Towards understanding effects of social influence on student choice of university - case study of Victoria University

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Abstract

Increased competition among education providers has made the process of student choice regarding higher education institutions (institutions) more complicated for potential students. At the same time, institutions are striving to attract new students through new and innovative ways. This research contributes to an increased understanding of the social influence factors that impact on student choice processes and explores their effect on the selection of institutions.

This study predominantly focused on factors influencing the final choice of institutions. However, in order to consider a broader range of social pressures on student choice, the study also examined the stages of development of a predisposition to engage in post-secondary education and the information search.

This study adopted a qualitative methodology and employed the phenomenological perspective as a theoretical basis to investigate students' choice processes. A series of research questions guided the in-depth face to face interviews, conducted with 13 first-year undergraduate students, which had the main objective of interpreting and exploring the participants' lived experiences contributing to their choice of institution.

The findings of the study highlight the importance of perceived elements of sincerity and credibility during prospective student encounters with influencing agents. These crucial elements affecting student choices provide further insight in identifying the prerequisite conditions for these perceptions to form. The research makes contributions to the broader body of knowledge concerned with student choice through the adoption of a phenomenological perspective and a strong focus on the role of social influence in this context. The research offers practical implications for higher education marketers as it informs the development of more targeted marketing communication and recruitment campaigns through increased knowledge of the student choice processes and the social influence determinants that underpin these processes.

I, Joanna Krezel, declare that the DBA thesis entitled *Towards understanding effects of social influence on student choice of university - case study of Victoria University* is no more than 65,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Joanna Krezel
01.08.2020

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Table of Contents

List of tables

List of figures

List of appendices

Chapter 1 - Higher Education Landscape

The Higher education environment is getting increasingly competitive (Pucciarelli and Kaplan 2016). The last couple of decades have witnessed the alleviated government control, changes to funding, and the move towards marketisation of higher education (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015). The political and economic environment of the higher education sector has resulted in a paradigm shift with higher education institutions (HEIs) becoming, in addition to research and knowledge generation, service providers with students as customers at the heart of the HEIs business operations. Therefore, it is not surprising that HEIs are fast adopting marketing strategies and business models to secure their ongoing success, and the marketisation of higher education has become a widespread phenomenon (Gibbs 2011, Gibbs and Murphy 2009, Judson and Taylor 2014). However, successful marketing requires a thorough knowledge of the targeted customer segment, customised strategies and greater understanding of the prospective student choice processes and motivations to study. When faced with the overwhelming selection of private and public HEIs, how do students make their choices?

The existing literature on the topic identified a broad and varied range of sources that yields influence on students during the choice processes; however, not all these sources gained equal attention (e.g. Meringe (2006), Ivy (2008), Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza (2014), Heasley-Brown and Oplatka (2015), Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton (2004)). An area that appears to be investigated in an only somewhat peripheral manner is social influence understood here broadly as a connection between an individual and social context in which the individual operates.

This research's key objective was to contribute to the pool of knowledge regarding students' choices of the HEIs and, more specifically, to gain further understanding of the impact of the social context on these choices.

Furthermore, this research has endeavoured to develop practical

guidelines for higher education marketers to assist in the process of attracting prospective students, and maximising the potential to develop recruitment campaigns through increased knowledge of choice determinants successfully. Through the investigation of the effects of social influence on students' choice of higher education institution, the research aims to identify social influence (SI) factors that impact on students' choice and investigate how these SI factors affect student choice of HEIs.

The HE environment globally is becoming increasingly competitive, and marketisation of higher education is a driving force in the sector (e.g., Judson and Taylor 2014, Marginson 2013). This paradigm shift from institutions of knowledge generation to business-like service providers has resulted in the intensification of marketing approaches to student recruitment, and an emphasis on commercial outcomes of HEIs activities (Mautner 2012). From the prospective student perspective, the complex processes of deciding on post-secondary educational choices, are made more difficult as the students face several higher education institutions actively advertising and promoting a frequently similar range of offers.

The paradigm shift that has seen the marketing principles applied broadly to student recruitment appears to be a global phenomenon. Commercialisation and marketisation have found their permanent place in what universities do around the world (Enders, De Boer, File, Jongbloed and Westerheijden 2011). The recent decades have witnessed the increased marketisation in a domestic context and an unprecedented cross border movement of students further fuelled by the growing universal demand for knowledge workers and the increasing importance of higher education in the context of international competitiveness (Nokkala 2006). With global agendas and local issues, higher education institutions are operating concurrently, locally, nationally, and globally (Marginson 2006).

From the Australian perspective, the latest statistic report released by Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA 2018) identifies 169 higher education providers, 42 universities and 127 non-

university providers, operating currently in Australia with 1,482,684 students with 71% being domestic students. While the overall number of students increased by 3% during the 2015-2016 period, the number of commencing domestic students has shown only a 1% increase and commencing international students increased by 12%. However, it is anticipated that the current slow growth in domestic students' numbers is likely to slow down even further (Norton, Cherastidtham and Mackey 2018). From 127 non-university providers, 105 are in the private sector. Private university providers increased by 26% in the last two decades and in 2016 enrolled 81,000 students - a staggering increase of 81.5% since 1999. While some private non-university providers cater predominantly to international students, 37 of them take only domestic students.

Furthermore, since 2012, the Australian government has uncapped the number of subsidised course places that universities can offer and consequently introduced a system that responds to market demands (Favaloro 2015). The demand-driven system that operated between 2012 and 2017 meant that higher education institutions were able to enrol as many students as they liked and, in the process, secure government funding for each domestic student. The situation changed in 2017 with the Australian government suspending the demand-driven system in favour of funding cap that provides each university with a fixed sum of money for teaching. However, universities do not have enrolment targets and, consequently, continue to compete for commencing students as well as engage in a range of activities to increase student retention and minimise transfer to another institution (Norton, Cherastidtham and Mackey 2018). The highly competitive environment has resulted in Australian higher education providers, like HE providers across the world, adopting marketing principles to student recruitment practices.

The transfer of marketing practices to the higher education sector and student recruitment is the logical follow-up to changes discussed in the previous sections. Literature that exists on the topic covers different areas of marketing practices including HEI image (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002), student as a consumer (Maringe 2006; Maringe and Mourad 2012), and

communication (Edmiston-Strasser 2009).

In Australia, marketing expenditure per student was close to $215 in 2013 with some universities' marketing budgets going into tens of millions (Favaloro 2015). There are likely to be substantial differences between the Australian Group of Eight leading universities' marketing expenditure, which may rely heavily on their reputation and national and international ranking, and other universities. Nevertheless, this competitive environment requires most universities to engage in a range of marketing practices to increase numbers of commencing students and, consequently, secure Government per-student funding.

These marketing activities are underpinned by an understanding of how and why domestic students select their preferable universities, and by increasing the likelihood of interaction between students and the higher education institutions.

1.1. Student choice of HEI

Generic models of student choice of HEI first started to appear in the literature in the 1980s. Initially, the models were broadly divided into three categories: economic models, sociological models, and models that combine both perspectives (e.g., Fernandez 2010, Maringe 2006). Economic models were based on the rational choice and cost-benefit comparison between values offered by each of the HEIs and relevant costs of attendance. These models proposed that the final HEI choice was made if the benefits offered by the chosen institution were more significant than those offered by other institutions. Economic models emphasised rational decision-making; however, did not allow for the plethora of social and socioeconomic factors that were likely to affect students' choice. Consequently, sociological models were introduced with their focus on these factors. Nevertheless, it was the models that combine both perspectives that gained the greatest popularity and continued to be applied in the strive to understand and explain student choices.

The key combined models were developed by Jackson (1982), Hanson and Litten (1982), Litten (1982) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987). While the models differ somewhat in the approach and terminology adopted, the underpinning processes through which students pass remain constant and consist of the predisposition, search and choice phases. The predisposition stage is predominantly concerned with the development of proneness to continue the education post-secondary school. It relates to various periods of student's childhood and adolescence, with the critical intensity period during senior secondary education. Most of the combined models acknowledge the vital role of socioeconomic status, student's background characteristics, and parental, peers and other significant individuals influences on the outcome of this phase. Predisposition stage culminates with students either commencing the search phase or embarking on other options as an alternative to pursuing higher education. The predisposition phase is predominantly concerned with events, pressures, and influences that occur before any considerations related to a specific HEI choice, and consequently sits somewhat outside of this research scope. Nevertheless, the predisposition phase was discussed with participants of this research project, albeit briefly, to uncover any specific factors and characteristics that may impact on later processes of search and choice of the HEI.

The search phase deals with gathering information about available institutions of higher education and, subsequently, forming a choice set of institutions that are being considered. During this stage, students reduce the number of HEIs to those few that meet a set of defined requirements - the choice set. Combined choice models acknowledge a broad range of factors that impact the search phase outcomes, including financial and geographical considerations, scope and quality of available information, specific course availability, and academic ranking and reputation of HEIs being considered. It is especially the information provided by HEIs that is of vital importance during this stage of choice processes (e.g., Gifford, Briceño-Perriott and Mianzo 2005, Hartley and Morphew 2008, Jackson 1982, Le, Dobele and Robinson 2019, LeFauve 2001) and, consequently, of great interest in the context of this research project. The outcome of the

search phase is the selection of the preferred HEI and, consequently, the enrolment decision made during the choice phase (Jackson 1982, Hansen and Litten 1982, Litten 1982, Hossler and Gallagher 1987.

The model that underpins this research was developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and is representative of the three process stages for student decision-making as applied to higher education institution choice. These process stages are deciding to go to university (predisposition stage), consideration of which universities to explore further (information search stage), and finally, selection of a preferred university (choice stage). The Hossler and Gallagher Model is one of the most popular college choice models (e.g., Cabrera and La Nasa 2000, Kankey and Quarterman 2007, Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza 2011). Its advantage lies in the representation of the HEI choice as a continuing process (Hossler, Schmit and Vesper 1999) rather than distinctly defined stages. Furthermore, as this research aims to increase understanding of social influences and their effect on student choice of HEIs, the suitability of Hossler and Gallagher's model is rooted in recognition of social context as having a substantial impact on the outcomes of this stage.

1.1.1. Social context and student choice

Early writers on student choice of HEIs and the most recent researchers both consistently highlight the importance of social context (e.g., Bonnema and Van der Waldt 2008, Chapman 1981, Gatfield and Chen 2006, Price, Matzdorf, Smith and Agahi 2003, Sojkin et al. 2014, Spears and Manstead 1989). However; it appears that frequently these factors are not thoroughly investigated, and their existence is simply acknowledged. Empirical studies addressing social influence related aspects of the HEI choice processes are scarce, and those that do exist predominantly adopt the quantitative perspective confirming the existence of these factors but not examining why or how they affect the outcome.

Family and friends, and other members of the prospective student's immediate reference group provide opinion and advice that constitute an

important choice factor (Chapman 1981, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, Johnston 2010, Joseph and Joseph 1998, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell and Perna 2008, Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza 2014, Baker 2019). The parental and family influences were previously found to affect student decision (e.g., Avery and Hoxby 2004, Brooks 2002, Brooks and Waters 2009, Cabrera and La Nasa 2000, Galotti 1995, Palmer 2004). However, while there is compelling evidence that families play an important role, there is scant literature to address these factors regarding the form they take in student choice processes. Even more infrequent, and somewhat inconsistent, are studies that endeavour to explain the influence of peers. Peer groups were found previously to either yield considerable influences (e.g., Constantinides and Stagno 2011, Johnston 2010, Mehboob, Shah and Bhutto 2012) across all stages of HEI choice, or have a limited impact (e.g., Kern 2000, Sojkin et al. 2014). The inconsistencies regarding peer influences are of particular concern due to the increasing inclusion of social media and the peer-to-peer communication in the HEI marketing strategies (Jeong, Morris, Teevan and Liebling 2013, Kim and Sin 2016, McCorkindale, Distaso and Fussell Sisco 2013).

Universities frequently utilise social media to attract future students, share students' experiences and provide answers to students' questions. With social media spaces facilitating communities based on shared interest, even extraneous encounters hold potential for influencing students (Ellison and Vitak 2015). As HEIs are frequently utilising social media in activities supporting recruitment and branding efforts (Mattson and Barnes 2009, Owyang, Bernoff, Cummings and Bowen 2009), more in-depth understanding of potential influences facilitated through these technologies is critical. Existing literature recognises the importance of communication via social media for young people (Hamid, Bukhari, Ravana, Norman and Ijab 2016, Osatuyi 2013), and the significant contribution of social media to HEIs recruitment and branding strategies (e.g., Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre 2011). These findings, however, do not necessarily equate to social media being a valuable source of information for prospective students or having a positive impact on the choice of HEI (Constantinides and Stagno 2011).

The inconsistencies in the literature regarding the influences of social context are of particular concern with regard to student HEI choices. Students are increasingly considered to be customers and, as such, confer to others when making decisions. Nevertheless, the existing knowledge on the topic is somewhat lacking and requires further research (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015). In an endeavour to gain a greater understanding of the role of social context on student choice, this research turned to the social influence theories.

1.2. Social influence theories

Social influence is a broad term that refers to changes in behaviour, emotions, or opinions resulting from the external environment in which one operates. This research project adopts a perspective offered by Kelman (2006) that sees social influence as a connection between an individual and the greater social environment. Specifically, it focuses on the impact of social influence, such as real or perceived reactions or opinions of others, on customer behaviour (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1990, Mangleburg, Doney and Bristol 2004). The adoption of the student-as-customer perspective in HE, and subsequent application of customer behaviour principles to HE marketing, further extends the need to understand the social pressures in this context.

It is understandable that students, as customers, seek the advice and information from their immediate reference groups - to which they belong, or desire to belong to. These groups may impact on the student either through influencing aspirations or by defining standards of behaviour (Schiffman and Kanuk 2007).

Previous research identifies three types of reference group influences: informational, utilitarian, and value-expressive influence (Bearden and Etzel 1982, Yang, He and Lee 2007). Informational influence is rooted in the human desire to make informed decisions. It has been previously tested in the context of student choices (e.g., Pimpa 2005), especially regarding family and peer influences. This type of influence occurs

through searching for information from those perceived to be knowledgeable, or through the observation of the behaviour of others (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989).

Utilitarian influence is concerned with changes in behaviour to satisfy expectations of others and gain the approval or avoid the adverse outcomes (e.g., Yang et al. 2007).

Finally, the value-expressive influence takes place when the individual matches their behaviour to that of others to improve self-esteem or self-concept (e.g., Bearden et al. 1990).

The goals that underpin the acceptance of influence - search for information in case of informational influence, gaining social approval for utilitarian influence, or improving self-esteem is an example of value-expressive influence - were further defined by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) as a desire to form the accurate perceptions of reality, strive to develop and maintain social relationships, and maintenance of a positive self-concept. Cialdini and Goldstein's definitions are consistent with early work on social influence by Kelman (2006) that put forward three processes that individuals pass-through "as they negotiate their social environment" (p.23) - compliance, identification and internalisation.

Compliance is defined as an acceptance of influence to gain a positive reaction, identification deals with acceptance of influence to create positive relationships, and internalisation takes place when influence is accepted to maintain the agreement of actions and beliefs with one's own value system.

The two areas that underpin the acceptance of influence - a concern about positive reaction and creating a positive relationship in the case of compliance and identification, and concern about the appropriateness of individual's behaviour in the case of internalisation, augmented by Cialdini and Goldstein's goals, offer an important scaffolding for investigation of motivations that underpin students' acceptance of influence in the HEI choice processes.

1.3. Gap in literature

The extensive research on the HE choice appears to be strongly oriented towards socioeconomic and institutional factors and their role in all three (predisposition-search-choice) stages of the process, and the rational choice perspective (e.g., Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, Obermeit 2012). Factors pertaining to social context receive lesser consideration and, especially in the context of influencing the choice of specific HE institution, require further investigation (e.g., Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, Cummings and Kinzie 2004). Even more importantly, the role of social influence on HEI choice processes, especially in the context of the search and choice phases, appears to be lacking. Subsequently, this research investigates the effect of social influence on students' choice of the specific institution of higher education through the adoption of the approach that encompasses both the HE students' choice model and a social influence perspective.

1.4. Research questions

This research's main contention is to gain a deeper understanding of social influences that may impact the student choice process, leading to the HEI selection. Consequently, the research is guided by the four key questions:

Main question

What is the impact of social influence on student HEI choice?

This question was explored throughout all three phases of the HEI choice model that underpins this research - predisposition, search and choice. While the research is predominantly concerned with stages of search and choice, identification of social influence factors that impact the development of the predisposition to pursue higher education allowed for

monitoring of these factors' role during subsequent choice phases.

Sub-questions

What constitutes the social influence factors of student choice of HEI?

How do social influence factors impact student choice of HEI?

Why do students rely on social influence in their choice of HEI?

These questions were explored primarily in the context of search and choice stages as these phases are concerned with specific HE institutions. To increase understanding of the impact that the social context has on student choice decisions, a modified scale developed by Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1990) to measure customer susceptibility to interpersonal influence was applied, and research participants were asked to talk about their experiences regarding any major general purchases made recently. The impact of social context on these purchases was then compared and contrasted with the effect of these influences on student choice of HEI.

1.5. Contribution to knowledge and statement of significance

The existing literature acknowledges various practical and socioeconomic determinants of students' choice that affect the formation of the choice set and the final selection of HEIs but appears to pay only limited attention to the impact of social context on that choice. This research endeavoured to increase understanding of the social influence factors that impact student choice processes and their influence on the higher education institutions' selection.

Conceptually, it bridges two critical concepts through the development

of a framework of HEI student choice that incorporates principles of social influence. The research makes contributions to the literature on students' choice and the role of social influence in this context.

From a practical perspective, the research outcomes benefit universities' understanding of student choices in a multitude of ways. The greater institutional knowledge of social pressures that yields its influence on students allows for more efficient interaction between the HEI and the potential student during the pre-selection stages leading to a choice of a particular institution. It also provides for an increased capacity to develop more targeted marketing communication and recruitment campaigns through increased knowledge of the student choice processes and the social influence determinants that underpin these processes. The social influence focus of this research broadens the understanding of pressures that exist in the greater social environment and which may impact on student selection of HEI, subsequently assisting in the process of attracting prospective students.

1.6. Research method

The research adopts a qualitative methodology as best suited for the investigation of participants' experiences, emotions and perceptions. The methodology was selected to address the limitations of current research on the topic of social determinants in student choice of HEI. Much of the present discourse tends to focus on processes and choice factors underpinning these processes but appear to overlook the depth of social interactions that might shape the final student choice. Social influence understood broadly as a relationship between an individual, and the greater social environment requires an approach that facilitates an investigation of these complex interactions. In response, the research moves the focus to the synergy between social influence factors and the student's decision to select a specific HEI, is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and adopts a phenomenological approach to provide an emphasis on participants' experience.

The in-depth interviews conducted are highly suited to phenomenological methodology and facilitated the investigation of social determinants' function in student decision-making processes. The one-on-one interviews were conducted face-to-face to allow for the greater understanding of the function of these factors in student decision-making processes and to evaluate the weighting of these factors on student choice. The questions that guided the interviews were preamble by a short introduction that was carefully designed to create an atmosphere of openness and communicate non-judgemental interest in participants' stories. To answer these questions, the participants were asked to reflect on their HEI choice from the two critical points in time: the time of making the initial decision to pursue post-secondary education, in the last year of secondary education or the last year before making VTAC application.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, and the selection was restricted to first-year bachelor degree students at Victoria University. This requirement emerges from the specific context of the study and the student choice models that underpin its theoretical foundations, ensuring that the experiences associated with the higher education institution choice processes were easier to recall. The research aim was to uncover the social influences that affect student choice of HEI, which broadly include parental, peers and institutional factors, and these are likely to have a more significant effect on undergraduate students that entered higher education either immediately or shortly after they completed the secondary education. It may be anticipated that postgraduate students' choice determinants may be somewhat different and, therefore, beyond this research's scope. Also, recognising a different range of practical factors specific to international students (e.g., entry and visa requirements) that may have a negative impact on the research outcomes, participants were restricted to local students only. Further, as one of these practical grounds for which student may choose Victoria University is the broad availability of courses with low to medium ATAR entry scores, participants were drawn only from courses that have ATAR scores on par with other Victorian universities' equivalent courses.

With the main objective of phenomenological research to interpret the human experience as it is lived by the person who experienced it, the core focus during the interviews was to create an atmosphere conducive to participants sharing their emotions and describing the lived experience of their encounters with the phenomena. All of the interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. In addition to the interview transcripts, the data consisted of field notes reflecting non-verbal data generated by participants and attempts to derive meaning and link the content of the interview with the theoretical foundations of the study. Transcripts and field notes were coded using the NVivo software, and the data was analysed through each of the predisposition- search-choice phases that underpin the research. This approach allowed for the participants stories to evolve as they recalled their journeys.

1.7. Definition of key terms and acronyms

The following list of the key terms and acronyms has been established and used consistently throughout the document to establish a common understanding.

Term/Acronym	Description
ACU	Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
Deakin	Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution - universities, colleges and institutes offering bachelor degree courses
LaTrobe	LaTrobe University, Melbourne, Australia
Melbourne University	University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; member of the Group of Eight Australian leading universities; highest ranking Australian university

Term/Acronym	Description
Monash	Monash University, Melbourne Australia; member of the Group of Eight Australian leading universities
Open day	HEIs opening their doors to prospective students to showcase a range of courses on offer, facili- ties and student life; Open Days generally take place between July and October
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Melbourne, Australia
School visits	HEIs representatives visiting senior secondary schools to provide information on a range of courses offered
Selective entry secondary schools	Selective entry schools enrol students based on performance in an entry examination
Senior secondary school	Years 11 and 12 of secondary education
SI	Social Influence understood broadly as a relationship between an individual and the greater social environment in which an individual operates in
Swinburne	Swinburne University, Melbourne, Australia
Tertiary Expo	VCE and Careers Expo - a forum for local HEIs to provide information and resources for the VCE, information about HEIs, and career and study advice
VTAC	Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre through which secondary school students apply for an admission to the selected HEI/s
VU	Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

1.8. Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the context of the research and provided a broad overview of the directions taken. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to the core of the research topic. Chapter 3 describes the methodology that forms the basis for the research, describes the method, and provides justification for the selection of the phenomenological approach. Sample details are also described. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss the key findings within the constraints of the three choice phases defined by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) - predisposition, search, and choice. Chapter 7 examines the key themes emerging from the students lived experience, and, finally, Chapter 8 addresses the research questions, examines the implications of the findings, and suggests future research.

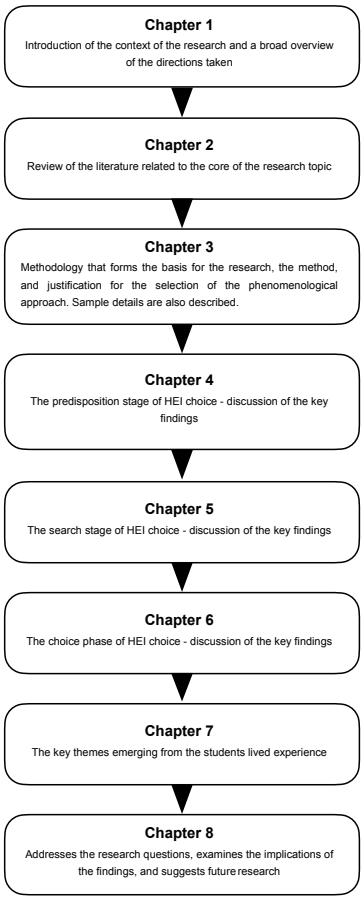


Figure 1. Structure of the thesis

1.9. Conclusion

This chapter provided a preamble to the research and introduced the research problem. The chapter included a succinct background to the literature on the HEI choice and HEI choice models and the context of the problem within the Australian higher education market. The chapter concludes that the HEI choice is an essential issue for prospective students, and the understanding of this issue is vital for HE institutions and student recruitment. The decades of research on the HEI choice provided a plethora of factors that impact and affect the final selection of the HEI. However, it remains largely unknown how the social context influences students in their choice decision, and why specific members of students' reference groups are more influential than others. The conceptual and methodological approaches adopted in this research project were chosen to explore these issues and provide some insights into the complicated relationship between student choice of the HEI and the social context from the perspective of those at the very centre of choice processes - students. The phenomenological inquiry that underpins this research project is used here to explore and gain knowledge from within the participants through the description and interpretation of participants' lived experiences as they recall them.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This study aims to explore the effects of social influence on student choice of higher education institution (HEI). In order to do so, the study addresses the following three research questions: What constitutes the social influence factors that participants perceive to influence their HEI choice? In what ways do these factors influence student choice? Why do students accept social influence in that context? In examining the literature on HEI choice, several significant research areas emerge as having a strong relevance to these research questions. These areas include perspectives regarding HEI choice, HEI choice models, determinants of student choice and influences and, especially, social influence on HEI choice. In order to answer the study's research questions, a selection of critical contributions from the social influence literature, which forms the conceptual foundation for this thesis, is examined. While this chapter aims to explore relevant contributions that connect student choice determinants and social influence concepts relevant to the research questions, it is acknowledged that the topics of HEI choice and social influence are covered by a much more extensive literature, the review of which is beyond the scope of this study.

The chapter is divided into four sections. First, it discusses the theoretical perspectives on HEI choice and choice models, followed by an outline of the determinants of choice that underpin these models. Next, it explores social influence perspectives that relate to student choice. Finally, it explains the conceptual framework for the study, adopting Hossler and Galagher's (1987) student choice model, Kelman's (2006) social influence perspective, and Cialdini and Goldstein's goals underlying the acceptance of influence (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). This framework is subsequently applied and used as a lens for this study's investigation.

2.2. Theories of HEI choice and choice models

HEI choice models appear to focus on two key areas: the predisposition to attend HEI, and the selection of a specific HEI institution. The HEI choice theories are often grounded in different theoretical perspectives and result in the emergence of three distinct types of HEI choice models: economic, sociological and, finally, models that combine both perspectives (Bateman and Spruill 1996, Fernandez 2010, Maringe 2006).

HEI choice models that adopt an economic perspective are based on a rational choice and focus on the cost-benefit comparison between values offered by each of the HEIs under consideration and the relevant tangible and intangible costs of attendance (Jackson 1982, Bateman and Spruill 1996). Subsequently, the selected institution is likely to offer benefits that are greater or perceived to be greater than those offered by other institutions. While economic models emphasise rational decision-making, sociological models focus on varied socio-economic characteristics and pressures that impact student choice throughout the entire selection process.

The models that borrow from both economic and sociological perspective, and as such are of particular interest in the context of this study, are combined models (Bateman and Spruill 1996, Joseph and Joseph 1998). It needs to be emphasised; however, that, while the various types of models somewhat differ in the way they view the process, they uniformly view the student choice of the HEI as a complex and diverse selection of activities that broadly encompass the period between later years of secondary education, up to the finalisation of enrolment in the chosen institution.

The combined models acknowledge numerous areas that influence student choices. These areas are frequently dependent upon the context in which research has been conducted. Subsequently, several combined models of HEI choice somewhat vary in their approach. Nevertheless, the

combined choice models, in agreement with economic and sociological models, frequently utilise a multi-stage funnel framework through which students pass, and which commences with the decision to pursue HE and concludes with enrolment at the specific college or university (Somers, Haines, Keene, Bauer, Pfeiffer, McCluskey, Settle and Sparks 2006). Some of the leading combined models of student choice that stand out among the vast literature on the topic are those developed by Chapman (1981), Jackson (1982), Hanson and Litten (1982), Litten (1982) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987). These models will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

David Chapman developed one of the first student choice models that combined both economic and sociological perspectives. Chapman's (1981) model is heavily focused on higher education institutions and offers a deep insight into several important factors that play a role in student selection of the specific HEI. While these factors encompass the background and characteristics of students and their family and a broad range of external influences, the attention is predominantly centred on the HEI characteristics. Chapman (1981) categorises external influences into three distinct groups: (1) significant persons consisting of family, friends and high school personnel, (2) HEI's attributes, and (3) HEI's communication with future students. Chapman's (1981) model of student choice is aimed at assisting HE administrators in the identification of pressures and influences that need to be considered during the recruitment processes. The model significantly contributes to the research on the topic by recognising the complexity of external factors regarding their impact on student choice of HEI and highlights the need for future research on that topic.

Conversely, the model proposed by Jackson (1982) shifts its focus from the institution to students and postulates three stages that a student goes through before deciding on a specific institution of higher education. Jackson's (1982) process of HEI choice commences with the initial stage that is predominantly concerned with the development of preferences for continuing education at the tertiary level. This phase is strongly influenced

by students' high school academic achievement and educational aspirations and, consequently, by students' background and broader social context that encompasses family, peers, and various high school influences.

The following stage of exclusion deals with a process of formation of the list of potential candidates and exclusion of some of the HEIs from the prospective list. The exclusion stage is strongly affected by resources and information available to students. Jackson (1982) broadly acknowledges a varied range of factors that may play an essential role during the exclusion process and include geographic location, physical and sociological costs, and academic standing of HEIs under consideration. The stage of exclusion culminates in the student forming a specific set of suitable choices.

Once the choice set is decided upon, the final stage of evaluation commences, leading to the final choice of HEI. At this stage, students are found to be utilising a "rating scheme" in order to exclude specific institutions.

Jackson's model (1982) limitations lay in its heavy weighting towards the development of preferences for pursuing higher education in the first place rather than the choice of the specific institution of higher education. Indeed, the external pressures that may affect the choice of a specific institution from the formulated choice set, or even the initial formation of that choice set, are to a great extent omitted.

The model that is positioned between Chapman's institution-oriented and Jackson's student-oriented models is developed by Hanson and Litten (1982). Hanson and Litten's (1982) model views HEI choice as a continuing, five-stage process. These stages include the development of the desire to pursue higher education, the decision to attend an HEI, search process of suitable institutions and sourcing relevant information, the application process, and the enrolment and admission.

Hanson and Litten (1982) determine the number of factors that have an

impact on that process and which include: (1) student's background characteristics (e.g., family income and education), (2) student's characteristics (e.g., academic aptitude and self-perception), (3) high school characteristics, and (4) HEI characteristics (e.g., size, location and cost).

The model developed by Hanson and Litten (1982) also acknowledges the existence of the separate, parallel to the five-stages, financial support aspect that yields its influence throughout the process.

The model developed by Hanson and Litten (1982) was further elaborated on by Litten (1982). Litten (1982) streamlined the five stages of Hanson and Litten's (1982) model along the critical activity periods and proposes a three-phase process: (1) the decision to pursue secondary education, (2) an investigation and formation of the list of HEI, and (3) lodgement of an application and an enrolment. Litten (1982) also identifies five distinct processes that underpin these phases and through which the student passes. These include: (1) having college aspirations, (2) starting the search process, (3) gathering information, (4) sending applications; and (5) enrolling.

The influencing factors that impact on students throughout the entire process are grouped into nine sections: (1) background of students and their family, (2) personal attributes, (3) high school attributes and student's academic performance, (4) environmental factors, (5) public policy, (6) college actions at recruitment, (7) college actions at admission, (8) college characteristics, and (9) external pressures and media (Litten, 1982). Some of the factors within the nine sections (e.g. cultural conditions, peer and family influences, media and college brand and ambience) refer strongly to social influence through their relationship with resulting social outcomes (Litten, 1982). However, while simply acknowledged, these social influence related choice determinants are not investigated in that context.

