UK will be outlined as a means to suggest why these two countries have been selected for this study.

## **1.2 HE in Taiwan and the UK**

Located in South East Asia, although comparatively not a geographically sizable country, Taiwan has been one of the main markets for international student recruitment (Maslen, 1998). In the past 25 years, the number of Taiwanese students studying overseas has increased from 3,000 to 33,000. Also, the most popular host countries for Taiwanese students to study include the USA, the UK and Australia (Ministry of Education, 2007).

The growth in international Taiwanese students in the past two decades has arisen mainly as a result of three major factors. Since the late 1980s, the Taiwanese government started to encourage the establishment of international links between universities in Taiwan and overseas (Weng, 2000). The encouraging attitude of Taiwanese government policy was also demonstrated through offering annual studentships for Taiwanese students to study abroad (Taipei Public Library, 2004).



Second, strong economic growth in Taiwan has increased not only the possibilities for families to send children overseas to study but also the demand for graduates with English proficiency (Chen and Zimitat, 2006). Finally, the Confucian values of the importance of education underpinning Taiwanese culture, encourages families to provide the best education for their children (Conner and HeyWood-Everett, 1998). Since education from developed countries is often seen as more superior than that in developing countries from the perspectives of Taiwanese parents, sending children to study overseas was preferred if parents can afford the costs.

In the past ten years, HE in Taiwan has also enjoyed rapid growth. Whereas in 1988 Taiwan had 84 universities, this had nearly doubled to 151 fifteen years later (Yam News, 2003). Hence, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan has attempted to transfer responsibility and power to individual universities, as well as autonomy for educational financing. National universities in Taiwan now engage in new searches for alternative non-state sources of income to support their operational costs. With the increasing pressures of financial autonomy, Taiwanese universities are becoming more marketised and privatised amidst the policy trend of decentralisation (Mok, 2003).

Apart from the push factors from the Taiwanese government, other forces also encourage Taiwanese universities to be more market-driven, such as the growing numbers of students studying overseas for their HE and the decrease in the national birth rate. Birth rates in Taiwan have more than halved from 2.29% in 1980 to only 1.10% in 2007 (Taipei Times, 2008), which has resulted in fewer university applicants. Since universities in Taiwan have to compete with more local and international universities for student applicants, amidst declining birth rates, the HE environment in Taiwan is changing. One sign of this can be seen from the increased acceptance rate of HE in Taiwan which has recently exceeded 90% at undergraduate level (Liberty Times, 2006). This might be one of the highest acceptance rates in HE globally and this indicates a shift from elite HE to mass HE in Taiwan.

Attempting to control the quality of HE in Taiwan, the MOE of Taiwan has started to evaluate the teaching quality of universities to decide which institution or courses may continue to operate and to gradually close the lower quality institutions in the



subsequent years (Liberty Times, 2006). It is therefore important for local universities in Taiwan to understand how Taiwanese home-based students select universities, so Taiwanese universities could better tailor their marketing strategies towards this market segment.

A similar situation applies to the UK context, where British universities also have comparable needs to understand the HE decision-making of prospective students. As education is rapidly moving from being product to market-driven (Eusden *et al.*, 1990), it is important for educational marketers to better understand their potential customers. It has also been suggested that there is an explicit need for British universities to understand the information search state of potential student applicants (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

Paulsen (1990) supports the above view and confirms that there is no understanding of the search and application phase of college choice (termed *information search stage* in the consumer behaviour literature) that characterise this important period of HE decision-making. Moreover, Foskett and Hesketh (1996) claim that knowing how students make their decision is important for competing British universities. Gaining insights into the key dimensions of consumer behaviour is important for educational marketers, managers and policy formulators in the UK. It was found however that for some universities in the UK, their marketing practices were at best based on hunches, unsubstantiated assertions and gut feelings (*ibid.*).

British universities target three broad market segments, namely national high school leavers (for undergraduate degree programmes), local mature students who mostly study part-time (to build on their existing skills and qualifications), and international students (for both undergraduate and postgraduate study) (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). Regarding the sources of recruiting international students, South East Asia has always been a key geographical area from which British universities recruit international students (Bruch and Barty, 1998).

As the HE industry in the UK generates up to £11 billion directly and a further £12 billion indirectly to the UK economy each year (British Council, 2004), this is of course a huge market that cannot be overlooked. Also, since international students



are one of the main market segments for the UK, it is of vital importance that international students' HE decision-making be better understood. As the competition in the international HE market intensifies, further investigation into the HE decision-making of international students is required.

Hence, Taiwan, as a country from the South East Asia region, is selected in this study as a means to enhancing our understanding of potential consumers considering British universities. Whilst Taiwanese students cannot represent the HE decision-making of all Asian students, their HE information search behaviour can nevertheless serve to strengthen the current lack of literature. In addition, this study can be compared to previous studies in the West to suggest how culture might affect students' HE decision-making. After presenting the practical justifications on why this study needs to be conducted, the next section will offer academic justifications to suggest the lack of research in the area of international students' HE decision-making.

### **1.3 Significance of this study**

HE decision-making has been studied broadly amongst home-based students in English-speaking countries (i.e. Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Brooks, 2004; Christie *et al.*, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005) -- especially in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, as opposed to international students (Hill *et al.*, 1992; O'Neill, 1995; Pimpa, 2003). However, within these studies, much less research has concentrated on Asian students' HE decision-making (Gray *et al.*, 2003; Pimpa, 2004). More specifically, the HE decision-making of Taiwanese students has received limited attention (Weng, 2000; Chen and Zimitat, 2006).

Furthermore, the majority of previous Western studies have focused exclusively on undergraduate, as opposed to postgraduate students. Although some research has addressed issues on the choices of postgraduate students (Kallio, 1995; Olson, 1992; Webb, 1993; Webb and Allen, 1994), many of them have been restricted to single HE institutions, and most previous research has adopted a quantitative approach, involving surveys of large numbers of students without looking into how information sources were used by prospective students. For example, these surveys did not



consider how a third party, (like educational agents), might affect international students' HE choices.

Table 1.1 below presents the main differences between this study and previous ones in the literature. This investigation focuses on students' search stage, which is the least studied aspect of HE decision-making (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Furthermore, this study looks at business Master's programmes, which expands our understanding from undergraduate to postgraduate level. Moreover, the scale of this study is wider than previous studies as a result of including a broader range of stakeholders, namely current students, potential students and educational agents. The comparison between the two groups in this study will also show how home-based students (the TW group) and international students (the UK group) differ in their HE information search.

**Table 1.1 Comparisons to previous studies**

	<b>This research</b>	<b>Previous literature</b>
<i>Stage focused</i>	The search stage	Mainly on either predisposition or choice stage
<i>Method used</i>	A qualitative method	Mainly via quantitative methods
<i>Scale of study</i>	Current students from four universities in Taiwan and in the UK. Potential students and educational agents were also included	Mainly at one institution in one country; on students and not other parties
<i>Level of study</i>	Master's level	Undergraduate level
<i>Students selected</i>	Focus on business students within Business schools	Mainly on all students across disciplines
<i>Focus of study</i>	Include both home-based students (the TW group) and international students (the UK group)	Mainly on either home-based students or international students alone



Previous literature on home-based students via quantitative approaches have suggested the types of external information sources used, as well as students' and/or the institutional characteristics that affect students' HE decision-making, and the most influential information sources informing subsequent decisions. However, fewer studies have investigated students' search for information when deciding upon a new degree and institution of study, particularly in the context of international students. As the Internet is used ever more extensively, how students search for information online to inform their HE choices needs to be studied, in order that universities can tailor the online information they provide.

Some previous studies (Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Moogan and Baron, 2003) have used decision-making theories of consumer behavior to explain students' HE choices. However, most literature on the HE decision-making process have been undertaken from an institutional marketing or recruitment perspective, and have focused on students' background characteristics and institutional (i.e., high school or college) characteristics (McDonough, 1997), but much less research has been carried out from the perspective of potential students' HE decision-making, especially on their information search.

Hamrick and Hossler (1996) have described the process of students' decision-making to be like a funnel, where all students go in the top and a few come out the bottom to attend a particular college. They suggest "the impact of information on student college choice is one variable that has received little attention because it does not easily conform to sociological or economic theories. Nevertheless, there is good reason to more carefully examine the effects of information" (ibid., pg. 179).

Hence, this study will examine what goes on 'inside' this funnel through identifying what information sources were used and the effect of that on students' HE decision-making. Although identifying applicants' demographic and academic characteristics are important, universities cannot intervene to change or affect students in these respects. Universities may nevertheless have more control on the information they provide to potential students.



As the access to accurate and timely information is critical in helping students achieve their post-secondary educational and/or career goals (Orfield and Paul, 1994), it is important to understand more about applicants' use of information. However, a gap exists between what information and guidance students need in order to make a successful HE choice and the actual information provided to them (Ray, 1992). Therefore, it is reasoned that research needs to investigate issues like the use of information sources, the interpretation of information from prospective students, and the effects of information on their HE decision-making.

Analysing students' behavior surrounding the selection of universities leads to greater understanding of how external factors influence students' information search and other stages of the decision-making process. Also, by understanding more on how students make decisions in HE, it will be possible to tailor more effective marketing strategies addressing the needs of potential target audiences. Therefore, this study focuses on Taiwanese students' information search.

Three initial research questions are considered. Firstly, how was the information search carried out by Taiwanese students in their HE decision-making process? Secondly, how did Taiwanese students evaluate the alternatives in HE decision-making? Finally, how were Taiwanese students affected by the commonly used information sources? These research questions will be refined into research objectives through the literature review process.

#### **1.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has introduced the context in which international HE decision-making takes place. The chapter identified key issues facing the HE sectors in Taiwan and the UK characterised by falling birth rates (and subsequent declining application numbers), and the need to fully understand the information sources and decision-making processes governing applicants' choices of HE institutions. Several push and pull factors influencing Taiwanese students to study abroad were also highlighted, followed by the importance of this country as a source of international recruitment for British universities. As a result of the lack of studies investigating Asian postgraduate applicants' choices of British HE institutions, the chapter outlined



the need for renewed research as a means to filling this current gap in the literature. The chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the remaining chapters.

### **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

The remainder of this thesis is comprised of eight chapters. Chapter 2 discusses past studies on consumer decision-making, including its stages, its applications in service sectors, and consumers' involvement and knowledge. Moreover, the stage of information search within HE decision-making and influential information sources will be discussed. In light of the reviewed literature, this chapter will conclude with the development of a conceptual framework to be applied to the current study. In addition, a refined research aim and objectives will also be identified.

Chapter 3 explains my ontological and epistemological positions and my research design. In addition, I also discuss sampling procedures of participants selected for focus groups and interviews. My role in observation is also discussed. In addition, the data analysis process will be explained, followed by related considerations of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 discusses and compares the internal search of the TW and the UK group to suggest the formation and the content of participants' internal information, which is addressed as a means to fulfilling the first research objective of this study.

Chapter 5 presents the findings for objective two in examining how external information sources are used by Taiwanese participants to find courses/institutions and to evaluate the performances of these courses/institutions.

Chapter 6 presents the findings for objective three, namely to explore the meaning of information quality from Taiwanese participants' perspectives. Chapter 7 covers findings for objective four concerning the impacts of the influential external information sources on the formation of students' consideration sets, application lists and enrolment choices.

Chapter 8 includes two unexpected but interesting emergent themes, and the revised conceptual framework based on the findings of this study is presented, and the



similarities and differences between the revised and the original conceptual framework are evaluated and explained.

Chapter 9 includes an overview of the key findings, as well as reflections on method, contribution to knowledge, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. The section on contribution to knowledge suggests how this study has filled the gap in the research of students' information search, and implications for practice covered what marketers of Taiwanese and British universities can consider when marketing universities to Taiwanese students. Moreover, recommendations for future research are also provided as a means to further developing knowledge in this area.

Having outlined the overall structure of this thesis, the following chapter provides a critical review of the literature relating to the stages and applications of consumer decision-making in HE course and institution choices, as well as a related conceptual framework for application to the current study.

## Chapter 2 Literature review

### **2.0 Chapter overview**

This chapter is comprised of three sections. First, consumer decision-making will be discussed, with a focus on the different stages of consumer decision-making in a generic context, followed by a consideration of consumer decision-making in the specific context of services and consumers' involvement and knowledge. Factors from the higher education (HE) decision-making models and factors influencing students' decision-making will also be addressed. Following this, the literature on the information searching stage, as a key stage within the decision-making process, will be discussed. A distinction will be drawn between internal and external searches, and this will be linked with students' use of information sources. Third, possible influential information sources in the decision-making, including reference groups and online word of mouth (WOM) will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with the presentation of a conceptual framework developed from the literature review for application to this current study.

### **2.1 Consumer decision-making**

Consumer decision-making refers to the processes consumers generally go through when buying products or services, and it has been studied from economic, psychological and cognitive perspectives (Richarme, 2004; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). An economic view on consumer' decision making is based mostly on quantitative studies that assumes consumers are rational buyers with nearly perfect information (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004; Richarme, 2004). The economists believe consumers maximise utility in their decision-making (e.g. Simon, 1959; Von Neumann and Oskar, 1944), and the assumptions of the economic view are that consumers are always expected to make rational purchasing decisions. The economic perspectives also assumed that consumers are aware of all product/service alternatives, so they can rank potential benefits and limitations of each alternative and are able to identify one best alternative (Von Neumann and Oskar, 1944).

However, it could be argued that an economic view is too idealistic as consumers are limited by their habits, values, and the extent of their knowledge (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). For example, consumer decision-making may be driven by brand



loyalty and less by the rational comparison of functional and specification differences between alternatives. Consumers may be attracted simply by the product's appearance or base their decision on their feeling of one service provider over other providers. It is therefore difficult for consumers to be totally rational, as decision-making can rest on less rational decision-making processes.

The second perspective focuses on consumers' psychological processes, such as consumers' motivation and need reduction (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). A psychological view on decision-making describes how people make choices in situations where they have to decide between alternatives that involve financial risks, and it includes how individuals evaluate potential losses and gains. The psychological models are useful to highlight how consumers manage risk and uncertainty when choosing between product or service alternatives (ibid., 1979).

Most psychological studies were conducted via qualitative approaches with particular focuses on cultural influences and/or family influences on consumer decision-making (Richarme, 2004). Although a psychological view considers social and family influences, it largely overlooks the role of utility maximization in the decision-making processes. Therefore, whilst consumers might not be totally rational in decision-making, the psychologists still need to include this feature in their account as an important, but by no means singular factor underpinning the consumer decision-making process. In other words, consumers may still maximise utility, but this is only one factor driving the decision-making process.

Generally speaking, theories that combine more viewpoints may have more explanatory power than those restricted to a single perspective. Therefore a third approach on consumer behaviour, namely the cognitive view, has been developed and used more recently by marketers (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Cognitive models that combine previous economic and psychological models therefore help offer a more comprehensive account of consumers' decision-making processes. The discipline of consumer behaviour was developed during the 1960s and 1970s and the well-known examples of consumer behaviour includes the Nicosia model (1966), as well as contributions from Howard and Sheth (1969), Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1995).



These models are closer to a cognitive view which sees consumers as thinking problem solvers.

From a cognitive view, consumers are believed to be information processors who actively search for the products or services that can fulfill their needs until they have sufficient information to make a satisfactory purchasing decision (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Whilst the models of consumer behaviour originate from largely untested theory building, the benefit of these models is that they include the possible effects of individual, situational and social influences on purchase outcomes (Gabbott and Hogg, 1998).

In this study, a cognitive perspective is combined with economic and psychological views and applied to students' HE decision-making processes. This study will apply the theory of consumer decision-making to a HE setting to see how HE choices can be explained by the generic consumer behaviour theories. It is first necessary to outline the various stages of decision-making that consumers go through when purchasing a product and/or service.

### **2.1.1 Stages of consumer decision-making**

As the stages of consumer decision-making have been applied to studies in HE settings (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Brennan, 2001b; Pimpa, 2003), and this current study also applies these concepts, the models of consumer decision-making are discussed in this sub-section. The five steps of consumer decision-making processes normally include (1) need recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation, (4) choice, and (5) outcome evaluation (Loudon and Bitta, 1993; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004).

HE decision-making is also known as “student college choice” to describe students' decision-making process to continue their formal education at a college or university after completing high school education (Chapman, 1981; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). This process is defined as,

*A complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to*



*attend a specific college, university, or institution of advanced vocational training* (Hossler *et al.*, 1989, pg. 234).

Although this study focuses on postgraduate as opposed to undergraduate level, the above definition is useful to suggest what choices students might need to make in HE decisions. The first stage of consumer decision-making, *need recognition* occurs when consumers realise a difference between their desired state and their actual state. In this stage, the consumer feels a need to close the gap between their actual and desired state (Engel *et al.*, 1995). In the context of HE decision-making, potential students of Master's degrees recognise a gap exists between the position they would like to be in and the actual state in which they are in currently. When recognising this gap, potential students must decide whether to fill it through further study (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004). Students will only fill the gap when this choice of studying a Master's degree is within their reach and appears to be attractive to them (Moogan and Baron, 2003). This is why the main motivation for continuing one's education is to obtain a decent salary with opportunities to choose varied and dynamic careers (Hossler *et al.*, 1989).

The second stage of consumer decision-making, *information search* includes "internal search" and "external search". *Internal search* starts when consumers access information stored in their memory to assist the purchasing decision, and *external search* begins when consumers use information sources (i.e. books, the Internet or talking to people) to assist the purchasing decision (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). The marketers of universities will be interested in knowing how much information potential students are likely to gather, what information sources they use and their relative importance. As HE decision-making could be a complex service purchasing process for potential students, a variety of information sources are likely to be used while personal sources are suggested to be the most important information sources (Franklin, 1995; Inoue, 1999; Clarke and Brown, 1998; Paulsen, 1990; Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004).

The third stage of consumer decision-making, *alternative evaluation*, means consumers evaluate available alternative choices based on the likely benefits the products or services could offer (Loudon and Bitta, 1993). The evaluation stage in the



HE setting is problematic for applicants, as it is difficult for potential students to know how good a particular university course is prior to enrollment. An additional problem is that universities present themselves as outstanding in their promotional literature (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004), and this makes an informed, unbiased evaluation even harder for potential students.

The fourth stage of consumer decision-making, *choice* is when consumers purchase the preferred alternative (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). In the case of HE choices, students select the preferred university from their list of alternatives and enroll at one institution (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004). This is then followed by the fifth stage of consumer decision-making, *outcome evaluation*, when consumers evaluate the consumption experience that directs to either satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Engel *et al.*, 1995). Post-purchase communication can reduce the degree of experienced post-purchase dissonance, so by having the right promotional message via the right methods and media, universities can reduce the possibilities of having dissatisfied students (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004).

Although widely used by marketers, the models of consumer decision-making have been criticised for their assumptions and generalisations. Firstly, the assumption of rational consumers might not be true. Rather than being totally rational, customers are affected by information provided by marketers and are also influenced by personal emotions, such as current mood and feelings. Moreover, consumers do not tend to have perfect information upon which to base their decisions (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). In addition, the generalisation of the decision-making process might not be applicable to the decision-making on all product ranges.

The structure of the models of consumer decision-making might exist within certain contexts. Yet, it might not be able to explain all situations. For example, the frequency of purchase, the product type, or the importance of the purchase, are not included features within the models (Erasmus *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, when consumers need to face higher social, personal or financial risks when purchasing, the decision-making usually involves more external information search. However, further external information seeking is not included in the generic models of consumer decision-making.



Despite these limitations, models of consumer decision-making generally cover the stages consumers might go through in the purchasing processes. Being aware of the limitations of the models of consumer decision-making, it is believed that using a generic model helps define the key stages that potential students might go through in making HE choices. Therefore, the five-stage concepts of consumer decision-making will be used to form one part of the conceptual framework applied in this research. Moreover, since decision-making may differ according to whether consumers are considering products or services, and since HE is considered to be a service, the next section will discuss the differences for consumers in services purchasing.

### **Consumer decision-making in services**

HE is a pure service which is characterised by a greater amount of interpersonal contact, complexity, divergence, and customisation than other service business (Patterson *et al.*, 1998). The notion of education as a service as opposed to a product is presented in several studies (Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Patterson *et al.*, 1998; Cubillo *et al.*, 2006), and researchers recommended that programmes of HE should be marketed on the basis of the tenets of service marketing (Umashankar, 2001). It has been suggested that HE decision making can be considered as one type of professional service, similar to medical services, financial advisers, or accountants (Freiden and Goldsmith, 1989).

In addition, the information search process for professional services (i.e. medical services, financial advisers, or accountants) was found to be different from the information search consumers would have for generic services (i.e. hairdressers, eating out, or shopping for food). Consumers are more willing to invest more energy to search for information on evaluation criteria and qualifications for professional services, and consumers rely more heavily on other, often personal, sources of information such as personal recommendations (Hill and Neeley, 1998). When purchasing professional services, the traits of consumers include higher perceived risk as they are not only harder to be evaluated, but also are purchased infrequently and are not accompanied by warranties or guarantees (Freiden and Goldsmith, 1989).



As services are intangible, heterogeneous, perishable, and require simultaneous production and consumption, consumers usually associate intangibility with a high level of risk (Murray, 1991; Zeithaml *et al.*, 2002; Ahmed *et al.*, 2002). In the case of HE, intangibility hinders both the communication of services to potential students and the setting of price for international education (Mazzarol, 1998). HE choices are naturally experiential, because it has only a small set of tangible components. In order to make intangible aspects tangible, experiential aspects of HE have to be translated into tangible attributes, otherwise consumers will experience difficulty when evaluating the available choices.

Most of the quality attributes in HE cannot be perceived, felt, or tested in advance (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006), and this brings difficulties to the evaluation of educational programmes, especially for international students (Patterson *et al.*, 1998). In international HE, there are many service aspects potential students might consider, such as safety, cultural activities, cost, visa and entry requirements, university environment, and quality of life (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). When making these decisions, it is likely that prospective international students are not in the host country yet, which makes the evaluation of programmes more difficult.

The evaluation of service quality is difficult partly due to the meaning of service quality differing between individual customers (Ahmed *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, the quality of HE services varies from year to year, class to class, student to student, and lecturer to lecturer (Patterson *et al.*, 1998). The third possible problem of service evaluation is it is usually impossible to determine when the service begins (Gronroos, 1997). For example, the HE service will probably begin long before the actual enrolment with universities, starting when a potential student contacts the institution by e-mail or phone, requesting information about the offered programmes and the entry requirements. This initial contact made with the university could be the first service image evaluation available to prospective students (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). However, if prospective international students use educational agents in their home country and do not contact universities directly, this channel could impact upon the way prospective students evaluate their HE options.



As HE is considered as one type of service provider in this study, the literature of consumer decision-making in services will be used to see how the intangibility and heterogeneity of services can be used to explain Taiwanese students' HE decision-making. Several questions arise. For example, do Taiwanese students feel it is difficult to evaluate service quality of an HE programme before purchasing when only a small set of tangible components are available to them? Do Taiwanese students experience a greater sense of risk when evaluating HE choices, compared to less specialist services? Levels of consumer involvement in the decision-making process may differ according to each individual. This consideration is addressed below.

### **Involvement and knowledge in decision-making**

Consumers' purchasing involvements could be characterised as *extensive problem solving*, *limited problem solving*, or *routinised response behaviour* (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004; Solomon *et al.*, 2002; Loudon and Bitta, 1993). In an HE context, Gray (1991) suggests that the purchase of an international HE service can be considered as high involvement, because of its high cost, high personal relevance, variety of different alternatives available and time taken to make the decision. It is not surprising to see the level of involvement in HE choices to be high, as HE services are infrequent and expensive purchases for students, and the costs and risks of a wrong decision are high. Hence, it is felt most students in HE decision-making are likely to be either extensive or limited problem solvers, and not likely to be routinised response buyers.

High involvement occurs when the purchase is viewed by consumers as high risk either socially, personally or financially, so multiple information sources will be used. High involvement decision-making also means information is processed more actively, and longer time will be invested in the search and purchase process (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). As *extensive* and *limited problem solving* are more likely to feature when making HE choices, Table 2.1 compares the differences between these two categories. The higher consumers' knowledge is on the products or services, the lower involvement they might have. Furthermore, the level of consumers' involvement could be seen from the amount of information sources, criteria and alternatives considered.



**Table 2.1 Effects of involvement and knowledge on consumers' decision-making**

	<u><i>Low involvement, High knowledge</i></u>	<u><i>High involvement, Low knowledge</i></u>
<b><i>Basic motivation</i></b>	Choose satisfactory product with reasonable effort	Choose "best" product
<b><i>End goal</i></b>	Obtain desired functional consequences	Obtain psychological consequences or value
<b><i>Goal hierarchy</i></b>	Simple hierarchy; clear, well-defined sub-goals; certainty about goals	Unclear, ill-defined sub-goals; uncertainty about goals; construct hierarchy
<b><i>Consideration set</i></b>	Several alternatives known; few considered	Few choice alternatives known initially; several considered
<b><i>Choice criteria</i></b>	A few, moderately abstract attributes are used	Unclear about important choice criteria
<b><i>Decision heuristics</i></b>	Use of a few search and decision heuristics	Use of many search and decision heuristics
	↓	↓
<b><i>Decision process</i></b>	<i>Limited problem solving</i>	<i>Extensive problem solving</i>

**Source:** Peter and Olson (1996, pg. 216)

Building on the effects of involvement and knowledge on consumers' decision-making as suggested in Table 2.1, Brennan (2001a) points out when consumers have limited internal information (knowledge) and are less capable to build expertise, they are most likely to search information actively. Expertise in the consumer research domain is closely linked to the information search process, because a consumer may only seek information relating to the purchasing decision if they are either unfamiliar with the situation or unconfident about their knowledge (Park and Leissig, 1981). On the other hand, experts who are more knowledgeable



consumers are able to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information and consequently, may spend less time evaluating alternatives, as a result of having a stronger understanding of what is important to the decision (Selnes and Troye, 1989).

Although it is generally believed that the greater the consumers' knowledge, the lower involvement they might have, Bettman and Park (1980) argue that information search is likely to be greater if the person has a great deal of knowledge or if they have minimal knowledge. They suggest the information search curve generated may resemble a U shape, with information search greatest at both ends of the curve. In terms of consumer knowledge, this can exist either from experience with the product or product class (*familiarity*) or from their ability to perform product-related tasks (*expertise*) (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; De Bont and Schoormans, 1995; Mitchell and Dacin, 1996).

Moreover, consumers' expertise can be comprised of either subjective or objective knowledge (De Bont and Schoormans, 1995). *Subjective knowledge* means the consumer may "believe" they have knowledge of the product class (Mitchell and Dacin, 1996), and *objective knowledge* refers to those cases where consumers have product-related memories which are accurate and can be measured by some objective means (Rao and Sieben, 1992). In the HE context, students' objective knowledge could be general knowledge about courses and programmes or specific knowledge about libraries, specialist subjects and staffing profiles. It is therefore likely that the students who have higher levels of objective knowledge are people who have conducted an intense information search for specific information. This however is not necessarily true for students who have a high level of subjective knowledge, as it is also quite possible for some students to "feel confident" about their degree of knowledge but to know relatively little in an objective sense (Brennan, 2001a).

Furthermore, other personal factors may also affect students' level of involvement. For example, it was suggested if students have a moderate level of self-confidence in undertaking the HE decision-making task, and do not underestimate their capability, they would conduct a relatively high level of actual information search activity, and have a high level of objective expertise (Brennan, 2001a). In addition, in a highly involved purchasing situation, such as HE decision-making, apart from the investment



associated with time and energy consumers in carrying out the information search, consumers might also devote considerable emotional resources. Galotti and Kozberg (1996) found students feel overwhelmed at times by the HE decision, and they are stressed by the amount of information that is potentially relevant to the decision and also by the short time they have to process the information and make a final decision.

“Male or female, more or less academically talented, all students paint a similar picture of the process: one of stress and difficulty” (Galotti and Kozberg, 1996, pg.14). The stress might have occurred because prospective students have no established criteria to help guide their selection, or they have not yet narrowed down the alternative choices (Loudon and Bitta, 1993). Yet, when more information search was conducted over time, students reported feeling more certain of their decision, more comfortable with their approach to the decision, and more confident and more satisfied with their ability to make a decision (Galotti and Kozberg, 1996). This might also have demonstrated how information search helps students to reduce the uncertainty that they might have felt in making HE choices.

Additionally, when the perceived risk is higher, it is more likely for consumers to obtain information from interpersonal information sources (Solomon *et al.*, 2002, pg.238). Interestingly, it was found that experts who have more knowledge about purchasing products/services are less likely to seek interpersonal sources of information than non-experts (East, 1992). Even when experts use interpersonal sources of information, those sources are also relied on less (Beatty and Talpade, 1994). However, when the purchase is a highly socially significant one, such as education, even experts may seek confirmation of their decision from socially significant others (Brennan, 2001a).

In this study, Taiwanese students' level of involvement, level of knowledge and level of information search activities will be investigated to see how previous literature can be used to explain Taiwanese students' HE information search. For example, how does the information search of home-based students compare to that of international students? The latter group would be facing a comparatively higher cost of studying overseas and will have a greater variety of different alternatives available across several countries. Furthermore, would international students experience greater stress



than home-based students through comparisons of the amount of information and the short time available to reach a HE decision? Are students with greater degrees of knowledge able to spend less time evaluating alternatives? Next, factors affecting students' HE decision-making as suggested by previous models will be discussed.

### **2.1.2 Factors from the HE decision-making models**

Researchers within the fields of sociology, economics, and psychology have conducted different types of research in HE choices. The problem of a sociological view is that the emphasis is more on external influences, from the culture or family, rather than seeing students as active problem solvers. Furthermore, an economic view only sees students as rational consumers who have perfect information to evaluate alternative choices. Such a perspective presumes all intangible costs could be counted by consumers, which might not be true in the real life. Moreover, a psychological view does not incorporate the propensity for students to maximise utility.

Based on different perspectives in studying HE choices, the conceptual approaches for explaining the HE decision-making can be grouped into three types of model, namely economic, status-attainment (sociological), and the combined models. Generally, *the economic models* are based on economic assumptions that prospective students are rational consumers and conduct careful cost-benefit analyses for their HE choices. By contrast, *the status-attainment models* are based on sociological perspectives that look at the interaction of factors that might affect students' HE choices, like family or peer group influences. Finally, *the combined models* are a combination of economic and status-attainment models which capture many possible affected factors suggested by the previous two types of models, and they also present a step-by-step framework encapsulating students' HE choices.

From the viewpoint of universities, the HE decision-making begins with a large amount of potential students that narrows down to those who actually enrol (Hanson and Litten, 1982). It was suggested that HE choice is a complex process, and most students go through it only once in their life (Litten, 1982; Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, it is truly an important decision for students to make. By examining the conceptual models, possible factors that might affect students' HE choices could be revealed and inform the design of this study. However, it is noticeable that these



conceptual models were mainly formulated in North American undergraduate settings. These models may therefore lack applicability to Asian cultural settings. Nevertheless, these models could be used to inform the structure of this study and to guide the focus of this study.

### **Economic models**

The economic models are based on the idea that a student uses some sort of cost-benefit analysis when making HE choices. This means students will evaluate their potential possible choices to see whether it is worth doing a degree, and furthermore on which institution offers them the most benefits. There are two streams within the economic models which include models of college-going and models of choice among colleges.

The first type, *college-going models*, deals with the issues of students on whether to study in a college or take other alternatives, like entering the job market. The second type, *choice among colleges models*, looks at why students select a particular institution as opposed to selecting other university alternatives. *College-going models* cover the factors that affect students' decisions whether to attend college or to choose other non-college alternatives (Kohn *et al.*, 1976; Bishop, 1977; Nolfi, 1978; Fuller *et al.*, 1982; Manski and Wise, 1983). Students' expected costs that are commonly mentioned in the college-going models include direct costs, foregone and future expected earnings. For potential students, direct expected costs include tuition, net tuition (tuition minus financial aid), room, and expenses. Furthermore, foregone earnings because of college attendance are additional expected costs included in models by Bishop (1977) and Fuller *et al.*, (1982). Future expected earnings either from college attendance (Bishop, 1977; Fuller *et al.*, 1982) or from a non-college alternative (Bishop, 1977; Nolfi, 1978) are additional economic concerns.

The second type of economic model, *choice among colleges models*, focus more on a student selecting a particular college as opposed to other alternatives. Factors related to this particular choice include out of pocket expenses, tuition or net tuition costs, parents' income, ratio of college costs to parents' income, students' academic ability, and college characteristics (Rander and Miller, 1970; Kohn *et al.*, 1976; Chapman, 1984). Overall, the factors pinpointed by the economic models that affect students'



HE choices include: tuition; net tuition; living costs; foregone earnings; expected future earnings; family background characteristics (parents' income, educational level, and occupation); students' academic ability; and even the aspirations of neighbourhood peers. The economic models focus on how certain characteristics, (such as parental socio-economic status, student gender, and student ability), impact on individual students when making their HE choices.

The basic assumptions of the economic models are that when students consider colleges, they can detail the advantages and disadvantages of each, associate a utility or a value with the attributes of each, make reasonable assumptions about the outcomes of one decision over another, and then choose rationally to maximise benefits and reduce costs. For example, indirect expenses of going to colleges from a student's perspective might include intangible costs, like students' losses incurred simply by leaving home and the loss of friendships. On the other hand, obtained benefits from a student's perspective could include financial rewards received from a particular institution, a location close to home, quality of student life, and the chance to study on preferred programmes. However, it is reasonable to question whether potential students act as rationally when selecting a HE institution.

The economic models stress the process of decision-making and how students rate and use different college attributes. The assumption of economic models is that students have nearly perfect information and rationally maximise value of their choices. However, whether students and their families always act as rationally as believed by economists is questionable. Also, students might not have perfect information on which to base their HE choices. Economics alone might be insufficient to understand students' HE choices. The economic models assume that a student's future has many possible choices which can be seen by students with some clear criteria. However, it is worth questioning whether these different alternatives can be evaluated by clear criteria, and also whether students truly evaluate choices by engaging in cost-benefit analysis as suggested by economists.

Kotler and Fox (1985) provide a four-stage model of college choice based on the economic models mentioned previously, and the four stages include making the initial decision to investigate colleges, gathering information in an orderly and



comprehensive way, evaluating and eliminating choices to generate a set of educational options, and finally choosing from among the options. Generally speaking, the Kotler and Fox model is similar to generic consumer behaviour models as discussed in 2.1.1. Interestingly, Kotler and Fox (1985) suggest that costs and risks that are difficult to value, such as parental expectations and encouragement, are assumed to be the most influential considerations to students during the first two stages within their model. It is difficult for economists to place a measurable value on these factors, whilst this has not deterred sociologists from developing the status-attainment models.

### **Status-attainment models**

The status-attainment models, which are also known as sociological models, concern the influences from sociological factors to students' HE choices (Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Whilst the economic models present HE choices more from students' personal perspective, the status-attainment models also include broader contextual social influences and family influences on students' decision-making.

The status-attainment models are based on sociologists' perspectives that different factors interact at different stages in students' lives and that all these factors affected students' decision-making in HE choices. Hence, the focus of the status-attainment models concern the impact of socialisation processes, family conditions, interactions with peers, and school environments on students' HE choices.

The status-attainment model proposes that behavioural variables, such as students' academic performance, or how leisure time is spent, interact with students' background variables, like students' parental education and occupational position. The status-attainment models particularly consider the impact of family characteristics (Rever, 1973). For instance, the status-attainment models presented the father's level of education was one of the most important factors that determined a child's college attendance. The status-attainment models also focus on the effects of socio-economic status of family in decisions about the children's career choices which lead to subsequent status attainment (Sewell and Shah, 1978; Sewell *et al.*, 1969). The status-attainment models present how personal and family characteristics



interact with the social and academic environment of high school to affect students' HE decisions (Boyle, 1966; Alwin and Otto, 1977).

Boyle (1966) suggests that students' academic ability has a direct effect on their college aspirations. Furthermore, Alwin and Otto (1977) suggests that a student's significant others, like family and peers, develop HE expectations for that student based on his/her academic performance and socio-economic status. Overall, the factors presented by the status-attainment models contain family socio-economic background; students' academic ability; the influence of significant others, like family or peers; academic performance at high school; educational aspirations; study motivation (which is viewed as a psychological factor); and high school characteristics (i.e. student/teacher ratios or school size). As the status-attainment models are still not comprehensive enough to cover why and how students make HE choices, the combined models arguably offer a more comprehensive account of the factors impacting on HE decision-making.

### **Combined models**

Combined models incorporate both the economic and the status-attainment models of college choice, for example Jackson (1982), Chapman (1984), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Since neither the status-attainment nor the economic models have provided suitable explanations for the process of enrolment decisions, the combined models include many variables suggested by the previous two models and present a decision-making process that provides a basic structure underpinning students' HE choices.

The Jackson model (1982) is comprised of three stages, namely the preference, exclusion, and evaluation stage. In the preference stage, students' academic achievement is strongly related to their educational aspirations. Jackson (1982) suggests that the most significant variables in the preference stage include academic ability, the role of significant others, and family background. In the exclusion stage, location, availability of accurate information, and the academic and vocational background of the family are the most important factors. Finally, in the evaluation stage, the remaining institutions are considered by students on the basis of institutional characteristics and cost-benefit analysis (Jackson, 1982). Although many



factors are covered in the Jackson (1982) model, it does not explain how the consideration sets are formed by students.

Yet, it is significant that Jackson (1982) rated the variables at each stage. When rating the variables, Jackson (1982) took factors from the economic models, such as location, cost, quantity of information about the institution, and the job prospects of graduates. Then he rated these factors as either moderate or strong in the last two stages of his model. Interestingly, factors such as family background and high school academic achievement were rated from moderate to strong in all three stages. Therefore, it can be said that the concepts from both the status-attainment models and the economic models are well mixed in the Jackson (1982) model.

The Chapman (1984) model proposes that student characteristics and external influences interact to form a student's general expectation of college life. Student characteristics include socio-economic status, academic ability, and educational aspirations. Moreover, external influences covered significant others, college characteristics, and college marketing efforts. In addition, the five stages proposed include pre-search, search, applications, choice, and enrolment stage. Interestingly, Chapman (1984) found that family income has a direct effect on which colleges are considered by students during the pre-search stage. Also, it was suggested that students tend to select colleges that have students with academic ability similar to their own (*ibid.*), and those concepts offered by Chapman contributed to the formations of other models, such as the model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987).

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model offers a three-stage process which places the individual student in the centre of the model (Figure 2.1). The three stages are the predisposition, search and choice stage. The predisposition stage covers making the decision to go to college, the search stage involves learning about and comparing institutions, and the choice stage includes completing applications and actually choosing an institution for enrollment. It can be seen from this model that at each stage, students' individual factors and those institutional factors interact to produce outcomes. The outcomes of each stage also influence the next stage of the students' decision-making.



**Figure 2.1 The three-stage model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987)**

Model Dimensions	Influential Factors		Student Outcomes
	Individual Factors	Organizational Factors	
Predisposition (Phase 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Student Characteristics</li> <li>▶ Significant Others</li> <li>▶ Educational Activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ School Characteristics</li> </ul>	Search for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) College option</li> <li>b) Other options</li> </ul>
Search (Phase 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Student Preliminary College Values</li> <li>▶ Student Search Activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ College &amp; Univ. Search Activities (Search for Students)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Choice set</li> <li>b) Other options</li> </ul>
Choice (Phase 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Choice Set</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ College &amp; Courtship Activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Choice</li> </ul>

In the predisposition stage, students decide whether they want to go to college or to pursue other options, such as work or military service. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggest that students' backgrounds and characteristics are positively connected with college attendance. The term "predisposition" refers to the plans students develop for education or work after they graduate from high school, and factors like students' family background, academic performance, peers, parents, and other high school experiences suggested as influencing to students in this stage (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987).

Secondly, the search stage outlines the dynamic process why students decide which universities they should apply. This stage begins when students start to seek information about university opportunities, and it ends when students have decided to apply to particular institutions termed the "choice set" (consideration set) in the theories of consumer behaviour. Students and universities have greater interaction in this stage, because students search and evaluate possible alternatives and determine what institutional characteristics they most care about and which university best caters towards these interests. Finally, in the choice stage, students compare each HE



institution they have applied by the choice criteria they care about and choose where to enrol. During the choice stage, “institutions increase their communication with students and stress courtship activities, while students evaluate their options and determine which specific colleges and universities to attend” (Poock and Love, 2001, pg. 207). In this stage, students evaluate their consideration set and choose a college from among those they have considered.

All the HE models discussed previously have their advantages and disadvantages in understanding the HE choice process. The economic models provide the perspectives on how students formulate their final consideration sets and how they decide which university they will attend, while the status-attainment models is useful for understanding the formation of educational aspirations. It may however be argued that combined models are more comprehensive as they combine concepts from both the status-attainment and economic models. Furthermore, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, as one of the combination models, is often referred to throughout the literature (Basksh and Hoyt, 2001; Bradshaw *et al.*, 2001; Pope and Fermin, 2003; Poock and Love, 2001).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have greatly influenced research on college choice. An example of this impact can be seen in the creation of the College Choice Influence Scale (CCIS) presented by Dixon and Martin (1991). The scale includes five groups of factors that influence students based on Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model. The five factors include attitudes toward the specific institution, life-planning influences, influence of others, independence-recreational reasons, and family tradition of attendance at the specified institution (Dixon and Martin, 1991). This scale is evidence of the substantial influence that Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model has had on the growth in college choice research.

Nearly all HE decision-making models were developed from the undergraduate level. Yet, the model developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is an exception. While designed to address the undergraduate enrollment process, this model has been used in previous research to scope the decision-making process of postgraduate students. For example, Waters (1992) applied the Hossler and Gallagher model to the factors influencing HE choices of international postgraduate students. Treseder (1995)



inspected the enrollment decisions of postgraduate students by developing a theoretical model based partly on the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Thus, there are examples of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model being applied to postgraduate students' HE decision-making.

Moreover, it was believed that by applying a combined view of HE models in this study, it could cover not only how students as consumers are influenced by external information sources and by the social environments they inhabit, but also how the information students used affected their final enrolment choices. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, being general in nature, allows researchers to adapt it to their specific area of interest. Based on the previous points, it was conceivable that Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model will remain at the forefront of college choice research until further frameworks have been developed. Hence, Hossler and Gallagher model (1987) is selected as a part of the conceptual framework of this study (see section 2.3.1), especially since the model is unique in considering the interactions between students' and institutional characteristics.

The factors included in the previous HE models will also be considered in this study to see to what extent they can be used to explain Taiwanese students' HE decision-making. For instance, do Taiwanese students use some sort of cost-benefit analysis when making HE choices as suggested by the economic models? Do Taiwanese students evaluate which institution offers them the most benefits in terms of tuition, living costs or expected future earnings? Also, to what extent do Taiwanese students' academic ability and the influence from significant others, such as family or peers, affect their HE decision-making as suggested by the status-attainment models? Moreover, to what extent are Taiwanese students affected in HE decision-making by factors suggested by the combined models, such as availability of accurate information, quantity of information about the institution, the job prospects of graduates or college marketing efforts? In the following section, the factors influencing students' information search and alternative evaluations will be discussed.

## **2.2 Information search and alternative evaluation**

Information search occurs when consumers are driven by an upcoming purchase decision that needs to be made. This type of information search is termed the



*pre-purchase search* (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Engel *et al.*, 1995). In another case, if the information search occurs on a relatively regular basis to develop a knowledge base to assist future purchases, this is termed the *ongoing search* (Loudon and Bitta, 1993). This study focuses only on the *pre-purchase search*, since HE choice is often a once in a life time decision for consumers. It is less likely for consumers to perform an ongoing search intentionally to assist their future HE decision-makings. In HE choices, information searching can be seen as a continuous process of students reducing uncertainty and gathering information about institutions, interpreting information, and making HE decisions (MacGowan, 2002). A successful information search yields a group of brands that a consumer views as possible alternatives. This group of products is called the consumer's consideration set (Dibb *et al.*, 1997). In HE choices, after the gathering and digestion of information, students develop a short list of institutions, the consideration set, which consists of a group of institutions that the student wants to consider and learn more about before making the final enrolment decision (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000).

This study focuses more on the information search of Taiwanese students as very few studies have researched the information search stage (i.e. Moogan and Baron, 2003; Harker *et al.*, 2001; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005), and it is the least researched stage within students' HE decision-making (Hossler *et al.*, 1989). Also, the information consumers have will be used to evaluate alternatives, so the factors affecting students' major and institution evaluations will also be covered by the end of this section.

### **2.2.1 Internal search**

Information search, the second stage of the decision-making process, can be defined as the knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the environment (Engel *et al.*, 1995), which means it can be either internal or external in nature. Internal search refers to consumers' memory scan of decision-relevant knowledge stored in the long-term memory, and it occurs prior to the external search. If this internal search provides sufficient information, consumers' external search will be very limited (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997).

On the other hand, external information search refers to everything but memory. Although internal and external information search behaviours are conceptually



distinct, in reality they are related in that external search is also dependent on consumers' memory. Unless a consumer is a complete innocent with regards to a particular issue or topic, memory must somehow be involved in any information search and must be the starting point for any information search (Peterson and Merino, 2003).

In HE choices, it was suggested that students often have perceptions toward universities based on their previous experiences (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Perception represents the process of selecting, organising and interpreting information inputs to produce meaning (Brassington and Pettitt, 1997), and information inputs are received through consumers' senses, i.e., sight, taste, hearing, smell and touch. However, each consumer receives, organises and interprets this sensory information in an individual way (Kotler, 1997).

As internal information may be from past experience of the product or service; from information that has been absorbed from past marketing campaigns; or from information collected from word-of mouth (WOM) recommendations (Engel *et al.*, 1995), it is therefore important to find out what internal information students possess and how this internal information was formed. However, since students' expectations or perceptions of college are often unrealistic, and accurate information is often ignored (Stern, 1965; Jackson, 1982), it is essential to understand the contents of Taiwanese students' internal information.

Consumers' perceptions are formed through three steps, namely selective attention, selective distortion and selective retention (Dibb *et al.*, 1997). *Selective attention* refers to the selection of inputs that people expose to their awareness. *Selective distortion* is the changing and twisting of currently received information. Finally, *selective retention* is the process of remembering information inputs that support personal feelings and beliefs and of forgetting those that do not (Dibb *et al.*, 1997; Kotler, 1997; Brassington and Pettitt, 1997).

This study will investigate how Taiwanese students form the knowledge stored in long-term memory about making HE choices. Are Taiwanese students' internal information from their past experiences or from WOM recommendations as suggested



by the literature? What perceptions do Taiwanese students have from internal searching? In addition, what internal information sources do Taiwanese students access in order to assist them in their decision-making process? Consideration now shifts to the consideration of external searching.

### **2.2.2 External search**

In making HE choices, *external searching* starts when students turn to either marketing (commercial) or non-marketing (non-commercial) information sources to obtain information they need for university and/or course comparisons (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Moogan and Baron, 2003). Communication strategies of universities, although being marketing information sources, have an impact on potential students' choices in the search stage (Chapman, 1981), and "the best way for institutions to expand their application pool is to reach students at the search phase" (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987 pg. 218). Therefore, when more understanding of students' external search behaviour can be built, this can assist universities to formulate and apply more effective marketing strategies toward prospective students.

Information searching is not restricted to a specific point in time within a decision process. Rather, it involves every phase of the decision process (Hwang *et al.*, 2002). Whenever customers feel insufficiency of information, they may extend their search and integrate newer findings with retained information from previous searches. Consumers start to utilise internal memories to list alternative products once they recognise their purchase needs. If the list of alternatives from memory is not satisfactory, they start to search for information from external sources, which may include personal, marketer-oriented and neutral sources (Crotts, 1999). Once information about alternatives is collected either by an internal or external search, or by a combination of both, individuals evaluate alternative products by categorising, evaluating, organising, and retaining/ignoring the information (Assael, 1992). This information processing continues until consumers reach a confidence level about their decisions.

The information sought by consumers via external search could include alternatives available, choice criteria on which to compare alternatives, importance of various choice criteria, and the performance of the alternatives on the attributes (Mowen and



Minor, 2001, pg. 178). The purpose of students' external search is to formulate their consideration set, which is comprised of the group of institutions that the student will select as warranting application. Moreover, students' consideration set might be slightly different from the list of institutions they actually apply to (Hossler *et al.*, 1989). For instance, if students select three universities during the information search stage to be in the consideration set, they might apply to only two and ultimately, might prefer only one of these options.

In the information search stage, students develop strong preferences, evaluate their own qualifications for admission, ponder alternative mechanisms for financing study, and apply to certain institutions (Hossler *et al.*, 1989). In addition, through external searching, potential students develop mental pictures of the institutions under consideration, and these images lead them to form application commitments toward certain institutions (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Hossler *et al.*, 1999).

This study will investigate what marketing and non-marketing information sources are used by Taiwanese students to obtain external information required for university/courses comparisons. A related question will be whether students' external search was conducted in every phase of the HE decision-making process whenever insufficient information was noted? Alternatively, does external searching only occur prior to the formation of Taiwanese students' consideration sets? Moreover, how are the external information sources used by Taiwanese students to form consideration sets? How do Taiwanese students develop mental pictures of the institutions under consideration through their external search? The factors influencing students' information search is discussed below.

### **Factors influencing information search**

It has been suggested that *situational factors*, *product features*, and *consumer characteristics* affect the extent of consumers' external searching (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Mowen and Minor, 2001; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). When the availability and quantity of information increases, external searching increases (Engel *et al.*, 1995). Furthermore, when information is presented in a clear and comprehensive manner, it reduces consumers' search efforts and enhances information search and usage (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). Moreover, the greater the



time pressure is to consumers, the smaller the external search is (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Hence, it will be interesting to see whether the situational factors mentioned above can also explain the level of Taiwanese students' external search when considering their HE choices.

The higher the price of a product or service or the higher the perceived risks are by consumers lead to a greater external search (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). Furthermore, as perceived risk is higher when buying services than products, more information sources could be consequently used in services purchases (Engel *et al.*, 1995). Additionally, consumers with higher ability to integrate complex information will process more external information (Mowen and Minor, 2001) while consumers who cannot cope with too much external information tend to make poorer choices when faced with synthesising large amounts of information (Keller and Staelin, 1987). Hence, this study will examine whether Taiwanese students possess high perceived risks in buying HE services. This study will also examine the extent to which Taiwanese students' ability to process information affects their external search.

Moreover, when the perceived benefits are higher than the costs of searching, external searching will be greater (Engel *et al.*, 1995). In addition, when the consideration set is bigger, the external search also increases (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). Furthermore, Dholakia and Bagozzi (2001) suggest information sought relies on the mind-set of the information searchers, such as the goals of information searching, knowledge, experience, and emotional state. Additionally, when consumers have more knowledge of the concerned products or services, they tend to search less (Mowen and Minor, 2001). Selnes and Troye (1989) suggest that the more informed and knowledgeable consumers are, the lower the likelihood of experiencing cognitive dissonance after purchase. In the context of HE choices, cognitive dissonance might be generated if the students' expectations of the institution are not fulfilled (Avis, 1997). Therefore, this study will explore how informed or knowledgeable Taiwanese students are when deciding amongst the various HE institutions available and how the knowledge affects their external search.

In terms of *demographics*, consumers with higher education levels could search more, because they might have a greater level of knowledge and more ability in collecting,



synthesising and analysing information (Mowen and Minor, 2001). Similarly, higher-income consumers could search less than lower-income consumers, because they face less financial risk on purchasing and they can choose from more alternatives (ibid.). In HE choices, the demographic factors that influenced students' information search will be covered next, including age, gender, ethnicity, parental educational level, socio-economic status, and academic ability.

### Age

Tumblin (2002) found in the US that for age-mature students who were over 23 years of age, word-of-mouth information sources from friends, relatives, and employer referral exerts the strongest influences on their HE choices. Similarly, Moogan and Baron (2003) suggested that in the UK, mature-aged students who were over 21 years of age did not refer to parents, but consulted friends or ex-colleges as a source of reference or information.

### Gender

Lewis and Morrison (1975) studied students in the United States and learned that women more than men, like to obtain advice from college students, while men tend to gain opinions from high school counselors more than women. Furthermore, Chalmers (2001) found that women were more likely to seek information from friends than men. Interestingly, male and female students are similar in some respects because they both used family members and relatives more than any other information sources (Chalmers and Kumekawa, 2000). In addition, a more recent study reported that women used more university prospectuses, open days, teachers and university school visits more than men. Women also used information sources more intensively than men do in making HE choices as well (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). However, Chalmers and Kumekawa (2000) observed no significant difference between females and males in their information search in New Zealand.

### Ethnicity

In terms of the use of information sources, Lewis and Morrison (1975) reported in the US that African-American students tend to use a greater range of information sources than white students. Also, although both groups used campus visits, college catalogs, and writing to universities for information, African-American students consulted



admissions officers of university, and talked to current college students more than white students (Lewis and Morrison, 1975). White students received more information from high school counselors and their parents. In other words, African-American students obtained more information directly from the university than white students (Lewis and Morrison, 1975). Although the study of Lewis and Morrison (1975) was not very updated, other studies on ethnicity in Higher Education reviewed for this study focused more on the stage of predisposition stage rather than the search stage, which helped less on how information sources were used differently by different ethnic groups.

#### Parental educational level

Students with higher levels of parental education in the United Kingdom rely more on their parents rather than on high school counselors for information (Gilmour *et al.*, 1981; Litten, 1982). Students with higher parental education also used less information from other types of information sources, like commercial guidebooks, campus visits, admissions officers, and alumni. On the other hand, students with lower parental education have more advice from high school counselors and publications.

#### Socio-economic status (SES)

Students with higher SES in the United States depend more on their parents for information while students with lower SES listen more to high school counselors (Leslie *et al.*, 1977). Moreover, Connor and Dewson (2001) discovered that while much information seems to be available, to low-SES students in the United Kingdom, information provided by universities was often seen as too general and overly complex. Similarly, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) confirm this point and reveal that SES affects students' access to information in the United States.

In general, high-SES students used more information sources than low-SES students, including private counselors to guide the decision-making process (Hossler *et al.*, 1999; McDonough, 1997). High-SES students are also more knowledgeable about college costs, are more likely to broaden the search to include a wider geographical range, tend to consider higher-quality institutions, and have parents who planned and saved for college expenses (Hossler *et al.*, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Horn and Chen,



1998; Hamrick and Hossler, 1996).

### Academic ability

Students with higher academic abilities tend to collect information about their future university studies more actively than students with lower academic abilities (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). High performers want to get a real feel for the university and they valued more highly the open days and the universities' school visits. In addition, high performers wanted to ensure a better quality of education, so they place more emphasis on the league tables and also advice from family members and teachers (*ibid.*).

### Types of institutions

Interestingly, Connor *et al.* (1999) report that pupils from independent schools consult on an average of over nine sources of information, in comparison to pupils from comprehensive schools who referred to an average of seven sources. Pupils will only choose an HEI where they feel they will settle well and succeed in their studies (Stanley and Reynolds, 1994). However, it may be difficult for them to foresee this as HE is a pure service which is harder to be evaluated before purchasing.

The above factors influencing Western students will be used to assist the explanations of Taiwanese students' HE information search. However, as Taiwanese students are seen as ethnically homogenous in this study, ethnic issues will not be investigated in this study. Next, the under-informed situations of students in making HE choices will be discussed.

### **Under-informed students**

The literature reveals that potential students feel that their search for the best HE is difficult, because the volume of data they need to access is massive (Moogan and Baron, 2003). Although information seems to be massive, some studies demonstrate that students' HE choices were often made from a poorly-informed situation (Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; James, 2000; Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Mortimer, 1997). Non-traditional students in Australia, including those from low-SES, disabled, and rural backgrounds, tended to be poorly informed in making HE choices, in terms of their access to information related to fields of studies, courses and universities, and



the quality of teaching (James, 2000). The explanation for this is that there was a substantial information gap between what students want and the information that had been provided by universities in their print communications (Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Mortimer, 1997; Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; Christie *et al.*, 2004). Prospective applicants criticise universities for being too vague in that adequate course descriptions are lacking (Nicholls and Wong, 1988 cited in Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004). Hence, it is understandable that students want the information provided to them to be as accurate and honest as possible (Hesketh and Knight, 1999).

In the information search, the quantity of data which needs to be absorbed may lead to confusion for some students, for they find it difficult to retain and recall these facts and figures at a later date. This has been attributed to the sheer volume of information as well as the conflicting opinions from various personnel and the large number of universities available in the first instance (Moogan and Baron, 2003). In terms of the improvements of information sources, students want a single point of contact who can answer their queries immediately. Students want to have a realistic picture of what life will be like at the potential university, and they would like to do achieve this through meeting current students, watching videos of actual class sessions, and meeting academic and administrative staff (Hesketh and Knight, 1999). However, students still have different information needs as individuals. For example, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds want more specific information than other applicants (Connor and Dewson, 2001).

The provision of adequate information to students is crucial, because when they are under or misinformed, this affects not only their HE decision-making but also their academic performance after enrolment. Yorke (1999) asserts that university students need a wide variety of quality information to succeed academically, and 39% out of 4,000 withdrawn students said they had initially selected the wrong programmes. It is therefore important to find out whether there are any problems regarding the quality of information sources that students have received leading them to unsuitable programmes.

The extent to which Taiwanese students have been adequately informed will be investigated in this study. Central here will be the focus on ascertaining whether there



is an information gap between what students want and the information that has been provided by universities. Also, this study intends to address the accuracy and honesty of the provided information. Is there, for example, a lack of adequate course description as suggested by the literature? In addition, from what sources (e.g. current students, videos clips, or staff) do Taiwanese students prefer to obtain information? These questions are addressed in this study. Next, the information that students require will be discussed.

### **The information required**

Students experience anxiety about making an incorrect HE decision, since it has been described as “a big decision affecting my whole future” (Moogan and Baron, 2003). Hence, it is not surprising to find that students were dissatisfied when the pre-entry information they received was inadequate or misleading (Martinez and Munday, 1998). Students need information that is more specific, better quality and accessible (Connor and Dewson, 2001), and students expect the information from universities, including videos, web and printed materials, to be of the appropriate style, dynamic, up-to-date and realistic (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999). More precisely, prospective students indicate preferences for receiving comprehensive enrolment packs *before*, rather than *after* it starts (Martinez and Munday, 1998).

The main information gaps that have been identified from previous studies rest largely on academic and practical aspects of the programme, including an indication of the required workload, the opportunity to talk with someone possessing detailed knowledge about the course (Martinez and Munday, 1998), career guidance (Hesketh and Knight, 1999), course timetables, examples of the kind of work students would be expected to do (Martinez and Munday, 1998), financial aspects, the likely benefits for future employment (Connor and Dewson, 2001; Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000), and how well students’ capabilities are suited for the course (Martinez and Munday, 1998; Krampf and Heinlein, 1981).

More precisely, in terms of the Hossler and Gallagher Model (1987), at the predisposition stage, students need information on financial costs of studying at universities to evaluate the worthiness of HE (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). During the search stage, university information is most needed, especially in terms of quality of



the institution, campus life and the availability of subjects (Bourke, 2000; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Furthermore, in the choice stage, information on costs and institutional characteristics, including course content, location, and reputation, is most important for students (Qureshi, 1995; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Although information on financial aspects was much needed, students generally felt information regarding the costs was insufficient for them (Martinez and Munday, 1998; Kern, 2000).

Furthermore, the information needs of international students on overseas studies have four dimensions (Patterson *et al.*, 1998). First, the economic dimension concerns the students' expectations on their ability to obtain and pay for things that are necessary for survival in a foreign country (Patterson *et al.*, 1998). Therefore, information will be needed on direct expected costs including tuition, net tuition (tuition minus financial aid), room, and expenses (Bishop, 1977; Fuller *et al.*, 1982; Nolfi, 1978). Secondly, the social dimension involves students' expectations about the quantity and quality of interactions with other individuals in the host country (Patterson *et al.*, 1998). Hence, students need information about social life on campus (Price *et al.*, 2003; James *et al.*, 1999). Thirdly, the personal dimension is about the students' self-perceptions and their expectations on the changes of themselves caused by studying overseas (Patterson *et al.*, 1998), including gaining language abilities and international experiences (Bruch and Barty, 1998; Cummings, 1993; Davis, 1996). Finally, the learning dimension describes the elements relate to students' expectations on the learning of knowledge and professional skills (Patterson *et al.*, 1998). Hence, students might want to have information about whether they can have a decent salary with opportunities to choose varied and dynamic careers (Hossler *et al.*, 1989) after studying abroad.

In terms of HE activities that universities can offer to assist the information search, students would like to have open days and opportunities to speak to existing college students (Martinez and Munday, 1998). Not surprisingly, the university open days are perceived by students as one of the most reliable and influential sources of information (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Yost and Tucker, 1995). Also, students would like to have career guidance and counseling in high schools (Hesketh and Knight, 1999), visits to schools by college personnel (Kern, 2000), have introductory programmes



linked with partner schools (Martinez and Munday, 1998), involve students' parents more in the process (Kern, 2000), such as parent open evenings (Martinez and Munday, 1998).

Although some HE activities mentioned above are already used by many British universities, this study will find out whether Taiwanese students have any preferences in terms of the HE activities they like to use when accessing information for making HE choices. Also, how do Taiwanese students define "more specific, better quality, more targeted and accessible" information? Do Taiwanese students want the opportunity to talk to someone with detailed knowledge about the course as suggested by the literature? If they do, what information do Taiwanese students want from the people they talk to? Do Taiwanese students need examples of the kind of work they would expect to do as suggested by the literature? If so, what kind of examples do they want to see?

Also, do Taiwanese students want to find out how well their capabilities fit the course, and if so, how do they discover this? Furthermore, what information on universities do Taiwanese students seek, especially in evaluating alternative programmes in consideration sets and enrolment choices? Finally, to what extent can the economic, social, personal, and learning factors explain the information needs of Taiwanese students studying in the UK? Next, information quality will be discussed to see how information quality might affect students' information search.

### **Information quality**

Most of the research on consumers' use of information has focused on consumers' search for product-related information (Vogt and Fesemaier, 1998). From a quality perspective, some studies suggest the attributes of information content include usefulness, clarity, update, accuracy, believability, relevance, and appropriate amount of data (Aladwani and Palvia, 2002; Ranganathan and Ganapathy, 2002; Huang *et al.*, 1999; Varian, 1996). The level of trust in the information source is an important factor affecting the perception of usefulness and consumers' level of confidence (Cho and Joun, 2003). Furthermore, from a value perspective, some studies confirm perception of saving time and cost, usability, efficiency, effectiveness, and convenience are the attributes of information content (Daniels and Norman, 2001; Klobas and Clyde, 2000;



Compeau *et al.*, 1999). For example, the most expected benefit collecting and using Internet information is time saving (Cho and Joun, 2003).

As making purchasing decisions in a service industry are high in perceived risks, customers are more sensitive to the quality of information content and will seek information that is more experience-based, as this type of information is more believable, differentiable and realistic (Cho and Joun, 2003). In HE choices, the most reliable source of information from students' perspectives include prospectuses, the university students, university websites, and official open days (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). However, other studies argue that information from students' social networks is perceived as more reliable than from marketing-dominated information sources (Christie *et al.*, 2004; Engel *et al.*, 1995). In other words, consumer perceptions of information quality are related to needs, content, and benefits. Moreover, information content has to satisfy customers' information needs, because information needs to be helpful to reduce the amount of uncertainty involved in purchasing decisions (Cho and Joun, 2003). Surprisingly, university league tables and news reports, which could be classified as more objective and credible, as they are not controlled by the universities themselves, are perceived as the least reliable sources of information (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005).

Possible explanations for the above phenomenon could be that the degree of consultation and the perceived reliability of information sources. Whilst students engage in a high degree of consultation with friends, the news, open days, league tables, prospectuses and websites, prospective applicants still question the reliability of such sources. On the other hand, students believe that their career advisors and campus lecturers are more reliable than the degree to which they are used (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). Interpersonal sources of information tend to be preferred by consumers, because they are often seen as more credible, flexible and trustworthy than commercial sources of information (Mitra *et al.*, 1999; Engel *et al.*, 1995). This study will therefore explore how Taiwanese students evaluate information quality, and how perceived information quality influences their external search.

In this study, the above information will be used to explain the findings of Taiwanese students' information search. For example, what are the attributes of information



content in HE decision-making from Taiwanese students' perspectives? Also, to what extent is Taiwanese students' level of confidence of information as HE information users? In reference to the above cited literature (Cho and Joun, 2003), why are some experience-based information sources seen as more reliable than others?

Furthermore, as there might be differences between students' usage of information sources and their perceptions of the reliability of information sources, this study will seek to identify the most commonly used information sources. Are non-commercial sources of information seen as more credible, flexible and trustworthy than commercial ones? If this proves to be the case, why is this so? In addition, how do Taiwanese students' evaluations of information quality influence the use of external search? In the next section, factors influencing students' decision-making, ranging from demographic to institutional characteristics, and factors influencing students' choice of study programme and institution will be discussed.

### **2.2.3 Factors influencing alternative evaluations**

This section covers the factors that affect students' alternative evaluations in deciding consideration sets and enrolment choices. This covers how students' demographic characteristics and institutional characteristics affect the choice criteria students used, as well as the criteria students used to evaluate the major and institution choices.

#### **Demographic characteristics**

Personal factors affect consumers' alternative evaluation (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004), and demographic characteristics, (such as sex, age and ethnicity), include examples of personal factors. The impact of demographic factors influencing students' HE alternative evaluations will be discussed.

#### Age

Focusing on mature-age students in the United States, Tumblin (2002) found that academic reputation of an institution and convenience factors are important for students when making enrolment decisions.



## Gender

In the USA, Lewis and Morrison (1975) found that men are more likely to place more emphasis on programmes or costs, while women tended to view all the institutional characteristics more equally. In addition, Litten (1982) found that women are also more likely than men to rate residential life as significant. Furthermore, Joseph and Joseph (1998) in New Zealand suggested that academic value of education and the availability of social life on campus were seen more importantly by men than by women. However, James *et al.*, (1999) argue the differences between male and female students' HE choices in Australia were actually minor.

## Ethnicity

In the United States, African-American students tend to consider more institutional characteristics than white students, and costs issue was also more emphasized by them than white students (Lewis and Morrison, 1975). Litten (1982) also observes that African-American students are more likely to rate financial aid as vital comparing to white students. African-American students also showed more interest on the social background of students at college (Litten, 1982). Similarly, in a study of high school students in the United States, Kern (2000) indicates that financial aid is an important consideration for ethnic minority (EM) students.