2.2.1. Hossler and Gallagher's model

One of the most popular, significant models of student choice of HEI was developed by Hossler and Galagher (1987). The model's notable contribution stems from the inclusion of both individual factors related to the student (e.g., students characteristics, significant others, educational activities, students initial HEI values, and students search activities), as well as organisational factors of the institutions (e.g., school characteristics, HEI communication and other search activities) as having a considerable influence on students.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) draw on work by Chapman (1981), Jackson (1982) and Litten (1982) and propose a three-phase model: (1) predisposition, (2) search, and (3) choice, and define expected outcomes in each of the phases. Table 1 illustrates Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice.

Table 1. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of HEI choice

Phase	Influencing Factors		Student Outcomes
	Individual level	Institutional level	
Predisposition	• Student characteristics • Significant others • Educational activities	• High school characteristics	• HE option • other options
Search	• Student preliminary college values • Student search activities	• HEI search activities (recruitment activities)	• HEIs choice set • Other options
Choice	• Choice set	• HEI recruitment activities	• Choice

The initial phase of predisposition concentrates on the development of educational aspirations. It acknowledges the role of, in addition to socioeconomic status and student's background characteristics, the parents, peers and student's involvement in a range of extra-curriculum

activities during high school. This phase recognises influences from the significant individuals in a student's reference group. The predisposition stage culminates with students either commencing HEI searching or embarking on other options as an alternative to pursuing higher education (Hossler and Gallagher 1987).

The second phase, search, is concerned with gathering information about colleges and universities and, subsequently forming a choice set of institutions that are being considered. The search stage sees students reduce the number of HEIs to those that meet a set of defined requirements or preferred characteristics and, in the process, create the desired outcome (the choice set). While the search phase is predominantly concerned with gathering information and formatting the choice set, the outcomes of this stage may still result in students pursuing other options than college or university attendance.

Finally, the choice phase involves the evaluation of alternatives included in the choice set to select the chosen institution. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) acknowledge a comprehensive range of external factors, such as the role of significant persons and HEI characteristics and communication, as having a strong impact on the outcomes of this stage. The range of communication activities undertaken by HEI is identified as having a powerful influence on the final choice decision.

The three phases at the core of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model are representative of the framework that is fundamental to the majority of the combined models on student choice of HEI. While the terminology used for the underlying processes of student choice may differ to some degree between various models, nevertheless, there appears to be consistency regarding the fundamental concepts of the predisposition-search-choice framework. The comparison of terms used to describe the three phases of student choice in the models reviewed in this section is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Three phases of student choice

Model	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Jackson (1982)	Preference for HE	Exclusion of options to form choice set	Evaluation and selection
Hanson and Litten (1982)	Decision to pursue higher education and desire to attend HEI	Exploration of options	Application and enrolment
Litten (1982)	College aspiration and decision to commence the process	Information gathering	Application and enrolment
Hossler and Gallagher (1987)	Predisposition	Search	Choice

2.3. Stages of student choice and their characteristics

2.3.1. Predisposition to pursue higher education

The first stage of most student choice models almost uniformly deals with the development of aspirations to pursue higher education. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) define this stage as a predisposition stage. The predisposition stage broadly includes a series of events that lead to the decision to continue formal, post-secondary education through college or university attendance. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) acknowledge a wide range of internal and external factors that affect students during this stage. These factors include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic factors, parental and peer opinions and expectations, and the high schools' characteristics and attributes. A similar range of factors was put forward as having an impact on the first stage of the choice models by

other authors.

This first stage of Jackson's (1982) model is concerned with the development of preferences for HE. It is strongly influenced by students' academic achievement and educational aspirations, which are, subsequently, influenced by students' background and broader social context that includes family, peers and school influences. Furthermore, Jackson (1982) highlights the strong correlation between students' high school academic achievements and the development of educational or occupational aspirations.

Comparable approach to the predisposition stage was proposed by Hanson and Litten (1982) who also pinpoint the arrival at the initial decision to participate in postsecondary education as the basis of the HE choice process. Hanson and Litten (1982) further acknowledge a vast number of factors that affect this stage: race and family culture, quality and social composition of the high school, parents and high school counsellors, self-image and personality, and economic conditions of student's environment.

The development of the predisposition to participate in postsecondary education is also central in the initial stage of the model developed by Litten (1982), which further elaborated on Hanson and Litten's (1982) work. Litten (1982), whose findings are consistent with Hanson and Litten's (1982), proposes a broad sweep of factors that impact on students developing an aspiration to pursue higher education. Parallel to other combined models, these factors include student background (parental education, income and socioeconomic status), personal attributes (academic abilities, self-image and benefits sought), high school attributes and environmental factors (economic or cultural conditions).

The predisposition stage of the combined models of student choice predominantly deals with the development of aspirations and desires to continue formal education post-secondary school. As such, this stage is not directly concerned with the choice of the specific institution of higher

education but, instead, focuses on the decision to pursue further education rather than other occupational options. As this is not relevant to this study's research objectives, the stage of the predisposition will not be examined further.

2.3.2. Search and the development of the choice set

The second stage of the models of student choice deals with the process of gathering information regarding relevant institutions of higher education, and the formulation of the choice set of preferred HEIs. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) define the extensive range of actions and activities that students undertake and which take place during the search stage. These include the preliminary evaluation of values that the considered HEIs represent, seeking information regarding the cost of attendance, and availability of financial assistance.

Jackson (1982) proposes that the search stage is strongly affected by available resources (e.g., financial costs associated with attendance at the potential HEIs) and the spectrum and quality of information available to the student at the time. Some of the factors that are likely to play an important role during this stage and the subsequent exclusion process that sees unfavourably evaluated HEIs eliminated include geographical location, tangible and intangible costs of attendance, and academic standing, ranking and reputation of institutions under consideration. The stage of exclusion culminates with the student forming a set of suitable choices.

Hanson and Litten (1982) suggest two distinct processes that take place during this stage: confirming the decision to attend college or university, and commencing the search process of suitable institutions and sourcing information. Furthermore, Hanson and Litten (1982) propose, in accordance with other authors on the topic, an extensive range of factors that impact on this stage of student choice processes and which include: student's background characteristics (e.g., family income and education), student's personal characteristics (e.g., academic aptitude and self-

perception), external pressures (peers and family expectations, media influences), and HEI characteristics (e.g., size, location and cost). Hanson and Litten (1982) also highlight the importance of financial support, which they position parallel to all stages of the choice processes.

The range of influencing factors that play a salient role in students' development of choice sets are expanded further by Litten (1982) and grouped into nine distinct sections: (1) student and student's family background, (2) personal attributes, (3) high school attributes and student's performance, (4) environmental factors, (5) public policy, (6) college actions at recruitment, (7) college actions at admission, (8) college characteristics, and (9) external pressures and media. It is evident that during the search phase, and especially during the formulation of the choice set of HEIs, the prospective students rely to a great extent on the resources provided by the HEIs. "Students exclude colleges as unfeasible based on partial information when more information would lead them to do otherwise, and quite reasonably they do not consider colleges unknown to them or about which they can obtain no information" (Jackson 1982, p.240).

Subsequently, during this stage, both the availability and quality of the information provided by HEIs are of vital importance, as any potential issues pertaining to these factors may lead to the exclusion from the group of institutions under consideration. It is apparent that some of the factors identified in the combined models discussed here as affecting the formation and the evaluation of the list of suitable institutions of higher education (e.g., cultural conditions, peer and family influences, media and college brand and ambience) are directly connected to social influence. However, neither of these social influence related determinants nor their role in that phase of the choice process, are investigated in that context, but their existence is simply acknowledged.

The omission in the literature on the topic to investigate social pressures that affect the choice set's formation is likely to impact HE institutions' marketing effort negatively. Effective marketing is underpinned by well-informed marketing strategy, and this strategy cannot be successfully

developed without the thorough knowledge of the customers and internal and external motivations and pressures that exert influence on them. Consequently, it is vital to thoroughly understand the role of social factors that impact student choice during the search and the development of choice set stage as well as during the following stage of choice of the higher education institution.

2.3.3. The choice of the higher education institution

This final stage of the process commences with the evaluation of the choice set of preselected candidates and culminates with the final selection of the preferred institution. During this phase, students are utilising a variety of rating schemes in order to exclude specific options.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) posit that the stage of choice is strongly influenced by the HEI attributes and communication, and student's perceptions, or impressions, of quality that the HEIs represents.

Jackson (1982) postulates that during this stage, students evaluate candidate institutions that are included in the choice set through, predominantly, assessing the net cost of attendance. Subsequently, HEI tangible and intangible attributes play a crucial role in this phase. However, the role of family characteristics (e.g., background and education) cannot be underestimated as these factors contribute to the development of the rating criteria that, in turn, forms the basis for the evaluation (Jackson 1982).

The process of applying to an HEI and, later, enrolment are also included in the last stage of a model developed by Hanson and Litten (1982). In their model, the phase consists of sending applications and enrolling, and is affected by a range of factors that include: student's self-image and personality, communication activities of HEIs, and the size, range and types of courses offered by each of the institutions. Similarly, the HEI characteristics and recruitment actions and activities feature in Litten's (1982) model are important factors that substantially impact the choice

phase. Further, Litten (1982), in line with other models, identifies a selection of additional factors that include parental, peers and media influences, and HEIs communication, publications and personnel which all affect the final selection of the HEI.

2.4. Factors influencing student choice of HEI

The review of the combined models of student choice identifies an extensive array of factors that affect the student selection of the HEI during the stages of search and choice, which must be considered in this study. These factors are separated into three broad groups: institutional factors (section 2.4.1.), student-related factors that include academic achievements and aspirations (section 2.4.2.), and social factors relating to pressures and influences of the greater social environment that comprise of family, peers and student's other reference groups (section 2.4.3.).

2.4.1. Institutional factors

Diverse factors pertaining to institutions of higher education were highlighted by different authors since the emergence of the choice models in the 1980s, and encompass a broad and varied range of HEI characteristics that include, but are not limited to, physical attributes of the institution, reputation, ranking and prestige, quality of teaching, and the scope of courses offered. In a study conducted for the New York College Admission Board, Hossler and Litten (1993) identify a range of institutional factors that are important to students, and which include: HEI reputation, the character of the community neighbouring HEI; safety; student involvement and diversity; programs and curriculum; and classes format and staff credentials.

Joseph and Joseph (1998) isolated a number of HEI related factors in two distinct groups: (1) degree characteristics and (2) physical aspects, facilities and resources, which both proved to be of uppermost importance. Institutional reputation and HEI ranking are frequently used as a selling

point. Monks and Ehrenburg (1999), investigating 17 HE institutions within the top 25 US rankings, found that the improvements in ranking result in more students applying and consequent greater selectivity. HEIs with declining ranking frequently choose not to lower the price to encourage a greater number of applicants as this may signal the possible decline in the quality of the offer but attract students through indirect incentives such as an increase in the availability of financial aid. Kern (2000) highlights the importance of the HEI reputation, as perceived by students, in the choice processes. Prominence, and especially institutional reputation and image, were also confirmed as important factors in a study of almost 400 business school students conducted by Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) to measure the role of these two factors in HEI student decisions.

Maringe (2006) identifies four groups of institutional factors: (1) HEI programme, (2) promotion, (3) prospectus, and (4) prominence, and finds that programme, promotion and prominence appear to be of uppermost importance in determining student choice of university. HEI's reputation and staff credentials, which are two of the elements included in the selection of prominence factors, are especially of critical importance (Maringe, 2006). Similar findings result from the research conducted by Ivy (2008) that investigated the selection of business school by over 500 MBA students. Ivy (2008) found that factors included in programme, prominence, price prospectus and people groups (HEI employees) were of great importance, with items included in programme selection achieving superior ranking.

Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza (2014), in the longitudinal study conducted in Poland between 2008 and 2013, identify numerous institutional determinants of the HE choice and measures the variation between these determinants over time. Sojkin, Bartkowiak et al. (2014) investigate the choice determinants in two phases: (1) decision to pursue higher educations and (2) decision to enrol in the specific university. The authors claim that, in the study conducted in 2013, not only did the selection of courses offered and university reputation emerge as the most important factors when choosing the HEIs, but the importance of these factors increased by over 80% since 2008 (Sojkin et al. 2014). The top five

determinants of student choice also included two factors that were identified in 2013 for the first time: (1) educational process (teaching and learning methodologies) and (2) university culture and atmosphere. Their study, while providing a significant contribution to the topic, has some notable limitations. The sample group was restricted to business students only and extending the study to participants from different fields may introduce a different range of influencing factors. Further, the study's real importance lies in the dynamism of student choice that may be, to some extent, due to specific conditions present in the Polish educational market at the time of rapid expansion of the HE sector following the fall of communism.

A systematic review of literature on student choice of university conducted by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) provided a comprehensive mapping of factors influencing HEI choice. Analysing 75 papers published between 1992 and 2013 in scholarly journals, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) categorise institution related determinants into two-sub-groups: (1) institutional factors, and (2) student/institutional factors. Both sub-groups are further divided into three categories. Institutional factors that encompasses: (1) the quality that includes HE image, reputation and teaching quality, (2) characteristics of HE institution such as quality of staff, entrance standards or academic ranking, and (3) outcomes and benefits that comprise of career prospects and lifestyle and social benefits. The student/institutional factors consist of: (1) geographical location, (2) sources of information, and (3) price sensitivity. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) found that there are no institutional factors that are salient for all students in regard to their choice of HEI, and findings vary greatly between various authors. However, while there is no agreement on the most dominant, or highest ranking, institutional determinants, there appears to be an underlying notion that it is not the specific HEI factors that matter most but rather the fit between the institutional and student characteristics. The concept of student-institution fit relies on three core elements: (1) student characteristics, (2) institutional environment characteristics, and (3) positive or negative outcomes of students' interaction with the institutional environment

(Cabrera et al. 1993, Williams 1986). Subsequently, the influence of the institutional fit comes into effect when the student characteristics match HEI characteristics.

2.4.1.1. HEI communication influence

Institutional communication forms an important part of HEIs marketing strategies to identify and attract potential students and has the greatest potential to influence student choice of HEI (Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton 2004). Consequently, it is of great importance that both the content and the format of institutional communication are fulfilling HEI strategic directions and objectives. Johnson and Chapman (1979) highlight both the importance of HEI produced brochures as the key reference for future students and the fact that these brochures are frequently written in a way that is too difficult for its audiences. From a marketing point of view, this presents two problems: the HEIs are not able to communicate their messages clearly and consequently reduce the effectiveness of the informational material, and the material written in a too complex manner may lead to misunderstandings. These issues are vital as student choices are influenced by their perceptions of HEI quality and these perceptions, in turn, are formed through interactions with HEI staff and written materials (Kealy and Rockel 1987).

While there is a clear increase of the online sources of information and the application of electronic media in regard to HEI recruitment are found to be responsible for increased efficiency (Gifford, Briceño-Perriott and Mianzo 2005, Hossler 1999), the printed material produced by HEIs remains an important source of information. Hartley and Morphew (2008), analysing 48 brochures from a range of HE institutions, found that they uniformly present an overly idealistic image of the HE. These almost utopian visions are presented across six major areas: institutional (e.g., location and technology), academic (e.g., curriculum and opportunities for international exchanges), co-curricular activities, admissions and financial aid, the value of education (e.g., alumni and rankings), and purpose of HE (e.g., future employment opportunities) (Hartley and Morphew 2008).

LeFauve (2001) investigated both printed brochures and the web content in regard to the provision of information and their persuasion on student choice. While the printed material appeared to be reaching students on more emotional levels, which can assist in the formation of a choice set of HEIs under consideration, the web content was more likely to form a source of information especially in early and late stages of the decision-making process (Le, Dobele and Robinson 2019, LeFauve 2001). One of the clear advantages of the electronic versus print media is the ability to personalise the content and the immediacy of response. The lack of personalisation in the HE communication during the admission process was previously criticised by Donehower (2003), who believes that it is the personalisation of HEI messages that allows for differentiation between various institutions.

The importance of personalisation of messages was also highlighted in the study conducted by Page and Castleman (2013), who investigated the personalised text messages regarding increasing college attendance among low-income high school graduates. Their analyses demonstrate that personalised text messaging is an effective strategy to increase HEI enrolment. Specifically, Page and Castleman (2013) highlight the importance of text messaging in consolidating and personalising complex information, and facilitates a connection between the student, his family and HEI.

The recent reliance of handheld, mobile technology, combined with the increasing affordability and subsequent accessibility of these devices, provided current and future students with broad access to a range of electronic communication platforms that include web content, email and social media communication, and texting.

It is evident that all of these platforms, together with more traditional printed communication, offer important avenues through which students connect with the HEIs during search and choice phases.

2.4.2. Student related factors

Student-related factors broadly refer to the student, student family, demographics and socioeconomic and characteristics, academic abilities, and practical determinants that stem from students' backgrounds. Chapman (1981) identifies socioeconomic status, especially family income, as having a specifically strong and direct impact on HEI choice. Other student-related factors identified by Chapman (1981) include academic achievements in high school and educational aspirations. Joseph and Joseph (1998) find that reasonable costs associated directly with the HEI attendance and reasonable costs and availability of accommodation both yield high importance on the choice process. Not surprisingly, the importance of price sensitivity and geographical aspects are also highlighted by other researchers.

Jimenez (2000) found that factors associated with cost, in addition to socioeconomic factors such as parental educational levels, family income and cultural factors, and intellectual capabilities and aspirations all have a significant impact on student choices. Avery and Hoxby (2004) highlight the importance of price and availability of financial aid in the choice process and, although they find some differences in college choice behaviour amounts students from different backgrounds, these differences are not dramatic. However, as expected, students with parents on high incomes or those who have graduated from very selective secondary schools, are somewhat less sensitive to factors associated with HEIs costs and financial aid (Avery and Hoxby 2004). Perna and Titus (2004), investigating the relationship between public policies and the HEI, find that state-based financial aid encourages student choice. DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2006), conducting a longitudinal study spanning five years, reported a strong correlation between the availability of financial aid and enrolment. Maringe (2006), Ivy (2008) and Kim and Gasman (2011) all acknowledge the importance of cost-related factors on student choice.

Correspondingly, Sojkin, Bartkowiak et al. (2014) emphasise the cost of studies and availability of financial aid as the most important factors when choosing the HEI which points to the 80% increase in the importance of these factors since 2008. More recently, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) conducted a systematic review of literature on the topic of student choice published between 1992 and 2013, and identify five distinct groups of student-related factors: (1) family income, (2) parental education, (3) gender, age and racial group, (4) socioeconomic status, (5) geographical considerations, and (6) price sensitivity that covers costs, availability of financial aid and affordability. While these factors are consistent with previous research on the topic that spans almost four decades, there are, not surprisingly, some variations regarding the importance of some of the factors, or groups of the factors. These variations are most likely the result of these studies' context and timing and, consequently, geopolitical, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the environment in which the research was conducted.

Consequently, it is likely that the role of cost-related factors on student choice is likely to be somewhat different in the case of Australia. The broad availability of the financial aid, such as previously discussed HECS-HELP, does alleviate immediate monetary issues associated with the HE attendance.

2.4.3. Social factors

While there is a consistency in the literature regarding the importance of institutional and socioeconomic factors on student choice, the findings are somewhat less clear regarding social determinants, with significant differences in the ranking of at least some of the social influence factors between different researchers (Bonnema and Van der Waldt 2008, Chapman 1981, Gatfield and Chen 2006, Price et al. 2003, Sojkin et al. 2014). Peer and family influences have shown a decline in importance in a study conducted in New Zealand (Joseph and Joseph 1998). The substantial decrease in the role of family opinions and expectations in student choice of HEI was also highlighted in the study conducted in

Poland (Sojkin et al. 2014). This relatively low importance of peers and family influences in both of these studies contradicts findings of the research conducted by Chapman (1981) who highlights these factors as having a superior impact on student choice. These variations may be due to the specific characteristics of the studies and the timing.

Chapman (1981), in a research paper that highlights students' reliance on family and friends opinions and advice, cites several studies that especially investigate that group of choice determinants (e.g., who was the most helpful person they consulted about the choice of HEI). In Joseph and Joseph's (1998) study, 30 high school students were asked to rate 17 different factors in order of importance. These factors are grouped into five distinct sections with peer and family influences rated lowest. Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza (2014) investigated over 1,500 university students through a combination of focus groups and surveys to measure a very broad range of factors that impact HEI choices. Numerous recent studies indicate strong influences of both family and peer groups.

For example, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell et al. (2008) support the role of significant persons (parents) in the process of HE choice and identify institutional marketing as one of the factors that shape parental involvement in this context. The strong influences of family, friends and other members of student's primary reference group were also highlighted by Johnston (2010) and isolated in the systematic literature review conducted by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015).

2.4.3.1. Family and parental influences

While the importance of influence exerted by this group may vary between different authors, there is a consistent acknowledgement that family, and especially parents, influence student HEI decision. Parental involvement was investigated extensively. Litten (1982), in a study that examines existing research on HE choice processes and Walker, Alloway, Dalley-Trim and Patterson (2006) found that parents, high school counsellors, peers, HE officials and publications, and other media are all

influencing student choices during the information gathering and application stages. However, Litten (1982) states the significant variances between the importance of family sources for different parental educational levels and among cultural groups (e.g., family related sources of information are more important to African Americans than to those of European origins). The notion of varied importance of parents' role regarding levels and depths of their involvement between different cultural groups was also supported by Hossler et al. (1999).

Another perspective is offered by Bouse and Hossler (1991) who recognise the importance of parental involvement in the choice process; however, they also found that involvement must occur early in the process to increase enrollment. Further, it appears that not all of the factors are of equal significance. Flint (1992) identifies three core areas that are of particular importance in the context of parental involvement: (1) course offering, (2) reputation and (3) selectivity, with financial considerations of HEI attendance being of lower-order concern. Galloti and Mark (1994) find that students whose parents are highly educated have a greater reliance on them as sources of information as they have reasons to expect their parents to be more knowledgeable about HE. This phenomenon is likely to result from shared family values that exist both within the student's family and broader reference group, and the level and the depth of parental involvement may be associated with students' academic ability level (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000).

There is little doubt that parental involvement plays a substantial role during all stages of the choice process. Some studies estimate that 90% of students consult their parents regarding their HEI choices (Brooks 2002). Avery and Hoxby (2004) associate the past university attendance by parents and siblings with the increased probability of enrolment. Previous research on the topic of parental involvement in the HEI choice is consistent and suggest that family exert, and are likely to continue to exert, a strong influence on the HEI selection process (Palmer et al. 2004).

2.4.3.2. Peer influence

While there is compelling evidence that parents play varied, but nevertheless important, roles in student choice processes, the influence of peers is less understood, and the research in the area indicates some considerable inconsistencies. Kealy and Rockel (1987) found that peer groups are a source of significant influence across various processes of student choice. Constantinides (2011), surveying 400 high school students in Holland on the impact of different information channels on their choice of HEI, found that peer influence ranked fourth highest out of nine-channel options.

The findings of Kealy and Rockel (1987) and Constantinides (2011) are consistent with research previously conducted by Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982), and research conducted by Johnston (2010) and Mehboob et al. (2012); however, are in direct contradiction with the results of Joseph and Joseph (1998), Sojkin, Bartkowiak at al. (2014) and Kern (2000) studies, who all state that peers have no significant effects on influencing institutional choice.

It is likely that the substantial variance between these two groups of findings lies in the study design and the depth of the interpretation of results. The study conducted by Kealy and Rockel (1987) investigated influences affecting specifically perceptions of college quality, while findings of research conducted by Johnson (2010) reflected immense changes in peer-to-peer communication, especially as a result of development in social media. These changes are likely to impact the increasing role of influences wielded by peers, consistent with general changes in the communication models.

Sojkin, Bartkowiak at al. (2014) indicate a decline in the role of peers as an important source of information (as compared to findings of their 2008 study); however, report an increase in the role of the internet. It is likely that the terminology used (e.g., “internet”) may include social media and peer-to-peer communication. The internet’s critical role is also acknowledged in other literature on the topic (e.g., Le et al. 2019,

Obermeit 2012, Pampaloni 2010, Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2008). It is more difficult to explain the findings of research conducted by Kern (2000). Investigating HE choice influences, Kern (2000) reported that 77.6% of respondents either disagreed or disagreed strongly with being influenced to enrol in HE by their university attending friends. However, it must be noted that Kern (2000) asked specifically about college attendance rather than the choice of the specific university and, subsequently, it is unknown whether peers influences during the later stages of student choice processes play a significant role (e.g., formulation of the choice set and the final selection of the HEI).

It is evident that peers play an important role in student choice processes; however, the inconsistencies in past research findings indicate that peer groups may influence some but not all factors of student choice and that their impact may be varied. Furthermore, fast-growing peer-to-peer communication via social media is likely to increase peers' influence on decision-making.

2.4.4. Social media and student choice of HEI

Social media use among young people is growing fast; however, it is predominantly misunderstood among HE marketers. From a marketing perspective, social spaces provide effective places for prospective students to source and share information, and influence each other’s opinions and behaviours (Jeong et al. 2013, Kim and Sin 2016, McCorkindale et al. 2013). Furthermore, social media spaces facilitate communities based on shared interests that communicate emotions, perceptions and uncertainties.

Subsequently, even incidental connections formed through social communities can potentially influence students (Ellison and Vitak 2015). HEIs are frequently utilising social media in a range of activities supporting their recruitment and branding communication efforts, and to gather other strategic information about their institutions and the perceptions of their institutions that exist in the target market (Mattson and Barnes 2009,

Owyang et al. 2009). However, there is some indication that social media, while important, does not constitute a valuable source of information for prospective students. A study conducted in Holland by Constantinides and Stagno (2011) examined, among other factors, the impact of social media on the choice of HEI. The study surveyed 400 high school students in the last two years of their secondary education regarding the three groups of social media activities: (1) Social engagement, (2) Information seeking, and (3) Content contribution. Participants were asked to rate different, traditional and social, information channels in the context of their impact on the final choice of HEI. Regardless of the high popularity of social media among this market segment (95.1% has a profile on a social media website and 77.5% log into their profile at least once per day), social media ranked last on the list of information channels influencing the choice of the HE institution (Constantinides and Stagno 2011). Campus visits, HE websites and the printed recruitment publications were the top three ranking options (Constantinides and Stagno 2011).

While there is some variance between suitability of different social media types regarding information seeking and information sharing, the importance of communication via social media for young people is undisputed (Hamid, Bukhari, Ravana, Norman and Ijab 2016, Osatuyi 2013). Social media contributes greatly to HEIs recruitment and retention communication and branding strategies. Furthermore, there are some suggestions in the literature that social media may not only drastically impact the brand but, in some instances, contribute to the brand survival (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Please see Table 3 for further details regarding the key authors and groups of choice determinants addressed by them in literature.

Table 3. Determinants of student choice of HEIs by author

Author	Institutional factors	Student related factors	Social influence factors
Maringe (2006)	• programme • promotion • respects • prominence	• price sensitivity • geographical aspects	• advertising and publicity • electronic media • marketing communication • personal contacts • reviews
Ivy (2008)	• programme • prominence • price • prospectus • people groups (HEI employees)	• cost of studies • financial considerations • geographical considerations	• advertising and publicity • electronic marketing • personal contacts
Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001)	• prominence • institutional reputation and image		
Sojkin, Bartkowiak et al. (2014)	• selection of courses offered • university reputation • educational process (teaching and learning methodologies) • university culture and atmosphere	• cost of studies • availability of financial aid	• friends and family pressures and expectations • HEI communication
Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015)	• characteristics of institution • quality of staff • entrance standards • academic ranking • institutional image and reputation • teaching quality	• demographics (age, gender and socioeconomic characteristic of student and student's family) • academic factors • outcomes and benefits (future career prospects and employability) • geographical factors • price sensitivity and other financial considertions • availability of financial aid	• friends and family • broader social influence
Joseph and Joseph (1998)	• degree charac- teristics • physical aspects • facilities and resources	• reasonable costs of HEI attendance • reasonable costs and availability of accomodation	• advertising and media • peers and family influence
Chapman (1981)	• HEI characteristics • location and physical aspects • selection of courses offered	• socioeconomic status, and family income • academic achievements in high school • educational aspirations • costs	• peer and family influences • students' primary reference network • HEI communication and media

Author	Institutional factors	Student related factors	Social influence factors
Kim and Gasman (2011)	• university prestige and ranking • academic reputation • availability of courses	• cost of attendance • other financial factors • geographical factors	• parental expectations • broader social network/ reference group • reviews
Jimenez (2000)		• socioeconomic factors • parental educational levels • family income • intellectual capabilities and aspirations • family cultural factors • costs	
Price et al. (2003)	• course selection • teaching and academic repu- tation • HEI facilities and resources	• academic achievements • geographical preferences • costs and financial considerations	• peer and family pressures • students' social networks • social influence through media
Bonne ma and Van der Waldt (2008)	• courses' range and content • student life and overall student experience	• employability • financial aspects	• friends and family • advertising • greater reference groups
Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008)			• significant persons (parents) • advertising

The factors that influence the HEI choice process are numerous, complex and varied, not only between individuals but also between various authors. The focus of the literature is predominantly on institutional and socio-economic factors and, furthermore, on the phases of predisposition for higher education and search, with the selection of the specific HEI receiving limited attention. Regarding social factors, the strong emphasis of the literature is on the socio-economic background and characteristic of students and students' families (Chapman 1981, Hanson and Litten 1982, Litten 1982, Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2008). However, both social and rational factors are represented in the majority of decision-making models, so it is understandable that these two groups of factors will impact on the choice of HEI by prospective students.

2.5. Social influence and motivations underpinning the acceptance of influence

> *One of the most pervasive determinants of an individual's behavior is the influence of those around him (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975,p.206)*

The review of literature on the topic of determinants of student choice strongly indicates a range of social pressures (family, peers, social media) that influence students throughout the HEI selection process. However, it is not clear how these pressures affect student choice, nor, why students accept these influences. In order to inquire into the effects of these social pressures or influences on the student, two concepts will be investigated; the relevant social influence perspectives and the theory underpinning the acceptance of influence.

Social influence is a broad term that refers to changes in behaviour, emotions or opinions caused by others in the external environment in which one operates. One of the earlier researchers on the topic of social influence, Herbert Kelman (1961, 2006) describes social influence as a connection between an individual and the greater social environment (e.g., primary and secondary reference group/s, media). The impact of social influence, or social pressures, on customer behaviour is well documented (e.g., Mangleburg et al. 2004). Bearden et al. (1989) highlight the importance of the real or perceived reactions or opinions of others and consumption behaviour. The adoption of the student-as-customer perspective in higher education, and subsequent application of customer behaviour principles to higher education marketing, further extends the need to understand the social pressures in this context. This section outlines the core social influence perspectives relevant to the social psychology domain in which this research is positioned.

2.5.1. Social Influence Theory

The drive for association with social groups is at the core of the theory of social comparison (Festinger 1954), and its premise that individuals seek

approval, or evaluation, of their own opinions, and their likes and dislikes, from outside reference group (Bearden and Etzel 1982), to which they either belong to or aspire to belong to. The external reference group is broadly understood to comprise of an individual, or a group of people, that influences an individual's behaviour (Bearden and Etzel 1982). Reference groups may vary from those to whom the individual actually belongs to, those to which they desire to belong to, and, finally, abstract groups that yield influence regardless of individual's lack of desire for membership (Stafford 1966). Reference groups may influence behaviour in two ways described by Stafford (1966) - either as (1) influencing a specific aspiration, or (2) by defining approval by the reference group standard of behaviour and, at the same time, establishing a frame of reference (Schiffman and Kanuk 2007). Previous research identifies three types of reference group influences: (1) utilitarian influence, (2) value-expressive influence, and (3) informational influence (Bearden and Etzel 1982, Yang et al. 2007). These forms of influence correspond with three processes by which individuals respond to social influence, and which were defined in Kelman's seminal works on Social Influence Theory (1958) as (1) compliance; (2) identification; and (3) internalisation. Kelman, describing social influence as a connection between an individual and the greater social environment, posits that, if particular conditions are met, individual's attitudes and behaviours may change as a result of social aspects.

2.5.1.1. Compliance

Compliance is described as an acceptance of influence to gain a positive reaction or avoid a negative response, from a specific person or a group. Compliance may exist either in the cognitive consistency form where the influenced behaviour changes are perceived as consistent with enhancing individual's value system or in the affective appropriateness form where the influenced behaviour changes are perceived as extending individual's self-concept. One form of influence that operates through the process of compliance is utilitarian influence (Bearden et al. 1989, Kelman 1961). Utilitarian influence deals with the change in behaviour that aims to satisfy a specific reference group's expectation to either gain the approval or

avoid adverse outcomes (Bearden and Etzel 1982, Kelman 1961, Yang et al. 2007). From a consumer behaviour perspective, this type of influence is frequently represented through preferences for a specific product, service, or brand to adhere to reference groups wishes (Childers and Rao 1992).

Compliance, as a form of utilitarian influence, is operationalised through subjective norms (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Subjective norms deal with processes during which the behaviour is modified as a result of social pressures regarding that behaviour (Ajzen 1991). Further, in order to alter the behaviour, social pressures from the individual or a group do not have to be explicit but merely perceived or anticipated. However, Mourali, Laroche and Pons (2005) propose that one of the conditions that need to be met for the utilitarian influence to take place is the visibility of the influence behaviour to the individual or a group that influences that behaviour.

2.5.1.2 Identification

Identification is defined as an acceptance of influence to create or enhance a positive relationship with a specific individual or a group. The key differences between processes of compliance and identification lay in the core premise that, in case of the identification, the individual influenced to adopt specific attitudes or behaviours, trusts, or is convinced by these behaviours. The type of influence that operates through the process of identification is value-expressive influence, which takes place when the individual matches his or her own behaviour to that of the reference group to which they want to belong (Bearden and Etzel 1982, Bearden et al. 1989, Kelman 1961). Value expressive influence is subsequently underpinned by the desire to improve one's self-esteem, or self-concept, and highlights the psychological need for the association with the specific reference group (Childers and Rao 1992). From the consumer behaviour point of view, Bearden et al. (1989a) propose that value expressive influence was found, to varying degrees, across a range of products and services that are conspicuous in nature. Value expressive influence, functioning through the process of identification, is

operationalised via social identity (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Social identity is broadly defined by Tajfel (1974) as part of an individual's self-concept derived from the maintenance of the relationships with a social group, and the sense of belonging, together with the emotional and evaluative values, that results from that relationship. Social identity comprises of three components: (1) cognitive, (2) emotional, and (3) evaluative (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002, Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 2002) and its core premise is concerned with the impact that social groups, within the greater social context the social groups operates in, have on the way that individuals see themselves. Subsequently, individuals define themselves through membership of social groups.

2.5.1.3. Internalisation

The process of internalisation is characterised as taking place when influence is accepted to maintain the agreement of actions and beliefs with one's own value system. The process of internalisation is manifested through informational influence. Kelman (1961) defined informational influence as having the origins in the desire to make informed decisions and suggested that this form of influence is accepted to advance knowledge and increase one's capacity to deal with the surroundings that one operates in. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) offered a similar perspective on informational influence and, later, Bearden et al. (1989) who suggest that this type of influence responds to the tendency to accept the information provided by others as evidence about reality. However, Yang (2007) proposes that the informational influence is only operational when the behaviour and values expressed by the reference group are perceived as being of advantage. Informational influence has been previously tested in the context of student choices (e.g., Liew, Tan and Jayothisa 2013, Pimpa 2005), especially regarding family and peer influences and other referents that exert high credibility (Childers and Rao 1992). Informational influence may either occur through the process of searching for information from those who are perceived knowledgeable, or through observing the behaviour of others (Mourali et al. 2005). Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) posit that internalisation, represented through informational influence, is operationalised by way of group norms.

The group norms occur when individuals adopt a specific group behaviour to support their own value system (Kelman 1958). However, it is suggested that the conformity with the group's norms is highly dependent on the commitment between the individual and the group. Subsequently, the greater the level of commitment, the more likely it is for the group norms to be adopted and informing the behaviour (Jetten, Postmes and McAuliffe 2002).

The three forms of influence: (1) utilitarian, (2) value expressive, and (3) informational, operating through processes of compliance, identification and internalisation, are frequently considered to be representations of interpersonal influence (Mourali et al. 2005). However, Bearden et al. (1989) group utilitarian and value expressive influence under a broader umbrella of normative influence. This grouping is in line with early work by Deutsch and Gerard (1955) who describe two types of social influence, (1) informational that is defined as an influence to acknowledge obtained information as a reality, and (2) normative that requires conformation with expectations of others.

Drawing on the work of Deutsch and Gerard (1955) Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren (1990) describe two types of social norms: injunctive norms that are concerned with "ought" and "should" (Burchell, Rettie and Patel 2013) and which define what is acceptable and right as based on beliefs and morals, and descriptive norms that refer to the behaviour of the majority. While these two types of norms are separate, the distinction between them is frequently blurred as describing what others may do and lead to the acceptance of that behaviour as what "should" be done (Burchell et al. 2013).

While informational, utilitarian and value expressive influences operate at the group level (e.g., adhering to expectations of others from the reference group, matching one's behaviour to that of others), it is likely that there as some implicit factors that underpin the acceptance of influence on the individual level (Abrams and Hogg 1988, Bearden et al. 1989, Pool, Wood and Leck 1998).

2.5.2. Goals underlying the acceptance of influence

Social influence perspective developed by Kelman (1958, 1961) recognises two areas that may be fundamental to acceptance of influence - a concern about the positive reaction, or creating a positive relationship in the case of compliance and identification, and concern about the appropriateness of individual behaviour in the case of internalisation. Further, Kelman (1961) proposed specific groups of antecedents and consequences for each of the three processes of compliance, identification and internalisation.

In the case of antecedents, the likelihood of each of the processes is presented as a function of the three core factors; (1) the significance of the influencing action, or, situation, and its relevance to the desired outcome that the individuals want to achieve; (2) the power of the party influencing the attitude or behaviour; and (3) the importance of the instigated response. Subsequently, Kelman (1961) extrapolates that the individual's concern with the significance of the influencing situation, or the underlying motivation that the influencing situation energises, will result in influence taking the form of a specific process.

Similar processes are defined by Kelman (1961) regarding the power of the agent influencing the behaviour, and the importance of the induced response. Depending on each of the three antecedents' character, the acceptance of influence will reflect either the process of compliance, identification or internalisation. The antecedents proposed by Kelman (1961) are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Antecedents of processes of compliance, identification and internalisation

	Compliance	Identification	Internalisation
Significance of influencing action	Motivation - concern with social effect of behaviour	Motivation - concern with social anchorage of behaviour	Motivation - concern with value compatibility of behaviour
Power of the influencing party	Means control	Attractiveness	Credibility
Importance of induced response	Limitation of choice behaviour	Delineation of role requirements	Reorganisation of means-ends framework

Based on Kelman (1961)

While the acceptance of influence differs for each of the antecedents and corresponds with emotions that underpin individual's engagement with that process, the same variation will apply to the resulting outcomes, or consequence, of the changes in behaviour or attitude. The differences in consequences are a function of three core factors: (1) under what conditions the influenced behaviour is performed; (2) conditions that lead to the abandonment of the influenced behaviour; and (3) types of the behaviour system in which the influenced change is embedded (Kelman 1961).

The conditions under which the behaviour is performed will differ for each of the processes. So, in case of compliance, the influenced change in behaviour is likely to be consistent with the accepted characteristics of a specific social setting and does not have to represent an individual's values. However, behaviours adopted through the process of identification, respond not to the external demand of the social context but to the role that individuals have, or aspire to have, within the specific group. While changes in behaviour taking place through the process of identification are regarded as representing the individual, behaviours adopted through internalisation are very much a part of an internal value

system. Table 5 illustrates the consequences of the three processes.

Table 5. Consequences of processes of compliance, identification and internalisation

	Compliance	Identification	Internalisation
Conditions under which the influenced behaviour is performed	Visibility of the changed behaviour to influencing agent	Importance of the relationship between the individual and the influencing agent	Relevance of individual's value set to issue
Conditions that lead to the abandonment of the influenced behaviour	Changes that result in alteration of conditions for social reward or avoidance of social punishment	Changes that result in alteration of conditions aimed at development or maintenance of self- defining relationships	Changes that result in alteration of conditions aimed at value maximisation
Types of the behaviour system in which the influenced change is embedded in	External requirements of social setting	Expectations of specific role the individual has or what to have within the social group or setting	Individual's value system

Based on Kelman (1961)

Almost fifty years after the social influence model was developed, Kelman (2006) revisited the original work and classified the three processes of compliance, identification and internalisation regarding their behavioural dimensions (responsibility and propriety) as discrepant with societal standards. This classification is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Types of discrepant actions in regard to societal standards in which they originate

Source of societal standard	Responsibility	Propriety
Compliance - External rules and norms	Social fear	Embarrassment
Identification - Role expectations	Guilt	Shame
Internalisation - Social values	Regret	Self-disappointment

Based on Kelman (2006)

Another study predominantly consistent with Kelman's (1961) perspective regarding the motivations that underpin the acceptance of social influence is presented by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), who describe three goals that are core to individuals' propensity to social influence. These are to (1) Goal of Accuracy - to form, and act upon, accurate perceptions of reality, (2) Goal of Affiliation - to develop and maintain social relationships or affiliations and, (3) Goal of Maintaining a Positive Self-Concept - to maintain a positive self-concept.

Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) investigate these three goals, or motivation, regarding how they drive individual's cognition and behaviour especially in areas of compliance (specific response to a specific request), and conformity (changes in behaviour in order to match responses of others). The perspective on social influence proposed by Cialdini and Goldstein's (2004) may not fully explain how a complex social context in which students operate influences their choice of HEI. However, Cialdini and Goldstein's (2004) suggest that, while the three core motivations that underpin individual's response to social influence (accuracy, affiliation and the maintenance of the positive self-concept) are associated with a specific social influence phenomenon, frequently, the influenced behaviours serve multiple goals. Subsequently, to impact student's choice of HEI, the influence is likely to be an ongoing process and activating few, if not all, described by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004).

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence that comprises of utilitarian, value expressive, and informational influences, operating through processes of compliance, identification, and internalisation, are considered important factors in consumer behaviour. A scale to measure all three facets of consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence was developed by Bearden and Netemeyer (1989). The development of this scale indicated the lack of discrimination between the utilitarian and value-expressive influences. This resulted in the two-dimensional scale that measures susceptibility to normative influence that combines both the utilitarian and value-expressive influences and the susceptibility to informational influence. This scale was validated in a range of marketing studies (Bearden et al. 1990, D'Rozario and Yang 2012).

There is an extensive body of research that deals with social influence and its bridging effect that exists between the individual and the social context, or system in which the individual operates (e.g., Kelman 1974, Kelman and Hamilton 1989). When viewed in the context of a specific social arrangement, each of the three processes of compliance, identification and internalisation represents a specific approach that allows for meeting requirements demanded, or expected, by that social arrangement, as well as for the maintenance of personal agreement in, and within it. In the case of compliance, the process involves adherence to the social system's norms, regulations, and behavioural demands. Through that adherence and the consequent acceptance of social influence, the individual assures ongoing approval and avoids disapproval. Acceptance of influence through the process of identification involves meeting the social system's expectation by changing, or adopting, specific behaviour and extending the self-concept. Internalisation indicates the acceptance of influence that is in an agreement with the individual's values and allows for maintenance of the personal value structure. These three processes of social influence (Bearden and Etzel 1982, Kelman 2006) reflect the different ways that people accept social influence and relate to the social system in which they operate, and provide a valuable model for investigating how students may be susceptible to social influence during the processes of HE choice.

2.6. Conceptual framework

The theoretical discussion of student choice of HEI found in the scholarly literature on the topic appears to be insufficient to explain the impact of social influence on choice decisions. Numerous studies identify social factors that impact students during all three stages of the choice process but, with the possible exception of the predisposition stage, mostly fail to examine how these forces exert influence. Thus, this research introduces an integrative theoretical framework composed of three theoretical perspectives: (1) tripartite model of higher education student choice (Hossler and Gallagher 1987), (2) goals of accuracy, affiliation and maintaining a positive self-concept that underlie the acceptance of influence (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), and (3) the processes of compliance, internalisation and identification through which the influence is accepted (Bearden and Etzel 1982, Bearden et al. 1989, Kelman 1961, Kelman 2006).

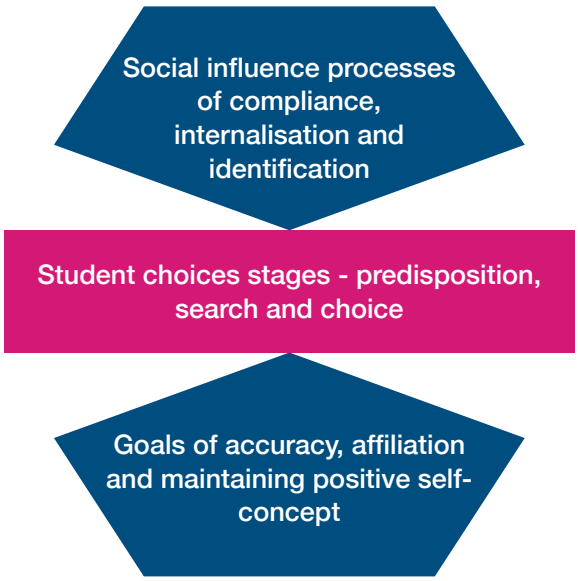


Figure 2. Conceptual framework diagram

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is comprehensive, based on the most important aspects of previous combined models, and provides an excellent overview of processes that students pass through prior to the enrolment in the HEI of choice. Since its development, the model has provided the theoretical background for numerous studies that

investigated HEI choice. While the model consists of three processes including predisposition, search and choice, the research will focus on the last two phases as the predisposition stage is concerned predominantly with the decision to pursue higher education rather than the choice of a specific institution that is the focal point of the study. It also must be noted that the phases of search and choice that are of particular interest in the context of this study are considered predominantly regarding the economic determinants of student choice. Subsequently, it is important to examine the factors that guide students during these stages through the adoption of the broader perspective that focuses on the social factors that influence student choice.

The three goals that underpin the acceptance of social influence (accuracy, affiliation and maintaining a positive self-concept) are identified by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) and provide a valuable framework for the investigation of motivations that drive behaviour through processes of compliance (specific response to a specific request) and conformity (changing behaviour to match responses of others). Behaviour and opinions of peers have been previously identified as having a strong influence on students (Castleman and Page 2013, Page and Castleman 2013), especially in the context of shifting perceptions of social norms.

The three processes that allow for the identification of effects of social influence are defined by Herbert Kelman (1961, 2006) and include compliance, identification and internalisation. The inclusion of Kelman's (1961, 2006) perspective is important as it allows for distinguishing between the effects of social influence that are oriented towards external rewards, either in terms of social impact (compliance), or the development, or maintenance, of desired relationships (identification); and intrinsic rewards (internalisation). Together, the framework allows for the investigation and identification of social influence related determinants of student choice and, further, for the investigation of the impact these factors have on the higher education institution's choice.

2.7. Summary

HE choice literature addresses the processes of choice and various factors that influence students during these processes; however, it examines neither the forms of these influences take nor the reasons students accept these influences. The literature implies the existence of numerous influences on a student's choice of HEI and the relationship between these influences, students, students' social surroundings, and various organisational factors. While there are some variances between different HEI choice models, these models' underlying structure tends to be consistent. This consistency allows for the strong base to introduce the social influence conceptual lens to investigate the effects of these forces on student choice.

Investigating influences on student choice has been addressed in previous studies; however, this research introduces a novel perspective to this issue with the introduction of the social influence focus. Additionally, through the adoption of the qualitative research design, this phenomenological study allows for a richer inquiry, which aims to extend beyond just recognising the existence of the influencing factors and explores their effect on student choice decisions.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

> *I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them.* James P. Spradley (1979)

The previous chapter presented a detailed review of the literature on student choice of higher education institution, determinants of choice and social influence. This chapter addresses methodological issues that underpin research in this domain. Specifically, this chapter will explain the adoption of qualitative methodology, the interpretive paradigm, and the phenomenological inquiry framework, for the research. Subsequently, the chapter discusses the use of in-depth interviews as a methodological tool.

3.1. Methodological considerations

The research adopts a qualitative methodology as it is best suited to the investigation of participants' experiences, emotions and perceptions. The methodology was selected to address the limitations of current research on the topic of social determinants in student choice of HEI. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) conducted a systematic review of recent literature on student choice of higher education and found that 78% of 75 papers reviewed applied either quantitative methodologies or analysed secondary data. Only ten research studies adopted qualitative methods that focus either on ethnicity or specific racial criteria (Gatfield and Chen 2006, Griffin, Del Pilar, McIntosh and Griffin 2012, Maringe and Carter 2007, Oplatka and Tevel 2006, Pasternak 2005, Pyvis and Chapman 2007), non-traditional entry age (Baker and Brown 2007), or issues external to HEI choice (Brooks and Waters 2009, Hemsley-Brown 2012). As discussed in the previous chapter, a vast body of literature identified a plethora of factors that impact student choice. Various authors offer somewhat different views regarding the importance of these factors in the

choice processes; however, very few endeavour to explore the choice determinants, including social pressures, and why and how they impact the final choice.

Young people operate in an increasingly complex social environment, that exerts immense pressures on their everyday decisions (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, Komarova Loureiro and Solnet 2013). This research focuses specifically on the investigation of these social influences regarding their effect on student choice of HEI. Social influence is understood as a relationship between an individual and the greater social environment and, as such, requires an approach that facilitates an investigation of these complex interactions. Much of the present discourse on HEI's student choice tend to focus on processes and choice factors underpinning these processes. The literature implies a range of external pressures but overlooks the depth of social interactions that might shape the final student choice. In response, the study moves the focus from the identification of social influence factors to the synergy between these factors and student decision of selecting a specific higher education institution. Being guided by this focal point of the project, the research is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and, in accordance with the phenomenological inquiry, provides an emphasis on participants' experience. The adopted approach is discussed further in the remainder of this chapter.

3.2. Qualitative Approach

The quantitative and qualitative methods are both broadly used in the social sciences. While the adoption of the quantitative approach in the context of human experiences, perceptions and emotions, may help with questions related to the existence of specific issues or phenomenon, or the frequency with which the event occurs, the qualitative methods are particularly suitable when the research centres around the depth and quality of human experiences. Page and Meyer (1999) hold that the intensity of the focus on people is directly proportional to how qualitative the research is.

As much as the contribution of the quantitative enquiry is undisputed, it is the qualitative research that extends beyond documenting the event or experience under investigation and seeks to understand the cognitions and feelings that comprise the phenomena examined. Consequently, at the core of the qualitative approach is the emphasis on feeling and words. However, there is another aspect of the qualitative research that was brought to researcher's attention recently by the work of Michael Patton (2015, p.3) who stated that "qualitative inquiry is personal". It is this argument that transfers the researcher from the external position to an inherent part of the inquiry. Patton's (2015) perspective proposes that the researcher's personal characteristics not only underpin the credibility of the research but also impact on the interpretation of results.

Different types of research questions require the methodology to be adapted to suit the specific questions, and different research inquiry requires careful selection of suitable research tools. Methodological considerations should be addressed within the context of a specific research project. Five seminal works on models of student choice, Chapman (1981), Jackson (1982), Hanson and Litten (1982), Litten (1982) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987), reviewed in the previous chapter, focus on the identification of determinants that impact on various choice phases. Similar approaches are also dominant in the work of other authors writing on the topic. Previous, quantitative and qualitative research on the topic of student choice of HEI identifies a wide variety of social influence related factors that affect that choice. However, limited attention is given to understand the impact of social influence on HEI's choice or why these pressures are accepted in this context.

Among various methods available to the researcher, qualitative, informal and in-depth interviews are most likely to provide the best opportunities for the study of these areas. Contrary to quantitative methods that require greater sample sizes, qualitative research predominantly involves an in-depth investigation of a smaller number of participants that allows for capturing participants' stories and exploring the richness of *their* encounter with the phenomena under investigation (Patton 2015,

Deshpande 1983). It is this intensity of the data that is crucial to justify the suitability of the qualitative method to this research project. Social influence is a complex phenomenon, and so is student choice. The qualitative method, and especially the phenomenological framework operating within the interpretative paradigm, is highly appropriate as it offers the means to record the lived experience, which is defined by Patton (2015, p.115) as "experience as we live through it and recognise it as a particular type of experience".

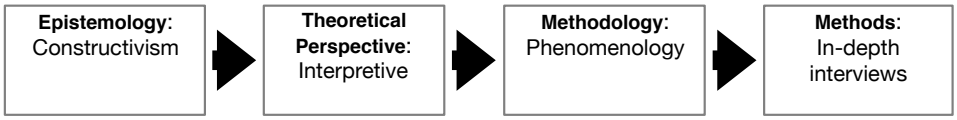
3.3. The Research Paradigm

The main epistemological positions are objectivism, subjectivism and constructivism (Crotty 1998). Objectivism posits that truth and meaning can only be achieved through scientific examination of *things* that themselves exist “independently of consciousness and experience” (Crotty 1998, p.6). Schwandt defines subjectivism as “feelings, attitudes, and beliefs, or that whatever one claims to be the case is nothing but a matter of personal opinion or taste” (Schwandt 1997, p.148), and has a strong focus on the construction and interpretation of social reality. Therefore, the key difference between objectivism and subjectivism is in the way that the existence of phenomena is proposed: in its own right in the case of objectivism, or as a creation of one’s mind for subjectivism.

Constructivism, which is the epistemological viewpoint this research adopts, has its focus on social processes and interactions (Schwandt 1997). Constructivists, rejecting realism and objectivity, hold that knowledge of the world is not a reflection of what exists, but “what we make of what is there” (Schwandt 1997, p.20), and the same accept multiple realities. The terminology of *constructivism* and *social constructionism* are frequently used concurrently; however, some authors make distinctions between them. Crotty (1998) reserves the term *constructivism* to describe epistemological position, while *social constructionism* is used in the context of the inquiry framework. This position is adopted for the purpose of this study. Figure 2 describes the interrelationship between the epistemological view, theoretical

perspective, methodology, and the methods that underpin the research. These are discussed further in the next sections.

Figure 2. Theoretical framework for the study (adopted from Crotty, 1998)



3.3.1. Constructivism

The origins of constructivism are set in the dissatisfaction with objectivist epistemology and positivism and, consequently, contrasting the notions that are behind these respective positions (Crotty 1998). While objectivism is underpinned by the concept of objective truth and the meaning is independent of consciousness, constructivism conversely proposes a concept of knowledge that does not, and cannot, exist outside of one's mind. Consequently, the concept of truth is deemed non-absolute and knowledge is constructed by individuals making sense of the world, based on their past experiences (Crotty 1998).

The core principles of constructivism are meaning-making and knowledge construction. As individuals operate in the social context, these processes (meaning-making and knowledge construction) are likely to consist of a complex interplay between new and existing experiences and beliefs within relationships to the external world. The adoption of the constructivist epistemology is suitable regarding interpretive theoretical perspectives, which allows for the extension of that world view throughout the study, and appropriate for a research project focused strongly on individuals constructing their understanding of social pressures regarding the choice of university.

The last years of secondary education, up to the commencement of the tertiary education are, undoubtedly, a period of emotional and intellectual turbulence for students. The decisions that were, up to that time, made predominantly by parents or guardians are no longer so. However, it is unreasonable to suspect that parental influences vanish

entirely in the short transition time. Concurrently, pressures from extended social networks that affect young people are also likely to impact major life decisions, such as the choice of the HE institution. The investigation of these complex influencers is well positioned within the epistemology of constructivism.

3.3.2. Interpretive Paradigm

As much as the previous discussion on constructivism provided an overall view of the world that the study adopts, this section is dedicated to the theoretical perspective that carries that view throughout the research process. This research is concerned with the complex interplay of social issues and requires a flexible theoretical perspective to enable meanings to emerge. The interpretive paradigm assumes that people construct their own realities as they engage with the environment they are interpreting, and make sense of the world based on their social perspective and past experiences which shapes that interpretation (Crotty 1998).

Subsequently, the paradigm posits that meaning and, by the extension, reality, is a function of how individuals interpret the world and, as such, not independent from consciousness. The origins of the interpretive paradigm are focused on the attempt to, contrary to positivism that centres on natural science and detached observation, understand and explain individuals within the social context they operate in.

Crotty (1998) attributes the birth of the interpretive paradigm to work of William Dilthey who, at the beginning of 20th century, proposed that the natural and social realities are in fact very different types of reality, which require different methods to investigate. This study focusses on effects of social influence on individuals in the context of student choice of HEI and, by its very nature, is concerned with the behaviour of actors (current and prospective students), as it is these actors that are subject to social pressures and make decisions that may be affected by these pressures.

The core objective of this research is to generate insights, interpretations

and meanings that explain *how* and *why* students accept social influences in the process of selecting their HE institution. The interpretive paradigm that emphasises social reality and complex social processes that shape this reality appears to be ideally suited for that purpose. Further, it allows for these insights, interpretations and meanings to occur from the viewpoint of those directly affected and involved.

Subsequently, the researcher's role in this study is not to measure or quantify student behaviour nor provide a causal rationale for that behaviour. Instead, the focus is on the *how* and *why* of this social phenomenon in the specific context this study operates in. Indeed, it is the interpretation of social interactions, thought processes, feelings and emotions, that is essential to understanding students' motivations and their acceptance of external social pressures. These phenomena are difficult to understand through quantitative methods. Therefore, interpretivism and phenomenological methodology, operating within the qualitative research approach, go hand in hand to achieve the goals this research sets forth.

3.3.3. Phenomenological methodology

Phenomenology has its origins in the work of Edmund Husserl (1970, 2012) who rejects the proposition that "objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable" (Groenewald 2004, p.43) and argues that the only certainty about the objects results from how these objects present themselves to people's consciousness. However, to arrive at the point of this personal consciousness, anything that is external to the investigated phenomena must be ignored. Creswell (2013) defines phenomenology as a philosophical approach that allows us to study a specific experience in order to make meaning out of people relationships to the world and their experiences and, further, to represent the essence of that experience. Crotty (1996) introduces a concept of 'new phenomenology' with its core focus on meanings of the particular experience assigned to that experienced by those experiencing it. It is that exact proposition that

highlights the suitability of phenomenological methodology to investigate the perceived experiences of first-year university students to clarify what social influences were yielding the most significant force in their choice of the higher education institution.

While the phenomenology may not be a specific method but rather an approach (Willis 2004), the literature identifies two broad types of phenomenology: (1) phenomenology and (2) hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty 2003) or heuristic inquiry (Patton 2015). While the terminology used by the authors differs, they agree in terms of the characteristics of each of these two types. However, in order to avoid confusion, this research adopts predominantly Patton's perspective.

Both phenomenology and heuristic inquiry share the common emphasis on meaning, and the aim to uncover human experiences as they are lived; however, there are some distinct differences between these two methodologies, with the core variance being the role of the researcher. The phenomenological approach is predominantly descriptive and "focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton 2015, p.117). Researcher experience is bracketed, and the findings are described and not interpreted.

Conversely, heuristic inquiry requires the researcher to have an intense personal experience with the phenomenon that is being investigated. Furthermore, in the researcher's opinion, it is that very requirement that precludes this study from adopting the heuristic inquiry methodology. The age gap between the researcher and the study participants does not allow for full transferability of experiences, nor does it allow for a thorough understanding of social pressures that presently affect young people. Consequently, the researcher cannot adopt the *insider* position that heuristic inquiry commends. Therefore, this research adopts the phenomenological approach that aligns with the purpose of this study.

Phenomenology is frequently employed in research projects that lack extensive existing research and which focus on participants with similar experiences of the same phenomenon (Creswell 2013). Further, phenomenology is considered to be highly suited to studies that seek understanding of experiences "to develop practices or policies" (Creswell 2013, p.81). Phenomenology as a methodology provides an appropriate framework to gain an understanding of individuals' lived experiences and to describe the experiences (Moustakas 1994). Indeed, the focal point of phenomenological research is the common meaning of a specific phenomenon to a group of people who experienced that phenomenon (Moustakas 1994).

Subsequently, to understand how social context influences student choice, this study broadly adopts a phenomenological methodology. The methodology is underpinned by three philosophical assumptions: (1) the research focus is on lived experiences, (2) these lived experiences are conscious experiences, and (3) the adopted approach describes and interprets these experiences (Patton 2015, Van Manen 1984, 2007).

Phenomenology attempts to understand an individual's relationship to the world, and the ultimate purpose of this type of research study is to uncover the *essence* or the very nature about a specific phenomenon. The essence that is at the core of the phenomena under investigation is described as the lived meaning of the experience or experiences, which is unwrapped through a rigorous process of reflection and searching for understanding (Van Manen 1984). Patton (2015) posits that these "essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced" (p. 116). This study aims to understand young people's experiences with social pressures in the context of their choice of HE institution. Therefore, the use of phenomenology is appropriate as it provides a suitable avenue to hear the voices of participants regarding their lived experience.

3.3.3.1. Lived experience

> *Lived experience is simply experience-as-we-live-through-it in our actions, relations and situations*
> (Van Manen 2007)

The concept of lived experience is likely to be at the basis of many qualitative approaches; however, it is of particular importance in the context of phenomenology. Van Manen (1990) posits that lived experience is not only the starting point of phenomenological study but, indeed, the endpoint. The sheer goal of phenomenological research is to provide an expression of the lived experience that is simultaneously "reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (Van Manen 1990, p.36). The phenomenological inquiry is centred around investigating how individuals experience the world and, in the case of this research, how they experience social influences when choosing HE institutions as they *live through this experience*. Therefore, it is the phenomena of the lived experience of social pressures affecting their (student) choice that is the core of this investigation.

3.3.3.2. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction

Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) drawing on Moustakas's phenomenology procedures (1994) propose a series of steps necessary to analyse phenomenological data: identifying the phenomenon, describing researcher's experiences with that phenomenon, identifying and clustering significant statements from participants into themes, combining the themes into descriptions of the experiences, and, finally, developing a description of the meanings of these experiences. The step of detecting, describing and setting aside the researcher's previous experiences with the phenomenon under investigation is called epoché or bracketing. Polkinghorne (1989b) identifies epoché as the first step in the process of understanding 'the things themselves' and rejecting any prejudgements. This position is in agreement with the original meaning of the word 'epoché' that coming from the Greek may be defined as precisely that - refraining from judgement (Moustakas 1994).

Epoché or bracketing the researcher's prior knowledge or assumptions regarding the SI phenomenon goes towards adopting the phenomenological reduction as proposed by Husserl (1970). Husserl (1970) states that to uncover the essence of the phenomenon under investigation the researcher should reject assumptions and existing perspectives and, by doing so, understand the phenomenon in a way that is unencumbered by prior beliefs and inferences. It is only after the past knowledge associated with the phenomena is put aside, that the phenomena may present itself in a true form as described by participants (Giorgi 1997, Parse 2001).