Moreover, Coccari and Javalgi (1995) suggest that Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian-Pacific students most value institutions with good quality faculty. On the other hand, African-American students paid more attention to cost, tutoring services and athletic programmes. Additionally, financial aid and costs were more important factors to African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-Pacific students than Caucasian students (Coccari and Javalgi, 1995). Furthermore, Webb and Allen (1994) studied postgraduate business students in the United States and found that white females, Hispanics, and American Indian/Alaskan Natives are more likely than blacks and Asians-Pacific Islanders to select a university because of location. Also, blacks and Asian-Pacific Islanders are more likely than other EM groups to be concerned about university entrance requirements.



More specifically, focusing on Asian immigrants in the United States, Hagy and Staniec (2002) examined post-secondary enrolment decisions and found that first and second generation of Asians are significantly more likely to enroll in both two and four-year public colleges and universities, while Hispanics and native blacks have a higher probability for enrolling in both public and private four-year colleges and universities. Their findings suggest that the behaviour of native Asians is similar to that of native Whites.

### Parental educational level

Students with higher parental educational level tended to place emphasis on the programmes and high academic standards, and were less likely to be concerned about costs (Gilmour *et al.*, 1981; Litten and Brodigan, 1982). Furthermore, when parents have a high level of education, students paid more attention to the social backgrounds of other students and on supplementary activities offered by institutions. On the other hand, lower parental education is correlated with more interest in rules and regulations affecting students (Litten, 1982).

### Socio-economic status (SES)

Typically, occupation and income serve to distinguish social class, but some researchers stress other factors such as education, lifestyle, prestige or values as better descriptive measures (O'Shaughnessy, 1995). In the HE choices, students' SES is often conferred by parents' SES. Low-SES students are more likely to rate financial aid more importantly than middle or high-SES students. A higher proportion of low-SES than middle and high-SES students cited financial aid as being dominant in their college attendance plans (Leslie *et al.*, 1977).

The effect of SES and gender has also been researched to compare course choices (Green, 1992; Trusty *et al.*, 2000). Green (1992) reports that more males who majored in business were from wealthier families than female students who majored in business. In addition, men were more likely to be motivated by money and status in their choice of courses regardless of their socio-economic background. More recently however, James *et al.*, (1999) in Australia found only minor differences between socio-economic status and HE choices.



## Academic ability

Researchers including Seneca and Taussig (1987) and Tierney (1983) have noticed that academically talented as opposed to more average students look for different choice criteria. The academically talented students evaluate an institution based on the quality of their programmes, while the academically average students, in addition to good programmes, are also interested in factors like physical appearance and the social environment at the university.

Litten (1982), as well as Litten and Brodigan, (1982) observe that when students' academic ability is higher, they cared more about academic standards, programme availability, and were more aware of the net cost (i.e., real cost minus financial aid) rather than just the "price". Also, the higher academic ability of students, the less concern they indicated about career opportunities, campus appearance, and financial matters. Other studies also illustrated that students care less about the location of institutions if their academic ability is higher (Gilmour *et al.*, 1981; Zemsky and Oedel, 1983). In addition to students' demographic characteristics, institutional characteristics also affect students' HE choices and these will be discussed next.

## **Institutional characteristics**

### Types of institutions applied to

James *et al.*, (1999) suggest that students going to different types of institutions might consider different criteria. Those students who applied to research-led universities were strongly influenced by reputation, facilities and social life, whereas those students who applied to technology universities paid attention to the flexibility of study options and geographic proximity (closeness to university campus). Moreover, for those students who applied to regional universities, they need ready accommodation. Similarly, Richardson and Stacey (1993) compared MBA students from public and private institutions in the United States and found that students opting for these types of institutions had different criteria when choosing a programme. Students from private universities were more concerned with the availability of financial aid and the number of students in the programme, whilst these very factors were not mentioned by students opting for public universities.



The demographic and institutional characteristics investigated in previous studies on Western students will be used to see to what extent they can explain the HE alternative evaluation of Taiwanese students in this study. The factors of ethnicity will not be used in this study as Taiwanese students are ethnically homogenous. As this study has two student groups who might have different demographics, especially in terms of age, academic abilities and the type of institutions at which they previously studied, comparisons of these factors will be made.

For instance, this study would like to discover whether academically talented Taiwanese students care more about programme quality and availability, and care less about campus appearance and location of institutions as suggested by Western studies? To what extent does the type of institution affect Taiwanese students' alternative evaluations? For example, do students from public universities and private universities differ in their choice criteria? Do Taiwanese students from "research-led universities" care more about reputation and facilities as suggested in the literature? Also, as this study focuses on decision-making at postgraduate level, it will be interesting to see whether the type of institutions students studied for their undergraduate degrees affect their choice criteria on Master's choices. In other words, do Taiwanese students' educational experiences in other educational institutions in the past affect their subsequent postgraduate programme choices? Next, factors that might affect students' major choices will be discussed.

### **Major evaluations**

Several studies confirm that students' demographics such as SES (Davies and Guppy, 1997; Green, 1992; Trusty *et al.*, 2000), parental occupation (Leppel *et al.*, 2001), gender and ethnicity (Kaynama and Smith, 1996) affected their major selections, where having a father in a professional or executive occupation has a larger effect on female students to major in business than does having a mother in a similar occupation (Leppel *et al.*, 2001). The reverse pattern was reported for males. Davies and Guppy (1997) indicate that students from families with lower SES tend to choose a field of study offering better salary. Moreover, females from families with high SES are less likely to major in business; where the opposite holds for males (Leppel *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, students who believe that being very well off financially is very important are more likely to major in business (Polachek, 1978; Leppel *et al.*, 2001).



Particular interest in the course was the most often considered factor in choosing majors (Adia, 1996; Hansen and Neuman, 1999; Kaynama and Smith, 1996; Hafer and Schank, 1982; Szafran, 1982). Even though high pay and job opportunities were important to business majors, the top factor to major in business was still interest (Kim *et al.*, 2002). Apart from “interest”, many other factors also affected students’ alternative evaluation of major choices, including personal values, educational achievement and work experience in the field (Hafer and Schank, 1982; Kaynama and Smith, 1996; Szafran, 1982), earning potential, earning growth (St. John, 1994; Kaynama and Smith, 1996; Kirk, 1990), previous coursework (Hafer and Schank, 1982; Szafran, 1982), personality, job satisfaction (Kaynama and Smith, 1996), desire for prestige, job security, and financial security (Hafer and Schank, 1982). Furthermore, influences from others (Kaynama and Smith, 1996), like from friends or relatives (Hafer and Schank, 1982; Szafran, 1982), also affected students’ choice study majors. For example, parental preference for accepted professional majors, such as medicine or law, affected ethnic minority (EM) students’ major choices much. However, only a very few EM students said their families chose the major for them (Adia, 1996).

Also, the factor of “higher earning potential” affects business majors the most, and this is seen consistently among different business disciplines, including accounting (Giladi *et al.*, 2001), management information system (MIS) (Goff, 2000), and marketing majors (Swenson *et al.*, 1993). Moreover, other factors considered by business major students include the job market and monetary rewards of careers (Mauldin *et al.*, 2000), such as “obtaining a good job in the future” or “entering the chosen careers” (Kirk, 1990; Kaynama and Smith, 1996), employment opportunities, and higher starting salaries (Cebula and Lopes, 1982; Mauldin *et al.*, 2000).

Kirk (1990) distinguishes between quality and opportunity oriented students. When making decisions about Masters’ degree programme selections, the quality-oriented students focused more on perceived quality of instruction, quality of advisement, and whether they were able to make high grades in the courses. On the other hand, the opportunity-oriented students tended to be influenced more significantly by a desire for greater employment and advancement possibilities, as well as increased incomes.



Although most research on major choices focus predominantly on the undergraduate level, these studies provide insights to inform this study. Previous findings on the major choices will be considered in this study to see to what extent they can explain Taiwanese students' alternative evaluations on majors. As this study focuses more on Taiwanese students' information search, a stronger emphasis will be placed to see how the information sources are used by Taiwanese students in finding postgraduate programmes that provide the majors they are interested in doing. The factors influencing students' institution choices will now be discussed.

### **Institution evaluations**

Many factors affect students' institution choices, including the suitability of programmes (Krampf and Heinlein, 1981), preferred location (Adia, 1996), wide selection of courses (Qureshi, 1995; McDonough, 1997), international recognition of the degree (Turner, 1998), availability of the courses, entry requirements (Moogan and Baron, 2003; Bourke, 2000), costs and availability of financial support (Qureshi, 1995; Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, other studies (Krampf and Heinlein, 1981; Lin, 1997; Mazzarol, 1998; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Turner, 1998; McDonough, 1997; Hossler *et al.*, 1999) include other factors like academic reputation of the institution, the quality and expertise of its teaching faculty, and campus atmosphere.

Furthermore, facilities are also important, which include elements such as social life at the university, its surroundings (Price *et al.*, 2003), library facilities (Qureshi, 1995), availability of computers and quiet areas for self-study (Price *et al.*, 2003). Trying to present the previous findings more clearly, Appendix 1 and 2 were used to present the factors students used in the alternative evaluation of institution choices. Appendix 1 presents the factors affecting students' institution choices across all disciplines, and it demonstrates that issues related to the "academic programmes" and "cost of education" are very important to students, while "peer influence, location and athletic facilities" were often considered.

Moreover, Appendix 2 presents the factors influencing business majored students' institution choices. Comparing Appendix 1 and Appendix 2, irrespective of degree discipline, issues on the "academic and programmes" and "cost of education" were



still important. Besides, for business students, “placement opportunities and high teaching quality” were additional factors of consideration. This is probably because business major students like to engage with both academic theory and practical business experience. It could therefore explain why business students like to have professors possessing strong academic and business/practice credentials to teach them whilst the same factor is not noted in Appendix 1.

Moreover, comparing Appendix 1 and Appendix 2, “flexibility of the programme, length of the programme and reputation or prestige”, seem to be more important to business students (Houston, 1979; Krone *et al.*, 1983; Webb, 1993; Joseph and Joseph, 1998). Cost-related issues also seem to be more important in the past 10 years for business students. For example, Houston (1979) found cost-related issues were at the bottom of the scale, while Webb (1993) and Joseph *et al.* (1998) note that this issue has become one of the most important factors for consideration.

Moreover, students’ backgrounds could affect their institution choices. For instance, EM students placed greater emphasis on the proximity (distance from home) and reputation of the institution than their Caucasian counterparts (Adia, 1996). Furthermore, parental influences were also noted in children’s institution choices. For example, some EM parents set high expectations for their children to compete for prestigious universities, while others wanted their children to go to local institutions (Adia, 1996).

Although past studies have suggested some factors influencing students’ institution choices, this study intends to explore whether these factors can explain how Taiwanese students evaluate institutions at postgraduate level. As this study focuses more on Taiwanese students’ information search, a stronger emphasis will be placed to see how the information sources are used by Taiwanese students in evaluating institutions. In other words, less emphasis would be on the choice criteria used in institution evaluations, but more on how do Taiwanese students use information sources to evaluate institutions based on the factors they care about? Influential information sources guiding students’ HE choices will be discussed in the following section.



### 2.3 Influential information sources

When external information sources are used by potential students, are some of these more influential than others? When the types of information sources are identified, this question can be more readily answered. Information sources are categorised differently by different authors (Engel *et al.*, 1995; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). For example, the concepts proposed by Veloutsou *et al.* (2005) are from the perspectives of universities and include *controllable* sources of information, such as promotional materials from universities, like prospectuses, CD's and videos; *non-controllable* sources of information, such as from friends, family, and other students; and *partly controllable and partly non-controllable* sources of information, such as information from the Internet or other media, including the websites from educational agents who assist British universities to recruit international students. However, it is reasoned that the use of more traditional divisions between “marketing and non-marketing stimuli” and “impersonal and interpersonal” information sources (Engel *et al.*, 1995; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997) can better avoid possible confusions, so they are adopted as information category sources in this study.

The types of information sources that potential students might use are presented in Table 2.2. In reference to this table, the information from alumni, student associations, and current students are seen as non-marketing stimuli. It could be argued that alumni bodies often have a certain level of contact with the university, and consequently might not always provide neutral information to potential students. However, as alumni are not paid by universities to promote the courses of universities, they are seen as non-marketing stimuli information sources in this study.



**Table 2.2 The four types of information sources in a HE context**

	<b>Impersonal source</b>	<b>Interpersonal source</b>
<b>Marketing (commercial) stimuli</b>	Advertising Campus visits Promotional materials (prospectuses, CD's and videos) Website of university Directory of courses	Educational agents University staff Recruitment staff Education exhibitions
<b>Non-marketing (non-commercial) stimuli</b>	<i>General purpose media:</i> News Magazines Critiques/Reviews	<i>Social others:</i> Family Friends Classmates Tutors  Alumni Student association Current students of university

**Source:** amended from Veloutsou *et al.*,  
2005, pg. 281;

Engel *et al.*, 1995, pg. 189; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997, pg. 386

On the other hand, promotional materials provided by universities, including prospectuses, CD's and DVD's, as well as university websites, are taken as marketing stimuli information sources in Table 2.2. Again, it could also be argued that university prospectuses and websites might contain much neutral information, like programme contents, coursework styles, or profiles of university, rather than commercial information only. However, as in this study, universities are considered from their



selling side and students (the potential consumers) are viewed as buyers, the information offered by universities is therefore recognised as a marketing stimuli information source. Finally, educational agents might arguably be seen as non-marketing rather than marketing stimuli information sources as well. Yet, educational agents are paid commission when they successfully help students to enroll with the universities with whom they have contracts. Therefore, in this study, educational agents are seen as marketing stimuli.

It should be stressed that Table 2.2 are formed for the stage of data analysis, so the findings of this study can show whether some types of information sources are more influential to Taiwanese students? If certain information sources are more influential, what make this the case? Also, how do influential information sources affect Taiwanese students' postgraduate degree choices? Next, students' use of information sources will be discussed and the influential information sources found from previous studies will also be identified.

### **The most used information sources**

The most commonly used information sources for HE decision-making include university prospectuses (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Adia, 1996) and library materials, such as books and leaflets from UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) (Moogan and Baron, 2003; Adia, 1996). Other commonly used information sources by students include promotional videos (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999), college admissions officers, alumni, college students, campus visits, HE fairs, and the Internet (Moogan and Baron, 2003). Some studies argue that information provided by universities is not as widely used as expected (James *et al.*, 1999; Brennan, 2001b). For instance, university commercial guides were used by less than one-third of students in Australia (James *et al.*, 1999).

Whilst students' social networks (influence including parents, families, friends, teachers, career counselors, and university staff) affect HE choices (Christie *et al.*, 2004; Connor *et al.*, 1999; Christie *et al.*, 2004; James *et al.*, 1999), some studies argue that reference groups are not used as widely as believed (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Harker *et al.*, 2001), and they suggest marketing information sources provided by universities are used more than applicant's social networks (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005).



In addition, friends and family are among the least consulted in making HE choices (Harker *et al.*, 2001).

The commonly used information sources by postgraduate students were similar to those used by undergraduates, except that the former also consulted careers office advisors and previous educational contacts, such as tutors (O'Neill, 1995). Moreover, the information sources international students used were similar to British home-based students, except the former also contacted and used the British Council as an extra information source (Allen and Higgins, 1994). Furthermore, international students often collect information from annual HE fairs organised in their home countries (Patton, 2000). More specifically, Prugsamatz and Pentecost (2006) found that Chinese international students' past experiences, advertising and word-of-mouth were the three most influential information sources on building their expectations toward overseas universities.

Within the promotional materials provided by universities, prospectuses are a crucial starting point for many students (Rosen *et al.*, 1998). Prospectuses are used at various stages of students' HE decision-making, and are perceived as one of the top sources providing study programme information (Harker *et al.*, 2001; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). When a prospectus is seen as colourful and interesting, it is more likely that students would select and read the publication (Harker *et al.*, 2001). However, it was found many university prospectuses are written at an inappropriate and unclear reading level while they were just "rolled out" every year with little or no changes made to them (Herr *et al.*, 1991). Therefore, the details of prospectuses should be vivid, clear and thought provoking, to create a more positive impression in the minds of prospective applicants (Herr *et al.*, 1991). In addition, where personal letters are sent out with the literature, this has a more favourable impact, as a result of adding a more individual touch (Fielden *et al.*, 1993).

Campus visits are also often used as it is crucial for potential students to go and see the institutions where they are planning on spending the next three or four years since they need to be sure that they are making the right choice. This is particularly essential when a student progresses through the clearing system, since their choices are more restricted (Heap, 2001). Information can also become more credible to



students if it is accessed through current students or staff when visiting the institution (Wasmer *et al.*, 1997). If students are left with a positive experience from a campus visit, they will keep that institution as their main choice and they are more likely to want to enroll there (Redwood, 2000).

Moreover, open days are one of the most influential information sources in changing students' minds (Yost and Tucker, 1995; Moogan and Baron, 2003), and they are used as a valuable source of information by students to find out more detailed information on specific courses and the university environment (Harker *et al.*, 2001; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). Open days are particularly useful for students who have been accepted by more than one institution and have to decide which offers to accept (Moogan *et al.*, 1999). Generally speaking, in terms of the interactions with potential universities, students expect prompt replies to enquires, adequate and timely information, staff that are professional, friendly and helpful, good organisation and administration, and a manageable and easy application process. This creates a favourable impression upon prospective students and consequently, they are more likely to be converted into applicants (Hesketh and Knight, 1999).

In addition, an information search pattern for postgraduate students is proposed by O'Neill (1995) comprised of 5 stages: *Stage 1* - Career libraries are visited by students; *Stage 2* - Once in the library, students read postgraduate course directories; *Stage 3* - Students contact universities and receive postgraduate prospectuses and/or course literature; *Stage 4* - One or more universities are shortlisted by students for application; *Stage 5*- Students are interviewed or have telephone conversations with course leaders. Some students also visit selected institutions on open days or have an informal look around the campus. As prospectuses and open days are widely used, universities need to provide full and perfect knowledge in a user-friendly manner to potential students via these marketing information sources (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

In addition, as league tables are increasingly publicised in many of the newspapers and publications such as 'The Economist' and 'Which', they are likely to become more influential in determining students' final enrolment choice (Bowden, 2000). However, Veloutsou *et al.*, (2005) argue that although students with higher academic



performances place more emphasis on league tables, they are actually perceived as one of the unreliable information sources by potential students. Bowden (2000) suggests that since the information from different league tables varies, these tables can produce conflicting and confusing statistics, which do not necessarily capture the real quality of an institution or a programme.

Over twenty five years ago, Litten and Brodigan (1982) suggested that students used different information sources to obtain different types of information (Appendix 3). However, the information resources students prefer today might be different from the types of information sought over two decades ago. For instance, the Internet, education exhibitions, or open days are newer information sources available to students' today. A recent study of students from Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong in Australia, indicated that the World Wide Web (WWW) was perceived to be one of the most important information sources for making HE choices (Gray *et al.*, 2003). Similar findings were also found in the United Kingdom (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

The Internet offers a means for geographically remote students to access university and course information (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). Students from different countries have different media preferences in the use of information sources, and this might be "related to differences in cultural values level of Westernisation and communications infrastructure in the home countries" (Gray *et al.*, 2003, pg. 111). However, Connor *et al.* (1999) argue that public media, including the Internet, newspapers, magazines, and TV, are among the least used information sources by potential students in the United Kingdom.

Although HE choices were normally perceived as high risk and high involvement, surprisingly, it was found the average time students spent on information searching for undergraduate courses was just less than three months (Moogan and Baron, 2003). While the decision-making for potential postgraduate students can be up to 12 months or even longer, they did not collect published information on many courses and did not weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of each (Pratt *et al.*, 1999). Rather, students tended to have a course in mind or just to choose from two courses (Hesketh and Knight, 1999). Some other studies had similar findings to suggest that students' HE choices are often made on very general impressions of reputation, campus



buildings, and visions of ideal types of institutions (Tumblin, 2002; James *et al.*, 1999).

Although past studies suggest what information sources were used by students, limited data was available concerning how the information sources were used. For example, how are sources like prospectuses, open days, or campus visits used by students? In which stage of students' HE decision-making are these information sources used? Moreover, what information did students want to gather from each respective source? This study will also investigate whether some information sources are more influential than others.

Also, to what extent do league tables affect Taiwanese students' alternative evaluations? How do Taiwanese students feel about the information provided by league tables? Furthermore, how does the Internet affect Taiwanese students' information search and how do they evaluate the information quality from the Internet? Moreover, how carefully do students conduct their information search? Do students collect published information on many courses and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of each or do they only have very general impressions on institutions when making HE choices? Next, the use of reference groups will be discussed further.

### **Reference groups**

Although many of the most used information sources by potential students were provided by universities, some studies suggest that non-marketing information sources are more influential to students (Connor *et al.*, 1999; James *et al.*, 1999; Brennan and Marriott, 1996; Christie *et al.*, 2004). Also, the information provided by universities often has little influence over potential students' final enrolment choices (Newell *et al.*, 1996). Similarly, Australian students from low-SES and rural background did not seem to take on board information provided by universities (James, 2000).

However, students do use some neutral information from universities, like courses offered, campus environment, and university facilities (Brennan, 2001b). Non-marketing interpersonal information sources prove especially influential, for



instance, word-of-mouth communications were more influential than paid sources of advertising (Tumblin, 2002; Brennan, 2001b; James *et al.*, 1999). Hence, this study would like to establish whether non-marketing information sources were more influential to Taiwanese students than marketing sources, and how students were affected by the former.

Also, marketing interpersonal information sources from universities or career related personal contacts, are not as influential as non-marketing interpersonal sources like students' friends and families (Brennan, 2001b) or career counselors from high school (Brennan and Marriott, 1996). Students' teachers or career counselors from high school might be influential as they may be seen by students as authority holders who have *legitimate power* over them (Loudon and Bitta, 1993). Furthermore, alumni and college students were used as reference groups by potential students (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999) as they might be seen as having *expert power* which comes from the specific knowledge they had on the universities they attended (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). Hence, the best promotion strategies for universities are those based on students' networks as the advice among students is a good channel for communicating a positive institutional and programme image (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). This study seeks to investigate how interpersonal information, (especially from non-marketing stimuli), affect Taiwanese students' Master's choices.

It is understandable that reference groups is greatly influential in students' HE decision-making, as post-secondary students' information is often gathered either internally within the family or externally through other external assistances, such as high school counselors (Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Reference groups are the people who serve as a point of comparison or reference for students in forming either general or specific values, attitudes, or a specific guide for the HE purchasing behaviour (Blythe, 1997; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004; Dibb *et al.*, 1997). Reference groups affect students' HE choices especially regarding decisions about what to study and where to attend (Harker *et al.*, 2001), and those people can be students' friends (Franklin, 1995; Brennan, 2001b), parents (Inoue, 1999; Brennan, 2001b), university admission officers (Chapman, 1981), subject teachers (Clarke and Brown, 1998; Chapman, 1981; Franklin, 1995), or career counselors (Paulsen, 1990; Chapman, 1981; Hossler *et al.*, 1999).



Tumblin (2002) found that word-of-mouth information sources from friends, relatives, and employer referral were the strongest influences for mature-age students. Moreover, reference groups were also found to be influential sources for young age students. When young people have access to interpersonal information via social networks (perceived as particularly reliable) to learn others' experiences of university and courses, they were more confident about making HE choices (Christie *et al.*, 2004). Learning from others' experiences of university and courses shows that students' social networks might have *information power* over them as they know something potential students want to know about in making HE choices (Solomon *et al.*, 2002).

Moreover, reference groups are also used by overseas students. After obtaining information from impersonal sources, overseas students confirmed the correctness of information with their close family members and friends (Hill *et al.*, 1992). As this study includes Taiwanese students who are home-based students and international students, a particular focus will investigate how reference groups influence both groups. Do Taiwanese students seek to learn from others' experiences of university and courses, and if so, do Taiwanese students as international students prefer to confirm the information again via interpersonal sources?

Students' peers are usually recognised as members of this complex web of interpersonal information networks (Chalmers, 2001; Brennan and Marriott, 1996; Christie *et al.*, 2004). Close friends are influential as personal influences, just after students' family and career advisors (Brennan and Marriott, 1996). Although friends do not significantly affect applicants' final enrolment decision, they do play an active role as a perceived credible information source (Vaughn *et al.*, 1978). Students' friends might offer *reward power* to them by granting intangible rewards such as social approval (Solomon *et al.*, 2002).

Veloutsou *et al.* (2005) suggests that friends are the most used non-marketing information sources, and are even used more often than teachers, parents, or career advisors. Similarly, Pimpa (2003) suggests that peers are among the most important non-familial sources of influence. Peers might exert *value-expressive influence* on



students' HE choices when students have the pressure to associate psychologically with peers (Mowen and Minor, 2001). This study will investigate the types of influences that friends exert over Taiwanese HE applicants. What information do students obtain from their friends? In what stage of HE decision-making are friends more influential to students, and why are friends an influential information source for prospective applicants?

Reference groups play a key role in situations where information is insufficient and less well understood, such as in the context of overseas student applicants (Patton, 2000) or for young students (Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Newell *et al.*, 1996). In the problem recognition stage of the HE decision-making, *primary reference groups* (such as parents, family members, teachers, friends, and career advisors) are especially influential (Chisnall, 1985; Moogan and Baron, 2003). Students' family and peers are the personalised and informal influences that are especially influential to students' decisions on whether to continue further education (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). This study will find out whether there are any *secondary reference groups* that influence students' HE choices (Chisnall, 1985). In a Taiwanese context, secondary reference groups could include classmates or teachers from the cram schools that they attend for the Master's exam preparations.

As the Internet is widely used by students for information sources in making HE choices, *virtual communities* that provide information and social interactions might also be used by students (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). Potential students can have online interactions with others to obtain knowledge for making HE choices. This could be done through different means, such as emails, chat rooms, or boards, which are organised by interest-specific electronic bulletin boards where members read and post messages sorted by date and subject (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). This study will examine the extent to which Taiwanese students use and are influenced by virtual communities in making their HE enrollment choices. A focus will also be whether students experienced any difficulties in trusting their opinions as majority of people online could be strangers who have never met potential applicants in real life.

Opinion leaders such as educational agents are one type of reference group, who in a HE context, are frequently able to influence potential students' attitudes or behaviour



in making HE choices (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). As one of the few studies that looked at the influences from educational agents to international students, educational agents are among the most important non-familial sources to influence Thai students' HE choices as international students studying in Australia (Pimpa, 2003). The influences from educational agents include "information" concerning university or course related information, and/or "persuasion" over students to make certain HE choices.

Educational agents are *surrogate consumers* who have specific knowledge on HE choices as paid professionals (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). Most Thai students felt international education is expensive and intangible, and they found it difficult to measure the quality of HE prior to enrolment. Therefore, they rely on the information and recommendations from educational agents to ensure the best HE choices can be made (Pimpa, 2003). Hence, this study will research to what extent Taiwanese students empower educational agents in HE decisions-making, and the types of influences from agents upon Taiwanese students. In addition, what makes some Taiwanese students opt for agents as opposed to applying directly to British universities themselves?

Generally, non-marketing interpersonal information sources are strongly influential upon students' HE choices, and for the young people who do not have access to such social networks, they were deterred in making the HE choices, because they do not have the required help or support (Christie *et al.*, 2004). Interpersonal influences were often used when students feel a lack of information; when students are in an ambiguous situation; or when students are not feeling ready to make HE decisions (Brennan and Marriott, 1996). Hence, this study will investigate the extent to which non-marketing interpersonal information sources influence Taiwanese students' HE decisions. Assuming non-marketing interpersonal information sources are influential, how are students affected by these sources? Assuming these are the most preferred sources, what makes this the case?

In this study, only the influences from *comparative reference groups* on students' HE choices will be included, as the *normative reference groups*, who defined values or behaviour (Solomon *et al.*, 2002; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Engel *et al.*, 1995), can be too broad to be defined within a snap-shot study. The influences of reference



groups will therefore be investigated in this study to see why Taiwanese students use reference groups, and how the reference groups affect HE choices. The role of educational agents in Taiwanese students' HE choices will be investigated to see how they affected students' Master's choices as it is a little studied area. As family influences are one of the most important influential forces found to affect students' HE choices, family influences in HE will be considered next.

### **Family influences**

Family members influence students' HE choices (Hill *et al.*, 1992; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Gray *et al.*, 2003; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Brooks, 2004), and in some studies, family is found to be one of the most influential reference groups (Chalmers, 2001; Inoue, 1999; Chapman, 1981; Brennan, 2001b). Parents were identified as the helpful and common inputs in students' HE decision-making (Inoue, 1999; Chapman, 1981; Brennan, 2001b). Family affected children's HE choices in several aspects, including finance, information, expectations, persuasion, and competition (Pimpa, 2004).

As parents are often the financial supporters of their children's HE, they might have *coercive power* which could force the individual to change their HE purchase behaviour (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). Additionally, parents might also display *normative compliance* if students try to satisfy their expectations in HE decision-making (Peter and Olson, 1996). Both students' *nuclear and extended family* might affect students' HE choices (Mowen and Minor, 2001). This might be especially true in a Chinese cultural setting, as the social ties amongst the family tend to be stronger in the Far East than in the West.

There are only a few studies that research how family influences international students' HE choices (Biblarz and Raftery, 1999; Pimpa, 2004; Brooks, 2004; Boggess, 1998). Pimpa's (2004) work is one of the most comprehensive studies in this area. Most Thai students were supported by the family financially, and the family may either support or limit students to study in certain countries or courses for financial reasons (Pimpa, 2004). Hence, students might not be the *deciders* (Engel *et al.*, 1995) who have the financial power within the family to choose how the money will be spent in HE choices.



The influences from family can be in the forms of opinion and recommendations as students asked their family members questions if they had been living abroad (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). The areas of questions from students include the country and city of intended destination, reputation of the academic course and the university, part-time employment, and accommodation (Pimpa, 2004). When the family members provide information or suggestions to students' alternative evaluation stage, they are acting as *influencers* (Peter and Olson, 1996) to students' HE choices.

Family recommendations are one of the prominent push factors for international students to study overseas (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Many students were pressured by the family expectation to study abroad, and the expectation from parents and siblings also had a great impact on students' choices of country, academic course and university (Pimpa, 2004). Moreover, some students mentioned that their parents convinced them since their childhood that education at an overseas university is superior to local education (Pimpa, 2004). Therefore, family members might also be *gatekeepers* (Engel *et al.*, 1995) in students' HE choices as they either control the flow of information into the family or gather information to aid students' HE decisions.

Students' parents might simply use the expression of like or dislike related to students decision to study abroad. Interestingly, although mothers of students are normally seen as ones that may assist in their children's information search, Brooks (2004) found in the UK that mothers might not necessarily be the key decision makers for their children's HE choices. Rather, fathers exerted major influences in children's HE choices while mothers were less aware of league tables and requirements of university (Brooks, 2004).

Inner family competition is another potential influence. Some students compare the opportunity of overseas study between themselves and other family members, such as siblings, cousins, or relatives. Also, it was suggested Thai students tend to compare themselves with others in terms of academic achievement (Pimpa, 2004). Also, some parents tried to convince their children to study abroad because "everyone else" did it (Pimpa, 2004). Therefore, although students might be *buyers* who act as the



purchasing agent in HE services (Engel *et al.*, 1995) and *users* who actually use the HE service (Peter and Olson, 1996), their HE choices are nevertheless affected by other family members. This study will investigate the extent to which family members influence Taiwanese students' HE choices. Also, which family members are more influential to Taiwanese students than others and why? What types of influences do family ties have on Taiwanese students' HE decision-making? With the exception of finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition as suggested in the literature, are there any other types of influences?

Do family members have a stronger or weaker influence over Taiwanese students who study Master's in the UK as international students, compared to those who study Master's in Taiwan? Also, if Taiwanese students ask the family members questions for opinions and recommendations, which queries tend to be raised most frequently? As this study looks at postgraduate as opposed to undergraduate decision-making, it is also believed that when students are older and more independent as postgraduate students, family influences might exert less influence.

### **Word-of-mouth communications**

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is "an exchange of comments, thoughts, or ideas between two or more consumers, none of them represents a marketing source" (Mowen and Minor, 2001). WOM can be either positive or negative verbal communications between groups, such as between family and friends or the actual or potential consumers (Helm and Schlei, 1998). WOM is typically considered as face-to-face spoken communication (Engel *et al.*, 1995). However, phone conversations, SMS (Short Message Service) and web dialogue, such as online profile pages, blog posts, message board threads, instant messages and emails, have been included more recently in the definition (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). Hence, both spoken and written forms of WOM are accepted in this study as one type of WOM. Moreover, since WOM is from non-marketing sources, information from marketing sources, such as information provided by universities, are not included as WOM in this study.

The Internet has introduced a new platform for traditional WOM communication, and has brought new realisation for both marketers and consumers in the way they use to pass or receive information about products or services (Granitz and Ward, 1996). As



very few empirical studies have been conducted studying the consequences of electronic WOM communication (Datta *et al.*, 2005), this study will consider whether online WOM influences Taiwanese students' HE choices. If online WOM sources influence HE decision-making, in what ways do these sources affect the process? Generally, consumers see WOM communication as more credible, flexible and trustworthy than commercial sources of information (Mitra *et al.*, 1999), because they commonly assume other consumers have no commercially motivated reasons for sharing information (Engel *et al.*, 1995). WOM communications also exert a much stronger impact than information from neutral sources, such as from "consumer reports" magazines, especially in the stage of alternative evaluations (Herr *et al.*, 1991).

WOM information is often used when an influential person is more accessible than other information sources (Mowen and Minor, 2001); when internal searches provide inadequate information (Buttle, 1998; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997); when an influential person can be consulted with a saving of time and effort (Mowen and Minor, 2001); when it is difficult for consumers to evaluate alternatives (Engel *et al.*, 1995); or when consumers perceive greater risk in making purchasing decisions (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). As consumers have opportunities to clarify information and have feedback, WOM is the most important information source for consumers to reduce the risks in purchasing (Murray, 1991). Also, as the service providers are not able to present the service in advance of the purchase, consumers of services rely to a large extent on personal communication and the exchange of experiences with other customers (Helm and Schlei, 1998; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996).

WOM communication is particularly important in relation to services purchasing, which is characterised by a high degree of experience and credence qualities (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Murray (1991) found that services consumers prefer to seek information from family, friends and peers rather than sponsored promotional sources. This might be because the WOM channel is immediately bi-directional and interactive, which allows for a 'tailored' flow of information to the information seeker (Gilly *et al.*, 1998). Hence, often the experience of other people is taken as a "virtual trial" by services consumers (Engel *et al.*, 1995).



People who are most likely to transmit WOM information are not those with purchasing experiences, but those who are experiencing the product/service (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Also, individuals who have an ongoing interest in a product/service category get enjoyment in talking about it (Assael, 1992). For some people, talking about products/services can be a means of social interaction (Dichter, 1966). Furthermore, WOM communication occurs more frequently when the individual has a high need for social approval (Engel *et al.*, 1995) as talking about the product/service and thus influencing people (as the WOM information transmitters) may provide them with personal satisfaction (Dichter, 1966).

Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) distinguish between three types of WOM communications, namely product news, advice giving and personal experience. *Product news* refers to information about the product, such as features or performance attributes. *Advice giving* relates to expressions of opinions about a product/service. *Personal experience* involves comments about product/service attributes or reasons for buying the product (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988). Whereas product news *informs* consumers, advice and personal experience are likely to *influence* consumer decisions. When receiving positive WOM, many customers will try the product/service, but when hearing any negative WOM, most customers will be discouraged from trying the product/service (Solomon *et al.*, 2002).

As dissatisfied buyers are more motivated to share their feelings, more than a third of all WOM information is negative in nature, and since marketer-dominated communication will normally be positive, potential buyers will be more alert to negative WOM (Engel *et al.*, 1995). Service marketers have long argued for the importance of positive WOM as a factor influencing consumer selection and service usage (Datta *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, more and more companies are proactively intervening in an effort to stimulate and manage WOM activity.

WOM can be used at different stages of the decision-making process, either before or after a purchase (Buttle, 1998). Different types of WOM communication also affect different stages of the decision-making process (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988). *Product news* is important in creating awareness about a product/service and its features. Hearing about *personal experiences* from a friend or relative supports the



consumer in the evaluation of alternatives. Moreover, it is through the opinion of “significant others”, that *advice giving* is important in the choice stage of the decision-making. As the current body of research provides little insight into the nature of WOM in the service market place (Mangold *et al.*, 1999), this study will research the extent to which different types of WOM communications affect Taiwanese students’ HE choices. In addition, if WOM influences Taiwanese students, in which stage of the decision-making stage is this most prevalent and what are the associated impacts?

Most previous studies on WOM focus on the consequences of WOM, the flow of WOM within the market place, and the role of social factors in the persuasiveness of WOM (Sundaram *et al.*, 1998). However, there has been little research to address this issue from an organisational perspective regardless of the fact that management of WOM may become an increasingly important marketing activity for companies (Christiansen and Tax, 2000). This study will seek to answer questions related to WOM communications, such as how do Taiwanese students see WOM in the HE decision-making process? Are WOM communications seen as more credible, flexible and trustworthy than commercial sources of information or are they seen as more neutral sources as suggested in the literature?

Also, if WOM is used by Taiwanese students, why is WOM information used, and does it play an important role in the HE service purchasing of Taiwanese students? Is the experience of other people taken as a “virtual trial” by Taiwanese students and what types of students transmit or receive WOM information? Furthermore, what types of WOM communication can Taiwanese students identify as their key sources? As online information can also be influential to students’ HE choices, this information channel will be discussed next.

### **Online WOM**

The Internet offers a diverse and extensive array of information with relative minimal expenditures associated with time, effort, and money. Hence, online information is also widely used in making HE choices, and university websites were within the top three most accessed information sources (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005). Many characteristics of the Internet affect consumers’ information search behaviour, such as



the speed and scope of access, provision of interactive assistance, flexibility and availability of retrieval techniques (Lehto *et al.*, 2006). Compared to face-to-face information providers, online information providers display less social anxiety, tend to be more willing to reveal personal information, and are more honest and forthcoming with their viewpoints (Roed, 2003). The Internet not only provides opinion leaders with efficient ways to spread information, but also greatly facilitates information searching for opinion seekers (Sun *et al.*, 2006).

Online communities are virtual social bodies that are maintained by individuals to exchange shared interests or values in an ongoing manner without physical interaction (Ridings and Gefen, 2004). Discussion boards, chatrooms and newsgroups are increasingly being recognised as important sources of information that influence the adoption and use of products or services (Subramani and Rajagopalan, 2003). Furthermore, online WOM is especially likely to happen within purchasing websites that have discussion boards (Sun *et al.*, 2006). The growth of online communities has created additional channels for product/service recommendations and endorsements between people who have never met, and such recommendations can influence consumption choices (Fong and Burton, 2006).

Cultural differences do however exist in the search behaviour for online information (Chau *et al.*, 2002). For example, Chinese consumers are more likely to request information from online discussion boards than Americans. Furthermore, Chinese consumers are also more affected by online WOM than American consumers (Fong and Burton, 2006). Information exchange, friendship, social support, and recreation were reasons for joining online communities (Ridings and Gefen, 2004).

As Bickart and Schindler (2001) argue, typical WOM communication consists of spoken words exchanged with one friend or relative in a face-to-face situation, but online WOM usually involves personal experiences and opinions transmitted through written words. An advantage of the written word is that people can seek information at their own pace. Writing may also transmit the information in a more intact manner and make the information appear more formal (Sun *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, written communication could be more logical than oral communication, as the former may



follow a more structured, logical line of reasoning modeled on step-by-step linear progression (Griffin, 2003).

Only a few studies have been conducted to explain how internal information influences the content of their online information search (Lehto *et al.*, 2006). Hence, this study will explore the extent to which the Internet influences Taiwanese students' HE choices, and how students' internal information influences their online information search. In addition, prior research on WOM has focused on face-to-face influences (Anderson, 1998) and has largely neglected online WOM (Sun *et al.*, 2006). Hence, this study will find out how online information is used by Taiwanese students, especially regarding the types of influences from online WOM. This study will also find out why online information is preferred by Taiwanese students if it is the case. Can "the speed of and scope of access, less social anxiety, and more honest and forthcoming information online" as suggested by the literature, explain Taiwanese students' use of Internet sites?

Also, do Taiwanese students join online communities to assist their HE decision-making? If they do, how do online communities, such as discussion boards, influence their decision-making? Are written online sources preferred to traditional face-to-face WOM? If this is true, why has this occurred and what are the differences between online WOM and traditional face-to-face WOM for Taiwanese students? Having reviewed the literature relevant to the research area, the conceptual framework for this study is presented below.

#### **2.4 The conceptual framework**

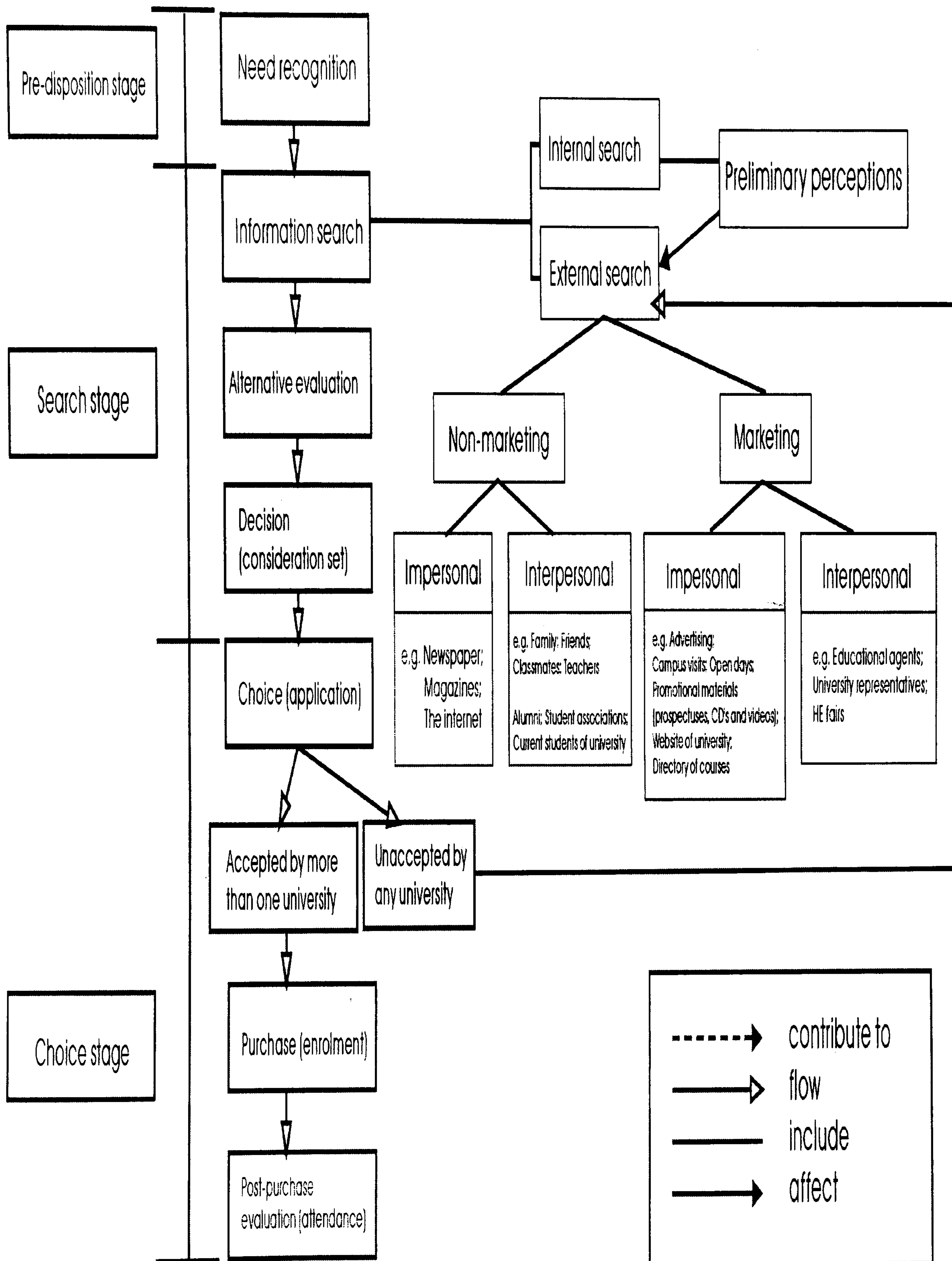
This section explains the formation of the conceptual framework and suggests the focus of this study. The conceptual framework in Figure 2.2 combined and amended from the five-stage model of consumer decision-making explained in 2.1.1 (Loudon and Bitta, 1993; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004), the types of information sources explained in Table 2.2 (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997) and the Hossler and Gallagher model (1987) explained in 2.1.2. A similar model was used by Brennan (2001b, pg.4) previously in Australia as that study also applied consumer behaviour theories to a HE setting.



Decision-making process contains mainly five stages that are *need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation* (Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). However, when applying the decision-making process to HE choices, more clear distinctions should be given to clarify possible misunderstandings. Hence, the five-stage was expanded to the eight stages in this study (Figure 2.2) that covers *need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, decision, choice, offers received, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation*.



**Figure 2.2 The conceptual framework**



**Source:** adapted from Engel *et al.*, 1995: 1154; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005: 281; Brennan, 2001:4



The main difference between the five-stage decision-making process and the eight-stage model used in this study is that the *alternative evaluation* stage is expanded into four smaller stages that include *alternative evaluation*, *decision (consideration set)*, *choice (application)*, and *offers received*. HE choices are special, because although students decide proactively on what universities or courses they would like to apply as consumers, students are also passively chosen by universities via comparisons with other applicants. This was not commonly seen in the purchasing of other products or services, as in most purchasing cases, consumers buy anything they prefer. However, in HE choices, students are choosing universities and universities are selecting their preferred types of candidates as well. This two-way evaluation is unique, so in Figure 2.2, eight-stages are presented to divide this two-way process.

The first stage, *need recognition*, includes students' motivations to do a Master's degree. The second stage, *information search*, concerns how students interpret the information, how information sources were used, and how influential the information sources are to students. The third stage, *alternative evaluation*, describes what factors students consider when choosing courses or universities. Decisions on the choice criteria used, the importance of choice criteria, and how the alternatives are evaluated by students are covered in this stage. After alternative evaluation, students will make a *decision* based on the consideration set, which is a list of universities that they will apply to, if they meet the requirements as stipulated by these institutions. The fifth stage, *choice (application)*, shows which universities students actually applied to. It is noticeable that students might not have applied to all the universities in the consideration set, or they might apply to universities that are not in the consideration set. Therefore, this study will find out if students change their minds in the last minute on where to apply and if that is the case, what occurred to influence these choices.

In the sixth stage, students need to be accepted by at least one university to study for Master's degrees. If students are not accepted by any university, they need to search for more external information to reform their consideration set. The arrow links the box of "Accepted by more than one university" back to "External search" in Figure 2.2. On the other hand, if students are accepted by more than one university, they need to choose from those university offers to make the final enrolment decision to



*purchase* a HE service. In this study, purchase is defined by students' final enrolment choice. Finally, *post-purchase evaluation* includes students' evaluations of the purchasing experience.

The stage of information search, including internal and external search on the right hand side of Figure 2.2, will form the research focus of this study. On the left hand side of Figure 2.2, three main stages identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) are used to divide the three key stages of HE choices, namely pre-disposition, search, and choice. The search stage of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model includes the information search and alternative evaluation stages as well as the decision of consideration set. These three afore mentioned areas will be the main focus of this study, and this study would like to see how the information search affects students' key HE decisions such as the use of choice criteria, the choice of consideration set, the selection of application list, and the choice of enrollment. Having presented the conceptual framework of this study, the key issues to be explored in this study will be considered next.

### **Two groups in Taiwan and in the United Kingdom**

Although past studies reviewed in this chapter presented relevant data on students' higher education choices, they did not provide in depth data on how students did information search and how that affected the different stages of their decision-making. Hence, this study investigates the information search of Taiwanese students in choosing a postgraduate study programme. Two groups of students were selected, which include Taiwanese students studying Master's business programmes in Taiwan and Taiwanese students studying Master's business programmes in the United Kingdom, for comparing the differences between their HE information searches. This study selects Taiwanese students studying in Taiwan to represent home-based students' information search behaviour, and Taiwanese students studying in the UK are used to represent the information search of international students studying overseas. As both groups are Taiwanese students, the ethnic or cultural variation is largely nonexistent, so if students behave very differently when conducting their information search, it might suggest how the internal information could affect students' external search.



Culture is found to affect consumers' decision-making and is defined as "... the values, norms, and customs that an individual learns from society and that leads to common patterns of behavior within that society" (Assael, 1992, pg.319). Consumers' purchasing behaviour cannot be understood without considering their cultural context. Furthermore, a culture can be divided into sub-cultures based on age, geographic regions or ethnic identity etc., which can separate consumers into even smaller segments by their attitudes, values and purchasing actions (O'Shaughnessy, 1995; Dibb *et al.*, 1997). Culture also determines how consumers react to certain aspects of the marketing mix (Ennew, 1993). Taiwanese students are seen as a single ethnic group in this study which assists in easier comparisons between the home and international HE students.

Since ethnicity affects students' HE choices as discussed in 2.2.2, to conduct research on a specific ethnic group helps to understand more detailed issues relating to this group. The reason to select Taiwanese citizens is because the vast majority of studies were done in English-speaking countries, like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. It could be argued that cultural differences might affect students from non-English speaking countries to have different concerns in making HE choices and their use of external information sources might differ. The purpose of this research is to extend the context to a different cultural framework which is Taiwan, one of the main target markets for international universities. Also, most previous studies were conducted at undergraduate as opposed to postgraduate level, so they might not be able to explain the Master's degree information search by Taiwanese students.

As this study consists of two student groups, namely Taiwanese students who study locally in Taiwan as home-based students (called the TW group in this study) and Taiwanese students studying abroad in the UK as international students (called the UK group in this study) will be compared. Although from the same cultural background—when Taiwanese students study in different countries, their preliminary perceptions (or knowledge) might affect the level of their purchasing involvement or the level of external search. As Hoyer and MacInnis (1997) suggest, if the scan of internal search provides sufficient information, consumers' external search will be very limited, and other studies (Mowen and Minor, 2001; Peter and Olson, 1996) also



suggest that when consumers have more knowledge internally in making purchasing decisions, they conducted less external searches.

Moreover, it is possible the information sources used by the two groups might be different. For instance, international students might face more challenges in information search than home-based students, as they are making Master's choices from a very different base level to home-based students. International students might have fewer preconceived ideas about geographical areas or different universities overseas, and most of them might not be able to visit overseas universities before making the enrolment choices. Furthermore, using English as a second language, international students might not fully understand the web pages or prospectuses provided by foreign universities. Those possible barriers mentioned above might affect the use of information sources of international students. Hence, this study intends to compare and contrast the use of information sources between home-based students and international students to obtain deeper understandings on how the use of information sources might differ.

This study will investigate the extent to which the TW and the UK group differ in the information search, including the content and the use of internal and external search, and how their external search influences HE decision-making. Having clarified a series of research questions in light of the literature reviewed above, followed by the presentation of the conceptual framework, the research aim and related objectives of this study are presented below.

### **Research aim and objectives**

This study focuses on Taiwanese students' information search. Hence, this study will investigate how Taiwanese students use internal and external information, how Taiwanese students see the quality of information, and how external searches affect Taiwanese students' other stages of HE decision-making. The research aims and objectives of this study are identified as follows:

**Aim:** to understand the information search undertaken by Taiwanese students in Taiwan and in the United Kingdom to inform the decision-making process of selecting business Master's degrees in Taiwan and the United Kingdom. In order to fulfill this aim, several objectives are forwarded.



## **Objectives:**

1. To investigate the formation and the content of students' internal information—how participants had the internal information stored in their memory, including from what information sources, at what timing and in what ways. This also includes addressing the areas of internal information possessed by participants.

The types of information sources can indicate what information sources are more likely to be stored in students' memory. The timing of forming internal information can suggest when the students started to pay attention to information regarding postgraduate decision-making. Furthermore, the content of students' internal information can show to what extent internal information affects the level of external searching, which is related to the second objective.

2. To examine the use of external information in the alternative evaluation stage—how are external information sources used by participants to find courses/institutions and to evaluate the performances of the courses/institutions.

This can suggest the patterns of participants' use of external information sources in the alternative evaluation stage. Also, this can help advise how the external information influences students' evaluations of potential alternative programmes. Moreover, linking back to the first objective, the content of students' internal information can be compared to the level of their external search to demonstrate their relation.

3. To explore the meaning of information quality from students' perspectives and to see how information quality affects students' external search—how participants evaluate the information quality of external information sources and how students' perceptions of information quality influence their external search.



The defined elements of information quality can indicate what characteristics of external information sources are expected from students. Moreover, the influential information sources from the fourth objective can be related to the third objective to see whether the perceived information quality of students is related to their use of external information sources.

4. To look at the impacts of the influential external information sources on the formation of students' consideration sets, application lists, and enrolment choices—how the influential external information sources affects participants' key decision-making stages, including a consideration set, an application list, and an enrolment choice.

The level of usage from external information sources can indicate whether students see all external information sources to be no different or whether there is any preference regarding the types of accessed information sources, which is related to the third objective. In addition, how influential the information sources are to key stages of decision-making can show whether students were much affected by the influential external information sources or if the internal information they had still plays a major role in the key stages of Master's decision-making.

5. To compare to what extent Taiwanese students in Taiwan and in the United Kingdom possess similar or different outlooks in the Master's decision-making based on the previous four objectives—to evaluate the similarities and differences between participants as home-based and international students in their internal search, external search, the definition of information quality, and the impacts from influential information sources.

The comparisons between Taiwanese students in Taiwan and in the United Kingdom suggest the extent to which home-based and international students might be similar and/or different. Also, additional interesting aspects that found outside the four objectives above can be included for consideration when comparing and contrasting between the two student groups. For further information on how research questions were sharpened by the literature review to form research objectives, see Appendix 4 for further details.



## **2.5 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, past studies on consumer decision-making has been discussed, including its stages, its applications in service sectors and consumers' involvement and knowledge within decision-making. Models on HE decision-making and possible factors that influence students' decision-making have also been presented, including economic models, status-attainment models and combined models. Moreover, the stage of information search was discussed, including factors affecting the internal and external searches, factors affecting alternative evaluations and students' use of information sources. Furthermore, some influential information sources regarding HE decision-making was explained, including reference groups and online WOM.

Although past studies reviewed in this chapter presented relevant data on students' HE choices, they did not provide in depth data on how students did information search and how that affected the different stages of their decision-making. Hence, the conceptual framework to be applied to the current study was presented and research aim and objectives were identified to provide understandings on the stage of information search. The following chapter will discuss the methodology adopted for this study.



## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.0 Chapter overview

This chapter will explain the methodology used in this research, which includes my adopted ontological and epistemological positions, focusing on why the interpretive paradigm was selected as the most appropriate for this study. In addition, the appropriateness of the inductive approach and cross-sectional timeframe will be explained to suggest why they were selected to explore and identify relevant topic issues. The reasons for why different methods, including focus groups, interviews, and observations, were used in this study as tools to meet the research objectives will also be provided. Discussion will then focus on the research design, which offers a detailed plan for data collection, including the procedures of data collection and how research objectives will be answered via the application of several different methods. Moreover, sampling on how participants were selected to participate in this study is explained, and the detailed issues on how focus groups, interviews, and observations were performed will be discussed. In addition, the data analysis process is presented, including the use of Template Analysis and considerations regarding issues of trustworthiness are also presented.

### 3.1 Constructivist-interpretive paradigm

As discussed in the literature review, the majority of existing studies designed to investigate the HE decision-making process have employed either a positivist or post-positivist approach to inquiry. The resulting research has been dominated by statistical analysis and researcher-driven explanations rather than offering students' perspectives on their experiences as HE decision-makers. Although many influential factors regarding students' HE decision-making were offered previously, the main focus from these studies has been on Western home-based students' HE decision-making. It was therefore reasoned that Taiwanese students' HE decision-making might compare differently to Western students, and that international students' information search cannot be assumed to be the same as home-based students.

Therefore, this study adopted a constructivist-interpretive paradigm which addresses the ways in which respondents construct their reality. My ontological standing is close



to the constructivists who believe that there are multiple realities, not just one objective or absolute reality in students' information search within HE decision-making. Individuals see and understand things differently and no one has "the answer" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Students negotiate the meanings for their HE actions to form the reality they believe, and through the interpretation, their HE experiences are shaped (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Hence, my ontological assumption is aligned on the basis of realities being constructed by the students under investigation.

My epistemological standing is close to the interpretivists who believe that as knowers we interact with subjects to create understanding. Truth or knowledge is not "out there" to be found by a perfectly objective knower or researcher. Students' experiences of their HE information search cannot be considered an "object", nor can their perceptions on the quality of information be simply "acquired". Therefore, I will be required to directly interact with students and this action will move the paradigm choice away from that of scientific enquiry (Collins, 1998). Through entering the HE decision-making setting and by talking to the HE decision-makers, the socially constructed meanings of students' information search can be gained to form knowledge and insights for this study (Punch, 2005). The aim here is to not only to describe students' HE actions, but also to uncover the reasoning underpinning their actions.

Methodologically, I believe that naturalistic procedures yield richer data. Entering a culture and becoming a part of it provides the data that positivist methods cannot obtain. I can understand and take into consideration students' perspectives and beliefs in ways not available to researchers using quantitative methods. This study seeks to understand how the information search was conducted by students from their own perspectives. Hence, the qualitative approach can focus on the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in students' language and actions through an inductive logic (Creswell, 1994).

I reasoned that students' information search in the HE decision-making process cannot be explained by simple "laws" or measurable facts (Johnson and Duberley, 2000), since many factors that affect students are from their perceived perceptions and



concepts that are socially constructed and are very complex to understand. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm is the most appropriate for addressing the research questions of this study, as it enables researchers to perceive the topic from the participants' perspectives. A constructivist-interpretive paradigm would therefore show what meanings students assign to their HE information search, why they act the way they do, and the reasons for the actions they have made (Guba, 1990).

Every student who has conducted information searches could have different experiences and stories, and this study will find out whether similar patterns of students' behaviour can be identified. Similar patterns can therefore be conceptualised and compared to previous literature to further explain students' information search. My inductive approach considers students' information search to have multi-dimensions open to interpretation. As conducting information search for HE choices was a behaviour that only lasts for a short period of time, this study adopted a cross-sectional approach in data collection rather than a longitudinal approach, and it was felt that although the latter approach might help to examine the long-term changes or impacts of students' HE choices, it is not what this study intends to achieve.

### **3.2 Research design**

It is doubtful that previous studies that focused on the HE decision-making of Western home-based students can provide this current study a clear and unambiguous conceptualisation on the information search of Taiwanese international and Taiwanese home-based students, as a result of the very different research settings. Furthermore, as students' information search is a largely under-researched phenomenon, a qualitative method is suitable to explore and explain what students' activities and thoughts regarding their information search, and more novel understandings and complex details can also be gained (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

As students are active and conscious beings who make choices, their interpretations of their experiences of their HE decision-making process is an important areas for investigation. Hence, it is reasoned that the views of a group of Taiwanese students could suggest how their information search was conducted and how they formed such things as consideration sets, application lists and enrolment choices, throughout the



HE decision-making stages. Moreover, this research presents the thinking underpinning students' information search, such as how they define information quality and how information sources influence their external information search.

Based on the above reasons, rather than being "detached" from this study, I decided to get immersed in the data collection process (Punch, 2005). I participated in gathering the perspectives of students as actors of HE information search, and I contextualised and interpreted the data to show how the information search was carried out. The in-depth interactions with postgraduate students made me the main research instrument as I observed, posed questions, and interacted with the study participants in the data collection stage (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992).

In the research design of this study, focus groups were used at the first stage to generate different views from students to identify key themes for the individual follow-up interviews. Once the data from the focus groups was analysed, this led me to appreciate the complexity of students' HE decision-making. I therefore decided the research area should be further narrowed down from students' entire HE decision-making process specifically to students' information search. In doing this, I reasoned that richer data could be gained on a largely under explored research area, namely the information search within HE decision-making.

### **3.2.1 Data collection procedures**

I decided to interview eight current students and four potential students each from the TW group and from the UK group as an initial plan to see whether they provided sufficient data for analysis. The rationale of interviewing current students was because they have completed their information search, so they can suggest how their information search affected other stages of their HE decision-making process, and especially how the information search affected their enrolment choices. On the other hand, when interviewing potential students, as they are either still in the stage of doing or have just carried out an external information search, they could offer more details regarding how the information search was done and how the information sources were used.



In addition, I decided that the data for the UK group should be collected first as they are the main interest of this study as international students, and this was subsequently followed by the data collection stage from the TW group for comparison. This would also provide understanding about the influential information sources used by students in their information search, where some “marketing-stimuli” information sources that participants identify in the interviews, could also be included in the data collection if possible. It might be argued that non-marketing stimuli information sources, (like students’ peers or family), should also be included in the follow-up interviews. However, it was felt that from a marketing perspective of universities, non-marketing stimuli information sources cannot be directly controlled by universities, as they were more likely to be WOM types of information sources. Yet, this study still reveals how students were affected by the reference groups through WOM from their own perspectives. Table 3.1 summarises the data collection procedures.

**Table 3.1 Data collection procedures**

**Pilot study**

1. One focus group with five PhD students at University D on 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2004 as a pilot to verify the questions for the focus groups



**The UK group**

2. Two focus groups with current business Master’s students studying at University D from the September 2004 and February 2005 cohorts on 1<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2005
3. Four interviews with current business Master’s students from University D with the September 2005 cohort on 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of March, 2006
4. Four interviews with business Master’s students from University C, September 2005 cohort on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of March, 2006
5. Two day observations in an HE fair on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2006 in Taiwan
6. Four short interviews with potential students met at the HE fair on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2006
7. Two short interviews with University D alumni after the HE fair on 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2006



8. Three observations in the offices of educational agencies between University D staff and agents on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of March, 2006
9. One-day observations in the office of an agency, Agency G, on counseling sessions between potential students and agents on 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, 2006
10. Four interviews with five agents in agencies from 23<sup>rd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> March, 2006
11. Four interviews with potential business Master's students from 27<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> March, 2006



### **The TW group**

12. Four interviews with current business Master's students from University A, September 2005 cohort on 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 2006
13. Four interviews with current business Master's students from University B, September 2005 cohort on 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 2006
14. Four interviews with potential business Master's students in Taiwan on 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 2006

After eight current students of the UK group were interviewed at stage 3 and 4, since agents and HE fairs were identified by current students as some of the often used marketing-stimuli information sources, I decided to include HE fairs and educational agents in the data collection process, which could be seen as one type of snowball sampling technique for the selection of new interviewees. Hence, stages 5-10 were decided to be carried out to strengthen the data collection through more interviews and observations on how students used the HE fair and educational agents.

Stages 5-7 were necessary to help understand students' use of HE fairs as an information source. In stage 5, the reason for conducting a two-day observation in a HE fair before interviewing potential students was to see how potential students were helped by university recruiting staff and agents in the stand at HE fairs. So, if any inquiry comes from the observations on potential students' uses of HE fairs, the inquiry can be followed up in the interviews with agents or potential students. In stage 6, four potential students I met at the HE fair were interviewed shortly to get more information on how the interviewees used the HE fair. In stage 7, alumni perspectives on how students used the HE fair was decided as an important means for providing



another way of looking into students' use of HE fair. Consequently, I conducted interviews with alumni.

Stages 8-10 were carried out to understand students' use of educational agents as an information source. In stage 10, four interviews were formally conducted with three agents individually, whilst another two agents talked informally together. After the data collection of the UK group was completed (stages 2-11), the data collection from the TW group commenced from stage 12. In stage 13, as the interviews with the current students of the TW group did not identify influential marketing-stimuli information sources to their HE decision-making, I decided to stick to the initial plan of the research design for the TW group, which was to interview eight current students and four potential students, and not to include any marketing-stimuli information sources for more data. The duration of the data collection was from December 2004 to April 2006.

### **3.2.2 Matching the methods and the objectives**

This study has multiple sources of data collection which contributes to the trustworthiness of the data (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992), and as the UK group is the central focus of this study, the TW group is used to contrast the differences between home-based students and international students in their information search. Table 3.2 summarises how the research methods were used to address the research objectives. The data collected for the TW group is indicated by “(TW)” and the UK group, is referred to as “(UK)”. Moreover, the question numbers from the interview guide are shown to indicate which interview question was used for answering which objectives. For instance, Q1 from the interview guide for potential students of the TW group (in Appendix 9) was used to address objective 1. For the observations, protocols were used to identify the key areas for observations.



**Table 3.2 Research methods and research objectives**

<i>Methods</i>	<b>Research objective 1:</b> To investigate the formation and the content of participants' internal information
<i>Focus groups</i>	N/A
<i>Interviews</i>	Potential students (TW): Q1 (Appendix 9); Current students (TW): Q1 (Appendix 10); Potential students (UK): Q1 (Appendix 11); Current students (UK): Q1 (Appendix 12)
<i>Observations</i>	N/A

<i>Methods</i>	<b>Research objective 2:</b> To examine the use of external information in the alternative evaluation stage by participants
<i>Focus groups</i>	Q4, Q7 (Appendix 6)
<i>Interviews</i>	Potential students (TW): Q2-Q4 (Appendix 9); Current students (TW): Q2-Q4 (Appendix 10); Potential students (UK): Q2-Q4 (Appendix 11); Current students (UK): Q2-Q4 (Appendix 12); Agents (UK): Q2 (Appendix 8); Alumni (UK): used "the protocols for observations" as interview Qs (see the box below); Potential students met at the HE fair (UK): Q1-Q4 (Appendix 12)
<i>Observations</i>	HE fair (UK): (1) The use of HE fair as an information source (2) Common questions asked by students at the University D stand

<i>Methods</i>	<b>Research objective 3:</b> To explore the meaning of information quality from participants' perspectives and to see how information quality affects participants' external search
<i>Focus groups</i>	N/A
<i>Interviews</i>	Potential students (TW): Q7 (Appendix 9); Current students (TW): Q7 (Appendix 10); Potential students (UK): Q7 (Appendix 11); Current students (UK): Q7 (Appendix 12)
<i>Observations</i>	N/A



<b>Methods</b>	<b>Research objective 4:</b> To examine the impacts of influential external information sources on the formation of participants' consideration sets, application lists, and enrolment choices
<b>Focus groups</b>	N/A
<b>Interviews</b>	Potential students (TW): Q5&Q6 (Appendix 9); Current students (TW): Q5&Q6 (Appendix 10); Potential students (UK): Q5&Q6 (Appendix 11); Current students (UK): Q5&Q6 (Appendix 12); Agents (UK): Q2-Q5 (Appendix 8)
<b>Observations</b>	<i>Agents and students (UK):</i> (1) the atmosphere in the conversations; (2) the counseling styles; and (3) the demands and needs of students <i>Agents and university staff (UK):</i> (1) the agency culture; (2) the types of relationship ; and (3) the demands and needs of two parties

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Research objective 5:</b> To compare the extent participants in Taiwan and in the United Kingdom possess similar or different outlooks in their Master's decision-making based on the previous four objectives
<b>Focus groups</b>	Compare the data collected from the previous 4 objectives
<b>Interviews</b>	As above
<b>Observations</b>	As above

### 3.2.3 Ethical issues

In this study, ethical issues include confidentiality and informed consent (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Individuals have the right to have their privacy, so participants were advised that their participation was entirely optional. However, the participants for the non-participant observations of this study were an exception and this will be explained further in 3.3.3. Also, a pre-interview email (see Appendix 5) was sent to participants to give prior knowledge of this study and to assure potential participants that the findings would only be used for academic purposes only.