Moustakas (1994), drawing on Husserl, further enhances the phenomenological reduction with the process of 'free imaginative variation' that aims "to grasp the structural essences of experience" (p.10). Van Manen (1990) defines the process of free imaginative variation as an endeavour to uncover the specific qualities that makes the phenomena what it is. Moustakas (1994) proposes that utilising the imagination and approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives may identify the essential rather than perfunctory characteristics of that phenomena. Therefore, the free imaginative variation is dependent upon the researcher's ability to apply these perspectives and extract themes that are critical to the phenomena of SI and integral to its essence (Polkinghorne 1989a).

Gearing (2004) identifies three stages of bracketing (abstract formulation, research praxis, and reintegration) and six distinct types: ideal (philosophic) bracketing, descriptive (eidetic) bracketing, existential bracketing, analytical bracketing, reflexive (cultural) bracketing, and pragmatic bracketing (see Table 7).

Table 7. Types of Bracketing

	Ideal Bracketing	Descriptive Bracketing	Existential Bracketing	Analytic Bracketing	Reflexive (Cultural) Bracketing)	Pragmatic Bracketing
Abstract formulation	Positivism	Postpositivism Interpretative	Interpreta-tive Critical	Empiricism	Constructivism Postmodernism	Variety
Orientation standpoint	Realism	Critical realism Relativism	Critical relativism	Relativism, constructi-vism	Relativism	Range of qualitative theories
Theoretical framework	Descriptive phenome-nology	Descriptive phenomenology Qualitative theories	Existential phenome-nology	Ethnography Qualitative theories Grounded theory	Phenomenology Hermeneutics	Qualitative theories
Foundational focus	Researcher sets aside supposition Focuses in on immediate and universal	Researchers sets aside suppositions Focuses in on immediate	Researcher sets aside suppositions	Researcher sets aside some suppositions	Researcher sets aside some suppositions	Loosely defined, subject to interpretation
Researcher supposition	All held in abeyance	Most held in abeyance	Impossible to set all aside Some theories set aside	Most personal assumptions but not theoretical orientation set aside	Values, culture and judgements identified and made transparent	Defined by researcher
Phenomenon supposition	All held in abeyance	Most held in abeyance	Impossible to set aside	Some (culture, institutions) set aside	Impossible to set aside	Defined by researcher
Temporal structure	Begins with investiga-tion of phenome-non Ends when pure description is attained	Begins and ends around specific phenomenon	Varied Bracketing established mainly to set aside theories	Unstructured Pocess repeated as required	Begins and ends during preparation May return during analysis	Defined by researcher

Based on Gearing (2004)

This research adopts reflexive bracketing as most suited to the theoretical framework and epistemological position. Reflexive bracketing acknowledges that the comprehensive bracketing of external (phenomenon) suppositions is unattainable due to the context in which the phenomena exists and which is essential to that phenomena, and establishes its focal point on the identification and transparency of the researcher's background, values, beliefs and presumptions (Gearing 2004). Adoption of this type of bracketing does not suggest the total and complete removal of existing assumptions, but simply an endeavour to critically analyse these assumptions, reduce the influence of researcher's past experiences on the phenomena and, consequently,

positively contribute towards robustness of findings (Giorgi 1997, Kvale 2008). The bracketed ideas and feelings are ‘unbracketed’ during the stage of reintegration that involves an interpretation of the data and where their impact on the research as a whole is minimised (Gearing 2004).

3.3.3.3. The Researcher

Reflexive bracketing and self-reflection are important elements of the interpretive, constructivist paradigm in which this research is positioned (Gearing 2004, Grbich 2004, Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2011). A short reflexive piece identifies and explains my background and past experiences with the phenomena of social influence and, especially, my experiences with this phenomenon in the context of student choice of higher education institutions.

I left Poland after high school when communism was in full bloom, and anything remotely connected to the West was a subject of our dreams and everyday desires. I arrived in Australia two years later, after a period of in-between uncertainties. My earliest memories of the new life in Australia are those of not belonging, of wanting to be a part of the society that was all around me but, at the same time, very much unreachable. I resisted the temptation to restrict my social circle to other Polish migrants for a fear of repeating the pattern of cultural isolation so prevalent among post-war migration. The constant desire to belong, to be a part of Australia, to contribute, to be ‘as they are’ have a constant place in my memory.

Among the chaos of my early years in Australia, among an array of casual jobs to support myself and a very young child, learning English and simply finding my place in the country that challenged me in so many ways, I always knew that eventually, I needed to go to university. I grew up in a family of formally educated parents, and grandparents and higher education was not only a priority but a natural path to be taken. My early memories were those of my Grandfather’s students visiting our family home and long discussions on subjects that sounded so important to me back then. A year after my arrival to Australia, I commenced my tertiary

education, selecting a course based purely on relaxed English fluency requirements. Many years later, as a mother of two daughters, I was involved in the process of them selecting the higher education institutions for very different reasons.

My interest in social influence and its effect on consumer choices stems from over twenty years managing marketing activities for one of the Victorian high arts organisations. My interest in investigating the social influence effect on the higher education institution choice processes originates from witnessing my husband, daughters and a broader network of friends and acquaintances enduring a complex journey from the desire to pursue post-secondary education to the final enrolment. Witnessing and participating in lengthy discussions and deliberations centred around different courses, different options, and different universities made me aware of the vast assemblage of influences that impacted the HEI choices. The four of us, my husband, my daughters and I, approached these choices in a very different way. This is not to say that some aspects did not remain constant but rather that for each of us 'different things mattered'.

My doctoral research topic of investigating the effects of social influence on student choice of HEI has been influenced by my own experiences as a marketer, mother, wife and student. But how have these experiences impacted on my role in this phenomenological research project? It would be reasonable to expect that my personal history, professional knowledge of social influence in the context of consumer behaviour, and private experiences with choice processes of HEI would shape my research in some way. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) posit that the research is indeed greatly influenced not only by researcher's experiences but also by background characteristics including social class and ethnicity. I embraced several measures in order to minimise that influence. When conducting interviews, I have adopted the attitude proposed by Giorgi (1985, 1997), bracketed my prior theoretical and practical knowledge of the social influence and student choice processes, and refrained from acknowledging the existence of the SI phenomena purely as it presented

itself to me. In other words, I took the phenomena “out of the world where it occurs” (Patton 2015 p.575) and kept it to scrutiny free from any preconceptions and judgements. I did not try to interpret it or assign any meanings that may present to me as a result of my experiences or existing literature. I listened and recorded the phenomena as the participants re-lived their experiences during the in-depth interviews.

3.3.4. Methods

I adopted in-depth interviews as they are highly suited in the context of the phenomenological study. The interviews facilitated the investigation of the function of social determinants in the student decision-making process and understanding of the effect of these determinants on student choice. Further, the interviews allowed for exploration of issues that some participants may perceive as somewhat sensitive (e.g., parental education level) and may not feel comfortable to share in front of others (Burgess 2010).

Employing this method allowed participants to respond in accordance with their own systems of relevance to the greatest possible extent (Hollstein 2011). The one-on-one interviews were conducted face-to-face to allow for a greater understanding of the function of the social influence choice factors in student decision-making processes and evaluate the weighting of these factors on student choice. Patton (2015) views interviewing in terms of a relationship between the researcher and study participants and highlights the importance of the key skills that impact on the quality of the interviewing. These skills are open-ended questions that are clear, relevant and meaningful, and which facilitate thoughtful responses; ability to listen and observe; appropriate, clarifying probes; ability to guide the interviewee through the interview process and flexibility and responsiveness to meet the unexpected; being empathic while remaining neutral and remaining attentive and interested throughout the interview process.

The questions that guided the interviews were preamble by a short

introduction that was carefully designed to create an atmosphere of openness and to communicate my non-judgemental interest in participants' stories. I have consciously made every effort to demonstrate both verbally and non-verbally my open-minded and non-critical attitude.

After each interview, I allowed for a period of reflection when I recorded my thoughts, perceptions and feelings that emerged during the interviews. These records also reflect the elements of the interviews that were non-verbal but which I considered equally important. The study participants frequently hesitated or paused before answering a specific question or appeared embarrassed about a specific aspect of the situation discussed. These pauses or nervous laughs offered greater insights and percipience into students' relationships with social pressures than just words alone.

3.3.4.1. Interview Protocol

To answer research questions, the participants were asked to reflect on their higher education institution choice processes from the two critical points in time: (1) at the time of making the initial decision to pursue post-secondary education, and (2) the last year of secondary education or the last year before making VTAC application. Within these points in time, I explored the significant sources of influence, gained understanding regarding the processes that each of the participants adopted regarding information sourcing, and investigated the meaning that individuals assigned to external pressures or influences. Subsequently, during the interview, I used a scale developed by Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) to inquire about participants' susceptibility to interpersonal influence across a range of general, significant and recent purchases. This final section of the interview protocol (Appendix D) allowed me to ascertain the similarities between importance assigned by participants to external sources of influence during the selection of the higher education institution versus general purchases they have made.

3.3.4.2. Participant selection

I have adopted a purposive sampling technique that is frequently used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants in accordance with their specific characteristics (Groenewald 2004, Guetterman 2015, Kalu 2017). This study's prime concern was to

gain a greater understanding of social influences that impact students' during the higher education institution choice processes. Therefore, I aimed to select participants that fulfilled specific criteria. Firstly, the selected participants were first-year, bachelor degree students at Victoria University. This requirement ensured that the experiences associated with the higher education institution choice processes were relatively recent and "fresh" in participants' minds. As I was investigating human perceptions and recollections of emotions that accompany a set of complex activities, this condition was considered to be of importance.

Further, the specific requirement for first-year students only, as opposed to a broader range of bachelor and postgraduate courses, lies in the specific context of the study and the student choice models that underpin the theoretical foundations for the study. The special interest of this research project was to uncover the social influences that affect student choice of higher education institution and which broadly include parental, peers and institutional (secondary school and higher education institution) factors. These factors are likely to have a much greater effect on undergraduate students who embark on their higher education either immediately or shortly after completing secondary education. Therefore, the choice determinants of the more likely, mature-age postgraduate students, may be different and are beyond the scope of this research.

Secondly, I accepted that there might be an additional range of practical factors that apply to international students studying at university. These factors may vary significantly between international students and may be related, but not limited, to entry and visa requirements specific to the student's country of origins, cost-related factors that may refer to both cost of the tuition and accommodation and living expenses, and academic entry requirements. Furthermore, Victoria University is one of the largest providers of Australian qualifications outside of Australia through international delivery partnerships. Such partnerships may have a strong influencing effect on regional students and result in their increased familiarity with Victoria University compared to other Victorian higher education institutions. This increased familiarity of international students

was considered by the researcher to have a negative impact on the research outcomes.

Thirdly, I acknowledged that there is a broad range of reasons for which students select specific higher education institution. Some of these reasons may be highly pragmatic. One of these practical grounds for which student may choose Victoria University is the broad availability of courses with low to medium ATAR entry scores that the University offers. Therefore, students who achieved results lower than anticipated during the last year of their higher education may have selected Victoria University predominantly because they could not gain entry into other institutions included in their choice set. To limit the impact of factors related to the low ATAR scores for some of the Victoria University courses, the participants were drawn only from courses with ATAR scores on par with other Victorian universities' equivalent courses (see Table 8).

Table 8. Selection of Victoria University courses with ATARs (2017) equivalent to courses at other Victorian universities[1]

	Victoria University	Deakin University	RMIT University	Swinburne University	Latrobe University	Australian Catholic University
Laws	80.05	92		93.10		80
Laws/Business	80.05	85-92		Approx. 93		Approx. 75
Laws/Arts	81.95	92.10		Approx. 93		75
Health Science - Paramedic	76.7					77.65
Communication	56.65	60		50.5-75		58.5
Psychology (Honors)	78.55	60.6 w/out honors	73.15	80.34	84	Approx. 60 w/out honors
Commerce (Applied Finance)/Laws	93.10	92.05		93	90	
Commerce (Applied Finance)	76.75	78	80.05		80.05	
Business (Management and Innovation)	60.65	65	68.20		Approx.50 -60	
Business (Marketing)	58.10	61.85	70.05	60	51.45	63.25
Education (Early Childhood/ Primary)	50.10	60.60		Approx. 60		Approx. 60
Building (Construction Management)	54.85	60.25	82 (honors)			
Biomedicine	82.7	76.40	Approx. 80			
Science (Biomedical Science)	62	60.10	Approx. 75		70.25	Approx. 60
Science (Biomedical and Exercise Science)	75.8	61.15-81.15	71.70			
Science (Osteopathy)	81.2		77.90			

[1]This research was conducted prior to Victoria University no ATAR policy for some courses

The participant selection procedure adopted is supported by literature on the subject (Goulding and Lee 2005, Groenewald 2004, Kalu 2017, Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Kalu (2017) posits that, as sampling in qualitative research plays an especially important role, the identification of individuals that can provide wide reaches of information is vital. Indeed, the very purpose of the phenomenological study is to obtain deep insights into a phenomenon under investigation, and the depth of these insights is highly dependent on the familiarity of the participants with this phenomenon. Further, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) propose that "the context affects the meaning of events" (p. 249). With this in mind, I have adopted the purposeful sampling technique where the participant selection was oriented towards those that fulfilled the three prerequisites defined by the researcher and described in more detail above: (1) recency of encounter with the phenomena under investigation that resulted in the recruitment of only the first-year undergraduate students; (2) geographical uniformity of the encounter with the phenomena that restricted the participants to local students only; and (3) limitation of extraordinary factors that led to the exclusion of participants from the courses other than those with the ATAR scores for the equivalent courses on par with other Victorian higher education institutions.

3.3.4.3. Locating participants

I selected participants immediately after receiving approval from the Victoria University Research Ethics Committee (HRE 16-246). After support was received from Victoria University, Dean of Students, I produced a printed and electronic version of the Student Recruitment Flyer (Appendix A) that I distributed to the course and unit coordinators of the selected courses. Introducing myself and the research project I asked for the distribution of the Student Recruitment Flyer, together with the Information to Participants Involved in Research (Appendix B) and the Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research (Appendix C), to students. Also, on the invitation of three of the unit coordinators, I introduced the project personally in the class and asked for volunteers to participate in the in-depth interviews.

While I did not provide any financial incentives to encourage student participation, I offered participants double movie tickets to compensate for their time. During the first three weeks of the participant recruitment, I was contacted by five students expressing their interest in participating in the research project. After the initial discussion with each of the students, I organised the interviews with four of them as the fifth student was identified as international and was excluded from the sample based on not fulfilling the criteria.

After coming to some impasse regarding recruiting further participants, I adopted a snowball sampling technique. Snowballing refers to a method of recruiting participants by asking those already participating to recommend others (Groenewald 2004). I provided each of the four students with copies of Student Recruitment Flyer and asked them to distribute it to their friends that may be interested in participating in the research project. By applying the snowballing technique, I recruited 11 further participants; however, two were excluded from the interview stage as they were identified to be international students.

In addition to the four students that expressed their interest in participation during the initial stage of participant recruitment, I conducted in-depth interviews with 13 students, including five females and eight males. These interviews are the primary units of data and analysis for this research project. Table 9 provides course and background information on each of the participants. In order to protect their privacy, each participant is assigned a randomly selected alias (randomlists.com). The participants represent five different courses also included in Table 9. The sample size of 13 participants was considered appropriate for the phenomenological study and in agreement with recommendations in literature (Charmaz 2006, Creswell 1998, Groenewald 2004, Patton 2015).

Table 9. Participants involved in research project

	Participant Alias	Participant Course	Participant background
1	Dean	Science (Osteopathy)	Australian born Completed his primary and secondary education in Victoria Enrolled in VU after completing two-year diploma at another Melbourne university
2	Nina	Business (Marketing)	Australian born No parents or siblings with tertiary education Enrolled in VU after a year break
3	Adam	Biomedicine	Born overseas Parents and other family members highly educated Completed the last couple of years of secondary school in Australia Planning to progress to medicine degree
4	Henry	Science (Osteopathy)	Born overseas Attended a selective entry secondary school Parents and siblings with tertiary education
5	Darren	Science (Osteopathy)	Family migrated from Asia Attended a selective entry secondary school
6	Mark	Biomedical and Exercise Science	Australian born Parent and uncle with tertiary education
7	George	Biomedical and Exercise Science	Australian born Sibling currently studying the same course
8	Tracy	Education	Australian born Briefly attended different university before moving to Victoria University
9	Paul	Education	Australian born Enrolled into university after couple of years in the workforce No parents or siblings with tertiary education
10	Kate	Business (Management)	Australian born Highly educated family Moved to Victoria University after semester at different HEI
11	Steph	Business (Management and Innovation)	Born overseas Family migrated to Australia during her primary school
12	Trish	Business (Marketing)	Born overseas Arrived in Australia during the last four years of secondary school
13	Jennifer	Science (Osteopathy)	Australian born Parents without tertiary education Attended selective entry secondary school

3.3.4.4. Data-gathering methods

Prior to the commencement of each interview, participants were provided with the Information to Participants Involved in Research and the Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research. The “Information to Participants Involved in Research” flyer provided a brief description of the research project, defined the nature of their participation, explained the potential risks and benefits of the research project participation and procedures undertaken to protect their confidentiality. The consent form was explained to participants at the beginning of each interview. All participants agreed with its content and signed the form. Through signing the Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research, I obtained their informed consent in the following areas:

- participation in the research project
- the voluntary nature of the participation
- the purpose of the research project
- acknowledgment of their prior access to the project details and the opportunity to question and clarify any areas of potential concern.

I also asked the participants for consent to voice record the interviews. All participants agreed to the voice recording. To maintain the informal and open atmosphere, I voice recorded the interviews using the iPhone. Immediately after each interview, the voice recording was transferred onto the secured drive and deleted from the iPhone.

As the main objective of phenomenological research is to interpret the human experience as it is lived by the person who experienced it (Patton 2015, Van Manen 1990, Van Manen 2007), I conducted the in-depth semi-structured interviews that were informal in nature and provided as little guidance as possible (Groenewald 2004). The duration of interviews and the order of questions asked varied between participants (Patton 2015) and ranged from 38 minutes to 70 minutes.

The specific phenomenon that is the core focus of my research is the effect of social influence on the choice processes leading to the selection of the higher education institution. My research questions were: (1) What is the impact of social influence on student HEI choice?; (2) What constitutes the social influence factors of student choice of HEI?; (3) How do social influence factors impact student choice of HEI?; and (4) Why do students rely on social influence in their choice of HEI? To answer these questions I asked a number of questions that required participants to reflect on their experiences with the phenomena from two points in time: the time when they first decided to pursue higher education on the completion of their secondary education, and the last year before the enrolment in their Victoria University course. The specific questions and the range of supporting questions that were asked as needed are included in Appendix D.

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted on Victoria University campuses in a selection of quiet and private spaces. During the interviews, my core focus was on creating an informal and relaxed atmosphere that was conducive to participants sharing their emotions and describing the lived experience of their encounters with the phenomena under investigation. I have consciously taken an open approach to ensure that participants used their own means to interpret the social context and assign meaning to their experiences as they were experiencing these themselves (Somekh and Lewin 2005). While to some degree the interviews I have conducted were a dialogue between myself and the participants, at the same time I have intentionally reduced my involvement in that dialogue to a minimum required to ask the questions and maintain the positive and open atmosphere that would allow for the essence of their experiences to emerge (Giorgi 2012, 2017).

3.3.4.5. Data

All interviews were transcribed from the voice recording soon after each interview was completed. This resulted in 142 pages of transcribed interviews. Also, I used two different additional data sources: (1) “notes to self” that are field notes that reflect a range of non-verbal data generated

by participants, and my observations, perceptions, feelings and thoughts both during the interviews and immediately after each of the interviews; and (2) “theoretical notes” that I made once I had a chance to properly reflect on each of the interviews, and which frequently included my attempt to derive meaning and link the content of the interview with the theoretical foundations of the study. Both sets of notes were dated and identified to correspond with each of the interviews conducted.

Once all the recorded interviews were transcribed by me and the transcripts imported into the NVivo software. To ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, the typed transcripts were compared with audio recordings.

The voice recordings and transcripts of the interviews were stored in accordance with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research on the secure central storage space (R-Drive) to which I was provided access by Victoria University.

3.3.4.6. Coding

Once the interviews audio recordings were transcribed and imported into NVivo, the data was broadly coded in accordance with the coding key that I developed. The coding key follows from my theoretical framework and is a logical extension of the interview protocol used in the in-depth interviews I conducted (Appendix D). During this process, the additional coding themes were derived as different concepts and categories emerged as students’ narrated their experiences (Parameswaran et al. 2019). As the transcripts of interviews did not include the non-verbal behaviours that were considered an important part of the participants’ stories, the data was appended with notes and observations taken during interviews or written immediately post each interview and imported into NVivo (Patton 2015).

3.3.4.7. Analysis

The phenomenon studied in this research project was the impact of social influence on students during the three phases of Hossler and Gallagher’s

(1987) college choice: predisposition, search, and choice. Subsequently, the data collected during the interviews, together with the researcher's own "field notes" and "theoretical notes", were analysed through each of these phases. The adoption of this approach allowed for the participant stories to evolve as they recall their journeys from early memories of wanting to pursue the post-secondary education up to the final enrolment in their chosen higher education institution.

3.4. Summary

This chapter discussed the choice of the methodology adopted and its suitability to the study. Consequently, the selection of participants and the approach taken when conducting interviews follows from this methodology.

The chapter also discussed the concept of reflexive bracketing as most suited to the theoretical framework and epistemological position adopted and, and in line with reflexive bracketing, introduced the researcher's past experiences and knowledge as relevant to the research study. Further, it provided a brief overview of participants and discussed an approach taken when conducting interviews.

The next three chapters represent the participants' own understanding and subjective meaning of their encounters with social influences throughout these journeys. In these chapters, the researcher seeks an understanding of participants' stories and to interpret the way in which they made sense of these encounters. It is also in these chapters that the previously bracketed ideas and feelings are "unbracketed' as the data was interpreted.

Chapter 4 - Phase 1 - Predisposition in HEI choice

> *I guess I always knew I will go to university… I don't know… isn't it what we should do? You know, I never really thought that I may not go.* Henry (VU student)

The previous chapter discussed methodological consideration for this research study and established the order in which the data is organised and discussed. This chapter will focus on the first phase of the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) student choice model, the predisposition to pursue higher education, and presents the major themes emerging from the interviews. The research participants were asked to reflect on the time they made the initial decision to pursue post-secondary education. Within this point in time, I enquired into the significant sources of influence and endeavoured to gain an understanding of the meaning that individuals assigned to these influences.

4.1. Predisposition phase of HEI choice

Predisposition is the first stage of the student choice model developed by Hossler and Galagher (1987) and adopted to form the theoretical foundation for this research. The predisposition stage is concerned with the development of educational aspirations to pursue the formal education post the completion of the secondary level. The predisposition stage culminates with students either commencing the higher education search or, alternatively, embarking on options other than higher education. This stage acknowledges the range of internal and external influences that impact young people as they consider their educational options. These influencing factors are identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) as affecting students at the individual level (e.g., socioeconomic status, student background characteristics, parents, peers, student involvement in a range of extra-curriculum activities), and institutional

level (e.g., high school activities, HEI communication).

Factors identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) as impacting on student choice during the predisposition stage are supported in literature on the topic. Several prominent authors in student choice research recognise student background (e.g., parental education and socioeconomic status), student personal attributes (e.g., academic abilities and self-image), and broader social context (extended family, peers, high school and HEI activities) as influencing the development of either educational or occupational aspirations (Hanson and Litten 1982, Litten 1982, Jackson 1982).

The following section focuses on student experiences during the predisposition stage, broadly adopting the Hossler and Gallagher's contextual lens. The questions that students were asked, and which pertain to the predisposition stage are:

- Could you tell me about the time when you decided to go to university?
    - When did you first start to think about it
    - Who did you talk to about it?
    - How did you go about seeking information about different universities and courses?

As the phenomenological approach adopted in this research is underpinned by the concept of lived experience, the fundamental objective was to provide an expression of this experience as students lived through it.

4.2. The Predisposition phase - student experiences

The participants were asked to reflect on their earliest memories of deciding to pursue post-secondary education. For some these memories were vague, some could not identify a specific point in time or a specific

action that initiated this decision, yet for others, the processes leading to the continuation of their education were organic and ingrained in their self. The following section presents the key areas identified by the participants regarding this phase of HEI choice.

4.2.1. Student background

Student background has been widely identified as having a strong influence on the development of predispositions to pursue post-secondary education. The specific areas of student background that were noted to exert the influence in this context are parental education, socio-economic status, student attributes and broader social context.

4.2.1.1. Parental education

Parental education emerged throughout the initial stages of the interview for all participants. However, what differs is the way that this factor is presented by different students and the emotions that accompany the disclosing of this information. It is also of interest that while varied influence factors frequently overlap and re-appear throughout the interview, parental education remained restricted to the initial section of the interview and not re-introduced by participants again neither directly nor in different situational transformations.

Students whose parents completed formal post-secondary education appear to be less inhibited in the way that they discussed parental education and appear to volunteer more detailed information. Trish, when asked about her family educational circumstances, said:

> *My sister is studying here and my mother, she is a single mother, my father passed away 17 years ago. So. my mother came here…she came to Australia seven years ago to do her degree in PR and she sponsored all of us…me and my sisters. So, I have one sister that already finished her degree at Melbourne University and another one at Latrobe in Bundoora. And also, the sister that is studying at Victoria*

University. So, this is my family. … I also have my brother-in-law study here. My brother in law he came from China five years ago and he finished high school and now he studies here. Yes. He just finished his Masters in Accounting. And my sister studied science and psychology.

Similarly, Kate also volunteered an exhaustive amount of information on the topic:

So, my sisters - they are all at uni too. Actually, they mostly already completed their uni courses. So, one completed law at RMIT and other is bio- medical… And my other sister is still doing, I think it is her last year, she is doing commerce and science at Monash. We all think that university is very important. …. And my parents as well. So, my dad, he is Australian, and he finished psychology and commerce and my mum also, she did, my mum did business here, she did actually business degree at Victoria University.

Conversely, those participants whose parents achieved lower education levels frequently treated the inquiry about parental education very briefly. Adam, whose parents arrived in Australia as refugees simply said:

No, they don't. My siblings do, though.

However, some of the participants with parents without formal tertiary education offered a more elaborate explanation. Dean, when asked about his background, said:

So, both my parents dropped out of high school and they went straight to the workforce and stuff like that. But I think these were different times and maybe they did not have the same opportunities. I don't know. My Dad started his own business when he was young, and he is still kind of doing that. We don't have many people in our family that went to university. But

> *they sent me and my two sisters to private schools and stuff so we could do the best we could. My oldest sister is a nurse so she completed a three-year bachelor and also a postgraduate.*

It is not only the openness with which students discussed their parents' educational achievements that vary between participants. It emerged that students of parents with formal post-secondary education more frequently discussed their own plans to pursue tertiary education with them and other family members. This is not surprising. The literature on student choice has identified a relationship between parental education levels and the influence that this group yields on the predisposition stage of decision making (Bouse and Hossler 1991, Cabrera and La Nasa 2000, Galotti and Mark 1994, Litten 1982). Galloti and Mark (1994) propose that the reason highly educated parents had greater influence may stem from the greater student reliance on them as reliable sources of the "first-hand" information. Another perspective is offered by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), who link this phenomenon to shared family values.

Social influence theory also supports these findings. The immediate family forms students' basic reference group to which they belong and which may influence their behaviour by either by either contributing to the development of an aspiration to pursue further education or by defining a standard of behaviour and establishing a frame of reference (Schiffman and Kanuk 2007). Parents with higher education themselves are likely to contribute to the environment where continuing post-secondary education is a natural, commonly understood progression. This could further explain that students in this group frequently mentioned discussing with their parents, and other immediate family members, different HE courses rather than merely deciding to continue their education.

The influence of these reference groups is also in agreement with utilitarian, value expressive and informational influence (Mourali et al. 2005) operating through, respectively, processes of compliance, identification and internalisation (Kelman 2006). It is likely that these students adhere to their parents' expressed or perceived expectations or

match their behaviour (pursuing post-secondary education) with that of their immediate family members. Further, the induced response (continuing the education) confirms the applicability of Kelman's (2006) processes through complying with accepted family norms (compliance), acknowledging the benefits derived from tertiary education (identification), and incorporating these benefits into an internal value system (internalisation). The behaviour that may have been accepted initially to satisfy parental expectations is represented by these students as representative of their own code of behaviour. This process is illustrated through the following excerpts from student interviews:

> *So, we are all like very university focused and we like studying. We all think that university is very important.* Kate

> *I always wanted to go to university. To have a degree. It is a must. I al- ways knew that…In Malaysia having a degree is a must. If you don't have a degree you are nobody, you have no value.* Trish

> *I guess I always knew I will go to university… I don't know… isn't it what we should do? You know, I never really thought that I may not go.* Henry

4.2.1.2. Socioeconomic status

The enquiry about the socioeconomic status of participants did not form a part of the interview protocol. The decision was taken consciously for two specific reasons.

First of all, Victoria University traces its origins 100 years to Footscray Technical School established in the western, considered a disadvantaged area of Melbourne to provide technical education that is "focused on transforming our students and our communities" (Victoria University 2019, p. 8). While the economy of Melbourne's west is on the rise, the three core geographic areas of disadvantage (Hobsons Bay, Brimbank and Maribyrnong) are found in the west with scores lower than 970 on the

Index of Disadvantage (1000 represents the Australian average) (Branch 2009). Currently, over 50% of the University's domestic students reside in the west, and the University's vision remains to be "open and excellent, creating exceptional value for any student from any background and uplifting the communities in which we operate" (Victoria University 2019, p.11).

In this context, the questions related to the socio-economic factors may be perceived as unnecessarily probing into somewhat sensitive areas. The researcher's aim was to create an atmosphere of trust and openness conducive to participants sharing their own stories as they recalled the lived experiences. In order to do so, the researcher attempted to remove from the interview protocol any points of discussion that are not directly relevant to the phenomena under investigation, and that may contribute to the participants' discomfort.

Secondly, the Australian Commonwealth government provides funding for domestic students who are only required to pay part of the tuition fees. Commonwealth supported places are available at all public universities, and the funding is paid directly to the university. The majority of Australian undergraduate students are covered under this government funding. For government-supported students, the student contribution may be deferred through the Higher Education Loan Programme. The loan repayments commence once the student's taxable income exceeds the repayment threshold ($45,880 for 2019-2020 financial year). While there is no interest charged, the loans are subject to indexation in accordance with Customer Price Index. The repayment rate is dependent on the income and increases proportionally to income increases. The minimum repayment is 1% once the threshold of $45,881 is reached, and the maximum repayment is 10% after the taxable income exceeds $134,573. Both figures, the threshold and the top income bracket, are readjusted each year by the Australian Taxation Office (Study Assist 2020).

Consequently, the financial burden on Australian domestic students is much lesser, and the socio-economic factors are likely to play a much lesser role than in those countries that do not offer such financial support. However,

some socio-economic factors pertaining to the choice of specific universities emerged in the interviews and will be discussed in the following chapters as the stages of search and choice in decision making are addressed.

4.2.2. Student personal attributes

Student personal attributes are predominantly concerned with their academic abilities and self-image. In order to avoid asking questions that may be overly sensitive for some participants and could negatively affect the open and uninhibited atmosphere of the interviews that the researcher was trying to achieve, the participants were not asked directly about either their academic abilities or self-image. The issues of self- image was previously addressed in research conducted by Hanson and Litten (1982) and it was shown to be influential predominantly in the development of aspirations to pursue post-secondary education.

Consequently, it was considered by the researcher as not directly related to the core phenomena under investigation as the research is predominantly concerned with stages of search and choice, and students' personal attributes are found to yield specific importance during the predisposition phase. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) approach to student choice, which this research broadly adopts, relies heavily on student background characteristics. These background characteristics, or social capital, include, among academic capabilities and self-image, parental education, socioeconomic status, and attitudes towards educational pursuits that exist in the student's family. It is important to note that the term "social capital" is used in this context in the broadest sense and, rather than relying on any specific definition, it merely represents the immediate social conditions or social setting that may impact the student during the choice processes.

Academic abilities are another set of characteristics that was purposefully omitted from the interviews. The participants were sought from courses with ATAR scores on par with similar courses at other universities in Victoria. In order to gain admission to the course in which the participants

were enrolled at the time of the interview, they needed to achieve a specific ATAR score that, in turn, is a reflection of their academic aptitude. While their perceptions of their academic abilities may differ from the results achieved, this was considered not to have a significant bearing on HEI's choice as the only admission criteria were the ATAR score achieved.

While students were not directly asked to reflect on their academic abilities or self-image, some information regarding those characteristics was volunteered; however, predominantly in the context of deciding on a specific field of study rather than pursuing post-secondary education. These student reflections will be discussed in the following chapter.

4.2.3. Broader social context

Broader social context forms a part of social capital or social settings in which the student operates as discussed in the previous section. The social context includes not only student immediate and extended family and peers, but also a range of characteristics related to the high school that the student attended and, further, some of the HEI activities that yield an impact on the student during the development of predispositions to extend the educational pursuits past the secondary school. The impact that the social context exerted on participants will be discussed in the sections that follow.

4.2.3.1. Extended family

The definition of extended family varies greatly between participants and appears to be dependent on cultural background and individual family characteristics and may simply include parents and siblings or broader, multi-generational group of relatives. However, for most of the participants, when the family influences were noted regarding the development of a desire to continue the education, these appear to be concerned with parents, siblings and immediate family members.

Adam, when asked about the earliest memories of wanting to attend HEI,

said:

> *I actually wanted to be a doctor since I was a child, like really a child … all of my aunts are doctors so we just talked… I wanted to be one of them.*

Darren highlighted family expectations when he said:

> *It was set out for me at the start. It was my parents who expected it. That was something, it was expected of me that I would go to university.*

Similar family expectation was expressed even more strongly by Henry and Mark:

> *My parents started saying - You have to go to uni, We don't care, you must go to university.* Henry

> *It was always assumed I would move on to uni sort of thing…… parents were always keen on me going, so yeah it was just ... it was always in that kind of back of your mind assumed that you'd be going to university.* Mark

While there were no significant differences regarding exerted family pressures to pursue higher education between highly educated versus families with lower education attainments, only participants from the latter group conveyed the complete absence of any pressure in this context:

> *We don't have many people in our family that went to university. But they sent me and my two sisters to private schools and stuff so we could do the best we could but that was pretty much it.* Dean

However, even with the absence of direct family pressures, there appeared to be an indirect family influence on the participants. George said:

I always knew I was going to pursue uni, there was nothing really, I thought I'd do straight after school except for attending uni. So, I guess I would have been ... I always knew at a young age I was going to go to uni because I heard my parents and my older brother talking about it. So yeah, I can't pinpoint the exact moment, but I always assumed I was going to go to uni, yeah.

Parental inspirations, while not directly exerting pressures, are also present in recollections of Paul:

My parents as well so they're a big influence because they never really saw me go to university. They saw me go to tech, which is school but it's completely different. I think they really wanted me to go back to uni or go to uni and just make something better of myself really…… to be honest, I think because they didn't get the chance to…

Parental pressures and parental aspirations that influence this phase are closely linked with influences exerted by siblings in this context (Kim and Gasman 2011, Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2008). It may be only expected that older children in the family attending the post-secondary HEI are likely to yield an influence on their younger siblings either directly or indirectly. As discussed in the context of parental education, the student's family, and especially parents and siblings, form the most immediate reference group. In turn, this reference group is likely to influence further behaviour through establishing a point of reference or a standard of expected behaviour. Students observing the behaviour of their older, HEI attending siblings, accept those as expected norms. This form of influence is in accordance with social norms influence (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004) that proposes that in times of uncertainty we look at norms to "inform us about what is typically done" (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004, p.597). This point is illustrated by the following excerpts from the interviews with participants:

My sister was graduating from high school and we are only one year apart. So, she was thinking about what to do after

she graduates and which universities to go to and courses and all of these things and we are very close and stuff. She was thinking about different universities so Monash and Melbourne and all of the other random universities. So, I was like - oh my God I have to start thinking about my universities too. … All of my sisters are going to uni or went to uni and they were giving me really good positive conversations. Kate

George especially expressed a degree of surprise at the very thought of not going to university:

I always knew at a young age I was going to go to uni because I heard my parents and my older brother talking about it. So yeah, I can't pinpoint the exact moment, but I always assumed I was going to go to uni, yeah. George

The influence of extended family on student choice processes will be discussed further in the next chapters.

4.2.3.2. Peers

Peers and high school friends were not identified as a significant source of influence during the initial stage of predisposition. Only a few of the participants volunteered any information regarding this reference group in the context of making the decision to pursue post-secondary education. Adam asked if he discussed his plans to attend HEI with his friends said:

Just close friends. Close friends. Yeah.

Kate highlighted significant change that secondary school students go through in the last years prior to graduation and which may, to some extent, explain the lesser role of this reference group on student choices:

(W)e were like we will all go to the university together but then by year 10 and 11 we would all have different electives and we would have different aspirations.

One of the participants who came back to continue their tertiary education after a few years of working volunteered information suggesting that their peers indeed yield to some influence. Dean who came back to study at Victoria University after six years post completing secondary education, said:

> *Probably like maybe thirty percent of my friends that, friends from high school and stuff, that actually went to uni. A lot of them actually did trade work and stuff, you know. Working for parents and stuff like that. I have a lot of friends with parents that run some business or tradies so when they finish high school you know, they just started to work for their parents.*

This statement highlights the indirect influence exerted by his friends (reference group) not embarking on tertiary education immediately after finishing secondary school, and is reflective of his earlier comment justifying the delay in commencing his degree: “I guess I just wanted to do something and earn money and stuff. I didn’t think like what would be the best career for me.”

However, no pattern emerged that may suggest that peers yield stronger influence for those participants that initially decided not to pursue the HE than for those that did. Paul, similar to Dean, came back to study after eight years break, said this about his friends:

> *I'd say 100% of them progressed to uni but not everyone's continued on so a lot of them have dropped out from either first semester or first year and just realised it wasn't for them. They're just working at the moment. A handful of them have pursued uni and so they're the ones that's graduated or almost graduating now.*

Indeed, the role of peers cannot be dismissed; however, it appears that their influence is not overly strong during the predisposition stage. Further discussion regarding this group's influence will take place in the chapters dealing with phases of search and choice.

4.2.3.3. Secondary school and HEI activities

The secondary school's role regarding influence on student decision to pursue HE was not dominant in the participants' stories; however, it became apparent that this influence somewhat differs between different school types and participants' cultural backgrounds. Adam, whose family arrived in Australia late in his secondary education, indicated that the secondary school did not impact his decision. When asked why he simply said: "It is not in my culture". That opinion was shared by other participants that arrived in Australia in the last couple of years prior to the matriculation and for whom the influence during this phase of HEI choice was restricted to either immediate or extended family. However, even for those participants that were born in Australia, secondary school and HEI activities were restricted to identification of different courses and HEIs rather than simply continuing the post-secondary education. The only exception came from Darren who attended a selective entry boys school in Melbourne and who said:

> P*retty much every person in my school was going to university because it was a selective entry high school, so it's widely accepted that was the next logical step. To be honest, there wasn't a whole lot of choice there.*

As Darren was the only participant who attended this type of secondary school, it would be difficult to ascertain if this type of utilitarian influence forms a pattern for other students of selective entry schools. However, compliance with social norms, especially in the context of informational conformity is likely to result in the acceptance of the view expressed by the school and, subsequently, contribute to educational pursuits.

The influences of secondary school or HEI activities appear not to be significant in the context of the predisposition stage. These factors will be discussed further in the next two chapters in the context of Search and Choice phases.

4.3. Conclusions

While important as background, the phase of predisposition is not the key phenomena under investigation in this research project. Nevertheless, participants provided some valuable information regarding social pressures that, to varying degrees, impacted on their decision to pursue post-secondary education. However, from all of the decision-making stages that were addressed with participants, it was the predisposition stage that was met with the least degree of enthusiasm and which was most frequently dismissed, or dealt with in a very cursory way, in participants stories. The reasons for that appear to be multi-dimensional.

For those participants who “always knew” that they were going to continue their education after secondary school, the influence exerted by parents and the extended family circles was almost unnoticeable as it formed a part of their everyday environment. For this group, it was merely a natural progression rather than a consciously made decision. Those participants were likely to have parents that were themselves formally educated, or older siblings were enrolled in HEIs. Interestingly, it appears that for this group, neither the secondary school nor the HEI activities contributed significantly to the desire to continue formal education.

The influence of their immediate family is in accordance with the premise of social conformity and especially in its informational form. The participants accepted the influence as the ‘right thing to do’. In other words, their parents or siblings’ behaviour informed them of what is an appropriate thing to do (e.g., continue their formal education post-secondary school level). This group of participants appear to comply (the process of compliance) with family norms, accepts these norms as appropriate (the process of identification) and, further, adopt these behaviours into their own system of values (the process of internalisation).

Social influences appear to perform a somewhat different role regarding participants that did not have formally educated parents. These

participants fall in two categories: those who were subjected to 'aspirational' pressures of their immediate families and commenced the tertiary education immediately after matriculation; and those who took some time off from educational pursuits and came back to it a few years later.

Their stories slightly differ. It appears that the 'aspirational' group responded to the expressed or perceived expectations of their parents by complying with these expectations; however, it also appears that these expectations did not result, at the time, in acknowledging the benefits derived from tertiary education (identification) as it had placed with the previous group. This behaviour is consistent with normative conformity and indicates that the participants continued their education predominantly to secure their families' acceptance. Interestingly, those participants also more frequently acknowledged the role of the secondary school personnel and HEI activities regarding their decision.

The group of participants that did not commence the tertiary education immediately after completing secondary school appear to consistently omit any social pressures from the recollections of that period of their life. It seems that the post-secondary education was not under consideration at the time and other, frequently vocational options took precedence. However, there is an exception.

Dean (Osteopathy) indicated that both the family education attainment and the group of peers indeed were to some degree influential albeit in reverse. With parents who left school early to start their own businesses, and friends that came from similar backgrounds, it seems that the vocational options were not only a 'correct' progression but a progression that was not different from those of participants with formally educated parents. His parents' behaviour, and parents of his friends, informed him of what is an appropriate thing to do and he complied with family norms and accepted these norms, for the time being, as appropriate. For him, the later development of HE aspirations was influenced by his girlfriend and her family.

Indeed, it is of interest that two factors are common for this group that appear to have an impact on their decision to enter higher education: the dissatisfaction with their chosen career path and support, or influence, of significant people in their life. It is the latter group that was acknowledged to be especially influential across all phases of HEI choice and will be discussed further in the next two chapters.

Chapter 5 - Phase 2 - Search for the HEI

> *The school makes it very Melbourne or Monash [University]. That all other universities are kind of agh…They say they've got heaps more course availabilities, more jobs at the end. Better funding. All that sort of stuff.* Jennifer (VU student)

The previous chapter discussed participants views regarding the first phase of the HEI choice processes - the predisposition to pursue the higher education. The participants' stories narrated the range of interactions and influences that, to varying degree, impacted on their decision to continue the education post the secondary school level. While the previous chapter offered observations regarding the influence of a diverse range of factors, previously identified in the literature, these influences are somewhat outside the core phenomena under investigation in this research project. Subsequently, this chapter addresses the social pressures in the context of the next phase of the choice processes - the search stage, as these emerged from the interviews with participants. For the part of the interviews dealing with the search phase, the participants were asked to reflect on the last years of their secondary education, or the last years prior to the commencement of the tertiary education for those participants that did not progress directly to HE after matriculation. Within this specific time frame, the researcher aimed to gain an insight into the significant sources of influence at play during this time, and the meanings these influences yield on participants.

5.1. Search phase

Search is the second stage of the three-phase Hossler and Galagher's (1987) choice model that underpins this research project. The search stage refers to processes and activities that surround the gathering of information about colleges and universities and the subsequent formation of a choice set of HE institutions that are being considered. During this stage, students condense the number of HEIs to those that fulfilled a set

of desired characteristics (the choice set). This stage's importance is twofold: while the core objective is to form a choice set of suitable HEIs, the undesirable outcomes of the processes leading to this may result in students pursuing other options than HEI attendance. The literature on the subject identifies a range of factors influencing the search phase. These include the availability of financial resources and associated costs of attendance at selected HEIs, the range and quality of information available to prospective students, peers and family expectations, and HEI characteristics such as geographical location or course availability. As discussed in Chapter 4, the financial considerations may have a somewhat limited impact in Australia due to the government support and, as such, are unlikely to yield a significant influence. However, the other three groups of factors - information, social network expectations, and HEI characteristics - were all expected to exert the influence on this phase. This chapter focuses on student experiences during the search phase. The following questions were asked to guide the discussion:

- Could you tell me about the last year of high school (or the last year before making VTAC[2] application)?
    - With whom did you discuss the options available?
    - How did you source information regarding options available?
- Looking back at all the communication and interactions you had during this time (last years of high school), who were the different groups of people with whom you have communicated/had discussions about your choice of university?
    - How did you communicate with them?
    - Do you think that it was important to have these communications/ discussions during that time? If so, why?

[2] The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) is the central office that administers the application processes for places in tertiary courses, and receives and forwards applications to the relevant institutions.

It is through these questions guiding the dialogue with participants, that the researcher aimed to narrate student stories in the context of this phase of the HEI choice.

5.2. The Search phase - student experiences

The participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in the last two years prior to the enrolment in the HEI of choice. For some of them, it was not easy. It may be that for those that progressed to university directly from the completion of the secondary school, this period of time abounded with stresses associated with matriculation examinations, necessities of decisions that may have a significant impact on their future, and, frequently, with identification of their individual career paths that may be different to those of their friends. Once the decision regarding their preferred course or courses has been made, the HEIs under consideration has been reduced to those that offer these courses. It is only at this point that other factors yield their influence. These factors are discussed in the following sections.

5.2.1.Information regarding HEI

Information regarding HEIs broadly refers to HEI and secondary school activities aimed at providing potential future students with necessary knowledge that would allow them to select an appropriate area of study and identify institutions that offer the relevant courses. In this context, these factors also refer to sources of information. The following sections deal with the information regarding HEIs in the groupings that emerged from participants' stories and which include secondary school personnel, HEIs activities, and parental and peer expectations and influences.

5.2.1.1. Secondary school personnel

Perceptions of the role of the secondary school staff in the information searching processes varied between participants. For some of the participants discussing options related to career choices with teachers and career counsellor was not appropriate due to their cultural

background. Adam, who completed only the last two years of his secondary education in Australia, said:

> *It is not in my culture. In Pakistan we don't have any of them. We didn't have those things there. There might be a nurse but… we didn't have that. Just the teachers and they may have been doing some counselling them- selves, but I would not speak to them…I don't talk to somebody like that about my future.*

However, cultural background not always explains the variations in the importance of secondary school personnel, as the source of information. Trish, like Adam, arrived in Australia in year 10 of the secondary school said:

> *I spoke with some of my teachers because I don't know what I am good at and I wanted my teachers to point out what I am good at.*

Many other participants offered neutral views regarding the role of teachers and school counsellors not only in the context of a source of information but also regarding providing advice and guidance. Their presence was frequently just stated; however, none of the participants assigned special importance to it. The secondary school personnel's peripheral role as a source of information remained constant regardless of the type of school (private, public or selective entry). The following statements illustrate this:

> *So, we had the student ... school counsellor. Sorry, more of a career advisor sort of thing that did both. So, we go in there. It was to get a kind of rough idea of your ATAR results, about where they were. Where your grades were, and then we're like, "Okay, so I'm looking at doing osteopathy. Where can I do it? Where can I get my info?" And staff pointed us in the right direction.* Mark

I guess, a few teachers at my school, just when selecting subjects…so I selected biology, and my biology teacher told me all the career pathways and all that for that, and I know...I'm just trying to think. Yeah, they sort of guided me into what sort of career I could choose. They told me to go with my strengths, and at school, science wasn't particularly my strength in Year 12 and Year 11, so that's why they sort of persuaded me to go to- wards the business side, which ironically now I'm doing science, which I find I'm better at now than business…I guess, speaking to the guidance counsellors and all that at school, they didn't tell me it was too hard for me to achieve, but they said it was ... They sort of swayed me towards doing subjects that I was going to perform really well in. George

I was at Bacchus Marsh Grammar, which is near Melton, that way. It was a great school, but I always felt like with the careers ... I'm not sure if the term is Career's Officer, whatever they are, they just sort of ... Well, in my case at least, when I went in and said, "I want to do this and this," they just went, "Oh yeah, it sounds like you've got it right. See you later." That was pretty much it. So long as you knew that you wanted to go to university and you'd picked something out, that was enough. Tracy

Our school careers counsellor was a bit clueless I would say. Jennifer

However, not all participants discussed the encounters with the secondary school personnel in the equally dismissive or perfunctory style. Kate said:

Our high school had a course or career counsellor office in our building, in the VCE building and I would speak to her once every week or couple of weeks, talking about my progress at school and enrolling at different courses and if I am likely to have enough points. This was in year 12 so two

> *years ago. And she would ask me questions what I would like to do in the future, different pathways if I did not make the ATAR score, different courses, different uni, and the whole bunch of different options. Sometimes she made me really stressed out because I was thinking what about if I don't get to uni and stuff. But then she really understood me and that helped me out because I could talk about my problems.*

Even more positive about the role that secondary school personnel had in the search processes was Paul who identified one of his teachers as a major source of influence and advice:

> *Well there were only two major unis that I researched and really inquired about, it was ACU and Vic Uni because my former high school teacher, she went to ACU and she told me, "That was a great school." I thought yeah, maybe I can go there."* When asked to reflect further on why this particular teacher was so influential, he said: "*because I still am pretty close with her".*

The low importance of secondary school activities and career personnel is somewhat surprising. Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (Victoria State Government 2018) ensures that secondary students have access to career development programs that facilitate the acquisition of necessary knowledge to make educated choices. The policy supports secondary schools to provide career development programs that include individual and group counselling and careers information and education.

In the last years of the secondary education, students spend a significant amount of their time at school which, consequently, form an important part of student immediate reference group and, as such, should yield some influence. As this appears not to be the case, could it be that the secondary school personnel's influence is declining in favour of easily available online information? Or, is it merely that the influence of this group was always lesser then of other groups and its lower position in

participants recollections is just a reflection of that? In research conducted over ten years ago, Metheny, McWhirter and O'Neil (2008) confirmed the influence of teachers on student career choices as ranked lower than family or peers. In Australia 87 percent of secondary students participated in individual conversations with school's career advisor and generally had positive opinions regarding the value of that advice; however, the most positive comments were provided by those students that were "unsure about whether they would complete Year 12" (Rothman and Hillman 2008, p.vi).

This may provide some explanation why research participants for whom no doubt existed regarding the continuation of their education would recollect their experiences in a neutral manner. Another explanation emerged from research conducted in Australia in 2006 by Walker et al. (2006). Interviewing 340 year 10 and 12 students, the authors linked the perception of the in-school career counselling to "the quality ascribed to the individual in the position of career counsellor" (p.39).

In other words, students who had a positive relationship with a career counsellor and perceived them "as an individual rather than a member of a large indistinguishable mass-labelled as 'students'" (p.40) would value the career advice much more than other students that did not have such impressions of the secondary school personnel. This finding appears to be in an agreement with participants recollections. Indeed, the only two participants' who reported positive experiences have highlighted favourable characteristics of the individual from whom they interacted in this context. Paul valued the career advice because he was "pretty close with" the teacher from whom he received that advice. Kate perceived the career counsellor as someone who "really understood me".

These types of comments were absent from all other participants who did not report positively on their experiences. So, it does appear that the perception of the value of the interaction with the secondary school personnel is indeed directly affected by the perception that student holds of the person and, more importantly, by the positive perception of caring about them as an individual. Both Paul and Kate were "closer" to the

people with whom they interacted than other students. Could it be that this “closeness” increased their perception of trust and sincerity on behalf of the secondary school personnel? If so, this very perception of sincerity, of viewing them as an individual rather than just another, indistinguishable member of the student cohort, rather than the quality of the advice or information itself may impact their assessment of this encounter.

5.2.1.2. Family and peers

If the perception of sincerity is indeed of fundamental importance than it appears likely that parents and peers would constitute an important source of information. After all, it is this group that more than any other cares about the best possible outcomes for their family members or friends. The role of family members and peers during the search phase has been discussed in the literature previously; however, their value as the important source of information has been inconsistent (Joseph and Joseph 1998, Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2008, Johnston 2010, Sojkin et al. 2014). While their importance may vary between different authors, there is a strong indication that parents and peers influence student choices during the information gathering stage.

Indeed, some studies estimate that as many as 90% of students consult their parents regarding their HEI choices (Brooks 2002). Participants’ recollections support the importance of parents and peers as an important source of information.

Consistently, when participants reflected on discussions with their parents during the last couple of years prior to the HEI enrolment, parents appear to play a multidimensional role during this phase of the choice process. Yet, there is some indication that the role of parents is somewhat dependent on their educational attainment. For those students with tertiary-educated parents, their role was frequently to provide advice and assist in processes of inclusion, and exclusion, of specific HEIs. Kate, coming from a highly educated family, when asked about people with whom she discussed the HEI options, said:

> *Obviously, all of my sisters are going to uni or went to uni and they were giving me really good positive conversations about it. And my dad especially because he has his psychology degree and psychology background so he could talk to me about what is going on. And it was good to have these conversations. Yes, they helped me a lot.*

Conversely, Jennifer reflected on the advice provided by her non-tertiary educated mother and said:

> *My mum just said ... just read and get your own knowledge but then she didn't have much experience in this area.*

The lack of parental tertiary education and subsequent limited experience regarding HEI choice does not preclude parents' importance as a source of support rather than information. Nina highlighted not only the general support - *"My parents were very supportive in whatever I wanted to do"* - but also their practical assistance in the search phase:

> *They helped me to do research and stuff like that and then my Dad came with me to all the open days for TAFE and open days for uni and he was very much like active and asking questions of teachers and things like that.*

It is understandable that students whose parents are highly educated, and subsequently have a greater knowledge about the HE sector, may have a greater reliance on their advice. The variations in the importance of parental advice between tertiary educated and non-tertiary educated parents find its support in the student choice literature (e.g., Galotti and Mark 1994, Cabrera and La Nasa 2000). The justification of this variation is also underpinned by social influence literature and, more specifically, through informational influence. Informational influence has its origins in the strive to make informed decisions and advance knowledge (Kelman 1961) and is manifested through searching for information from those who are perceived to be knowledgeable (Mourali et al. 2005). Consequently, it is tenable that tertiary-educated parents may be

perceived to be more knowledgeable about the intricacies of HEI choice than those that did not have this experience.

The relationship between the perceptions regarding the knowledge about the HE extends to other members of student's immediate reference group such as peers. Similar to parents, the reliance on advice provided by peers is directly proportionate to the participants' perceptions of HEI knowledgeability among their peers. Adam, when reflecting on the role that his friends played in the formation of a choice set of HEIs during the search phase, said:

> *I talked to my friends that already have some experience with the universities I was looking at.*

Further, when asked about the most valuable sources of information during this stage, he said:

> *From my friends…and those friends that already studied at the universities.*

A similar sentiment was shared by Henry when discussing the role of peers in that context:

> *I was talking to friends in the field; past students from Melbourne High.*

The following participants' insights further illustrate this argument:

> *But when I was deciding to which university to go to I was talking to my friends. Actually, mostly to my friends…I mean… if they were at the university then they knew more than the counsellor…* Kate

> *Friends and all that didn't really come into it. Like, no one really knew what they were talking about or what they were going to do. We all just had to pick somewhere to go.* Tracy

> *Friends did not have such a big impact on what I wanted to do because we were all in the same situation…you know, none of us new anything about these universities…* Nina

Further, it is only perceptible that the participants had a greater reliance on opinions of those friends they perceived as positive and sincere, as illustrated below by Adam:

> *Actually, only one of my friend's opinion was important to me. That is it… Because he is a good friend of mine and he is honest and he is an intelligent person so his opinion matters, he has helped me a lot deciding what to do in life.*

Similar view was held by Trish:

> *When you talk to friends…it may be very confusing and it may upset you but it is very good to talk to people that know you and want to help you.*

An interesting perspective was offered by Dean who extended the important role of peers to the group he perceived as negative:

> *The negative groups… I could not really explain to them what I was doing or what my goals were so, and I guess they did not, I mean I felt that they could not understand my choices so I felt I did not want to talk to them about it…But I also think that if there was negative, the people that were negative it may have fuelled me a bit more because I like felt, maybe I wanted to prove myself or something.*

While it is indisputable that both parents and peers yield some influence on the formation of the choice set of considered HEIs, it appears that this influence is strongly dependent on the students' perceptions of knowledgeability among the members of their reference circle. This is not only perspicuous but strongly supported by theoretical underpinnings of informational influence that deals with the acceptance of information as

"the evidence about reality" (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975, p.206). Subsequently, it is conceivable that the acceptance of this influence is likely to be directly correlated with the perception of knowledgeability as it is this observation that advances the credibility of the evidence.

5.2.1.3. HEI activities

The range of HEI activities introduced in the interviews by the participants varies significantly and includes a selection of in-school and on-campus events. While some participants reported school organised sessions with HEI representatives, the recollections of these activities are not indicative of their overall importance as a valuable source of information. Accordingly, participants' impressions of these experiences were somewhat dismissive. When those few of the participants that recalled the in-school visits were asked to reflect on these events further, the emerging pictures evince that the HEI sessions conducted in school were perceived as an augmentation of career counselling offered by the school. Consequently, the peripheral value attributed to career counselling offered by the school was by default, extended to the HEI visits. The following examples illustrate this argument:

> *So, I think some universities came to my secondary school and they gave some campaigns and they talk about different courses they have and so some universities must have done that, I am sure…* Trish

> *I think in year 10 or actually, yes, in year 9, in the beginning of year 9, our school started to introduce us to different types of universities, what they can offer and we started to have people from different universities coming to our high school and talk about what subject they have or students representatives would come and talk about what they studied. Ask this sort of things.* Kate

While the in-school activities served as sources of information of limited value, the on-campus events were generally met with greater enthusiasm.

Indeed, participants' stories and their recollections of activities during the last years prior to the enrolment in the chosen HEI, suggest the significant reliance on these sources of information.

Adam highlighted the advantage of visits to HEIs over the online search:

> *Online information is good but sometimes there could be some outage or some other information that is not online that is why I would prefer to call and talk in person… talk to the person so… I would ask which biomed is the best to do the medicine degree. So, you know what will be the out- come and what work will be required if I want to get good grades, you know, what should I do…These sort of things. And how to get the books before I actually started to study for the degree.*

Similar, positive, sentiments regarding visiting HEIs were shared by Henry:

> *I went to all the Open Days just to get a feel of what it would be like. I talked to the people doing the courses. I still look at the other courses now and I don't really know what's going on because it's like a self-study module where you choose your subjects and what not. I don't know. It confuses me when Osteo is … Everything is really straightforward here.*

However, some of the participants reflected on the perceived lack of "personalisation" of the encounter with HEI. Henry said:

> *I didn't feel the Careers Expo and careers counselling was exactly that helpful. It was more of a, "This is what past students have done. Follow in their footsteps."*

Conversely, it was the very personal approach that featured in Mark's recollections:

> *Yeah it was ... just coming to have a look sort of thing, and*

> *they'd ... it was just us walking around, and then there was one of the students up in the osteo clinic, and we went and asked him a couple questions. He said that he didn't have any patients at the time, and he was happy to take us around and stuff so he walked us around and showed us everything. And I thought it was pretty cool showing us around here.*

Similarly, Trish spoke highly of her encounter with one of Melbourne's universities:

> *The first time I walked into university when I was still in high school and on open day, I was talking to the lecturers and I asked some questions and they could not answer it so they took my details and they actually called me back! … their customer service people approach you and talk to me about what I would like to do and what are the different options and…I know it is a form of marketing but they were very informative and really wanted to help me with my courses.*

It is also important to mention that the participants' recollections and the researcher's field notes taken during the interviews point towards a dual role of the HEI on-campus activities. Besides providing avenues to obtain the relevant information, the visits to HEIs allow prospective students to become familiar with the university atmosphere, staff and social life. The participants spoke of noticing the general "feel" of the institution they visited, and it was interesting to notice a range of non-vocalised emotions when they were discussing these encounters. Henry said:

> *I went to all the Open Days just to get a feel of what it would be like.*

Two participants especially referred to this aspect of on-campus activities. It was evident that for them the "feel" of the campus and the sense of belonging were of significant importance, albeit for different reasons. Kate is based predominantly at the small campus located in the centre of Melbourne CBD, and it appears that, for her, the intimacy of the campus, small classes and a relatively limited number of students contributed to

the overall attractiveness of the University.

> *I liked that …there is also… like compared to La Trobe or RMIT …these can be very big and very like overwhelming and I liked it here… it feels so comfortable…*

Paul, who came back to complete his university education after a couple of years in a workforce, was not entirely convinced if he is going to fit in the HE culture. He said:

> *I went to the Open day at Vic Uni and I was sold by the feel of it then so I thought, yeah, I can do this.*

HEIs activities, in-school or on-campus, were perceived differently; however, their value as a source of information was limited. One of the factors that differentiated the HEI visit was the personalisation of the encounter that was directly proportionate to the positive recollections of this encounter. Subsequently, it is likely that the HEIs that delivered higher personalised services were more likely to be included in the choice set formed during the Search phase.

5.2.2. HEI prestige and social network expectations

Some of the participants referred to the social expectations regarding the HEI choice set. It appears that students attending selective entry or high performing academically focused secondary schools were somewhat expected to progress to one of the prestigious group of eight universities that market themselves as Australia's leading HEIs and which include in Victoria Monash University and the University of Melbourne. Jennifer, who attended one of the public, high performing schools, said about her secondary school's attitude towards HEIs:

> *We could go to any university we choose as long as it was Melbourne or Monash.*

The pressures associated with the choice of one of these universities

were more evident among participants whose families recently migrated to Australia. Henry, whose family moved to Melbourne from Singapore, said:

> *I think it's pretty widely accepted that Melbourne Uni is internationally regarded as one of the most prestigious schools. So, to them (parents) it was like, if you ever want to work overseas, it's better that you have gone to Melbourne. Your sister's going to Melbourne and she's doing well there, so go to Melbourne and if you don't like it you can opt out or whatever.*

Conversely, those participants whose family members were not formally educated reported on lesser pressures associated with HEI choice. Tracy said:

> *They (parents) weren't putting pressure on around any of the unis or anything like that because neither of them went to university.*

University prestige was previously noted in the literature on the topic as an important determinant of student choice. The participants' stories suggest that the importance of prestige in the formation of a choice set of HEIs is dependent on the family characteristics and the type of secondary school that participants attended. It is likely that for participants attending a selective entry or schools high performing academically, as well as for students from families that recently migrated to Australia; the HEI prestige holds greater importance than for others.