Moreover, after the interviews, participants were regularly updated with regards to the progress of this study. Hence, after the transcriptions of the interviews, I could send them transcripts to review the accuracy of the interviews. In addition, after the findings were drawn, I sent participants the key conclusions for further comments. Continuous reporting of the progress of this study helps participants to be willing to offer comments and feel respected and valued for the information they provided.

Participants were also assured of their right to confidentiality and anonymity before the interviews both verbally and in writing, including the request that their information be presented as part of the findings, but that their identity would be withheld, as they were either given a code number (U1) or a pseudonym. Respondents were also reminded before the interview that they could decline to answer any questions which they were not comfortable talking about.

### **3.3 Sampling**

As this study is aimed to explore a range of opinions and the different representations of the issues in students' HE information search rather than simply counting people's opinions (Gaskell, 2000, pg.42), a non-probability sampling technique was deemed most appropriate. Although non-probability sampling does not involve random selection of samples, it can achieve the goal to explore how information search was performed by students. I reasoned that the most important sampling consideration was to find individuals willing to describe their HE decision-making experiences. As long as those individuals are willing to express their inner feelings and describe physiological experiences that occurred with their feelings, the interviews would provide potentially insightful findings. Hence, this study recruited interviewees through voluntary processes than selecting them randomly, as it shows that they could be more willing to describe and give details about their HE decision-making experiences.

Although the consequence of using non-probability sampling is that an unknown portion of the population is excluded, (such as those who did not volunteer for this study), I still felt volunteers were more likely to be very willing to share their HE information search, so the data they provided should be richer and deeper, which is the main purpose of this study. Hence, the main purpose of this study was to select



participants willing to provide rich information for subsequent comparison and analysis. Although the participants were selected based on their willingness and availability, Table 3.3 presents sampling techniques used in recruiting participants.

**Table 3.3 Sampling techniques**

<b>Focus groups</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Observations</b>
One focus group with five overseas PhD students, including Taiwanese students, at University D as pilot focus group to verify the interview questions	<p><b>Current students:</b> select two universities first in Taiwan and two universities in the UK, and then recruit four volunteers from each case university</p> <p><b>Potential students:</b></p> <p>(1) UK: four students at HE fair and four were volunteers from four IELTS schools in Taiwan</p> <p>(2) TW: four volunteers from two cram schools of Master's entrance exam</p> <p><b>Agents:</b> five agents from three agencies were selected based on the contacts available</p> <p><b>Alumni:</b> Two alumni from University D who helped at the University D stand at the HE fair</p>	<p><b>HE fair:</b> the HE fair in Taipei was selected</p> <p><b>Agents and students:</b> One agency was selected based on the possibility of access</p> <p><b>Agents and university staff:</b> Three agencies were chosen based on the possibility of access</p>
Two focus groups with Taiwanese business Master's students at University D; a group of five and a group of six people		

### 3.3.1 Sampling of focus groups

University D was chosen as the site for recruiting the focus groups because of my familiarity with the university and the resulting ability to gain access to the potential participants. As the first stage of data collection, the findings from the two focus

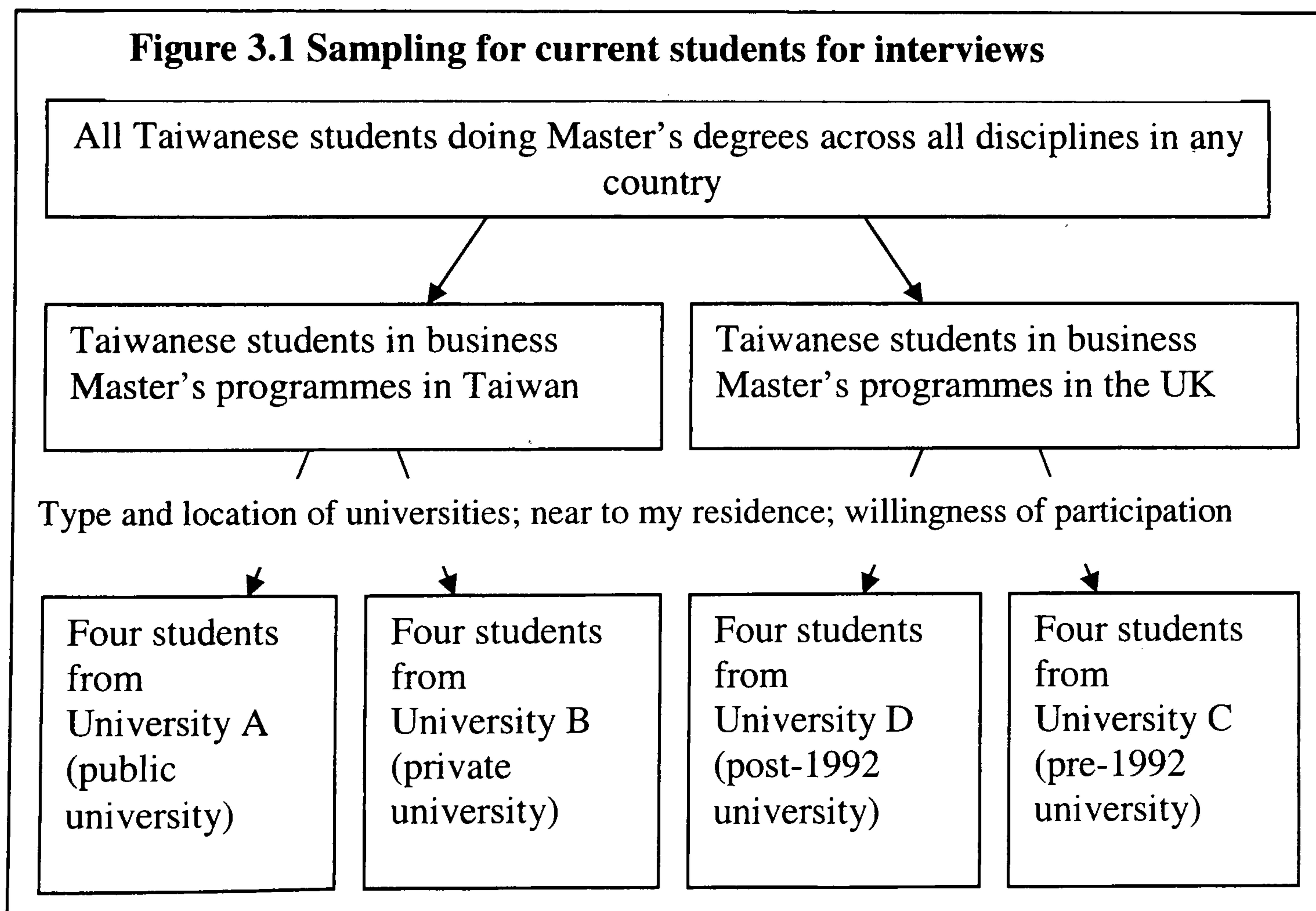


groups were used to identify interesting issues to be followed up in the individual interviews.

### 3.3.2 Sampling of interviews

#### Current students

I decided to select two universities each from Taiwan and from the UK, and from these institutions, four volunteers from each of the four case universities would be recruited for interviews. Figure 3.1 presents the criterion of sampling current students for the interviews: (1) choosing only business Master's students in Taiwan and in the UK and not all postgraduate Taiwanese students from any disciplines; (2) choosing participants from two different types of universities in Taiwan and in the UK to include more possible HE considerations from students; (3) selecting the location of two case universities situated closely to each other, so the location of universities are seen as not totally different to potential students; (4) choosing the universities that are near to my residence for interview convenience; and (5) selecting the business Master's students from the case universities who are willing to be interviewees.



Regarding to the first sampling criterion, justifications are provided below from both a practical and an academic perspective. Practically, as both in Taiwan and in the UK,



business programmes are the most favorable majors for students (People News, 2001; HESA, 2004), it is important for universities to understand more about how business students make HE decisions. Business majors as the most popular Master's programmes in Taiwan only have about 2% to 10% acceptance rate (People News, 2001). Even when studying abroad, business Master's are still the most popular for Taiwanese, especially MBA (Master's of business administration) (Lin, 2001; Wen, 2003), marketing and finance majors (Wen, 2003). Furthermore, business and administrative studies are also the most favourable majors in the UK forming nearly a fifth (17%) of the total postgraduate study (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2004).

Furthermore, from an academic perspective, Master's students' HE decision-making process needs to be investigated because the majority of previous studies researched undergraduate level (i.e. Christie *et al.*, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Brooks, 2004; Brennan and Marriott, 1996; Connor *et al.*, 1999) as opposed to Master's level (i.e. Kallio, 1995; Kirk, 1990; Olson, 1992; Webb, 1993; Webb and Allen, 1994). Furthermore, for those studies investigating postgraduate students, they tend to focus either on particular programmes or on all programmes at a single institution only. Moreover, only a few previous studies focused on business students' choices (i.e. Kim *et al.*, 2002; Mauldin *et al.*, 2000; Richardson, 1993). Therefore, in light of the above reasons, MA business students from several HE institutions were chosen in this study as opposed to including postgraduate students from all disciplines from a single institution.

The second criterion of the sampling was decided because it was found that the types of university affect students' HE decision-making (James *et al.*, 1999; Richardson and Stacey, 1993; Howard, 2002). As mentioned earlier in 2.2.3, those students from research-led universities and technology universities (James *et al.*, 1999) and those students from private and public universities (Richardson and Stacey, 1993) used different choice criteria in HE decision-making. Hence, it was decided the type of university would be used to see whether students' information search or considerations differed.



In terms of the types of university, universities in Taiwan could be categorised as being either public or private universities. In Taiwan, public universities are basically seen by the public as more prestigious and also cheaper in terms tuition fees, while the private universities are generally viewed as less prestigious and charging higher tuition fees. In the UK, universities could be generally categorised as being either new universities, (which were transferred from polytechnics to universities after 1992), or traditional universities, that have longer histories as universities.

The location of institutions was chosen to be the third criterion as it was observed in previous studies (Discenza *et al.*, 1985; Hossler, 1985; O'Neill, 1995; Coccari and Javalgi, 1995; Joseph and Joseph, 1998) and by the focus groups of this study to be one of the important considerations for students. Hence, I decided to choose the location of two case universities situated close to each other. The standard of proximity was defined by the distance between the two case universities to be less than 1.5 hours by car. I reasoned that the location of institutions can be controlled, so I could focus more on understanding students' considerations, and how information was searched and evaluated based on these considerations. For instance, if the location of institutions was important, why was this seen as an important factor, and what constituted a "good location"? Were factors like living costs, transport convenience factors used for consideration?

The fourth criterion was about the convenience of arranging interviews, so the two case universities would be closely situated to my residence. Therefore, based on the four previous criteria, two case universities in Taiwan and two universities in the UK were selected. In the UK, University D and University C were selected. University D was selected to represent "new universities" and University C to represent "traditional universities" to suggest whether current students from different types of universities differ in their information search. Similarly, in Taiwan, two case universities, University A and University B in the mid-north of Taiwan were selected. University A was selected to represent public universities while University B was chosen to represent private universities in Taiwan.



Regarding to the fifth sampling criterion, after the case universities were selected, I started to recruit volunteers from the four case universities of the business Master's programmes. For University D, I posted posters on the students' notice boards of the business school to invite four Taiwanese students for interviews. For University C, the international office of University C was asked on my behalf to send out an email to invite four Taiwanese students who were studying business Master's programmes for interview. For recruiting interviewees from the two case universities in Taiwan, interview recruitment posters were on my behalf, displayed by the course administrators of business schools in the two case universities. Through emails and telephone calls, the first four students from University A and first four students from University B who indicated their interest to participate were contacted to arrange interviews.

As the Masters programmes in Taiwan are 2-year courses (which is longer than the one-year Master's courses in the UK), the Master's students selected for interviews of this study were students who were in their first year of study. It was felt that they should remember their HE decision-making processes more clearly, since their information search was more recent than second year Master's students.

#### Sampling for potential students:

*(1) The UK group: four were met at the HE fair and another four were volunteers from four IELTS schools in Taiwan*

Regarding the sampling for potential students of the UK group, four interviewees were the student visitors who I met at the HE fair and invited for short interviews. Four short interviews were conducted during the two-day HE fair with potential students who came to visit the University D stand. The short interviews lasted from five to thirty minutes in duration, depending on the interviewees' availability. The reason for doing this is because the interviews with the current students suggested the HE fairs were used as one of the information sources. I therefore felt those potential students who came to the HE fair could suggest what information they had from the HE fair, and how they selected which university stand to go to in the HE fair etc. In addition, they might provide more detailed information on the impact of the HE fair on their information search.



In order to develop a stronger understanding of the information search stage, another four potential students who were still carrying out their information search for studying business Master's programmes in the UK were interviewed. These interviews were conducted to build up a strong picture of what was really going on in the process of students' information search. As many potential students of the UK prepare for IELTS exams by attending IELTS cram schools in Taiwan, the four potential students were selected from these locations. Through posters posted on my behalf on the notice board of four IELTS schools, (Excel Language Learning Centre, Elite Language Centre, Trinity Language Center, and Time International Language Center), the first four volunteers who responded were contacted to arrange interviews. The reason for choosing the four IELTS schools was because of access, as one of the agencies I interviewed, Agency G, had contacts with the IELTS schools, the posters were distributed with the prior agreement of the cram school managers. The length of the interviews, ranging from sixty to ninety minutes in duration, were far longer than those conducted at the HE fair.

*(2) The TW group: four volunteers from two cram schools for the Master's entrance exam*

To better secure their chances as potential students of business Master's programmes in Taiwan, many students attend cram schools to prepare for the entrance exam. I posted posters on the notice board of two big chain cram schools, Taso and Get Institute of Advanced study. The two cram schools were selected because of their well-known brand reputations and the large amount of enrolled students. The first four students that indicated their interest in participating were contacted for interview arrangements. Unlike the sampling for the current students, the criterion on the type and the location of universities was not considered for potential students. This was because potential students are still in their information search and have not decided on which programme to enrol.

Sampling for agents: five agents were selected based on the contacts available

Four interviews were carried out with five agents in three agencies to obtain their perspectives on how students conduct their information search and their observations on the factors influencing students' Master's choices. Three agents were interviewed formally and individually, while I discussed informally with two when they were free



from the work inside the agency. Hence, only note-taking was done with these two agents and not voice recorded as with the other three agents. The three agencies that were chosen were the partners of University D, so I was introduced by the University D recruiting staff to them and had access to the interviews with the agents who were either the managers or the counselors of the agency.

#### Sampling for alumni: two alumni from University D who helped at the University D stand at the HE fair

Two short interviews with two alumni of University D who helped at the University D stand in the HE fair were conducted after the fair finished on the second day. Since the two alumni as helpers at the University D stand answered many potential students' questions, their perspectives on the type of questions students often asked can be valuable to suggest the important considerations of potential students and students' use of HE fairs as an information source. In addition, students might ask alumni different types of questions that they do not ask of agents or university recruiting staff, so the short interviews with alumni, which lasted for fifteen minutes each, also proved to be valuable data collection opportunities.

### **3.3.3 Sampling of observations**

#### The next available HE fair in Taiwan

As the HE fair proved to be one of the marketing-stimuli information sources used by current students of University D and University C when interviewing them, two-day observations were also conducted in the next available HE fair in Taiwan, which was in March, 2006. HE fairs for British universities in Taiwan were held in several cities in Taiwan, and the choice of the city was considered. When evaluating data sites, one criterion is to collect the richest possible data (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The HE fair in Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan, has the most participating stands of British universities compared to other cities in Taiwan. In addition, more visitors attended the HE fair in Taipei in comparison to those held in other cities. Hence, Taipei was selected over other alternative cities in Taiwan as a location for the HE fair observation.



### Between agents and students: one selected agency

One-day observations were conducted in one agency, Agency G, to see the interactions between agents and potential students, including the atmosphere in the conversations, the counseling styles, and the demands and needs of students. Agency G was selected, on account of the fact that one of the University D staff I went along with has a good relationship with the agency, so access was made possible through this contact. Furthermore, Agency G, as one of the most experienced educational agencies in Taiwan, offers the possibility to provide potentially richer data.

### Between agents and university staff: three agencies chosen

Three observations of meetings between agents and university staff of University D were conducted. After the HE fair, two staff from University D had meetings with three agencies to exchange feedback on how University D and the agencies could work to better market University D to potential students. I had a chance to go to agencies with two University D staff to observe the meetings. Without the contacts between the University D staff and the agencies, it is very unlikely that I would have gained access to these agencies as they might worry about my purposes for seeking to make contact with them. Hence, the three agencies were selected based on the greater ease of access afforded by my connections with University D recruitment staff.

In the interviews, agents appeared to be one of the often used marketing-stimuli information sources for Taiwanese participants of University D and University C, so it is important to understand more about how the agents operate. The observation focus was on the agency culture, the types of relationships between British universities and agents, and the demands and needs of these two parties. This data is useful as well, since very few previous studies include how agents affect students' information search. Initially, the research design was to interview 24 Taiwanese students, including eight current students and four potential students for each group. However, some additional data collections were later added, and Table 3.4 demonstrates the eventual research design for the two student groups applied in this study.



**Table 3.4 Total numbers of data collection**

<i>Applied Method</i>	<b>UK group</b>	<b>TW group</b>	<b>Total number</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	3 focus groups (including one pilot) 8 current MA business students 8 potential MA business students 4 interviews (with 5 agents) 2 alumni <i>--sub-total</i> <i>3 focus groups</i> <i>22 interviews</i>	8 current MA business students 4 potential MA business students <i>--sub-total</i> <i>12 interviews</i>	3 focus groups and 34 interviews
<b>Observations</b>	2-day at HE fair 1-day at one agency office 3-meeting observations at three agencies		3 day and 3 meeting observations

Next, a more detailed discussion of the research design will follow, focusing on particular features respectively related to the focus groups, interviews and 4746 observations.

### **3.4 Focus groups**

Focus groups, concerning students' HE decision-making, provide insights into students' attitudes, perceptions and opinions. Focus groups provide access to a variety of different opinions which is especially desired when exploring issues in an under-researched area. Having focus groups in the initial stage of this study helped to understand what Taiwanese students, as HE decision-makers (who compare differently to Western students in terms of geographical location and cultural



attributes), might behave differently. Hence, focus groups are used in this study to explore Taiwanese students' HE experiences and to see what students did in the information search.

The benefits of conducting focus groups were for students to interact with each other, so more of the group interactions and differences between their HE decision-making could emerge (Vaughn *et al.*, 1996). In the discussion, respondents can also listen to others' comments and recall their own experiences, which might be especially helpful on researching topics on consumer behaviour, such as in this study on student' HE decision-making. Several Taiwanese respondents in the focus groups added more opinions after they were reminded by what others had said in the discussion. Compared with one-to-one interviews, focus groups enable respondents to be studied in a more natural and relaxed atmosphere (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

I conducted one pilot focus group with five overseas PhD students at University D on 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2004 to validate the questions and to identify the effectiveness of the discussion style. These PhD students were informed that they were part of a pilot and not an actual study for this research. During the group discussions, I asked the students about their experiences of selecting PhD courses in the UK. As the main purpose of the pilot group is to learn about the research process and interview schedule (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992), after the discussions, I talked to the PhD students to gain feedback, especially on the design of the questions. Here I asked about the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. I also asked whether there were any other questions that were overlooked and which needed to be posed in the focus groups. As a consequence of this feedback, I developed questions that focused more on how students made HE decisions and less on the rank order of importance of students' choice criteria, as the latter can be gained via a quantitative approach and was less helpful in explaining students' HE decision-making.

For the two focus groups that were used as data for this study, the respondents were current Master's students studying at University D in February, 2005. One focus discussion group was conducted with five Taiwanese students from the September 2004 cohort and another group was with six Taiwanese students from the January 2005 cohort. The locations for the focus groups were in the lounge of Cranbourne



House, a residential building for most Master's students at University D. As the two focus groups were conducted in social spaces, participants were quite relaxed in the discussions and it was not difficult for them to interact with each other.

Semi-structured questions were used which allowed me to add extra questions when new ideas or issues were raised by the respondents (Appendix 6), and the questions set were based on previous literature and the research objectives of this study. The questions covered all stages of students' HE decision-making, including motivations for studying Master's degrees, the UK as the destination choice, the information search process, the choice of the major, and the final enrolment choice. Two additional questions were added to understand students' opinions on how British universities can help them in the information search and the satisfaction level of studying on the current programme. I thought that the two added questions could suggest the improvement of the use of information sources of British universities and reveal whether there is any relationship between students' involvement of HE decision-making and the satisfaction level of their enrolment choices.

My role as a moderator in the focus groups allowed me to ask questions, observe students' body language, and to probe areas requiring further attention. Although I might have less control over the discussions of focus groups than individual interviews, as long as the discussions are still within the research area of students' HE decision-making, it is acceptable and welcome as some unexpected issues might arise and assist the exploration. Furthermore, trying to explore some interesting issues raised by participants from the focus groups, more one-to-one interviews were used in the next research stage to provide more details of students' information search. This will be covered next.

### **3.5 Interviews**

Following focus groups, one-to-one interviews were held with individual Taiwanese students, agents and alumni. A semi-structured interview approach was selected to give a basic format of interview questions and allow probing with interviewees. Appendix 7 explains how the research objectives were adapted to interview themes. The purpose of interviewing students was to see how students interpreted their HE information search. For instance, when students stated education quality was



important for them in selecting institutions or programmes, I probed to see why this mattered. Here I probed the meaning of “education quality”. For example, did this mean a better learning experience, promise for future employment, or public recognition? Also, what information was used by students to decide which university offered better education quality?

Several key themes were identified from the results of the focus groups, and they were followed-up in the interviews with students, such as how league tables were used and how the quality of information was evaluated. The details of interview questions are presented in Appendices 8-12. These include the questions for agent interviewees (Appendix 8), potential students of the TW group (Appendix 9), current students of the TW group (Appendix 10), potential students of the UK group (Appendix 11), and for current students of the UK group (Appendix 12).

Although quantitative methods can be used to see what information sources were used, it is more difficult to see how they were used and how students were affected by these influential sources. On the other hand, the influences from reference groups and the use of information sources can be better addressed via interviews regarding students’ perspectives and interpretations. Moreover, the interviews enabled me to see how students perceived and interpreted the information they received. For instance, when students suggested ranking or location as important factors, little is known on what information sources were used by Taiwanese students to evaluate that factor. Next, the preparations carried out for the interviews will be explained.

### **3.5.1 Interview preparations**

A pre-interview email (in Appendix 5) was sent to all respondents after they agreed to participation by phone. The information provided in the email included the background of this study, the use of the interview data, the promise of confidentiality and anonymity, and the time and location of the interview was also confirmed.

The locations of interview were either in respondents’ campus buildings or quite public areas, such as cafés. For instance, the interviews with students of University D were done in my PhD office in Bournemouth House in campus while the interviews with students of University C were done in the campus café, and for the interviews



with potential students, quiet cafés that the interviewees suggested were used. It was felt to choose the locations that the interviewees are familiar with and are easy for them to go to could encourage them to be more willing to come, and make them more comfortable and relaxed in the interview sessions which help the richness of the data.

### **3.5.2 During the interviews**

On the day of the interviews, to foster a comfortable atmosphere for the interviewees, I provided light drinks and snacks. Before the interview formally started, interviewees were encouraged to engage in small talk and to have something to eat as an “ice-breaker”. This made interviewees feel more relaxed and willing to speak more in the interviews.

Before the interview formally started, I gave a word of thanks to the interviewee for agreeing to talk. This was then followed by some introductory comments about the research and a request for permission to record the session (Gaskell, 2000, pg.51). In the introductory comments, I set the ground rules to explain to interviewees that their personal experiences were sought, so I emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers. Hence, interviewees were encouraged to say whatever they wished and not only what they thought I expected them to say.

These interviewees, as current students in the UK, were asked prior to the interviews whether they would like to be interviewed in English or Mandarin. All of them chose to speak in Mandarin, because with their native language, they could speak more freely rather than worrying about grammar or sentence mistakes. Although using Mandarin in the interview might cause translational problems for me in the data analysis, attempting to get a richer data, it was still believed to be the most suitable. Only for the interviews with the three British agents were conducted in English.

The key themes of interviews were provided as hard copies to participants at the beginning of interviews (Appendices 8-12). Although interviewees might not have followed the themes all the time during the interview, the supply of themes helped interviewees to concentrate on the topic and contextualise more complicated issues that they might not be sure about when considering my questions. In addition, I avoided defensive postures, like crossed arms and legs in the interviews, when



listening to the responses of interviewees. I also made notes to record respondents' non-verbal behaviour when they were talking, such as confused or impatient looks.

The style of questioning was also considered. The interview questions were designed to be as simple as possible and not to bother interviewees with the theoretical concepts of HE decision-making. Hence, theory questions that have theoretical concepts and jargon were rephrased for the interviewees (Wengraf, 2001, pg. 62). Moreover, leading questions were avoided and I clarified respondents' real meanings if the language was ambiguous. Also, when interesting points appear, depth-probing was used by asking interviewees to "tell me more" or "please explain further" (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, pg.92). I tried to talk less and let interviewees speak as much as they wanted. From time to time, eye contacts and head nodding were used to help communicate with interviewees and encourage them to talk.

I kept the research questions in mind, occasionally checking the interview guide during the interview, but the focus was on listening and understanding the responses. I listened carefully, so I could recall what was heard and identify gaps or inconsistencies of the answers for further inquiry. Furthermore, as it was important to provide the respondents time to think, I made sure not to fill any pauses with a further question. When closing the interview, I ended on a positive note to thank the respondents and reassured them of anonymity of their responses. Followed by this, I explained how the information they provided will be used in this study and the progress of my research so far (Gaskell, 2000, pg.53).

With the permission of the participants, interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Although being recorded might affect interviewees' readiness to say something and the voice recorder could not record non-verbal behaviour, recording process was still chosen for better preservation of data. To overcome any potential problems by using a recorder, interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality of the data, and non-verbal behaviour was noted in the notebook during the interviews. Next, the preparations for observations are explained.



### 3.6. Observations

Observations were chosen to offer greater breadth and depth of data (Gaskell, 2000). Non-participant observations allowed me to observe and record the behaviour of participants. Benefits of doing non-participant observations were that it was less intrusive and I could be more objective and focused on the observations than participating and collecting data simultaneously. Hence, as a direct observer, I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible in the observations (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). A semi-structured approach was used for the stream of actions and events to naturally unfold from the observations and this helped the unexpected concepts to emerge rather than be imposed on the data from the outset (Punch, 2005, pg.179). In other words, protocols were used for observations rather than exact questions on certain issues.

Two-day non-participant observations were done in the HE fair to see how university recruitment staff interacted with potential students in the University D stand and what information was exchanged in the process. Furthermore, I carried out a 1-day non-participant observation in one agent's office, Agency G, to see how the agents advised potential students in the counseling sessions and how potential students were assisted in their information search. Additionally, I conducted non-participant observations of three agency meetings to observe the interactions, needs and demands between the agents and University D representatives.

Prior to entering the observation sites, permission was gained from the authorities of the sites, including University D representatives at the stand of the HE fair and senior managers of educational agencies. As I was a student at University D, access to the University D stand to observe the HE fair was granted by the University D staff without a problem. Moreover, the observation sites in agencies were selected as they were the cooperative parties who have contracts to promote University D to Taiwanese students. Through the introductions of the University D staff, permission to enter the agencies as an observer was therefore gained from the senior managers of the agencies. When entering the observation site in the HE fair, I was an "unknown investigator" to potential students who were the main observation subjects (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). I therefore sought not to affect any potential students' behaviour in their information search. By contrast, for observations in the agencies, as the



permission was granted by senior agency managers, the agents who were observed inevitably knew I was an investigator.

I reasoned that if potential students were not informed about being observed, their natural behaviour would be less affected. It can be argued that ethical issues may be raised as a result of this decision, but as the purpose of this was only to observe how potential students made their information search, the observations were considered not to result in any harm to those being observed. Also, by engaging in non-participant observation, students' rights in obtaining the information they need from the HE fairs or from educational agents were not affected. One big limitation of being an unknown investigator to potential students was on losing the possibility to openly inquire participants (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). However, interviews with potential students in the next stage of data collection were conducted to overcome this setback.

### **3.6.1 Protocols for observation**

Protocols are a list of issues to guide the focus of observations and to provide a common framework across field notes. In the HE fair on the information search of potential students, the protocols that were identified beforehand were on students' use of HE fair as an information source and common questions asked by students at the University D stand. The observation protocols concerning the interactions between the agents and potential students of the UK group in the agencies concerned the atmosphere in the conversations, the counseling styles, and the demands and needs of students. Finally, between the agents and the university representatives of University D, the protocols focused on the agency culture, the types of relationship and the demands and needs of the two parties.

The observational points were on the people, behaviour, times (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998), the types, the processes, and the causes of the participants' interactions (Lofland and Lofland, 1995, pg. 124). For instance, between the potential students and the agents, the observational points concerned their behaviour on what counseling types they displayed, how the counseling was done, agents' recommendations to students, and to what extent agents' suggestions were considered by students.



For recording the observation data, it was felt that students, agents or university recruiting staff would be uncomfortable having their conversations recorded. Moreover, in the HE fair, the surrounding noise could be too loud to be clearly recorded, even with a digital recorder. Hence, the observation data was recorded via handwritten field notes instead. Field notes were written as soon as possible either during or after the observations. As there were tables and seats in the agents' offices, field notes were made *during* the observations. However, as there was nowhere to be used for note-taking at the University D stand, field notes were taken *right after* the HE fair closed at the end of the day.

Notes were taken to describe all relevant aspects of the situation, such as scenes, time, date, description of place and chronicle of events. Keywords were first listed, followed by what was seen or heard. During the observations, descriptive notes were taken as written records that contained information about the direct observations. After the observations, notes were written as reflections of my reactions to the observations, such as questions, insights, and thoughts. The descriptive and reflective notes were kept separately, so that they could be tested out from the final findings emergent from my observations. Moreover, supplementary data that was available from the observation sites, such as textural documents students had from the HE fair, were taken as additional information for this study. After all the observations were done, I created an electronic file with my field notes and transferred this into MAXqda for data analysis.

### **3.7 Analysis process**

As Mandarin was used in the majority of the interviews, except for those with British educational agents, before the data analysis, I listened to the recorded interviews and compared these to my translated English texts. The conversations were translated as closely as possible to what interviewees actually said. Although it is a very time-consuming process, all the conversations were written down to ensure that important data was not lost. I also consulted bilingual friends to assure the adequacy of the translations of participants' phrases into English words and concepts.



The procedures of data analysis were to reduce data, display data, and draw and verify conclusions from the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In the first few times of reading transcripts, I focused on telling a story of participant's HE decision-making without stepping back to explain why certain events occurred. Next, after I was familiar with the participants' stories, I began the coding process. Template Analysis was the approach used for the coding process.

### **3.7.1 Template analysis**

Template Analysis and computer software, MAXqda, were used in coding. This involves the development of a hierarchical coding system (King, 1998) within the MAXqda software. The hierarchical coding system consists of pre-defined codes and new codes that were added during the analysis process. The pre-defined codes were derived either from my findings of the focus groups in the first stage of study, or from the academic literature which later formed my conceptual framework (Figure 2.2). Hence, pre-defined codes, including terms like "internal information", "external information", "alternative evaluation", and "quality of information", were organised into the *initial template* (Appendix 13).

Developing an initial template before the analysis may be brought into question. One important justification was that the research area of this study was established by some previous studies (i.e. Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Brennan, 2001b; Pimpa, 2003), and certain issues in relation to this topic were safely expected to arise from the data collection. Also I avoided possible dangers associated with the use of pre-defined themes through careful evaluations of the material and not to overlook any information that did not relate to the pre-defined themes. Furthermore, I restricted the number of themes within the initial template to fifteen, so the benefits of having an initial template could be gained and potential dangers of pre-defining too many themes was limited.

When coding the initial template, the segments that appeared to tell me something of relevance to the research questions were marked. Where the segments corresponded to the initial template, they are coded as such. Otherwise, new codes were added to include the relevant material. For example, the influence of reference groups was found to be influential to participants' information search, and as from the literature,



reference groups can be either from “non-marketing stimuli information sources” or “marketing stimuli information sources”, these two themes were added as new codes to see whether more comparisons could be drawn with the type of reference groups that were used by the two student groups. The initial template was modified and revised and new themes if necessary were added in analysing each subsequent transcript. These modifications, including inserting or deleting a theme and changing the scope of a theme, will be explained with the provision of the following examples.

In terms of inserting a theme to the initial template, new codes were added to include relevant material that came out from the interview or observation data. Comparing the initial template (Appendix 13) with the final template (Appendix 14), several new themes/codes were added. For example, “known choice criteria”, “alternative known”, “UK images” and “Master’s in the UK” were added as third level codes of “internal search”, because it was found in this study that the TW group knew more choice criteria and alternatives than the UK group, and the UK group only possessed very limited internal information on the UK as a country and of the one-year Master’s in the UK. By having more detailed third level codes, the differences between both groups can be better identified and presented in the findings.

In terms of deleting initial themes, a few codes were crossed out from the initial template. For example, for the observation data, the codes that were deleted on the analysis of observations between agents and students were “relationships” and “power distributions”, because it was felt another code “counselling styles” could better accommodate the observation data. Also, similar decisions were made on the codes used for analysing the observations between agents and university representatives. “Power distributions” and “cooperative level” were included in the code of “relationships”, because it avoided confusions in defining the terms and reduced the complexity of overly detailed codes.

Moreover, in terms of changing the scope of a theme in the initial template, “family” was the fourth level code in “external search”. However, family was not found to be used as much as expected. This proved to be an interesting surprise. Hence, it was decided that “family influences” would be moved to a first level code and be discussed as a special phenomena to explore what kinds of influences respondents had



from families and why this study did not find family to be influential. After all the transcripts were analysed, with modifications and revisions, the initial template became the final template, which included all the themes from the data that served as the basis for my interpretation of the data set. Furthermore, the final template was also used as a foundation to present the findings of this study from Chapter four onwards.

### **3.7.2 MAXqda and personal files**

MAXqda was used as it is effective in handling large amounts of data, and it makes the research process more systematic and explicit, and therefore more transparent and rigorous (Kelle, 2000, pg.293). One useful feature of MAXqda is that each line of the transcript texts was given a line number, so when quoting them, the line numbers can be given for references in analysis and findings. The biggest problem of MAXqda, however, was that when multiple transcript texts were shown together in the retrieve segments, it was difficult to analyse the data within their contexts. That happens because when looking at the retrieve segments of Maxqda, participants' behaviour were more likely to be focused than examining the causes of participants' behaviour. Hence, I paid more caution not to get absorbed in the technology and losing sight of the text (Gaskell, 2000, pg.55).

To overcome the problem MAXqda might cause, I thought about how to reduce the data without significant loss of information, and not to strip the data from their context. Therefore, personal files of each student respondent were prepared manually. The personal files, which were used alongside the MAXqda, contained the key background information of each individual and included keywords and line numbers of quotes used by them in answering research questions. The benefit of this was that when using MAXqda along with the personal files, each respondent was seen more as an individual with different mindsets and agendas in the process of making Master's choices. Hence, the quotes from participants could be better explained and closely examined rather than merely being literally seen.

The personal files helped me to evaluate the data from a higher level which looked at participants as an individual and to consider how their personal or family backgrounds, including their academic performances, age or family influences, might affect how they made their HE choices. This helped avoid simple comparisons on the



phases used by respondents, and directed the analysis to show the deeper meanings underpinning the texts. Furthermore, within respondents' personal files, a flow chart was produced to show the chronicle stages of that participant in HE decision-making. By comparing the flow charts of all participants, this helped to identify similar or different experiences across the cases.

### **3.7.3 Concept verifications**

In data analysis, frequency, duration, rate, and timing of participants' behaviour received particular attention, and questions about "who, when, why, where, what, how, how much, with what results" were asked to get more understandings of the data. In addition, through reading the transcripts over and over again, a word, a phase, or a sentence, I closely scrutinised these for significance. Moreover, incidents are compared to look for similarities and differences across the participant's descriptions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pg.87), such as how the league tables were used by participants. Furthermore, terms like "always, never, everyone, and no other way" from the transcripts received close attention, as they might indicate the beliefs or assumptions participants had in mind regarding their HE decision-making (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Additionally, as it is important to clarify what decisions were made and actions were taken during the analysis, a simple decision rule was adopted outlining "two confirmations and no contradiction" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pg.131). This means I regarded a concept as important if it was confirmed by at least two interviewees and not negated by other participants. However, if some extreme cases from interviewees are interesting to be explored or discussed, they will also be presented. Furthermore, event classifying and memoing were used for "conceptualisation". I classified events and objects in participants' information search processes to form concepts to explain how information sources were used. Also, through memoing in MAXqda after the data were reduced to themes, clusters and patterns, I recorded my ideas about themes and their relationships. The memos helped me to move from the empirical to the conceptual level of data analysis and towards developing propositions.



Although some possible conclusions were noted in the early stage of the analysis, they were vague and ill-informed, so I first saw conclusions in the form of working propositions. Once propositions were drawn, I integrated data into a more meaningful and coherent picture through drawing and verifying conclusions (Punch, 2005). For example, the league tables were used by participants of the UK group and were much less used by the TW group. Through more comparisons between how the league tables were used, propositions were formed suggesting the league tables were used by the UK group to know the academic performances of each university, and the UK group matched their self-estimated academic performances to the ranking of the potential British universities. On the other hand, the propositions for the TW group as home-based students concerned how they already knew the ranking of local universities from past experiences, so they had less need of the league tables to assist them in the evaluation of the quality of universities.

Through more verification, I drew conclusions to suggest that although participants of the UK group would like to go to study in universities that were seen as “better” academic institutions, if their self-evaluated academic performances were not of equivalent levels, they could reject offers from good ranking universities. By contrast, as the TW group entered the Master’s courses through exams which proved their academic performances were equivalent to other students, the TW group tended to choose the “best” ranking university from their offers. Moreover, for the TW group, the definition of the “best” depends on participants’ perceptions on the quality of that university rather than official league tables for the UK group.

Through conceptualising and explaining, data was developed to formulate abstract concepts, and finally, an explanatory scheme was constructed to integrate various concepts through statements of relationships (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pg.25). Figures of networks were used to present the concepts found in this study (such as Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The new concepts found in this study were either from the terms or quotes used by the interviewees or through literature reviews. As I had experience of HE decision-making being an international Master’s student from Taiwan, I believed I could observe more insights from the data, as a result of being an “insider. I was able to identify cultural and experiential features raised by the interviewees that an outsider may have missed. However, on the other hand, more caution was also



given when analysing data, so I could be a researcher who interpreted participants' perspectives rather than inject my thoughts or experiences in the analysis process. In other words, whilst my personal experience would prove helpful in understanding the interviewees, I was mindful of the need to avoid contaminating the data with my personal experiences. Next, trustworthiness of this study will be discussed.

#### **3.7.4 Trustworthiness**

Since the purpose of this study is to understand students' information search from their perspectives, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. Hence, for checking the accuracy of the description, after the interview transcripts were drafted, I sent electronic copies of the transcripts through emails for the approval of the interviewees. I received positive comments and none of them replied with objections concerning transcript content.

Also, at the completion of this study, I sent the findings to the interviewees to ask them to assess accuracy and/or provide corrections as well as further elaboration on the conclusions. This was to see whether my conclusions were recognisable from their perspectives, as conclusions that are grounded in data should be recognisable to participants. Although my analysis might not fit every aspect of participants' cases, the larger concepts should apply (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pg.161). However, it needs to be explained that not all the finding chapters were sent to interviewees as they might not read them when it is too long. Also, as this study has not been published yet, for protecting the copyright of the work, only the statements of conclusions were sent to interviewees and not all the quotes.

Furthermore, for checking the accuracy of inferred meanings, multiple listening of audio recording was done to ensure the accuracy of the translation of the interview transcripts. In addition, as my interpretation developed, I returned to the raw material, (both the transcript and recording), to check that any interpretation was rooted in the interviews themselves (Gaskell, 2000, pg.54). After the conclusions of this study were drawn, they were also validated by comparing both the audio recording and transcripts of interviews for consistency.



Moreover, various data collection methods, ranging from focus groups and interviews to observations, were used, and comparisons with the literature were done to triangulate the findings. Furthermore, time is a major factor in the acquisition of trustworthy data, such as the time spent at the research site and time spent interviewing. For this study, the total numbers of interviews were three focus groups and 34 interviews, resulting in an equivalent of approximately 37 hours spent on data collection. The total numbers of observations were three day and three meeting observations equal to about 30 hours spent in further data collection via observations. Hence, the total time spent in collecting primary data study was nearly three days (approximately 67 hours).

As a researcher in a qualitative study, I enhance transferability by describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to this study, so anyone who wishes to transfer the results to a different context can make the judgment of how sensible the transfer is (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pg.298). Briefly, the research assumptions of this study see Taiwanese students as international students who differ from Western students in their HE information search. This difference is predominantly attributed to cultural differences. My assumptions were also based on the differences between home-based and international students despite being from the same cultural setting, Taiwan. I thought that students' familiarity of the education system and the level of internal search might be different, which could affect their external search. Hence, the two groups of Taiwanese students, the TW and the UK group, are used to compare and contrast the differences in terms of their HE information search.

In this study, the participants of the TW group were younger and had just finished their undergraduate degrees, while the participants of the UK group were older and had full-time work experience in Taiwan prior to embarking on their study abroad in the UK for their Master's degrees. To provide more information on the research context of this study, I made use of vignettes (Appendix 15) to provide background information of interviewees and to judge whether my findings are applicable to other research settings. Furthermore, two interview transcripts were given as examples in appendices for increasing the transparency of data analysis. Appendix 16 was retrieved from MAXqda file of the TW group while Appendix 17 was retrieved from



MAXqda file of the UK group. Also, one code “league tables” was retrieved from MAXqda file to show how the data was coded (see Appendix 18).

When the transcripts were imported into Maxqda for data analysis, each paragraph was given a line number. Therefore, when presenting quotes from students, I provided the new name of the participant and the line number to present where the quote was taken (e.g. MA, 63-65). By giving evidence extensively in the findings to indicate where students’ quotes are from, increases the transparency in the data analysis from concept-building to conclusion-verification.

Moreover, to ensure this study was peer reviewed, one of my colleagues Jung Wu, who holds a PhD based on qualitative research, was asked to check the use of my codes and my interpretations of interview quotes (Robson, 1993). In the check-coding, Jung Wu did coding on one transcript to compare the differences and/or similarities between our respective analyses (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pg.64). As the initial template was checked first by Jung Wu, and was also used in her coding, when the initial template formed the basic foundation for both of our coding, the similarities of our codes were high. I also asked her to examine whether my process of inquiry was understandable, well documented, and provided adequate mechanisms protecting against bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). She reviewed the audit trail, including recorded materials, interview transcripts, interview guides, interviewees’ personal files, codes and hypotheses lists used while analysing the data, and notes about research procedures. By doing this, dependability and conformability of this study were assured.

In summary, this study presented Taiwanese participants’ experiences in the HE information search via focus groups, interviews and observations. Furthermore, by comparing the primary research findings to previous Western literature, more insights could be gained in understanding Taiwanese students’ HE information search. As the focus of this study is to understand the subjective world of students’ information search and to explore students’ individual HE decision-making behaviour, I do not attempt to generalise the findings but to seek to render complex and varied accounts of the insights related to Taiwanese students’ information search and its impact on the HE decision-making process (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992).



### **3.8 Chapter summary**

This chapter explained my ontological and epistemological positions, focusing on the interpretive paradigm. I sought to explain my research design, including an account of my data collection procedures and how the methods were used to address my research objectives. Sampling on how participants were selected for focus groups, interviews, and observations was also explained. The chapter also provided an account of the detailed issues on how focus groups, interviews, and observations were conducted. In addition, the analysis process of data was explained, namely Template Analysis and related considerations of trustworthiness. Having outlined the philosophical underpinnings and related data collection process and analysis procedures, the following chapter presents the findings of this study obtained by the methods and analyses techniques discussed above.



## Chapter 4 Internal search

### 4.0 Chapter overview

As this study has two student groups, in presenting the findings I distinguish between those studying their Master's in Taiwan (the TW group) and those studying in the United Kingdom (the UK group). The demographics of the TW and UK groups are in Appendices 19-21 and Appendices 22-24 respectively. Also, as two focus groups were conducted to identify the focus of the research, the demographics of participants from two focus groups are also presented in Appendices 25 and 26. Data from focus groups, interviews and observations were all presented in the findings chapter to describe the phenomena of Taiwanese students' information search. Furthermore, some words were added to the quotes from interviewees with blanket symbols [] to make the context of conversations clearer to readers.

This chapter answers the first research objective which is to investigate the formation and the content of Taiwanese students' internal information search. Central to this are several considerations, namely how the Taiwanese participants stored the internal information in their memory, and also the key sources accessed. Moreover, what was known as internal information by the Taiwanese participants? Figure 4.1 below illustrates the key concepts found from the TW group, and the numbering of each box refers to the section numbers in the finding chapters. For example, Box 4.1.1 is addressed in section 4.1.1.

**Figure 4.1 Internal search of the TW group**

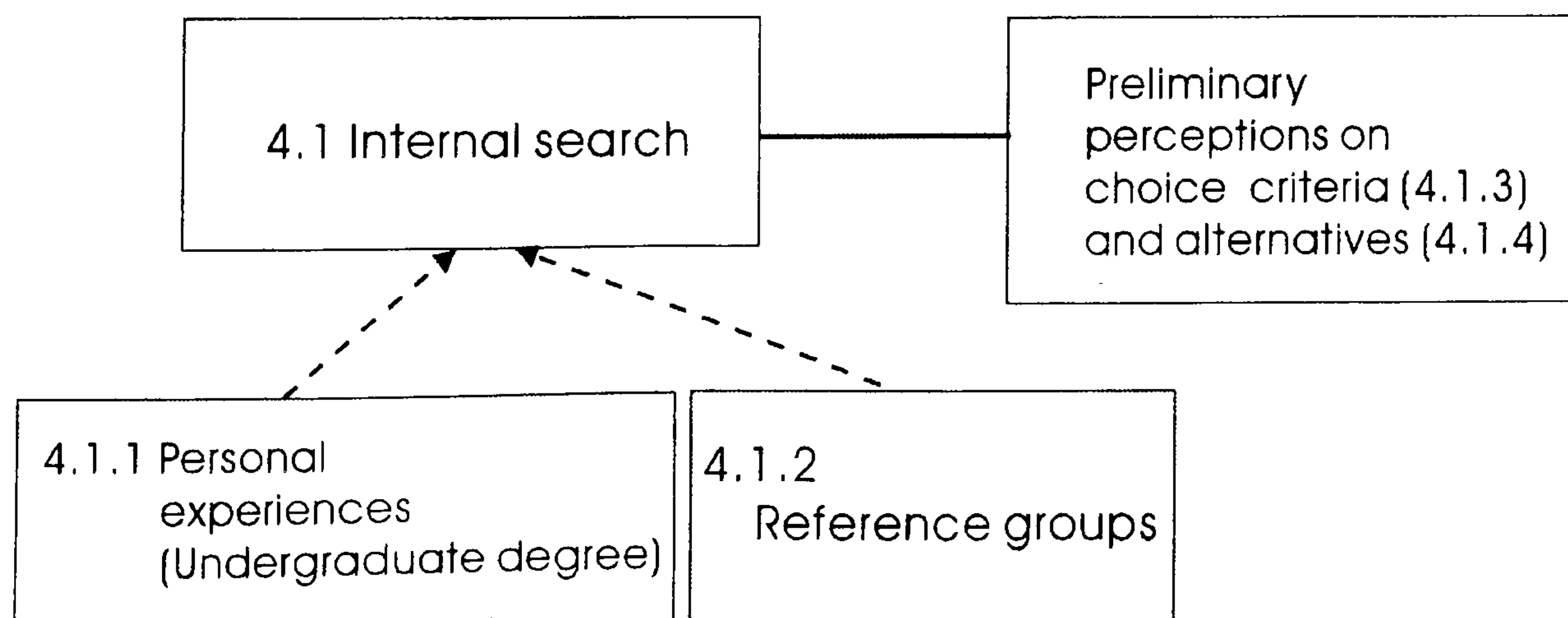




Figure 4.1 demonstrates the internal search of the TW group was formed by respondents' personal experiences in making decisions for undergraduate degrees (section 4.1.1) and by the information received from reference groups (section 4.1.2) before actively searching for external information. The preliminary perceptions (also termed 'internal information') of the TW group included clear choice criteria (section 4.1.3) and several alternatives for Master's choices (section 4.1.4). The findings from the TW group will be presented next, followed by the findings of the UK group.

## **4.1 The TW group**

This study found the TW group had rich personal experiences from choosing undergraduate courses in Taiwan, and they had many reference groups contributing to their internal information. In addition, the TW group had clear choice criteria for university evaluations, and they had several university alternatives in mind.

### **4.1.1 Rich personal experiences**

The information sources used by the TW group on forming internal information were mainly from personal experiences in making HE choices at undergraduate level, as all respondents of the TW group did their undergraduate degrees in Taiwan. The TW group needs to pass a university entrance exam to study undergraduate courses, and when they were deciding which university or course to select, the required grades of all courses were accessed by students. Therefore, when respondents were choosing where to apply for Master's study four years later, the memories on the requirements of each university at undergraduate level contributed to the internal information of respondents. For instance, one respondent, CI, who studied finance for both his undergraduate degree and Master's degree, said he made Master's choices based on "personal memories from applying to universities for the undergraduate degree" (CI, 80-83).

Participants could not remember exactly all the information they came across four years ago, but the majority of them still had rough memories on the required grades of some universities, which were used to indicate the academic performances of universities at postgraduate level. Another participant said, "...when I was choosing undergraduate degrees, I learnt which universities had the best programmes for specific degrees" (BO, 42). Moreover, the use of memories from making



undergraduate choices were especially strong when participants had similar or the same majors for undergraduate and Master's study. For example, one participant confirmed,

*I didn't use much [external] information really [for the Master's study], because I think for Taiwanese, we have had an unshakable perception on rankings to know which university is better...I had this perception when I was selecting a university for my undergraduate degree... (HU, 36-38).*

#### **4.1.2 Many reference groups**

With the exception of personal experiences in making choices for the undergraduate degrees, the TW group had many chances to receive internal information during the four years of university study. In this case, the TW group was exposed to a range of personal opinions or comments on different universities from senior students, teachers and peers. A few participants had obtained internal information from senior students who entered the Master's courses earlier. For instance,

*I only knew it's quite tiring to do a Master's in Taiwan, but I didn't know it's SO tiring! [laughing]. I had a senior student friend from the same university [at undergraduate level]. She was one year older than me...The Management school of University A was famous for its exhausting courses, so I knew this from her... (HS, 15).*

Some respondents heard comments from teachers who taught them at undergraduate level about what other universities are like, and that information became part of respondents' preliminary perceptions. In addition, teachers at undergraduate level might even encourage respondents to study a Master's degree.

*... my university teachers greatly influenced me much...they told me in the class that the acceptance rate is about 100% in undergraduate courses, so when we go to work, the companies cannot distinguish who is competent and who is not. So if we can have Master's degrees, we will be more competitive at work (WI, 6-8).*

Moreover, some respondents were influenced by peers through either listening to their comments or visiting them when they were studying at other universities.



*I had many high school friends who studied at other national universities for their undergraduate degrees...When I was in university [at undergraduate level], I visited them and found that their universities are better than my university [sounds unhappy]. [I mean] The environment and modules they had [were better] (HS, 83).*

Although the TW group did not actively seek information, they were passively receiving comments from people around them, especially peers who studied at other universities, regarding the experience and quality of other universities or courses.

*When you passed the university entrance exam, you would know something [of the performance of universities]. Also in the four years of your undergraduate degree and when you were preparing for the Master's exam, you heard people's [peer group] comments. You heard people talking to each other about their universities. To compare those, you would have a view on universities... (YU, 30-32).*

The internal information attained by the TW group was either from personal experiences (when choosing courses at undergraduate level), or from the information they received from others (before they actively searched for external information regarding postgraduate study). However, other internal information sources participants used might be harder to identify, as participants themselves might not even recognise the influences from other sources. For instance, one respondent suggested his preliminary perceptions were shaped by the predominant values of Taiwanese society,

*[The building of perceptions on universities] started much earlier when I was younger, because all the society, the values of the society, affected those impressions on universities... (HU, 49-51).*

The above statement should not be surprising, because previous studies based on the status-attainment models also suggest that the wider social environment around students influence their HE decision-making (e.g. Hossler *et al.*, 1999). This maybe comprised of family factors, schools attended, peer groups, and even the wider educational values from the society. However, those less obvious influences were harder for participants to clearly identify in the interviews, but it should be accepted



that although the direct influences that contribute to participants' internal information were mainly from past personal experiences in making undergraduate choices and reference groups, other less obvious influences might include other information sources from the wider social environment in Taiwan.

#### **4.1.3 Clear choice criteria known**

As the internal information of the TW group was rich, many participants had clear choice criteria from which to evaluate alternative Master's courses, especially about "going to better universities" at Master's level than current universities at undergraduate level.

##### **Going to "better" universities**

Many respondents of the TW group expressed the wish to study at somewhere more superior for their Master's degree compared to the universities in which they studied during their undergraduate programme. For instance, the majority of participants from public universities did not want to study at private universities because the former are generally seen as being better educational establishments than the latter. Similarly, participants from private universities did not want to study at polytechnics, as the former are perceived to be better places to study than the latter.

*Polytechnic universities are generally seen as worse than normal [non-polytechnic, e.g. public and private] universities. I only consider universities that are better than Chinese Culture University [where I had my undergraduate degree from]. You cannot study a higher degree at a less superior university. (MI, 19-20).*

This perception of "going to a better university for a Master's degree" affected the Master's choices of the TW group very much, and only those universities that were seen as "better" than participants' previous universities of undergraduate degrees were preferred. The reason for such a criterion could be explained by one participant, who expressed the possibility that going to a less superior university might indicate that the student did not study hard at undergraduate level.

*I had talked with friends and concluded that we needed to study Master's somewhere better than Chungyuan University, our current university. If not, it's better we don't study Master's degrees. If you study somewhere worse than*



*Chunyuan University, doesn't this show you didn't study hard in your undergraduate degree? That's my feeling. I think it means your life is going down rather than going up (BO, 56-57).*

Interestingly, if respondents could not get into “better universities” for their Master’s degrees, some of them would not compromise to enter a less superior university, and this tendency was more prominent amongst participants from public universities that were generally seen as the best range of universities in Taiwan. For example,

*I'm very proud of being a student of Tsinghua University [for my undergraduate degree]. I feel it's a very good university, so no matter what, I wouldn't want to go to other universities that are much inferior to that [Tsinghua University]. So I only applied to... more famous universities. I think if I couldn't be accepted by any of them, I would go for military service (JA, 35-36).*

For students who wanted to study Master’s degrees, they might desire to achieve more on either a personal or professional basis in the future. This feeling on “going up in the stream rather than going down” reduces the possibility to go somewhere inferior for Master’s studies. However, if this is what Taiwanese students normally believe, how about those students who are already studying at “the best” universities in Taiwan? Where should they go for their Master’s degrees? One respondent who had many friends studying at Taiwan University, (which is generally seen as the best university in Taiwan), observed and commented on what happened to graduates of Taiwan University.

*... I have many high school classmates who studied at Taiwan University for their undergraduate degrees, and when they finish that, they didn't prepare to take the Master's' entrance exams in Taiwan, and went straight to prepare studying abroad...they are in the top Taiwanese university already, there's nowhere they can go now if they stay in Taiwan, so they would need to go abroad. All my friends chose to go to the US. I think this is also to do with how Taiwanese feel about the US culturally. I mean the US is the best choice to study aboard (HU, 86).*

Another noted phenomenon was that respondents from private universities were more determined to get onto Master’s courses, because several of them did repeat their



Master's entrance exam after their first initial rejection. By contrast, respondents from public universities are less determined to study a Master's degree, as some respondents from public universities said if they were not accepted in the first year, they would give up preparing the exam for the second year. This phenomenon might exist because graduates from private universities might have felt their competitive advantages are not as strong as those from public universities. Therefore, graduates from private universities might feel by having Master's degrees, this can help them more in securing desired career opportunities. As one respondent from a public university stated,

*I feel if I have an undergraduate degree from a national university, it is very similar to having a Master's degree from a private university. If that [studying a Master's degree at a private university] would not help me much in my career, why should I spend two more years to do a Master's? (HS, 41).*

When an undergraduate degree from a national university is seen as similar to a Master's degree from a private university, students from public universities might therefore be less motivated in entering Master's courses at less prestigious institutions. Moreover, this study found the TW group not only wanted to go to better universities, but several of them also had alternative universities in mind.

#### **4.1.4 Several known alternatives**

Many respondents of the TW group knew several alternative universities from their internal search, and had formed a mental list of preferred university alternatives in rank order.

#### **Impressions on ranking maps**

The internal rank list stored in participants' memory affected many of their Master's choices on where to apply. For example, one participant said,

*Everyone has a list [of universities] in their minds based on what they heard from others during their four years of undergraduate study... we have all had our own impressions on universities already... (YI, 85-86).*

This mind map on ranking of universities differs slightly according to each individual based on what internal information sources participants had come across, but their



perceptions on universities certainly affected their Master's choices regarding potential universities for application. This can be especially true when respondents study the same major both for their undergraduate and Master's degrees, because the alternative universities can be very similar in that case.

For the TW group, the majority of respondents studied related subjects for the undergraduate and Master's degrees, because it was far harder for students to be accepted by the Master's courses through entrance exams if they had not studied related subjects as undergraduates. For respondents who did similar majors at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, they knew more about which university offered better programmes. However, for a few participants whose study areas for Master's degrees differed from undergraduate degrees, these participants knew less about the potential alternatives. For those participants who selected similar majors for their Master's studies, although they might still need further information in making Master's choices, (such as the reputation of courses in their specialised majors), they already had some impressions on reputations of universities. For instance, one participant said,

*I considered both the overall reputation [of the university] and the reputation of that subject. I had impressions on the overall reputation as a university, but I still needed to talk with classmates on how good certain accounting and finance courses were (JA, 74).*

As the TW group had much information internally, some preferred or disliked universities were also known.

### **Preferred or disliked universities known**

As most respondents of the TW group know much about certain universities as internal information, several respondents could evaluate them even without external information. Moreover, respondents had preferred or disliked universities already in mind. For example, one respondent said she applied to one university because she had good impressions of it,

*I like Fujen University, because my sister studied there. Also Jolin, the singer, studied there. My sister said students from Fujen University are very fashionable, so I think it's good to watch them in the campus [laughing]. I*



*consider many things that are not just about studying, but more about living really. I think the life of a Master's degree is also important, not only the studying (WI, 76).*

Another respondent decided not to apply to one particular university for Master's study, because although it was generally seen as prestigious by the general public, she did not like that university personally.

*When I was choosing the university for my undergraduate degree, everyone else said Chengchi University is very good, but I just don't like it. I don't like its [university] name. Also, it is in a very remote location. I don't know why when the location is so bad, the ranking is good. I didn't choose it for my undergraduate degree either (HS, 49-50).*

When respondents of the TW group have had a clear mind map on the ranking of universities, they evaluated the performance of the institutions spontaneously when hearing the name of the universities. As one respondent said “reputations were also heard from others and from my feelings on universities that were built up [in my mind] for so many, many years” (YU, 57). With the ranking map of universities in mind, when hearing the name of one university, many respondents of the TW group could easily pinpoint at which range that university was academically in their minds, and this has made the decision of consideration set relatively easy for the TW group. For instance, one participant talked about his stereotype of public universities as being certainly better than private universities.

*When studying a Master's degree, it's not only about learning more, but also about your future career. So you also need to consider how companies see your university. Although they might say even though you are graduated from a private university, “we would still hire you”, I think they are lying [suspicious tone]. I think the name of universities is very important (JA, 37-40).*

When the above respondent has preliminary perceptions on the strong distinction between private and public universities, he easily opted only for those “good public universities”.



## **Deferred evaluations to enrolment choice**

Rich internal information also affected respondents on the timing of evaluating universities. In this case, the entrance of Master's studies in Taiwan was by passing exam, where several respondents deferred the university evaluation to the enrolment stage rather than making decisions by using external information sources prior to taking their entrance examinations. In other words, participants used more external information sources to compare universities *after* they had received offers from some courses.

This was especially the case for some respondents of the TW group from private universities, who showed less confidence in their own academic performances, so when deciding consideration sets, they applied mainly to private universities and decided to apply to "as many universities as possible" to maximise their chances of being accepted.

As several participants felt the best timing to evaluate the performances of universities was after they have received offers from some Master's courses, they deferred the evaluation process of universities to the point of making enrolment choices. Hence, those participants used less choice criteria in forming their consideration sets, because they preferred to evaluate only those universities that provided placement offers. This phenomenon might have occurred because of the exam-based Master's entrance system in Taiwan, so students might feel that they are chosen by universities and less able to just freely choose between their preferred universities.

*For my Master's choices, I tried to apply to as many universities as possible. If two universities were running exams on the same date, I chose the better one to apply. The logic of making [application] choices was to choose public over private universities, and if they are from a similar range in my mind, I chose the one that for me appeared more favourable (BO, 51-53).*

The common attitude for those respondents was to be accepted by some universities first, and then to evaluate those offers more seriously by using more external information sources.

*I only studied and prepared for the Master's entrance exam. I didn't go ask people about which graduate schools to apply... I should have done more*



*research before making [application] choices, but I didn't. I only chose some better universities and some back-up ones, and thought if I am accepted by any, I would then do more research on which one to enrol with (WI, 33-34).*

*I should be accepted by universities first and then think about other things. My time for the exam preparation was very tight already, so I didn't search much information on where to apply. I used all the available time to study, because I had only six months to prepare for the exam (CE, 30).*

Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) suggest that one of the situational factors that affect information search is consumers' time availability, and this might explain the above quotes, since in making Master's choices, when the exam preparation was seen as a priority, and when the time pressure was high, less external search was undertaken by participants.

In summary, the internal information of the TW group was mainly from their personal experiences in choosing courses at undergraduate level. In addition, during the four years of undergraduate studies, reference groups round the TW group also contributed to their internal information by simply expressing their views on the performances and values of particular universities. Although the TW group did not seek information from reference groups before the stage of need recognition regarding whether to study a Master's degree, their internal information was still naturally built up when they interacted with those people around them, including senior students, teachers and peers, during their undergraduate courses.

Moreover, some less visible information sources that contributed to respondents' internal information could also include Taiwanese societal values, as respondents grew up in that environment and might naturally accept some collective perceptions toward Taiwanese universities. As one respondent said, "Taiwan University as the best [university] is the deep rooted stereotype. [It is] hard to change this view" (JA, 37). The perceptions on universities might differ from person to person, but some principle concepts were still similar to many respondents. For instance, this study found that most respondents of the TW group believe "public universities that have longer histories are better than private universities", whilst "private universities are



better than polytechnic universities”. These notions therefore affected their alternative evaluations of Taiwanese universities. Having presented the internal search of the TW group, attention now shifts to consider the UK group.

## 4.2 The UK group

Unlike the TW group, the UK group had comparatively limited internal information as international students, and little was known on the UK as a whole and more specifically, on British Master’s courses. Figure 4.2 below was drawn to show the key concepts found from the UK group.

**Figure 4.2 Internal search of the UK group**

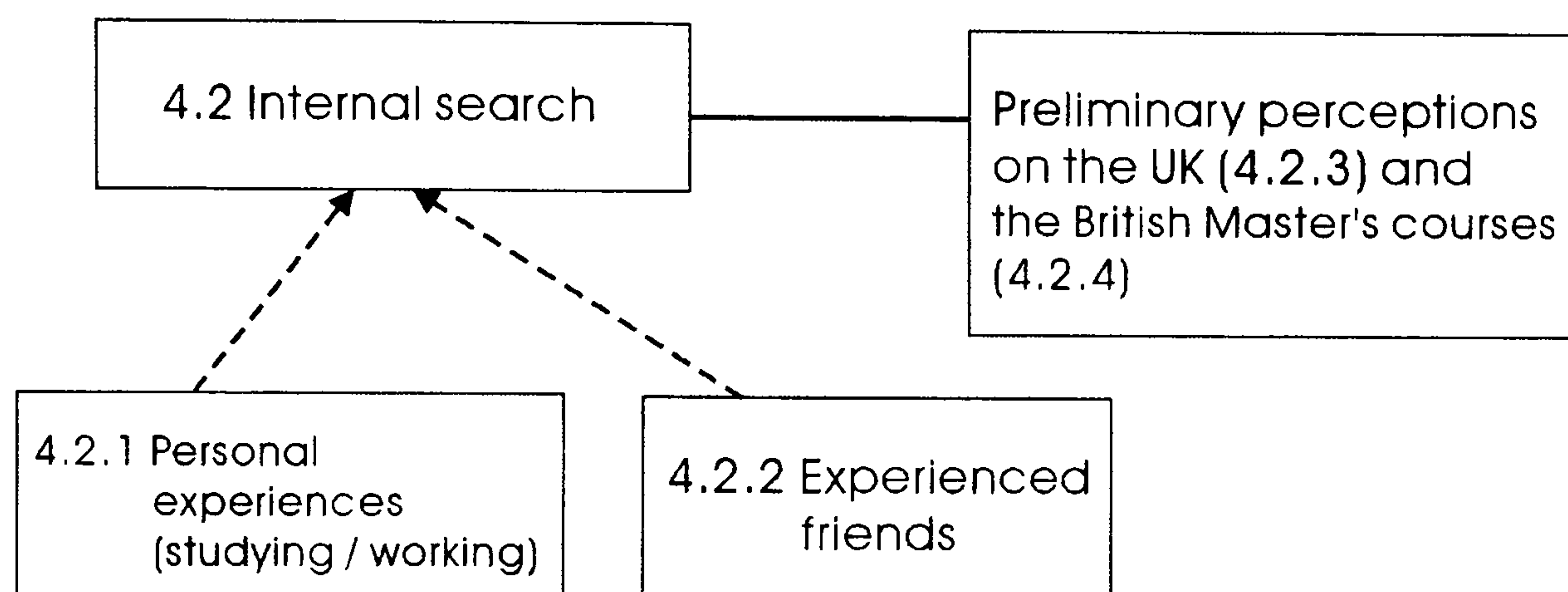


Figure 4.2 illustrates that the internal search of the UK group was formed by respondents’ personal experiences of working and studying (section 4.2.1) and by experienced friends who had studied in the UK (section 4.2.2) before actively searching for external information. The preliminary perceptions (or internal information) of the UK group included perceptions on the UK as a country (section 4.2.3) and on the British Master’s courses (section 4.2.4).