5.2.3. HEI characteristics - course availability and location

Regardless of the broad range of factors that contribute to the formation of the choice set during the search phase, participants' recollections indicate that the practical considerations, including course availability and geographical location of the HEI, frequently feature among most

important determinants of choice. Some of these factors, such as course availability are easily perceived and understood. While none of the participants was enrolled in the courses that were offered solely at Victoria University, for some the University was one of only two in Melbourne that offered this specific course. For those participants, the secondary determinants included location, availability of public transport, and the perceptions regarding the quality and prestige of the course rather than a university itself. As these factors are more concerned with the actual choice of the HEI rather than the formation of the choice set, these will be discussed in the following chapter.

For other participants, it appears that the location of HEI was one of the strongest influencing factors during the formation of the choice set. For some, it was the proximity to the family home, for others the availability of public transport or the central CBD location. Adam, when asked the factors that he took into account when forming his choice set said:

> *I would say the environment of the university and the location of the university.*

The location also features strongly among other participants:

> *I lived very far in the West, so Monash to me at the time just seemed too far.* Henry

> *And I saw that VU was in the city. My parents wanted me to be comfort- able and stuff, and they though in the city, was probably a better option. So, they pushed more to come to the city campus rather than being out at RMIT, which is out at Bundoora, so a bit further out sort of thing.* Mark

> *Vic Uni is the closest to me and I'm going to choose that.* Paul

> *I think…I would say location…I don't drive and the location is really easy to get to.* Kate

The availability of courses and the HEI location were identified previously as important choice determinants (Kim and Gasman 2011, Sojkin et al. 2014). It is likely that these factors are of special importance in the context of Melbourne, which covers a vast area with long distances between some residential areas and university campuses.

5.3. Conclusions

The search phase deals with gathering information regarding relevant HEIs and the formulation of the choice set of preferred institutions. The participants recollections support the sources of information identified in the literature; however, assign disparate importance to some of these sources. While practical factors, such as availability of courses or location of the HEIs in question, are consistently dominant, other sources of information and influence differ between participants. The secondary school personnel and HEIs in-school visits were viewed to be of lesser importance as valuable sources of information compared to on-campus HEI activities, the information provided by family and peers and university prestige and social network expectations. Participants' recollections of this important period of their HEI choice process; however, suggest some relationship between the value assigned to specific sources of information and the perception of the genuineness of these sources. This underlying notion of sincerity that is frequently present in participants' stories as they reflected on their experiences during the predisposition and search phases will be further explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 - Phase 3 - Choice of the HEI

> *I Googled Osteopathy, Melbourne Universities and then RMIT and Vic Uni. came up and I saw Vic Uni. at Flinders Street.* "*That's so close. That's re- ally convenient."* Darren (VU student)

> *I did not go to Victoria University because I wanted to go to Victoria University, but I am going to Victoria University because they are offering me what I need. They are offering exactly what I need and I am happy to go through the system there and so far, you know, it is working.* Henry (VU student)

The previous two chapters explored participants' recollections of their experiences during phase 1 - the development of predispositions to pursue the post-secondary education, and phase 2 - the formation of choice set of the preferable HEIs. This chapter is dedicated to the last phase of the Predisposition-Search-Choice model that underpins the theoretical framework for this research - the stage of choice of the HEI, which culminates in the enrolment and the commencement of the selected course. It is this stage that is of special interest in the context of this research project as it is most directly associated with the actual choice of the HEI institution.

6.1. The choice phase

The Predisposition-Search-Choice model's final stage commences with the evaluation of the choice set of preselected HEIs and concludes with the final selection and the enrolment at the preferred institution. Hossler and Gallagher (1987), in agreement with other authors writing on student choice of HEIs, propose a range of influences that impact on students' decision: HEI characteristics and communication activities; students' perceptions of HEIs and quality that the HEIs represents; students' self-image and personality; and parental, peers and media influences.

Consequently, these factors are separated into three broad groups: institutional factors, student-related factors, and social factors relating to pressures and influences of the greater social environment that comprise of family, peers and student's other reference groups. Participants' recollections of their experiences during the last phase of the HEI choice processes are analysed within these groups.

6.2. The choice phase - student experiences

Participants' recollections regarding this phase were somewhat more specific than when discussing Predisposition and Search stages. Their experiences with the final choice of the HEI were more recent and, as such, more clearly embedded in their memory. However, the subtle but definitive change when talking about the selection of university maybe, in researcher's view, attributed to the fact that during that stage it was the students, rather than their family members or teachers, that 'owned' that decision.

None of the participants expressed that view directly nor explicitly dismissed the influences of their reference groups; however, it was observed and interpreted by the researcher there were some verbal and non-verbal indications that, with the matriculation, participants crossed some divide and gained a set of powers to decide their future for themselves. Sometimes it was nothing more than the slight change of voice. Sometimes they just readjusted their position in the chair. Sometimes they established more direct eye contact with the researcher.

The variations were minimal, but, nevertheless, they were there. All of a sudden, the participants were talking with a greater degree of authority - "I made this choice", "I considered these universities", "I decided these were the most important factors for me". The "I" was more pronounced in the participants' stories than ever before. While discussing the previous two phases, the existence of social network influences was prominent and ever-present, the dominance of these influences during the choice phase was replaced by a range of highly practical factors that predominantly

related to a varied range of HEI characteristics including physical attributes of the institution, reputation, ranking, and prestige, and the scope of courses offered.

6.2.1. Institutional factors

The importance of institutional factors was highlighted in the literature previously (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, Hossler and Litten 1993, Ivy 2008, Joseph and Joseph 1998, Kern 2000, Maringe 2006, Monks and Ehrenberg 1999, Sojkin et al. 2014) and is strongly supported by participants' stories when reflecting on their choice of the HEI. The range of institutional factors proposed by participants as having an impact on their choice of HEI is broad and could be further divided into three sub-groups - practical factors, HEI communication, and students' perceptions and interpretations.

6.2.1.1. Practical factors

Practical factors include a range of courses offered, the university's geographical location, and proximity of services, among others. It is not surprising that these factors featured prominently in participants stories. Courses offered by the HEIs under consideration in an obvious way impact on student choice. It is especially true for those students with a strong preference for courses offered by only a few of Melbourne's HEI. An example includes osteopathy offered exclusively by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Victoria University. All participants studying osteopathy developed a keen interest in that specific course, and while other alternative medicine courses were considered as auxiliary options, the availability of osteopathic medicine was the key choice factor:

> *I went to Victoria University for the course and did not go to the course because of the university.* Henry

> *I Googled Osteopathy, Melbourne Universities and then RMIT and Vic Uni came up.* Darren

I wanted to do osteopathy so it was between RMIT and Victoria University. Dylan

Once the course criteria were satisfied, participants discussed a range of secondary factors that contributed to their choice. Across the entire groups of students interviewed, the most important of these determinants identified was the university's geographical location. While there were some differences regarding the rationale why the location of the HEI was held in such esteem, it appears that all of these justifications are strongly underpinned by simple pragmatism:

Commute times. It's relatively short for me. Darren

It was just ... mostly location based…and I saw that VU was in the city. They were really big on me that I could live and be comfortable and stuff, and they though in the city was in the city was probably a better option of the two. So, they pushed more to come to the city campus rather than be- ing out at RMIT, which is out at Bundoora, so a bit further out sort of thing. So, it was mainly their ideas of being in the city and being close to every- thing, and being able to branch out after being established in city was probably that idea. Mark

There wasn't any clubs or anything like that on that I really felt interested in back then, especially because of the location, it wasn't convenient to go into the city and go for a run or something like that, or go waste time there. It was like you'd go in and go home. Tracy

My friends…they just went for location same as me so we're all around from the same area and Vic Uni is the closest to me so I thought I'm going to choose that. Paul

However, it must be noted that the high importance of the geographical location of the HEI may be related to the fact that all of the participants were domestic students and most of them were living at home. With

Melbourne metro area spread almost eighty kilometres across, enrolment at inconveniently located HEI could result either in lengthy commute negatively impacting on family and social life, or moving out from a family home to be closer to the HEI which has negative financial implications.

> *So, I wanted to go to the university that is close to my house because I also want to go to work and I also want to go to university and it is much more convenient if the university is close to my house. And also, financial- ly it is more convenient if I stay at home with a very low rent and don't have to pay the high rent at some place. So, I always wanted to go to the university that is close to my house.* Trish

6.2.1.2. HEI communication

Institutional communication is well recognised to form an important HEI choice factor (e.g., Gifford, Briceño-Perriott and Mianzo 2005, Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton 2004). Students form opinions based on interactions with HEI staff and written materials, and these opinions, in turn, impact their final choice. The most dominant forms of HEI communication that emerged during the interviews with participants include websites and visits to the campuses. Neither the attendance at the career expos nor the printed material produced by universities did feature strongly in participants recollections of their experiences during the choice phase, even if prompted by the researcher.

The importance assigned to web content is in line with the previous finding by LeFauve (2001) who investigated printed material and the web content in the context of student choice and found that the web content is more likely to yield an influence in the late stages of the decision-making process. While the participants uniformly assigned importance to HEIs websites, the degree to which the content was perceived as beneficial was directly correlated with the simplicity of the design and ability to locate the desired information.

Participants reflected on the overwhelming avalanche of activities,

information, and decisions to be made in the last months prior to the final choice of the HEI. It is only natural that any information sources that provided some form of clarity and enabled the participants to easily and accurately access the desired information were met with positive feedback and evaluation. The following quotes support that:

> *So, it was fairly easy to understand what was outlined in the course, it was easy to understand what was…what to expect. What I will be learning from year one to year five. So yes, it just gave me the simplified view. Probably more simplified than the RMIT in hindsight. I think that the web- site, like the structure, their website had structure like what is in the course, what are the units of the course, you can click on the units of the course and see what I will be learning in this units about, how I will be learning, will it be lab or classroom. You know it just broke down every- thing to this simplistic form whereas at RMIT it just will be this massive slab without any subheadings or anything and I just could not, I don't think I have the attention span to read it all without getting bored. So yeah, definitely the VU information website made a difference.* Henry

> *I did look at the Vic Uni website and just looked to see what I was getting myself into, read all the subjects, and just all ... I actually read a few of the unit guides for some of them. So yeah, I looked at the website mainly, and then honed it down into the Bachelor of Osteopathy, just to have a look at the core units and that.* George

> *A lot of it was just going on the website and seeing what courses were available. So I picked out, I think it was between Deakin and Vic Uni really, because I didn't like RMIT, so I didn't want to go back there, and Swinburne, I think I briefly looked at them, but I couldn't find much in the way of education, they're a lot more technically focused from what I*

could see. So I spent a lot of time just reading the unit guides and seeing what I'd actually be studying at either course, and also I did a bit of checking just to see what students thought as well, so just seeing online if there was any reviews or opinions, or anything like that. Tracy

Career and expo and you know…open days…it's just too much…so, I was just going on the website and I could do it in my own time and decide. It was sort of simpler to make up my mind this way. There are so many business courses and they all look the same so I just took time and checked what they were offering…and I decided that I like what VU has. Nina

I think that the website is good and simple. You know when I was looking at other universities, it was so difficult to understand where to find information and the website here is like really easy and you can find the course and classes and what you will be learning. I really liked that. Kate

While participants highlighted the simplicity and clarity of the information offered on the website as being of the uppermost importance, the personalisation, or the lack of it, was accentuated in the context of visits to campuses. The importance of personalisation in the HE communication was identified previously by Donehower (2003) and Page and Castleman (2013).

The support for this finding emerges from participants' recollections, and their stories suggest that the personalisation allowed not only for differentiation between considered HEIs but frequently solidified their choice. Personalisation and the broader concept of customer engagement discussed in the Introduction chapter received extensive recognition in marketing literature and especially in the context of high involvement products to which the HE belongs.

It is not surprising that students embarking on one of the most important choices of their young lives are especially attuned to personalisation and

the assurances and perception of a greater fit with the subject HEI that the personalisation offers. The personalisation of communication in the context of visits to HEI campuses was represented in a variety of ways. For some participants, it was a returned phone call to answer the question for which there was not a ready answer available at the time. For others, it was a welcoming gesture at arrival, special attention paid to their inquiries, or time taken to focus on their needs.

It is likely that these behaviours served in a way as a form of a 'loop closure' in which student efforts to engage with the HEI were acknowledged and reciprocated with some effort on the part of the HEI itself. The following quotes provide examples of the participants' views and perceptions regarding personalisation:

> *So, I went to the open days … the booklets that you got were useful, but not so much more going on… if they could have just sent them to our school, it would have been just as helpful. It was a whole day taken out just to get some booklets that I can read at home anyway, rather than read this and … I talked to a couple of people just about prerequisites, but it was clearly stated in the booklet, so …* Jennifer

> *I was speaking to some people in here. Actually, got in a tour with one of them ... I think he was a fourth or a fifth year at the time around the clinics and stuff like that. And he spoke really well of VU and I thought that, that would probably be the best one, so I ended up accepting and coming to VU … it was just us walking around, and then there was one of the students up in the osteo clinic, and we went and asked him a couple questions… and he said he didn't have any patients at the time, and he was happy to take us around and stuff, so he walked us around and showed us everything. And I thought it was pretty cool thing to do and I would like study around here.* Mark

> *First time I walked into (…) University when I was still in high*

school, on open day, I was talking to the lecturers and I asked some questions and they could not answer it so they took my details and they actually called me back and they contacted the right person and passed to them my questions …their customer service people approach you and talk to me about what I would like to do and what are the different options and… I know it is a form of marketing but they were very informative and really wanted to help me with my courses. I think they understand that it may be difficult for me to choose…So when I was talking with these people they were asking me and then they told me to talk to this person and consider these things that I did not think of before. And they told me that everything is ok, that they know that I am in Australia only a couple of years and I may not know everything. And I feel very comfortable with that. Trish

I went with my Dad and we were asking all of these questions … I didn't know what to ask actually because I never been to university before … and they just smiled and, you know, spent so much time with me and I thought - ok, I can do this university thing. Nina

Another interesting proposition was introduced by Trish, who negatively connected marketing activities with HEI success. Trish discussed the fact that, in her opinion, Victoria University does not actively market themselves; however, when approached, offers superior customer service:

They don't have to keep marketing themselves like X, like good university does not have to keep marketing themselves. You don't do a lot of market- ing but when you have enquiries then you guys reply and even if it is a difficult question than you send an email saying that you will reply later. So, customer service is very good and it is there but it is on email so not face to face. It is just Victoria University style. Yes, I

think this was the most important for me … I think you guys… you have earned your name so you don't have to market yourselves. Trish

Throughout the interview, Trish alluded to the connection between marketing and the underlying need for some HEIs to market themselves. The HEIs that are 'good' are likely to attract students naturally and do not need to actively engage in recruitment activities. By extension, the lack of marketing provides a clearer message about the attractiveness of the HEI than an extensive marketing campaign. It also appears that Trish, who was highly animated about her positive experiences with Victoria University customer service encounters, assigned a greater value to that aspect of the University communication. She highlighted the fact that the response to her queries was thoughtful, and the customer service person gave them the necessary attention to research and personalise the answer. These small modifications appear to be sufficient to establish a perception of sincerity on the Victoria University part.

Tracy, when talking about her experiences during the open day at Victoria University, provided further insight into the essence of the perception of sincerity that underpins the importance of personalisation:

It wasn't just they were there for the sake of being there or doing a bit of promotional work, it was a real student who'd come through and was telling me that it was because they meant it was actually good, it wasn't just they felt obliged to, or anything like that.

Regardless, however, of the form in which the personalisation was represented during student encounter with the HEI, the important factor was its outcome on the perception of fit between the student and the HEI. It appears that the personalised service provided participants with a deeper level of involvement with the HEI and allowed them an insight into more intimate HEI life or culture predominantly reserved for the existing students and personnel only. So, the frequently simple forms of

personalisation transformed the student from an outsider into insider and the same established closer bonds with the institution. The underlying message, frequently not verbalised but nevertheless in researcher's perception present, was that as a result on this personalisation the HEI moved ranks from one of the HEIs under consideration to "my" HEI, the same solidifying its position on the top of the choice ladder.

6.2.2. Student related factors

When discussing student-related factors impacting HEI choice, the literature broadly refers to a range of factors that predominantly include the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of students and students' families. As discussed previously, in the Australian context, the availability of the financial aid programs alleviate immediate monetary issues associated with the HE attendance, and this category of student-related factors do not feature in participants' stories. However, it appears that a different category of factors emerged strongly in their recollections of the choice phase. This category includes students' perceptions of the HEIs, including perceptions of social life, and quality or prestige represented by the HEIs under consideration. These considerations will be discussed in the following sections as they revealed themselves when participants reflected on their experiences.

6.2.2.1. Student perception of HEIs and the quality that HEIs represent

All of the participants had strong perceptions of the HEIs they considered immediately prior to the enrolment; however, it was sometimes difficult to ascertain the exact origins of these perceptions even when prompted by the researcher. As the interviews took place towards the end of the first year of their course, so almost a year post the enrolment, it is likely that the selection of elements that contributed to the development of these perceptions disappeared in the excitement and challenges of the university studies. Nevertheless, the perceptions remained firmly in participants' memories and were frequently volunteered when discussing the HEI choice. Indeed, it is these perceptions that were recalled with the most clarity and eagerly discussed.

6.2.2.1.1. Social aspects of student life

It became apparent that the social aspects of HEI attendance are of great importance to the participants. The general 'feel' of the campuses, social life, and sports activities all featured strongly in their stories. Participants' perception of these aspects of HE attendance were frequently formed through visitations to social sites such as Facebook or Instagram. Some of the comments suggested a pattern of behaviour that involved the selection of preferable HEI in the context of courses offered and location, and the subsequent 'confirmation' of this selection through approval or disapproval of social activities that were offered. Kate, who moved to Victoria University after a semester at a different HEI reflected on the perceived importance of social aspects of HEI attendance and said:

> *With Victoria University, it is a big campus, it has a lot of community stuff, and societies and games and what not but then X is like complete opposite. It is like a building with little park thingy and a carpark…but I decided to go out of my comfort zone and see how it is. And obviously it did not turn out swell so yeah.*

> *…it just looked like a fun university like they have soo much stuff and different groups and societies they I can join and funny photos and stuff that people add on the discussion pages and stuff and I thought it was great. And then when I came in…when I obviously accepted the offer I had no hesitation because I knew it would like a great opportunity for me to come here and make new friends which I have made them. Yeah, when I looked at their Facebook page I had like… I had good thoughts about it. I did not want to…I also did not want to go to new university like with negative thought…*

Steph who shortlisted two universities during the search phase emphasised the importance of social aspects of the student life when deciding on her final HEI choice:

I saw...like I liked X in the beginning but I then did not think it had a lot of a relaxed atmosphere like a relaxed vibe...I wanted to picture myself like in the place when there is a lot of social interactions and like activities and I guess …I wanted to go there initially because it was like pretty I guess. And here, with Victoria University … I saw how relaxed it was … and I saw views online, like city views online and on Facebook … there were so many people on Facebook and it did it sort…it pumps me up to come here so I made it my first preference.

Mark, an osteopathy student, when faced with the decision to choose one of the two Melbourne universities offering the course said:

How I chose? Probably just scrolling through the internet and stuff like that. Just having a look at sport teams and all that type of social stuff as much as osteo course and specifics like that. Yeah, it was just looking around. There wasn't really too much that I was looking for rather than just what was going to be studied, and I was pretty set on doing osteo so it was kind of like going through the motions of what it was going to be … you know…how it would feel.

The concept of the right 'feel' of the HEI was overwhelmingly present in participants' stories; however, it is likely that the criteria that underpin the 'feel' vary somewhat between different students or different groups of students. While all of the participants were local students, some arrived in Australia only in the last couple of years prior to the commencement of their post-secondary education. For those students, the perception of the 'right' balance between international and local students formed an important choice factor. Trish, comparing two HEIs she shortlisted during the Search phase, said:

X is very…X is very concentrated with Asians…and I…that is my point of view and I know that it is actually true or not but the way I see it it's very concentrated with Asians and I

> *wanted to have a bit of more Australian culture, different cultures like in Victoria University that is why I came here. There are people from different countries…*

Similarly, Steph, who arrived from the Philippines towards the end of the primary school, highlighted the right ‘feel’ in regard to a balanced international student cohort:

> *I feel somewhat excited…to be in the midst of it...to see international people and their thoughts about the city…it is the right mix of people...it makes me feel like it is right.*

The expectations of extensive social life likely have their origins in HEIs marketing messages, discussed in greater detail in the Introduction chapter, which promise, in addition to qualifications, an exciting, busy and diverse social life. It appears that the prospective students elect to confirm at least this part of the marketing promise prior to their enrolment, frequently utilising available social media platforms. This ‘confirmation’ function of social media platforms finds its support in the literature on the topic that acknowledges social spaces as providing effective places for prospective students to share information and influence each other opinions (Jeong et al. 2013, Kim and Sin 2016, McCorkindale, DiStaso and Sisco 2013).

It is not only the significance of social activities at HEIs and its influencing power over the final selection of the HEI that is of particular interest in the context of this research. From a marketing perspective, social media's role as the platform through which the 'confirmation' of these social activities takes place, yields a considerable opportunity in the HEI student recruitment activities. Ellison and Vitak (2015) posit that even coincidental connections with social communities could potentially influence students. Both, the literature and researcher's own observations indicate that HEIs are increasingly utilising social media platforms to support their recruitment efforts; however, the participants' stories indicate that students somewhat dismiss the HEI provided content in favour of the opinions of their peers.

While the participants did not clearly specify the reasons for that, it may be that the official content outside of factual evidence related to the course structure or other courses related information is simply perceived as an HEI marketing and met with some scepticism. This point of view finds some support in social influence theory and, more specifically, value-expressive influence operating through processes of identification. This form of influence is likely to take place in this context when students use the opinions of their peers to guide their own action. Kelman (2006) proposes “that positive reference groups are associated with acceptance of the message and negative reference groups with opposition to it” (p.6). So, drawing on participants’ reflections of their experiences, the preference for peers’ opinions rather than HEI provided content suggests that prospective students seek to establish and maintain their relationship with and within the HEI.

6.2.2.1.2. HEI quality and prestige

Perceptions of HEI quality and prestige frequently featured participants’ stories, albeit in a different context and within the different comprehension of these terms’ meaning. When discussing issues of quality and prestige, none of the participants referred to published university rankings and, instead, devised their own systems of values and measures. These values differed somewhat between the participants and range from local and international employability, class sizes or perceptions regarding marketing activities delivered by HEIs. It appears that participants with a non-English speaking background or those that themselves arrived in Australia recently, assigned greater importance to the conventional university ranking:

> *I was born in Singapore as well, and I think it's pretty widely accepted that Melbourne Uni is internationally regarded as one of the most prestigious schools. So, to them it was like, if you ever want to work overseas, it's better that you have gone to Melbourne. Your sister's going to Melbourne and she's doing well there, so go to Melbourne and if you don't like it you can opt out or whatever. But it was always similar to*

having to go to university, Melbourne was always the option there … I think the fact that, probably because I'd been conditioned so much that Melbourne was the more internationally renowned school and that my sister had been there and my parents wanted me to go there was definitely factors in leaning toward Melbourne. Dylan

However, Steph, whose family arrived in Australia from the Philippines during her primary school years, had a very different view of the importance of HEI prestige:

I did not really know about all of the prestige or rating but I think it is … I think it really undervalue what this uni really is… what it really gives to the students. I don't really know why, really don't know why it is that people say this, that it does not have the prestige … I actually really enjoy being here …

A detailed discussion regarding the perceptions of quality and prestige of Victoria University was offered by Darren. Darren, whose parents arrived in Australia as refugees from Asia, is an osteopathy student who completed a selective entry boys' secondary school. Towards the end of the interview, Darren reflected on how much he enjoyed his first year at the VU and with some amusement referred back to the last year of secondary school:

And I said I'm going to VU and they all laughed. That was pretty much it.

When queried further as to the reasons behind such a response, he said:

VU has the stigma of … you known … not being successful but I stopped

… It took me a while to disregard that stigma. It wasn't until I fully em- braced the course and see that what I could get out

of it, to actually start liking it and not really worry about people's opinions. Some of them are a lot nicer about it, "VU, haha," but they'll be, "I'm just kidding. I don't judge you for where you go," but we all have had the expectation that you have to go to prestigious Unis. Melbourne Uni. Monash in order to be successful. It was difficult for me to adjust but just the more time I spent here, the more I liked it.

When asked about the time when he first became aware of the negative perception of his peers regarding Victoria University, Darren said:

Year eight. What happened was at my previous school before Melbourne High, I went to Williamstown High School. We had a science fair up at the Footscray campus; at the beginning it was really fun. … The representatives that helped us were just really laid-back people. I asked about their… Back then they called them ENTER scores instead of ATARs now. My parents would be "You got to get a high ENTER score/ATAR to be successful, so then that was the expectation of me. At the time that's all I thought of. Then when these people were, "Yeah, I got 30-something, 40- something, 60-something." Then I was "They're not successful." They were content with where they were. They were happy with what they were doing and what they were pursuing. Now looking back I see that they're trying to make do and trying to improve but at the time I wasn't really … I was just, "You got a low score" and I judged them for that score which wasn't a good thing looking back.

It appears that these clearly dismissive views of Victoria University have its origins in Darren's own observations and are further supported by the opinions of his peers. However, it also appears that their perceptions are embedded in the Australian highly marketised secondary school system with the specific pressures applied during the last two years to achieve

the highest scores as an indication of not only students' but also the school's performance. From a marketing perspective, generating the highest scores possible equates to a good business decision as schools with higher ATAR scores can market themselves more successfully, thus potentially attracting more students and greater funding. Interestingly, the negative views of Victoria University were dismissed by Darren when counterposed against practical factors such as availability of the preferred course or favourable location of the HEI:

> *Something about Osteopathy attracted me before that; probably because my sister had started treating me, practicing techniques on me. It would be really helpful and I was just, "But it's so good. It's so practical and I really liked it." I looked at the fact that it was at VU and I was, "There's no difference." It's either VU or RMIT where I have to travel and extra 40, 50 minutes just to get to uni and then I was just - Oh well, it's the same thing. I get a Masters out of it so it's already better.*

Participants also reflected on a range of other factors that contributed to their perception of the quality of the HEIs they considered during the choice phase. For osteopathy students, the quality of the course rather than the HEI was of uppermost importance. In this instance, the measures of this course quality were associated with smaller classes, availability of hands-on experience in the HEI run clinic or personal experiences with osteopathic practitioners educated at Victoria University:

> *At VU there's a lot more teachers to students and the work would be a lot more hands-on and learning would be a lot more interactive, and that applied to me because I can't really learn by someone just feeding me sheets and sheets of paper.*
> Dylan

This group of students' strong preference for practical experience may be unique to the course and not indicative of other groups' preference.

Osteopathic medicine courses require students to gain a theoretical background combined with clinical training. With the strong emphasis on clinical skills, it is not surprising that this group of participants paid special attention to these course elements that facilitate the best preparation for professional practice. However, it also appears that for osteopathy students, especially the higher ATAR bracket for Victoria University versus that for the only other Melbourne university offering the same course, provided an indication of superior quality:

> *I think it was between (X) and Victoria University and at the time the ATAR to get into VU was higher, so that automatically in my mind made me think VU was more difficult to get into and thus a more prestigious or a better course.*

For other groups of participants, the concept of quality has its basis in other factors including employability or more personal, hands-on unit delivery as compared to other HEIs. It appears that the perceptions of employability are frequently a result of a combination of opinions of friends and the HEI marketing message aimed at attracting prospective students. Tracy, studying education, reflected on the attractiveness of Victoria University's courses regarding preparing for future employment:

> *They want you to just come through, go out, and start working straight away. It makes them look better as well, and when you actually do look at the stats, which I think they used to advertise them on the campus a lot, talking about how when you leave Victoria University you have a much higher chance. Most VU students have a really high employment rate, or they have a better opportunity, like their job rating, and that's apparently how a lot of businesses see them. I'm not sure if it's true about the businesses, but it is true about getting employment, especially from my circle of friends. Most of them have gone on to find work, or have had experience now working in their chosen degree. So that would probably be one of the strongest influences besides personal research on it, just seeing the actual results of it. Not someone telling me,*

"Oh, you get results," but see- ing someone, "Yep, I studied. Now I'm working, and I'm working in what I studied."

For Tracy, it was the tangible aspect of the friends' messages, especially that appeared to yield a significant influence. She highlighted, verbally and non-verbally, that the physical proof of the superior, as compared to other HEIs, employability - provided by friends and acquittances that completed the course she is doing and are now working in the profession, was highly influencing. Subsequently, through the confirmation of 'real' people with 'real stories', the University's marketing messages gained the credibility required to make an impact. It was difficult to ascertain; however, if for the 'real' component of this confirmation to be achieved, the personal knowledge of the person sharing the story is required. For Tracy, the critical difference was the ability to observe her friends actually getting the 'results' rather than someone telling her "you'll get results".

From the HEI marketing perspective, the successful graduates frequently feature in the recruitment marketing activities, but in this instance, it appears that their stories are not sufficiently 'real' or believable to evoke the positive response. While the reasons for that were explored in greater detail neither with Tracy nor with other study participants, it is likely that the HEI marketing messages are somewhat dismissed in regard to their sincerity and are dissociated from the 'real' university environment and 'real' students and their experiences. Towards the end of each interview, the participants were asked several questions that aimed at measuring their susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) whose research underlined the development of these questions, posit that people with high self-esteem are less predisposed to display normative behaviours (copy purchase behaviours or worry what others think) but may adopt informational behaviours (avoid purchases that others find not satisfactory). Tracy's recollections of her experiences support this proposition. She presented herself as a highly confident person who, when asked about the role that the opinions of her peers play in the context of general purchase behaviour, said:

What other people think of the purchase doesn't really bother me.

However, when discussing the acceptance of advice and opinion of one of her friends when purchasing camping equipment, Tracy offered an interesting explanation:

> *It was just trust and just knowing that he's not going to give you superfluous things, and just knowing him personally, he knows what he's talking about. We've talked about camping and stuff before, and he's always been on the money on every other topic that we've discussed … because he's been camping and he was able to tell me about camping, I could trust him. It was the same with VU, people who have studied at it, they told me about their experiences, and from that I was able to trust them. Like, I knew that they weren't making things up, because they'd already been and done it, so they knew what you had to do to go through it.*

So, it appears that for Tracy the acceptance of influence was related to the confirmation of the HEI communication not simply by the 'real' people and their 'real' experiences but by people that gained her trust. It is unclear; however, what actions, behaviours, and perceptions led to the acquisition of that trust. In case of her camping friend, it is likely that the trust was positively correlated with Tracy's past experiences and with the accuracy of her friend's opinions and advice; however, in case of opinions regarding Victoria University, her friends' experiences were simply shared with her and not witnessed nor experienced by herself. So, why it remains somewhat unclear what are the origins of Tracy's trust in this instance, it appears that the value of the opinion or advice given may be proportionate to the perception of sincerity associated with the person giving the advice.

Other quality-related factors that were volunteered by the participants related to the more intimate academic environment and smaller class sizes offered by Victoria University as compared to some of its key competitors. Trish recalled her perceptions regarding superior unit

delivery:

> *If they have 100 students they take care of 100 students very well where- as at X they just keep bringing students in. If you go to any student and ask them … about X or Victoria University, they will say X is like a gold digger … they will say that. And I have the same perception of them like a gold digger and they are nothing better than Victoria University. And I think, you know, that Victoria is better, it is impossible that X is better university. They have soo many students and the classes are so big…* Trish

For Trish, the critical difference was the caring, “honesty” aspect that resulted in the Victoria University limiting its student intake only to those students that the University can ‘take care of’ rather than excessive intake purely for financial gain. During the interview, Trish was prompted to elaborate on these perceptions; however, no further information was obtained. However, verbal and non-verbal communication indicated that the negative perceptions regarding university X are predominantly based on X adopting an overly businesslike position in regard to student recruitment.