### 4.2.1 Limited personal experiences

With the exception of one respondent who studied her undergraduate degree in the USA, the rest of the respondents of the UK group did their undergraduate studies in Taiwan. As the UK group had no personal experiences making HE choices in the UK, they also had limited internal information compared to the TW group. Only very few respondents of the UK group had internal information regarding studying in the UK, and the main information sources they had were from their limited personal



experiences when working and/or studying. For example, one respondent had work experiences in the tourism industry as a tour guide after graduating from university, so he had more chances than other respondents in building up his knowledge of different countries, including the UK. Also, another respondent was influenced by her previous academic background which made her more attracted to the British culture. Her personal experiences also influenced her greatly, because the UK was actually the only country she considered as a possible study destination, and this was not seen from other respondents' cases.

*I studied English literature at university, so I'm more attracted by the British culture. I feel the UK is a country that I can relate to, especially in terms of its arts and literature. In London, there are lots of art activities, business activities, and it is a very multi-cultural environment as a result of the diversity of many immigrants (MA, 6).*

Moreover, another respondent (who was the only one who had studied English language courses in the UK), confirmed that her travelling experiences made her only want to choose universities in England.

*I didn't want to choose Scotland [for my Master's study], so universities in England I would all consider, not limiting the location [of university] much. I travelled to Scotland and felt they don't have summer time [there]. Also the [Scottish] accent was quite heavy for me. When I had stayed in the UK for six months I visited Scotland, but when talking to Scottish people, I still couldn't understand them. I was SO upset. It's the accent [that put me off] (LU, 36).*

The opportunity for respondents to build their personal experiences regarding the UK was either during or after their undergraduate studies. Hence, the formation of respondents' internal information could only be traced back a few years earlier before they decided to study in the UK. Moreover, apart from the limited personal experiences from working or studying in the past, the UK group had only a few experienced friends who contributed to their internal information. It is this area that is discussed in the next section.



#### 4.2.2 Input from a few experienced friends

A few respondents of the UK group had friends or work colleagues, who had studied or lived in the UK. These friends contributed to their internal information.

*When I was little, I had thought about studying abroad, but I hadn't really started to prepare for this seriously. While I was working, I found that I had a friend who was preparing to go to the UK to study English in a language school, so I asked him things like how to apply, the process, and the cost (MA, 4).*

Interestingly, the people respondents talked to might not only provide them information gained from their personal experiences, but they could also build the standard for the respondents to identify how easy or difficult it could be to study a Master's degree overseas. Two respondents were indirectly encouraged by their friends to study a Master's degree overseas,

*I knew nothing about it [studying a Master's degree in the UK]. Only I had a friend who went to study a Master's in the UK, and his English was very bad, so I thought if I he could do that, I could also [laughing] (BI, 10).*

Compared to the TW group, the UK group had very limited reference contacts with whom to speak regarding studying in the UK, and the timing for respondents to hear from experienced friends was when they had started working full-time after undergraduate studies. Hence, it can be said the main timing for the UK group to build internal information regarding studying in the UK was normally after their undergraduate studies. This compares slightly later than the TW group, who built internal information mainly before and during undergraduate studies. The TW group as home-based students might therefore have more chances to form internal information and from earlier stages of their lives than the UK group as international students. This study found only a few respondents of the UK group could provide details on their internal information regarding studying in the UK, and this could be because “studying in the UK” was neither part of their personal experience nor the common experiences people round them have. What the UK group knew as internal information on the UK as a country will be discussed next.



### 4.2.3 Limited knowledge of the UK

Apart from one respondent, LU, who had come to the UK to study English courses, no other respondents had been to the UK prior to the commencement of their Master's studies. Hence, during the interviews, the majority of participants of the UK group gave very brief and general comments on what they knew as internal information on studying in the UK. The information the UK group gave was far less detailed than the TW group, and this is understandable because the internal information the UK group had on studying Master's in the UK were formed when they were still in Taiwan. Hence, less internal information might be available for the UK group before they started actively searching for external information.

The limited internal information from the UK group on the UK as a country included their perceptions of British people, the living situation in the UK, national history, rich British culture, British accent, and the academic reputations of UK universities. However, respondents could only give very brief descriptions when outlining their preliminary perceptions. For instance, one respondent said, "*London is an old European city*" (LE, 4), while another said "*[the UK is] an old country with culture and academic reputation*" (TO, 14).

Moreover, British people were described by one participant as "*gentleman*", while another participant felt British people were "*more inflexible than American people*". Furthermore, one respondent who used to work with people from different nationalities said "*I feel British people are very proud. I went to continental Europe for several business trips, but had no chance to come to the UK*" (JU, 10). JU had never been to the UK before coming to the UK for her Master's study. It could be argued that without being in the UK, her comments on the "*proud*" British people could be prejudiced. However, this also showed that most respondents of the UK group formed their perceptions subjectively while they were still in Taiwan.

Regarding the perceptions of the living situation in the UK, the high living cost in the UK was known by a few respondents as internal information. General and descriptive comments were again provided, such as "*the UK weather is grey, the living cost is high*". Furthermore, although internal information was generally received from either



past personal experiences or some experienced friends, it might come from other types of information sources, such as online sources.

*[I knew] everything is very expensive here [in the UK]. I have a habit to browse for information in BBS, so I knew this. Have you heard of PTT, the biggest BBS in Taiwan? They have a board on studying in the UK. I hadn't thought about studying in the UK then [when reading that message online] (JO, 19).*

Very few respondents talked about the academic reputations of the UK as internal information. However, it is interesting to see that one respondent said his country perceptions were “the academic reputation of the USA is the best. The UK comes second, followed by Australia and Canada”. He explained further how this impression was formed and said,

*It is related to how strong and how weak the country is I think. Like the economic power and the number of famous universities [they have]. Like there are more famous universities in the USA. It's the value system I have from Taiwanese society (LE, 6).*

Similar to the TW group, the quote from the above respondent, might have suggested the UK group as international students in the UK could also have broader influences from Taiwanese society on their internal information. This might also explain why several respondents of the UK group had certain level of internal information, but had no ability to explain the source of these preliminary perceptions.

#### **4.2.4 Limited understanding of British Master's courses**

The UK group also had internal information on British Master's courses, and the “one-year” Master's course in the UK was very often mentioned by the UK group as internal information, while it was often directly associated by respondents with the shorter time it required from them and the intensive design of courses.

*I knew it takes 1 year to do the Master's degree with many assignments and less holidays. [This is] very intensive. One of my best friends from university had come to study in the UK one year earlier than me, so she passed those messages on to me because she had done her applications [in the UK] (AM, 6).*



Shorter completion time for the Master's degree in the UK was related by a few respondents directly to the lower costs it might require from them, and this view was also expressed by one educational agent.

*[The] British Council did a good job [recruiting Taiwanese students] here [in Taiwan]. They make this brand [British HE] known to [Taiwanese] people. Secondly, the time is short [to study in the UK]. Thirdly, students misunderstand that studying in the UK is expensive. To be honest, to study in the US for two years requires two million NTD [New Taiwanese Dollars], but to study in the UK for one year, this only requires one to 1.2 million NTD (Agency S, T, 57).*

The majority of respondents felt very positive about the shorter time offered by British Master's courses, but one respondent mentioned that she doubted the possibility of having a one year Master's courses when she first heard about this.

*I knew it takes only one year to do a Master's in the UK [before searching any information]. I heard it from a junior student from college about the one year course in the UK, because she was coming to the UK to study. I had a doubt about this, because in Taiwan and in the US, it takes one and half years or two years to do a Master's degree (JU, 8).*

Although one-year Master's courses in the UK were attractive to many participants of the UK group, there might also be some potential problems. In this case, one year Master's programmes might attract students who care more about doing the degrees quicker and care less about other considerations. When observing interactions at one agency, I found that one student was especially motivated about getting a Master's degree as quickly and easily as possible.

Student J said to Counselor D that she was considering studying in either the UK or in Australia...Student J said...she heard from a friend that “*there's a university in the US that doesn't ask for English scores, and they [students] can even choose to have the class run in Chinese rather than English. So you can go quicker and come back [to Taiwan] quicker.*” Counsellor D was very surprised to hear that, and he asked Student J whether the Taiwanese government would approve of degrees from this university. D and J went on to discuss preparing reference letters [for the application to British universities], and J said that



“Australia doesn't ask for reference letters” (Agency G student observation, 38 – 41).

The above data gained from my observations might have shown that as there is strong competition within international HE market, students might seek out the most beneficial products (courses). To some students, the most “beneficial courses” might even be the one that requires the least from them. Hence, it could be questioned whether the “one year” British Master’s courses always help recruiting the right students. Having discussed the internal information of the UK group, the similarities and differences between the TW and the UK groups will be next be compared as a means to partially addressing one part of the fifth research objective.

### **4.3 Internal search of the two groups**

This study found that similar information sources were used by both groups to form internal information. However, home-based and international students have comparatively different levels of internal information.

#### **4.3.1 Similar information sources used**

Comparing the findings of both groups, one similarity was that personal experiences and reference groups were both the main information sources to form respondents’ internal information. One possible explanation on why past personal experiences contributed more to respondents’ internal information than other sources can be because personal experiences are normally remembered better and are most trusted by individuals. This argument finds support in the literature (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Engel *et al.*, 1995) where internal information was often from previous personal experiences.

Secondly, regarding why reference groups contributed much to Taiwanese respondents’ internal search, one possible explanation can be that when potential students were not actively searching for information, reference groups could still reach students inadvertently, and students could naturally listen to those people’s comments, experiences, or suggestions on making HE choices. Such a finding is similar to what Engel *et al.*, (1995) suggest where the internal information is often collected via word-of-mouth recommendations. Moreover, similar are more recently



confirmed in the findings of Prugsamatz and Pentecost (2006), who report that the most influential information sources on building Chinese international students' expectations toward overseas universities included past experiences and word-of-mouth. Although Prugsamatz and Pentecost's (2006) study focused on students' external as opposed to their internal search, it proves certain information sources were more influential to students than others, regardless of whether their search was external or internal.

One difference between these two afore mentioned studies, was that no respondent from that study (ibid.) referred to "advertising" as a source of internal information. One possibility that past marketing campaigns were not stored in Taiwanese respondents' memory could be that when students have not thought about doing Master's degrees, they might pay less attention to marketing stimuli sources from universities. Another explanation could also be Taiwanese respondents did not prefer marketing stimuli sources, and this issue will be discussed later in Chapter 6, as it concerns respondents' perceptions on information quality from different information sources.

#### **4.3.2 Different levels of internal information**

Although both the TW and the UK group used personal experiences and reference groups as information sources in forming internal information, the level of their internal information was different. As mentioned earlier, the TW group had personal experiences from selecting universities at undergraduate level, and their peers and teachers contributed to internal information as well. By contrast however, the UK group had no direct personal experiences in making HE choices in the UK and only a few of them had personal experiences or experienced friends in forming internal information. Hence, the UK group had limited and lower levels of internal information compared to the TW group.

I found that in the interviews, when the TW group was asked about what they knew about studying Master's degrees in Taiwan before actively searching for any external information, some respondents were confused by the interview question and sought further clarification. For example, in one respondent's case,



Interviewer: what did you know about studying a Master's [degree] before you started to search for any information?

JA: *I don't quite understand your question. What aspects of understanding are you asking about? I only heard from my teachers [at universities] that if we study Master's, it is really for us to learn something. First degrees are more for building the foundation [of knowledge]* (JA, 18).

A possible explanation on why the interview question on internal information caused confusion for the TW group could be because there was too much internal information known by them as home-based students regarding studying Master's degrees in Taiwan. Hence, they had problems answering the question specifically in the interview, and needed more clarification on what I wanted to know from them. On the other hand, the same interview question did not cause any confusion at all to the UK group, and a possible explanation could be because this group as international students had very little internal information regarding the UK. Compared to the TW group, they were unclear about what choice criteria to use, and had nearly no university alternatives known initially prior to searching for external information.

Although the interview question on internal information was not directly answered by some respondents of the TW group as a result of their confusion, they covered that later when they explained to me how they eliminated potential alternative universities from application decisions. Here I found that the TW group mainly used internal rather than external information to confirm their consideration sets.

#### **4.4 Chapter summary**

The internal search of the TW and the UK group was discussed and compared to suggest the formation and the content of participants' internal information. Although both the TW and the UK group used personal experiences and reference groups as information sources, the level of their internal information was different. While the TW group had personal experiences from selecting universities at undergraduate level, and their peers and teachers contributed to internal information, the UK group had no direct personal experiences in making HE choices in the UK. In addition, only a few of those in the UK group had either personal experiences or experienced friends contributing to their internal information. Hence, the UK group had more limited



internal information compared to the TW group. The following chapter will discuss respondents' use of external information sources.

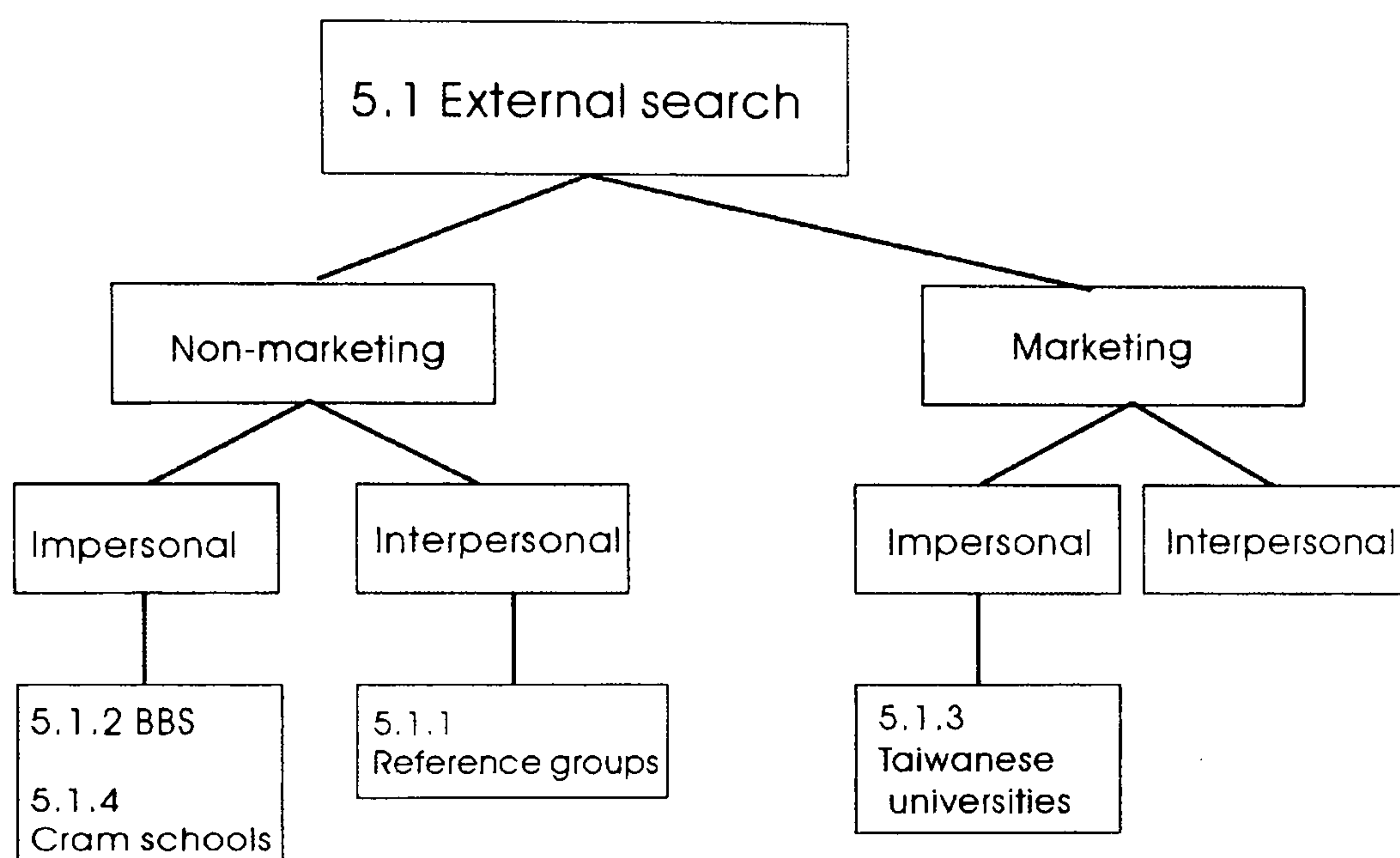


## Chapter 5 External search

### 5.0 Chapter overview

This chapter covers findings for Objective 2 in examining how external information sources are used by Taiwanese participants to find and evaluate courses and/or institutions. Figure 5.1 below illustrates the external information sources used by the TW group.

**Figure 5.1 External search of the TW group**



Divided by the types of information sources, Figure 5.1 indicates the information sources include reference groups (section 5.1.1), BBS sites (section 5.1.2), websites or application packs from Taiwanese universities (section 5.1.3) and attended cram schools (section 5.1.4). How the external information sources were used will next be discussed.

### 5.1 The TW group

Since the TW group knew clear choice criteria and several alternatives as internal information, the level of involvement of their external search was lower compared to the UK group.

#### 5.1.1 Reference groups for evaluating courses

Apart from for internal information, the TW group also used reference groups as sources for external information. This group was comprised of respondents' teachers,



friends who were current Master's students, and peers who were preparing for their Master's entrance exams. Most respondents of the TW group knew some choice criteria as internal information that could be used when selecting Master's programmes, such as university rankings. However, a few respondents learnt more criteria that they could use to evaluate universities from teachers. Teachers normally affected respondents' evaluation of universities through teaching them in class by offering comments on different universities. Those teachers included not only those from undergraduate studies, but also teachers at cram schools that participants attended for their Master's entrance exam preparations. As one respondent said, "*[Information was] from teachers at university and from teachers at cram school. Otherwise many universities I haven't been into myself, how can I know what they are like? [laughing]*" (WI, 78).

Interestingly, the attendance of cram schools is an unexpected theme from this study, as all respondents of the TW group went to cram schools for intensive Master's entrance examination preparation courses. Hence, this phenomenon will be discussed further in Section 8.2, and this section will focus on the influences teachers had on respondents' Master's choices. For instance, one respondent suggested that his teachers encouraged him to focus more on the subject ranking than overall ranking of the university, when evaluating courses.

*I was affected by teachers at the cram school and from University A [where I had studied my undergraduate degree]. The influences from them were mainly were on ranking, where it is very different when you see it by subject or by the university as a whole. After listening to them [teachers], I would tend to choose subject ranking and not only the overall ranking. However, Taiwan University is the only exception, because it's hard to change people's stereotype [Taiwan University as the best university] (HU, 59-61).*

Moreover, some respondents had friends who were senior students who had studied Master's courses, and their comments affected respondents' evaluations. For example, one respondent learnt from his friend, who was a current Master's student, to pay attention to how research supervisors treat their students, and this became his choice criteria when selecting universities.



*I heard from a friend that one Master's student had done very much for his research supervisor in the research and deserved to get his Master's, but he was not given the Master's degree for a long time. After hearing that, I would like to ask what current students say about their research supervisors. [Because] I don't want to get myself into that kind of problem (BO, 70-72).*

I found that current students of Master's courses were counselled by some respondents for their comments on the courses they attended, and when current students' comments were negative, respondents could even lose interest in applying to that university. One participant said,

*I didn't apply to Fujen University, because I heard about their pass and failure rates [on the Master's course]. I heard this from my friends who were doing their Master's in [their] business schools, so I decided not to apply Fujen University (JI, 22).*

Furthermore, negative comments from current students not only affected some respondents' willingness to apply, but also affected their enrolment choices. Another respondent said,

*I heard lots of negative information from people, many people, either from the PTT [a BBS site] or current students, about Chengchi University. They said the relationship between professors there is terrible, and this affected students' studies as well. They said the professors of Information Management School have vicious competition between each other. Hence, although Chengchi University is good, it became the last choice for me within my application list. I would still apply to Chengchi University despite this [negative comment]; however, it would affect my willingness to study there if I were accepted (HU, 77-78).*

In Taiwan, the undergraduate courses are all four years in duration, and these are completed without a placement in industry. As the majority of the TW group started the preparation of Master's entrance exam in their third year of undergraduate studies, many of their undergraduate classmates were also preparing for the exam at the same time. Hence respondents exchanged personal opinions on the potential courses with



peers, which also affected how some interviewees evaluated the courses. For example, one participant stated,

*I considered both the overall [university] reputation and the reputation of that [specific] subject. I had impressions on the university overall [from previous experiences in selecting undergraduate studies], but I still needed to consult my classmates on how good certain finance and monetary courses were (JA, 74).*

Moreover, respondents' friends who had studied at other universities gave comments on the courses they attained, and interviewees consequently knew more about the various features between different courses.

*The information sources I used were mostly from asking senior students or classmates on the programme. [I asked about] the course, the facilities, and the resources of certain universities. The focus of the course was also a key point of comparison. Taiwan University I know provides more technical-focused courses. I had friends there. My teachers also said so (YU, 32).*

It was felt most respondents could not provide much detail on what exact advice they had gained from reference groups, and a possible explanation for that could be because respondents tended to receive small pieces of information from reference groups at different points in time. However, the influences from reference groups were strong on the TW group, as the respondents' reference groups were big, including teachers, senior students, friends and peers from undergraduate studies. All of them helped the TW group to be more capable in identifying the little differences between alternative courses.

### **5.1.2 BBS for current students' comments**

The same information sources might be used for different purposes. For instance, the BBS websites were used for different functions. The TW group, made most use of PTT, a widely used discussion board for postgraduate study in Taiwan, or the BBS within the website of attended cram schools. Some respondents used BBS for getting current students' comments regarding the Master's courses or general university characteristics. Respondents also used this site to discuss previous exam questions, or for application queries, while others cared less about information from BBS, but



wanted emotional support from peers who were also preparing for their Master's entrance exams.

*When you don't feel like studying, you can go to PTT to read messages on how other students got through this stage of [exam] preparation...I don't tend to get involved in discussing previous exam questions [in PTT]...I ask more questions regarding the process of exam preparation, like how other students obtained their exam identification cards from universities or just sharing advice (BO, 28-34).*

*...the information I had from PTT was about the characteristics of each university, and their teaching and learning related information. Also, living considerations, like the convenience of living and safety of particular areas etc. (WI, 55-58).*

However, this study found BBS did not influence students' consideration set much, because most respondents of the TW group knew several alternatives already. For instance, one respondent said,

*Online information, BBS site, like PTT [was often used by me]. [But] Their influence on me was very limited, because I knew where to apply in my mind. However, if I was accepted by more than one university, I would use information [from PTT] to assist me on where to enrol (HU, 72).*

This study found that BBS influenced students' enrolment choices more than consideration sets, and how BBS affected students' enrolment choices will be further discussed in section 7.1.2.

### **5.1.3 Taiwanese universities for teaching/learning information**

The information provided by Taiwanese universities included information from university websites and application packs sent to participants. Taiwanese university websites were mainly used by participants to gather information regarding teaching and learning, such as teachers' specialities, course content and application particulars. One respondent said university websites were used "...to see the previous exam questions and the numbers of applicants at that university" while another respondent confirmed using university websites to ascertain several different things,



*I looked at the teachers' specialties...the amount of teachers as well. University A was one of the universities that had the most teachers at Information Management field. The most important considerations for me were on the teachers and their reputation (YU, 39-41).*

University websites might not influence student evaluations as much as their internal information in their alternative evaluations. However, when respondents get more understanding on what is going on at the university under consideration for application, they had better impressions toward that university when seeing their website. This in turn influenced enrolment choices.

*Well, when I saw posters or online information about them [University B], I would then realise how they are teaching their students at the moment. For example, they use English to teach students. I would understand them [University B] more on how they teach students. But for other public universities, because they do not give such kind of information in their website, I don't understand how they teach their students (CE, 44-50).*

Furthermore, as cram schools are often attended by many prospective students, some Taiwanese universities arranged presentations at some cram schools to promote their Master's courses. A few respondents talked to current students from those courses in such a more formal setting. Respondents might be attracted by the Master's courses of some universities if the presentations from universities showed benefits of attending that course. One respondent was attracted by one university after the presentation, because they offer "*students exchange programmes with overseas universities, and...their graduates...all have very good jobs*" (JI, 83). However, the influences from those presentations might not be strong if respondents already had existing perceptions on that university.

*I've been to Soochow University myself, so when they are saying how good they are in the presentations, I knew what it's like [sounds sceptical]. Their campus is very small. But if I hadn't gone to that university, and they said how good they are, I would be attracted more (JI, 43-44).*



I found that although respondents talked to current students at the presentations done by universities at cram schools, their preliminary perceptions still exerted stronger impacts on their university evaluations, and many questions they asked current students could be about exam preparation, rather than their evaluation of courses.

*I talked to current students who came to the cram school to introduce their course. I asked them about their research areas, how to prepare for the exams, and also about their dissertation supervisors... I don't need to know very much, because the universities I chose were either better or equal to University A [where I had my undergraduate degree] anyway. I just needed to get myself accepted first, so I would have the chance to choose where to go. Even though I asked some senior students questions [in those presentations], I also asked things regarding exam preparations, and not much about their universities (HU, 55-59).*

Another type of information that was used by participants included university application packs. However, when the TW group had “ranking maps in mind” with clear choice criteria and several alternatives known as internal information, only a few respondents said that university application packs were essential. For example, one respondent said, “*I didn't feel I needed much information when deciding where to take Master's exams. I didn't use other information really, except the exam application forms*” (HS, 77). Meanwhile another respondent said,

*Much information was more noise than information. I don't want to be affected by them at all. I only need the [university] application packs and what I had in mind to decide where to apply (CI, 98-101).*

Although application packs are seen as marketing-stimuli information sources in this study, they actually had very limited influences on the consideration sets of the TW group. Since entrance examinations are the means by which graduates can enter Master's programmes in Taiwan, the application packs that Taiwanese universities offer are very basic in terms of the provided information. Unlike the prospectuses provided by British universities, the application packs from Taiwanese universities simply include the application form and the exam subjects required to be taken by applicants, which should be considered as “requirements” rather than “promotional information” from universities.



#### 5.1.4 Cram schools for finding courses

All respondents of the TW group went to commercial cram schools offering intensive preparation courses for students planning to take their Master's entrance exams. These cram schools gave respondents lists of exam subjects required by the majority of courses and universities. However, information from those cram schools was quite neutral, which does not affect how the TW group evaluate alternative universities, as one respondent's words the information from cram schools is actually "*facts rather than suggestions*". The information provided by cram schools included exam subjects required by universities and information regarding exams that have been done in past years, such as "*previous exam questions, the accepted marks [by universities at previous years]...*" Another respondent said,

*They [cram schools] show you what the exam subjects are for each university. They don't advise you where to apply. They simply say if you can, try to apply to as many universities as possible, because the acceptance rate [of Master's courses] is very low (YI, 13-14).*

As all respondents have decided what subjects they would prepare before the application, when they see the list of exam subjects required by universities, they would know clearly what university they can apply. Hence, the exam-related information provided by the cram schools did not have direct influences on respondents' consideration sets.

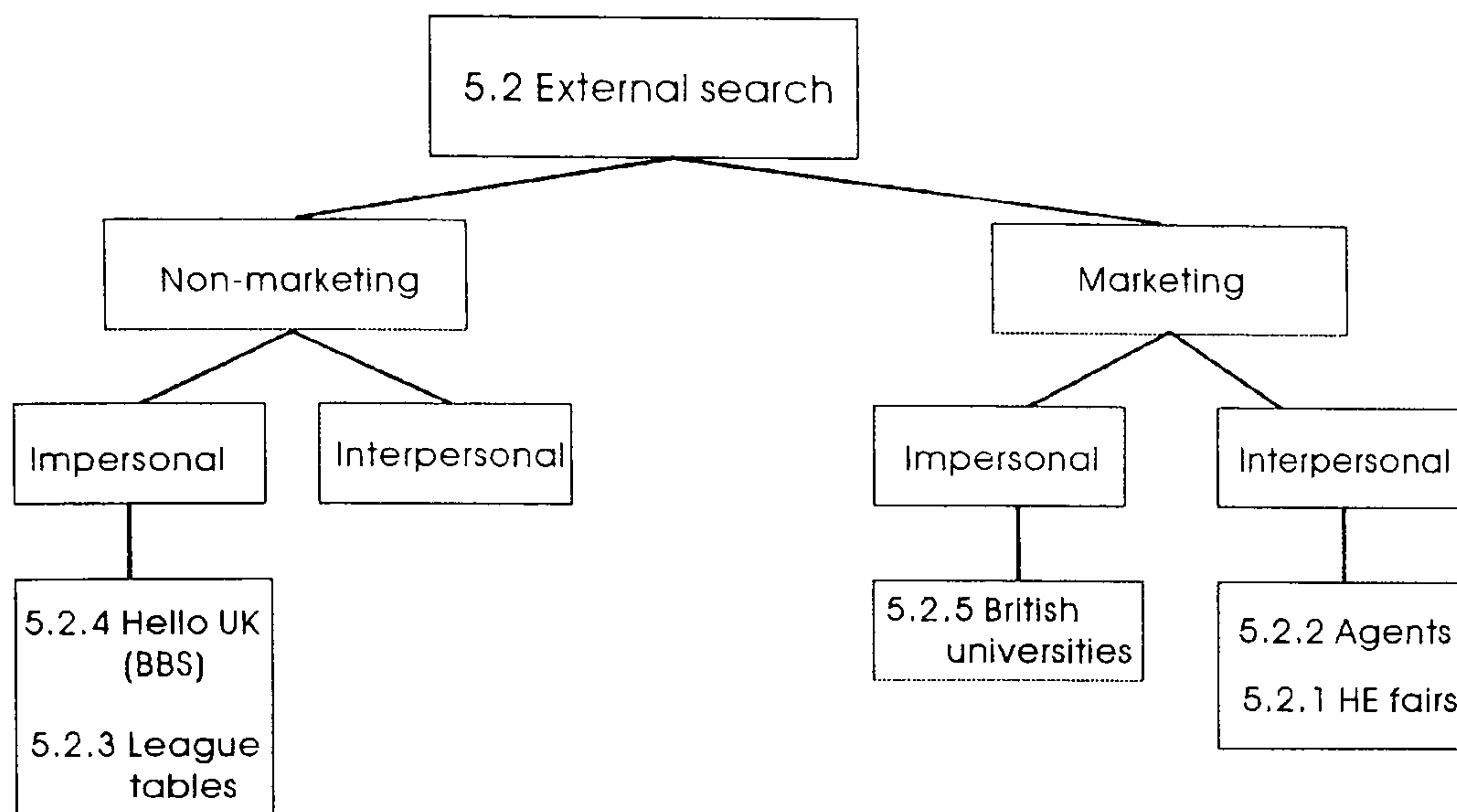
Overall, in the use of external information sources, it can be said that preliminary perceptions were mainly used by the TW group to select their consideration sets. Only when interviewees felt they needed certain information they had less idea about, (e.g. the teaching quality of the Master's courses), they turned to external information sources to get further information. However, as the main criterion of the TW group was to go to "better universities" than their current one, the majority of interviewees had several university alternatives in their minds already. Therefore, it can be said most external information sources were used to assist respondents in the alternative evaluations and only the subject lists from cram schools was used for findings available courses.



## 5.2 The UK group

Figure 5.2 categorises the external information sources used by the UK group according to the different types of information sources.

**Figure 5.2 External search of the UK group**



The external information sources used by the UK group included HE fairs (section 5.2.1), educational agents (section 5.2.2), league tables (section 5.2.3), Hello UK (section 5.2.4), and British universities (section 5.2.5). How these respective sources were used will be discussed next.

### 5.2.1 HE fairs for finding courses

A few respondents searched for available Master's programmes at HE fairs. Both posters displayed at the stands and the list of participating universities provided at the HE fair were used by them to decide which stand to visit and/or from which to get prospectuses. One participant talked about how she decided which university stands to visit,

*I looked at their posters at the back of the stand to see whether they had any courses I was interested in doing. If they had art courses, I took their prospectuses. I know I might not do art courses, maybe [I will study] marketing or tourism courses, but before making a definite decision, I would still like to comfort myself by knowing more [about different majors] (LU, 46).*



The interviews with alumni also showed that some potential students, whom alumni talked to at the HE fair, could not identify the minor differences between different courses. One alumnus said,

*Students were also confused about the differences between MBA [Master's in Business Administration] and MAIBA [MA in International Business Administration], because University D offers MAIBA and not MBA. I told [potential students] that MBA normally requires students to have working experiences, and University D only offers part-time MBA courses, not full-time ones. However, it seemed students [in the HE fair] still didn't understand these differences between similar courses (Alumni HE fair interviews, GL, 2–3).*

Moreover, from the observations, the actual course titles could be crucial in attracting potential students.

Although every course offered detailed lists on the compulsory and optional subjects within that programme, many potential students did not seem to read all that information. Even when students did read them [modules], they could still be unsure about the exact teaching materials used in the courses...[For knowing more about] detailed information regarding teaching and learning, potential students needed to ask either alumni whom they met at the HE fair or current students of that course to find out more...Although the subject lists might be basically the same as other universities that offer similar programmes, when potential students first heard about the names of a programme, they could ignore the subject lists, and only choose based on the names of the courses if it [the course title] was very different from others (HE observation 19-3-06, 62–64).

The previous quotes might indicate that potential students who went to the HE fair were often at the early stage of their decision-making, so they knew little about the differences of courses. Also, the names of courses influenced them more than the compulsory or optional subjects required by universities.

Potential students who came to HE fairs seemed to be more likely to be in the early stages of the HE decisions-making process...it seems that the majority of students were still in the external information search stage, because many of them were still finding out what potential courses were available. Very few



students whom I observed in the HE fair were those who had already applied to some British universities (HE observation 19-3-06, 47–48).

Similarly, this point was supported by one alumnus who felt many potential students who came to HE fair might have only started their information search, as they often had no idea regarding available courses from British universities.

*Students do not know what courses we have [at University D]. The British Council gave students a big chart at the entrance of the exhibition hall and it has had all the universities and courses up there [in the chart]. But students don't look at that. If they do, they would not come to the [University D] stand and ask in the first sentence "does your university offer Y subject?" Many students didn't use that chart, and they came to the stand to ask about what courses we have. They don't know they could have saved the time on searching a course stand by stand [by using the provided chart] (Alumni HE fair interviews, LI, 3–4).*

Moreover, I found that HE fairs were used by prospective applicants as a place to meet current students. For instance, a potential student and her boyfriend came to the University D stand, and the first thing they asked me was "are you an agent or are you someone from the university?" I said I was a current University D student, and I asked them why they wanted to know this information.

Respondent A said it was because "*whenever we want to ask agents questions, we can do that. But we have fewer opportunities to ask university representatives or current students questions*". Respondent A said they can only meet those types of people [university representatives, alumni or current students] in the HE fairs, so they cherish this opportunity and wanted to ask more detailed questions about the programmes, or the location of the accommodation etc. (HE observation 19-3-06, 2–4).

One alumnus said that potential students seemed to prefer to talk to alumni than university representatives at the HE fair.

*Also, because my Master's degree was on tourism, when students wanted to ask me things on business majors, I would suggest them to talk to Representative J. I*



*told students she's a lecturer in the University D business school, so whatever questions you have, you could go ask her.*

Interviewer: Did students go talk to Representative J then?

*GL: They tend to be very hesitant. I don't know whether it's because of their English ability or they don't know what specific questions to ask. They don't normally go to talk to Representative J. Rather they keep asking me more questions that I might not be 100% sure (Alumni HE fair interviews, GL, 6–7).*

Taiwanese respondents did want the opportunity to talk to someone with detailed knowledge about the courses, which echoes Martinez and Munday's (1998) point, and it was found the people they preferred to talk to most, were current students as opposed to university staff. This phenomenon might be explained by the linguistic and cultural backgrounds, where if the UK group talks with British university staff, they would need to speak English, which might make them nervous. Also, potential students might also have higher trust towards current Taiwanese students who are seen as having "similar positions", and who are also Taiwanese who they share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Further information on why current students were preferred by potential students as the information source will be discussed more fully in sections 5.2.4 and 6.2.1.

When coming to HE fairs, the time potential students stayed at each stand is short, and the observational data suggested possible reasons for this phenomenon.

"It is really rare that one student stayed for more than 10 minutes in one stand. Because there were 59 university stands in the fair, most students tended to walk around many stands and tended not to stop for too long at each stand. Only for some students, if they have decided what universities they wanted to know more about, did they stayed longer. But most people would leave very soon from a stand, on average between three to five minutes. Normally, after asking a few questions, they would say "I would like to walk around all stands first". Very few people showed the attitudes of "this university is my only choice" or "I have to study at this university".



[As an observer] I felt strongly that the HE market is very competitive, because there are so many universities and courses for potential students to choose from. It seems that only when the programme is very rarely found at other universities, students might think it is more special than other alternatives (HE observation 19-3-06, 61).

Furthermore, the most common questions asked in the HE fair centered on teaching and learning, living in the UK, or future career enhancement. For instance,

“In teaching and learning aspects...many students asked whether the courses at University D are more practical or theory-based...Students also asked about the specialised areas of the teachers, and whether teachers were more from business or academic backgrounds. Also, potential students wanted to know the current students’ backgrounds, such as their nationalities” (HE observation 19-3-06, 7-11).

Regarding what types of courses prospective students were looking for, one alumnus mentioned,

*Students prefer to have practical courses [at Master’s study], like sandwich courses with placements. But I normally said to them that basically Master’s courses tend to be a bit more theoretical, because it is a research degree. When I said that to them [potential students], they looked a bit disappointed (Alumni HE fair interviews, GL, 4-5).*

Similar findings were also from interviews with the UK group, where several respondents mentioned that they preferred to study courses that were more practical than academic-based. Overall, my impressions as an observer at the HE fair was that,

“I really felt when potential students came to the University D stand the questions they asked showed that they see themselves more as “buyers” of the “services” which are the University D courses. Potential students also looked like they were comparing “alternative brands” which are “British universities”...someone like Representative J who had 10 years experience recruiting Taiwanese students said “we don’t want to show students that we are desperate for them to come to study at University D”. Representative J was



saying that if universities are too proactive on recruiting students, students might feel that the university is not very good” (HE observation 19-3-06, 51-53).

Certainly, it is understandable that the UK group as international students cannot attend open days provided by British universities as freely as home-based students in the UK. Hence, the often attended HE activity for the UK group is the HE fair hosted in Taiwan, to enable greater ease of access.

### **5.2.2 Educational agents’ suggested lists**

Educational agents were used by the majority of respondents in the UK group. For the few respondents of the UK group who did not use agents, they seemed to be the people who were more confident with their English ability than those who used agents. For instance, two participants from focus group did not use agents, and one of them had studied in the UK for her language course (U9), while another (U6), often used English in his job, so they decided to apply British universities themselves.

In terms of how agents were used by respondents, several of them mentioned that in the counseling sessions, counselors evaluated their previous academic backgrounds, including the types of universities they had undergraduate degrees from, their average marks from their undergraduate studies, and their past work experiences. Mainly, the influences from agents on the TW group were in finding courses/institutions. Counselors at agencies also asked respondents’ selection requirements, such as their choice of majors, budgets for studying in the UK, or preferred locations. After getting that information from respondents, counselors provided a suggested application list of British universities to respondents. One respondent said,

*They [the agents] looked at my work experiences and grades from university, some personal background [details], to see whether I was suitable for the five starred RAE schools. My agent thought RAE 4 fitted me better...and also based on my conditions, like to get cheaper tuition costs, they gave me a list of suggested universities [for application] (AL, 70).*

It was found the agents’ suggested lists hugely affected the consideration sets of the UK group, as several respondents went away with the suggested lists and searched more external information to narrow down the alternatives from about ten to six



universities for application. Moreover, nearly all respondents who used agents only applied to universities that were included in the suggested lists from agents. Hence, it can be said that agents had strong influences on many interviewees' consideration sets.

In the interview, one agent mentioned her understandings on the different requirements from British universities.

*British universities are graded from one to four. The Taiwanese graduates from public universities need grade point averages (GPA) over 75 and the Taiwanese graduates from private universities need GPAs over 80 to enter the "band one" British universities... (Agents' interviews, Agency S, T, 46-50).*

The above quote from the agent indicates that agents might have standards in their minds on how to suggest potential Taiwanese students on which British universities could be more likely to accept their applications. Therefore, as some participants believed, through agents' suggestions in students' consideration sets, students might increase the chances of getting offers from British universities. As one participant said,

*She [the agent] looked at my background to suggest what universities suit me more. My English is not very good, so she didn't recommend me universities that require high IELTS. [She] mainly [recommended] middle range universities. Most of the universities they [agents] suggested, provided me with conditional offers (BI, 30).*

### **Unpersuasive counseling styles**

Since agents were particularly influential, how did they communicate to potential students? What types of counseling styles do they use? When conducting observations at agencies, I found that agents talked to students in a soft as opposed to a strongly persuasive style. Nevertheless, agents gave their personal opinions to potential students on the "best choice" available to them.

Counselor D said to Student B that the living cost in London is about £1,000 per month and it is truly more expensive than other places in the UK. Counselor D suggested that Student B study at London Metropolitan University, because they have two terms [of Master's courses every year]. If B could not get accepted in



the first term, she could enter in the second term. When D was talking to B, his way of talking was not pushing her to apply to certain universities. The way D talked was more like sorting things out for B as a friend and was looking at things from her perspective. The agent therefore adopted an empathic approach to guiding the student in her application decisions (Agency G student observation, 8).

There is no evidence to suggest whether the information from agents always directed potential students to the “best choice” they could have. However, one alumnus pointed out the suggestions from the educational agents to potential students could sometimes be subjective, simply because of the commissions they might want from British universities. As one alumnus suggested,

*Agents might have commission concerns, so they tend to ask [potential] students to go to the UK to prepare for their IELTS. I felt it's different to prepare for the IELTS in the UK and in Taiwan, because the standards [they have] might be different. I think if you are examined orally [in the IELTS] in the UK, the interviewers would expect you to be able to speak English. But if you are examined orally in Taiwan, a foreign country, they [the interviewers] would expect less from you I think (Alumni HE fair interviews, LI, 11-13).*

It is possible that agents might think potential students can improve more by learning English in the UK. However, when potential students use educational agents to apply to British universities, during the counseling sessions, potential students would ask counselors questions regarding what universities/courses to include in their consideration sets. So, what are the top questions that were often raised with agents? One agent said, “*the top questions from students relate to ranking, location and weather, and what courses to study*”, while another agent suggested the top questions from students include,

*...how many Chinese-speakers [are base as that university], ranking, how cold is it, and lots of students want to know whether they are going to be in a city or outside of a city. These are the questions that are quite often asked. But most of the time, the questions are because students haven't been to the UK. I think in the UK, you are never far from a city, and anywhere in the UK can be very cold*



*[laughing]. So a lot of questions are just through a lack of understanding (Agents' interviews, Agency G, M, 54-56).*

Furthermore, the findings indicate that after the UK group had decided their consideration sets, they were not affected by “last minute” information sources to change their application lists. To my surprise, educational agents had little influence on the UK group’s application lists once respondents had made up their minds on where to apply, except one respondent who said,

*I wanted to apply to more than ten universities, but I went to the agent and after the discussion with her [counselor], I had seven universities left [to apply]. Six of them were from my choice and one of them, Sheffield [University], was suggested by the agent. Yes, the agent influenced me a little on the application. I had reduced my number of applications and Sheffield [University] wasn't from my selection (JU, 104).*

### **5.2.3 League tables to simplify the evaluation process**

In contrast with Veloutsou *et al.*, (2005), who observed league tables were seen as a less reliable information source, this study found they were widely used by the UK group as an indicator to evaluate university and course quality. As the majority of the UK group used agents’ suggested lists in narrowing down alternative British courses, league tables were often used afterwards for further evaluations on courses/institutions. However, for those respondents who did not use agents to eliminate potential alternative British universities, league tables were also used for narrowing down alternatives to the few remaining in their consideration set.

*I used ranking and [university] location [to choose where to apply]. For the first 40 universities [from the league tables], I chose ten southern universities near to London. I then compared the ten [universities]. If the ten [universities] were not enough [for application], I included some worse ranking ones to extend the [application] ranges. I used ranking within 40 to exclude universities that I didn't want, but as my English friend suggested me to apply to Kinston University, I also considered it, although the ranking of it is 70 something (MA, 66).*



League tables were used by the majority of the UK group to simplify the decision-making process, as participants were often anxious about the sizable amount of information they needed to access in making Master's choices to study in the UK. One participant commented,

*There is too much information, so if any information is easier to be understood and worth trusting, you tend to believe. When you don't know any universities, ranking is the most straightforward way [to get to evaluate different universities]. Before coming to the UK, you might have heard of only about four or five British universities, so how can you judge the rest [of British universities]? The ranking is for foreigners to use because we don't know [British] universities (LE, 70).*

Moreover, one agent also commented on why league tables were widely used by Taiwanese students. The agent felt league tables assisted students' Master's decision-making, especially when they were not familiar with the British education system.

*I think it [ranking] is very important for Taiwanese students because they are on the other side of the world...but they need as much of information as possible about the schools. The downside is that ranking is often not very accurate. There are many different rankings. They compare differently to each other. A lot of the times, students will look at just a general ranking for a school and that might not be indicative of their intended courses. They might be going for very highly ranked courses in a poor university, and there might be some very bad courses in a very highly ranked university. So I tend to advise students to try to look at ranking for each course rather than just for a school. But yes, it [ranking] is important to them [potential Taiwanese students] (Agent interviews, Agency G, M, 26-28).*

As the above agent suggested, this study found interviewees of the UK group did not clearly know what ranking elements were covered within each different league table. Rather, the UK group was just simply convinced that ranking was an important indicator for them to use in evaluating universities. Several respondents believed that by using league tables, many criteria were also "automatically" included in the ranking, such as evaluations of university facilities and campuses, teacher and student



ratio or course design, how well-known the university is, or even in getting more job opportunities after graduation. For instance, one participant suggested,

*Like the teaching quality, the facilities, and campuses are directly related to ranking. How good the students and teachers are, many [factors were included in the ranking]. Also those [factors included in the league tables] will affect my study life. Ranking is the most important indicator for me. I can see all the things I need from [university] rankings (AM, 20).*

When many respondents of the UK group thought that by using league tables, they could cover many important choice criteria, respondents seemed to be more relaxed in the application choices and worried less about whether they had missed any important criteria that they should have used in the evaluation process. On the other hand, the reliance on ranking from the UK group might have also made them use fewer criteria, because as one respondent said, *“If I use ranking, it has already covered all the factors that I might need to consider”* (ME, 94). Hence, fewer criteria could be used by them as league tables were believed to have covered all important “standard attributes” in university evaluations.

Hoyer and MacInnis (1997) suggest that when information is presented in a clear manner, it reduces consumers’ search efforts. The use of league tables by participants of the UK group could be an example of this, whereby university rankings were presented in a matrix format with merely ranking numbers. This might have helped potential students to understand information easier and faster, and on the other hand, reduce their external search efforts and the use of further criteria.

### **To identify “middle range” universities**

I also found that many respondents of the UK group thought that universities with a better ranking would be more challenging for them academically. For example, one participant said, *“For good ranking ones [universities], their IELTS requirement is higher, and also they [teachers] give more assignments”* (BI, 88). Another respondent commented,



*I could also know from the ranking on the quality of students from that university... Better ranked universities do not necessarily mean it would be harder to study there, but it would mean it's more competitive between classmates (ME, 94).*

As many respondents related ranking positively to the competitive level of studying at courses/universities, this might explain why several respondents said they did not want to apply to top ranking universities, but rather, preferred “middle” range universities.

*I don't want to apply to the top ten universities, because I'm not good enough for that. I don't want to get into the top universities, but would try to avoid the very bad ones [universities]. I prefer to choose universities ranked in the middle (LU, 64).*

*I wanted to choose universities ranked between twentieth and fortieth. I didn't want the universities ranked below. Also, I didn't want the top universities, because I might not graduate from them [laughing] (AM, 18).*

Several respondents used ranking to exclude not only the top universities, but also the “bad” ranking ones, as they wanted to go for middle range universities. Regarding how to define “top” or “middle” range, respondents either asked for people’s advice, like from Hello UK, friends, or some of them would just decide on a preferred ranking range themselves. One participant talked about what she learnt from Hello UK and said,

*In the beginning stage [of searching information], I had information from Hello UK to see what universities were better, like ranking. Whether those ranked between thirtieth and fiftieth were considered good universities in the UK? They said within thirtieth means good. After that [thirtieth], remaining universities were considered acceptable (LN, 37-40).*

Through the use of league tables, the UK group felt assured that they had better ideas about what range of British universities they were applying to, and this helped them emotionally as it reduced their anxieties of being international students who had



relatively little understanding about British universities. Next, respondents' use of Hello UK will be discussed.

#### **5.2.4 Hello UK for students' comments**

Hello UK, a BBS (bulletin board system) website operated by voluntary Taiwanese students, was used by most participants of the UK group, although in slightly different ways. The reason for Hello UK to be widely used was because current students/alumni who had studied in the UK were seen as more qualified by the UK group to be the people who advise them about the performances of British universities. For instance, a few respondents used Hello UK to find potential courses for application.

*I used initially ranking to find out the first 30 universities for comparison, from an original list of over 100 universities. I then went to the Taiwanese student association of each university in Hello UK, to see what current students said about that university. That's how I selected Leicester University and Exeter University [for application]. I wanted to know about the interactions between classmates and the introduction of that university... I think [current] students' experiences are important because they are there [in the UK] (ME, 98).*

Some respondents learnt from Hello UK about "what to pay attention to when selecting universities", while two other respondents said more specifically that they learnt to pay attention to some choice criteria, such as university location.

*I preferred to choose universities in the South and in the middle of England... because people in Hello UK said other places [in the UK] are very cold. I'm afraid of cold weather, so I didn't want to go [to the North]. I didn't know at that time that inside the buildings in the UK, there are heating systems (JU, 37-40).*

As Hello UK is a BBS site, respondents of the UK group either raised their queries by posting messages for current students to answer them, or browsed messages posted by others to get general ideas regarding studying in the UK. Keyword searches were also used by some respondents for finding specific information. For example, one respondent talked about how he found potential courses for application from Hello UK without using educational agents.



*The process for me to find courses is to have an idea on what to study, and use that [major] as a keyword in the [British Council] search engine to get the names of universities. Similarly, I used the keyword search in Hello UK as well. For example, I key in TESOL to Hello UK and receive all the related messages, say [I have] ten pages [of messages], and I read through every message. Those messages would include which university offer TESOL courses. Finally, I use the names of universities, I then read the websites of universities (CA, 46-51).*

### **Required Information**

The majority of interviewees obtained studying and ranking information from current students/alumni via Hello UK. Interviewees wanted to have information regarding the teaching and learning of Master's study, such as course or teaching quality, teaching styles, the percentage of Taiwanese students on the course, or the interaction between classmates. From the observations of this study, the frequently asked questions from potential students to current students related to living aspects and future career development.

Some questions concerned living aspects, like the university location in the UK, how warm the place is, and how far the university is from London. Students tended to relate the location of the university directly to the weather. Hence, after asking about the location, they normally followed this up with questions about the weather. Students also asked about living in the UK, such as the environment on and off campus or the university accommodation. Students also asked about the convenience of living arrangements, like "how far is it from the food shopping area?" and/or "how far is it from banks?" Students asked about living and tuition costs. Common questions included, "how much is the cost of living per month?" and "how much money should I set aside for study in the UK?"

Some questions were about future career development. Potential students asked about current students' personal evaluations on the values of studying in the UK, such as "do you think it's worthwhile to spend such a sizable amount of money on doing this degree overseas?" and/or "does the experience of studying abroad add value to your life?" More specifically, some people asked about whether the study in the UK can help their future careers, like "what types of



careers do University D alumni enter?" (HE observation 19-3-06, 7-23; 31-44; 45-46).

Apart from meeting current students or alumni in HE fairs, it is difficult for the UK group to meet current students of British universities face-to-face before coming to the UK, so Hello UK has become a platform for the UK group to receive current students' comments on universities.

*To see teaching quality, I used Hello UK. If current students of that course said their teachers were not teaching hard, not teaching practical things, the course was not good etc. I would not apply there [the course]. People's comments affected me more than the ranking [of that university] (CA, 63-64).*

*[Within Hello UK] you can see students' reactions and feel the value of that university. It's your feelings. It also shows the percentage of Taiwanese students in that university. So if they don't have many Taiwanese in that university, they won't even bother to post any message on their sub-board [used by each university], because there's no one there to reply (BI, 110).*

This study found that WOM from experienced students was often provided in the form of "advice giving" or "personal experience". This echoes Richins and Root-Shaffer's (1988) findings and this study confirmed that experienced students express opinions and attributes about their universities/courses. Moreover, in some respondents' cases, such as the case of CA, who changed his decision when hearing negative WOM. This finding supports the points raised by Solomon *et al.*, (2002). Respondents might use information from Hello UK in different ways, and might be affected by Hello UK. However, it was found that Hello UK is generally preferred as one information source by the UK group in the evaluation stage of British universities.

### **5.2.5 British universities for campus environments**

The majority of the UK group used British university prospectuses, which gave respondents information about living and tuition costs, and to see the campus environment. The UK group cared more about campus life than the TW group, and



this might occur because the UK group as international students is less familiar with the living situation in the UK, as opposed to Taiwan.

*When using the prospectuses, most of the time I see the photos to find out about the universities. Like University D has no big campus, so their prospectus didn't show campus photos. They presented only the photos of the town. When seeing that, I would know University D has no campus. They [prospectuses] would also have photos for the computer rooms and library, so I could also get some feeling from those (AM, 64).*

From the information provided by British universities, several respondents of the UK group wanted to see campus photos, and this partly supports what Tumblin (2002) and James *et al.*, (1999) suggest whereby students' choices are often made on general impressions of campus buildings, because when respondents see campus photos, general impressions were made on that university, and that image affects their Master's choices.

It is also interesting to see that when the photos of campus were not showed on university prospectuses, respondents might interpret that information to be "that university doesn't have a wonderful campus" rather than "nice photos of campus of that university were not included in prospectuses". Such an attitude might have also shown that the UK group did not have trust for the information provided by British universities, and this will be discussed further in section 6.2.3.

Harker *et al.*, (2001) suggest that where a prospectus seems colourful and interesting, it is more likely that students will pick it up to read, and this is also evidenced from this study. When photos and/or the presentation of prospectuses attract respondents' attention, their impression of that university improves, and the possibility in selecting that university increases. Furthermore, some respondents used prospectuses to know about the courses, including the course length and curriculum.

*I saw the prospectuses from seven potential universities...I wanted to know more about course design, like what the core or optional modules are...I would try to compare the differences between the modules of each university. I wanted to have more choices on the optional modules. I wanted to have more modules*



*related to marketing, which is more related to my [previous] work [experience] (JU, 74).*

*I just see whether the names of the module look good [from the prospectuses] [laughing]. I want a course to be practical, because I've been doing marketing [in my job] for four years, so I would like to get something useful out of study abroad (WN, 11-14).*

While prospectuses were widely used by the UK group, I also found that apart from the information from prospectuses, its quality and presentation might also affect participants' perceptions of the universities. For example, one respondent said,

*[I used prospectuses] to see how beautiful the pictures [of universities] are and how high-quality the print is [big laughter]. It's an image [of university]. If I want to learn marketing [course] in that university, I want to know whether that university does good marketing for themselves (BI, 64).*

Except prospectuses, the majority of respondents used university websites to know about the courses and environments when evaluating alternative universities or courses. In terms of course information, respondents had information from university websites about their curriculum, teachers' backgrounds, and the length of the course.

However, although seeing the curriculum, respondents might not feel they have enough information about the courses. For example, one respondent said he wanted "to see the curriculum, the option and core subjects. But it's hard to tell from the names to know what that [course] is about". Ironically, when the same respondent was followed up to ask whether he would prefer British universities to provide him more information regarding their curriculum, he did not think he needed that information.

*No, I don't think I would want to know that [more information on curriculum] either. If I felt I like the names of courses, I would apply to that university. I think when I get into that course I would then know [what it is]. It's an experiment [laughing] (CA, 56-59).*



From this example, making HE choices is not always about making rational choices. In some students' cases, despite the fact that much time and money was involved in this HE purchase, choosing courses or universities could sometimes be just about personal choices, which is strongly related to respondents' personalities and preferences.

From the university websites, respondents also wanted to know about university and campus environments (general appearance) and facilities, (particularly the library), and the city/town environment.

*I want to see the campus environment, but it's strange that not many university websites have many photos on campus. I want to know the size of the campus, how it looks etc. Also the city environment, the convenience of living, and how far it is from London [are additional considerations] (LE, 34).*

In addition, the promotional video clips within the university websites were used. Engel *et al.*, (1995) suggests that information can be either in a verbal or visual form, and when the information is given visually, it can be through actual product/service demonstration. In the case of getting information via visual means, some respondents used video clips to "observe" the universities themselves.

*When [current] students are talking [in the video clips], I would see how good their English is and how organised they are in their talks. In the university websites, much information [from there] is similar between different universities, but from the video clips, you could see their differences. How much did students learn [from their study] and what are their lives like there? Videos can show this (BI, 68).*

Apart from prospectuses and websites, representatives of British universities, whom the UK group met at either HE fairs or in agents' offices, were also used by some interviewees. Similar to the questions raised to current students/alumni, the UK group asked representatives questions about studying or living at that university, such as curriculum, living environment or the ratio of students to lecturers. However, some questions like teaching course quality or career development of alumni were not raised with university representatives. A possible explanation of this relates to interviewees' lack of trust toward representatives as current students who were not



paid by British universities could be seen as people who could offer fairer and more independent views.

It is possible that university representatives responsible for recruitment, might be affected by their role when providing prospective students information regarding their universities, as they certainly want to try to increase prospective students' interests in their courses/universities. When observations were done in one agency, two representatives from two British universities were also in the agent's office talking to potential students, so my observations on their interactions with students were also recorded.

My observations [of the university representatives] were that they try to be very friendly to students. They spoke English slowly to students and if students asked any questions, they tried their best to help, including showing them the prospectuses and explaining the situations in class (Agency G student observation, 61-62).

However, the information from university representatives could be ambiguous, because university representatives might not want to put students off when talking to them. Student C talked to representative E of the University of West England (UWE) first [in the agency]...The UWE representative told her how would things be like if she studied the visual communication course [at UWE]. When they were discussing about the location of UWE, Student C said "*Birmingham is very near to London*", and when C said this, Representative E was a bit hesitant and said "*yes, it's not far from London*".

I felt there might be some misunderstandings within student C's mind, because for a Taiwanese, a two hour journey is enough to travel half way across Taiwan. Student C might not know very much about where Birmingham is situated in the UK, so she described such a distance as "near" to London. However, although hesitant, representative E did not try to clarify and explain how far the distance really is. A possibility can be he does not want student C to lose interest in UWE. Hence, although this might be a potential chance to reveal more reality of the UK situation to student C, no action was taken by that university representative to correct her. On the other hand, it can also be said that using interpersonal information sources might raise



potential problems to prospective students, as each individual might have bias or even personal interests when providing them information, which might also affect the accuracy of information provided to prospective students.

### **5.3 External search of the two groups**

After presenting how external information sources were used by both groups, the similarities and differences between the use of external information sources will next be compared.

#### **5.3.1 Similar in deciding possible alternatives**

I found many interviewees from both the TW and the UK group were not aware of how many potential alternative universities/courses were available to them, and they did not seem to need that information either in making their Master's choices. Respondents did not need to know the total number of universities/courses available for application, because they had some ideas on what types or ranges of universities at which they wanted to study. For the TW group, since they have known clear choice criteria on going to "better" universities, most respondents of the TW group knew what types of universities they would apply, such as public or private universities, while polytechnic universities were not considered at all by some respondents, as they are not seen as good as the other two types of universities. For example, one respondent said,

*About 20 universities [offered Master's courses in the area of finance] I think. I didn't know how many there are if this includes polytechnic universities. I didn't consider them (MI, 28).*

Moreover, some interviewees of the TW group not only knew the types of universities but also the names of alternative universities, especially when they studied the same majors for undergraduate and Master's courses.

For the UK group, as the majority of interviewees had limited internal information before conducting an external search, British university league tables were used by them to eliminate alternatives. As mentioned, the UK group had normally decided on a ranking range, which was then used to select specific universities to be considered for comparison in the external information stage. This was done in order to decide



consideration sets. Hence, I found several respondents of the UK group decided to apply to middle range British universities, so the league tables were used to find out the names of these institutions, and they therefore did not know the total available universities/courses. When one respondent was asked about the total alternatives for her in making Master's choices, she indicated ambiguity.

*Well, I don't know [the total number of British universities]. Are there about 200 universities? I looked at the ranking first, so I had the university names that I could use to find where they are in the UK, from the map of [the website of] UKEAS [to see the location of universities] (JU, 99-102).*

Mowen and Minor (2001) suggest the information sought via external search includes "alternative brands available". However, many respondents of both groups in this study, especially those from the TW group, did not access the total available numbers of universities before deciding their consideration sets. Rather, they used some choice criteria, often ranking and locations, to narrow down alternatives to a manageable size. This was often about ten universities, and they then evaluated these with more external information sources to reach their consideration sets. A possible explanation for this situation could be because there might be over a 100 available courses for prospective students, so in order to manage this huge collection of possibilities, the students sought to narrow down the choices first rather than trying to compare the total number of available courses. This helped respondents to better manage their search time and efforts in making their Master's decision-making process easier.

Moreover, the fact that many respondents were not aware of the total amount of course alternatives might have shown that respondents used either internal or external information to self-evaluate and identify a range of universities that they preferred for application and excluded other universities that they did not think were suitable. Therefore, from the perspective of student recruitment, it might mean that when specific universities do not fall into this considered range, it could be very difficult to market themselves to perspective students, who had already excluded those universities.



### **5.3.2 Different usage of external sources**

The usage of external information sources compared differently for the groups in terms of the level and timing of the external search. Since internal information serves as the starting point for external information search (Peterson and Merino, 2003), this study confirmed Hoyer and MacInnis' (1997) view and found that in an HE setting, if the scan of internal search provides Taiwanese respondents sufficient information, their external search will be very limited. In other words, when respondents had more knowledge internally, they searched for less external information.

In this study, the TW group had more sufficient information from internal search and greater knowledge of local Taiwanese universities compared to the UK group, so they spent less time on the external search. By contrast, as the UK group had less internal information on making Master's choices in the UK, more search efforts were given by the UK group in their external search. As the UK group was not clear about what choice criteria could be used to evaluate universities/courses, and they had nearly no known alternatives, it reasonably led them to a higher level of external searching than the TW group.

Secondly, this study found the TW and the UK group used external information sources intensively at different times. For the TW group, as they entered the Master's courses by exams, some respondents had a strategy of applying to as many universities as possible, and deferred the serious university evaluation to the point when they had received offers from several universities. Therefore, if respondents were accepted by more than one university for Master's courses, they then accessed more external information sources to find out which university would be the best choice for enrolment. Such an attitude made those respondents of the TW group less cautious in choosing consideration sets, by comparison to the UK group.

On the other hand, the UK group started the evaluation of universities more seriously than the TW group from the stage of confirming their consideration set. More external information sources were used by the UK group in deciding consideration sets, which was a stage relatively ignored by the TW group. This might have occurred because the TW group knew more internally about Taiwanese universities, and their internal information helped them to decide the consideration sets rather than having to rely on



external information. By contrast, without external information, it would be unlikely for the UK group to know what British universities they could apply to, as a result of having very limited internal information.

Except for the level of internal information, it was found that the limited time respondents had for external search could also defer their evaluations of universities from the point of deciding consideration sets to deciding their enrolment choices. Some respondents from both groups searched less externally before deciding consideration sets, as they felt unable to evaluate the information because of the limited time available. For example, some respondents of the TW group decided to search less in making decisions on consideration sets, as they had decided to concentrate on the exam preparations first and only to choose universities when they had received firm offers.

Similarly, some interviewees of the UK group were working full-time when applying to British universities, so agents were much relied on in deciding consideration sets, and more external search was conducted prior to enrolment choices instead. Generally, the majority of respondents from both groups spent more time in making enrolment choices than making the choice of consideration sets, as the former decision was seen by them as a more important than deciding on their consideration sets.

It seems the UK group experienced greater stress in the external search, than the TW group. This is attributable to the fact that the UK group needed to process a greater amount of external information when their internal information was very limited. However, as a majority of the UK group used agents to narrow down alternatives, only those who did not have agents' suggested list indicated great stress in alternative evaluations. However, for both the TW and the UK group, many of them faced great stress not in terms of alternative evaluation, but in the stage of deciding enrolment choices, because it is seen as a much more important decision to them within HE decision-making. Hence, many respondents felt worried and stressed when they were given offers from more than one university, as they needed to search more external information to decide where to finally enroll.



This study found a negative relationship where the greater the amount of internal information, the lower the external search would be and vice versa. However, as many of the UK group used agents and league tables to assist them in evaluating alternatives, it might also have showed that when internal information was low, some external information sources were more relied on to reduce the searching time. When respondents felt they lacked knowledge about studying Master's in the UK and felt unable to evaluate the information regarding all potential alternatives, they relied on agents and/or league tables to eliminate potential choices. By doing so, the potential alternatives became more manageable for them, particularly within the limited time they had in making their final enrollment choices.

#### **5.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the findings for Objective two, concerning how Taiwanese applicants use external information sources to find and evaluate the performances of courses/institutions. The TW group had more sufficient internal information concerning local Taiwanese universities compared to the level of the internal information of the UK group. The TW group spent less time on the external search than the UK group. In addition, the level of internal information affected the timing of when both groups consulted external information sources. The following chapter discusses how Taiwanese participants evaluated the information quality from external sources.



## Chapter 6 Information quality

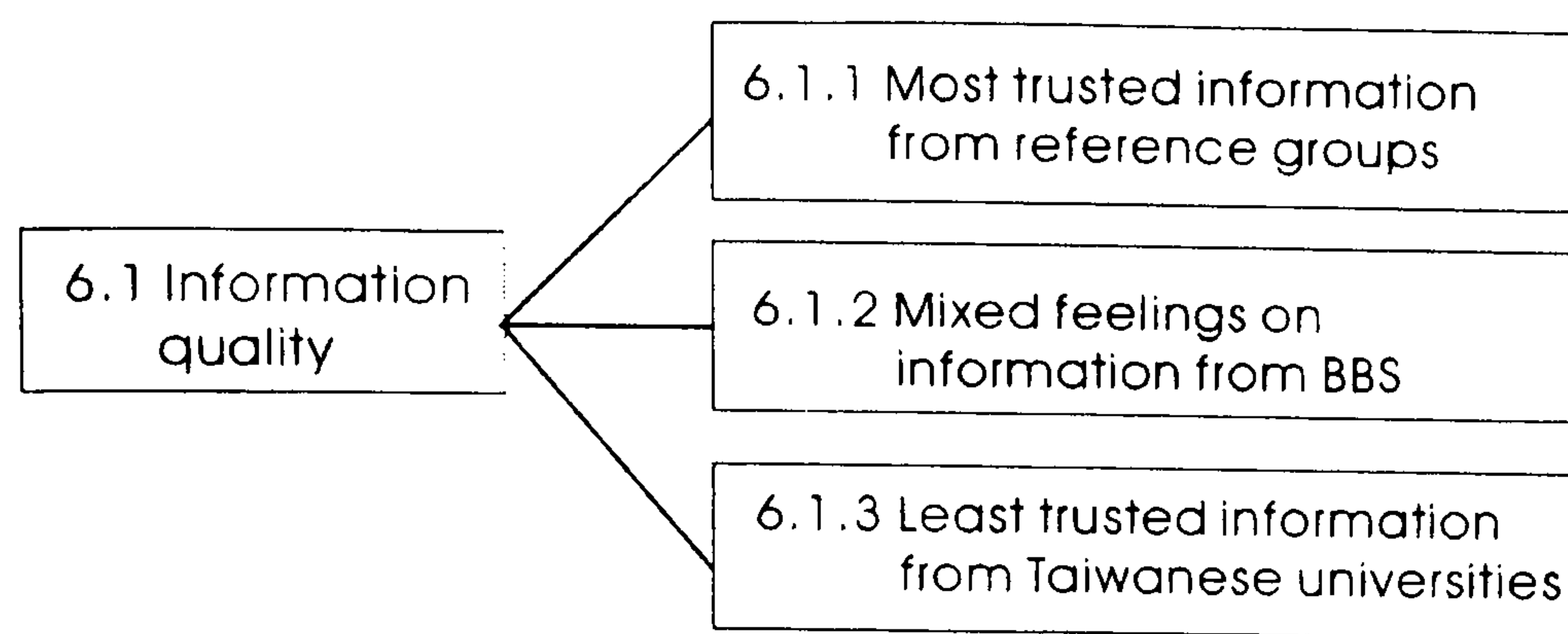
### 6.0 Chapter overview

This chapter includes findings for Objective 3, which is to explore the meaning of information quality from Taiwanese students' perspectives and to see to what extent information quality influenced interviewees' external search. Connor and Dewson (2001) suggest that students need information to be more specific, better quality, more targeted and accessible, but what students mean by "better quality information" was not clear. Hence, this chapter will suggest what Taiwanese students mean by better information quality. Briefly, this study found "trust" of the information sources is very much related to how students perceived the information quality from that source. In other words, when respondents have higher trust towards one information source, the perceived information quality on that source is also higher, and the level of influence from that information source is higher.

Figure 6.1 illustrates that within the external information source used by the TW group, reference groups were seen as the most trustworthy information source (section 6.1.1), while respondents expressed mixed feelings about information from BBS (section 6.1.2), and Taiwanese universities were the least trusted information source (section 6.1.3). These respective points will be discussed with in greater detail.



**Figure 6.1 Perceived information quality from the TW group**



## **6.1 TW group**

Although the key factor that affected the TW group's evaluations on information quality was their trust towards that information source, there were other elements they identified that influenced their evaluations, such as reliability, objectivity, and accessibility.

### **6.1.1 Most trusted reference groups**

Many interviewees from the TW group felt experienced friends and teachers to be reliable and objective information sources regarding advice about studying/teaching at certain universities or courses. Respondents' "experienced friends" included three types of people. Firstly, they might be respondents' classmates from high schools, who studied at other universities at undergraduate level. Secondly, they might be senior students whom respondents met during their undergraduate study. These senior students had entered Master's courses slightly earlier than the interviewees. Finally, friends could include people with Master's degrees whom respondents originally knew from school. However, the common point between the above three types of people was that they had studied as either undergraduates or postgraduates at the potential university, which the respondents were considering as one of their application choices, or indeed their final enrollment decision.



Interviewees perceived information from experienced friends to be good quality, because the friends were believed to have similar perspectives in evaluating universities. Furthermore, friends could provide more updated information as they might have just started or done their Master's studies. For instance, one respondent said, "*...My age is close to the senior students, so the thinking [between us] should not be too different. Things [about universities] wouldn't change much within a short time either...*"

Interviewees cared less about whether the experienced friends had done Master's studies or not, but they cared more about whether they had personally experienced studying at that specific university. The interviewees perceived these friends as "insiders" who possessed first-hand, reliable information. With this in mind, one interviewee stated that "*...there's nobody who can study at two universities at the same time, so you can only listen to senior students who have study experiences from different universities.*"

Interviewees who had access to information from experienced people, felt more confident about the information they received, and when the relationship between respondents and the information-givers was closer, interviewees believed the information to have more reliability.

*I asked people who I know [for information]. You have all kinds of people online [at PTT, a BBS site]. You cannot trust all that they say. But I still had a look online...just to have some references (YU, 33-34).*

*I believe [the information] more if it's from someone who has studied at that university or if it's a respected teacher. I would trust them more...how high my*



*trust is on that information also depends on from who or where I got the information from...I don't mind reading many messages [at PTT], but I would only believe the information from current students (HU, 73-76).*

However, as reference groups commented on things from their personal feelings and experiences, it could be hard for respondents to fully subscribe to the information they received from reference groups, because this information arises from people's differing perspectives and interpretations. One respondent said, "...I've asked all the people I could possibly ask [about deciding where to enroll], so I cannot confirm [the information] any further. I asked more about people's feelings, so it's also hard to testify that..." (MI, 77) Nevertheless, interviewees still believed that information from reference groups was objective, and because they knew the contact personally, it helped respondents to adjust their expectations in light of the comments they received. For instance, one respondent talked about how he managed his expectations after receiving information from reference groups.

*People's personalities would certainly affect how they see things, so if I don't know what sorts of people they are, I cannot judge whether it's an objective or subjective opinion that they are giving me...If someone who studies very hard tells me that course is quite easy to do, I would think I might need to spend more time studying there [at that course]. [I need to] not only listen to what people say, but also add my own judgments [on what they say] (JA, 63-66).*

*They [teachers at cram school] don't show their emotions or prejudices when offering comments on [performances of] universities, so you won't feel they are subjective. They normally recommend that we to apply to national universities... (Jei, 79-80).*



Certainly, it can be argued whether the objectivity of information should be defined as “having no emotion involved in expressing comments”. However, as teachers were professional people in the HE sector and with authority over students in educational organisations, respondents tended to believe their comments when making HE decisions. Besides, comments from teachers normally included general information that was provided in class, rather than personal suggestions to individual respondents on where or where not to enroll. For the TW group, interviewees saw information from experienced students or teachers as being of better information quality, and this finding is consistent with the literature (Solomon *et al.*, 2002; Engel *et al.*, 1995) that suggests information obtained from the people who consumers know, tends to be seen as more reliable and trustworthy than information from impersonal, marketer-dominated sources.

### **6.1.2 Mixed feelings regarding BBS**

The BBS used by the TW group included PTT, operated by non-profit organisations and discussion boards of cram schools, like the Get Institute. Although participants expressed differing opinions on the information quality from BBS, the majority of participants still used it for its accessibility and to consider different perspectives. One respondent said,

*...online information was the easiest to get. I was so panicked at that time, so wanted to get [any information] I could. Although I didn't feel the information quality was good, I still used them [PTT] the most frequently...to listen to different views (Y1, 99-102).*



Another participant preferred to use information from magazines, but as some information regarding the ranking of universities published by magazines was scanned and posted on BBS, he ultimately preferred using BBS rather than magazines.

*... As for the magazines...they had done some surveys...for example they asked business owners how they feel about graduates from each university...Generally, when I think the information quality from magazines is better, I prefer to use that [source] more. But it's harder to get access to the magazines. So basically, it's also about how easy it is to receive that information...online information was still the easiest to get. The magazines I read were only those posted by people online [at the BBS website of the Get Institute] (CE, 98-102).*

This study supports the views of Veloutsou *et al.*, (2005), where respondents of this study used information from the Internet mainly because it was available with relative minimal expenditure in terms of their time, effort, and money. The speed of obtaining information is important for respondents, “... *because the information there [on PTT] was more immediate and fast-replying. After you posted your messages, you soon had information [you wanted] afterwards*” (WI, 106). Although the information from BBS was not seen as fully reliable, interviewees still used it for hearing different voices from experienced students.

It can therefore be said that while quality is important, respondents also cared about the quantity of information as they thought that more opinions would lead them closer to the “truth” about the performances of certain course/universities.



*...Although personal opinions might be more subjective... what universities or online information [from the university websites] said could make me feel that they only said good things about themselves. They don't say bad things about themselves. You can only take that [information from universities] for references. Although people's opinions are more subjective, if you ask more people, and everyone said the same thing, it's not too far from the truth then (YU, 75).*

Even though information on the discussion boards was contributed by different people, this made quality control of information on BBS harder. Some respondents worried less about the information quality from BBS, because “...if there's someone [on PTT] trying to spread incorrect information there, other people would also spot that and point it out [to other readers]” (BO, 83). Cooperative actions between the users of BBS trying to increase its information quality might have also made respondents enjoy using information from BBS, because respondents were involved in the process of getting information, and they might act simultaneously as information transmitters and receivers. Interestingly, for respondents who were not happy with the quality of information from BBS, they might still use it for emotional support and discussion of exam issues.

*...information from the BBS sites is very biased, because people play psychological games there. They might not want you to study at that university, so they give very subjective, wrong information. I very much doubt the accuracy of the information from the BBS sites...I have the lowest trust [on BBS]...but I need [BBS] only for emotional support and to discuss the mock exam questions [with others]. It's the only function really for me (HU, 79-81).*



As the process on preparing for the Master's exam could be long and boring for many potential students of the TW group, using BBS could be about having fun rather than getting useful information. One interviewee said, "...I read them [the messages on BBS] to get some laughter. To know what others are thinking. These [messages] do not affect my judgment [on where to apply]" (CI, 107), while another respondent commented,

*...Some potential students would try to spread incorrect information on the board [of PTT] to disturb other competitors [potential students], and to see that is funny [laughing]. For example, they [people on PTT] might say one university has sent out their exam identifications, but it's not true. Some people would be seriously panicked and affected...I'm not influenced, because I don't get nervous easily. I'm calm when facing problems. It's very funny though to see what happened on the message board (BO, 77-80).*

As the reliability of information from BBS was not high from some respondents' views, some interviewees said they "filtered" the information by ignoring extreme statements and only listened to mild opinions.

*[When using PTT], I would choose people who are not very subjective or judgmental. Similarly, if my teachers from cram school are those extremists, I would be more careful in listening to what they say... (WI, 101-103).*

*Some messages [on the cram school discussion board] are also very extreme. I only tend to listen to people who stand in the middle of the two extremes. Overall, although the quality of information is not guaranteed when it's on discussion boards, it's always good to know a bit more anyway (EN, 72).*



This attitude of “wanting to know more regardless its information quality” seemed to attract the TW group to use BBS more. Furthermore, I found that some respondents related the level of objectivity to a more gentle approach of expressing opinions, and when people’s opinions were seen as “moderate” rather than “extreme”, their views were regarded as more objective, and therefore consisting of stronger information quality.

It could be argued whether ignoring extreme opinions on BBS really helped respondents to gather information. However, the main focus here is about being aware of respondents’ individual and cultural differences in their use of information sources, and to be less concerned about the usefulness of respondents’ approaches in evaluating information quality. It is also worth noting that although some respondents tried to ignore extreme opinions without being affected by them, extreme opinions from BBS could still have some influence on interviewees’ Master’s choices. For example, one respondent said “*even trying to be more objective when reading [extreme information from PTT], sometimes you still would be pulled away by the information*” (WI, 64).

### **6.1.3 Least trusted Taiwanese universities**

Many interviewees of the TW group do not have good perceptions toward information provided by Taiwanese universities as they feel these institutions only promote themselves, and this does not help them in the evaluation of alternatives. According to the interviewees, information from university websites (although highly accessible), often lacked sufficient detail, and also needed to be updated. This finding is similar to Armstrong and Lumsden (1999) who suggest that students expect the information from universities to be up-to-date.



*University B was the best in providing information. Their website was current, so we know the latest news like who published papers, which lecturer was accepted by a PhD course, which overseas university is now a sister university with us etc. Other universities might have information about their facilities or teachers' backgrounds, but don't update other information at all...It's also good to update [university website information] more often. Students can feel whether they [universities] spent time on doing this (YI, 98).*

*The university websites provided general information like modules and compulsory subjects. But you cannot know the details about teaching materials there. It would be good if they can provide what books will be used and what [types of] teaching would be like in their websites (MI, 81-82).*

Herr *et al.*, (1991) found many university prospectuses were just “pulled out” every year with little or no changes made to them, and this was similar to what the above respondents highlighted with regards to the information on university websites. In this study I found that interviewees saw information provided by universities as the least reliable, as official information provided by universities tended only to present details of the brighter sides of the university. For example, one respondent said, “*I don't trust university marketing, because I feel they are all false*” (CI, 61). When using information provided by Taiwanese universities, respondents indicated less trust than information provided by other sources, as they felt “*...the information from their [universities] websites only told good things about themselves. I don't believe that very much*” (JI, 87).



Moreover, Taiwanese universities that conduct HE marketing more aggressively might even bring side-effects to their recruitment of prospective students, because some respondents felt “good universities do not need to market themselves”. For instance, one respondent said, “*those universities with prospectuses were universities that were not as good as others. That [university prospectus] would not affect me, because I wouldn’t consider them [the universities that have prospectuses]*” (YU, 73). This indicates that respondents of the TW group as home-based students might assume good universities is well-known by the public already, so there is no need for “good universities” to market themselves. Although it might be true that home-based students have built preliminary perceptions on local universities, this does not mean that further marketing activities have no chances in changing students’ perceptions. This study shows that the majority of participants from both groups had higher trust toward people they know, so the above finding might also suggest that non-marketing as opposed to marketing stimuli information sources might be more effective in changing students’ preliminary perceptions.

As mentioned above, respondents of the TW group indicated higher levels of perceived reliability when the information was from people they knew, like from experienced friends or teachers. Furthermore, information from people at BBS sites was seen as worth reading and could be used as reference points in decision-making. However, the “bright” information from universities was the least trusted information source, and another reason to distrust information from universities was that a few respondents felt reading and digesting university’s documentary information took more time and effort than just asking for people’s opinions. For example, one respondent said,



*...I think it's good to ask friends, as long as they experienced a similar situation. When I told them what the key factors are for me [in choosing universities], they could immediately give me the information I needed. If I go read some documents, it's quite hard to get the information I want straight away- -It's more time-consuming (JA, 59-60).*

Information from experienced students can be obtained more quickly and was seen as being more reliable by the TW group. This finding supports Mowen and Minor (2001) who suggest that WOM information is preferred when other information sources are perceived by consumers as having low credibility or when an influential person is more accessible by consumers than other information sources and can be easily and quickly consulted. As the TW group felt the information from Taiwanese universities had low reliability, and they could save time and effort when using WOM, they preferred information from reference groups.

Although many respondents from the TW group used information provided by Taiwanese universities it is doubtful, to what extent such information affected the TW group's alternative evaluations. Similar to what British universities do, some Taiwanese universities attended educational fairs to promote their courses to prospective students, but this might not directly encourage students' applications. As one respondent said,

*EN: I attended an educational fair and felt the information there was only okay, and it's very similar to what you can get from university websites. The more helpful thing was you could talk to current students at their stands...*

Interviewer: did that [educational] fair affect your Master's choices? Did you apply to any universities that were at the fair?

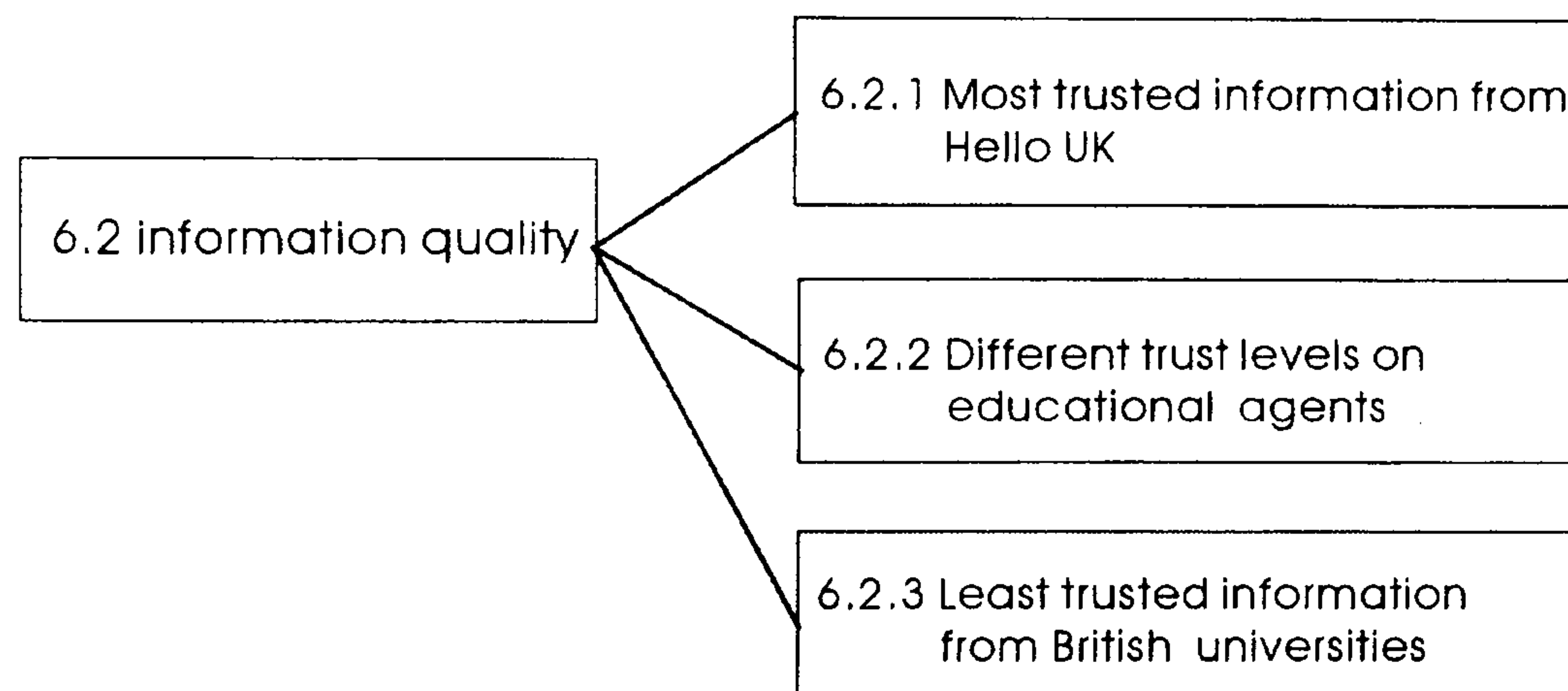


EN: *No, I didn't apply to any of them. I was there only to listen to latest news, like their future plans or [details of] new courses (EN, 74-78).*

## 6.2 UK group

Figure 6.2 shows the perceived information quality from the UK group. Hello UK was the most trusted information source (section 6.2.1), while the UK group had different levels of trust towards educational agents (section 6.2.2), and British universities tended to be the least trusted information source (section 6.2.3). These respective areas will be discussed next.

**Figure 6.2 Perceived information quality from the UK group**



### 6.2.1 Most trusted Hello UK

As the information from Hello UK is normally from either current students or alumni, several respondents felt it was the most reliable information source. Although websites like BBS is an impersonal information source, it seems respondents accepted “typing” communication as another form of “interpersonal” communication. Moreover, some respondents saw written forms of information exchange as being more reliable than verbal communications.



*I trust online information. Compared to verbal communication, I trust written information more. If someone wants to write something and puts that online, I think the information is more trustworthy than verbal information (AL, 92).*

*...by students' written records, you can see whether they use Chinese or English more, to see how they exchange information. For example, in Hello UK, you see students from that university, they write in English and [you can see] how good their English is... (BI, 106).*

*...People tend to give you general ideas, but written documents have more detail. I feel personal [verbal] comments are more subjective. Although the content [of written documents] is also written by people, I still think they are more trustworthy (LE, 78-79).*

Respondents might have personal preferences on the type of information they use, and this also affected their use of external information. For example, one respondent said the speed of getting information is the most important, so that would affect what types of information sources he used.

*[In the use of information sources] it depends how quick I can get the information. I'll choose the quickest and most convenient way to find the information. If it's quicker to ask people, I will ask. If it's quicker to read something, I will read (LE, 78).*

In addition, regarding those respondents who think written information is more trustworthy, they would naturally increase their use of written information, and this is also supported in the literature which suggests online written WOM, was preferred as



it made the information appear more formal (Sun *et al.*, 2006). As the UK group wanted to get experienced students' advice, BBS was the most likely information source for potential students, because potential students were still in Taiwan while current students of British universities were in the UK. Generally, information from experienced students was seen as objective by the UK group as students abroad were "already in the UK".

*I liked to see students' experiences [from Hello UK] because British universities would only say how good they are [laughing]. Students' comments are more objective (AM, 32).*

*People who use Hello UK are already in the UK, so it's better to ask them than for me to make subjective decisions. It's good to know more opinions for reference. I didn't know which one [university] to choose, so I wanted to ask people about the weather, tuition fees, and their feelings on the universities etc. (LN, 46).*

To the UK group, having information from other Taiwanese students, who have the same cultural backgrounds, also increased the reliability of information for some respondents. For example, one respondent said, "I wanted to know how international students feel about that university. By using Hello UK, I could see Taiwanese students' perspectives". Being Taiwanese students, a few respondents felt if they listened to students from the same country, they could communicate better without cultural misunderstandings.

*...I think I would want to listen more to Taiwanese students than students from other countries. I feel more familiar, friendly with students from my*



*country, so they shouldn't want to cheat me...we share the same cultural background (JO, 101-104).*

Some interviewees liked Hello UK as it offered detailed information, *"...I also like things from Hello UK because I can see detailed information from people expressing different opinions"*. The nature of BBS sites allows respondents to exchange opinions by posting messages, so it made the information search more specific and personalised. Another respondent said, *"...I like to ask people [for information] because it's quicker to know things and also some of my questions are more personal..."*. Moreover, the detailed information respondents required was especially on the teaching and learning aspects of the Master's courses,

*Like the assessment, mark-giving, the percentage of students failing the programme overall, and the nationality of students [was not provided by universities]. That information might vary every year, but university websites or prospectuses tend to only cover them generally rather than specifically...I like Hello UK the most, because my questions could be answered specifically (JU, 122-125).*

*...study information [was not provided by university websites]. How do students feel about the courses? But I didn't want to know that from the universities [anyway] because I still might not believe them. [It is] better to know from students about the study situation (TO, 83-88).*

It is interesting to see some respondents wanted certain types of information from particular information sources. For instance, the above respondents, preferred to know about studying information from experienced students and not from British



universities. This is because they reasoned that experienced students gave specific answers and were also more credible when providing such information.

Moreover, some respondents liked Hello UK as an information source was because it is written in Mandarin.

*...I like personal information more [from Hello UK]. They are more convincing to me...However, when reading the written information from university websites, I don't have much faith in it, because everyone might interpret the [written] information differently after reading the same thing...I prefer Chinese information, because we still have better understanding and reading abilities in Mandarin... (JU, 114-117).*

*I like Hello UK because it's written in Mandarin, so I could write [messages online] quickly without problems. Also, [it has] detailed information and [you can get] quick responses...you can post a message in the morning, and someone [would] reply in the afternoon- very fast (JO, 106-108).*

Although British universities and agents were aware that some Taiwanese students might like information to be written in Mandarin, there is a dilemma in terms of the language use for marketing British universities. As one agent commented,

*Sometimes if they [Taiwanese students] see the Mandarin information, they think there must be all Chinese students in the school, so sometimes they are happier to see the English information. But then again they will understand the Chinese a lot better. It's quite a difficult situation. I was talking with the university representatives previously about whether we should make the information on the flyers in English or Mandarin. They were thinking if it's in*



*Mandarin, the students won't want to go because they think there's all Chinese students there. But if it's in English, then a lot of students might not understand. It's quite a difficult situation (Agent interviews, Agency G, M, 50-52).*

As the UK group had little internal information, it might explain why WOM information from Hello UK was preferred. As suggested in the literature (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997), when the consumer feels the lack of sufficient information to make an adequately informed purchasing choice, the use of WOM information increases. Also, the UK group as international students might prefer WOM information more, because the experience of other people can be taken as a “virtual trial” (Solomon *et al.*, 2002) which helps them in alternative evaluations of British universities.

### **6.2.2 Different feelings towards educational agents**

The UK group had different comments on the quality of information provided by educational agents. While some respondents were pleased with the information from agents, which led to more reliance on agents, other respondents felt less trusting toward agents. Consequently, this led to negative perceptions about the quality of information provided by agents. When respondents have closer relationships with agents however, a greater degree of trust emerges, and the information from agents is seen as more objective and reliable.

*They [educational agents] were objective with good attitudes. I always saw the same counselor when I went [to the agency]. My agent didn't get involved after I had offers. I mean when I was thinking either to enroll at Southampton or Liverpool [University] (ME, 76).*



*[My trust of educational agents is] very high. I can apply to any university through them [agents]. They supported me much. I frequently used information provided by my agent. It's good that my agent can help narrow down the scope of universities from over 100 to 9 universities. So I could compare them in detail. I feel they have provided me with objective suggestions (BI, 102).*

However, some respondents did not trust the information from agents as much when they did not have close relationships.

*I trust more the universities more than the agents. If I get information from the agents, I'll go check that [information] to see whether they are telling me the truth. But if it's from the universities, I won't do that... (LU, 76-77).*

Interestingly, not only did respondents have problems trusting agents, agents also had problems trusting potential students.

*I can only say that Taiwanese are very good shoppers, so they will go around and they will speak to lots of agents...so they will check lots of places and find who they are most comfortable with, which I think is mainly a good thing... (Agent interview, Agency G, M, 68-69).*

*...Students might use one agent for a period of time and suddenly stop coming. Peter and David feel sad about this because students suddenly change their minds and stop using their services. Counsellors might feel they are students' friends initially, but if students suddenly change their minds, they will stop coming, stop answering telephones, and stop replying to emails. Peter and David feel very upset about this (Agent interview, Agency G, P and D, 9-10).*



Although respondents had different opinions about the quality of information from agents, close relationships with agents increased the level of trust amongst the UK group towards agents, and it encouraged the group to value information from agents more highly.

### **6.2.3 Least trusted British universities**

The UK group also did not feel information from British universities was very trustworthy, mainly because they only “said good things about themselves”. Although respondents still used British university websites for detailed comparisons between courses/universities, some comments from the UK group indicated that provided information might not be very influential. Moreover, regarding using university websites, individual respondents might have very different feedback about the design of the same website. For instance, two participants who both used the University D website expressed totally opposite comments about its design. While one participant felt the design was not easy to follow, another participant felt it was user-friendly.

*...The design of the University D website is not good, because it's not easy and clear for us to find things there. You select from many options and when you get into that section, you have only a few lines to read...they [University D] present detailed information, but they need to present the information in an easier, clearer, and more “easy-to-be understood” style (LE, 84).*

*They [University D] don't have video clips [on their website] but their prospectus is good. The website is also clear [to follow]. Different academic schools differentiate themselves with different colours. [It is] quite clear and easy to search (BI, 97-99).*



The reason respondents feel so differently regarding the same online information source might be because each participant has different levels of computer literacy and different habits when using online resources. Hence, this might also affect how they find the website design. Furthermore, many respondents of the UK group believed information from current Master's students, often accessed from Hello UK, is more reliable than information from British universities. One respondent outlined the reason for this whereby "*...things inside the university website might have been changed to package the university better. Compared to Hello UK, it's not as real...*" Therefore, although respondents still used the information provided by British university websites, certain types of information was used more, such as "*some concrete facts that they [universities] cannot lie about*" while another interviewee stated,

*...I only used their information about the curriculum and tuition fees. Fixed facts. I think universities still might give me brighter images about themselves, so I prefer to ask experienced students (JO, 111-113).*

*I think their information was okay. Just like marketing your products to customers, universities need to package themselves to attract customers, but we need to be aware whether they have over packaged themselves...I would look at some facts that they cannot lie about, like Internet access, the facilities, the library etc. I did pre-sessional courses first, so if I came and found they were lying, I could transfer to another Master's course later (TO, 68-70).*

*I only trust certain information like [details about] tuition and accommodation, but not the living cost. The [estimated] living cost that University D provided [on the website] was far from the truth, it was much more expensive than that!*



*[sounds annoyed] They did this probably because they really want to attract students to study here (AM, 76).*

There was a feeling amongst the UK group to think of British universities as the “selling side” who wants to sell courses to them, while the information from agents seemed to be seen as slightly more reliable, and this might have happened because respondents tend to think agents can apply to “all” (not only a few) British universities for them. This made agents more trustworthy in terms of the information they provided, as agents would be seen as an “adviser”, as opposed to a “seller” of his services.

A few respondents of the UK group viewed universities as “companies” that were trying to package their “products” (courses) for sale, and did not see universities as “non-for-profit organisations” as HEIs have been traditionally viewed. Hence, this might also help explain why information from universities was less preferred. Similar to the points raised by Brennan (2001b), the UK group of this study used “neutral information” from universities, like courses offered, the campus environment, and facilities, because this information was factual, and could not be lied about. However, “bright information” provided by universities to prospective students was not preferred. Also, as discussed in chapter 5, different information sources were used by respondents for obtaining different types of required information. As one respondent said,

*[It] depends on what information I need, I use different information sources... although the response speed [from university], to be honest, was quite slow. But [they were] more accurate. For example, I asked university staff things about the entrance requirements, [because] they are the people who gave the offers.*



*For another type of thing, like how good the course is, I asked current students in Hello UK. Those kinds of questions, I would not ask universities. (CA, 84-88).*

Moreover, in support of Hesketh and Knight (1999), respondents expected “adequate and timely information”. For instance, some respondents felt information from universities was not comprehensive or detailed enough. One participant stated, “*their prospectuses [of British universities] don’t tell you much. They only tell you the course choices and location etc., general information...*” (ME, 106), while another respondent said,

*[The information from universities] was not very good, because they didn’t cover all the things you want to know. If they [universities] don’t have that information, you might need to send them emails to ask. For example, in the website, they might only have one page on the MBA course. In the prospectus, from a thick book, you could have only a few pages about the MBA [course]. [This is] not detailed enough (JU, 119-122).*

Hence, to obtain more detailed information, respondents of both groups used BBS websites, as they could gain “personalised” information from current students/alumni, especially regarding information about teaching. In support of Newell *et al.*, (1996), this study found the information provided by universities had little influence over respondents’ final enrolment choices. Rather, respondents from both groups preferred consulting current students for information about where to enroll. Potential students preferred the opinions of alumni and current students (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999) as they were believed to have specific knowledge of the universities they attended. This gave alumni and current students *expert power* over potential students (Solomon *et al.*, 2002).



Generally, the UK group viewed information provided by British universities as being less reliable. Yet, one respondent suggested she preferred “official information” provided by British universities than information from Hello UK.

*I like official information, from the government or universities. I don't like the Hello UK website because they are personal opinions with emotions. I like official information, because it's more complete, neutral, and objective... I prefer to read documents myself, rather than asking others. I want to read, think and make my own judgments than only reading what others told me (MA, 72-74).*

The above quote might indicate that personal preferences did affect respondents' use of external information sources, including the format and the types of information they prefer using. Certainly, this is not about making right or wrong choices, but is more about the favoured sources and the ways in which respondents prefer to receive information.

### **6.3 Information quality for the two groups**

After presenting the findings for Objective 3, the similarities and differences between the TW and the UK group will next be compared. A notable similarity here is that interviewees from both groups used similar attributes to evaluate information quality.

#### **6.3.1 Similar attributes used**

Previous studies (e.g. Aladwani and Palvia, 2002; Ranganathan and Ganapathy, 2002) suggest certain attributes for evaluating information quality, such as update, accuracy, believability, and appropriate amount of data. Although slightly different terms were



used by interviewees from this study to describe the attributes they cared about, the above elements were also considered by interviewees as indicators for information quality. For instance, “reliability” and “the coverage of information” was used in this study instead of “believability” and “appropriate amount of data” respectively.

Moreover, in this study, terms like “objectivity” or “reliability” seem to be directly related by both groups to the level of trust in using information sources. The TW group, trusted their friends and teachers more as information sources, followed by information from BBS, and the least reliable information from their perspectives was from Taiwanese universities. Regarding the UK group, most of them had very few experienced friends to ask for advice, so the most trusted information source for them was Hello UK, which was used to contact current students or alumni of British universities. The UK group had different levels of trust toward the information provided by educational agents. This trust was mediated by the type of relationships that prospective applicants had with agents. The UK group generally trusted information from agents more than from British universities.

As mentioned, the reason that information provided by universities tended to be less preferred by respondents was that universities were seen as “selling” agents. Whilst respondents of the UK group, used university prospectuses and websites, the reliability of the information from these sources was not trusted. These sources were therefore mainly used to collect “facts”, that were seen as less easy to represent than other types of information.



In this study, “objectivity, reliability and accessibility” were commonly used by both groups as attributes to evaluate information quality, and this might mean that being Taiwanese students, irrespective of the study destination, they still shared mutual cultural backgrounds influencing their evaluation of information quality. Interestingly, although the attributes used by both groups were basically similar, the TW group did not use “coverage of information” as an indicator of evaluating information quality, while a few respondents of the UK group mentioned this element, and suggested when the information from one source was more comprehensive it was used more.

*I like the UKEAS website very much, because they have an interactive map of every university...When you click the London area, you have all the universities in the London area on the map. You can see the Mandarin introduction of each university, and also you can link to the university websites. [UKEAS] also includes the ranking, the city, and what previous graduates said about the university. It's very good, because almost everything I want to know I can get, so I'll rely on that website (LE, 81-83).*

*I prefer information to be more structured. It needs to be logically presented and the coverage...needs to be wide, so I don't need to look at other websites for other information. If I couldn't find out all the information I need from a website, I don't think the quality of information is good, and I would never use that website again (MA, 82).*

It could be possible that for the TW group, as they had richer internal information, they did not need comprehensive external information to help them in their Master's choices. On the other hand, for the UK group, they needed to build up a basic understanding of the overall situation of studying in the UK, so if any information



source offered detailed and comprehensive information, they might prefer using that to save time and effort.

### **6.3.2 Different attitudes regarding BBS**

In this study I found that interviewees from both groups highly regarded online information provided by BBS. This finding echoes previous studies (i.e., Daniels and Norman, 2001; Cho and Joun, 2003) which suggest “saving time and cost” and “convenience” are the elements for the evaluation of information quality. As both groups felt the information from experienced students was more reliable than information from universities, this might also make them use BBS more, because it was a main source for potential students to contact current Master’s students.

Although respondents from both groups used BBS, they seem to have different attitudes toward the information provided by this site. The TW group normally talked to reference groups before using BBS, as the information quality from reference groups was still rated more highly by them. Another reason for the TW group to be more concerned about information from BBS could be that in Taiwan, when one student decided not to accept an offer from one university, other students who were on the waiting list from that university would be moved up to accept that offer. Hence, some respondents of the TW group worried that people from BBS might spread negative comments about one university, so other students might be put off from accepting the offers from that university, which might increase their chances of getting offers from those universities.



It is understandable that the TW group might worry about whether other potential students as “competitors” might offer false information on BBS to affect their enrolment choices, and this might explain why the TW group had lower trust towards the information from BBS sites compared to the UK group. Moreover, the TW group had much internal information in their memory, so they did not need as much advice from current students as the UK group, and this can be supported by the fact that some respondents of the TW group used BBS for fun or emotional support and not only for information.

By contrast, as the UK group applied to British universities knowing that they did not need to be in a waiting list for offers, they did not worry about whether other potential students would try to deceive their Master’s choices via BBS. Also, as the UK group normally had much less personal contacts to know about current students’ advice on studying in the UK, they relied more on the comments from current students at BBS than the TW group.

As previously discussed, the TW group showed more effort in evaluating information from BBS, while the UK group did not mention ignoring extreme opinions from BBS, like Hello UK, at all. This might have happened as the UK group did not know much internally about studying or living in the UK, and without enough internal information to evaluate the external information from Hello UK, the UK group had fewer complaints on the information from BBS compared to the TW group.



The UK group might need experienced students' advice very much to assist their Master's choice in the UK, so they relied more on the information from BBS, and they also seemed to appreciate experienced students who advised them at Hello UK more. For example, one respondent said,

*Hello UK has been the most useful and comprehensive place in terms of UK studying. I met so many people there with the same dreams [of studying abroad] and I got answers and inspiration from them. Hello UK connects people on the Internet or even in real life. I can still remember I contacted a woman who used to study in Ulster [University] and she was very enthusiastic about answering every single query I had...The idea of the Hello UK community is about give and take, and everyone is willing to do so. The system would collapse otherwise. So I think Hello UK is the greatest [information source] (CA, 89-91).*

Solomon *et al.*, (2002) suggest that a virtual group, (such as members at Hello UK), is a new concept of community and define it as “a collection of people whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for and knowledge of a specific consumption activity”. It is interesting to see the above respondent, CA, point out the “enthusiasm” of community members of Hello UK to be an element of a successful virtual group. On the other hand, very few respondents of the TW group showed appreciation toward current students' comments from BBS.

Although studies (i.e., Christie *et al.*, 2004; Connor and Dewson, 2001) demonstrate that students' HE choices were often made in a poorly-informed situation, this study found only a few respondents from the TW and the UK group that were dissatisfied with the pre-entry information they received. On the other hand, the majority of respondents from both groups were satisfied with the information they received.



Although a few respondents felt some information could be more detailed, more user-friendly or more accurate, especially in terms of the teaching and learning aspects, they were generally happy with the quality and quantity of information they received from external sources.

One particular interviewee of the TW group was the most dissatisfied about his experiences on studying a Master's course, which differed from his expectations, but he actually blamed not only misleading information from universities, but also his unrealistic expectations on courses or universities.

*I thought I could learn more practical things here [on the Master's course]. But there's not even a bit here...[everything] is very academic. I thought my English could improve [after studying the Master's], but it hasn't. This part is my own problem, not them [University B]. But it's different from my imagination...It's good for any university or companies to do marketing, but if they do it too much, and people came here to find out it's not true. It's too much. I think University B has done it too much...they don't have any modules to teach us how to use the database that they said they had (CI, 108-113).*

Both the TW and the UK group, when they wanted to know more about the teaching and learning aspects, they preferred to get that information from the comments of current students and not from universities. Hence, this might be referred back to reliability and trust issues from university-provided information.

Individual respondents' perceived quality on sources and their preferences of information sources affect how they used these sources. Also, when interviewees of both groups saw any information source as being higher in quality, they used that



source more. As one respondent said, *“If I think the quality of information is good, I use that information source more often and the influential level [on my Master’s choices] would be higher”* (TO, 86).

#### **6.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the findings for Objective three to explore the meaning of information quality from Taiwanese participants’ perspectives and to see to what extent information quality affected participants’ external search. It was found participants from both groups used similar attributes in evaluation of information quality, but they had different attitudes to the information obtained from BBS. When relating the findings to Chapters five and seven, it also showed that when the perceived information quality was high, participants used them more in the external search. The influential information sources will be discussed in the following chapter.



## Chapter 7 Influential information sources

### 7.0 Chapter overview

This chapter covers findings related to Objective 4 concerning the impacts of the influential external information sources on the formation of students' consideration sets, application lists, and enrolment choices. Therefore, how the influential external information sources affected Taiwanese participants' key stages of Master's decision-making, (including their consideration set, application list, and enrolment choice), will be presented next.

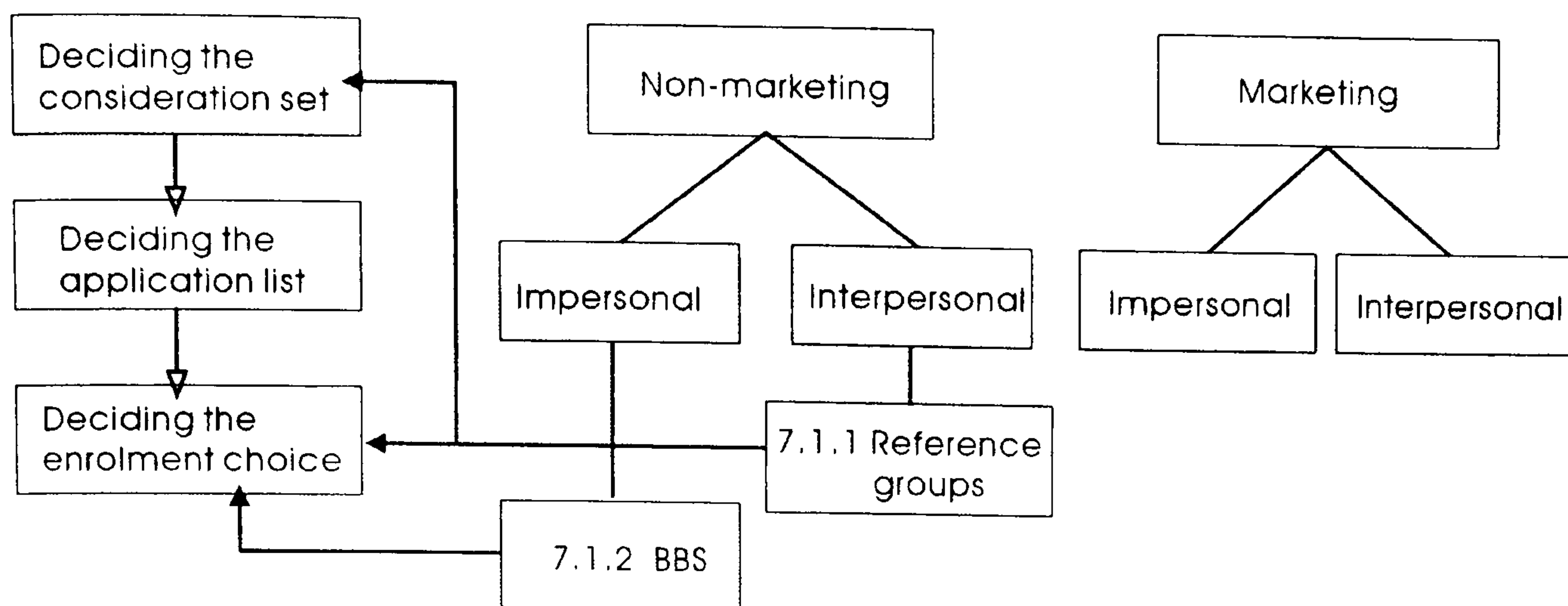
Interviewees of the TW and the UK group admitted that when they thought the information quality from one information source was good, they used that information source more often, and also that source could be more influential to their Master's choices. In other words, although several information sources were used, certain information sources affected respondents more than others. When referring back to Objective 3, the information sources that were seen as having better information quality were also the more influential ones for participants in this study.

### 7.1 TW group

Figure 7.1 illustrates how influential information sources affected respondents' key stages of their Master's decision-making process. Reference groups were influential to respondents' consideration sets and enrolment choices (section 7.1.1), and BBS was influential to respondents' enrolment choices (section 7.1.2). However, the decision of choosing application lists was not affected by influential information sources.



**Figure 7.1 Influential information sources of the TW group**



Reference groups and BBS were the influential information sources for the TW group. Reference groups included experienced friends, teachers and current students. Also, BBS was influential as they were often included current students' comments which directly affected respondents' enrolment choices.

### **7.1.1 Reference groups for consideration set and enrolment choice**

Several interviewees of the TW group indicated that reference groups were the main information sources influencing their consideration sets and enrolment choices.

#### **Experienced friends used in consideration set**

Experienced friends of the TW group included respondents' peers or senior students from undergraduate level who entered the Master's courses a few years earlier. Respondents tended to think their experienced friends had more understanding as a result of their personal situation, so their suggestions were more useful. One respondent said, *"My classmates [were the most influential], because we have similar positions, and also they know my problems better, so I would accept their suggestions more..."* (EN, 80), while another respondent stated,



*I would think senior students [were the most influential]. The most surprising comments were on Cheng Kung University... I used to think it was quite good. But after I heard what senior students said, I didn't really want to choose it [Cheng Kung University] (YU, 67).*

In support of several previous studies (i.e., Chalmers, 2001; Christie *et al.*, 2004; Pimpa, 2003), this study found that students' peers affected their HE choices. Peers of the TW group were not only informative, but also offer emotional support. As the preparation process for the Master's entrance exam could be lonely and routine to many respondents of the TW group, one respondent mentioned he had a peer to support him in that difficult period.

*I appreciated my flatmate, because he was accepted very early by a Master's course, so when I was preparing for the exam, I got him to support me emotionally whenever I need (JA, 85-86).*

For the TW group, some respondents' experienced friends affected the choice criteria they used, and some respondents sought for experienced friends' advice when evaluating the performance of various universities to form consideration sets. Experienced friends were influential to some respondents' consideration sets, including the use of choice criteria and the evaluation of universities. Experienced friends' influences could be on which university or what types of universities (i.e., public or private) were selected. For instance, one respondent applied to one university, because he heard the name of that Master's programme from one of his friends. He searched for some information at the website of that university, and he applied to that programme as well. He said, "*I had another friend from my university*



*who had wanted to apply Taiwan Normal University, so I knew this course and applied*” (EN, 46).

Similarly, another respondent intended only to apply to private universities, which are seen as less prestigious than public universities in Taiwan. He mentioned that decision to some of his friends who had had Master’s degrees, and they suggested he apply to public universities as well. This suggestion from experienced friends on consideration sets was later adopted by that respondent.

*I didn’t want to apply to any public universities in the first place. I thought I only prepared [for the Master’s entrance exam] for 6 months, how could I be accepted [by public universities]? Also, public universities normally test English. My English is terrible. However I have friends who studied at Taiwan University, and they suggested I apply to public universities as well. They said my math is good, and although my English isn’t good, I still have chances to get into public universities* (CE, 61-62).

### **Teachers affected consideration set**

Teachers’ suggestions were influential to some respondents from the TW group, and the differences of receiving information from respondents’ experienced friends and teachers was often that the former type was characterised by two-way as opposed to one-way interactions.

*I normally listen to the comments from the teachers of cram school in class, and don’t ask them directly. When talking to friends, I actively ask them questions myself. Most of the time, I arranged meetings with friends to ask them questions, either by phone or via MSN. I asked them things regarding their study experiences at that university* (JI, 60).



*...The way I had information from the teachers from cram school and from PTT was to receive what they wanted to tell me. I didn't have interactions with them. I only listened to them... (WI, 97).*

Interviewees of the TW group tended to ask experienced friends questions directly. But the approach to obtaining information from teachers was more passive, which was normally characterised by receiving their comments on universities in class rather than in direct face-to-face interactions. Hence, respondents tended to passively receive information from teachers in class. By contrast, when receiving information from friends whom they personally knew, the interactions were more in a question-and-answer format. It was therefore a more active way to receive information.

Furthermore, the teachers respondents used were more often their teachers at cram schools rather than teachers who taught them at undergraduate level. This could be because teachers at universities might have talked about the performances of other universities in class during the four years of respondents' undergraduate study, which might have slightly influenced the TW groups' Master's choices. However, when the TW group attended cram schools for preparing the Master's exams, as the decision to study Master's had been firmly decided, respondents of the TW group might have hence paid more attention to the relevant information around them, including the comments from cram school teachers on universities. Therefore, the influences from cram school teachers could be stronger than their university lecturers on the TW group.



Comments from cram school teachers were influential to some respondents in deciding their consideration sets. However, the influences from those teachers were not as strong and obvious as experienced friends' influences on the TW group. Teachers at cram schools might comment on the performances of some universities in class, and those comments generally influenced some respondents' perceptions.

*Teachers at the cram school would comment on the Master's courses when they were teaching us the exam questions from that university. I couldn't remember exactly what they said, but I trusted the information from them, and if they said that university has a good studying atmosphere, I would really think about applying there (WI, 69-70).*

*I chose [to apply to] Chengchi [University] because it's the best university offering the Master's of business administration programme. It has the longest history and was strongly recommended by the Principles of management teacher at the cram school (JI, 22).*

In JI's case however, as Chengchi University is one of the best universities recognised generally in Taiwan, it seems JI's teacher didn't really "suggest" her to consider that university. It is more likely that the teacher's comments increased the possibility for JI to include Chengchi University in her consideration set. In general, comments from cram school teachers were normally less specific compared to comments from the TW group's experienced friends, as experienced friends might have personal experiences of having studied at those universities, but teachers might only have broad understandings on certain universities or courses.



O'Neill (1995) suggests that students' previous educational institutions were influential to Master's students' HE choices, and this was similar to the findings of the TW group, especially on the influences from the cram school teachers. For the TW group, teachers from students' previous universities were not as influential as cram school teachers to students' Master's choices. However, for the UK group, as their previous educational institutions were in Taiwan, they could not really help them in making their Master's choices in the UK, this study did not find previous educational institutions to have any influences on the UK group.

### **Current students affected enrolment choice**

When the respondents of the TW group were accepted by more than one university, many of them had advice from current students on where to enroll. One respondent said he asked friends who were current students "*if you were me, which university would you choose?*" This question might have shown that the TW group wanted to know how other "experienced students" perceived the desirability of studying at particular universities. If respondents were considering several potential universities for enrolment, they especially wanted to listen to someone who had studied at those particular universities.

*I talked to that student [a current student] and found he happened to be a graduate from Soochow University...I asked his advice and he said the teachers at University B work harder than those at Soochow University...He said the professors at Soochow are old, so they didn't work as hard [as professors at University B]. If professors research harder, they can help you more when you do your dissertations. I think so (MI, 41-44).*



*I especially asked senior students at Yunlin University of Science and Technology and they suggested me to come to University B. They said the students here [at University B] have higher academic performance...you can see this from the acceptance list. People who were accepted by Yunlin University of Science and Technology were often only accepted by that university alone. But people who were accepted by University B were normally accepted by more than one university. It means their [academic] abilities were higher (YI, 42-46).*

Both respondents above enrolled with the university that was suggested by the current students with whom they spoke with, and it might suggest opinions from current students could have strong influences on potential students' enrolment choices, especially when they are struggling between two possible choices. Also, as opinions from current students are viewed by potential students as reliable and objective, it helped interviewees to reach a decision regarding their enrolment choices.

### **7.1.2 BBS for enrolment choice**

As mentioned earlier, the BBS websites used by the TW group were either PTT, a widely used discussion board for postgraduate study in Taiwan, or the BBS within the cram school websites that respondents attended. BBS as online information sources were not as influential as the reference groups for the TW group, as the TW group still had higher trusts towards people they knew from personal contacts than just anyone online at BBS. However, when there is no information available from respondents' personal contacts, information from BBS was still used, because the majority of the TW group feels "more information is always better than no information". As one respondent said,



*I would prefer to listen to as many views as possible, because you would know what people think about the universities. If everyone says that university is okay, this means it's more likely to be the general views people have on that university (YI, 79-80).*

When making an enrolment choice, several respondents of the TW group had information from people at BBS. For instance, one respondent said, “...from PTT and the Get Institute website....many people [potential students] asked questions there [at BBS] about where to enrol...” Although respondents might have ideas on where is a better enrolment choice, they still preferred to know as much information as possible from BBS, and one of the most important justifications for this was because some respondents thought views from BBS might represent how the majority viewed the performances of certain universities.

*I asked quite a lot of people [at BBS]. People who supported Soochow University were because of its longer history [than University B], and they have more graduates in the industry. Also their [Soochow University] reputation was quite good to people. People who like University B said it's a new course that gets more attention lately [from the public]. Their [University B] teachers work harder and the computer databases are better (MI, 39-40).*

For the TW group however, as they have previous perceptions from making choices for their undergraduate degrees, it is also very possible that after counseling information from external information sources, a few of them still made the opposite decision based on their personal considerations, rather than following the crowd. For example, in one respondent's case, he enrolled with a private rather than a public university, which was against the advice from people on BBS.



CE: *I think "public universities are definitely better than private universities" is a myth. To be honest, the main reason I chose University B [for enrolment] was because of its English-teaching programmes.*

Interviewer: was that the main reason for you to choose University B?

CE: *Yes. I asked people on the Get Institute [the BBS site]. Still most of the people would vote for Chunghsing [University]. But I think I would lose on my English ability in the exams, so "wherever I fall down, wherever I should get up"* (CE, 76-78).

In CE's case, he was comparing a public with a private university, with the former being seen as publicly more prestigious. However, CE decided to choose a private university, mainly because he had his own beliefs in terms of programme choices. However, this study found generally BBS was influential upon several respondents' enrolment choices, as the majority of the TW group wanted to find out how the general public viewed alternative universities they were considering.

Although this study identified influential information sources that affected respondents' consideration sets and enrolment choices, there was no influential information source found that influenced respondents' application lists. The reason for that was because the TW group decided the consideration sets via internal and external searching, and when consideration sets were decided, respondents would then apply to those universities in their consideration sets. The majority of respondents did not change their minds at the last minute before application. However, there were still a few exceptions. For example, one respondent missed the deadlines to apply to some universities that she had in her consideration set.



*I also forgot to apply to some universities that I had selected, because the classmates who prepared the exam with me, 3 out of 4 have given up on this exam. I ended up being alone on this [exam preparation], and because I had no one to discuss [the exam application with], I missed the application deadlines of some universities. I was very annoyed by this (WI, 38).*

Moreover, as the exam dates for each university in Taiwan are different, the application forms were sent by respondents at different times. Hence, the application lists of a few respondents might be affected by their self-evaluated performances in exams. For example, one respondent decided to apply to one polytechnic university, which was not in his consideration set, after he felt he failed one exam at another university.

*When I finished the Master's exam of Mingchuan University, I thought I wouldn't be accepted at all. I then called my dad to say I would try to apply to some very bad universities, like Aletheia University, just to try to get into any university. However, when the results were announced by Mingchuan University, I was the first on the waiting list [sounds surprised] (CI, 21).*

Except for a few cases however, when the consideration sets were formed within respondents' minds, the application lists were more often not changed by any external information sources. If any respondent changed their consideration sets to application lists, it was really about personal considerations or situational factors, rather than as a result of influential information sources.



This study also found that if respondents of the TW group were given offers by more than one university, they tended to choose two of the most preferable potential universities themselves first, and then tried to compare the two universities with more external information sources. These external sources included reference groups and BBS. As suggested, the TW group as home-based students used more internal information to decide where to apply first, and then before the enrolment choices, they used more external information sources to assist their final decisions.

Interestingly, when several respondents were talking about making enrolment choices, they mentioned that they were under a great level of anxiety and uncertainty at that time, as it was very difficult for them to identify which university was a better choice for their enrolment. This is similar to what Galotti and Kozberg (1996) suggest about students being stressed by the amount of information that is potentially relevant to the decision and the short time they have to process it, as the TW group listened to many voices online from BBS, plus their own impressions towards the alternative universities, and they often needed to make enrolment choice within a short time. This was because some of them were just informed by the university when they were moved up from the waiting list to the official offer lists.

Some respondents struggled much in making the enrolment choice, because this choice was seen by them as very influential to their future career. A few respondents said by gathering more external information, they found themselves more confused, because people around them offered very different opinions on which university was a better enrollment choice. Therefore, the level of anxiety increased when more external information was collected. This situation might help to explain why experienced students had strong and direct influences on some respondents' enrolment choices, as



they offered a way for respondents to be released from the anxiety of making enrolment choices. Since they are more experienced in making enrolment choices than those respondents of the TW group, their suggestions were more likely to be the “final say”.

However, it should be stressed again that although influential information sources affected respondents’ enrolment choices, respondents were also affected by personal considerations and situational factors, and this might even include things like the preference to be in a new environment, or to follow the historical records of past students’ enrolment choices.

*I’ve stayed in Hsin-chu [city] for too long, five years, so I would like to change to a new environment to meet different people. This was really the most important consideration for me at the end, because I really feel both of them [the two potential universities that were considered for enrolment] are quite good. (JA, 48)...The main reason for me to go to University A was mainly because I was sick of being in the same city for any longer [sounds a bit uncomfortable] (JA, 56).*

*I found from asking a few people what they felt about Mingchuan [University], and they didn’t seem to have positive feelings on Mingchuan [University]... It’s just how people relate to the name of a university. I haven’t seen anyone who’s been accepted by University B or Tunghai [University] go to study at Mingchuan [University]...You could check on the website of the Get Institute [a cram school] to get the history of the [university] acceptance lists. You could also know how many universities accepted that person and which university that person finally chose [to enroll with] (CI, 66-71).*



Somehow, to make choices that follow the opinions of the majority could still be quite reasonable for some respondents, and that might also explain why the TW group wanted to use BBS for enrolment choices, because opinions from BBS were considered as the general views from the public on how good a university was.

Although some studies argue that references groups are not used as widely as university marketing information sources (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Harker *et al.*, 2001), this study presents different findings. By contrast, this study is consistent with other studies in the literature that suggests students' social networks affect their HE choices (Connor *et al.*, 1999; Christie *et al.*, 2004; James *et al.*, 1999), as they are perceived as more reliable than other information sources. However, the difference between the literature and this current study was that the latter did not find family, career counselors, and university staff to influence respondents to the degree as suggested by the literature.

One explanation on why parents, families, career counselors, and university staff were less used by Taiwanese interviewees could be because they are at postgraduate level and not at undergraduate level, which might mean that they have fewer needs in identifying the choices of majors. As Master's students all had experience making HE choices for their undergraduate courses, their internal information assisted them greatly, and consequently reduced the use of external information. Furthermore, as interviewees did not trust information from universities much, it might also affect their use of university staff, as current students of universities were preferred more than university staff. Moreover, the reasons on why family did not affect the TW

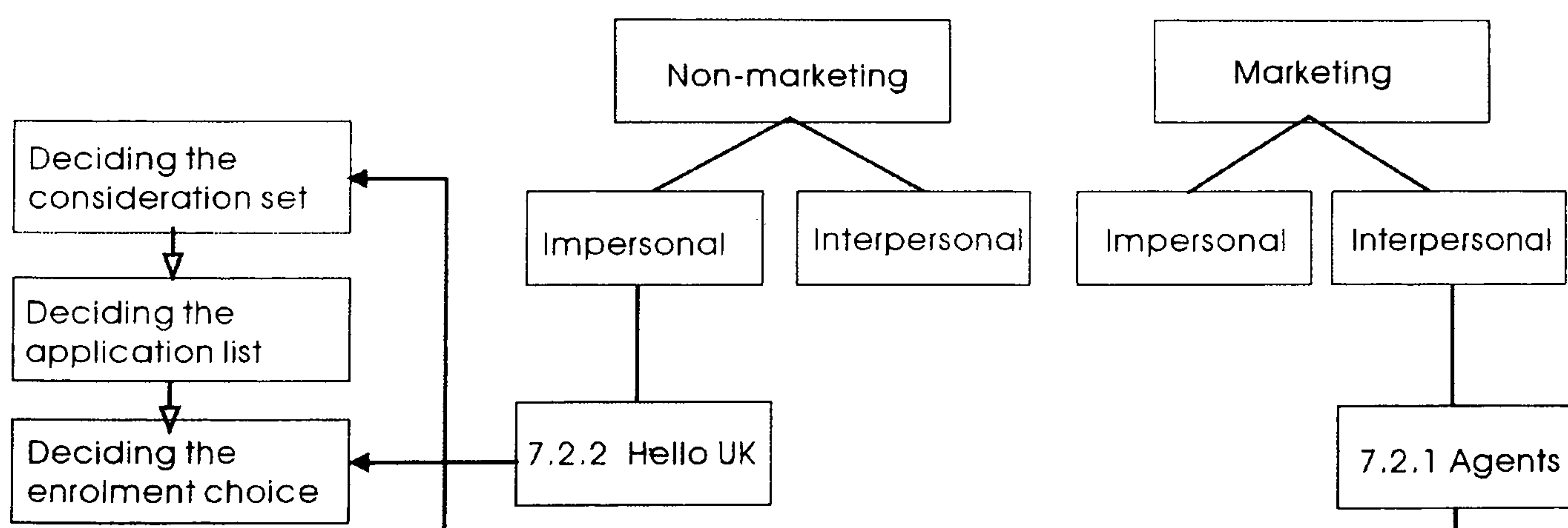


group will be discussed further in section 8.1, as this is an interesting point found from this study that differs from the literature.

## 7.2 UK group

Figure 7.2 demonstrates that educational agents and Hello UK were influential information sources for the UK group. While educational agents were influential to respondents' consideration sets (section 7.2.1), Hello UK was influential to respondents' enrolment choices (section 7.2.2). Also, similar to the TW group, the decision of the UK group's application lists was not affected by influential information sources either. How educational agents and Hello UK affected the key stages of the UK group's Master's choices will next be discussed.

**Figure 7.2 The influential information sources of the UK group**



### 7.2.1 Educational agents affected consideration set

Some respondents identified agents to be the most influential information sources, and agents' influences on the UK group were mainly on the stage of deciding consideration sets. For example,



*They [educational agents] selected the universities for me initially and I chose from the list to save time. I could not compare the 120 universities myself. It would be too time-consuming (TO, 82).*

*Actually, the suggested list from the agent did influence me. Because there were many schools with RAE 4, but my application choices were quite similar to the [suggested] list from the agent. They did influence my application list a little (AL, 70).*

*The most important information was provided by P [a boss of Agency G, an agency]. I think he knows much on universities... He knows your situation, so can recommend where you are more likely to be accepted. He also knows the reputation, the teaching quality, and which one [university] fits your demands the most (BI, 76).*

As section 5.2.2 has covered details on how educational agents affected respondents choice of consideration sets by advising suggested lists, this section will consider how agents' roles were seen by participants. In trying to understand agents' role from participants' perspectives, two issues need to be considered, namely participants' understandings on agents' positioning and their commissions.

### **Positioning of agents**

A few respondents were suggested by their experienced friends to use educational agents to apply British universities, so word-of-mouth from friends might have helped to increase respondents' trust of agents' services. One respondent said, "A friend of



*mine suggested me to go there [agent's office], so I had already had more trust towards the agents"* (LE, 34). The similar point was raised by one agent.

*I think a lot of the time they [potential students] empower counselors highly. Most of our students come through word-of-mouth, so when the [potential] students hear that people they know have had good experiences before with the counselors, they feel comfortable with giving them [counselors] a lot of power and listen to their advice* (Agent interviews, Agency G, M, 56–58).

This study found respondents had four different types of perspectives on the positioning of agents. First, some respondents felt agents were closer to British universities than to them, and thought agencies were commercial organisations, which also reduced respondents' trust. For example, one respondent said,

*They [agents] are people from a commercial organisation. I don't see them as the representatives of British university, because they are also selling flight tickets, applying for visas for students and trying to get profit out of that [service]. My agent even suggested me to apply University C that has no spring programmes! [sounding unhappy]. I was thinking whether they are not professional to know this [University C has no spring programmes] or they didn't listen to what I want* (MA, 40).

Second, a few respondents see agents as people from semi-official organisations, who are linked to the British and Taiwanese governments, and this made them feel agents' positions are more neutral and trustworthy.

*I think I saw that [agents are a semi-official organisation] from their website. They cooperate with the UK and Taiwanese government. When they are a*



*company like this, they are less commercial and think for the students more*  
(AM, 28).

When those respondents viewed their agents as representing semi-official organisations of the British government, they also tended to have higher trust towards them. In addition, as information from British universities was not seen as reliable as other information sources by the UK group, this might have suggested the nature of organisations, whether marketing or non-marketing, might affect students' views on the reliability of the information. In other words, when respondents believed the organisations were "non-commercial", information from them was seen as more reliable.

Thirdly, a few respondents were very positive about agents' services, who they felt were closer to students than were British universities. One respondent suggested agents' advice was "*neutral...not working for the universities, but more to consider me*". Finally, a few respondents did not care about agents' positioning at all, as one respondent said, "*I didn't think about that [the position of educational agents]. As long as I get what I need [from agents], I don't care which position they have*". Although some respondents might not care as much about agents' positioning, this might relate to where the agents get their commission.

### **Commission issues**

Many interviewees acknowledged their agents receive commissions for help with their applications, and a few of them even knew the commissions were paid by British universities to the agents.



*Yes, I knew that [commission information] from Hello UK. I knew agents get commissions from the universities that I chose. I think if I didn't know much about the universities, I would have been very much influenced by the agent. But because I've done my information search before using agents, they couldn't influence me that much (JU, 80).*

Although some respondents might worry the commissions could affect agents' services, when the services were free to them, they cared less about this issue.

*I knew they [agents] can be sponsored by the university if I go to the school to which they applied for on my behalf. But it didn't affect me much, because I would pay the same tuition anyway. I felt they were neutral in their suggestions, so it was fine for me (AL, 74).*

*Although the university pays the agent, it's a part of my tuition fee, not an extra cost for me, so it doesn't matter. They [the agency] chose a dozen universities for me first, so it's quite useful to me. I wouldn't want to compare every university myself. I didn't want to apply myself, because I was working and preparing for IELTS at the same time (JO, 80-81).*

Some respondents thought wherever they enrolled, their agents would get commission from that university. For example, one respondent said,

*I heard that if students go to universities via their [agents'] application, they could get commission. So if they sent students to any university, they would get money. This would not affect my interest, because wherever they send the student to, they can get commission (ME, 72).*



The above quote might have shown that some respondents thought the agents have business contacts with all British universities rather than a select few, which also indicates why some interviewees cared less about where their agents suggested they apply. However, from the agent interviews, one interviewee said they had agreements with some but not all British universities.

*We work closely with about 40 universities and those are the universities we have actually signed agreements with. But if students want to go to any other universities in the UK, we can help them to do applications with any university (Agent interviews, Agency G, M, 6–8).*

This means potential students can still apply to all British universities through agents, but if students choose the university that has no contract with that agency, no commission will be paid to that agency. Although there is no evidence to show whether this might influence how agents advise students' Master's choices, it is possible that agents might be provide biased advice.