Trish was not the only participant that highlighted the importance of the more intimate environment offered by Victoria University. Tracy, who came to Victoria University after studying at X, reflected on the differences between these two universities:

> *… they sort of just threw the work at you, but didn't really give you any guidance on how to study it. They just said, "Oh, you're going to have to learn how to do this on your own." I'm like, "Well why am I here then?" Be- cause you go to university to have a tutor or a lecturer explain things to you, and it often it did not feel like it in the lecture ... I think it was because they ... they want you to work in groups, and it's because they've got so many students now. Here, I like the culture a lot more because it's a lot more independent. Like,*

> *you're going to be working as a team and sharing your knowledge, but you're still expected to do the work yourself. I think it's better here because, although we still do have large classes, I've heard that we've got quite a big intake, it's better because it's a bit smaller. So, you've got camaraderie almost between different students. Like, you don't go to every single class and you've got a completely new set of people that you have to familiarise yourself with. Just the culture as well, like be- tween students and teachers, you have a better relationship with them, I've found. Like, you get a lot more one on one time to talk with them. So, it wasn't just you came in and did the work. It was, you came in, you did the work, you discussed if you had any problems, that sort of thing, which you can do at any university, I'm sure, but maybe it's just the type of teachers at VU. They just seem to be a bit more on the level with you, or they're not a student teacher, so they're not studying something else while trying to teach you. They're not going between those two sorts of mindsets as well.*

It appears that for Tracy, the issue of familiarity or closeness was multifaceted and extended from smaller classes to the camaraderie between students and, finally, greater relationship with the academic staff. Some participants discussed these factors from a purely pragmatic perspective as smaller classes offered an opportunity for more one-on-one time with teachers and instructors, which was of particular benefit to osteopathy students for whom the unit content frequently extended beyond written content and included highly complex practical elements. Others reflected on these HEI characteristics differently and from the broader perceptive stance. Their recollections of their encounters with HEIs during the choice phase indicate that the real or supposed intimacy factors contributed to a sense of being ‘cared for’ and treated in a more personal manner.

It may be that for Tracy who studied at both X and Victoria University, large class sizes and production line type of approach resulted in the

disconnection with the HEI and allowed for the development of dissatisfaction and isolation. Tracy appeared to be ambitious in her academic pursuits and when she said: “you go to university to have a tutor or a lecturer explain things to you, and it often it did not feel like it in the lecture“. It was not said with irritation but with disappointment and sadness. From her point of view, Victoria University offered different “type of teachers” - teachers that facilitated the acquisition of knowledge but also cared enough to allow for the development of a professional learner-expert relationship with students, teachers that provided her with a greater sense of sincerity.

6.2.3. Social factors and influences

The impact of social determinants on the final choice of the HEI is ranked somewhat differently by different authors writing on the topic (Bonnema and Van der Waldt 2008, Gatfield and Chen 2006, Price et al. 2003, Sojkin et al. 2014). While there appears to be no agreement as to how strong is the influence of various reference groups on student choice of HEI, there is a little doubt that the students’ family, friends and other significant persons in some way impact on that choice. It is only natural that prospective students facing one of the major decisions will likely consult their family and friends’ opinions and advice.

Participants’ recollections support the proposition that family, peers and other significant reference groups influence prospective students during the choice processes; however, it appears that the impact of these influences is predominantly restricted to the stages of predisposition and search. It does not mean that the phase of choice is entirely free of social pressures. Some of the participants referred to some sources of influences within their broad social network. These sources are discussed in the sections below.

6.2.3.1. Parental influences

Prospective students faced with one of the most significant decisions are highly likely to consult with people not only closest to them but also most

interested in the choices they make - parents and family members. Participants' stories and their reflections on the years, leading to enrolment in the HEI strongly indicate that parental advice is a significant source of influence. However, it appears that its role is somewhat more pronounced during the phases of developing the predisposition for HE and the search for a suitable HEI. During the choice phase, the influences of this reference group appear to be more subtle and less dominant in participants' accounts. It may be that in the last six months of the secondary education when the choice of HEI decision is generally made, students go through some adjustments in their relationship with the family group as they acquire greater independence in decision making. During the interviews, when reflecting on the choice phase, indicators emerged, suggesting a shift regarding the control over some choices made by students.

As discussed previously, these indicators were neither definite nor well pronounced but, nevertheless, clearly present in participants' tone of voice, the degree of authority adopted, or slight accent on the 'I'. However, parental involvement was not uniformly dismissed but simply downgraded regarding its impact on the final choice of the HEI. While some literature (e.g., Cabrera and La Nasa 2000, Galotti and Mark 1994) previously indicated that highly educated parents are likely to yield more significant influence over the entire HEI choice process, this finding was not supported by participants recollections of their experiences during the choice stage. There appear to be some differences between participants in regard to parental influences; however, no clear pattern emerged as to why some participants accepted and disclosed information pertaining to parental influence, and some did not.

It is not reasonable to doubt that parental, and greater family, involvement plays an essential role during all stages of the choice process with some of the previous studies estimating that 90% of students consult their parents regarding their HEI choices (Brooks 2002). Participants' stories, while not actively supporting that proposition, are not contradicting it. It is only that that involvement is stronger and more conspicuous in the stages

of predisposition and search. From the practical perspective, it may be that the parental interests in regard to HEI choice are more oriented towards the continuation of the post-secondary education and the suitable course choices rather than the choice of a specific institution at which the post-secondary education is to be continued.

There are some indications that emerged from the participants that indicate a relationship between the participants' attendance at the selective entry and high performing secondary schools and the greater parental involvement in the selection of the HEI. These schools themselves, as discussed previously, appear to create specific prestige of the HEI related expectations and frequently utilise the rates of student admission into the prestigious universities for their marketing purposes. It may be that parents selecting secondary schools for their children respond to these marketing messages and accept these expectations into their own value systems.

Subsequently, their involvement in all of the choice processes is to ensure adherence to the long-standing assumptions that culminate their child's secondary education.

6.2.3.2. Peers and other reference groups

While participants' stories provide compelling evidence that parental influences, while somewhat varied, do not constitute an overly important source of influence during the choice phase, the influence of peers and other important persons appear to be less ambiguous. The previous research on the topic indicates some significant inconsistencies - the study conducted by Constantinides (2011) found that peer influence ranked fourth highest out of nine-channel options; however, three years later Sojkin, Bartkowiak at al. (2014) have shown practically no significant effect of peers on influencing institutional choice. Participants' stories reveal a picture that is somewhat in-between these two extremities.

It appears that the opinions of friends and other significant people yield influence directly proportionate to the degree of trust that the participants

held in the source of the information or advice provided. Mark, who relied strongly on his uncle's advice regarding the choice of the HEI, indicated that he accepted his opinion because "he had an informed opinion, so I thought that would probably be a good person to be listening to". The perception of the "informed opinion" resulted from careful consideration of facts and was not hastily formed. The uncle in question was a professional working in a field and, as such, the participant found it reasonable to expect a degree of knowledge required to form an educated and informed opinion. Mark indicated that his reliance on his uncle's advice was further enhanced by the in-depth understanding of the Victoria University courses that his uncle was able to develop as a result of "VU graduates that come into his clinics and work with him. So, they had spoken very highly of the course as well, but was mainly just from him having conversations with other people that he passed onto me".

It was interesting to observe that other participants studying osteopathy also reported on the osteopathy practitioners treating them as highly valuable sources of advice.

> *…the osteopath that treated me had gone to VU as well, and he said had some bias but he definitely said VU was a better course.* Dylan

For George, that valuable and knowledgeable source of information was his brother that also studied at Victoria University:

> *Well, the main influence would have been my brother. He was the one I sort of seek my information from because he was already studying it.*

For George and Mark; however, the additional factor further enhanced the importance of the specific sources of influence. In both cases, the person that yielded the greatest influence was closely related to them and, as such, likely to provide information that the participants perceived as sincere and given with their best interests at heart. For Dylan, the advice he relied on came from the osteopathic practitioner who was treating him

for many years, and while the relationship was purely professional and not personal, there was also a non-verbal indication by the participant that the osteopath's own admission of bias to some degree solidified the criteria of honesty and sincerity.

It is equally noteworthy that where this criterion could not be satisfied, it appears that the opinion of friends and other significant persons was to some extent, dismissed. This was the case even for those participants who reported that they frequently seek friends' advice and accept this reference groups' influence regarding general purchases they make. This phenomenon is further discussed in Chapter 7.

6.3. Social Media and Students' Choice of HEI

The use of social media among young people in many aspects of life is pervasive. Previous research investigating these platforms and their impact found that even incidental connections formed through social communities have a strong potential for yielding influence (Ellison and Vitak 2015). However, the research into the impact of social media on students' choice process established that the social media ranked last on the list of information channels influencing the choice of the HE institution (Constantinides and Stagno 2011). Participant recollections confirm social media's peripheral position regarding the choice phase regardless of its previously established value regarding HEIs recruitment and branding (Kietzmann et al. 2011). With a notable exception of social media use to confirm social aspects of the students' life as discussed in 6.2.2.1.1., social media did not feature strongly as either the source of advice or influence.

6.4. Conclusions

This chapter closely examined a selection of factors and determinants previously identified to impact students' regarding the last stage of HEI choice processes that underpin this research. Participant recollections of their experiences during this stage support the important role of some of

these factors including the perceptions of the HEIs, the quality, and prestige of the universities considered, and advice of reference groups that were perceived by participants as credible, honest, and sincere. It appears that this last group of factors especially holds strong importance not only during the choice phase but indeed during all three phases of students' choice of the HEI. Participants' recollections of the events leading to their choice of university suggest that the broad notion of perceived 'virtuousness' formed through cognitive assessment of a range of characteristics of information sources positively impacts the value which participants assigned to these sources.

The concept of virtuousness in this context includes a group of attributes and qualities relevant to the message or information source and identified by participants in their recollections of experiences during all the three HEI choice phases. These attributes and characteristics may be synthesised predominantly to broader concepts of sincerity and credibility. The meanings that underpin these constructs found their way into participants' stories and provided an interesting perspective regarding why some information sources tend to yield greater influence than others. In the search for the essence of the student choice of the HEI phenomena from the social influence perspective, the role of these factors, as introduced by participants when recalling their experiences, will be discussed in the greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 7 - Discussion: the essence of the phenomena

I feel like she really
understood me. I could
see that he really
cares.

I felt I could trust him.

She really wanted the
best for me. I could
tell he was honest.

He understood what I want the do.

They were really passionate about the courses.

She was so knowledgeable and I felt they really wanted to give me good advice.

I took her advice because she was, you know, she was really sincere.

These statements have been uttered by the research participants when asked why specific people were more influential than others in the context of deciding on a specific higher education institution. Honesty. Trust. Genuineness. Sincerity. These are the words that reverberate through the interviews. The previous three chapters discussed each stage of the choice process. It became apparent that different participants look for advice in different places. Participants accepted influence from different sources. Some groups of people or some individuals were more important for them during a specific stage. Some were important all the time. Yet, some were important but yielded very limited influence. The aims of this research were to identify the social influence factors that impact on

student choice, to gain insight on how these factors affect student choice, and to understand better why students accept social influence in their choice of HEI - to come closer to understanding the very essence of the phenomena.

Talking to the participants about their experiences, listening to their stories, being the witness to them talking about their experiences as they lived through it - it became discernible that the key element, the essence that makes some sources of information more influential than others may indeed be the virtuousness of these sources demonstrated through characteristics of honesty, truthfulness, genuineness, and sincerity. The perceived honesty of people they came across in their journey, the truthfulness of advice they received, the genuineness and sincerity of encounters with the information or message sources. The influential people varied from participant to participant, but the importance of these characteristics, the virtuousness of these sources, remained constant.

But what is meant by virtuousness of sources of advice and information in this context? All the people that the participants encountered during their HEI choice processes were, in one way or another, honest, truthful, genuine, and sincere. High school counsellors were undoubtedly honest when assessing students' capabilities and recommending specific courses and universities. Parents and extended family members wanted the best for their children, and their advice cannot be described by anything but genuine. University marketers were likely to be sincere in their actions as their job performance was dependent on the outcomes.

So, why were some of these people perceived by the participants as virtuous when others were not? And, as this research project adopted a phenomenological approach with the broad aim of identifying the very essence of the HEI choices, is the perceived virtuousness at the core of participants' experiences and influencing their choices? More specifically, are honesty and truthfulness represented through a broader construct of credibility and sincerity that also includes genuineness, the very essences of the phenomena under investigation?

When analysing the data collected during interviews with research participants in the search for the answers to the above questions, I endeavoured to remain as objective as possible. However, it would not be reasonable to accept that my reflections on the issues of sincerity and credibility in the context of my own experiences with selecting the university at which to conduct my doctoral research, would not make any impression on the way I interpret the participants' experiences. In a way, my reflections on my own experiences formed a benchmark through which I explain this phenomena' intricacies as I examine the participants' stories.

Just over three years ago, I decided to abandon a successful career in marketing and embark on the perilous journey of doctoral research. I visited several universities, attended various sessions and seminars directed at post-graduate student recruitment, and spoke with a diverse range of university staff. All of the people I came across were pleasant, and the information given to me was satisfactory. Yet, nothing seems to be right. I could not define what was missing at this stage, but I felt it is not what I wanted or was looking for. The change from full-time employment to full-time education is always massive but even more so when you are in so-called middle years of your life. I wanted to make sure that the decision I am making is the right one.

One day, by chance, I came across the Victoria University City campus. I did not make an appointment, so I just walked in the student support office, hoping for some information as to the availability of different doctoral courses. I stood in the front of the automated ticket machine deciding on the most appropriate type of enquiry when some woman with a bunch of papers in her hands approached me with a smile and offered to help. She did not appear to be a member of the student support, but the documents she was holding suggested that she works at the University. I briefly outlined why I am here. She listened. She asked some questions about me. I talked some more about what I wanted to do, what I was hoping to do. She attentively listened to what I was saying. She thought for a moment and took me upstairs to see a staff member to help

me with my inquiry. It felt right.

Three years later, I am approaching the end of this challenging but wonderful experience. The woman I met that day in the student support office, by chance, became my primary supervisor. It was not until I conducted the interviews with the research participants that I started to question what was so different in my experience with Victoria University as opposed to four other universities I had visited. Why this particular experience was right, and the others were wrong? Why was this specific encounter with the staff member so influential in my decision? I thought about it for a while. I recalled the experience in as much detail as possible and reflected on it. And then the answer presented itself. She was genuine. She was sincere. She listened to what I was saying. She paid attention to me. She responded in accordance with what I said.

But what about the other universities and other people I spoke with? They were all nice. They provided the information I sought. They gave me flyers and booklets and directed to their websites for further information. However, in my encounters with them, I was secondary. They did not listen to me. They listened to yet another person looking for advice on postgraduate research courses. They did not respond to what I was saying. Their response was always nice, polite, and so generic that it was equally applicable to any person that may have approached them. It was not sincere.

The following sections explore concepts of sincerity and credibility about the relevant information sources, in the context of student choice, and an interpretation of the participants' experiences during the three phases of student choice of the higher education institution.

7.1. Sincerity

The word sincerity dates back to the XIII century (Dunne 2018); however, the values that underpin the concept of sincerity - honesty, trustfulness, authenticity, and genuineness - play an important part in human relations

from times immemorial. It is not surprising therefore that sincerity was found previously to be of importance in a range of areas including, among others, marketing, sales, fund-raising, and tourism (e.g., Beverland 2005, Sharpley 2014, Taheri, Gannon, Cordina and Lochrie 2018, Taylor 2001, Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts and Wigboldus 2009).

Bialystok (2011) defines sincerity in terms of concerns regarding avoiding deception of others about oneself; however, Stephen Dunne (2018), discussing sincerity in the context of 'murketing', commented on the recent changes to the concept that has seen it moved from the straightforward assessment of the information source to "subtle gestures" that underpin the "allusive mode of the new sincerity" (Dunne 2018, p.1309). While there are obvious differences between the advertising strategy of 'murketing' and social influences exerting its pressures on students during the HEI choice processes, the importance of the "allusive mode of the new sincerity" appear to be equally applicable. It is possibly even more so regarding the HEI marketing strategies that, at least to some degree, actively engage in the form of murketing via their range of recruitment activities including visits to the senior secondary schools or social media.

If we accept the broad definition of murketing as "marketer's calculated double-bluff which anticipates the iteration of an average consumer's responses, the firm's playful wink to the spectator, the advertisement's own revelation of an underlying strategic intention alongside" (Dunne 2018) then the school visits could easily be perceived as fulfilling this very description. The HEIs visits to senior secondary schools frequently focus on the general introduction of the university life, or specific disciplines, and appear to offer broad informative sessions that are; however, strongly underpinned by the recruitment objectives. It is only understandable that the prospective students faced with a deluge of local HE institutions providing generic information may question the sincerity of the messages. It may be that at this very point, the new, redefined sincerity is either confirmed or rejected through a careful assessment of the allusive characteristics of students' encounter with the HEI representatives.

At the time of these encounters, the students are going through a

stressful and intensive period of uncertainties, crucial decisions to be made, and significant changes. Overwhelmed with choices and treading a narrow path among societal expectations, academic abilities, and own dreams and desires, students are likely to seek sources of information that offer clarity and appear to address their individual concerns, rather than pre-defined issues that may or may not be relevant to them.

While, from a practical perspective, the modification of HEI communication to the individual student level may not be possible, the greater understanding of elements that contribute to the perceptions of sincerity appears to be highly beneficial to the final outcome. French novelist and diplomat Jean Giraudoux once said 'The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that you have got it made.' It is not to say that the aim of the HEI should be the 'faking' of the sincerity in their communication with the potential students but rather to illustrate the importance of sincerity in communication in general. Further, it is likely that the importance of sincerity has never been greater than now. In the western world, we are all bombarded with literally thousands of, frequently competing, marketing messages each day. How do we know which of these messages to trust? Why do we accept information from some sources and not from the other?

As early as in 1955, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) defined informational influence that serves to acknowledge obtained information as a reality and separate from the normative influence that aims to comply with the expectations of others. Deutsch and Gerard also posit that if individuals assign a difficulty to a situation or a problem, and at the same time perceive that others may have the same difficulty with the judgement of that situation, he "will not trust their judgments any more than he trusts his own" (p.630).

Consequently, the informational social influence will only take effect as the perceptions of others ability to judge the situation improves. This, at least to some degree, explains the peripheral role of peers in the choice processes. Being in the same situation and likely to go through the same uncertainties associated with HEI choice, does not provide a solid basis

for high confidence in peers opinions, as illustrated by Tracy and Nina's comments:

> *Friends and all that didn't really come into it. Like, no one really knew what they were talking about or what they were going to do. We all just had to pick somewhere to go.*

> *Friends did not have such a big impact on what I wanted to do because we were all in the same situation…you know, none of us knew anything about these universities.*

Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) findings, however, do not provide an adequate explanation of why not only peers but also secondary school and HEI personnel do not appear to be a significant source of influence. After all, they are, without a doubt, able to offer a superior judgement as a result of their knowledge and experiences. So, why do the participants not assign greater importance to the information obtained from these sources? Could it be that, at least to some extent, both groups directly benefit from the desired outcomes of their communication?

Secondary school is likely to benefit from a greater number of their graduates attending universities in general and particularly at prestigious groups of universities. HEI representatives visiting secondary schools during this crucial stage for students, do so predominantly as part of student recruitment strategies. Both parties are, predominantly, not interested in students on the individual level but rather in the overall cohort behaviour that may benefit them. It may be that at the time of their encounters with secondary school or HEI personnel, students form their perceptions in accordance with Dunne's (2018) concept of 'new' sincerity, and the basis of these perceptions are indeed in the plethora of the allusive elements observed during these encounters.

While the concept of sincerity appears not to have been tested previously in the context of student choice, an interesting insight may be offered from the tourism literature, and some parallels drawn between the host-guest interactions (Sharpley 2014) and the interactions between students

and the secondary school or HEI personnel, and other important persons serving as information sources. Sincerity, lacking pretence, and genuine engagement between the host and the tourist all have been shown to improve the overall perception of the tourism experience. Sharpley (2014), evaluating the concept of sincerity in the context of the host-tourist interaction, paid special attention to two aspects of sincerity: “sincere social interaction” and “sincere emotional response” that, combined, result in a more positive experience for tourists and reduces the feeling of being financially exploited. Sincere social interaction is predominantly concerned with the way in which the information is communicated, and the sincere emotional response deals with the feelings that result from this communication or interaction. Thus, the focus is moved from the delivery of the information to the recipient’s emotional response.

Participants’ recollections of their experiences with secondary school personnel during the search phase, and HEI personnel during the choice phase indicate that the perceived value of these encounters is directly proportionate to the positive perception of the interaction with the person from whom the advice was received. The secondary school personnel were generally not identified by participants as an important source of information and, consequently, influence during the search phase. While that may be for reasons that were not explored in detail in the study, some participants suggested a broad suspicion that it is not an individual student that is of concern to the secondary school personnel but rather the desired outcome of having as many students as possible continue with tertiary education. Mark’s comment well illustrates this point:

> *So long as you knew that you wanted to go to university and you'd picked something out, that was enough.*

Mark indicated that he received advice from the secondary school career counsellor and that he had a highly positive opinion of his school - “It was a great school”. It appears that, for Mark, it was not the sincerity of the information received from the school, which he had no reason to doubt, but the elicited emotional response to the communication of this

information that resulted in the overall negative perception of his experiences in this regard. Mark appeared to find the encounter with the career counsellor dismissive - “Oh yeah, it sounds like you have got it right. See you later.” - and not specific to his individual needs and wants. So, for Mark, the perceived lack of sincerity in his encounter with the counsellor stems not from the truthfulness of the advice received, but from the perceived deficiency in the genuineness and rectitude of the communication mechanism. Indeed, the essence of the encounter between Mark and the school career counsellor shifted from the delivery of the information to his emotional response to the way in which the information was delivered or communicated. The likely valuable communication was dismissed by Mark purely because of the perceivably disparaging nature of delivery. It appears that the truthfulness aspect of the sincerity remained intact, but the emotional sincerity of the counsellor was compromised.

The concept of emotional sincerity was previously explored in the context of leadership and its effect on the followers’ trust (Caza, Zhang, Wang and Bai 2015). Caza et al. (2015) specifically analysed the relationship between the perceived emotional sincerity of a leader as a source of information and the trust of the followers in that information. The authors identified three key qualities crucial to the positive assessment of the leader’s trustworthiness: ability, integrity, and benevolence and pose that perceptions of emotional sincerity do not significantly affect followers’ beliefs regarding the ability (knowledge or skills) but influences perceptions of integrity and benevolence.

These findings may be successfully applied to Mark and his experiences. His negative assessment of the school career counsellor’s emotional sincerity did not affect the ability component of the encounter (counsellor’s knowledge), but resulted in a non- favourable perception of the underpinning intentions, in Mark’s case the lack of interest - “So long as you knew that you wanted to go to university and you had picked something out, that was enough”. In the context of this research this is of special interest as the lack of benevolence - the perceived lack of interest

displayed by the school counsellor - may result in lower acceptance of the influence from that source (Caza et al. 2015).

While Mark's negative perceptions of emotional sincerity of his secondary school career counsellor resulted in a dismissive assessment of him as the valuable information source, two participants specifically recalled their positive experiences with secondary school personnel. Paul and Kate highlighted the perceived 'closeness' of the secondary school personnel from whom they received the advice. When prompted further about the meaning of 'closeness' in this context, both Paul and Kate described what could be easily labelled as the very benevolence lacking in Mark's encounter. It is likely that they perceived the secondary school personnel as emotionally sincere as the specific people they encountered were able to create an environment in which students' feelings, doubts, and insecurities were openly shared.

Consequently, the secondary school personnel were perceived as acting in a more benevolent way towards students (Butler, Egloff, Wlhelm, Smith, Erickson and Gross 2003), leading to higher quality, more positive connections (Caza et al. 2015) between secondary school personnel and students. In contrast, the environment contributing to suppressing emotional expressions is likely to result in inhibited interpersonal connections (Butler et al. 2003), and development of negative perceptions of being not listened to or not being viewed as an individual with a unique set of needs and characteristics.

Kate's comment indicates that her positive perceptions were directly related to being viewed as individuals, to being understood.

> *This was in year 12 so two years ago. And she would ask me questions what I would like to do in the future, different pathways if I did not make the ATAR score, different courses, different uni, and the whole bunch of different options. Sometimes she made me really stressed out because I was thinking what about if I don't get to uni and stuff. But then she*

really understood me and that helped me out because I could talk about my problems.

For Kate, the environment created by the career counsellor, an environment conducive to talking freely about her concerns, was sufficient to have created a perception of being understood and, subsequently, viewing the entire experience as positive regardless of being simultaneously stressful. Kate's career counsellor appears to have encouraged emotional expressions and information sharing - "she would ask me questions what I would like to do in the future", "I could talk about my problems". It may be that this is predominantly due to this openness and the perceptions of emotional sincerity that Kate considered the secondary school counsellor as one of the greatest sources of influence in her choice of the HEI journey.

While Paul was not as forthcoming with information about his relationship with the secondary school personnel, he also mentioned the element of closeness.

Well there were only two major unis that I researched and really inquired about, it was ACU and Vic Uni because my former high school teacher, she went to ACU and she told me, "That was a great school." I thought yeah, maybe I can go there.

When asked to reflect further on why this teacher was so influential, he said: "because I still am pretty close with her". Neither Paul nor Kate mentioned a greater quality of advice received from the secondary school personnel, nor the superior attributes that may point to those personnel having greater knowledge. It appears that the higher rating of their encounters was assigned predominantly because, in their cases, the secondary school personnel was perceived as someone who 'really understood me'. And, if they really understood them as individuals, then it is likely that the advice given was perceived as more suited or tailor-made and, subsequently, appeared to have achieved a greater sincerity score.

The perception of being viewed as an individual is likely to have alleviated the possible mistrust assigned to generic information that may be viewed as given predominantly to support secondary school strategies of having as many students as possible continue to post-secondary education.

Tuk et al. (2009), conducting research on sales and sincerity, confirm the relationship between the perceptions of ulterior motive for recommending a product and the mistrust on the part of the customer. HEIs visits to schools are not necessarily a direct sales attempt; nevertheless, they are underpinned by the recruitment efforts. It appears likely that the prospective students' awareness of this ulterior motive lowers their perceptions of sincerity on the part of HEI personnel. However, Tuk et al. (2009) offer another insight that may, at least to some degree, suggest a solution. Fairly reasonable suspicion of an ulterior motive may be alleviated by the disclosure of any potential intentions and, subsequently, may lead to a more positive evaluation of the source of information. Accordingly, it may be that the simple statement by HEI representatives regarding their key purposes for the school visits may indeed assist in the development of a more trustworthy relationship with students. This solution need not be restricted to the HEI visits to the secondary schools, but it is likely that the same approach may be extended into other recruitment activities, including career expos and HEI open days. While this view may appear to be somewhat oversimplified, some of the participants' recollections of their lived experiences appear to support it.

Discussing various encounters with HEI personnel, participants' stories indicate that their perceptions of how valuable the given source of information was improved once the disclosure of the potential intentions took place. This point is well illustrated by Dylan, osteopathy student who highlighted the osteopathic practitioner treating him privately as a specifically important source of influence:

> *…the osteopath that treated me had gone to VU as well, and he said that he had some bias but he definitely said VU was a better course.*

The disclosure of the obvious bias that the practitioner attended and completed the university he was recommending, appear to be made in the early stages of the participants encounter and immediately established a platform of trust and sincerity. Dylan extensively discussed the benefits of the specific treatment he received and which resulted in the satisfactory resolution of the ongoing sports issue. He spoke highly of the specific practitioner both about the professional aspect of their relationship as well as more personal attention and advice given regarding career choices facing Dylan.

It is likely that the combination of the disclosure of the bias, combined with the credibility established through professional practice, and attention paid to the individual needs and dilemmas facing the participant, all created favourable conditions and formed a valuable source of influence. This proposition is also supported by recollections of other participants who, through different circumstances and varied pathways, appear to point to the similar combination of factors. As mentioned previously, Paul identified one of his secondary school teachers as a major source of influence and advice.

Similar to Dylan's story, all three of the elements - identification of bias, credibility, and specific attention paid to individual circumstances of the participant - were also satisfied in Paul's case. The teacher not only disclosed the information about her attendance at one of the HEIs considered by the participant but was perceived to be '*great teacher*', the same satisfying the credibility criteria. Further, the participant specifically highlighted his ongoing positive relationship with the teacher on a more personal level.

Closeness may indicate the greater knowledge about the participant's specific set of conditions and, consequently, the advice that is more targeted to these conditions. Closeness is often an antecedent to trust (Naz 2019). During phases of search and choice, participants frequently referred to situations where specific behaviour on the part of people providing the information indicated greater attention paid to participants' unique needs and requirements.

> *I was talking to the lecturers and I asked some questions and they could not answer it so they took my details and they actually called me back! … their customer service people approach you and talk to me about what I would like to do and what are the different options and…I know it is a form of marketing but they were very informative and really wanted to help me with my courses.* Trish

> *It wasn't just that they were there for the sake of being there or doing a bit of promotional work, it was a real student who'd come through and was telling me that it was because they meant it was actually good, it wasn't just they felt obliged to, or anything like that.* Tracy

It appears that this 'personalisation' of behaviour had an immediate positive impact on the way in which the participants viewed the information exchange. These participants that experienced the more personalised service were not only highly positive about the source of information, but it is likely that these sources yield a far greater influence.

The disclosure of the motivation that underpins the HEI actions, the perceived emotional sincerity of the communication source, the personalisation of the communication - these elements of sincerity appear to offer clear benefits regarding the overall perception of these activities and their value in HEI choice processes. Indeed, these factors form the meandering theme, rising to the surface with various intensity during the recollections of participants lived experience, the very essence of their experiences. There appears to be little doubt that the sincerity, and especially the 'new' sincerity as defined by Dunne (2018) - based on subtle and elusive elements and characteristics - constitutes a powerful determinant during the choice phase; however, it needs to be highlighted that the sincerity in this context works in conjunction with the perceived credibility, as it was illustrated in stories of Paul and Dylan, rather than in isolation. It is the combination of these two elements that emerged in the participants' recollections to be of a specific value to them.

7.2. Credibility versus Sincerity

The concept of credibility differs somewhat from that of sincerity. The dictionary (lexico.com) definition of credibility is that of competence and believability, while sincerity is predominantly concerned with genuineness, trustworthiness, and benevolence. Pornpitakpan (2004) reviewing the effects of the credibility of the information source on persuasion, defined credibility in terms of the cognitive assessment of the knowledge, expertise, and trustworthiness of that information source. While knowledge and expertise are predominantly linked only to credibility, trustworthiness is closely connected to the perceptions of sincerity discussed in the previous section. Providing an important tool for the evaluation of messages and sources of communication, it is not surprising that the complex and intuitive concept of credibility has been found to have a positive impact on persuasion (Eisend 2006, Pornpitakpan 2004).

Participants frequently referred to factors related to competence and believability when discussing sources of information that were of importance in their HEI choice processes. It is only natural that, when faced with a difficult choice, young people seek advice from sources that they perceive as knowledgeable. The preference and reliance on information coming from people or groups displaying these characteristics are evident across all three stages of the choice processes and emerge in reference to most of the groups that were found to yield the influence.