Overall, respondents' different perspectives on agents' positioning might have been affected by their relationships and experiences with their agents. Also, as their trust level towards agents differed and, the level of influence that agents had on the interviewees, also differed. Not surprisingly, it was found that the more neutral the respondents perceived the agents to be, the more influential the agents were.

*I see them [agents] as students' helpers, because they have many universities they work with. I feel they can apply to any university for me. Maybe they did have their motivations for suggesting certain universities, but I didn't feel that. Having said that, when talking with the agents, I could feel which universities they were closer to [and] which ones [universities] they don't have good*



*relationships with. I could feel that when they spoke to me. I did feel agents might want me to go to one university because they are closer with them. But they are not too subjective, so it's okay for me (LE, 50).*

O'Neill (1995) suggests an information search pattern for postgraduate students, but as the majority of UK group interviewees used educational agents for applications, the information search patterns for applicants in this study were different. The information search patterns found on the UK group included 5 steps, namely;

- Visiting agents: after deciding to study in the UK, most respondents found agents through either friends' WOM or online search. They then visited educational agents to find more external information.
- Getting suggested lists from agents: in counseling sessions at agencies, respondents told agents what they cared about (choice criteria), their previous backgrounds (i.e. GPA, previous university they had undergraduate degrees from, work experience and IELTS scores), and the agents gave respondents a suggested list, which included the names of British universities suggested by agents for application.
- External search: after having the suggested list from the agents, respondents used more external information sources to compare universities that were in the suggested lists to decide consideration sets, which were the desired universities for application. The external information sources used by respondents at this point included league tables, prospectuses and university websites, as well as other online sources, like Hello UK.
- Send applications to universities: after the consideration sets were decided, interviewees of the UK group sent applications to British universities through their agents.



- Getting information from current students: after receiving offers from British universities, the UK group compared the offers through more external information sources, especially experiences posted by current students on Hello UK.

### 7.2.2 Hello UK for enrolment choice

After receiving some offers from British universities, the UK group used Hello UK to listen to comments from current students to make enrollment choices. Several respondents of the UK group have had about two alternative universities that they wanted to compare for the enrolment choice, and current students' comments from those two universities were very influential in their enrolment choice.

*I compared the pre-sessional courses of Brunel University and University D, and I contacted the presidents of Taiwanese student society of the two universities through Hello UK. The president of University D said it's easy to graduate from University D [laughing]. Also the president of Brunel [University] said it's only the second year for the marketing course at Brunel University, so I didn't want to be there for their experiment. New courses might have new or young teachers, which affects the teaching quality. It's a risk (TO, 40).*

*I was thinking about going to Liverpool [University], because its ranking is better than University C...When comparing the two universities, I used students' comments in Hello UK. I heard people said there's less sunshine in Liverpool, and I don't want to get depression because of that, so I chose University C. I said to myself, ten something ranking [of Liverpool University] and twenty*



*something ranking [of University C] were similar, because it's out of tenth [in the ranking] anyway (ME, 96).*

As Hello UK was found to be influential to participants' enrolment choices, the following section will address how interviewees perceived Hello UK. Hence, what interviewees liked about Hello UK will be presented next.

### **Information from “insiders”**

Several respondents wanted to know about current students' experiences from Hello UK, because current students were seen by respondents as “insiders”. As one respondent said, “[Current] students' experiences are important because they are there” (ME, 98), while another respondent suggested “Hello UK was like a survey centre that collected consumer comments”. Furthermore, current students offered deeper information than other information sources.

*I used Hello UK more than the information sources from the British universities, because you have deeper information there [in Hello UK]...For example, you can see information from the university to say you have three routes to go to the university, but you wouldn't know which route is the fastest. When you asked this question on Hello UK, someone would tell you which route is the quickest. Those kinds of things you cannot get from reading documents, because those people [current students] experienced many things, and unless you ask them, you won't know until you try yourself (JO, 87-89).*



The above quote is similar to what Gilly *et al.*, (1998) suggest about WOM allowing for a “tailored” flow of information, and that might help to explain why respondents could have “deeper information” from Hello UK. Moreover, potential students trust comments from current students, because they have the same position as “students”.

*Well, because I think information from Hello UK won't try to trick me. People in Hello UK are students who study abroad, so they are in the same position with me. If I have any questions, I could just ask them (LN, 102).*

As current students are also Taiwanese students studying in the UK, and they are not paid to work for Hello UK, their views are seen by respondents as more objective, which won't “trick” them. Moreover, some respondents preferred the information from Hello UK, as it is a non-commercial organisation. *“I trust [Hello UK] very much, because it's an open forum run by a non-commercial organization. So I think it's trustworthy” (JU, 94).*

### **“Network of people”**

Hello UK was also seen as a “*network of people*”, where current students offer potential students' advice based on their personal experiences. Therefore, with people's time and efforts, this network was built and grown. Since current students are not paid by anyone to offer advice, potential students seem to appreciate this more.

*Hello UK has many passionate students to answer your questions, and even British universities offer such a forum for students to talk, I don't think it will work. You need people to get this [BBS site] to work. I don't see universities as commercial parties who want to "sell" products to students, but I think Hello UK, as a non-commercial website, still gains people's trust (JO, 100).*



It was felt Hello UK linked current students and potential students together, even when they were in two countries, and similar to what is suggested in the literature (Dichter, 1966; Assael, 1992), for some people, talking about their experiences or opinions on choosing products or services can be a means of social interaction with others, and they might even get enjoyment from this activity. Hence, this might also explain why BBS have many “unpaid” and “passionate” current students or alumni to reply to potential students’ inquiries about making Master’s choices.

In addition, even after some interviewees of the UK group enrolled at the Master’s courses in the UK, and become “current students in the UK” themselves, some of them still keep using Hello UK. As one current student of the UK group said,

*Even now I’m using it [Hello UK] for living types of information, like cooking.*

*The information areas they [Hello UK] cover are very comprehensive. Also, it’s not the organisation [Hello UK] itself to answer your questions, but many current students or potential students who have been through the application process. They could therefore assist you by providing advice (JU, 112).*

Furthermore, in terms of deciding application lists, this study did not find direct influences from influential information sources to the UK group’s application list. This finding was similar to the situation of the TW group. After consideration sets were decided by the UK group, the application lists were normally the same for them, as no further external information sources were subsequently used.

However, some situational factors might make the UK group’s application lists differ from those of their consideration sets. For example, the applications of the UK group



might be done in different periods of time, especially when some respondents applied to British universities not only through educational agents but also self-applied to other universities at different times. Also, if respondents were not accepted by the courses to which they applied, they might be forced to apply to more courses, which again made their consideration sets different from their original application lists.

Within the UK group, there was in fact only one participant of the UK group who was not accepted by any universities after his applications, and was forced to apply to more institutions. Actually, that respondent was initially accepted by some courses, but he changed his mind on the major choices and rejected those offers. Because of that, the decision time was therefore delayed, and at the end, when I interviewed him in April 2006, he was still waiting to get an offer to be able to come over to study in the UK in September 2006.

*Because I couldn't go to University D now, so I will wait to see whether Aberdeen [University] or UEA [University of East Anglia] accept me. If they do, I would definitely go. No other choices. I was not happy with the way University D handled this situation (CA, 80).*

The above respondent, CA, intended to study in a new programme at University D, but that course was canceled because of low applicants. He was forced to apply to two other universities at the last minute. However, the above case was not due to any external information sources that influenced him in the last minute, but more about situational factors. Hence, it can be said that influential information sources affected the UK group in their consideration sets or enrolment choices, but not on their application lists.



### **7.3 Influential information sources for the two groups**

After presenting the findings for Objective 4, the following sections will focus on the similarities and differences between the TW and the UK group in terms of influential information sources. One similarity was on the influential level from BBS to respondents' enrolment choices.

#### **7.3.1 Similar in the influential level from BBS**

Both groups were affected by BBS in their enrolment choices. The most common type of influences from BBS on the TW and the UK group were identified in the literature (Solomon *et al.*, 2002; Mowen and Minor, 2001) as “informational influence”, which was about potential students seeking information from current students/alumni in this study. When the TW and the UK group were making Master's choices, they preferred to seek advice from “experts” who had “more experience”. Hence, current students who have experience in making Master's choices have information power over respondents, as they know something respondents would like to know.

On the other hand, “normative compliance” and “value-expressive” types of influence were not seen in this study, and this might be because both the TW and the UK group are either current or potential students of Master's programmes, so they might not try to satisfy the expectations from peers or others as much as teenagers might do, and they might also have less pressure to associate with a group psychologically.

A possible explanation on why BBS was influential to respondents could be because universities tend to present themselves as outstanding according to their promotional literature (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004), where in one respondent's words “*they [universities] only say good things about themselves*”. Also, as the quality of HE



services often varies from year to year (Patterson *et al.*, 1998), respondents wanted honest and updated information from current students of recent years rather than from universities.

Moreover, another reason for BBS to be influential could be because making HE choices is similar to choosing a professional service (Freiden and Goldsmith, 1989), such as choosing an accountant or a G.P., so respondents of this study wanted to seek information content that was more “experience-based”, as information from “experienced customers” was seen as more believable and realistic (Cho and Joun, 2003). Similar to the points raised by Mazzarol (1998), the intangibility of HE hinders the communication to potential students, so in order to make intangible aspects tangible, “experienced students” were often used by both groups for consultation. Comparing the TW and the UK group, the latter showed a greater sense of risk when evaluating HE choices, and it could be mainly because overseas Master’s studies involves more time and costs. Therefore, this might also explain why the UK group generally spent more time and effort in evaluating alternative courses than the TW group.

Furthermore, it is interesting to see non-marketing information sources to be more influential to respondents’ enrolment choices. This supports the literature (i.e., Brennan, 2001b; Christie *et al.*, 2004) that suggests non-marketing information sources are more influential to students’ HE choices than other types of information sources. As making enrolment choices was seen by both groups to be the most important stage of Master’s decision-making, it might mean that only information sources that were more trusted by respondents (section 6.0 Information quality) were relied on for making such an important decision.



Although BBS was traditionally seen as an impersonal information source, the nature of BBS is very much “interpersonal”, as it is about interacting with other current or potential students online to obtain the required information. However, the means of interaction from BBS was not face-to-face communication, but rather via reading messages on boards or via typing new messages to get replies from others.

As new technology changes the communication between people, information from online written sources has actually been accepted recently as one type of WOM (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). Hence, written forms of information from BBS could also be seen as one type of WOM. In making enrolment choices, many respondents from both groups used BBS to compare how current students felt about their courses, and those comments affected respondents’ decisions on which university offer to accept for enrolment. The main reason for information from BBS to be more influential than information provided by universities was about the interactions prospective students could have with other students. For example, one respondent affirmed that,

*I like information from people more. I like to know their experiences, and I’m interested in reading people’s comments [on their courses]...I don’t like to read documents...because it’s plain boring...I don’t like to read brochures, because they are more like advertisements. Not much can be seen there (WI, 98).*

Moreover, Solomon *et al.*, (2002) suggest the negativity bias happens in WOM communications, which means one piece of negative information on a product or service affects a consumer more than one piece of positive information, and that concept can be applied to the use of BBS for both the TW and the UK group. Some respondents mentioned that when reading any negative information from experienced



students on BBS, they did not want to enroll with the courses or universities. Also, as marketer-dominated communication, such as information from universities, will normally be positive information (Engel *et al.*, 1995), potential students were more alert to anything that provided a different perspective.

### **7.3.2 Different influences from marketing stimuli sources**

Comparing both groups in the influential information sources they referred to, the TW group did not refer to any marketing stimuli information sources, while the UK group indicated that educational agents to be an influential information source. As no respondent from the TW group said marketing information sources were influential to their Master's choices at all, it might have indicated the TW group was less affected by marketing stimuli information sources than the UK group. One possible explanation on why marketing information sources, like agents, were more influential to the UK group might be because the UK group needed more information externally than the TW group. Hence, this might have increased the necessity of using all available information sources, including marketing stimuli sources.

This study found the influences from educational agents were strong for the UK group, especially in providing suggested lists that affected many interviewees' consideration sets. Although Pimpa (2003) suggests the types of influence from educational agents in terms of both "information" and "persuasion", this study found that the type of influences from educational agents to the UK group was only "information" while "persuasion" from agents to students' HE choices was not obvious.



Indeed, the observations conducted in this study showed that counselors were not persuasive.

Students are often the one who raised questions within the counseling session. They often ask counsellors “how do you feel about...” or “is it better to...” Counsellors’ roles are like an information provider who offer opinions to students. The ways counsellors talk to students were not strong or persuasive, but more like friends who share personal experiences. They did not tend to use strong words, like “you must...” or “definitely”, but more often, counselors used “I think” or “I feel” when responding to students’ inquiries...Students asked any questions freely and they had answers [from counselors] right away” (Student observations, Agency G, 53-56).

Moreover, from the observation data, it seems educational agents were very cautious in the way they spoke to potential students when they were suggesting which university to choose. This might have happened as agents could be aware that students might worry that agents have other intentions in their suggestions, such as commissions from assisting their applications. Hence, suggestions from agents were very similar to suggestions from friends, which were not pushy at all, but gentle and soft in the tone of speech.

However, it is arguable that my presence as an observer in the agencies could have influenced the ways in which agents communicated to the applicants as well. Since agents knew they were being observed, they might have consequently modified their behaviour. Yet, such a possibility was unlikely, because from the interviews with the UK group, they also reported that the suggestions from their agents were normally



gentle than pushy, as the UK group only want agents to “assist” their Master’s choices rather than “making the choices” for them.

In addition, the position of educational agents is special, because although being a marketing information source sponsored by British universities to recruit students, some respondents viewed agents as “students’ helpers” rather than people who work for British universities. However, although for the UK group, educational agents influenced them greatly in the choice of consideration sets as they had suggested lists of universities from the agencies, the UK group only used the suggested lists from the agents to narrow down the scope of comparison, and not for educational agents to tell them directly where to apply. Therefore, although the support from educational agents was preferred by most respondents because their services were free and time-saving, to some extent, interviewees of the UK group still wanted to do some external searching themselves to decide where to apply, rather than relying totally on agents.

As respondents were only affected strongly by agents on their consideration sets, agents’ influences in persuading applicants to make certain enrolment choices were not observed in this study, because applicants mainly used current students/alumni via BBS for making enrolment choices. Therefore, it might also mean that although marketing stimuli information, like agents, could be influential to respondents’ in the stage of consideration sets, when it came to the stage of enrolment choice, respondents might still prefer to use current students’ opinions, which was a non-marketing stimuli source.



## **7.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter covered findings for Objective four, which concerned an investigation of the impact of influential external information sources on the formation of students' consideration sets, application lists and enrolment choices. It was found that both groups were affected much by BBS in their enrollment choices, and while the UK group referred to educational agents, (a marketing stimuli source), as one influential source to them, the TW group was less affected by marketing stimuli sources. The following chapter will present and discuss two unexpected themes, as well as a revised conceptual framework.



## Chapter 8 Unexpected themes and revised conceptual framework

### 8.0 Chapter overview

In this chapter, two unexpected but interesting emergent themes will be discussed. These themes concern limited familial influences and cram school attendance. In addition, the revised conceptual framework based on the findings will be presented at the end of the chapter.

### 8.1 Limited familial influences

Although Kotler and Fox (1985) suggest that parental expectations and encouragement are the most influential factors determining students' HE choices in the stages of need recognition and external search, this study did not find parental influences to be as strong as initially expected. Moreover, this finding applied to both the TW and the UK groups. More specifically, although the findings from focus groups of this study found 4 out of 11 participants were influenced by their family members when they were searching for information to come to the UK, with more data from interviews and observations in the later stage, familial influences were not as strong as expected.

Although a few respondents of the UK group needed to report the progress of their information research to their family during the information search process (i.e. U4, 85), and a few respondents of both groups had information from family members who were more experienced in making Master's choices (i.e. U2, 175; U8, 49; U7, 59), the input from family members regarding respondents' Master's choices, and the level of participation from respondents' family was minimal.



A possible explanation for limited familial influences could be because only a few participants of the UK group had family members who had experiences of having studied abroad, while interviewees of the TW group felt their experienced friends had more updated information than family members. Furthermore, although some interviewees of the TW group have family members or relatives who had done Master's degrees in Taiwan, the influences from families to the TW group were mainly on choosing a suitable major, rather than on what universities or programmes to select for application or enrollment.

Parents might be closer to the interviewees in terms of their personal relationships, but the TW group did not listen to parents' advice as much as experienced friends in making their Master's choices. Although respondents' parents are trusted, some interviewees of the TW group felt their parents did not have the credibility that experienced students had, as the information from parents was not seen as current, and parents might not have similar perspectives as respondents because of age gap differences. As one interviewee said, "*Older generations [like my parents], only know about public universities and don't know about new universities. They couldn't give much advice*", while another respondent said,

*...They [the experienced friends] are living there [the potential universities] themselves, so they can tell you things from their experiences. Your friends tend to be the people who have close personalities to you, so how they feel about that university or courses, would be the same when I go to study at that university...I trust them [experienced friends] much...if it's my parents who say that university is not good, I would not listen to them, because I feel they knew nothing about Master's courses. It depends on where the information is from...*

(HS, 86-89).



Although past studies suggest that familial influences affect students' HE choices (i.e. Hill *et al.*, 1992; Brennan, 2001b; Brennan and Marriott, 1996), this study found the family influences on respondents' choices were not as strong as expected, and the influences from friends, current students, teachers, or agents were far stronger. Although family influences were believed to be strong in a Chinese cultural setting, as the authority of family tends to be stronger in Far East than in the West, the findings from this study do not support this assumption. This could be because interviewees of this study were students at Master's rather than undergraduate level, so they could be more independent and experienced in making Master's choices, which made them less reliant and receptive towards familial involvement and support.

This study showed both the TW and the UK group used experienced students as information sources more than from family members, and one possible explanation for this might be because of the use of Internet, especially BBS. Since potential students can now contact current students of Master's programmes more easily than before, and when current students offered more specific and updated information or comments on the courses or universities, such comments were more preferred than general opinions or less current information from family members. This study found that to both groups, three types of familial influences existed, namely financial influences, family expectations and information from family. Each of these three areas will be respectively discussed below.

### **Financial influences**

For both groups, the financial influences from families were the strongest type that was found. However, although paying for the course, the majority of interviewees'



parents were not involved in their children's Master's choices. For example, one interviewee stated,

*They [my family] didn't [affect my Master's choices], although my dad would pay for me, they didn't know anything about doing Master's, so they couldn't help. They encourage me to do a Master's [degree], but don't care what programme I do. They feel Master's are Master's (W1, 99-100).*

As the majority of interviewees' parents knew little about Master's studies, parents might not see differences between different programmes, so they cared less on what programmes their children selected, but cared more that their children obtained a Master's degree. This parental attitude applied to both groups. For instance, one agent confirmed that parental influences over the UK group were more about financial support, than giving their children suggestions on where to study in the UK.

*...I think a lot of the time the parents will not have a great idea [on studying in the UK] because Taiwanese students haven't been going to the UK for very long. So parents often don't know a great deal about the UK and the universities specifically. So they won't be able to help with the courses, but the parents seem to care a lot and they will look into students' safety...Obviously a lot of the times, the parents are helping with the financial side, so they are going to look at how much the course will cost and whether they can afford it or not (Agent interviews, Agency G, M, 62-66).*

### **Family expectations**

With the exception of financial support, the second common type of familial influences for both groups related to parental expectations about studying "as much as possible". Such a phenomenon can probably be explained by Confucianism that



deeply characterises Chinese values. The first principle of Confucianism is the emphasis on education (Sung *et al.*, 1992). For instance, parents place great importance on educating their children and they believe through hard work and perseverance that all students can achieve academic success. Such thinking places great pressure on the students and results in extreme competition for acceptance into prestigious universities, and students might also have frequent psychological and emotional problems because of this pressure (*ibid.*).

In most interviewees' cases from this study, they knew their parents stressed the importance of education, so many of them had decided to study a Master's degree first themselves and then subsequently spoke to their parents about that decision. Hence, it can be said parents' expectations of their children doing Master's studies were mostly passive, as the majority of parents did not push their children into studying a Master's degree if the children did not first think independently about doing this. For several interviewees, after they spoke to their parents about their ideas on doing Master's studies, the parents were very supportive, and either encouraged them verbally, or even promised the children to offer financial support for their studies. For instance, one participant stated,

*They [parents of the respondent] are very supportive [about me doing a Master's degree]. I didn't want to do a Master's before my military service, so when I wanted to do that [after the military service], they were happy. All parents are like that, they want their children to study as much as possible (CA, 22-23).*

The only exception was that one interviewee (U11) from the 2<sup>nd</sup> focus group mentioned that he was discouraged by his mom to study in the UK, and the main



reason for that was that he had been working for more than ten years in Taiwan with a stable job and with a family engagement, so his mom felt it is risky for him to give everything up to study a Master's degree in the UK. Except that interviewee, no other respondents suggested parents being an discouragement for them to opt for their Master's study.

However, in a few interviewees' cases, parents' expectations were more active, and through giving verbal encouragement, they encouraged their children to pursue a Master's degree *before* the children even thought about that possibility. One interviewee confirmed,

*Also, it is because of my parents' encouragement [for me to study a Master's degree]. My dad studied his Master's [degree] in the Netherlands after he graduated from university [in Taiwan]. Since the day I had graduated from university, he suggested me to study abroad...My parents are very open-minded, and they said as far as they can afford, they would pay for my study here [in the UK]. Although I've saved some money from working, they have paid for my [Master's] study (LN, 8).*

Interestingly, parents' expectations could be more specific if they knew a little bit more about making Master's choices. For instance, one agent mentioned that parents encouraged their children to choose British universities that have better rankings.

*Parents also care about ranking and often ask students to go to more renowned schools. It's because parents will speak to their friends about where their children study in the UK, so they hope their friends know [the name of] that school. They can therefore show off to their friends (Agent interviews, Agency O, S, 15–16).*



## Information from family

Although the majority of information interviewees had was from non-familial information sources, this study found within the familial sources, specific information regarding universities or courses was often not given by parents, but more were from interviewees' siblings or cousins. For example, one interviewee of the TW group had information from his elder brother about what major to choose for his Master's study,

*Well, my parents knew little about studying, if there's any [familial influences], [these are from] my elder brother. He studied at Taiwan University, and he suggested me to study further on accounting and finance. My university subjects allow me to choose different Master's courses, like finance and accounting, economics, and business administration. My brother told me the differences between these subjects by asking his friends who had done Master's [studies]*  
(JA, 5-6).

Although familial influences were not strong generally, this study also found that if any family members are believed by respondents to be more experienced in making Master's choices, the greater their influences were on respondents' choices. For instance, one respondent of the UK group, (whose brother and father had both studied in the United States), trusted them for knowing more about selecting universities, so the level of involvement from her family members was the highest by comparison to other interviewees. That respondent applied to British universities twice as she did not finish her Master's study on the first attempt, and her father was highly involved in both of her application processes.

AM: *...my dad searched information for me. He worked harder than me!*  
*[laughter]*



Interviewer: Where did your father find the information?

AM: *I don't know, maybe from websites. If I found any information, I would also go back to discuss this with my dad. He also told me what was important when choosing schools, for example the most important thing are the library facilities. I then searched for information about the library. He is a professor who teaches engineering at university, so I know he knows more than me. I listen to him and do not disagree with his opinions (AM, 40-42).*

When the above respondent, AM, had her father to help in choosing the consideration set, she also seemed to be more relaxed compared to other interviewees of the UK group, and she was not as involved as others in the process of Master's decision-making, because her dad conducted an extensive search on her behalf. As AM's dad was more experienced than her in selecting overseas universities, she empowered him largely to make the most of Master's decisions for her.

Previous studies (Gilmour *et al.*, 1981; Litten, 1982) suggest that students with higher levels of parental education rely more on their parents for information, and they used less alternative information sources. AM's case supported such a view, as her dad had studied in the United States and is a professor at a Taiwanese university, she relied on her father's help and did less external search than other interviewees of the UK group. However, AM's case is a rare one in this study, because the majority of parents from both groups did not provide information to respondents regarding their Master's choices.

Overall, although Pimpa (2004, pg.352) suggests five types of familial influences, (namely finance, expectation, information, persuasion, and competition), only the first



three types were commonly noted in this study, while “persuasion” and “competition” from family was not found. A possible explanation for this could be because students at postgraduate level were older and had more life experience than students at undergraduate level, so they might be less affected by their family in making Master’s choices.

This study found that for both the TW and the UK groups, parental influences were limited because the majority of the participants’ parents did not know a great deal about studying a Master’s degree either in Taiwan or in the UK. Parents’ of the TW group knew little about the new universities transformed from former polytechnics while majority of the parents’ of the UK group did not have personal experiences studying overseas. However, although with limited parental influences on participants’ choices, parental expectations were high for both groups to study a Master’s degree, as the majority of participants’ parents encouraged their children to study as much as possible. The Confucian work ethic may explain this situation, where parents place great importance on educating their children. Next, another unexpected theme found from this study will be discussed, which concerns cram school attendance as preparation for the entrance to Masters’ courses.

## **8.2 Cram school attendance**

Although the attendance at cram schools was very popular amongst Taiwanese students at all levels of their study, what was surprising was the fact that this research found attending cram schools to prepare for Master’s exams was always the next step that all interviewees of the TW group took right after the stage of need recognition of doing a Master’s degree. The decision to attend a cram school was not really a decision-making for the TW group, but was more like an ‘instinct’, which was



astonishing. After deciding to prepare for their Master's entrance exam, all interviewees of the TW group immediately thought of choosing a cram school to attend, and the strategy of choosing a suitable cram school was often via WOM, while reputation and convenient location were often important criteria for consideration.

Similarly, several interviewees of the UK group also attended cram schools after they decided to study in the UK, such as cram schools for preparing for their IELTS or TOEFL. However, the sizes of the IELTS/TOEFL cram schools were much smaller than the cram schools attended by the TW group for the Master's exam preparations. For both groups, although the cram schools were not the main information sources used by both groups in making Master's choices, this is an interesting phenomenon to consider, as the possibility for both groups to attend cram schools was high. As a result of the high attendance rates at cram schools in Taiwan, cram schools were used by universities to approach potential students, which differed from the approach that was often used by Western universities, such as visiting high schools of potential students (Kern, 2000). For example, a few interviewees of the TW group attained "introductory programmes" that were held by Taiwanese universities at cram schools.

Cram school attendance has been discussed previously (Nelson, 2006), as a phenomenon characteristic to several Asian countries, like Hong Kong, mainland China, Japan, and South Korea. The cram school is well-known as "buxiban", which literally means "make-up class", "catch-up class" or "to learn more advanced classes". Nearly all students have attended some sort of buxiban in their lifetime, to study mathematics, computer skills, English, other foreign languages, or exam preparation, including college, graduate school, TOEFL, GRE, etc. (Culture of Taiwan, 2007).



Although the information exchange between potential students whom they met at cram schools had only weak influences on respondents' Master's choices. This was because other potential students were seen as new and inexperienced in making Master's choices. However, there were still some rare cases where respondents were affected strongly by other prospective students whom they met at cram schools. For example, one interviewee of the UK group who had applied to Australian universities came to study in the UK, because he met his girlfriend at TOEFL school. In order to be near to her, he selected the UK as the final destination for Master's study.

The high attendance of respondents at cram schools could be explained by two possible reasons. First, most Taiwanese students started attending cram schools for different types of learning needs when they were little, which might have socialised them to believe that preparing for exams through attending cram schools was a necessity. Nelson (2006) suggests the cram-school culture has spread widely in Taiwan, often taking priority over ordinary school education, irrespective of whether this is in single-subject classes or comprehensive curriculum, in the city or the country, and it has become children's primary mode of learning. Second, Taiwan is a highly competitive environment which pushes everyone inside the society to "move up in the ladder" and not to loose out. Hence, Taiwanese people ask for quick results in whatever they do, and this includes educational contexts as well. This phenomenon might have been affected by the culture of Taiwan that measures merit through testing, with entrance into college, graduate school, and government service decided entirely on testing (Culture of Taiwan, 2007).



As mentioned previously, expectations from parents of both groups resulted in children studying to become academically accomplished. Hence, cram schools might also be related to parental expectations or pressures as these schools were extensively used by parents to help their children learn as much as possible to achieve competitive advantages. Moreover, as cram schools are not only operating in Taiwan, but also are commonly seen in other Asian countries, like Hong Kong, China, Japan, and South Korea (Nelson, 2006), it is possible to assume that parental expectations or pressures for children to be educated might also exist in other cultural settings.

When the TW and the UK groups go to cram schools, they might expect to learn “quicker and more” within the same length of time by comparison to self-study. In trying to achieve this, cram schools might focus more on teaching students “skills” for exam preparations, rather than increasing students’ “knowledge”, because it can be imagined that students’ English abilities are hard to increase dramatically within the three to six month period during their attendance at either the IELTS or TOEFL schools. Although the TW group normally attended cram schools for their Master’s exam preparation at a period ranging from one to two years (in Year 2 or 3 of their undergraduate studies), which might be more likely to help them to increase knowledge, as the time of attendance is much longer than that of the UK group. However, regardless of the results of attending cram schools, students who attended cram schools might prefer to be “fed” by teachers, rather than engage in independent, self-directed learning.

Although the attendance of cram schools is high, in the majority of interviewees’ cases, the influences from people whom respondents met at cram schools was not strong for both groups. For the UK group, a few respondents said they spoke to



classmates at English cram schools who were also potential students preparing for overseas study, while a few respondents also discussed their Master's choices with English teachers who taught them at the IELTS/TOEFL school. However, only one respondent was actually influenced by people met at cram school. One respondent of the UK group, AL, said one of his IELTS teachers, a British citizen, suggested he choose universities that are in the South of the UK for the better weather. This suggestion was therefore considered alongside other criteria, and University C was selected for enrollment.

For the TW group, within the information sources from cram schools, the most influential sources were their teachers (section 7.1.1) and the BBS as a part of the cram school website (section 7.1.2). As the majority of the TW group had no direct interactions with their classmates at cram schools, no respondent of the TW group suggested that they were influenced by cram school classmates.

Many large cram schools in Taiwan are highly commercialised and they operate more like big enterprises than small-size schools. These cram schools are an extremely large and profitable business, and they have been criticised by some people as being the result of the cultural overemphasis on academic achievement (Education in Taiwan, 2007). In some famous cram schools, classes are very orderly and controlled, with class sizes as high as 200 students, and while some of the larger schools and chains write their own programs and produce their own textbooks (Education in Taiwan, 2007), some small-size cram schools might have poor teaching quality.



Overall, although for the majority of interviewees from both groups, information sources from cram schools did not affect their enrolment choices, this study found the phenomenon of attending cram schools to be worthy of discussion. This is because it showed a special side of Taiwanese culture, which is very different from the West, and this phenomenon might also affect how universities market themselves to prospective students. For instance, western universities may opt to use cram schools as a channel to market their courses to prospective students, since cram school attendance is high.

### **8.3 The revised conceptual framework**

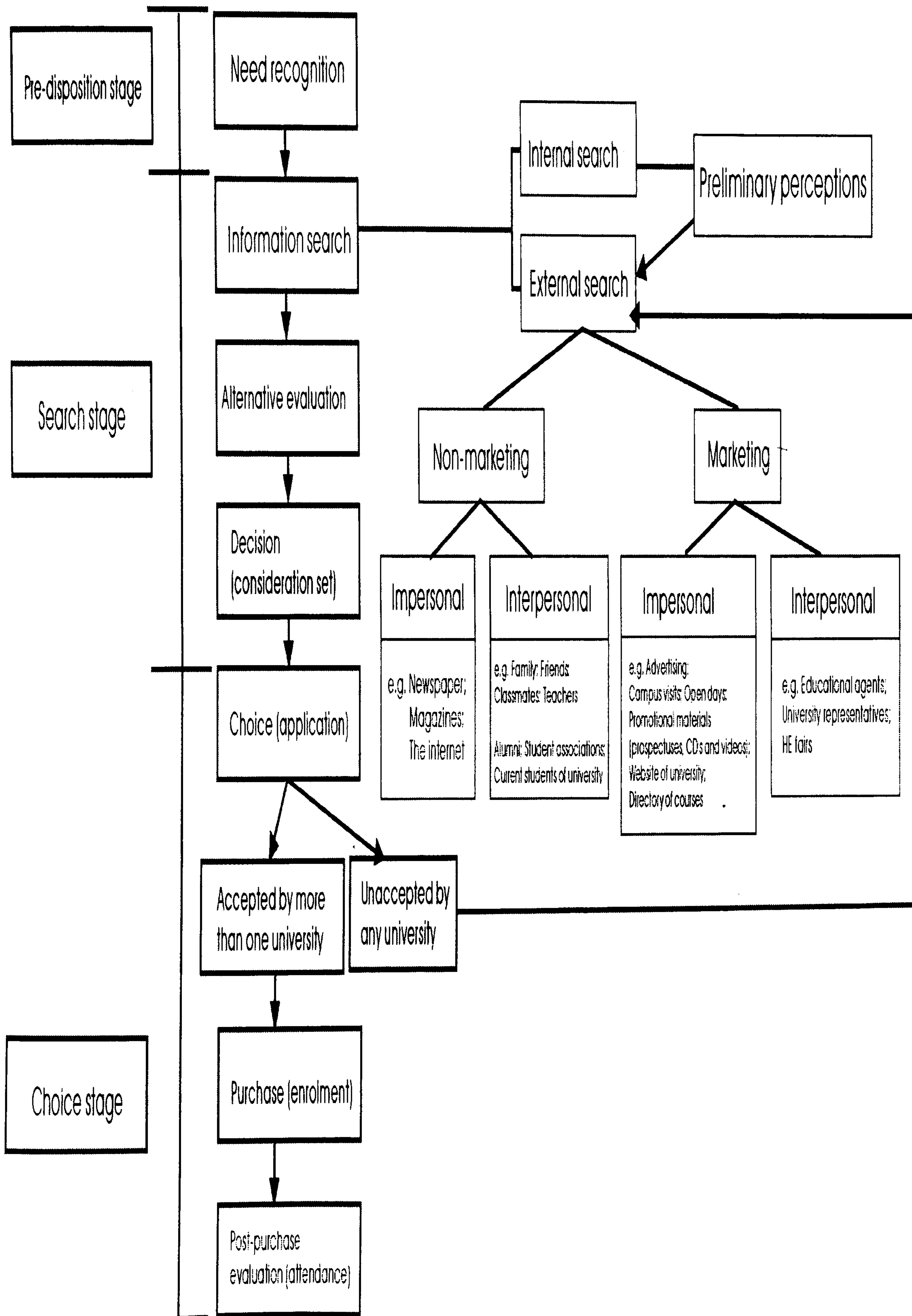
In light of the presented findings, a revised conceptual framework is presented in this section. Here the similarities and differences between the original and the revised conceptual framework will be identified and discussed.

#### **8.3.1 Differences from the revised conceptual framework**

Based on the findings of this study on Taiwanese participants' Master's decision-making, the original conceptual framework (Figure 8.1) was revised (Figure 8.2).



**Figure 8.1** Original conceptual framework





**Source:** adopted from Engel *et al.*, 1995, pg.1154; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005, pg. 281; Brennan, 2001a, pg. 4)

To compare the revised and the original conceptual framework, they are largely identical, although there are some minor differences regarding the information sources used by interviewees. A further difference exists in how the stage of students' information search affected them in other stages of the decision-making process. As the stages of students' decision-making were identical between the original and revised conceptual framework, this indicates that the Western literature (i.e., Brennan, 2001; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005) on decision-making can largely explain the stages of Taiwanese students' Master's decision-making process.

Furthermore, this study confirmed that previous Western literature on the information search (i.e., Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997) can also largely explain Taiwanese students' information search in a HE contexts, including the formation of internal information, the possible types of external information sources used, the relationship between consumers' internal and external search, and possible attributes used for the evaluation of information quality.

Hence, decision-making models suggested by researchers in the field of consumer behaviour (i.e., Loudon and Bitta, 1993; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004) are appropriate in the context of Taiwanese students' HE decision-making. Based on this, further assumptions might even be drawn regarding the possibilities to apply decision-making models not only to consumers' product purchases in the West, but also to decision-making in other services sectors, or even to students' HE decision-making in other nations. This study has helped to widen the application of

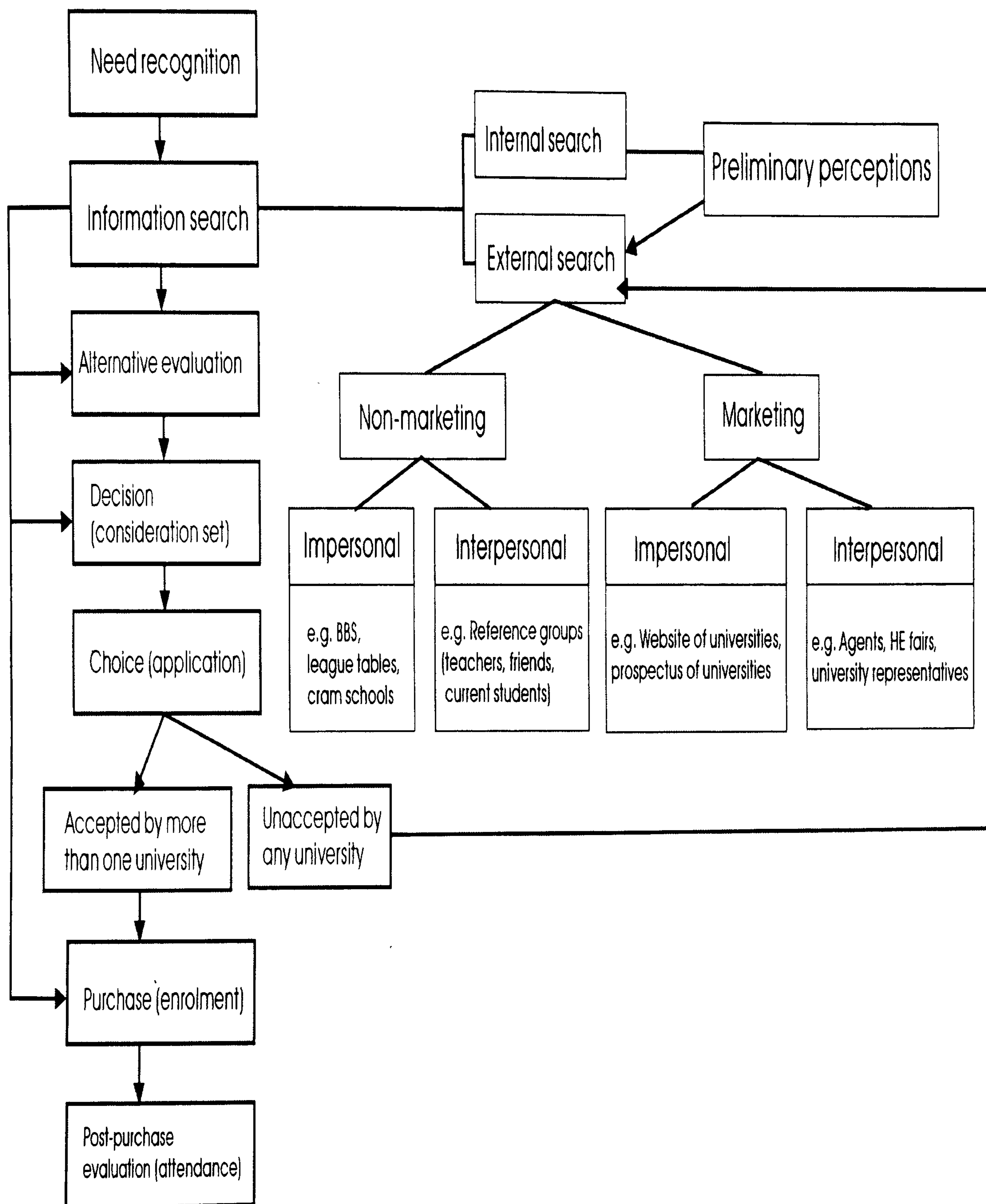


the decision-making models to another context, namely Taiwanese students' HE decision-making, and further studies could be conducted to see whether the application of decision-making models can be expanded further to additional settings. Despite the similarities, this study also identified key differences between the revised and original conceptual framework existed in students' use of information sources and the influences the stage of information search had on other stages of students' decision-making. First, this study suggested that Taiwanese students used some information sources that were not addressed by previous studies, such as the use of BBS and cram schools.

Moreover, this study also showed that although the stage of information search affected other stages of students' decision-making, as suggested by previous contributors (i.e., Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004; Engel *et al.*, 1995), the stage of students' information search was more influential to certain stages of their decision-making, such as the stage of alternative evaluation, decision, and purchase, rather than the choice stage. To further clarify these points, the respective similarities and differences between the revised and original conceptual framework will be further detailed in the following sections.



**Figure 8.2 Revised conceptual framework**



The revised conceptual framework of this study (Figure 8.2) consists of two parts, namely “the information sources used by students” (presented on the right-hand side) and “the decision-making stages students go through” (presented on the left). As



mentioned earlier in Chapter 6, this study suggested students had different levels of trust towards the various information sources available, and the extent of trust regarding these sources resulted in differential impacts on their Master's decision-making. Hence, although Taiwanese participants did not categorise information sources when using them for making HE choices, it was felt to divide information sources into categories when presenting them could help show the differences between the original and the revised conceptual frameworks, as it might also indicate students' preferences on the types of information sources they used.

For further explanations, "the information sources used by students" (the right-hand side section Figure 8.2) will be shown separately in Figure 8.3, so the differences between the participants of the TW and UK groups in the use of their external information sources can next be discussed.

**Figure 8.3 Information searches of Taiwanese participants in both groups**

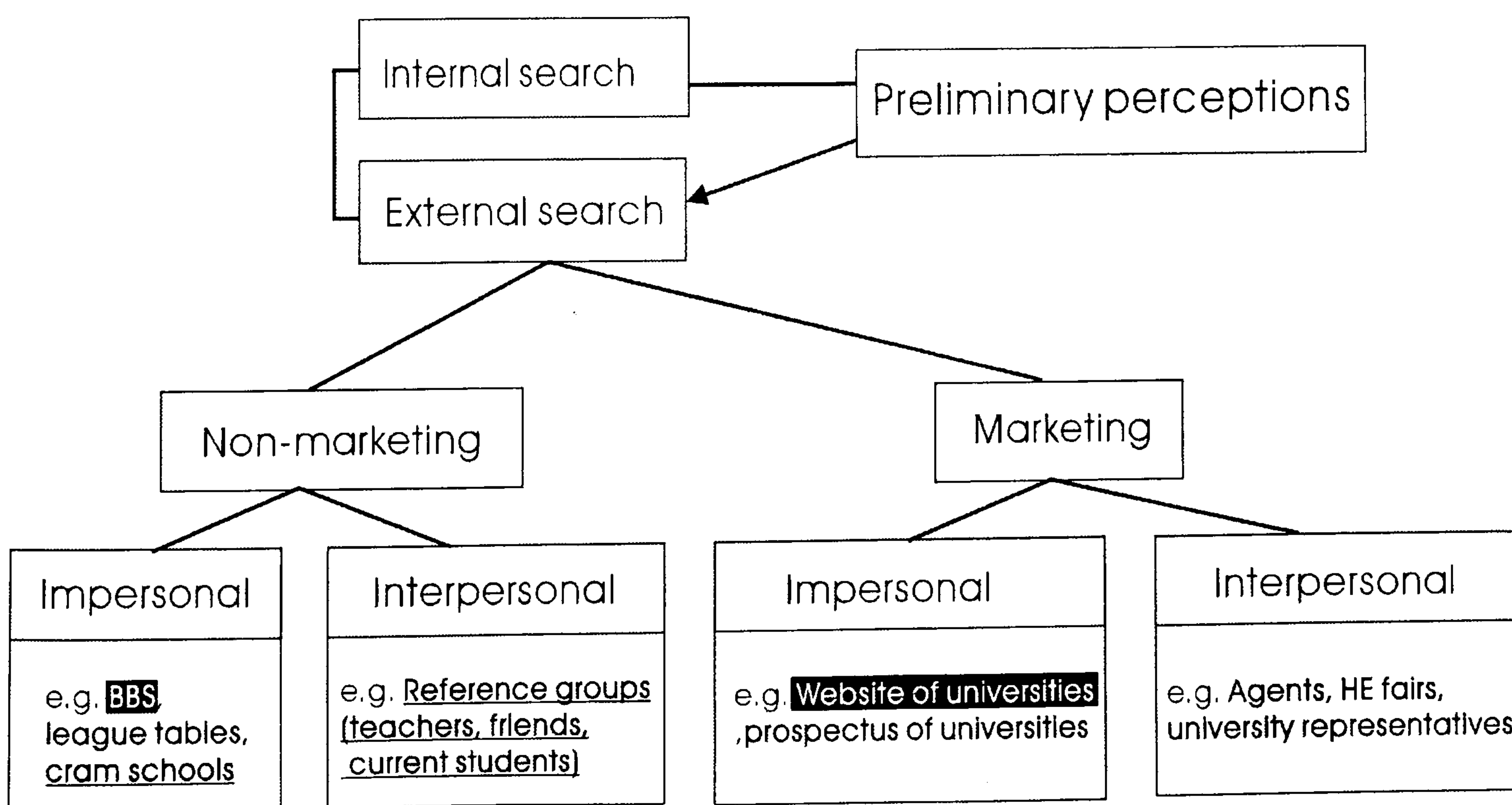


Figure 8.3 illustrates the external information sources Taiwanese participants used in making Master's choices. Those information sources that were highlighted in black



were both used by the TW and the UK group, including BBS and website of universities. Moreover, the sources that were underlined were used by the TW group and the sources that were not marked were used by the UK group.

In support of previous literature (i.e., Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997), this study found that Taiwanese participants did internal searching to scan their preliminary perceptions before their external search. This study also confirmed that participants' preliminary perceptions affected the level of their external search. Namely, the greater an applicants' internal information, the lower their consequent external search will be, because this study suggested the TW group as home-based students had more internal information, which caused less external search. By contrast, the UK group as international students had less internal information. Because of limited internal information, they felt compelled to search for additional external information.

Referring to Figure 8.3, in terms of non-marketing impersonal information sources, the TW group used BBS (such as PTT and cram school message boards) and the cram school websites, while reference groups were the only non-marketing interpersonal source mentioned by the TW group. Moreover, in terms of marketing impersonal information sources, the TW group used Taiwanese university websites. However, the TW group did not refer to any marketing interpersonal information source.

Moreover, Figure 8.3 also shows that in terms of non-marketing impersonal information sources, the UK group used BBS (Hello UK) and league tables, while only a minority of UK group interviewees referred to experienced friends as non-marketing interpersonal sources. Furthermore, in terms of marketing impersonal sources, both British university websites and prospectuses were used by the UK



group. In addition, concerning interpersonal marketing sources, interviewees from the UK group reported using agents, HE fairs, and university representatives.

Comparing the original and the revised conceptual frameworks in terms of the use of information sources, this study found online sources were used by Taiwanese participants of both groups more than other impersonal non-marketing information sources. Taiwanese participants felt that online sources were more accessible than hard copy magazines or newspapers. Moreover, considering the online sources, BBS (PTT for the TW group and Hello UK for the UK group) were often accessed, as some participants mentioned that they could obtain information from newspapers or magazines posted online in BBS by other prospective students (section 6.1.2).

Moreover, Taiwanese participants from both groups used BBS to contact alumni and current students instead of engaging in face-to-face interactions, and this study found that the UK group was comparatively more reliant on BBS (section 6.2.1) than the TW group as home-based students. The reason that the BBS was preferred is attributed to the fact that participants had particular universities/courses that they wanted to know more about, and BBS offered prospective applicants the easiest means to directly contact either alumni or current students from those universities/courses.

This study demonstrated how BBS was used by Taiwanese participants, and as the influences from BBS on students' HE choices has not been previously identified in the literature, this study offers a new perspective on how online sources (like BBS) can affect applicants' Master's choices (section 7.1.2 for the TW group and section 7.2.2 for the UK group for further details). Apart from the use of BBS, this study also



added knowledge on how league tables and cram schools were used by participants, because the UK group used league tables for alternative evaluation (section 5.2.3), while the TW group used the subject list provided by cram schools to find available courses (section 5.1.4).

Second, within the category of non-marketing interpersonal information sources, family was not used as much as expected by the UK group being international students (section 8.1), while friends, classmates or even people from BBS were used more by the TW group. Moreover, it is interesting to see that “experienced friends”, who had studied at universities that respondents were considering, were more often counselled by applicants as they were believed to have “first hand” information.

The reason family were less influential than experienced friends, was mainly because participants felt the information from experienced friends was more current, and this phenomenon could also be affected by the rapid increase in the number of new universities in Taiwan that were transformed from former polytechnics. In other words, the family of the TW group, especially their parents, might know very little about those new universities. Similar situations also applied to the cases of the UK group, as only very few participants’ family members have experiences studying overseas. Relatives could not offer the UK group help on Master’s decision-making in the UK.

As BBS can be used by both groups to reach current students at the universities that participants wanted to consider, the more updated information from current students was therefore preferred by participants. Hence, it can be said that the educational changes in Taiwan (i.e., more new universities) and technological developments (i.e.,



BBS) might have made Taiwanese participants use family members less as information sources.

Third, within the category of marketing impersonal information sources, participants from both groups disliked advertising sources, and they preferred to use “visual” information provided by universities, such as campus photos from either university prospectuses/websites or video clips of class situations from the university website.

University websites were widely used by Taiwanese participants, and this might be the impact of new technology as well. As a result of the innovation of digital cameras, high quality images can be directly uploaded without the need for scanning the photos first. Moreover, as digital video recorders were developed, online video clips presented on university websites can be used by participants to see overseas campuses without having to physically travel to the UK. Online video clips also reduced the necessity for participants to use VHS (Video Home System), VCD (Video Compact Disc), or DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) provided by British universities, which could also be a much easier way for international students to evaluate the environment of prospective universities than before this new technology was developed.

Although university prospectuses or VHS could previously be used by students to see the environment of overseas campuses, potential students nowadays could access university websites to get more updated and speedy information, and from the perspectives of universities, it might also mean that universities could display more campus photos online in a cheaper way, as opposed to colour-printing them to hard copy prospectuses.



In contrast to previous literature (i.e., Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005), the “directory of courses” was seldom used by Taiwanese applicants, and a possible explanation could be because most of the UK group used agents to eliminate potential courses on their behalf, so there was less need for them to use directories to find available courses or to see general descriptions of courses/universities. Moreover, the TW group also did not use course directories, because they used exam subject lists provided by cram schools, which are very similar to course directories, as they would know the available courses by seeing the subject lists.

Although the original conceptual framework included “campus visits” and “open days” as information sources, this study found that only a few participants of the TW group used them, because some Taiwanese universities had “introduction days” for potential Master’s students who had been given offers. However, no participants from the UK group mentioned attending either campus visits or open days held by British universities, as the majority of them were still in Taiwan when they were evaluating potential enrolment choices.

Having said that, this study found that some respondents of the UK group attended pre-sessional courses provided by British universities before the Master’s courses commenced, which might have helped them to be more familiar with the university environment and facilities, and also to identify the teaching quality of the university with whom they intended to enroll. Yet, pre-sessional courses were still different from the nature of campus visits or open days, as the former type was more for students who had made their enrollment decision, while the latter type was more for students who had not yet made their enrollment choices.



Finally, within the category of interpersonal marketing information sources, the UK group used agents, HE fairs and university representatives. Although those sources were all included in the original conceptual framework, this study explained more about how these information sources were used by the UK group, for instance, how agents are used to assist participants' decisions on consideration sets. However, I found the TW group did not refer to any interpersonal marketing information sources, and the main reason for this could be because the TW group entered Master's courses via entrance exams, so Taiwanese universities did not need to "market" courses to prospective students, as much as British universities. Hence, only a few respondents of the TW group interacted with the university staff that visited cram schools to introduce their Master's courses to prospective students. However, even in that situation, participants from the TW group wanted to talk to current students more than to university staff. The TW group was therefore less affected by marketing interpersonal information sources provided by Taiwanese universities, as compared to the UK group. Next, the literature will be used to put the HE decision-making of Taiwanese respondents into context. Another part of the revised framework will be also discussed, namely "the decision-making stages that students go through".

### **8.3.2 Decision-making of Taiwanese respondents**

This study confirms that generic consumer behaviour theories can be applied to Master's decision-making in a Taiwanese setting, and as the generic consumer behaviour theories have also been applied to other HE settings in various geographical settings (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Brennan, 2001b; Pimpa, 2003), this study found the stages of Taiwanese students' Master's decision-making was similar to other students' HE decision-making processes.



The generic consumer behaviour theories can largely explain Taiwanese respondents' Master's decision-making, as the findings from this study suggest respondents all went through the five steps of decision-making processes (i.e., need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, choice, and outcome evaluation). Although the research objectives of this study focus on the second, third and fourth stages of HE decision-making, all of the five decision-making stages could be identified from the interviews conducted with Taiwanese postgraduates.

As the TW group generally planned "to be accepted by some courses first and then choose where to enroll after gathering further information", the TW group used more information sources before making enrolment choices than at the time of deciding consideration sets. This phenomenon is slightly different from the literature, because the linear decision-making process from the original conceptual framework did not indicate that respondents would go back to search more external information before the stage of making enrolment choices. Previous studies (i.e., Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004) assume information search is done at the second stage of decision-making, and sufficient information will be used by consumers at the following stages of decision-making to make choices, including deciding consideration sets and enrolment choices. However, this study showed that more specific information searches were conducted by respondents before making the enrolment choices for comparing some courses, and certain information sources were also more influential than other sources.

Such findings support the study conducted by Hwang *et al.*, (2002) who suggest that information searching does not take place only at a specific point in time within a



decision process, but it involves every phase of the decision process. In other words, whenever customers feel inefficiency of information, they search for more information and integrate the new information into retained information from the previous search. For both groups of this study, external searching was mainly done by respondents before deciding consideration sets, and more searches were done specifically for comparing the differences between the few alternatives before respondents' final enrolment choices.

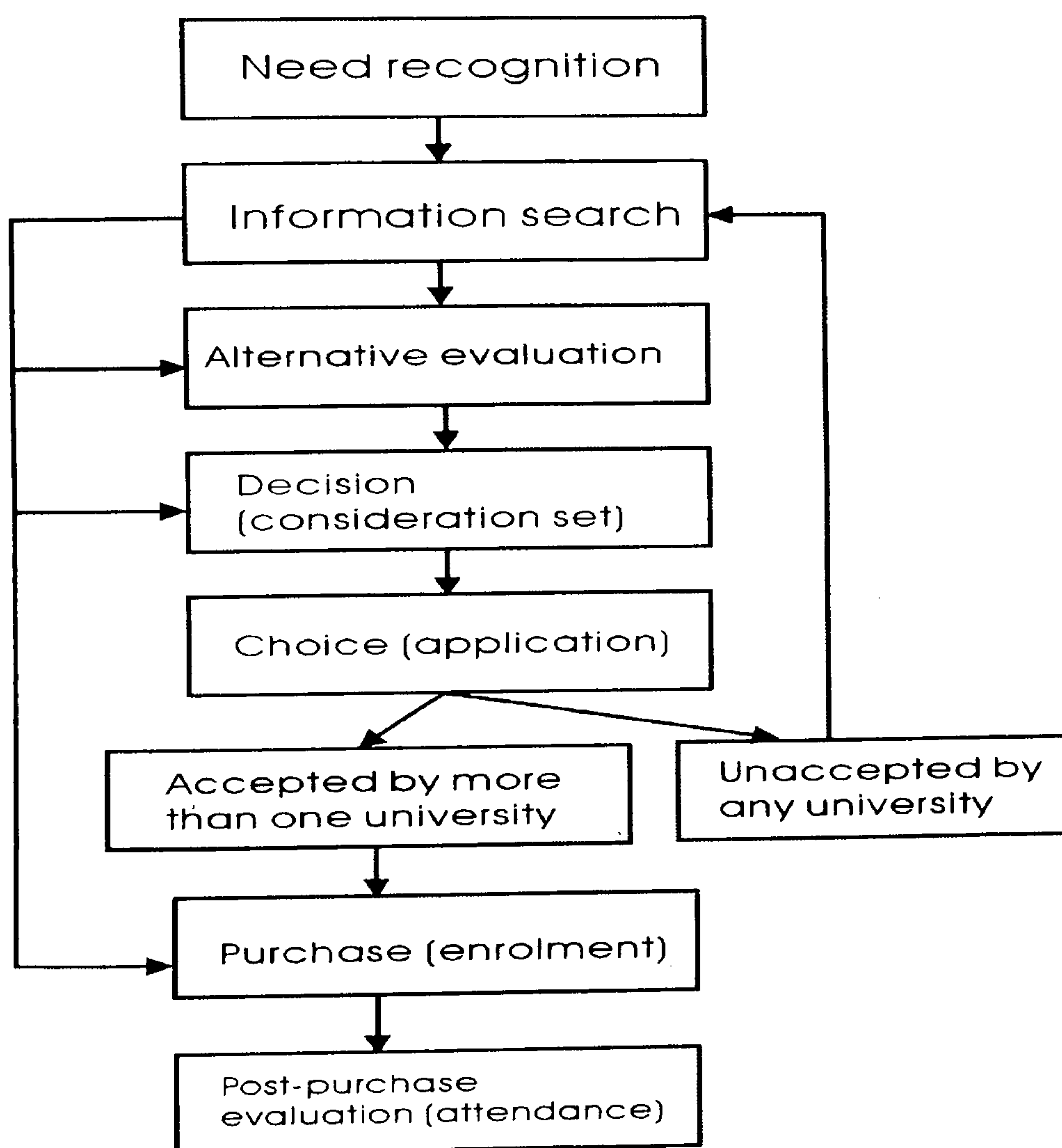
A possible explanation why more additional external search were often done before respondents' enrolment choices, could be attributable to the unique nature of HE services. Since respondents could not choose any university they prefer to attend, and universities were also choosing the best applicants, this two-way evaluation might have affected applicants' decision-making. This means respondents will not know which university they might be accepted until the point they received offers from them. Hence, to search further externally on those universities that have provided respondents offers could be very sensible, because applicants could compare between their preferred courses to find out the small differences before making enrolment choices.

The stages of participants' Master's decision-making, which was one part of the revised conceptual framework in Figure 8.2, is presented separately in Figure 8.4 for further discussion. This study found that the second stage, information search, contributed to other stages of participants' decision-making, especially to the stage of alternative evaluation, the stage of decision (consideration set) and the stage of purchasing (enrolment). Hence, arrows were drawn from the stage of information search to point to the stage of alternative evaluation, the stage of decision



(consideration set) and the stage of purchasing (enrolment) to illustrate that external information respondents found was used particularly in these stages. Briefly, the inside lines of Figure 8.4 identify the linear process that students went through when making their Master's choices, while the outside lines in the left-hand side suggest how the information obtained from the stage of information search affected other stages of decision-making. The line on the right-hand side shows that if any student had difficulties in obtaining university offers, s/he would need to go back for further information before applying to additional universities.

**Figure 8.4 Stages of Taiwanese participants' Master's choices**



Although Hossler *et al.*, (1989) suggest that students' consideration set might be slightly different from the list of institutions to which they actually apply; both groups of this study (with the exception of a few participants who were influenced by



situational factors) had basically the same list for consideration sets and application lists. Hence, this study found that actually after consideration sets were decided by participants, they tended not to change their minds on where to apply, and no additional external information sources were used before the stage of application.

Also, Figure 8.4 on the right-hand side has an arrow from the box of “unaccepted by any university” pointing to the stage of information search, because similar to the original conceptual framework (Figure 8.1), when a few Taiwanese participants were not accepted by any university at all, they opted for more external searching and went through the decision-making stages again until they were accepted.

Previous studies (e.g. Boyle, 1966; Alwin and Otto, 1977) suggest students’ “academic ability” and “the performance of the previous educational institutions the students attended” as factors that affected their HE aspirations. In addition, students tended to select colleges that have students with similar academic abilities (Chapman, 1984). Similarly, this study also found participants’ academic ability and the performance of their previous educational institutions affected their decision-making. However, the difference between this study and previous studies was that this current investigation found participants’ academic ability and the performance of their previous educational institutions being more influential on consideration sets than motivating them to do a Master’s study.

For instance, the TW group showed strong aspirations in applying for the Master’s entrance exam regardless of their academic ability at undergraduate level and the academic performances of their previous educational institutions. This might be caused by the high acceptance rate at undergraduate level of Taiwanese universities,



which encouraged more students to go for Master's studies in Taiwan. Moreover, this study found the TW group was affected more by their academic ability and the performance of their previous educational institutions in their "self-evaluated academic abilities" regarding which university to apply. The evidence can be seen from this study that those graduates from public universities at undergraduate level mainly applied to public universities at Master's level, while graduates from private universities at undergraduate level tended to apply to private universities at Master's level, as they felt those were in the "suitable range" for them to apply.

Moreover, similar to the TW group, the UK group's academic ability and the performance of their previous educational institutions also affected their "self-evaluated academic abilities" on what types of universities they considered to be more suitable for them. For example, middle as opposed to top range universities, were preferred by several respondents. Also, in the case of the UK group, their previous academic ability or the performance of their previous educational institutions also influenced them less in their Master's aspirations, as the UK group only need to "apply" to British universities for Master's studies rather than passing entrance exams on the specialised subjects to be accepted by British universities. With the exception of a very few respondents who had problems in the timing of their applications, the majority of the UK group were given offers by British universities regardless of their previous academic achievements or the performance of their previous educational institutions.

Having said that, this does not mean that it is easier for participants to be accepted by British universities, but it was more about the fundamental differences in HE between the British "application system" and the Taiwanese "exam entrance system". It means



for the UK group, the most important thing for them to be accepted by British universities might be more about their past work experience and their English test (IELTS or TOEFL) scores rather than whether they have studied certain professional subjects at undergraduate level.

Moreover, in terms of wider external influences, although this study did not find participants' friends to be widely consulted by the UK group, it was found that some respondents' friends either directly or indirectly influenced their information search. For example, from focus groups done in this study, some participants' friends did not directly affect their Master's choices but influenced them indirectly by pointing them to use educational agents (i.e. U1, 131). Friends who had direct influences on the UK group's information search tended to be those who had either studied in the UK, or were English people known by the participants (i.e. U10, 53; U6, 61). Hence, participants' friends who had experienced making Master's choices were most likely to be consulted. Although this study did not find respondents of the UK group were greatly influenced by their friends in making Master's choices overall, some agents suggested friends' influences were indeed strong.

Interviewer: How about friends' influences? What kind of influences are there?

Mark: *A lot of the time, they [potential students] are coming to us because they are advised by friends. So it's usual that a student that is going to the UK has known someone who has been to the UK. They [potential students] will obviously speak to them [friends who have studied in the UK] and get information from them, so I think friends are very important [to students' HE choices]. And like I said, it's important for students to listen to as many people as possible and develop their own ideas (Agent interviews, Agency G, M, 66-68).*



However, agents might not be happy with friends' suggestions to potential students as *"...friends are quite influential [to potential students], but [friends] often provide subjective information which tends to be based on personal opinions"* (Agent interviews, Agency G, P and D, 24-25). In other words, agents still believe themselves to be more qualified as professional people who should provide suggestions to potential students than students' friends. Another possibility could also be that agents are paid for their advice to potential students, so agents might prefer to be the "only advisers" to students for securing the commissions they can receive for their services.

On the other hand, to the TW group, peer influence was noted in some respondents' cases in this study, as some of them were indirectly motivated by peers to apply to the Master's entrance exam, because the majority of their classmates from undergraduate courses had done so previously. However, peer influence was not noted amongst the UK group, as many respondents had started working full-time before doing a Master's degree, they did not have peer pressures to study Master's degrees as the TW group might have. Although a few participants of the UK group were encouraged by friends who studied abroad to do so, peer influence was not a very strong effect for the UK group's aspirations.

#### **8.4 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, two unexpected but interesting themes were discussed, namely limited familial influences and the phenomenon of cram school attendance. The types of familial influences that participants had were explained, and it was found the strongest type of familial influences related to the financial support provided by parents. Also, the revised conceptual framework based on the findings of this study



was presented. Here the similarities and differences between the revised and the original conceptual framework were explained. Moreover, some additional factors that affected participants' Master's decision-making were also discussed, such as participants' academic ability and peer influences. In the following chapter, the conclusions drawn from this study will be presented.



## Chapter 9 Conclusions

### 9.0 Chapter overview

This chapter considers this study's contribution to knowledge, implications for practice, and also provides recommendations for future research. The section on contribution to knowledge will discuss what this study has contributed in the research area of students' decision-making and information search. Secondly, Implications for practice will address the managerial issues that Taiwanese and British universities need to consider when promoting themselves to prospective students. Finally, recommendations for future research will suggest additional avenues that researchers may wish to investigate further.

### 9.1 Contribution to knowledge

This study suggested that the information sources used by Taiwanese participants differed slightly from that as highlighted in the Western literature. In addition this study also demonstrated how the Taiwanese students used information sources slightly differently from students presented in the Western literature. The stages however, that Taiwanese applicants go through in their HE decision-making is very similar to Western students. Hence, this study found the theories in the area of consumer decision-making are largely appropriate for application to Taiwanese students' HE decision-making.

Furthermore, as there is no big difference in the stages of students' HE decision-making between the Western literature and this study, despite the existence of cultural differences, it is also possible to assume theories in consumer



decision-making might also be appropriate for application to students' HE decision-making in other Far East contexts.

Moreover, as HE decision-making is considered as one type of service in this study, it could also be possible to assume that theories in consumer decision-making might also be appropriate in other service sectors as well. Although small amendments might be needed regarding the theories of consumer decision-making to make them more appropriate in other contexts, similar to this study, it is possible to assume that theories in consumer decision-making could be useful in explaining consumer behaviour in other contexts. For example, in the case of this study, one addition to the previous literature was that one more stage of decision-making was added into the original conceptual framework.

Although the linear process of the decision-making was largely supported by previous studies (e.g. Loudon and Bitta, 1993; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004), this study found the stage of information search was more influential to certain stages of students' decision-making. This applied especially to the stage of alternative evaluations, consideration sets, and enrolment choices. Hence, although this study basically supports the view of the linear process of decision-making, it also identifies the stage of information search might be more influential to certain stages of students' decision-making. Moreover, this study indicates that additional information search could be done by students even after the information search stage, especially before making their final enrolment choices.

Moreover, this study proposes that new technology, such as BBS, affected participants' decision-making, and as the strong influences from the Internet on



students' decision-making were not previously found by other studies, it could be possible to assume Taiwanese preferences of using online information sources might be as a result of cultural issues or even the highly-developed IT infrastructure in Taiwan. In other words, the reason that Western students seem to rely less on online information sources in making HE decision-making could either be due to cultural preferences or attributed to the less developed IT infrastructure in the West than some parts in Asia. In addition, another explanation could be that previous studies in the West focused more on home-based rather than international students, and as the former might have more internal information that offered them sufficient information, they might not need to rely on current students' comments from BBS as much as international students.

On the whole, this study presents how information search was done in the context of Taiwanese students in choosing business Master's degrees, which deepens our understandings in the research area of information search. First, internal search has received little attention in the past (i.e., Peterson and Merino, 2003), and this study contributes by suggesting the formation and the content of Taiwanese students' internal information, which indicates what information sources might be more likely to be stored in students' memory, and what were known as preliminary perceptions.

Second, although external search has been studied in the past focusing on what information sources were used and what information was required by students (i.e., Moogan and Baron, 2003; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005), this study adopted a qualitative approach to present how external information sources were used by participants to find courses/institutions and evaluate the courses and/or institutions. This study suggested possible patterns of participants' use of external information sources in the



alternative evaluation stage, and advised how some external information sources affected the way students evaluate potential alternative programmes.

Third, as limited research was conducted on information quality in the past (i.e. Cho and Joun, 2003; Aladwani and Palvia, 2002; Huang *et al.*, 1999), this study showed the meaning of information quality from students' perspectives, and how these perspectives on information quality influenced their external search. Furthermore, although past studies (i.e. Prugsamatz and Pentecost, 2006; Pimpa, 2004) suggested what influential information sources were to students' decision-making, this study helps to suggest the impacts of the influential external information sources on the formation of students' consideration sets, application lists, and enrolment choices. The level of impacts from the influential external information sources also indicated that participants had preferences and perceptions for specific types of information sources, which also very much determined how influential the information sources could be for them individually.

Finally, although past studies suggested what factors affected home-based (Brooks, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005) or international students (Hill *et al.* 1992; O'Neill, 1995) in choosing universities, this study presented the similarities and differences between Taiwanese participants as home-based and international students in their internal and external search, as well as the definition of information quality, and the impacts from influential information sources.



Moreover, although previous studies that used a mainly quantitative approach have generated some useful findings regarding students' HE decision-making, they have also raised unanswered questions. Some of those puzzles were tackled in the context of Taiwanese students in this study. For instance,

1. How did students learn the names of institutions in order to decide which universities to select for application?

According to the Guardian University guide, there are 122 universities in the UK (Guardian, 2008). The approximate numbers of universities that Taiwanese respondents of the UK group applied to were around six universities, and this study found that trying to eliminate 122 alternative universities to reach the six universities, many of them used educational agents, league tables, and the location of universities to narrow down the sizable list of available options.

Although Pimpa (2003) found educational agents affected Thai students' HE choices, no other investigations reviewed for this study had suggested how agents actually influenced students' application choices. This study found educational agents normally offered a suggested list with about ten names of potential universities, which respondents used to decide the consideration set (section 5.2.2), and this basically was the most common way for participants to learn the names of institutions in order to decide on their application choice.

However, how influential agents are to participants in their consideration sets was also very much about their personal relationships with the agents they used. This study found respondents' trust level towards agents affected how influential the latter were to applicants' consideration sets (section 6.2.2). Therefore this study suggests that educational agents were one of the most important information sources that



influenced participants' eliminations of alternatives that eventually led to their consideration sets (section 7.2.1).

Moreover, as the UK group had limited internal information on British universities, it was difficult for them to distinguish between universities. Therefore, for the few respondents of the UK group who did not use agents for consideration sets, league tables were the main information sources which they consulted. Although some studies suggest that league tables were used as one external information source (i.e. Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Bowden, 2000), this study actually provided details on how league tables helped respondents of the UK group to simplify the evaluation process by identifying the "middle range" universities that they would consider for application (section 5.2.3).

On the other hand, for the TW group, respondents' internal information on universities affected their formation of consideration set so much, that less external information sources were used by them as compared to the UK group. Similar to the UK group, the TW group also did not seek the complete list of all available courses before deciding their consideration sets, as their rich internal information was used to identify "better universities" for their Master's studies, compared to their current undergraduate universities. Hence, their preliminary perceptions affected what types of universities they would select for application, such as opting for public, private, or polytechnic universities. As internal information was mainly used by the TW group, it might also suggest that home-based students might have much less problems than international students in learning the names of institutions, in order to decide which universities to apply.



2. What is the role of universities in the stage of students' information search?  
How influential is university-provided information/activities to students' decision-making?

The university-provided information or activities included information from university websites and prospectus of universities, campus visits, open days, or HE fairs overseas etc. Although some studies suggested university-provided information sources were less influential than other types of sources (James *et al.*, 1999; Brennan, 2001b), other studies found they influenced prospective students' decision-making to some extent (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005; Moogan and Baron, 2003).

This study found information provided by universities was less influential to both the TW and the UK group when compared to other non-marketing stimuli information sources, as information provided by universities was seen by most respondents to be less trustworthy. Hence, university-provided information was only used by participants for knowing the "facts" about universities, rather than to evaluate how good the universities were. When respondents of both groups wanted to know the reputation of the courses, they preferred to ask "experienced students" who had attended that course or university, whose information was seen as more reliable and objective than other sources.

3. What information did students want at the stage of their information search, and how were the information sources used to obtain the required information?

Although a quantitative approach could show the types of information sources students used, much less can be found from such an approach regarding what exactly students wanted to know and how the students obtained the required information,

such as how students used HE fairs and educational agents. This study used a qualitative approach to find how information sources were used, and found HE fairs were normally used by students at the starting point of external information search to find more general information regarding British universities, including the availability of courses and the geographical locations of universities. Moreover, this study also suggested how agents influenced the information search of the UK group by offering suggested lists to them.

On the other hand, the TW group was more knowledgeable about alternative universities and choice criteria as home-based students, so they often deferred serious comparisons between alternatives until the stage of the enrolment choices, where they used reference groups and BBS to assist their final decision. Actually, in the case of both groups, it can be said that this study found BBS sites maximised the influences from current students to potential students' Master's choices.

#### 4. How did students evaluate the information they received?

Although there seems to be substantial information provided to prospective students in their information search, little was known about how students evaluated the quality of information they received. This study found reliability, objectivity, accessibility, and coverage of information were some of the indicators respondents used to evaluate information quality. Respondents generally felt the amount of information was sufficient, although some improvements on information quality were suggested by them, including providing more updated or honest information. Generally, this study found respondents' perceived information quality was positively related to their use of external information sources. This implies that the higher perceived information quality that information source is, the more that source is used.



In summary, students' information search has received little attention in the West, and Taiwanese students' information search was selected for the first time to extend the context of students' information search to a different cultural and geographic setting. In terms of academic contributions, this study helps to understand the process of students' information search and shows the influences from information search to students' Master's decision-making, especially in participants' use of educational agents, league tables, BBS, and university-provided information. Furthermore, in terms of practical contributions, by understanding students' information search, universities in Taiwan and in the UK can adjust the university-provided information and marketing activities to recruit students accordingly. The following section will consider these managerial issues in greater detail.

## **9.2 Implications for practice**

Some issues that were revealed in this study present implications for university administrators, including how internal information affected students' consideration sets, how students were affected by league tables, how agents influenced students' consideration sets, the influence of BBS, and the lack of trust from students towards university-provided information.

### **Internal information**

This study demonstrated that internal information strongly influenced consideration sets of the TW group. The TW group as home-based students possessed much internal information on universities, which was largely used in deciding consideration sets. By contrast, the UK group as international students had limited internal information at their disposal, so they relied on external search more in deciding consideration sets.

Therefore, this might mean it could be easier for university administrators and marketers to promote HE services to international rather than to home-based students, as the latter might have had strong preliminary perceptions, which might make them harder to be affected simply by using external information sources. On the other hand, as international students need many external information sources to give them ideas about overseas universities, marketing stimuli information might be more influential. For instance, educational agents as a marketing stimuli were one of the most influential information sources to the UK group, and it is also interesting to see the UK group trusted educational agents more for information than information provided directly from British universities.

It might therefore be more difficult to market courses/institutions to home-based students as their preliminary perceptions could be too strongly entrenched and thus difficult to be changed by universities' marketing efforts. Conversely, it could be more possible for universities to market courses/institutions to international students, as they used external search to build perceptions rather than relying on their internal search. Moreover, as reference groups were one information source used by both groups for internal information, it can also be said the best way for universities to affect prospective students' internal search could be to focus on improving the teaching quality and services to current students. In this way current students might share their good experiences at certain universities with prospective students.

### **League tables**

This study found that league tables affected alternative evaluations of the UK group more than the TW group. While the TW group had internal ranking maps mainly from



past experiences of making undergraduate choices, the UK group relied on British university league tables in deciding consideration set. As league tables were widely used by the UK group who are international students in the UK, British university administrators might need to be more aware of the impact of ranking. Since international students knew much less about how to evaluate foreign universities, league tables was seen as an indicator that included all possible evaluations that they should have considered in making their HE choices.

Agents were aware of how influential league tables could be to Taiwanese students' choices, and some of them even tried to explain to students how league tables were developed, because they wanted to reduce students' reliance on the ranking. In addition, some agents commented that Taiwanese students did not know much about the individual elements used to compose the ranking of league tables. Hence, it was important for British university representatives and educational agents to inform prospective students on what league tables might do and might not do for them. Paradoxically, this study found top ranking universities might not be where every student wanted to apply, as this study showed "middle range" universities were preferred by most respondents of the UK group, because they felt they were more academically capable attending those kinds of universities.

### **Educational agents**

This study showed the UK group was influenced very much by their agents in deciding consideration sets, because agents gave respondents a suggested list that had about ten courses, which were the most suited to respondents' past backgrounds and criteria from agents' perspectives. Although it can be argued that whether those courses were the "most suitable" ones for potential students, it cannot be denied that

the suggested lists from agents greatly influenced respondents' consideration sets. Therefore, for administrators of British universities, the relationship between university and agents needs to be carefully considered.

When observing the meeting between University D representatives and agents, I found some agents had difficulties getting the information they needed from University D, because they felt they did not know who to contact for different queries, and they were often transferred to several different people until they finally received the required information. In light of this, some agents wanted to have a one-stop contact from University D who they could always approach for all their information needs. This might mean that when trying to assist overseas agents, British universities could consider having someone who represents the whole institution across academic schools and to provide agents an entire range of information. The Internet might also help British universities to assist agents in their information access. For example, the university website portal could have a password protected section for agents, so they could get updated information on applications tracking sent for potential students, or they could get detailed information on what new courses were developed by universities etc.

Moreover, regular meetings between university representatives and agents are important, so any newly raised problems can be swiftly resolved. In addition, agents as the "first tier representatives" facing potential students might also report feedback from prospective students to British universities. Agents will be in a position to suggest better ways in which universities can provide information to prospective students. For instance, one agent suggested University D hold regular social events for



alumni in Taiwan, because it could be a good idea to keep relationships with alumni, which might even encourage positive WOM from them to prospective students.

### **Current students/alumni via BBS**

This study found BBS influenced both the TW and the UK groups, especially in making enrolment choices. It is interesting to see how the Internet connected potential students with current students and alumni. As experienced students' comments on courses on BBS were seen as reliable by many potential students, the level of influence from current students/alumni to potential students could be much higher than the pre-Internet era.

It is important for university administrators to be aware of how influential current students/alumni can be to their recruitment of new students. Although HE marketing is important as an external university activity, this study found that it might be even more important for universities to spend time meeting the needs of current students internally. In doing so, satisfied current students and alumni would naturally spread favourable WOM, which could potentially help universities marketing to potential students in a much more efficient way. This is likely to be cheaper and more effective in the long run.

### **Information from universities**

As this study showed that both groups did not have much trust of the information provided by universities, it is important for universities to try to provide more "reliable" information. Since study participants tended to feel universities only provided "bright" information about themselves, universities could try to provide some information that potential students could evaluate themselves. For example,

some respondents mentioned seeing video clips of teaching sessions or of campus environments on university websites, which could be a more reliable possibility from students' perspectives. In this way, prospective students could evaluate the visual information they see rather than just read the "bright" information written and presented by the universities.

Moreover, as potential students like to see comments from experienced students on courses, universities can film short interviews video clips with current students. These students could then offer comments on their learning experiences, which might help increase the reliability of information from potential students' perspectives. Furthermore, university websites can have a discussion board for current and potential students to use, as BBS is one of the most popular mediums used by Taiwanese participants in this study. If universities have some staff to answer current and prospective students' enquires on the discussion board, it might also help students in increasing the usage of the information provided by universities, as respondents tended to feel information gained from discussion boards was more "personalised" than "one for all" information.

### **9.3 Recommendations for future research**

The findings from this study suggest that decision-making models (i.e., Loudon and Bitta, 1993; Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004) are largely appropriate for application to Taiwanese students' HE decision-making. Based on this, further assumptions might be drawn on the possibilities to apply decision-making models not only to consumers' product purchases in the West, but also to decision-making in other contexts of services sectors, or even to students' HE decision-making in other



countries. Hence, the direction for future research could be about the application of the decision-making model in other contexts to expand its application.

More specifically, other research directions could further investigate the influences from agents and from the Internet (including BBS), and also the impact of the information quality on students' use of information sources. As this study found agents' influences were strong for Taiwanese respondents, and it would be interesting to see whether agents' influences are strong when different ethnic student groups are studied, such as mainland Chinese or other students from the Far East. For instance, what kind of influences do agents have on other Asian students? Do agents' counselling styles differ from those agents observed in this study? To what extent do other Asian students rely on agents?

Moreover, as the Internet was used more extensively than ever before, how is online information used by students for making HE choices, and how does the Internet usage influence students' information search. Since this study suggested current students were influential reference groups influencing Taiwanese respondents' HE decision-making via the use of BBS, it would be useful to see whether students from other countries also use information from BBS as much, and whether the main influences from BBS were also on students' enrolment choices. For instance, do Western students as home-based students from English speaking countries use BBS in making HE choices? Why or why not? Do students from Asian countries use BBS as much as Taiwanese respondents? Is there any difference between countries in the use of BBS? If so, what factors affect students' preferences in using information from BBS?

Furthermore, this study found that potential students had perceptions on information quality, which affected their use of external information sources. For instance, when information from universities was seen as less reliable by students, the information was also less relied on than other information sources. This phenomenon can be studied further in other cultural contexts and with different populations, such as undergraduate students or even PhD students in other countries, to see how information quality was evaluated. For instance, are similar elements used to evaluate information quality regardless of being undergraduate or PhD students? Is trust issue also involved in students' external search in any other context?

As no other previous studies reviewed focused on the information quality of information sources from prospective students' views, it will be interesting to see more work in this area, so that possible conclusions could be drawn to see whether prospective students from different countries define information quality differently.

#### **9.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter provided how this study filled the gap in the research area of students' information search, and followed by some reflections regarding some implications for practice addressing potential activities to be pursued by Taiwanese and British university administrators in marketing their universities. Finally, the chapter concluded with the provision of several recommendations for further research.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Studies on students' institution alternatives

<b>Researcher and Year</b>	<b>Factors in institution alternatives</b>
<i>1967 Baird</i>	Good faculty High academic standards Special programmes
<i>1973 Bowers and Pugh</i>	Good faculty High standards
<i>1975 Lewis and Morrison</i>	Special academic programs Cost Location Size of institution General reputation Distance from home
<i>1981 Gilmour et al.</i>	Cost Location Programs Quality of the institution
<i>1979 Chapman</i>	Quality of the institution Cost
<i>1980 Ihlanfeldt</i>	Programs Quality Cost Location
<i>1981 Murphy</i>	Academic reputation Cost
<i>1981 Maguire and Lay</i>	Financial aid Peer influence Special programmes Size of the institution Location Athletic facilities Social activities
<i>1982 Litten and Brodigan</i>	Financial support Fields of study

	<p>General academic reputation</p> <p>Location</p> <p>Social atmosphere</p> <p>Faculty teaching reputation</p> <p>Academic standards</p> <p>Careers to which college might direct</p>
<i>1985 Discenza et al.</i>	<p>Academic reputation</p> <p>Peer influence</p> <p>Financial assistance</p> <p>Location</p>
<i>1985 Hossler</i>	<p>Academic reputation</p> <p>Peer influence</p> <p>Financial assistance</p> <p>Location</p>
<i>1985 Olson and King</i>	<p>Location</p> <p>Personal contact with faculty at the institution</p> <p>Reputation of the academic department</p> <p>Cost</p>
<i>1994 Allen and Higgins</i>	<p>Academic reputation</p> <p>Content of the course</p> <p>The institution's international reputation</p> <p>Level of fees</p> <p>Accommodation guaranteed throughout time at the institution</p>
<i>1995 O'Neill</i>	<p>Course content</p> <p>Reputation of the institution</p> <p>Familiarity/contacts with an institution</p> <p>Funding</p> <p>Preferred region</p> <p>Recommendations from others</p>
<i>1995 Coccari and Javalgi</i>	<p>Quality of staff and faculty</p> <p>Types of degree programmes</p> <p>Costs</p> <p>Course offerings</p> <p>Location</p> <p>Student faculty ratio</p> <p>Financial aid availability</p>
<i>1996 Adia</i>	<p>Course content</p>



	<p>Entry grade requirements</p> <p>Distance from home</p> <p>Academic reputation</p>
<p>1998</p> <p><i>Joseph and Joseph</i></p>	<p>Academic and programmes issues</p> <p>Cost of education</p> <p>Location and recreation facilities</p> <p>Peer and family influences</p>
<p>1999</p> <p><i>James et al.,</i></p>	<p>Financial aid</p> <p>Ranking</p> <p>The academic reputation</p> <p>Convenience factors</p> <p>Quality of the institution</p> <p>Campus life</p> <p>Availability of majors</p>
<p>2000</p> <p><i>Joseph and Joseph</i></p>	<p>Course and career information</p> <p>Value of education</p> <p>Physical aspects and facilities</p> <p>Degree (content and structure)</p> <p>Cost of education</p>
<p>2003</p> <p><i>Moogan and Baron</i></p>	<p>Course content</p> <p>Location</p> <p>Reputation</p> <p>Entry grades</p> <p>The social atmosphere (entertainment facilities and union events)</p> <p>Positions of the institution</p>

## Appendix 2 Studies on business students' institution evaluations

<b>Researcher and Year</b>	<b>Factors in institution alternatives</b>
<i>1984 Kurst</i>	Accreditation Supporting facilities Faculty make-up Student/faculty ratio
<i>1988 Miller</i>	Accreditation Teaching methods Programme duration Fields of specialization School ranking Cost
<i>1988 Powers</i>	Academic quality Quality and reputation of the faculty Placement opportunities
<i>1989 Parker et al.,</i>	Educational attainments of faculty Image of the university Placement records Research of faculty Tuition costs
<i>1992 Linden et al.,</i>	Placement records Tuition fees Average GMAT scores
<i>1993 Richardson and Stacey</i>	Placement opportunities Academically challenging programmes Reputation of department faculty Physical facilities (e.g., computers, library) Time required to complete program Departmental faculty and student ratio
<i>1994 Webb and Allen</i>	Academic reputation Accreditation Tuition
<i>1995 Panitz</i>	Professors with business experience and knowledgeable in theory High teaching quality Staff professionalism



	Supporting facilities Ethical standards The image of the school
<i>1999 Chiu</i>	Institution's reputation Programme curriculum Tuition fees Mode of delivery
<i>2004 Donaldson and McNicholas</i>	Reputation of institution Reputation of course, department Accreditation of course Nature and content of course Location Commitments in the area Mode of study

**Appendix 3 Preferred information sources for information on institutional characteristic**

<b>Information wanted</b>	<b>Preferred information resources</b>
<i>1. Financial</i>	Admissions officer College publications
<i>2. Fields of study</i>	College publications Admissions officer
<i>3. Academic reputation</i>	High school counselor Commercial guides Alumni
<i>4. Teaching quality</i>	High school counselor College students
<i>5. Academic standards</i>	High school counselor College students
<i>6. Location</i>	College publications College students
<i>7. Social atmosphere</i>	Alumni College students
<i>8. Careers available</i>	Alumni Admissions officer

**Source:** Litten and Brodigan, 1982



#### Appendix 4 The rationale of designing research objectives

Research objectives (RO)	Propositions (P)	References
<p>RO1: To investigate the formation and the content of students' internal information—how participants had the internal information stored in their memory, including from what information sources, at what timing and in what ways. This also includes addressing the areas of internal information possessed by participants.</p>	<p>P1.1: When consumers' internal information search provides sufficient information, their external search will be very limited. RO1 will find out whether the above concept could be applied to students' HE choices. Also, more needs to be known on what internal information students have and how it was formed. Hence, it can be seen how students' preliminary perceptions (or internal information) affect their external search which is asked in RO2.</p>	<p>Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997</p>
<p>RO2: To examine the use of external information in the alternative evaluation stage—how are external information sources used by participants to find courses/institutions and to evaluate the performances of the courses/institutions.</p>	<p>P 2.1: Information sources were divided into four types, including interpersonal marketing sources, interpersonal non-marketing sources, impersonal marketing sources, and impersonal non-marketing sources. This study will therefore see what type of information sources are more preferred by respondents and how the information sources are used for what information.</p>	<p>Engel <i>et al.</i>, 1995; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997</p>
	<p>P 2.2: Students' expectations about studying overseas were conceptualised as four dimensions which are economic, social, personal, and learning dimensions, and this study</p>	<p>Patterson <i>et al.</i>, 1998</p>



<p>RO3: To explore the meaning of information quality from students' perspectives and to see how information quality affects students' external search—how participants evaluate the information quality of external information sources and how students' perceptions of information quality influence their external search.</p>	<p>will see whether they can be used to explain the type of information students need in making HE choices.</p> <p>P2.3: The information sought via external search can be (1) alternative brands available, (2) choice criteria on which to compare brands, (3) importance of various choice criteria, and (4) the performance of the brands on the attributes. This study will suggest how students use external information sources to make the above decisions, especially on how information sources are used to find what information.</p> <p>RO2 was asked to find how external information sources affect respondents' alternative evaluation, so it can be linked to RO3 to see whether the information sources that are seen as better quality are also more frequently used for alternative evaluations.</p> <p>P 3.1: Students' HE choices were found to be made in a poorly-informed situation, and students were dissatisfied when the pre-entry information they received was inadequate or misleading. Therefore, it was suggested that information for students need to be more specific, better quality, more targeted and accessible. This study will find</p>	<p>Mowen and Minor, 2001</p> <p>James, 2000; Christie <i>et al.</i> 2004; Yorke, 1999; Martinez and Munday, 1998; Connor and Dewson, 2001</p>
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	<p>out what students mean by specific or better quality of information.</p> <p>RO3 is asked to see how students define “good” information and how the evaluation of information quality affects their use of external information sources, which was asked in RO2.</p>	
<p>RO4: To look at the impacts of the influential external information sources on the formation of students’ consideration sets, application lists, and enrolment choices—how the influential external information sources affects participants’ key decision-making stages, including a consideration set, an application list, and an enrolment choice.</p>	<p>P 4.1: It was found interpersonal marketing sources from students’ friends or families are more influential than interpersonal non-marketing information from universities or career related contacts. This study will find out whether the above concept is also true in a Taiwanese context and why some information sources are more influential to students than others?</p>	<p>Brennan, 2001b</p>
	<p>P 4.2: Decision-making process contains mainly five stages that are <i>need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation</i>. In this study, the decision-making process of students was divided into eight stages which added three more stages after the stage of alternative evaluation, which are <i>decision, choice, and offers received</i>. Since the decision-making process is a step-by-step process, the previous stage affects the next</p>	<p>Engel <i>et al.</i>, 1995; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Brennan, 2001b</p>

	<p>stage.</p> <p>Hence, RO4 looks at how the influential information sources affect students' other decision-making stages, especially on the choice on consideration set, application list, and enrolment choice.</p>	
	<p>P 4.3: The types of influence from family in HE choices include finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition influence. Hence, this study will see how influential familial influences are to students, and whether the types of familial influences in a Taiwanese context are similar to literature.</p>	<p>Pimpa, 2004</p>
	<p>P 4.4: Parents' involvement in children's HE has different levels, including an interest level, an influence and support level, or investment and intrusion level. If parents are influential to Taiwanese students, this study will find out whether the above concepts can explain the level of involvement from parents to students.</p> <p>The key decision-making stages in HE including deciding a consideration set, an application list, and an enrolment choice. Hence, RO4 is asked to see how influential</p>	<p>Reay <i>et al.</i> 2005.</p>



	<p>information sources affect students in those turning points. RO2 looks at respondents' detailed use of external information sources at the stage of alternative evaluation, while RO4 focuses more on how the influential information sources affect students' key stages of decision-making.</p>	
<p>RO5: To compare to what extent were students in Taiwan and in the UK similar or different in the Master's decision-making based on the previous four objectives—to evaluate the similarities and differences between participants as home and international students in their internal search, external search, the definition of information quality, and the impacts from influential information sources.</p>	<p>P 5.1: Although both the TW and the UK group are from the same cultural background—Taiwan, when they search information to study in different countries, namely Taiwan and the UK, their preliminary perceptions (internal information) might affect the level of their external search. Hence, this study will find out whether any differences exist between the two groups, and why that happened.</p> <p>P 5.2: The TW group might be less involved in external information search than the UK group as home-based students, and the use of external information sources by the two groups might be different. Also, the use of choice criteria of two groups might be different, and the UK group as international students might use educational agents to assist their application in the UK, which will not be used by home-based students as one information source.</p>	<p>From the findings of focus groups as a pilot study</p>

RO5 indicates the differences between the TW group and the UK, which could also explain the possible differences between the information search of home-based students and international students.  
RO5 links RO1 to RO4 together to see whether respondents' information search differ when the destination of study differ.



## Appendix 5 Pre-interview email

Hi \_\_\_\_\_, I am Hsiao-Pei (Sophie) Yang from the PhD course at Bournemouth University, UK. Thank you very much for showing an interest to be interviewed for my study. The benefit for you as an interview participant is that your personal stories in making HE choices can be shared with others. Also, this experience of participating in a research project could assist you in writing your Maser's dissertation in the near future.

The research is on the information search of Taiwanese students within Higher Education decision-making, and the focus of this study is to know about your experiences when choosing where to study for your current Master's business programmes. The reason for conducting this study is to learn how Taiwanese students' information search might differ when being international students or home-based students. The interview will be recorded by a digital voice recorder, so the data could be translated to English and be analysed. If you have any problem on being recorded, please let me know in advance.

All the information you provide in the interviews will be used only for the purpose of research, and will be kept confidential and anonymous. After the interview was transcribed, the copy will be sent to you for correction. Also, I will send you my key findings when the data analysis was done for your comments and feedback.

The interview time is approximately one hour, and my role as an interviewer is to understand and gain your unique personal experiences, and not to judge or evaluate the experiences. Also, there is no right or wrong answer expected from you. Rather, you are seen as the expert who has been through the HE decision-making and has valuable information to share with me.

Thank you very much again for your precious time. Please allow me to remind you again with the time and location for the interview:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much.

Regards, Hsiao-Pei (Sophie) Yang

## Appendix 6 Outlines questions of focus groups

**Topic guide** about 80 min

**Welcome** 3 min

My research topic

Their experiences-- Can agree or disagree with each other; No right or wrong answers; their feelings and perceptions

The ground rules—interactions; don't talk at the same time (recording); don't need to say only positive things

Introduce themselves—English names; courses

1. What motivated you to do a **Master's** degree? 10 min

When, what happened, or who affected you?

Self-image on studying

What family and friends said

2. What made you come to **UK** to study? 10 min

Why not Taiwan (why overseas)

Ever been to UK before?

Any other countries considered—why were attracted by them?

Considerations when selecting countries

3. What made you studying on the current **subject**? 5 min

Previous background

Other considerations

4. How did you **search for information** on studying in the UK? 15min

When, where you went, and seen whom

Self-applied or agents?—satisfied with agents' services, what suggestions they've got

Feelings on searching

How many you applied for? How many accepted you?

How did you choose where to apply for? —choice criteria—search stage

What other preparations you did?

5. What made you come here to study in **University D**? (choice stage) 15 min

Considerations on selecting schools—Business school or University D?

Why not other universities?—what are they?

Feelings when deciding where to study



Even been to University D before?

6. **Orders** of making those decisions? Master's—UK—subject—University D 5min

7. What do you think British universities or other organisations could do on helping the information search of Taiwanese students? 10 min

Open days; education exhibitions; agents; representatives from universities; British Council; websites; brochures; international offices

Other activities, personnel needed?

8. **Satisfaction** 5 min

Are they happy studying here?

Will they make the same choice again if they could?

Will they recommend others to come?

Summary for the discussion 5 min

Additional questions or comments

## Appendix 7 The rationale of designing interview themes

<b>Research objectives (RO)</b>	<b>Interview themes (IT)</b>	<b>Indication</b>
<p>RO1: To investigate the formation and the content of students' internal information—how participants had the internal information stored in their memory, including from what information sources, at what timing and in what ways. Also, what were known as internal information by participants?</p> <p>RO2: To examine the use of external information in the alternative evaluation stage—how external information sources are used by participants to find courses/institutions, decide choice criteria, and evaluate the performances of the courses/institutions?</p>	<p>IT1: What was known about studying a business Master's programme before students search for information from external sources?</p> <p>IT2: What information sources were used by students to form their preliminary perceptions?</p>	<p>From IT1, students' preliminary perceptions suggest how informative their internal information is, such as the amount of alternative courses/institutions known and the amount of choice criteria known.</p> <p>IT2 showed how internal information was formed by what information sources. IT1 is linked to IT2 to see what information sources are more likely to be used in forming preliminary perceptions.</p>
<p>RO2: To examine the use of external information in the alternative evaluation stage—how external information sources are used by participants to find courses/institutions, decide choice criteria, and evaluate the performances of the courses/institutions?</p>	<p>IT3: What information do students want about alternative courses/institutions before making a HE choice?</p> <p>IT4: How information sources were used to decide choice criteria and to evaluate alternatives?</p>	<p>The types of information needed by students can be seen in IT3, and they might be categorised to be four dimensions that are economic, social, personal, and learning dimension as suggested by literature.</p> <p>Specific information sources used by students will be identified in IT4, and it will be followed up to find what information sources were used for what information, and how information</p>



		<p>from information sources was interpreted by students.</p> <p>IT1 links to IT4 to see the relationship between internal search and external search, especially on whether when students' internal information search provides more sufficient information, their external search is more limited as suggested by literature.</p>
<p>RO3: To explore the meaning of information quality from students' perspectives and to what extent information quality affected the external search—how did participants define the information quality of external information sources and to what extent do students' perceptions on information quality influence their external search?</p>	<p>IT5: How do students see the quality of information they receive?</p>	<p>IT5 is to see whether students evaluate the quality of information they received, and it links to IT7 to see whether information sources that are seen as having better quality by respondents are also more influential to students in making Master's choices.</p>
	<p>IT6: In students' views, what makes a good piece of information?</p>	<p>Students' interpretation of a good piece of information can be indicated in IT6 to see whether the format or the accessibility of information affects students' views on its quality of information.</p>
<p>RO4: To look at the impacts of the influential external information sources on the formation of students'</p>	<p>IT7: Why some information sources are more influential than</p>	<p>The reasons on using certain information sources more can be seen in IT7 to indicate why</p>

<p>consideration sets, application lists, and enrolment choices—how the influential external information sources affected participants’ key stages of Master’s decision-making, including a consideration set, an application list, and an enrolment choice?</p>	<p>others to students? IT8: How the influential information sources affect students in the key stages of their decision-making process?</p>	<p>those sources are preferred. The key stages cover how consideration set, application list, and enrolment choice was decided, so IT8 show how influential the information sources are to students’ key stage of choices.</p>
<p>RO5: To compare to what extent were students in Taiwan and in the UK similar or different in the Master’s decision-making based on the previous four objectives—to evaluate the similarities and differences between participants as home and international students in their internal search, external search, the definition of information quality, and the impacts from influential information sources.</p>	<p>IT9: What type and what level of influences were the influential information sources to students?</p>	<p>It is important to see not only what are influential, but also what types and how strong/weak the influences are to students. This study has two groups of students, so RO5 is to compare two groups to see to how they differ in terms of information search. RO5 links RO1 to RO4 together to see the main similarities and differences between the information search of the two groups, and this might help explain the possible differences between the information search of home and international students</p>



## **Appendix 8 Interview guide for educational agents**

### **Welcome**

#### **My topic**

My PhD topic is on information search and its influence on Taiwanese students' higher education choices. As agents are used by many Taiwanese students, I want to interview you about this industry and how you help students to study in the UK.

#### **Your experience**

You can be relaxed and just describe what you do to help students. As it is about your personal experiences, there is no right or wrong answers. What I would like to know is your feelings, views, and interpretations of the relationship between you and students. You are welcome to say anything, both positive and negative.

#### **Confidentiality of the data**

The information you provide will only be used for my PhD research, so I can reassure you the confidentiality of the data. Your name and personal information will be protected as well when they were used in my findings.

#### **The recording**

Since I need to analyse this interview later, I'll need to record our conversations if you agree. Don't be nervous about this, as I'm the only person who will listen to the recording.

Before we start, is there any other thing you want to ask me about?

### **1. Can you tell me briefly how did you come to be an agent?**

Educational background, working history, experiences in this industry—any trainings  
How the agency operate?—profile of company (paid or free for students)  
How many British universities do you work with?

### **2. How do you know what to advise students?**

How do you find out what students need?  
What kind of suggestions do you give to students?  
What sources of information do you use?  
The information sources for the agency website  
How do you decide which universities students should apply to in the UK?  
When students are accepted by more than one university, how do you advise students which university to go to?

### **3. Tell me about your role as an agent in students' HE choices.**

#### **(1) Positioning**

How do you build up contacts with potential universities?  
How do you build up contacts with potential students?  
Do you often have students come in because of word-of-mouth?—the percentage—do they appoint a particular agent?  
What services do you offer as an agent?—pre-departure, during the course in the UK, and after students finished the course in the UK

#### **(2) Introducing**

How do you introduce your company to students?—sub-official or commercial organisation?—the impact of this  
How do you explain why you offer free services to students?  
Why do you think students want to use agents?

(3)Personal comments

How do you see the differences in service you offer as a free agent compared to agent who is paid by students?

**4. Can you talk me through a typical case of how you advise students?**

The procedure of your standard services process

How many times on average do you meet a student before he/she goes to UK to study?

How much normally students empower you?

When students come to see you in the office, do they come alone or with someone else?

Can you categorise Taiwanese students into types in terms of how they use agents' services?

**5. What influences do potential Master's students' friends have? What type and what level of influences are they?**

The influences from students' family members? Type/level

The influences from the British university recruiting staff? Type/level

How do your (agents') influences relate to other people's influences (family, friends, university recruiting staff) on students?—who's more influential?

How much do students trust you? Why?

The satisfaction level of students on your services—how do you know/measure this?

**Summary for the discussion**

Is there any other things you want to say before I leave?

If needed, I might do a 2<sup>nd</sup> interview with you by phone or the Internet to ask a few extra questions. It will not be more than half an hour. Is it okay for you?



## **Appendix 9 Interview guide for potential students of the TW group**

### **Welcome**

#### **My topic**

My PhD topic is on information search and its influence on Taiwanese students' higher education choices. Hence, I want to interview you about what information sources you used and who influenced your MA choices in Taiwan.

#### **Your experience**

You can be relaxed and just recall your personal experience regarding choosing a MA course in Taiwan. As it is about your personal experiences, there is no right or wrong answers. What I would like to know is your feelings, perceptions, and interpretations for your MA choices. You are welcome to say anything, both positive and negative.

#### **Confidentiality of the data**

The information you provide will only be used for my PhD research, so I can reassure you the confidentiality of the data. Your name and personal information will be protected as well when they were used in my findings.

#### **The recording**

Since I need to analyse this interview later, I'll need to record our conversations if you agree. Don't be nervous about this, as I'm the only person who will listen to the recording.

Before we start, is there any other thing you want to ask me about?

1. Going right back to the time when you first thought about doing a Master's in Taiwan but haven't already started looking for information. What did you know about doing a Master's in Taiwan?

Sources of information

Timing

2. What swayed you to think about doing a Mater's in Taiwan?

Choice criteria for country

Taiwan or any other foreign countries

Sources of information

How the family felt about this?—the Master's, the Master's in Taiwan

3. After you've decided to do the Master's in Taiwan, how did you get more information about this?

(1) Choice of subject, what/why/how—Past working experiences? Future career?

(2) Information needed--Economic, social, personal, and learning dimensions

(3) Sources of information

#### **Steps of information search**

Information from Taiwan universities? (website of university, campus visits, recruiting staff etc)--personal or non-personal?

Information not from Taiwan universities?—personal or non-personal? (news, friends, families, current students, university tutors etc)

Online information--verbal or non-verbal e.g. MSN, message boards, websites or emails

4. When you were selecting where to apply, what were important to you?



(1)Choice evaluation

Choose the course, the institution, or both? Why/how?

Choice criteria—the importance orders

(2)How to find out where to apply?—sources used for each choice criterion

Any influential information sources on where to apply?

The cost of education and academic and programme issues (teaching quality, reputation)?--Sources of information

League tables? What/Why/how?

See any relationship between the ranking, teaching quality?

See any relationship between the ranking and the graduation rate?

(3)Awareness set

How many courses/institutions you knew about?

How many courses/institutions you compared? Why/sources?

Was there any university you didn't want to consider going? Why not/sources?

5. After you've decided where to apply, what did you do next in your application process?

(1)Apply to all the courses/institutions selected for the application list? --If not, what happened? What type and what level of influences?

Any influential information sources when filling application forms?

Where you applied for? Where accepted you?

(2)Why the current institution? What were important to you when selecting which institution to enroll at?

Compare business schools or the institutions as a whole? Why?

Any influential information sources on the enroll choice? How/type/level

6. In terms of your MA choices in Taiwan, tell me in overall what were the more influential information sources for you? Why?

(1)Overall more influential sources? Why? Trust, type, level

Overall the more frequent used sources? Why? Trust, type, level

(2)the 4 types of information sources

Non-marketing (not from Taiwan universities) or marketing information (from Taiwan universities) more influential? Why?

Non-personal or personal information more influential? Why?

(3)Personal influences

Types of influence?-- finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition influence

Level of influence?--an interest level, influence and support level, or investment and intrusion level

Negative impact of personal comments?

7. What did you think of the quality of information you receive?

The quality of information from Taiwan universities

The quality of information not from Taiwan universities

See any relationship between the quality of information to the use frequency?

See any relationship between the quality of information to the influential level?

Any information not available? Where you prefer to get that information from?

**Summary**

Is there any other things you want to say before we finish?



I will send you the transcript when I've got that, so you can see whether it's what you said. Your email address?

If needed, I might do a 2nd interview with you by phone or the Internet to ask a few extra questions. It will not be more than half an hour. Is it okay for you?

## **Appendix 10 Interview guide for current students of the TW group**

### **Welcome**

#### **My topic**

My PhD topic is on information search and its influence on Taiwanese students' higher education choices. Hence, I want to interview you about what information sources you used and who influenced your MA choices in Taiwan.

#### **Your experience**

You can be relaxed and just recall your personal experience regarding choosing a MA course in Taiwan. As it is about your personal experiences, there is no right or wrong answers. What I would like to know is your feelings, perceptions, and interpretations for your MA choices. You are welcome to say anything, both positive and negative.

#### **Confidentiality of the data**

The information you provide will only be used for my PhD research, so I can reassure you the confidentiality of the data. Your name and personal information will be protected as well when they were used in my findings.

#### **The recording**

Since I need to analyse this interview later, I'll need to record our conversations if you agree. Don't be nervous about this, as I'm the only person who will listen to the recording.

Before we start, is there any other thing you want to ask me about?

1. Going right back to the time when you first thought about doing a Master's in Taiwan but haven't already started looking for information. What did you know about doing a Master's in Taiwan?

Sources of information

Timing

2. What swayed you to choose to do a Mater's in Taiwan?

Choice criteria for country

Taiwan or any other foreign countries

Sources of information

How the family felt about this?—the Master's, the Master's in Taiwan

3. After you've decided to stay in Taiwan for the Master's, what did you do to get more information about this?

(1) Choice of subject, what/why/how—Past working experiences? Future career?

(2) Information needed--Economic, social, personal, and learning dimensions

(3) Sources of information

#### **Steps of information search**

Information from Taiwan universities? (website of university, campus visits, recruiting staff etc)--personal or non-personal?

Information not from Taiwan universities?—personal or non-personal? (news, friends, families, current students, university tutors etc)

Online information--verbal or non-verbal e.g. MSN, message boards, websites or emails

4. When you were selecting where to apply, what were important to you?



(1)Choice evaluation

Choose the course, the institution, or both? Why/how?

Choice criteria—the importance orders

(2)How to find out where to apply?—sources used for each choice criterion

Any influential information sources on where to apply?

The cost of education and academic and programme issues (teaching quality, reputation)?--Sources of information

League tables? What/Why/how?

See any relationship between the ranking, teaching quality?

See any relationship between the ranking and the graduation rate?

(3)Awareness set

How many courses/institutions you knew about?

How many courses/institutions you compared? Why/sources?

Was there any university you didn't want to consider going? Why not/sources?

5. After you've decided where to apply, what did you do next in your application process?

(1)Apply to all the courses/institutions selected for the application list? --If not, what happened? What type and what level of influences?

Any influential information sources when filling application forms?

Where you applied for? Where accepted you?

(2)Why the current institution? What were important to you when selecting which institution to enroll at?

Compare business schools or the institutions as a whole? Why?

Any influential information sources on the enroll choice? How/type/level

6. When looking back to your MA choices in Taiwan, tell me in overall what were the more influential information sources for you? Why?

(1)Overall more influential sources? Why? Trust, type, level

Overall the more frequent used sources? Why? Trust, type, level

(2)the 4 types of information sources

Non-marketing (not from Taiwan universities) or marketing information (from Taiwan universities) more influential? Why?

Non-personal or personal information more influential? Why?

(3)Personal influences

Types of influence?-- finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition influence

Level of influence?--an interest level, influence and support level, or investment and intrusion level

Negative impact of personal comments?

7. What did you think of the quality of information you receive?

The quality of information from Taiwan universities

The quality of information not from Taiwan universities

See any relationship between the quality of information to the use frequency?

See any relationship between the quality of information to the influential level?

Any information not available? Where you prefer to get that information from?

How close it is between your perceptions from the information search and the reality of studying at the current institution? If not close, what problems do you think were there?

## **Summary**

Is there any other things you want to say before we finish?

I will send you the transcript when I've got that, so you can see whether it's what you said. Your email address?

If needed, I might do a 2nd interview with you by phone or the Internet to ask a few extra questions. It will not be more than half an hour. Is it okay for you?



## **Appendix 11 Interview guide for potential students of the UK group**

### **Welcome**

#### **My topic**

My PhD topic is on information search and its influence on Taiwanese students' higher education choices. Hence, I want to interview you about what information sources you used and who influenced your MA choices in the UK.

#### **Your experience**

You can be relaxed and just recall your personal experience regarding choosing a MA course in the UK. As it is about your personal experiences, there is no right or wrong answers. What I would like to know is your feelings, perceptions, and interpretations for your MA choices. You are welcome to say anything, both positive and negative.

#### **Confidentiality of the data**

The information you provide will only be used for my PhD research, so I can reassure you the confidentiality of the data. Your name and personal information will be protected as well when they were used in my findings.

#### **The recording**

Since I need to analyse this interview later, I'll need to record our conversations if you agree. Don't be nervous about this, as I'm the only person who will listen to the recording.

Before we start, is there any other thing you want to ask me about?

1. Going right back to the time when you first thought about doing a Master's in the UK but haven't already started looking for information.

What did you know about doing a Master's in the UK?

Sources of information

Timing

2. What swayed you to choose to do a Mater's in the UK?

Choice criteria for country

Taiwan or any other foreign countries

Sources of information

How the family felt about this?--The Master's, and the Master's in the UK

3. After you've decided to come to the UK for the Master's, how did you get more information about this?

(1)Choice of subject, what/why/how—past working experiences? Future career?

(2) Information needed--Economic, social, personal, and learning dimensions

(3) Sources of information

#### **Steps of information search**

Information from British universities? (prospectus, website of university, campus visits, agents, recruiting staff etc)--personal or non-personal?

Information not from British universities?—personal or non-personal? (news, friends, families, current students, British council etc)

Online information--verbal or non-verbal e.g. MSN, message boards, websites or emails

4. When you were selecting where to apply, what were important for you?

(1)Choice evaluation



Choose the course, the institution, or both? Why/how?

Choice criteria—the importance orders

(2)How to find out where to apply?—sources used for each choice criterion

Apply yourself or use agents? Suggestions from agents, how you use agents?

Agents—how you see their positioning? why their service is free?

Any influential information sources on where to apply?

The cost of education and academic and programme issues (teaching quality, reputation)?--Sources of information

Safety? How to know this before coming? Information sources

League tables? What/Why/how?

See any relationship between the ranking, teaching quality?

See any relationship between the ranking and the graduation rate?

(3)Awareness set

How many courses/institutions you knew about?

How many courses/institutions you compared? Why/sources?

Was there any university you didn't want to consider going? Why not/sources?

5. After you've decided where to apply, what did you do next in your application process?

(1)Apply to all the courses/institutions selected for the application list? --If not, what happened? What type and what level of influences?

Any influential information sources when filling application forms?

Where you applied for? Where accepted you?

(2)Why the current institution? What were important to you when selecting which institution to enroll at?

Compare business schools or the institutions as a whole? Why?

Any influential information sources on the enroll choice? How/type/level

6. When looking back to your MA choices in the UK, tell me in overall what were the more influential information sources for you? Why?

(1)Overall more influential sources? Why? Trust, type, level

Overall the more frequent used sources? Why? Trust, type, level

(2)the 4 types of information sources

Non-marketing (not from British universities) or marketing information (from British universities) more influential? Why?

Non-personal or personal information more influential? Why?

(3)Personal influences

Types of influence?-- finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition influence

Level of influence?--an interest level, influence and support level, or investment and intrusion level

Negative impact of personal comments?

7. What did you think of the quality of information you receive?

The sources with the best quality of information

The quality of information from British universities

The quality of information not from British universities

See any relationship between the quality of information to the use frequency?

See any relationship between the quality of information to the influential level?

Any information not available? Where you prefer to get that information from?



## **Summary**

Is there any other things you want to say before we finish?

I will send you the transcript when I've got that, so you can see whether it's what you said. Your email address?

If needed, I might do a 2nd interview with you by phone or the Internet to ask a few extra questions. It will not be more than half an hour. Is it okay for you?

## **Appendix 12 Interview guide for current students of the UK group**

### **Welcome**

#### **My topic**

My PhD topic is on information search and its influence on Taiwanese students' higher education choices. Hence, I want to interview you about what information sources you used and who influenced your MA choices in the UK.

#### **Your experience**

You can be relaxed and just recall your personal experience regarding choosing a MA course in the UK. As it is about your personal experiences, there is no right or wrong answers. What I would like to know is your feelings, perceptions, and interpretations for your MA choices. You are welcome to say anything, both positive and negative.

#### **Confidentiality of the data**

The information you provide will only be used for my PhD research, so I can reassure you the confidentiality of the data. Your name and personal information will be protected as well when they were used in my findings.

#### **The recording**

Since I need to analyse this interview later, I'll need to record our conversations if you agree. Don't be nervous about this, as I'm the only person who will listen to the recording.

Before we start, is there any other thing you want to ask me about?

1. Going right back to the time when you first thought about doing a Master's in the UK but haven't already started looking for information. What did you know about doing a Master's in the UK?

Sources of information

Timing

2. What swayed you to choose to do a Mater's in the UK?

Choice criteria for country

Taiwan or any other foreign countries

Sources of information

How the family felt about this?--The Master's, and the Master's in the UK

3. After you've decided to come to the UK for the Master's, how did you get more information about this?

(1)Choice of subject, what/why/how—past working experiences? Future career?

(2) Information needed--Economic, social, personal, and learning dimensions

(3) Sources of information

#### **Steps of information search**

Information from British universities? (prospectus, website of university, campus visits, agents, recruiting staff etc)--personal or non-personal?

Information not from British universities?—personal or non-personal? (news, friends, families, current students, British council etc)

Online information--verbal or non-verbal e.g. MSN, message boards, websites or emails

4. When you were selecting where to apply, what were important for you?



(1)Choice evaluation

Choose the course, the institution, or both? Why/how?

Choice criteria—the importance orders

(2)How to find out where to apply?—sources used for each choice criterion

Apply yourself or use agents? Suggestions from agents, how you use agents?

Agents—how you see their positioning? why their service is free?

Any influential information sources on where to apply?

The cost of education and academic and programme issues (teaching quality, reputation)?--Sources of information

Safety? How to know this before coming? Information sources

League tables? What/Why/how?

See any relationship between the ranking, teaching quality?

See any relationship between the ranking and the graduation rate?

(3)Awareness set

How many courses/institutions you knew about?

How many courses/institutions you compared? Why/sources?

Was there any university you didn't want to consider going? Why not/sources?

5. After you've decided where to apply, what did you do next in your application process?

(1)Apply to all the courses/institutions selected for the application list? --If not, what happened? What type and what level of influences?

Any influential information sources when filling application forms?

Where you applied for? Where accepted you?

(2)Why the current institution? What were important to you when selecting which institution to enroll at?

Compare business schools or the institutions as a whole? Why?

Any influential information sources on the enroll choice? How/type/level

6. When looking back to your MA choices in the UK, tell me in overall what were the more influential information sources for you? Why?

(1)Overall more influential sources? Why? Trust, type, level

Overall the more frequent used sources? Why? Trust, type, level

(2)the 4 types of information sources

Non-marketing (not from British universities) or marketing information (from British universities) more influential? Why?

Non-personal or personal information more influential? Why?

(3)Personal influences

Types of influence?-- finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition influence

Level of influence?--an interest level, influence and support level, or investment and intrusion level

Negative impact of personal comments?

7. What did you think of the quality of information you receive?

The sources with the best quality of information

The quality of information from British universities

The quality of information not from British universities

See any relationship between the quality of information to the use frequency?

See any relationship between the quality of information to the influential level?

Any information not available? Where you prefer to get that information from?  
How close it is between your perceptions from the information search and the reality  
of studying here in the UK? If not close, what problems do you think were there?

### **Summary**

Is there any other things you want to say before we finish?

I will send you the transcript when I've got that, so you can see whether it's what you  
said.

If needed, I might do a 2nd interview with you by phone or the Internet to ask a few  
extra questions. It will not be more than half an hour. Is it okay for you?



## Appendix 13 Initial template

### Internal search

- Internal information
- Information sources used

### External search

#### Impersonal

- Non-marketing
  - League tables
- Marketing
  - Prospectuses
  - University websites
  - HE fairs

#### Interpersonal

- Marketing
  - Agents
  - University staff
- Non-marketing
  - Reference groups
  - Hello UK

### Alternative evaluation

- Find course
- Choice criteria
- Evaluate courses
  - Major choices
- Factors

### Quality of information

- Definition
- Evaluation
  - Information required

### Influential information sources

- Interpersonal
  - Non-marketing
  - Marketing
- Impersonal
  - Marketing
  - Non-marketing

### Consideration set

- Application list
- Offers evaluation
  - Factors
  - Information sources

### Observations--agents and students

- Atmospheres
  - Relationships
- Power distributions

Demands and needs

Observations--agents and university representatives

Agency cultures

Demands and needs

Relationships

Power distributions

Cooperative level

HE fairs

Students' use of HE fair

Common Qs asked

Alumni interviews

Students' behaviours

Common Qs

Agents' interviews

Students' HE decision-making

Agency industry

Family influences



## Appendix 14 Final template

### Internal search

#### Internal information

Choice criteria known

Alternatives known

UK images

Living situation

Long history

Rich culture

British people

Academic reputation

Master's in UK

1 year courses

Information sources used

Peers

### External search

#### Impersonal

Non-marketing

League tables

Why ranking

Types used

Subject ranking

Overall ranking

Ranking range

Different ranking systems

Marketing

Prospectuses

University websites

British Council

HE fairs

#### Interpersonal

Marketing

Agents

WOM

Services offered

Positioning

Commissions

University staff

Non-marketing

Reference groups

Peers

Teachers

Senior students

Current students

Friends

Feedback on course

From English preparation courses

Hello UK

Living information  
Alternative evaluations  
Supplementary schools

Alternative evaluation

Process

Find course  
    Supplementary school  
Choice criteria  
    Tuition  
    No interview  
    Research  
    Environment  
    Location  
    Reputation  
    Ranking  
    Life of quality  
    Teaching  
    Safety  
    Spring programmes  
Evaluate courses  
    Same exam dates

Major choices

Factors  
    Personal goals  
    Career goals  
    Reference groups  
    Previous backgrounds  
    Interests  
Timing of choice  
    After getting offers  
    Before application

Quality of information

Definition

Evaluation

Information required  
University information  
Non-university information  
Misleading information

Influential information sources

Interpersonal

Non-marketing  
Peers

Marketing

Impersonal

Marketing  
Non-marketing  
PTT



- Consideration set
- Application list
- Offers evaluation
  - Factors
  - Information sources
  - Enrolment choice

- Observations--agents and students
  - Atmospheres
    - Counseling styles
  - Demands and needs

- Observations--agents and university representatives
  - Agency cultures
  - Demands and needs
  - Relationships

- HE fairs
  - Students' use of HE fair
  - Common Qs asked
    - Alumni interviews
    - Students' behaviours
    - Common Qs
  - Personal feelings

- Agents' interviews
  - Students' HE decision-making
    - Good shoppers
    - Top Qs
    - Less Chinese
    - Hello UK
    - Reference groups
    - Ranking
  - Agency industry
    - Counseling
    - Applications
    - Information sources

- Family influences
  - Study more
  - Finance



## **Appendix 15 Interviewees' vignettes**

### **University B of the TW group**

#### **YI**

YI graduated from finance and monetary major at Mingchuan University. YI did Master's exams twice and he had different choice criteria in selecting application lists for the two exams. In the first year, YI only wanted to get exam experiences, so he applied two universities that ask for easier exam subjects. However, in the 2nd year, he had higher self-expectations and only applied universities that were seen as "better" than Mingchuan University that he had first degree from. YI was enrolled with Yunlin University of Science and Technology for Master's study, but was contacted by University B later that he has been moved up from the waiting list to receive an offer from them. YI struggled much on whether to withdraw from Yunlin University, and eventually he took on board the suggestions of senior students at Yunlin University, and decided to enrol at University B for its English teaching programmes and better reputation.

#### **MI**

MI studied Finance and Monetary at a collage, and then carried on doing International Trade at Chinese Culture University. He did Master's exam twice, and how he selected application lists differed in the two times. As MI had low confidence on his academic ability, he mainly applied to private universities in the 1st year of Master's exam. But in the 2nd year, he applied mainly to public universities which are normally seen better than private universities for publics in Taiwan. MI was accepted by Soochow University first, and he paid tuition fees to them for enrolment. However, when he was informed that he has been moved up from the waiting list by University B later, he decided to choose University B. The two key influences on MI's enrolment choices were from current students of University B who gave good comments on their university, especially on the teachers and facilities. MI's case showed the influences from current students could be stronger than many other sources, as they are often seen by potential students as "experienced" people who have tried the Master's courses.

#### **CI**

CI graduated from Finance and Monetary at Tamkang University, and CI was different from other respondents, as he relied on internal information more. He used less external information sources, as he felt some information was actually noise that distracts him from making right decisions. Although some people were still counselled by CI for enrolment choices, he mainly used interpersonal sources to identify how publics see the two universities that he was comparing for enrolment choice. The most important choice criteria for CI was practical teaching rather than facilities or environment of universities, because he felt the brains of teachers were what he really cared about. Interestingly, Tunghai University was not selected by CI for enrolment mainly because it is a brand new course that recruits students for the 1st year. CI didn't like that as it means the course has no alumni in the industry and has no graduate who guarantees his Master's study can be done within 2 years.

#### **CE**

CE graduated from Business Administration at Mingchuan University, and he decided to prepare for Master's entrance exam when he was doing the 2nd term of Year 4, which is very late in timing comparing to other respondents of the TW group. Consequently, CE had only 6 month to prepare for the Master's exam, so he tried to



reduce the time of external search in selecting universities, and to save that time for studying. The main external information sources for him were the website of his cram school which has a BBS for potential students and his friends who took the Master's exam twice. Although CE was accepted by one public university for Master's study, he decided to choose University B, a private university, which offered English teaching Master's course. The main reason for such a decision was that CE felt his English isn't good, so he should focus on improving that during the study of Master's study.

### **University A of the TW group**

#### **YU**

YU studied Information Management at University A for the first degree and carried on doing a Master's on the same major at the same university. YU applied a few public universities that were seen as better or equivalent to University A, and the main choice criteria were teachers' research interests, teachers' relationship with students, and the reputation of courses. Also, senior students who had started Master's study were the most influential external source to YU, as they were seen as trustworthy people who would give responsible suggestions. Interestingly, although online information was not very much trusted by YU in terms of information quality, he still felt it is always better to have "some" information rather than knowing nothing.

#### **HU**

HU studied Information Management at University A for both his first degree and Master's degree. HU suggested that potential students had "unshakeable" preliminary perceptions on the ranking of universities, which affected their Master's consideration set much. Except internal information, for further external information on the subject ranking of Master's courses, HU used comments from teachers at university, teachers at cram schools, and current Master's students. Information from BBS was not preferred by HU, because it was seen as biased since some students play psychological games online trying to affect other students' enrolment choices. Interestingly, HU suggested the concept of information usage and the level of consultation, as he said he used information from PTT more while the information there was less influential to his choices. Oppositely, although he counseled experienced students and teachers less, they were more influential to his choices, because the trust level on them was much higher than from online information.

#### **HS**

HS applied 6 public universities and the main source used for that was her internal information on universities. She only wanted to go to universities that are better than Taipei University which was her university at undergraduate level. HS used little external information sources as she likes to make decisions on her own. Although friends' comments were used by her, especially on how they felt about the universities that they studied before, HS pointed herself as the most influential information source in making Master's choices. HS was also another respondent of the TW group who felt the decisions of studying abroad is more about learning English than getting knowledge, and that view was also given by another respondent of the TW group, CI.

#### **JA**

JA used internal information to decide application list which consists 6 public universities, and the key criterion used was reputation which was partly obtained from classmates or teachers at university. JA evaluated information quality based on the personalities of people he asked, and he only asked people he trusted much, like



experienced friends and teachers. JA was given offers by 2 universities, and he struggled much in making enrolment choice. At the end, the main reason for him to choose University A rather than keep staying at Tsinghua University was because he wanted to move to a new city after being in the same place for 5 years. JA's case showed that students' Master's choices might also be affected much by personal reasons rather than only detailed external information that they searched.

### **Potential students of the TW group**

#### **WI**

WI is a Year 4 student in business administration at Chungyuan University. When I interviewed her, she was still preparing for her Masters exams. Her Master's choices were much affected by preliminary perceptions she had on universities, because she did little external information search. The main information sources for her were her teachers from the cram school for the exam preparations, PTT, and her peers who are also preparing for the Masters exams. WI cared less about the quality of information, and the speed of obtaining information was the most important criterion for her in evaluating the quality of information. Her attitude on making Master's choices was to delay the time of evaluation until she is accepted by more than one programme, she would then compare more on which programme to enrol with.

#### **JI**

JI was a Year 4 student studying Social Psychology at Shihhsin University. When she was interviewed, she was waiting for the result of Master's entrance exam. However, as she was one of the very few respondents who studied different subjects for undergraduate and postgraduate level, she felt she won't be accepted in 2006, and have decided to take the exam again in 2007. The main reason for JI to take exam this year was only to have exam experiences, but her choice criteria for next year would be more including choosing universities that help her future job seeking, with better facilities, and to apply more public universities. JI's case showed that students' self-evaluated academic performances could affect their consideration sets and application lists. Also, JI preferred information from people she knows, while information from universities were seen as "official" information that only talk about how good they are.

#### **BO**

BO is a Year 5 student who studies Applied Math at Chungyuan University. When I interviewed him, he was still taking exams for entering Master's courses. He searched little external information regarding where to apply, because he chose consideration set mainly based on preliminary perceptions he had on universities. BO suggested his external search would not start until he is accepted by some universities, as it makes more senses to choose where to enrol with when he has been offered the choices. His preliminary perceptions on universities were mainly built when he was selecting where to apply for his first degrees, from teachers of university and cram school, and from friends who were either preparing Master's exams or who study at other universities.

#### **EN**

EN is a year 4 student doing International Trade at Shinchien University. When he was interviewed, he was waiting for results of Master's entrance exam. Although he has been accepted by one polytechnic university, he was considering whether to enrol there, as he didn't have good perceptions on that university. As EN applied to several special majors, such as Leisure Industry Management or Air Transportation



Management, he couldn't find available courses from the information provided by cram schools as other respondents did. Hence, he used a local ranking magazine and university websites to find available courses to apply. EN only prepared two exam subjects which also affected him in the courses he could apply. He had much limited choices on where to apply rather than applying to any courses he want because of the limited preparations on exam subjects he had.

### **University D of the UK group**

#### **TO**

TO's parents wanted him to study a Master's degree, because they themselves also are well-educated, one with Master's degree, and another one is studying a PhD. TO's parents had started to suggest him to do a Master's degree even before he entered university for the undergraduate degree. TO didn't enjoy studying as much as working personally, because he had more self-confidence from working and felt learnt more from the practical work experience. Interestingly, he came to the UK and not other countries for Master's study, because he misunderstood to think that one of his friends was here as well. Although he found out later that the friend of his was actually in Canada, he had applied British universities, so he came eventually. In making Master's choices, TO was affected by his rich work experience and the practical teaching style he had from undergraduate study, because he paid more attentions to the module and teaching quality of British universities to see how practical and up-dated the design of the courses were.

#### **LE**

LE studied constructed engineer course at undergraduate level, and worked full-time in tourism industry for 2 years before coming to the UK. After he decided to study abroad for Master's study, he applied universities in Australia first, but changed his mind to apply British universities and came to the UK finally. The main reason for the change was because his girlfriend was going to France, so coming to the UK can be near to her. LE used agents for applying Australian and British universities, and he commented that agents' attitudes and professionals affected him on how much he trusted their advices. Generally, he trusted the agent he used for applying British universities, but not the Australian one, and this might indicate that when the relationship between students and agents are closer, the trust level from students to agents are higher, which made agents more influential to their Master's choices.

#### **AM**

After AM had graduated from university, she applied American universities in 2001 and was accepted by a university in Los Angles. She went on a flight from Taiwan to the US on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, but she couldn't land because of the twin tower tragedy. She therefore changed the plan to apply the Master's in the UK and came to study at Nottingham University in 2002. She didn't finish her study there because of her health, and she applied British universities 3 years later for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in 2005. She came to study Marketing Master's course in 2006 eventually. Interestingly, her considerations on selecting British universities were very different for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> applications, and the differences were caused by her growing age and the working gap she had before the application. This might also indicate that when making Master's choices in different timing within someone's life time, the choice criteria could also be different.

#### **MA**



MA studied International Trading at a 5-year college and worked for 6 year full-time, and she carried on studying Applied English part-time at a 2-year polytechnic in the evening while working full-time. She only considered studying Master's degree in the UK, and no other countries are considered, and she related this to her perceptions on English people and culture. With the strong desire about coming to the UK for Master's study, MA didn't search external information in making country choices. Unlike other respondents who relied on agents' suggestions in application, MA did the entire external search and prepared all the documents herself. However, she still went to agents at the end for psychological comforts that she needed. The main reason for that was because she wanted someone to discuss with her about the applications, and to double-check everything for her. She used very little of agents' services, and although she felt she was capable on applying British universities herself, she still felt she needed the reassurance from the agents.

### University C of the UK group

#### **AL**

AL worked for 4 years after university study before coming to the UK for his MBA. He sold his house and car in Taiwan to self-finance for his study in the UK, because he had a dream to study a MBA. His job as a project manager in company seems to affect his Master's choices, because he was the only respondent who used an Excel programme to compare 99 potential MBA courses in details against his choice criteria. Although AL was influenced slightly by the agent he used, he was actually less affected by interpersonal information sources comparing to other participants. However, Hello UK was still used by AL as one of the main sources to learn current students' experiences which affected his evaluations on British universities.

#### **ME**

ME wanted to go to the US for Master's study but couldn't do so because of her GMAT grade. Hence, she decided to apply to British universities. During the interview, she talked about rankings all the time, and it is a key choice criterion for her in evaluating universities. She believed to have a degree from a good ranking university will help her in the future career, both in terms of money and promotion. Also, although ME's family was not involved in her Master's choices, her brother affected her major choice. Unlike other respondents of the UK group who used the board of Taiwan student association at Hello UK mainly for making enrolment choices, ME mainly used that for deciding consideration set.

#### **JU**

JU is 30 years old, not married, and with over 10 years work experiences. She studied International Trade at a 5-year college, so wanted to get a higher degree, so decided to do a Master's. She spent 6 months searching external information for evaluating British universities, and wanted to do application herself. However, she changed her mind later after meeting an agent from attending a HE fair. Although JU still didn't have high trust on her agent's suggestions for her application, she felt she saved time from using them. Also, JU used Hello UK frequently for its comprehensive information. Interestingly, although she was accepted by other better ranking universities, she decided to enrol at University C for the cheaper tuition cost, the warmer weather, and the shorter pre-sectional course they asked for.

#### **LN**

After working full-time for 2 years after graduation from university, LN decided to study Master's degree in the UK to expand her world views and experience the life



abroad. The two main external information sources LN relied on much were the website of Hello UK and her agent. She didn't like information from universities because she felt only positive information is provided there. Although LN's Master's decisions seemed to be affected much by interpersonal sources, she still suggested she is the one who made her own decision. The 6 universities LN applied at the end were all from the agent's suggested list, and this showed how strong influences agents could affect potential students on the choice of consideration set.

### **Potential students of the UK group**

#### **JO**

JO graduated from night course of Economics from Fujen University 3 years ago. As JO studied in the night and worked in the daytime, she has worked for more than 10 years. She has worked as a salesperson in clothing and IT industry. The major information sources used by JO were Hello UK and her agent, and she felt she couldn't apply British universities herself, because her time was limited when working full-time. However, although information sources seem restricted, JO didn't feel any lack of external information. Also, it is interesting to see the attitudes from university representatives of British universities were seen as an important indicator for JO to identify how helpful that university will be to their Master's students.

#### **BI**

BI graduated from a design course at Taiwan University of Arts, and he has been working for 10 years full-time. He planned to study English in the UK initially and was encouraged by friends and the agent he came across to study Master's degree in the marketing field later. When he was interviewed, he has applied to British universities and was waiting for do IELTS test in Taiwan. BI is a special respondent in terms of the way he used external information sources, as he tried to examine the messages hidden behind the content of information. For example, from the video of university, BI wanted to see how good that university is on marketing themselves in the video clips, and he felt if the university couldn't get this right, how can he learn things from the marketing course they offer?

#### **LU**

LU has worked 3 years full-time after graduated from university, and when I interviewed her, she has only started her external information search on studying Master's in the UK. LU is a special respondent within the UK group, as she was the only respondent who has been to the UK before applying for Master's study in the UK. She studied English for 8 month in Bournemouth in the gap year of her university study. She liked Europe much which attracted her to choose the UK to do her Master's, so she could travel to Europe easily. The one-year Master's course in the UK is also attractive for LU because of the shorter time and the cheaper cost it involves. LU used agent for choosing her previous language school in the UK, and she might also want to use agents in helping her application in Master's study. However, as she didn't have high trust on the information provided by the agents from her past experiences, she wanted to search as much information as possible before using agent's services.

#### **CA**

CA graduated from Jing-Yi University, the Information Management course. When he was doing military services, he decided to study a Master's in the UK, and started to apply British universities in Dec. 05. CA is a very special case in terms of his major choices. He considered all kinds of courses across different disciplines, including



Interpretation, TESOL, Trade, and Intellectual Property courses, which were little related to his study at undergraduate level. However, due to the low demand of one of the courses he applied, he was forced to apply more British universities in early August, 06, to secure his acceptance by one of British universities. As it was very close to the starting date of the autumn courses in 2006, CA was very upset and decided not to come to study at another alternative course that University D offered him.

### **Denny**

Denny is a year 3 student at university studying electronic engineering. I met him at the HE fair, and interviewed him to find out what stage he is in making Master's choices in the UK. He wanted to study abroad after the university study, because he feels the educational system in Taiwan doesn't suit him. He has only thought about studying a Master's abroad, so when one of his male friends said he wanted to come to a HE fair, Denny decided to come with his friend. The motive for Denny to study abroad is to experience the life living in another country, to experience the education situations there. He might want choose the UK, but he was worrying about his English ability, and he was afraid the British accent might be hard for him to understand.

### **Long**

Long has 5 year work experience being a teacher at school. She studied Special Education at university, and wanted to study the same major for her Master's degree, but to be more focused within the field of Special Education. Although Long said getting a Master's degree from whatever British universities makes no difference to her future career if she goes back to her current job as a teacher after the study. However, she still thought if she needs to spend big money to study abroad, she would like to go to "better universities" in terms of ranking. Long was affected by her friends a lot, because she kept mentioning how her friends affected her Master's choices, including motivating her to do a Master's abroad, using an agent, and choosing the UK as the study destination.

### **Connie**

I met Connie at the HE fair and found that she graduated from a Christian college, and wanted to study Master's in either Tourism or Marketing in the UK. Connie has applied to some British universities, and as the degree from Christian colleges were not recognised by Taiwan government, it affected Connie's applications in the UK as well. Hence, she has got only one offer so far from a British university. When Connie came to the stand of University D in the HE fair, she only wanted to find out whether her degree from the Christian college can be accepted by University D. I asked Rachelle from the International Office of University D, who was at the stand at the same time with me, who said University D doesn't accept the degrees from Christian Colleges, so if Connie comes to University D, she needs to start from an undergraduate course. Consequently, Connie decided not to apply to University D as she wanted to study from Master's level.

### **WN**

I met WN in the HE fair, who had a first degree in Sociality. After graduation from university, she has been working as a marketing specialist for 4 years. Although WN thinks it's not too difficult to apply to British universities herself, she wanted to use agents, because it's a free service and could save her lots of time. WN is deciding her consideration set at the moment, and the process of doing that was that WN used website of universities to compare the suggested list of 10 universities provided by her agent, and she selected 4 universities mainly base on the location of universities. In terms of location, WN is a city type of person, so being in a city rather than



countryside is an important choice criteria for her.

## Appendix 16 Example of interview transcript of the TW group—CI

CI 30-3-06

Sophie: when did you first think about doing a Master's and what happened?

CI: It was in my Year 3. The 1<sup>st</sup> term of Year 3. I had a friend who wanted to prepare for the Master's exam, so I decided to do that with him. Secondly, when I was in university, I didn't think I would do a Master's. But there are too many graduates with first degrees, so if I have a Master's, I thought I will not be replaced by others as easy. It's too normal to only have a first degree. Thirdly, I mainly felt I didn't learn anything at university, because I didn't study hard really. It's good to push myself to study something.

S: when you first thought about doing a Master's in Taiwan, what did you know about doing Master's in Taiwan?

C: do you mean the differences between studying in Taiwan or study overseas?

S: well, it's the next question. Do you have any friends or relatives studied Master's in Taiwan?

C: I'm the only one in my extended family doing a Master's I think. No. I thought about studying abroad. I thought my professional knowledge might not improve very much by studying abroad, but my language ability would certainly be more advanced. But to be honest, if you asked me now, I don't think there's something called professional knowledge really. Even though I do my Master's in Taiwan, I didn't learn the things I wanted to learn.

S: explain more to me please.

C: like in my field, when you graduate, you will work in stock, monetary, or investment markets. Like my teachers, they researched in the academic areas, but their studies don't help me at all. Like one professor didn't even know how many days the stock market was opened. Another professor said he has sold out all his stocks and changed them to cash. When they are teaching us in finance and monetary, but they don't invest in stocks themselves, how can they teach us investment? (sounds suspicious) I used to want to learn something, but now I don't think I can learn much.

S: you said you have thought about studying abroad?

C: I thought about studying abroad, and I asked my family about that. They said they can afford my study in terms of finance. However I thought I prefer to learn professional knowledge more, because I thought if I can learn how to choose stocks, to invest. This will help me more. If it's only the language itself, it helps me less. However, if I can choose again now, I would have gone to study abroad. I feel there's no such a thing so called professional knowledge. Professors' studies are all academic studies that don't help us in our practical industry work (sounds a bit disappointed).

S: did you search any information about studying abroad?

C: I asked friends who have studied in New Zealand, Europe or the US. They are my friends' friends. My friends told me what their friends said. Their views didn't affect me directly, because at that time I felt the professional knowledge was more important (laugh ironically). They only mentioned about the language ability, and not the professional knowledge. I guess if I study abroad, I learn more on the language ability, and not as much on the professional knowledge. I guess.

S: how did your family feel about you doing a Master's ?

C: they were quite happy because they didn't think I would want to do a Master's. I said I wouldn't in my 1<sup>st</sup> year of university. They wanted me to study a Master's , but



they didn't say that to me, because I said to them not to direct my way since I was young.

S: do you take studying a Master's for granted or it's not what you plan to do?

C: I'm from Chingmen (a remote island of Taiwan). When I was in my high school Chingmen High School, they divided students into good classes and bad classes. I was in a bad class. However, when I did the university entrance exam, I did the best in my high school. A student from the bad class did the best (sounds satiric).

S: your family must be quite surprised on your academic performance.

C: yes. When I finished the Master's exam of Mingchuan University, I thought I wouldn't be accepted at all. I then called my dad to say I would try to apply some very bad universities, like Aletheia University. Just to try to get into ANY university. However, when the results were announced by Mingchuan University, I was the first on the waiting list (sounds surprised).

S: I thought you need to apply all universities at the same time?

C: no, every university has different exam dates and application times. Like Chengchi University was very early, in January you would need to apply. But like Aletheia University, you applied by June. I applied Aletheia University but didn't go to take the exam, because I was accepted by Mingchuan University already.

S: did you go to a supplementary school for the exam preparation?

C: yes, I went to the Get Institute in Taipei. My friend went there, and I believed his choice, because he has been living in Taipei since young. He's familiar with all the supplementary schools in Taipei. When he said the Get Institute is good, I believe it's good.

S: would you say you were affected by peers much?: no. My study habits are different from them. They studied at the library together but I didn't like that. I had my own study plan. Frankly, I don't study hard, but I study harder when I studied about how to invest. I study harder in my own research in the investment.

S: when you were choosing subjects for your first degrees, were you quite sure what you wanted to study?

C: I only chose 6 universities in my priority card for the first degree. They were all finance and monetary subjects. I didn't have any special interest before, but in the Year 2 at the high school, I started to invest in the stock market. I was quite fortunate, so the money was doubled for several times.

S: did your parents give you some money to invest?

C: yes. When I earned money, I thought why should I get a job? But actually, I didn't know how to invest at that time. I didn't use any tool to analyse which stock to buy. I judged that myself (laughing).

S: did you only apply to finance and monetary courses for the Master's ?

C: Yes. The reason is the same with when I was choosing courses for the first degree. I like this area.

S: what information did you see to choose where to apply?

C: first of all, I had no confident on myself, so I didn't choose public universities. I thought my grades at university were not good, which means my foundation of study wasn't good. In addition, those public universities almost all need the interviews. I thought if I bring my university marks to the interviewers of universities, I would scare them to death (laughing).

S: what's your logic on choosing universities?

C: public universities that require interviews, I didn't choose them at all. Private universities that require interviews are okay, because I thought the competition would not be as strong as the public universities.



S: where did you apply?

C: I applied to 8 universities and plus Aletheia University would be 9. I had 3 stages in my university choices. In the 1<sup>st</sup> stage, I chose universities that are beyond my ability. I thought if I could be accepted, it's my luck. If I'm not, it's normal. Like Sun Yat-sen University. The 2<sup>nd</sup> stage on choosing universities included those I think that are similar to my ability. There's a chance to me to get in. Like University B, Fujen, Tamkang, and Tunghai. Those are the better ranges of private universities. The 3<sup>rd</sup> range were Mingchuan, Shihhsin, and Donghua.

S: Donghua is a public university, but you saw it as the same range of Mingchuan?

C: from the application numbers you would know that. Donghua had only 216 applicants and Mingchuan had over 700 applicants. The location of Donghua isn't good. Also, they have a finance and monetary group under the course of business administration. It's not very professional.

S: do you think University B, Fujen, Tamkang, and Tunghai are in the similar range?

C: yes, they are. Tunghai was at its 1<sup>st</sup> year of starting that course, so I would list it by the end of the 4 universities. All the universities I chose don't need interviews, because if I show my grades to them, I would be showing my own defects.

S: did you take the exams from the 9 universities?

C: yes, except Aletheia University. I didn't take the exam from the Aletheia University, because I wouldn't go to study there either. My dad asked me not to go. To leave chances to others.

S: have you thought about going above the level of Tamkang for your Master's ?

C: no, I didn't. I didn't care. The main thing for me is that university has no interviews. It's the only consideration. In fact, I considered going to study at Mingchuan, because they are more practical in the teaching. Other universities are more academic.

S: Anything else did you consider apart from whether interviews are required and how practical the course is?

C: also the acceptance rate. I had an Excel file to compare the acceptance rates of universities of the past two years. I also compared the focus of exam questions of each university. To see what might be more likely to be tested by that university this year.

S: what were the main information sources for you when choosing where to apply?

C: I could see whether they have interviews from the application packs. Some of them I went to see their university websites. To see the teachers' backgrounds. Are their degrees from local or overseas universities? Like most of teachers at Mingchuan have local degrees. Other universities are about half and half. And teachers at University B have a particular higher percentage of having overseas degrees.

S: did that information affect you?

C: actually they did not really affect me (laughing). I just browsed that information. To see how they hired their teachers.

S: did you use PTT at all?

C: nothing I could ask others. It's related to what I learnt from investing stocks. When playing stocks, someone might suggest you to buy one stock, and his plan is that he wants to get profit within a day. However when I wanted to invest it for a long-term, their recommendations don't help me at all. It's better to research myself. Not to listen to others.

S: did you discuss with friends on where to apply?



C: not really. There were not many options anyway, so not much left when considered my own situations. Like NanHua University that's funded by Master Hsing-Yun. I wouldn't consider that at all (looked down on that choice in the tone).

S: how about your friends? Did they have similar choices as you do?

C: no, they might also apply to Chung Cheng University. I don't like that because I still prefer to be in the North. I had Tunghai University as an exception. SunYat-sen University was because I thought it has a good reputation, so it's another exception. Donghwa University was a spare tyre for me, so it's another exception. Actually my main focuses were on University B, Fujen, Tamkang, and Mingchuan. I felt I would be more likely to be accepted by them. I was also more willing to study there.

S: so you didn't really search much information and base more on what you cared?

C: not much information I need. Very little choices I had for the finance and monetary courses. I don't care about facilities or the environment because those are the things they show to people who are outside the university. You should compare the brains and not those things you see from outside. I don't trust the marketing things from universities, because I feel they are all false.

S: did you use magazines or newspapers, like the ranking?

C: no. I think personal judgements are more important. Not what they evaluated to be good. I didn't use that. It's after I was accepted, I would get a bit more information on where to choose for enrolment.

S: were you affected by teachers at university or at supplementary school? Like their comments on universities?

C: I don't listen to them. They haven't studied there before. Even they do, we might feel differently. Like I had a classmate who called back to a teacher at Tamkang on how difficult it is to study at University B. At the same time, I sleep everyday until 12 noon. If I were asking him about studying at University B, I would then think University B is very frightening.

S: what universities were you accepted?

C: University B, Tunghai, Mingchuan, and Donghwa. I only wanted to choose either University B or Tunghai. I found from asking a few people how they felt about Mingchuan, and people don't seem to have positive feelings on Mingchuan.

S: was it the feelings on their academic performance or something else?

C: I don't know whether it's academic. It's just how people relate to the name of a university. I haven't seen anyone who's accepted by University B or Tunghai who gone to study at Mingchuan.

S: where did you get that information?

C: you could check on the website of the Get Institute to get the history of the accepted lists. You could also know how many universities accepted that person and which university that person finally chose.

S: did you use the website of the Get Institute much?

C: not much. Only something like the numbers. Not from people's opinions.

S: how did you choose University B or Tunghai?

C: I didn't want to leave the North. Also, Tunghai was the 1<sup>st</sup> year for the course. It means they have no alumni at the moment, so I didn't want to challenge myself to get into that.

S: how do you feel about there's no alumni from one course?

C: it's about whether I can really get the degrees in 2 years. Although University B has only 4 or 5 years in history, there are many graduates already. Some were accepted by the PhD course at finance and monetary at the University A.

S: where did you get that information?



C: from their website. Anything helps them {University B}, they would put that on their website. Like they also have something like to cooperate with overseas universities. Exchange students.

S: what information sources would you say affected you the most?

C: nothing. My own memories on universities.

S: where did you get that do you think?

C: probably from applying to universities for the first degree.

S: do you care about teaching quality?

C: yes. The reason to be here is to learn things. Mingchuan is more practical in the course, because I looked at their modules, and they have some operational types of modules. University B has more teachers from abroad, and I would see that as an indicator to show they are more academic. Like that professor who didn't know the stock market doesn't open on Saturdays.

S: would you relate ranking to the teaching quality?

C: no. I think teachers from good universities can also be too academic and not helping me at all in the investment. I heard their speeches at university. When they covered the macro economic, I didn't see how that would affect how I choose which stock to buy.

S: do you think universities with better ranking are harder to study at?

C: they are harder to get into, because public universities are normally 1.5 times more difficult to get into than the private universities.

S: you said you were not affected by the marketing strategies of University B at all?

C: no. I felt all the marketing are to deceive people. I don't believe any of that. I don't think that's a standard to judge which university is good or bad. Many things don't exist physically, and it's only people's thoughts on them that exist.

S: I feel you are a philosophical person (laughing). How about the English teaching at University B? Did that affect you?

C: I was quite scare of that at the first place. But then I thought I could work hard to get through that if I really want to do a Master's .

S: is it really 100% English teaching?

C: yes. For some specialised terms, teachers explain with Chinese. But we have some foreign students in the class, so teachers need to use English. When we ask questions, we can use either English or Chinese. But for a private tutorial, we use Chinese. The main restriction is in the class.

S: when you were choosing where to enrol, what information sources affected you the most?

C: my own judgements. I did send an email to ask the administrators of University B to ask whether the English-teaching would hinder the learning. They answered my other questions and avoided answering that question. So I knew the English-teaching DID hinder the learning of students.

S: overall, what's the most influential information to you? Is there anything you can think of?

C: nothing. Much information was noise than information. I don't want to be affected by them at all. I only need the application pack and what I had in mind to decide where to apply. I only need to consider whether they have interviews, and how difficult the exams are.

S: how can you know that?

C: from whether they are public or private universities. I applied to more private universities, so I was accepted by several. But many of my friends applied to so many



public universities, and it's too hard to them. It's like buying stocks, you need to increase the winning probability.

S: your choices are quite different from other students, because others seem to be more affected by other people. Why do you think this happened?

C: this might be from the experiences of buying stocks. I don't like to listen to what others said, because whenever there's any positive news on the newspapers for a company, its stock price drops the next day. Much information was actually noises. I don't want that.

S: do you think the experiences on buying stocks affect many aspects of your life?

C: yes. I think from that, I learn to handle my emotions and physiological feelings well. When the stock market closes, you wouldn't see from my face to tell I've won or lose today. That's how I was trained.

S: final question. It's about information quality. On what you used, how do you see the information quality?

C: I used only the application pack and the website of the Get Institute. They have a discussion board for students to discuss where to choose. I read them to get some laughs. To know what others are thinking. Those do not affected my judgment.

S: do your imaginations on University B differ from the reality after studying here?

C: yes, I confirm what I believe that marketing of universities are not true. I thought I could learn a bit practical things here. But there's not even A BIT here. All very academic. I thought my English could improve, but it's not. This part is my own problem, not them. But it's different from my imaginations.

S: but it's not about the wrong information you received, is it?

C: no. It's more about my expectations in mind and the reality. Although we (the course) have a so called "best database" in the country, but the university doesn't have a teaching session to teach us how to use the database. When the university was marketing outside saying we have that database, others think EVERY students here can use it. But we cannot.

S: perhaps you were not affected by the marketing of University B, but do you think by doing this, it still attracted some students?

C: yes. About half of my classmates came because of their marketing. It's good for any university or companies to do marketing, but if they do it too much, and people came here to find out it's not true. It's too much. I think University B has done it too much. Especially they don't have any modules to teach us how to use the database that they said they have.



## Appendix 17 Example of interview transcript of the UK group—MA

8-3-06

Sophie: Going right back to the time when you first thought about doing a Master's in the UK but haven't already started looking for information. What did you know about doing a Master's in the UK?

MA: When I was little, I had thought about studying abroad, but I haven't really started to prepare for this seriously. While I was working, I found that I had a friend who was preparing to go to the UK to study English in a language school, so I asked him things like how to apply, the process, and the cost. I also have friends who studied in other countries, but I like the UK more. I knew the Master's courses in the UK takes only one year from another friend who did MA in the UK. The one year Master's course is a key point for me and also I studied English literature in university, so I'm more attracted by the British culture. I feel the UK is a country I'll relate to arts and literature. In London, there are lots of art activities, business activities, and with the multi-cultural environment with many immigrants.

S: Before coming to the UK, how did you know so much about the UK and London?

M: I had an English friend in Taiwan and he gave me the information about the UK. He made me feel that I would like to go to this country to see whether he's telling me the truth (laughing). Whether the UK is as good as he said?

S: Have you ever considered to study in any other countries except the UK?

M: No, I don't. I also know an American friend in Taiwan and I felt I'm more comfortable with the English way of talking, thinking, and socializing than the American way. I just had a close English and a close American friend in Taiwan, but somehow they build my country images toward the 2 countries. I also met some English and American people in my job, but it's for work only. I felt the American people are very proactive, aggressive, and self-centered which made me a bit uncomfortable, and English people are very polite without speaking or arguing too much.

S: Have you thought about Australia or Taiwan for doing the Masters?

M: No, Australia to me is a natural country with lots of animals and outdoor activities. My friend also told me that to study Master's in Australia takes longer. I don't want to study in Taiwan because I feel I've stayed there for long enough, and I want to experience multi-cultures. So Taiwan isn't considered. I only consider coming to the UK. I once thought about studying in Japan, but I didn't go because my Japanese isn't good enough (laughing).

S: Did you do any information search on the choice of country?

M: Base on my previous experiences and thoughts, I knew exactly that I want to go to the UK, so I didn't search information about choosing countries.

S: How did your parents feel about you going to study in the UK?

M: they didn't know until I've got all the preparations done, so when I told them, they were surprised. They lent me money for studying here. My parents had no special feelings about me doing a Master's or doing it in the UK. It's my choice. They don't push kids at all.

S: Did you take doing this Master's for granted? Is this part of your life plan?

M: It's not. After graduated from the 5-year college, I worked for 6 years. And then because my sister was preparing for the exam of the 2-year polytechnics, I thought I could do that as well. Doing a Master's isn't part of my life plan. It's not. But I'm always excited about learning new things. It's what I like doing. Coming to the UK, I can experience multi-culture life. It's what I want.



S: Do you mean studying this Master's is only about personal goal? Is this related to your future job at all?

M: It might also be about working. I was working in a big company before coming (to the UK), and I found if I have a Master's degree, my salary can be higher. Also the people I worked with in the big company were very different from my previous colleagues in smaller companies. Many of them studied abroad, and I felt when talking to them, I learnt things and I NEEDED to use my brain to talk to them. It's unlike the colleagues in smaller companies because we only talked about daily living stuff. I want to be like those people who studied abroad. To think differently. I can also go to other big or foreign companies when having the Masters I think.

S: After you've decided to come to the UK for the Master's, how did you get more information about this?

M: I thought about my past travelling experiences on getting visas, so I thought if I wanted to go to the UK, I should contact their office in Taiwan. I went online to find their office location and went to the British Council office in KaungChung, but it's not very helpful to me. I had two counselling sessions there, but because I wasn't sure about what courses to take in the UK, they could only give very general suggestions. Like if you study in the autumn programmes, you could have more choices than in the spring programmes. When I asked things like the studying atmosphere, the course focus, or whether the ranking matters, they couldn't tell me much. But I did think that information was important to me. I didn't feel staffs in the British Council office were proactive comparing with educational agents. The office was more like an after-school school than an official department of British government.

S: What did you do after talking to the British Council?

M: I felt the information from them was not enough for me, so I searched information online myself after that. They have two search engines from the website of the British Council for Master's courses, so I linked from there to each website of British universities. I compared the cost, location, ranking, courses, and felt BIG headache! (laughing) I had one file for one university! I could well be an agent! Time was very short for me from starting prepare until coming to the UK. I felt very tired from doing this. I started from August, 2005 and came here on January, 2006. Took the IELTS exam in October, 2005. I only compared courses in the spring programmes.

S: How did you feel about the search engines of the British Council?

M: They are very good. You can search the location, the starting time, and then find out more on the courses to see which one you like. I spent 3 months on comparing courses. My main information was all from websites, online information. I also prepared all the documents myself.

S: Did you use agents?

M: Yes, I did. After I've compared courses and had all documents, I went to see the UKEAS in Kauchung. I did all the preparation myself but had no one to ask, so I think the decision to use agents was more like a psychological reliance for me. When it comes to the application, I wanted to discuss with someone. A friend of my sister studied in the UK, and I knew from her the website of Hello UK. From Hello UK, I found the UKEAS. The agent in the UKEAS I talked to was a girl, graduated from tourism of University D, also the spring term course. We had a lot in commons. She is very patient. I then found later she was a previous colleague from my co-worker as well.

S: What information you used from the Hello UK?

M: I didn't use much information from there when preparing for the application. Only used the section about preparing study in the UK, like the pre-departure information.



Things like transportation, what to buy or not to buy before coming. About living in the UK.

S: What did the agent do for you?

M: The American boss at the UKEAS proof-read the documents for me. The girl agent I like recommended University D to me because she said here (Bournemouth) is a very beautiful place, and the teachers are great. However, there's one thing I got wrong. What I want is different from what she wants. She had difficulty on speaking in English, so she might not feel the professional of teachers is a key point for her. I had no problem on delivering in English, but I wanted to learn more from the course itself. When I came to my class (in University D) and saw there's not even ONE English native-speaker, I felt so faint! When tutors ask questions, my classmates cannot even understand that, how can tutors teach us more?

S: Tell me more about what agents did for you?

M: They said they can apply the visa and buy flight tickets for me, but I found it's more expensive than normal. So I decided to do all those myself. It's good enough for them to get my commission, because they didn't do anything for me really. The agent told me much about University Band applied the accommodation for me. That's it! To use agents was a psychological reliance for me, so I will not worry that if I've missed anything. They can double check for me.

S: Where did you apply?

M: I applied only one university, University D, because its ranking was the best within the spring programmes. The rankings of others were too bad for me to go. I thought if I am not accepted by Bournemouth, I could wait until September to go to Surrey University. I also need to get my IELTS pass in November to get into Bournemouth. I got both the IELTS and the offer from Bournemouth, or I shall be at Surrey in September..

S: What were the subjects for the two universities?

M: Both are about business administration or business management. I considered English literature or tourism courses as well, but because I studied business in the college and from the working perspective, to study business still is a better choice. Within the business related courses, I tried to find a course that study accounting as little as possible. I don't like marketing, because it's like packaging, to make things better to sell. My personality doesn't fit into marketing. I think management suits me better.

S: How did you choose from all the British universities to the two universities you consider going?

M: I use "management" as the keyword to find programmes. When searching programmes, I limited the searches by the course, the location, and the spring programme. I want to go to the South, Southern than London, around London, but not inside London. I don't like the noise city life because I want to have a rest while staying in the UK. Also, it's more expensive to be inside London. To be around London is for its convenience. I considered Brighton University, but they have no spring programmes. I only looked at spring programmes, so only about 10 universities have that. From those 10, I chose by its location and the environment. I like the environment in Bournemouth because it's pretty, a tourist spot. There was one university in London I knew about, Westminster University. I entered their website and found they have no campus, only a building in London. It's not what I like, no campus. Also, the ranking of University D is also the best within the 10. I applied only University D and thought if I didn't get my IELTS pass or they didn't accept me, I'll wait until September to study at Surrey. I think if you spend all this money (to



study in the UK), it needs to be worth what you are spending. I don't want to drop my standard. If I cannot get what I want right away, I'll rather wait. It's like choosing a boyfriend (laughing).

S: How do you see the agents you use?

M: They are people from a commercial organisation. I don't see them as the British university representatives, because they are also selling flight tickets, applying visas for the students and try to get profits out of that. My agent even suggested me to apply University C that has no spring programmes. I was thinking whether they are not professional to know this or they didn't listen to what I want. I don't listen to my agents much, because I felt I've done the searches myself. They don't know more than me. I used other information sources, like I found a blog made by a Taiwanese student at Surrey University accidentally. It includes things like the study atmosphere, the living environment, the teaching, the holiday period etc. I felt the student has a logical mind and it affects my feeling about Surrey.

S: When you looked at the ranking, which one did you use?

M: I used both the Times and another one, I couldn't remember the name. I only want universities within 40 in the league tables, but because of my limitations on the location and spring programmes, I couldn't use ranking to limit my choices. There's only very few choices left.

S: Did you use overall ranking or the subject ranking?

M: I asked my agent and she said when you apply for a job, they will only care about the overall ranking of your university and not the subject ranking. I think she's right, so I don't look at subject ranking.

S: Did you compare management courses from different universities?

M: Yes, after selecting from ranking and location, I compared Canterbury, Kent, Brighton, Surrey, and Bournemouth. I had a chart to compare the module of courses. I don't want the courses to be too intensive because the quality of life is also important. I linked to each university website to find the tuition, the accommodation fees, and the focus of courses. However, as long as they are the courses I want, I don't mind the tuition to be more expensive than others. When I decided to only take spring programmes, I don't need my evaluation chart anymore.

S: What were the reasons that made you chose the spring programmes?

M: It's about my job. I had many English colleagues in the previous job, and many of them left at that time. I felt if I keep doing that job, there's no one I could learn from anymore. There's no point for me to keep working there, so I want to come to the UK as soon as possible. For me, English isn't a big problem, but to learn the multi-cultures here.

S: You mentioned about the life of quality when studying in the UK. Can you tell me how do you evaluate this?

M: I looked at the module of the course to see whether it's heavy. If it's not too heavy, you can have some personal time. After I was accepted by University D, I looked at the website of the Bournemouth Council to find out what I can do here, like tourist spots, the art activities, and the events to attend. I wanted to learn dancing here as well.

S: Did you see any prospectus from universities? What did you want to know from it?

M: I had a University D prospectus from the agent. I wanted to look at the environment, so only saw the photos (laughing). Like the library, computer rooms, the sport centre. How they look like?

S: When you are accepted by University D, did you ask anyone about this university? any friends, people from the Hello UK or current students?



M: Before coming to Bournemouth, I contacted the Taiwan student association in University D for accommodation enquiries, but I didn't get responses.

S: When you look at ranking, what information you want to get from it?

M: I want to know the teaching quality and how people from the industry see the university. I think when I apply for jobs in Taiwan, the people of the companies can see the ranking of my university to know how good I am. If I study at better ranking universities, I will have higher chances to work at better companies.

S: Do you relate ranking to the graduation rate?

M: Yes, I think if the ranking is better, it's harder to study there.

S: Why do you think you have those feelings about ranking?

M: That's why they want to make league tables, otherwise why they bother to do this?

S: What are the ranking elements you look at?

M: Like RAE, about the publication of papers. But I also heard people said the ranking isn't accurate enough because some new universities have short histories, and it's not fair to compare them on the same standard with the old ones.

S: Do you concern about the safety in the UK?

M: I think it should be okay in the UK, so I didn't look into it.

S: Tell me a bit more on the process how you selected from 100 universities to only a few to compare at?

M: I used ranking and the location. Like for the first 40 universities, I chose 10 southern universities that near London. I then compared the 10 I found. If the 10 are not enough, I include some worst ranking ones to extend the ranges. I used ranking within 40 to exclude universities that I don't want, but as my English friend suggested me Kinston University, I also considered it, although the ranking of it is 70 something.

S: Did you say to choose University D was mainly because it has the spring programmes?

M: Yes. Its ranking was the best within the spring programmes.

S: Tell me what are the most influential information sources to your application?

M: The websites from the British Council and the university websites. Mainly online information. I can find all the information from those websites, but it really takes long time to read all. The design of University D is not very user friendly. It's quite complex for me and you cannot come back to where you started when you finish searching. I think Kinston University did great on their website. I used the university websites the most. Once I found the universities I consider to apply from the British Council sites, I only looked at the university websites to see how they differ in the courses. I can get almost all the information I need from the university websites, so I don't use other things.

S: Seems you use official information a lot, like from the British Council or the universities. Do you have any preference on the type of information you use, like from whom?

M: I like official information, from the government or universities. I don't like Hello UK website because they are personal opinions with emotions. I like the official information, because it's more completed, neutral, and objective.

S: Do you have any preference between personal or non-personal information?

M: I prefer to read documents myself than asking others. I want to read, think and make my own judgements than only reading what others told me.

S: Would you say family has any influences on you in the university choices?

M: Not at all. I only showed my mom the big pile of information I found and she knew that I determinate to come, so she lent me money (laughing).



S: Seems agents didn't affect your choices much either, would you say YOU made the university choices on your own?

M: Yes. I'm the one decided that. However, I could also be affected when I heard people said University D isn't good. Like the English engineer who wrote my reference letter for me, he said he hasn't heard about University D. I felt upset about this. But because I don't have many choices within the spring programmes, there's nothing I can do about it.

S: Do you mean the negative comments from others still can affect you?

M: Yes, I think so.

S: Tell me how did you evaluate the quality of information?

M: I prefer official information than personal comments. I prefer information to be more structured. It needs to be logical when presenting the information and the coverage of information needs to be wide, so I don't need to look at other websites for other information. If I couldn't find out all the information I need from a website, I don't think the quality of information is good, and I would never use that website again. When I think the quality of information is good, I use the websites more and they are more influential to me.

S: But the websites you use are the ones like search engines, so do the website really affect your university decision?

M: Mainly I used the websites as the information providers for me. I analyse, get the information I need and make decisions myself as an information user.

S: Is there any information you need that is not available to you?

M: well, I think there's something unavailable there otherwise I wouldn't be so tired on finding information (laughing). I think accommodation and transportation information are not available. I wanted to know how to go from the university accommodation to the university, and couldn't find it. They have that information in the website of University D but it's too unclear, like the North, South, East or West. You wouldn't know the distance or what transportation tools are used to get there.

S: Do you prefer to know this before you come to University B or you don't mind to know this when you attend the orientation week of University D?

M: If I know this first, I will have more ideas on selecting university accommodation. I guess university might have considered this, so they don't want to show students that information. But I still prefer to know. I also wanted to get the timetable and the academic calendar for the term time and holidays beforehand, but the university staff said I need to wait until the course starts to get the finalised version of that. I didn't like the way they do things, but I could only accept that and thought maybe English people are more cautious on doing things.



## Appendix 18 Example of coding—League tables

Text: University AHU

Weight: 100

Position: 65 - 67

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: would you relate the ranking to the teaching quality and how difficult it is to study at that university?

H: I would think it's related to the teaching quality, but I don't think about how hard it is to study in the masters, because if I study hard, I know I would get the degree. But yes, ranking means teaching quality to me I think.

Text: University AJA

Weight: 100

Position: 77 - 79

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: would you relate the ranking to the teaching quality or how hard it is to study there?

J: yes, kind of. I feel so and also I asked my friend who studied at Taiwan University, the finance and monetary masters, and he said "gosh, it was like studying a math masters".

Text: University B\CI

Weight: 100

Position: 85 - 89

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: would you relate ranking to the teaching quality?

C: no. I think teachers from good universities can also be too academic and not helping me at all in the investment. I heard their speeches at university. When they covered the macro economic, I didn't see how that would affect how I choose which stock to buy.

S: do you think universities with better ranking are harder to study at?

C: they are harder to get into, because public universities are normally 1.5 times more difficult to get into than the private universities.

Text: University BMI

Weight: 100

Position: 60 - 64

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: do you think the teaching quality of SunYat-sen University is better than somewhere like University B or Shoochow?



M: well, I think so. I looked at their teachers' backgrounds and felt their degrees and experiences were all good. Its course is rather famous in Taiwan.

S: do you think if the ranking is better, it's harder to study there?

M: harder to study? No. I think it's about how active the teachers are in research. If the teachers are active in research or require more, it will be harder to study.

Text: University B\YI

Weight: 100

Position: 87 - 89

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: does ranking mean teaching quality or how easy it is to study there?

Y: I think ranking doesn't mean the teaching quality, but more about the reputation.

It's just when people heard that name of university, they would know which university it is. This helps you on getting a job. About how easy or how hard it is to study at a university, Of course, somewhere like Taiwan University or Chengchi University, must be hard to study there.

Text: University B\YI

Weight: 100

Position: 89 - 91

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: when you were comparing universities, do you compare the university as an overall or by the subjects you take?

Y: I compared the business subjects only, because it's very different from other engineering types of subjects. Some universities are famous for their engineering subjects but not business subjects.

Text: TW potential\BO

Weight: 100

Position: 73 - 74

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: you mentioend reputation. What do you associate with reputation? The easiness of studying there?

B: no, I don't think like that. I'm a person who gets used to the environment easily, so whatever the environment is, I can adjust myself into it. I don't worry about that.

Text: TW potential\JI

Weight: 100



Position: 68 - 70

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: you said Chengchi University is the best university in your mind. Would you link this perception to its teaching quality as well? Would you think best ranking equals the best teaching quality?

J: yes, I would. The teacher I mentioned from my supplementary school, he has had his degree from Chengchi already, but he said he still goes back to Chengchi to listen to some classes until now. In this term, I studied a subject at Chengchi University, and I felt the atmosphere and the teaching method that teacher used are different from private universities. The students at national university also study harder than students from private university. I feel the difference.

Text: TW potential\JI

Weight: 100

Position: 72 - 74

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: what were the differences between the courses at your university and at Chengchi University?

J: some teachers at my university were very unprepared in their teaching; like there's one teacher we had for a compulsory subject. He kept complaining about Microsoft when teaching us the use of SPSS, and I didn't understand what he's teaching about. That's a compulsory subject for my course, but my university had such a teacher to teach us (sounds annoyed). I think it's because my university didn't control the teaching quality good enough so this happened. The facility of Chengchi University is also much better than my university. They have better equipped classrooms, so students' timetables could be better adjusted. My timetable could have a big gap without any classes for several hours in a day, and it's only because my university doesn't have so many classrooms with computers. In Chengchi University, they have their own PC rooms within the school. Don't need to share with other schools, so the timetables are much better for students. Don't need to wait.

Text: TW potential\WI

Weight: 100

Position: 83 - 87

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: what does ranking tell you about? teaching quality?

W: No, it's not related. Some teachers at supplementary school were commented as good teachers in the PTT, but when I went to their classes, I couldn't see why they were seen good by other students. I mean you cannot know how they were evaluated. Only the rank numbers didn't indicate much. Would be good if the evaluating standards could be shown as well I think. I used ranking to see which ranking range a particular university belongs to, but I wouldn't think no. 1 is definitely better than no. 2. I might feel no. 1 to 5 are in the same range, and they are equally better than other ranges of universities.



S: would you feel it's harder to study at better ranking universities?

W: yes, probably. I think I might have heard people from good universities said it's harder to study there, so...(laughing). Could be harder I think.

Text: UK potential\BI

Weight: 100

Position: 41 - 47

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: where did you get the idea that universities after 50th are not good?

B: my friend said to me "not to choose universities rank after 50th", so I thought people feel the universities rank after 50th are not good.

S: did your friend use to study in the UK?

B: no, he didn't. But I thought maybe people commonly feel 50th is the number for them to accept universities (laughing). Probably it's because there's about 100 universities in the UK, so the half would be 50. I don't know.

S: did your agent say "within 50th is good" that kind of thing to you as well?

B: no, they didn't say this to me. They said wherever you go, it's the same when you come back to Taiwan, unless you are going to Cambridge or Oxford. Or the 2nd choice is to choose from the name of cities. The name of places people know about. Like Keele University, who the hell would know where Keele is? (laughing) You need to look at the map to see where it is.

Text: UK potential\BI

Weight: 100

Position: 85 - 88

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: when you use ranking, do you relate ranking to the teaching quality?

B: when you don't understand British universities, you would. But when you know more about the universities, you believe less on this view. I think teaching quality cannot be reflected in the ranking. It's only to see how well-known the university is. I mean whether people have heard that university.

S: would you relate ranking to the easiness or difficulty of studying in one place?

B: yes. For good ranking ones, their IELTS requirement is higher, and also they would give more assignments.

Text: UK potential\BI

Weight: 100

Position: 61 - 63

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\subject ranking



S: when you compare universities, did you compare more on the universities or the marketing as a major?

B: I paid more attentions to the marketing, because a university has many academic schools which are too big to be compared with. I think the teaching in the marketing course is more important. Each university has different focus, like on business, literature or others, so I look at marketing course more than on university.

Text: UK potential\CA

Weight: 100

Position: 63 - 66

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: Taiwanese students care much about the ranking, why do you think you don't care? You said you don't relate ranking to the teaching quality?

C: I don't. To see teaching quality, I used Hello UK, the board of each university. If current students of that course said their teachers were not teaching hard, not practical, the course was not good etc. I would not apply there. People's comments affected me more than the ranking.

S: do you feel the ranking is related to the easiness of studying there?

C: yes. I think old universities are harder to study at. Red-bricks. I don't know the names of those red-brick universities. I don't care this either.

Text: UK potential\LU

Weight: 100

Position: 61 - 67

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: I know you haven't applied for universities, but when you are choosing which universities to apply, would you compare the universities overall or the majors?

L: choosing universities are still important for me. It's fine if I haven't heard the name of university, but it's not acceptable to study at bad universities. Bad on the ranking I mean.

S: which ranking system did you use?

L: there are MANY out there (laughing). I don't want to choose Top 10 universities, because I'm not good enough for that. I don't want to get into top universities, but would try to avoid the very bad ones. I prefer to choose universities rank in the middle.

S: but there are too many ranking systems, how can you choose which one to use?

L: if I choose tourism as a major, I would go find what universities offer this course. Then I would go to see the ranking of universities and also the ranking of tourism courses. The ranking of my major is more important for me, because the overall ranking is very unstable. I mean the overall ranking is affected by many other factors.



Text: UK potential\LU  
Weight: 100  
Position: 65 - 67  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\subject ranking  
S: but there are too many ranking systems, how can you choose which one to use?  
L: if I choose tourism as a major, I would go find what universities offer this course. Then I would go to see the ranking of universities and also the ranking of tourism courses. The ranking of my major is more important for me, because the overall ranking is very unstable. I mean the overall ranking is affected by many other factors.

Text: UK potential\JO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 45 - 50  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: what did you do if the two ranking were very different?  
J: I would choose to look at marketing, because it's my subject. Although the other subjects are good, it's not what I study. I know wherever I go, it would not make any big difference in my future job, because Taiwanese don't know much about British universities. How good they are etc.  
S: if the ranking wouldn't matter in your career, why you care about the ranking still?  
J: I still don't want to study universities that are in the final range. I only want to consider the universities rank before 70th or 80th, not the final 1/3. I don't want to go to top universities, because I know my university grades and IELTS are not good enough. Also, I didn't want to get myself into troubles (laughing). I don't want to study at places that easy to get into but hard to get out.  
S: so do you think it's harder to study at good ranking universities?  
J: yes, I think that should be more difficult, because the universities would require you more. More strict. I think top universities ask you for higher level of standard in your work. I don't want to give myself too much pressure, but I'll do my best, because I don't want to waste my money.

Text: UK potential\JO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 45 - 46  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\subject ranking  
S: what did you do if the two ranking were very different?  
J: I would choose to look at marketing, because it's my subject. Although the other subjects are good, it's not what I study. I know wherever I go, it would not make any big difference in my future job, because Taiwanese don't know much about British universities. How good they are etc.



Text: UK potential\JO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 81 - 83  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\subject ranking  
S: did you care teaching quality?  
J: yes, so I used subject ranking, because it means the level of quality in each area is better. I think overall ranking tells you the academic achievement of one university, but they don't tell you what research area they are stronger or weaker. Subject ranking can tell you how much this university invest in this subject within that university. I compared both of them.

Text: UK potential\JO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 45 - 46  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\different ranking systems  
S: what did you do if the two ranking were very different?  
J: I would choose to look at marketing, because it's my subject. Although the other subjects are good, it's not what I study. I know wherever I go, it would not make any big difference in my future job, because Taiwanese don't know much about British universities. How good they are etc.

Text: UK potential\Long HE fair  
Weight: 100  
Position: 27 - 31  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: do you mean you'll select universities from the league tables?  
L: well, yes, because I don't have other information like that, so I would still choose from the league tables.  
S: would you look at overall or subject ranking?  
L: I would use subject ranking, look at the education streams. After talking to the counsellor, I went back to check the league tables and found out they didn't select the best British universities for me. She didn't know much about Special Education as a subject, so she spent long time to search for me. She suggested me 3 or 4 universities at the end. But in the website I found, they had about 10 universities there. I also checked the ranking of the universities that they suggested me, and the rankings were only 4 or 3a.



Text: University C\AL

Weight: 100

Position: 27 - 31

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: Did you pay many attentions to the teaching quality?

A: EYERYONE pays attention to the teaching quality! But I felt it was a bit blind choices, because that's no way I could know how good the teaching quality of one school is. I could only rely on the Times ranking to tell me that. The MBA ranking I used was evaluated every 4 year by Times.

S: Did you use Guardian as well?

A: Guardian? No. I might have missed this source.

Text: University C\AL

Weight: 100

Position: 45 - 47

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: It seems you only used the teaching quality criteria from the Times.

A: yes. At the end I only compared the universities by its teaching quality. It's more important than facilities, students ratio, or the Internet access for me. I cared less about the university facilities, I cared more on those criteria I compared in the Excel chart.

Text: University C\AL

Weight: 100

Position: 65 - 67

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: when you looked at the ranking, did you see both the overall ranking and the subject ranking?

A: Yes, I read both overall and subject ranking. But when they were very different, I would choose to use subject ranking only. Like Bradford University, my friend came to study its MBA in 2004, and he said it was good. Although its overall RAE ranking was only 3, the MBA ranked 5 and was within the top 100 worldwide. I chose to look at its business ranking only, because the overall ranking might be affected by the performance of other academic schools or the facilities.

Text: University C\AL

Weight: 100

Position: 81 - 83

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: Do you relate ranking to the teaching quality and the easiness of graduation? Why or why not?



A: Yes. I think they are related. It's about how good the ranking is and the IELTS scores universities ask for. It's about the competitiveness. The best students certainly choose the best universities, so if you are accepted there, it's more competitive for you, because your classmates are all good. It then makes the study harder for you. More competitive.

Text: University C\ AL

Weight: 100

Position: 65 - 67

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\subject ranking

S: when you looked at the ranking, did you see both the overall ranking and the subject ranking?

A: Yes, I read both overall and subject ranking. But when they were very different, I would choose to use subject ranking only. Like Bradford University, my friend came to study its MBA in 2004, and he said it was good. Although its overall RAE ranking was only 3, the MBA ranked 5 and was within the top 100 worldwide. I chose to look at its business ranking only, because the overall ranking might be affected by the performance of other academic schools or the facilities.

Text: University C\ AL

Weight: 100

Position: 81 - 83

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: Do you relate ranking to the teaching quality and the easiness of graduation? Why or why not?

A: Yes, I think they are related. It's about how good the ranking is and the IELTS scores universities ask for. It's about the competitiveness. The best students certainly choose the best universities, so if you are accepted there, it's more competitive for you, because your classmates are all good. It then makes the study harder for you. More competitive.

Text: University C\ JU

Weight: 100

Position: 47 - 57

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: where did you get information on ranking?

J: most of that came from the Financial Times and Economics. They were the links from Hello UK. I used only MBA ranking and not overall ranking, because I knew little about British universities. I only heard Oxford and Cambridge, no any others, so if I focused on the MBA ranking, I thought it might be more accurate for me to



choose from. I used only the ranking number itself, and didn't look into the elements of ranking, because I didn't know how they evaluate universities and what they've included as elements.

S: did you use Guardian?

J: no, I didn't.

S: did you have a ranking number in mind to filter the universities you applied?

J: No, but actually I was thinking to choose universities with not good rankings (laughing). Like after 40th. Because my friend was doing his MBA at that time, he had a hard time. Although he didn't say it might be a problem for him to graduate, I wanted to have a rest while studying in the UK. So I didn't want to choose very good ranking universities. I can then rest a bit while studying here. After spending all that money, I didn't want myself to fail on getting the degree (laughing).

S: it sounds like you relate ranking to the easiness of graduation?

J: yes.

S: did you also feel that teaching quality is also related to the ranking?

J: oh, yes. I think the teaching quality and the design of courses will be different (if the ranking is different). But now I felt there's no direct link between the ranking and the easiness of graduation. I felt so after studying the MBA. My thought was not correct at that time (laughing). Although the ranking of University C was not very high, it's hard enough for me.

Text: University C\JU

Weight: 100

Position: 57 - 61

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: did you apply only universities rank after 40th?

J: no, at the end I applied some good ranking ones and some not as good ones.

Because my friends in Taiwan said if I meant to spend all that money and time to study abroad, why didn't I try to apply better universities? So I applied some good ranking ones.

S: have those friends studied in the UK before?

J: no, they didn't. But their suggestions worked.

Text: University C\JU

Weight: 100

Position: 97 - 101

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: did you use ranking to evaluate the teaching quality and the reputation of universities?

J: well, it's very hard to know the teaching quality, so I just ignored that factor (big laughing). I only looked at the overall ranking, not each individual element. But I think teaching quality was one of the evaluated factors of the ranking.

S: did you know the total number of British universities?



Text: University C\JU

Weight: 100

Position: 55 - 57

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: did you also feel that teaching quality is also related to the ranking?

J: oh, yes. I think the teaching quality and the design of courses will be different (if the ranking is different). But now I felt there's no direct link between the ranking and the easiness of graduation. I felt so after studying the MBA. My thought was not correct at that time (laughing). Although the ranking of University C was not very high, it's hard enough for me.

Text: University C\JU

Weight: 100

Position: 51 - 53

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\ranking range

S: did you have a ranking number in mind to filter the universities you applied?

J: No, but actually I was thinking to choose universities with not good rankings (laughing). Like after 40th. Because my friend was doing his MBA at that time, he had a hard time. Although he didn't say it might be a problem for him to graduate, I wanted to have a rest while studying in the UK. So I didn't want to choose very good ranking universities. I can then rest a bit while studying here. After spending all that money, I didn't want myself to fail on getting the degree (laughing).

Text: University C\LN

Weight: 100

Position: 79 - 81

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: in the use of ranking, did you use overall ranking or subject ranking?

L: I used overall ranking, because I care more on whether people have heard the name of university before.

Text: University C\LN

Weight: 100

Position: 85 - 89

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: would you think ranking is related to the teaching quality?

L: I think so. Yes, if the ranking is better, it means that university is stronger in some aspects than others, so it could include teaching quality as well. I think they are



related. If the ranking is good, the teaching quality would not be too bad. If the overall ranking is good for that university, it means the other aspects are not too bad, so I don't need to compare other small elements myself.

S: would you relate good ranking to the difficulty of studying there?

L: yes, so when I was selecting universities, I didn't want to choose top ranking ones. I didn't want to have a hard time in my study. I don't need to study at Oxford or Cambridge. I don't want to do that. I want to experience the life here, and to have time to travel as well. But also not to get too bad universities. Middle ones I think.

Text: University C\LN

Weight: 100

Position: 95 - 99

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: which ranking system did you use?

L: Times and also others that are showed in Hello UK.

S: when you have different rankings from different organisations, how did you choose which one to use?

L: all those I used showed that Southampton has a better ranking than Kent, so I didn't need to choose which ranking to use (laughing).

Text: University C\LN

Weight: 100

Position: 79 - 81

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\overall ranking

S: in the use of ranking, did you use overall ranking or subject ranking?

L: I used overall ranking, because I care more on whether people have heard the name of university before.

Text: University C\LN

Weight: 100

Position: 97 - 99

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\different ranking systems

S: when you have different rankings from different organisations, how did you choose which one to use?

L: all those I used showed that Southampton has a better ranking than Kent, so I didn't need to choose which ranking to use (laughing).

Text: University C\ME  
Weight: 100  
Position: 41 - 42  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: when you said the ranking is not good, what do you mean by good?  
M: I mean Top 100 globally.

Text: University C\ME  
Weight: 100  
Position: 53 - 56  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: which ranking systems you used?  
M: I used Guardian and Economist. I also looked at the Top 100 MBA globally.  
S: why did you want to choose the Top 100? How do you think that makes a difference?  
M: Of course it makes a difference. When you are applying a job, even people don't know that university name always; you can say that in your CV. From my application, University C is within Top 100 globally.

Text: University C\ME  
Weight: 100  
Position: 65 - 67  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: because there are many ranking systems, did you face problems on which ranking to believe?  
M: yes. But those universities I applied, their ranking from different organisations were close. So it's fine.

Text: University C\ME  
Weight: 100  
Position: 82 - 84  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: did you use MBA ranking or overall ranking?  
M: I told my agent I wanted to do MBA, so they looked at only the MBA ranking for me.

Text: University C\ME



Weight: 100

Position: 90 - 94

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: Why do you think ranking is so important to you?

M: it's more about getting jobs. It makes differences I think.

S: do you think there's any relationship between the ranking, teaching quality, and the easiness to study there?

M: I would think ranking is related to the teaching quality and the teacher student ratio. If the ranking is not good, maybe the teacher student ratio is too high. I think if I use ranking, it has already covered all the factors that I might care. Some ranking systems might even include the evaluation of the graduates' future salary. I could also know from the ranking on the quality of students from that university. I looked at the ranking number, but also the elements evaluated in that ranking system, such as future salary and teacher student ratio. I care about how much I can earn after getting the degree, and I don't want to have over 100 or 200 classmates in one MBA course. It's too many! I cannot accept that. Better ranking universities do not mean it would be harder to study there, but it would mean it's more competitive between classmates.

Text: University C\ME

Weight: 100

Position: 82 - 84

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\subject ranking

S: did you use MBA ranking or overall ranking?

M: I told my agent I wanted to do MBA, so they looked at only the MBA ranking for me.

Text: University C\ME

Weight: 100

Position: 90 - 94

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: Why do you think ranking is so important to you?

M: it's more about getting jobs. It makes differences I think.

S: do you think there's any relationship between the ranking, teaching quality, and the easiness to study there?

M: I would think ranking is related to the teaching quality and the teacher student ratio. If the ranking is not good, maybe the teacher student ratio is too high. I think if I use ranking, it has already covered all the factors that I might care. Some ranking systems might even include the evaluation of the graduates' future salary. I could also know from the ranking on the quality of students from that university. I looked at the ranking number, but also the elements evaluated in that ranking system, such as future salary and teacher student ratio. I care about how much I can earn after getting the degree, and I don't want to have over 100 or 200 classmates in one MBA course. It's too many! I cannot accept that.



Text: University D\LE

Weight: 100

Position: 41 - 43

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: Which ranking systems did you use?

L: The Times and the Guardian. The Times has no specific major ranking, but the Guardian has. When applying universities, I used the overall ranking from the Times first. Then when I got accepted, I used the Guardian for the specific majors I chose. The reason for using them at different stages was because their ranks are VERY different, so we could only pick one to use at one time.

Text: University D\LE

Weight: 100

Position: 65 - 71

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: What can you see from the ranking?

L: I can see the teaching quality, reputation, and the rate of getting jobs for graduates. I remember University D was said to have a very high rate of getting jobs.

S: Do you relate teaching quality and graduation rate to the ranking of universities?

L: Yes, I think it's a myth we (Taiwanese) have. I think it's about the self-confidence. Universities with better ranking can attract good students, and if you are accepted by your first choice, a very good university. You'll think that you have many intelligent classmates, so you feel pressured. Of course you will. You will think whether I can graduate? Can I survive there? It's not about the university rules on the graduate rate but about my own performance.

S: Why do you think Taiwanese students use ranking so much?

L: There is too much information, so if any information is easier to be understood and worth to be trusted, you tend to believe. When you don't know any universities, and you want to know, ranking is the most straightforward way. Before coming to the UK, you might have heard about 4 or 5 British universities, how can you judge the rest? The ranking is for foreigners to use because we don't know universities.

Text: University D\LE

Weight: 100

Position: 65 - 67

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: What can you see from the ranking?

L: I can see the teaching quality, reputation, and the rate of getting jobs for graduates. I remember University D was said to have a very high rate of getting jobs.



Text: University D\ LE  
Weight: 100  
Position: 41 - 43  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\different ranking systems  
S: Which ranking systems did you use?  
L: The Times and the Guardian. The Times has no specific major ranking, but the Guardian has. When applying universities, I used the overall ranking from the Times first. Then when I got accepted, I used the Guardian for the specific majors I chose. The reason for using them at different stages was because their ranks are VERY different, so we could only pick one to use at one time.

Text: University D\TO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 46 - 50  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: Did you use ranking at all?  
T: yes, I did. I only looked at business subject ranking, because the overall ranking of universities includes the evaluation on facilities, the campus, the accommodation, the buildings etc. If I use only business subject ranking, it indicates the teaching quality rather than other things that I might not care. Ranking shows how publics and experts see the courses, so it might not be the only consideration for me, but can be a reference. I wanted to go somewhere around 50th to 60th in the ranking. I did not dare to go to better ranking universities, because it's harder to graduate from them.  
S: Why do you get this impression from? I mean the better ranking universities are harder to study at?  
T: Basically people from Hello UK all said that. Like students study at Manchester University and Leeds University are all complaining the heavy workload they have, so I didn't want to be like that. I had the feeling from them that ranking is about the teaching quality and the easiness of studying there.

Text: University D\ TO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 56 - 58  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: Which ranking system did you use?  
T: I used mainly the Times, and also Guardians.

Text: University D\ TO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 48 - 48  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\subject ranking

I only looked at business subject ranking, because the overall ranking of universities includes the evaluation on facilities, the campus, the accommodation, the buildings etc. If I use only business subject ranking, it indicates the teaching quality rather than other things that I might not care.

Text: University D\ TO  
Weight: 100  
Position: 48 - 50  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\ranking range  
I wanted to go somewhere around 50th to 60th in the ranking. I did not dare to go to better ranking universities, because it's harder to graduate from them.  
S: Why do you get this impression from? I mean the better ranking universities are harder to study at?  
T: Basically people from Hello UK all said that. Like students study at Manchester University and Leeds University are all complaining the heavy workload they have, so I didn't want to be like that.

Text: University D\AM  
Weight: 100  
Position: 17 - 18  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: How did you find out about the ranking? From which organisation?  
A: I used the Times. I looked at the overall ranking and the business ranking. I wanted to choose the ranking between 20 to 40. I didn't want the universities that rank after 50th. Also, I didn't want the top universities, because I might not graduate from them (laughing).

Text: University D\ AM  
Weight: 100  
Position: 19 - 22  
Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables  
S: What can you see from the ranking? Like you said the easiness of graduation, and any other things?  
A: Like the teaching quality, the facilities, and campuses are directly relate to the ranking. How good the students and teachers are, many many. Also those will affect



my study life. Ranking is the most important indicator for me. I can see all the things I need from the ranking.

Text: University D\ AM

Weight: 100

Position: 59 - 62

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: You mentioned earlier about the relationship between the ranking and the easiness of graduation and the teaching quality. How did you know this?

A: I studied at Nottingham, and did feel it's harder to study there. Also, my dad said that to me as well. He said it's better I don't go to a good ranking university, because it could be harder to study at.

Text: University D\AM

Weight: 100

Position: 19 - 22

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: What can you see from the ranking? Like you said the easiness of graduation, and any other things?

A: Like the teaching quality, the facilities, and campuses are directly relate to the ranking. How good the students and teachers are, many many. Also those will affect my study life. Ranking is the most important indicator for me. I can see all the things I need from the ranking.

Text: University D\ MA

Weight: 100

Position: 41 - 45

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: When you looked at the ranking, which one did you use?

A: I used both the Times and another one, I couldn't remember the name. I only want universities within 40 in the league tables, but because of my limitations on the location and spring programmes, I couldn't use ranking to limit my choices. There's only very few choices left.

S: Did you use overall ranking or the subject ranking?

A: I asked my agent and she said when you apply for a job, they will only care about the overall ranking of your university and not the subject ranking. I think she's right, so I don't look at subject ranking.

Text: University D\MA

Weight: 100

Position: 55 - 63

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables

S: When you look at ranking, what information you want to get from it?

A: I want to know the teaching quality and how people from the industry see the university. I think when I apply for jobs in Taiwan, the people of the companies can see the ranking of my university to know how good I am. If I study at better ranking universities, I will have higher chances to work at better companies.

S: Do you relate ranking to the graduation rate?

A: Yes, I think if the ranking is better, it's harder to study there.

S: Why do you think you have those feelings about ranking?

A: That's why they want to make league tables, otherwise why they bother to do this?

S: What are the ranking elements you look at?

A: Like RAE, about the publication of papers. But I also heard people said the ranking isn't accurate enough because some new universities have short histories, and it's not fair to compare them on the same standard with the old ones.

Text: University D\MA

Weight: 100

Position: 43 - 45

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\types used\overall ranking

S: Did you use overall ranking or the subject ranking?

A: I asked my agent and she said when you apply for a job, they will only care about the overall ranking of your university and not the subject ranking. I think she's right, so I don't look at subject ranking.

Text: University D\MA

Weight: 100

Position: 55 - 57

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\why ranking

S: When you look at ranking, what information you want to get from it?

A: I want to know the teaching quality and how people from the industry see the university. I think when I apply for jobs in Taiwan, the people of the companies can see the ranking of my university to know how good I am. If I study at better ranking universities, I will have higher chances to work at better companies.

Text: University D\MA

Weight: 100

Position: 42 - 43



Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\ranking range  
I only want universities within 40 in the league tables, but because of my limitations on the location and spring programmes, I couldn't use ranking to limit my choices. There's only very few choices left.

Text: University D\MA

Weight: 100

Position: 66 - 67

Code: External search\impersonal\non-marketing\League tables\ranking range  
I used ranking within 40 to exclude universities that I don't want, but as my English friend suggested me Kinston University, I also considered it, although the ranking of it is 70 something.

**Appendix 19 Demographics from University B of the TW group**

	<b>YI</b>	<b>MI</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>CE</b>
<i>University /Course</i>	YU/Finance	YU/ Finance	YU/ Finance	YU/ Finance
<i>Gender</i>	Male	Male	Male	Male
<i>Age</i>	24	24	23	24
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	No	No	No	No
<i>Undergraduate degree /Major</i>	Private university /business major (took the Master's exam twice)	Private university /business major (took the Master's exam twice)	Private university /business major	Private university /business major (took the Master's exam twice)
<i>Financial support</i>	Family	Family	Family	Self and family



**Appendix 20 Demographics from University A of the TW group**

	<b>YU</b>	<b>HU</b>	<b>HS</b>	<b>JA</b>
<i>University /Course</i>	University A /Information management	University A /Information management	University A /Finance	University A /Finance
<i>Gender</i>	Male	Male	Female	Male
<i>Age</i>	23	23	23	24
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	No	No	No	No
<i>Undergraduate degree /Major</i>	Public university /business major	Public university /business major	Public university /business major	Public university /business major (delay the graduation time one more year because of bad grads)
<i>Financial support</i>	Family	Family	Family	Family

**Appendix 21 Demographics from potential students of the TW group**

	<b>WI</b>	<b>JI</b>	<b>BO</b>	<b>EN</b>
<i>Status at the point of interview</i>	Waiting for exam results	Waiting for exam results (will take the exam again next year)	Waiting for exam results (has been accepted by one private university for Master's)	Waiting for exam results (has been accepted by one private university for Master's)
<i>Gender</i>	Female	Female	Male	Male
<i>Age</i>	22	22	23	22
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	No	No	No	No
<i>Undergraduate degree /Major</i>	Year 4 at a private university /business major	Year 4 at a private university /psychology major	Year 5 at a private university /math major, business minor major (Year 5—delay the graduation time one more year to prepare for the Master's exam)	Year 4 at a private university /business major
<i>Financial support</i>	Family	Family	Family	Family



## Appendix 22 Demographics from University D of the UK group

	<b>TO</b>	<b>LE</b>	<b>AM</b>	<b>MA</b>
<i>University /Course</i>	University D/IMM	University D/IMM	University D/IMM	University D/IMM
<i>Gender</i>	Male	Male	Female	Female
<i>Age</i>	26	27	28	29
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	No	Tour guide	Company staff	Company staff
<i>Working experience</i>	No FT, PT 4 year	2 year	3 year	6 year
<i>Undergraduate degree /Major</i>	Private university /business major	Private university /engineering major	National university /business major	2 year college /English major
<i>Financial support</i>	Family	Family	Family	Self and family

## Appendix 23 Demographics from University C of the UK group

	<b>AL</b>	<b>ME</b>	<b>JU</b>	<b>LN</b>
<i>University /Course</i>	University C/MBA	University C/MBA	University C/EMBA	University C/IMM
<i>Gender</i>	Male	Female	Female	Female
<i>Age</i>	30	26	31	27
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	Project manager	Bank staff	Company staff	PR assistant
<i>Working experience</i>	4 year	2 year	10 year	2 year
<i>Undergraduate degree /Major</i>	Private university /engineering major	Private university /business major	5 year college /business major	Private university /Public affair major
<i>Financial support</i>	Self	Family	Self	Family



**Appendix 24 Demographics from potential students of the UK group**

	<b>JO</b>	<b>BI</b>	<b>LU</b>	<b>CA</b>
<i>Status at the point of interview</i>	University D/preessional course	Waiting for offers	Choosing programmes to apply	Waiting for offers
<i>Gender</i>	Female	Male	Female	Male
<i>Age</i>	28	34	26	26
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	Sales in clothing/IT	Designer in IT	Marketing staff	No
<i>Working experience</i>	10 year	10 year	3 year	No
<i>Undergraduate degree /Major</i>	Night-time private university /business major	National art university /fine art major	Previous polytechnic university /architecture major	Private university /computing major
<i>Financial support</i>	Self	Self	Self	Family and self

	<b>Denny</b>	<b>Long</b>	<b>Connie</b>	<b>WN</b>
<i>Status at the point of interview (met those 4 students in the HE fair)</i>	Came to the HE fair with another friend (thinking about studying abroad in the future)	Considering whether to apply British universities (haven't taken IELTS yet)	Has applied to some British universities (comparing the offers for the enrolment choice)	Has chose 4 British universities in consideration set (will apply them later)
<i>Gender</i>	Male	Female	Female	Female
<i>Age</i>	22	28	26	27
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	No	Teacher	English teacher	Marketing specialist
<i>Working experience</i>	No	5 year	3 year	4 year
<i>Undergraduate degree /Major</i>	Year 3 at a private university/ engineering major	National university /education major	Christian College/ English major (Degrees from Christian colleges are not recognised by the Taiwan government)	National university/ Sociality major
<i>Financial support</i>	Self	Self	Family	Family

## Appendix 25 Demographics from the 1st focus group

<i>1<sup>st</sup> group/Code</i>	<b>U1</b>	<b>U2</b>	<b>U3</b>	<b>U4</b>	<b>U5</b>
<i>University /Course</i>	University D/IMM	University D/IMM	University D/IBA	University D/IBA	University D/IBA
<i>Gender</i>	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
<i>Age</i>	26	26	29	29	26
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single
<i>Previous occupation</i>	Sales	Sales	N	Staff in management department	Supermarket staff
<i>Working experience</i>	3 year	1.5 year	N	1 year	1 year
<i>First degree /Major</i>	Private university /Spanish	Private university /business major	Private university /business major	Private university /business major	Private university /business major
<i>GPA</i>	61-70	61-70	71-80	61-70	71-80
<i>Financial support</i>	Family	Family	Family	Family	Family



**Appendix 26 Demographics from the 2nd focus group**

<i>2<sup>nd</sup> group/code</i>	<b>U6</b>	<b>U7</b>	<b>U8</b>	<b>U9</b>	<b>U10</b>	<b>U11</b>
<i>University /Course</i>	University D/IMM	University D/IMM	University D/IBA	University D/IMM	University D/IMM	University D/IMM
<i>Gender</i>	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female	Male
<i>Age</i>	36	34	32	26	25	37
<i>Marriage status</i>	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single	Married
<i>Previous occupation</i>	International sales	Software engineer	Assistant manager in trading company	Design engineer	Engineer assistant	Sales in trading company
<i>Working experience</i>	8 year	4 year	7 year	2 year	3 year	11 years
<i>First degree /Major</i>	Private university /business major	National university /engineering major	University in the USA /business major	Previous polytechnic university /engineering major	Previous polytechnic university /engineering major	Private university /business major
<i>GPA</i>	51-60	71-80	61-70	71-80	71-80	71-80