During the phase of the search, secondary school personnel did not feature highly as a valuable source of information with the exception of the participants that specifically highlighted the competence factor. Trish, one of the few participants who relied on advice and guidance of their secondary school teachers, said:

> *I spoke with some of my teachers because I don't know what I am good at and I wanted my teachers to point out what I am good at.*

Trish appears to have accepted the advice of her teachers as she perceived them to be knowledgeable about what she is 'good at' and contrasted their competence in this regard with her own lack of understanding of her academic strengths or weaknesses - 'I do not know what I am good at'. These self-limitations and the acknowledgement of the secondary school personnel competence were also voiced by other participants:

> *They sort of swayed me towards doing subjects that I was going to perform really well in.* George

It is also of interest that some of the participants who did not assign significant value to the advice of the secondary school personnel, highlighted the very lack of competence as illustrated by Jennifer's comment:

> *Our school careers counsellor was a bit clueless I would say.*

The concept of credibility did not emerge purely with the secondary school personnel but was prevalent in the context of family, peers and other sources of information and, potentially, influence. Kate, discussing the search phase, highlighted the value of her father's education in regard to the advice given to her:

> *Obviously, all my sisters are going to uni or went to uni and they were giving me really good positive conversations about it. And my dad especially because he has his psychology degree and psychology background so he could talk to me about what is going on.*

While the word 'especially' suggests that the education in Kate' case was valued higher than the currency of her sisters' HE experiences, it may be due to the fact that she was able to access and compare both sources of information - one with formal education and perceived competence, and one where the competence was still 'in the making', but the information is obtained from the equal source. However, the currency of experiences

took precedence when Kate highlighted the importance of her peers' advice as compared to the secondary school counsellor:

> *But when I was deciding which university to go to, I was talking to my friends. Actually, mostly to my friends…I mean… if they were at the university then they knew more than the counsellor.*

Other participants also reported on the importance of relying on the advice of peers that are knowledgeable about HE in general, and the specific HEI that was under consideration in particular:

> *I talked to my friends that already have some experience with the universities I was looking at.* Adam

Conversely, when the knowledgeability or competence factor was not satisfied, the influence of peers drastically diminishes:

> *Friends and all… they didn't really come into it. Like, no one really knew what they were talking about or what they were going to do.* Tracy

> *Friends did not have such a big impact on what I wanted to do because we were all in the same situation…you know, none of us new anything about these universities…* Nina

The same search for credible sources of information emerged about other significant people that yield influence on participants. Mark assigned significant value to his uncle's advice due to his perception that the uncle 'had an informed opinion, so I thought that he would probably be a good person to be listening to'. It also appears that this perception of competence was carefully formed as the uncle was a professional working in the field that Mark had planned to study and, as such, it was reasonable to expect a degree of knowledge. George accepted influence from his brother who studied the same course and at the same university that was in his choice set and eventually enrolled in:

> *Well, the main influence would have been my brother. He was the one I sort of seek my information from because he was already studying it.*

The multidimensional and complex concept of credibility, through different forms and appearances, appeared in most of the participants' stories. Adopting a social influence perspective, this is hardly surprising. The credibility of the influencer has been identified to significantly improve persuasion by increasing the power of the influencing party (Kelman 2006). Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) identified three goals that underpin the individuals' propensity to accept social influence. Among them, the Goal of Accuracy deals with the desire to form, and act upon, the accurate perceptions of reality, which are likely to respond positively if the source of information is perceived to be knowledgeable and credible. Operating broadly within the information influence, it is reasonable that the greater perception of credibility ought to result in greater acceptance of influence as it better serves the undermining purpose of acknowledging the obtained information as reality.

Participants' stories support this proposition. These participants that acknowledge the sources of influence that, in general, appear to yield only limited influence, specifically highlight the credibility of the source. However, while both the sincerity and credibility, especially when operational together, appear to play an important role in the acceptance of influence in the context of student choice of the HEI, there are some substantial differences as to how and when the perceptions of sincerity and credibility are formed. As observed through interviews, perceptions of credibility appear to rely on the evaluation of knowledgeability of the information sources that are based on the cognitive assessment of factual evidence. Participants frequently justified their perceptions of sources credibility in their stories - 'he has his psychology degree and psychology background', 'he was already studying it', 'they have some experience with the universities I was looking at'. In the case of sincerity; however, the processes of forming these perceptions appear to be more ambiguous.

7.3. The Essence of the phenomena

The adoption of phenomenological enquiry allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The lived experience of the HEI choice processes, as described in participants' recollections, was analysed in search of the very essence that underpins the experience. In this search, it was important that it was the participants' experiences and not researcher interpretation of these experiences that were used to identify the very essence of the social influences on the HEI choice (Giorgi 2012, 2017).

Analysing the data, with its richness of descriptions, it emerged that the essence of the participants' experiences, the key common elements that result in some sources being influential in their HEI choice processes while leaving other sources less important, is a powerful combination of sincerity and credibility. It is especially the perceptions of the sincerity of the information sources that appear to be formed through processes that appear to be complex and relying on a plethora of allusive and subtle elements and characteristics.

Sometimes it was just a small gesture, an indication of special attention, an unexpected follow up on an inquiry, a genuine interest in their specific situation. While these elements indeed may be fleeting, their impact appears to be significant. It needs to be noted at this point, that discussing the very essences of participants' experiences as they lived through it, the researcher follows the methodology that deliberately allows for the reliance on researcher's own notes and observations, and utilises her own reflections written down after each of the interviews, rather than purely referring to the interview transcripts.

However, this methodology does not imply the interfering with participants' experiences nor their descriptions of these experiences. Rather, it introduces the faint elements that extended beyond the verbal recollections shared by participants and augments their stories with participants' voices continuously present. And it is this mélange of

credibility and sincerity that reverberates in their stories.

However, these two constructs - sincerity and credibility - appeared to be assessed by participants in very different ways. Again, it is the adoption of the phenomenological enquiry that allowed for the recognition of both the 'real', cognitively assessed elements and characteristics, and the 'irreal' attributes (Jackson, Vaughan and Brown 2018) such as a sense of sincerity and genuineness. Perceptions of credibility appear to require a logical evaluation of knowledgeability and believability that either takes place during the encounter with the influencing party or formed previously based on the available information and common knowledge. The assessment of sincerity, however, seems to be formed at the very time of the encounter between the participants and the influencing party, especially if the influencing party does not originate in the participants' immediate reference group - i.e. school career counsellors or HEI personnel.

Perceptions of sincerity, or lack of it, appear to be developed based on the interactions that take place between both parties at the time of this encounter. As much as the elements and characteristics that underpin the sincerity are allusive and subtle, so are the participants' recollections of them. Some of the participants were able to clearly identify and communicate verbally the specific elements that have led to the development of their perceptions of sincerity. Others engaged a range of verbal and non-verbal mechanisms to describe the delicate features that resulted in the development of these perceptions. However, it should be noted that both groups of participants appear to emphasise the perception of sincerity rather than the perceptions of insincerity. While the concept of sincerity, in one form or another, emerged from all participants' stories, none of them reported on the insincerity or the negative emotions associated with insincerity.

Subsequently, it is likely that the individuals or groups that could potentially yield influence, were perceived as sincerity-neutral unless sincerity was confirmed. As the two elements - sincerity and credibility - appear to affect the acceptance of the influence of the sources of information, the cognitively confirmed credibility of the source establishes

a neutral platform that upon the development of the perceptions of sincerity, together serve to acknowledge the perceived information as reality.

Participants frequently referred to the credibility of the source prior to introducing sincerity or, at least, indicated that order. The exceptions include family members and peers in which case both credibility and sincerity appear to be cognitively acknowledged prior. That point is well illustrated by recollections of Adam:

> *Because he is a good friend of mine and he is honest and he is an intelligent person so his opinion matters. He has helped me a lot deciding what to do in life.*

Adam valued the advice of his friend whom he confirmed to be a credible source of information: “he is an intelligent person, so his opinion matters”. Further, the credibility factor was supported by previous, positive experiences: “He has helped me a lot deciding what to do in life”. Once the credibility determinant was established, Adam confirmed the sincerity factor: “he is a good friend of mine, and he is honest”. Being ‘good friend’ implies that his friend is concerned with Adam’s wellbeing and, as he is previously perceived as honest, the sincerity augments the credibility to uphold his friend’s position as a valuable source of information and influence. In Adam’s case, both elements were confirmed cognitively prior to the encounters and processes related to the HEI choice.

Similar to other participants accepting advice from family members, friends or trusted teachers, the sources of information were able to be accepted and evaluated positively in regard to the credibility and sincerity, long before the advice was sought and accepted. However, the prior cognitive assessment is frequently not available regarding the external sources that include secondary school personnel, HEI activities or other sources of information.

While the credibility factor, in such instances, is likely to be cognitively evaluated based on the broad and general sources of knowledge, the

sincerity determinant appears to be a result of the careful evaluation of allusive and delicate elements surrounding the encounter with the influencing party. Trish especially highlighted the factors that contributed to the positive evaluation of one of the universities pre-selected during the search phase:

> *The first time I walked into X University when I was still in high school and on open day,…I was talking to the lecturers and I asked some questions and they could not answer it so they took my details and they actually called me back and they contacted the person in the finance area and passed to them my questions.*
>
> *When you walk into X University their customer service people approach you and talk to me about what I would like to do and what are the different options and … I know it is a form of marketing but they were very informative and really wanted to help me with my courses. I think they understand that it may be difficult for me to choose.*
>
> *So, when I was talking with these people in X University they were asking me and then they told me to talk to this person and consider these things that I did not think of before.*

Trish's recollections clearly illustrate the development of the determinants of credibility and sincerity. The credibility factor for Trish's, and other secondary school students, is established through acceptance of information received from a broad range of sources that include secondary school personnel, peers, family, and general perceptions of HEI institutions communicated through media. However, the perceptions of sincerity were formed only at the actual encounter with the X University.

For Trish, the process was multi-layered. Initially, at the open day, the 'caring' element of sincerity was established through paying particular attention to her individual needs - "I asked some questions, and they

could not answer it, so they took my details, and they actually called me back, and they contacted the person in the finance area and passed to them my questions". Trish verbally and non-verbally indicated her positive surprise at the HEI taking time to address her questions. She especially highlighted the understanding of her individual situation - "they were very informative and really wanted to help me with my courses. I think they understand that it may be difficult for me to choose."

The HEI wanted to help HER with her courses. They understood that it might be difficult for HER to choose. For Trish, the perceptions of sincerity were formed via nothing more than the perceived individualisation and personalisation of HEI responses, and extra attention paid to her as the customer: "they were asking me and then they told me to talk to this person and consider these things that I did not think of before".

This last statement especially highlights an important aspect of HEI communication. It is anticipated that most of the secondary school students visiting HEIs during the open arrived equipped with a selection of questions to ask. Consequently, HEIs personnel are predominantly centred on answering the questions rather than anticipating the areas of concern that may exist outside of potential students' area of knowledge - what they 'did not think of before'. Of course, it is simply impossible to anticipate what prospective students do and do not know; however, the subtle change in focus from predominantly the information source to a forum in which greater attention is paid to students' individual situations and needs, may result in the increased perceptions of sincerity and, subsequently, increased positive evaluation of the HEI.

Trish's story is indicative of other participants' recollections. The personalisation, greater attention paid to the individual, honesty, truthfulness - these are all the elements of sincerity that weave through the participants' reflections of their HEI choice processes. And, like for Trish, the evaluation of these elements appears not to be pre-determined and instead takes place during the actual encounter with the influencing party. For some of the participants, it was a student encountered during Open day, whose credibility resulted from the currency of knowledge and

was augmented by the perceived sincerity that stems from taking time to walk the participants through the campus. For others, it was an osteopath who successfully treated the medical complaint but also inquired into the prospective student's wants and desires before offering any advice.

The forms and ways in which the elements of sincerity surface during these encounters are varied but share common characteristics that underpin them. They all stepped away from treating the participants as indistinguishable members of society and recognised them as individuals - individuals who embark upon one of the more significant decisions of their young lives, decisions that are complex and complicated. It is evident that in the HEI choice processes, one size does not fit all.

In discussing sincerity in the context of HEI choice, there is another model that deserves mention. Friestad and Wright (1994) developed a Persuasion Knowledge Model, which postulates that people, through a plethora of interactions and experiences such as "first hand experiences in social interactions with friends, family, and co-workers; from conversations about how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours can be influenced; from observing marketers and other known persuasion agents; and from commentary on advertising and marketing tactics in the news media" (p.1), develop a specific knowledge that comes to action during various episodes of persuasion.

Further, Campbell and Kirmani (2000), in the research on consumers' use of the Persuasion Knowledge in the sales setting, found that this knowledge could be applied easily, if not automatically when the influencing party behaviour makes the motives accessible. Otherwise, the application of persuasion knowledge is likely to involve cognitive skills. In both instances; however, the application of the Persuasion Knowledge may affect the perceptions of the sincerity of the influencing party.

The model was applied previously in advertising and sales; however, its applicability in the HEI choice processes is likely to be limited predominantly due to the participants' age and possibly limited opportunity to gain the broad general experiences required to develop the

Persuasion Knowledge. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that in over two decades that have passed between the development of the Persuasion Knowledge Model and this research, the developments in technology, access to various media through electronic platforms and increase in the marketing communication targeting ever-younger audiences, is likely to result in greater persuasion knowledge among secondary school children. While this proposition is outside of the scope of this research project, it is an area that may benefit from further studies.

7.4. Conclusions

Participant recollections strongly indicate that the combination of sincerity, especially the 'new' sincerity grounded in an array of subtle and allusive characteristics, and credibility constitute important determinants during the HEI choice processes and, indeed, the very essence of that underpins the acceptance of influence from some sources and not from the others. Elements of sincerity, through different forms and variations, emerged in most of the participants' stories; however, it became discernible that only by working together with the perceived credibility rather than in isolation, that these two elements form a considerable force affecting student choice.

Both sincerity and credibility, especially when operating simultaneously, appear to be of importance for the acceptance of influence in the context of student choice of the HEI. Importantly, it emerged from this research that apparently, perceptions of credibility and sincerity were formed differently by students. Perceptions of credibility rely on the predetermined cognitive evaluation of the information sources' knowledgeability, whereas perceptions of sincerity are formed through the assessment of delicate characteristics of the actual encounter with the influencing agent.

The subtle characteristics of these encounters were frequently difficult to clearly define; nevertheless, they share a common thread of personalisation of communication and the perceived benevolence of the

information source. With the important role of sincerity and credibility in the HEI choice processes, and especially during the decision-making stages of search and choice, these factors deserve careful attention and further research. The formation of the perceptions of sincerity at the time of the encounter with the influencing agent may hold a special significance for these sources of information that appear to be fairly low rated regarding the influence they yield in the participants' recollections - HEI activities that include open days, career expos, and visits to schools.

From a marketing perspective, these findings are of uppermost importance. Regardless of the chosen career path, prospective students are faced with the ever-increasing choice of HEIs offering the same, or similar, range of courses, facilities, delivery modes, and social opportunities. Any knowledge that may lead to the increased positive perceptions of the HEI may improve the likelihood that this HEI will be included in the choice set and, eventually, result in an enrolment. Further, the changes necessary for that to happen are relatively minor and of low cost. It is not the combination of recruitment activities that necessarily require an adjustment, but rather the manner in which these activities are conducted.

Prospective students are customers shopping for an important and expensive high involvement product, with multiple influencers and high risks involved. As such, they appear to seek the personalised service from the source that they perceive as both - credible and sincere. Since the sincerity factor is evaluated at the time that the communication with prospective students takes place, the final outcome is entirely at the hands of HEI academic and marketing personnel involved in these communication processes. The findings of this research project indicate that these communication processes need to be carefully planned and specifically designed to facilitate the development of perceptions of sincerity. This is not to say that the HEI academic and marketing personnel are not currently sincere but, instead, that the development of these perceptions appears to be of such importance that purely from the business perspective, it cannot be left to chance.

Chapter 8 - Conclusions and recommendations for further research

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of HE students in regard to their HEI choice processes through the identification of social influence factors that impact on students' choice of HEIs, and an investigation of how these social influence factors affect student choice of HEI. To satisfy these objectives, this study addresses the three research questions: What constitutes the social influence factors that participants perceive to influence their HEI choice? In what ways do these factors influence student choice? Why do students accept social influence in that context? To answer these questions, a selection of key contributions from the student choice and social influence literature, provided the conceptual foundation for the thesis that comprised of three theoretical perspectives: a tripartite model of higher education student choice (Hossler and Gallagher 1987), goals of accuracy, affiliation and maintaining a positive self-concept that underlies the acceptance of influence (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), and the processes of compliance, internalisation and identification through which the influence is accepted (Kelman 2006).

Introducing a novel, social influence-oriented perspective to the HEI choice issue, and adopting the qualitative research design, this phenomenological study extended beyond just recognising the existence of the influencing factors and explored their effect on student choice decisions. The phenomenon was studied overarching the three phases of higher education institution choice: predisposition, search, and choice. The data collected during the interviews, together with the researcher's own field notes and theoretical notes, were analysed through each of these phases. The adoption of this approach allowed for the participants' stories to evolve as they recall their journeys from early memories of wanting to pursue post-secondary education up to the final enrolment in their chosen higher education institution, and represent participants' own

understanding and subjective meaning of their encounters with social influences throughout these journeys. The thesis is structured in a way that follows this path.

Chapter Two explored the current literature on the topic and identified research areas that may have been, to some extent, overlooked by other studies on social influence and student choice of HEI. Hossler and Gallagher's model (1987), and other combined models of student choice of HEI discuss a broad range of factors that impact student choices, with a strong emphasis on stages of predisposition and search, and fairly limited attention paid to the actual selection of the specific HEI. Further, a range of social pressures and influences - family, peers, social media - that influence students throughout the HEI selection process is identified, but the forms of these influences take, and the reasons why these influences are accepted by students are predominantly not explored.

Chapter Three dealt with methodological concerns and especially with the choice of phenomenological methodology that is utilised to understand an individual's relationship to the world. The ultimate purpose of this study was to uncover the essence, or the very nature about HEI choice phenomena, and to understand young people's experiences with social pressures in the context of their choice of HE institution. The use of phenomenology provided a suitable avenue to uncover the voices of participants regarding their lived experience. Their recollections of these experiences are discussed in Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven.

8.1. Research Conclusions

This section deals with the research findings for each of the three research questions: What constitutes the social influence factors that participants perceive to influence their HEI choice? In what ways do these factors influence student choice? Why do students accept social influence in that context?

8.1.1. Social influence factors - influence on HEI choice

The social influence factors that participants perceived as having an impact on their HEI choice processes were examined within the stages of predisposition, search, and choice.

8.1.1.1. Social influence factors in the predisposition phase

The recollections of participants of their experiences in the predisposition stage were somewhat vague and unclear; however, several social influence factors emerged throughout their stories. The strongest of these factors within this phase appears to be parental and family influences taking different forms and processes. For some participants, especially those whose parents, and other family members, were highly educated, the influence of parents and the extended family group was almost unnoticeable. The message of continuing an education past secondary level was weaved through the pre-defined and expected progression through life, and any questions on a subject were met with an element of surprise. Indeed, for this group, HEI attendance was a natural development rather than a consciously made decision. It also appears that for participants with parents who were themselves formally educated, the parental influence took precedence over other potential sources of influence such as secondary school or HEI activities, which, subsequently, were inconsequential.

For participants that did not have formally educated parents, immediate families were still the most significant sources of influence; however, this influence was manifested in a slightly different way, with participants frequently reporting on simply complying with parental expectations. Consequently, within the broad factor of parental and family influences, it is the parental education that appears to be an important determinant.

Conversely, the influence of peers and high school friends were not identified as a significant source of influence during the stage of predisposition, and only very few participants volunteered any information regarding this reference group. There is some indication, though, that peers

are more likely to yield influence during the predisposition stage for these participants who decide to continue their education years after finishing the secondary school than for those participants who followed a standard secondary school to HE path. It is likely that this may be a result of unfavourable comparison between the career outcomes with and without tertiary qualifications.

Similarly, neither the secondary school nor the HEI activities have emerged in the participants' recollections to be of significant influence; however, their role varied somewhat between different participants and appear to be dependent on school types and participants' cultural background. For participants born outside of Australia, and especially for those participants who arrived in Australia during senior secondary years, school and HEI activities yield a very limited influence. For Australian born participants, the influence of these groups was also not significant, except for participants attending private and selective entry schools, who reported on the compliance with schools' expectations of the entire cohort progressing to higher education.

8.1.1.2. Social influence factors in the search phase

Three broad groups, parents and close family members, peers and secondary school and HEI personnel, were also identified by participants when discussing the second stage of the choice processes - search. Similar to the predisposition phase, parents and other close family members played an important role; however, this role appeared to be multidimensional and again, dependent on parents' educational attainment. For students with tertiary-educated parents, their role was predominantly to provide advice and assist in processes leading to inclusion, and exclusion, of specific HEIs from the choice set. For other participants, the lack of parental tertiary education was perceived as a limitation of their experiences and knowledgeability in this context and, subsequently, their role was somewhat limited to being an important source of support rather than information.

Similar to parents, the influence of peers appears to be directly

proportionate to the participants' perceptions of knowledgeability among their peers; however, in a general sense, the influence of this group seems to be far greater during the search than during the predisposition phase. It is conceivable that during the final years of secondary education, all prospective students gain a greater knowledge regarding HE options and, consequently, their credibility as reliable sources of information increases.

The role and influence of the secondary school personnel varied significantly between the participants and was dependent on the cultural background of participants and their perceptions of the individual personnel members. The key difference between predisposition and search stages is that the fairly negative view of this group in the later phase was uniformed across all types of schools - private, public, and selective entry. The few participants who acknowledged the positive influence of secondary school personnel also highlighted a positive relationship with the teacher or career counsellor that frequently resulted in a more personal encounter and consequently moved away from the perception of a school employee to a trusted member of the reference group.

HEI activities introduced by participants include a selection of in-school sessions with HEI representatives, and on-campus events, with both groups of these activities were inconsequential in regard to their overall importance as a valuable source of information. The HEI sessions conducted in school were viewed as an extension of career counselling, and the less than positive value attributed to the counselling was extended to the HEI visits. The on-campus events were generally perceived positively with participants reporting significant reliance on these sources of information.

The additional sources of information and influence introduced when discussing the search phase included HEI characteristics and HEI prestige and social network expectations. Practical considerations, including course availability, the HEI's geographical location, availability of public transport, and the perceptions regarding the quality and prestige of

the course rather than a university itself, all featured strongly among the most important determinants. Further, social expectations of progressing to one of the prestigious Group of Eight universities that market themselves as Australia's leading HEIs were reported on by these participants that attended selective entry or high performing academically secondary schools, or whose families recently migrated to Australia.

8.1.1.3. Social influence factors in the choice phase

During the choice phase, the set of factors reported by participants to have an effect on their choice of HEI was expanded further and, in addition to factors already identified during the search phase included: HEI communication, participants' perceptions of HEIs and the quality that HEIs represent, including social aspects of student life.

Elements of the HEI communication that emerged to have an important impact on HEI choice include websites and visits to the campuses. On the other hand, neither the attendance at career expos nor printed material produced by universities did feature strongly in the participants' recollections. It also became apparent that social aspects of student life are of great importance to the participants, and the general feel of the campuses, social life, and sports activities all featured strongly in their stories.

Perceptions of HEI quality and prestige were also of importance; however, in contrast to the search phase. The evaluation of these aspects relied on local and international employability, class sizes or perceptions regarding marketing activities delivered by HEIs. The conventional university ranking appears to be of importance predominantly to participants from the non-English speaking background and those that arrived in Australia recently and may be explained by a highly aspirational focus of these groups resulting from their cultural background and value placed on education (Carling and Collins 2017).

The role of parents and family influences appear to be significantly less pronounced during the choice phase; however, there seems to be a

relationship between the participants' attendance at the selective entry and high performing secondary schools and the greater parental involvement in the selection of the HEI. Also, these schools themselves, are likely to exert an influence through the creation of expectations related to the HEI prestige.

Participants' recollections allude to the stronger role of peers, and other important people compared to the stages of Predisposition and Search. However, their influence is directly proportionate to participants' trust regarding the knowledgeability of these groups.

Social media, regardless of its fast-increasing usage among young people, surprisingly did not feature strongly as a source of advice or influence, and participants' stories indicate that its role was frequently reduced to confirming social aspects of the students' life and the general 'look and feel' of the HEIs under consideration. Table 10 summarises the key factors and the strength of the influence they yield on each of the HEI choice stages.

Table 10. Key factors and the influence they yield on choice stages

Factor	**Predisposition**	**Search**	**Choice**
Parents and close family members	High	High/ Medium	Low
Peers and significant persons	Low	Low	Medium/ Low
Secondary school and secondary school personnel	Medium	Low	Low
HEI communication	Low	Medium	Medium/ Low
HEI characteristics	na	Medium/ High	High
HEI prestige and perceptions of quality	na	Medium	Medium
Social media	Low	Low	Low

8.1.2. In what ways do these factors influence student choice?

The six groups of influencers that were identified by participants' to be of importance - parents and family members, peers, secondary school personnel, HEI communication, characteristics, and prestige and perceptions of quality - yield their influence in different ways and with different intensity throughout the choice processes.

8.1.2.1. Influence of parents and family members

Parental influence features strongly across all stages; however, its role is significantly varied. Student family background has been identified as one of the key factors impacting the development of predispositions to pursue post-secondary education. In this context, three aspects of family background appear to be of particular importance: parental education, socio-economic status, and student attributes.

Students of parents with formal post-secondary education more frequently discussed their own plans to pursue tertiary education with them and other family members. The greater influence of these group is likely to stem from shared family values and students' perceptions of knowledgeability of reliance of their parents on HE related issues that they themselves experience.

Participants' recollections concur with social influence theory (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004) that proposes that the basic reference group to which participants belong, may influence their behaviour by contributing to the development of aspirations to pursue HE and, the same, establishing a frame of reference (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). Participants with university-educated parents referred to extensive discussions regarding their HE choices, and it appears that these parents contributed to the environment in which post-secondary education became a natural, commonly understood progression.

Roles of parents in this context and students adhering to the expressed or

perceived expectations of their parents or matching their behaviour with the observed behaviour of family members, are all in agreement with processes of compliance, identification and internalisation. Kelman's (2006) processes of compliance, identification and internalisation are operational through complying with accepted family norms (compliance), acknowledgment of benefits of HE (identification), and accepting these benefits into an internal value system (internalisation).

Parental influences during the predisposition stage were also closely linked with influences exerted by siblings in this context (Kim and Gasman 2011, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell and Perna 2008). It may be only expected that older children in the family attending the post-secondary HEI are likely to yield influence on their younger siblings either directly or indirectly. As discussed in the context of parental education, student family, and especially parents and siblings, form the most immediate reference group. In turn, this reference group is likely to influence further behaviour by establishing a point of reference or a standard of expected behaviour. Students observing the behaviour of their older, HEI attending siblings, accept those as expected norms. This form of influence is in accordance with social norms influence (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004) that proposes that in times of uncertainty we look at norms to "inform us about what is typically done" (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004, p.597).

8.1.2.2. Influence of peers and other significant persons

During both stages, search and choice, the importance of peer's advice appeared to be limited and strongly dependent on the students' perceptions of knowledgeability among the members of their reference circle. These findings confirm that the acceptance of this influence is likely to be directly correlated with the perception of knowledgeability as it is this observation that advances the credibility of the evidence. Subsequently, friends and other significant people's opinions were identified to yield influence directly proportionate to the trust that the participants held in the source of the information and advice provided. The informational social influence theory supports these notions, accepting that this type of social influence only takes place when the

positive perceptions of others' ability to judge the situation are formed. This does explain not only the relatively peripheral role of peers in the choice processes but also a substantially greater role of significant other people that satisfy the criteria of knowledgeable, competent sources of information which peers, frequently being in the same situation and likely to go through exactly the same uncertainties associated with HEI choice, do not.

8.1.2.3. Influence of secondary school personnel

Perceptions of the role of the secondary school staff in the information searching processes were identified to be low across both phases of HEI choice. Many participants offered neutral views regarding the role of teachers and school counsellor not only in the context of a source of information but also in regard to providing advice and guidelines. Only those students who had a positive personal relationship with a career counsellor acknowledged some influence of this group. It appears that the positive perception of the interaction with secondary school personnel, in turn, affected by students' favourable evaluation of that person, increased their perception of sincerity and, consequently, the acceptance of that influence. Nevertheless, the limited influence yielded by this source was reported to be restricted to simply providing information regarding the course selection and suitable HEIs, rather than assisting in the development of preferences or yielding an influence on the final choice.

8.1.2.4. Influence of HEI communication

Institutional communication emerged during the interviews as having a substantial overall influence; however, this influence was predominantly restricted to HEI websites and visits to the campuses, with neither career expos nor secondary school visits providing a significant influence. While printed material produced by universities also did not appear to be of great influence, nevertheless some participants indicated the value of this form of communication especially regarding the convenience and ability to reflect and compare the information at one's leisure.

Participants uniformly assigned importance to HEIs websites and the

benefits gained from this sort of communication was proportionate to the utility offered as indicated by the simplicity of the design and easy access to the desired information. In the context of visits to campuses, it was the personalisation of their encounter with the HEI staff that appear to be of uppermost importance. Faced with important choices students were seeking personalisation and assurances, and while the forms of personalisation somewhat differed, the underlining desire for individual acknowledgement and deeper levels of involvement was constant. These findings are consistent with Kelman's (2006) process of identification and importance of the relationship between the individual and the influencing agent. Personalisation of their encounters, in whatever form it took, resulted in the advancement of the role of the HEI from one of many institutions under consideration to a more personal subset of the HEIs under consideration.

8.1.2.5. Influence of HEI characteristics

HEI characteristics appear to play a significant role, with practical factors - a range of courses offered, geographical location, the proximity of services - and featured strongly in participants' recollections. While it is reasonable to expect that the range of courses offered will strongly impact on the final choice of university, it must be noted that none of the participants attended a course that was only available at Victoria University. Indeed, the participants accepted an offer from Victoria University, where they had the opportunity to undertake the same course across several Victorian HEIs with a similar entry (ATAR) scores. Geographical location and availability of services including transportation; however, may have special importance in the context of Melbourne, where the research was conducted. Melbourne metropolitan area spreads across almost eighty kilometres, and enrolment at inconveniently located HEI is likely to result in lengthy commute, negative financial implications and impact on family and social life.

8.1.2.6. Influence of HEI prestige and perceptions of quality

Perceptions referring to HEI quality and prestige included a broad and varied range of factors. While published university rankings did not

feature strongly in participants' stories, it became evident that students developed their own system of values and measures employed in this context. A few participants who assigned some importance or understanding of the conventional university ranking were those who arrived in Australia fairly recently or attended a selective entry secondary school.

Australian secondary school system is highly marketised, and admission of a large proportion of students into prestige universities reflects positively on a school's performance and the same increases the marketability of the school. For the majority of participants, however, the values that contributed to the development of perceptions of quality and prestige included employability, class sizes, hands-on unit delivery, and perceptions regarding marketing activities. The origins of perceptions of employability were predominantly grounded in the combination of the HEI recruitment messages and opinions of friends and significant other persons that added validity and credibility to these messages.

Other quality-related factors that were volunteered by the participants related to the more intimate academic environment and smaller class sizes offered by Victoria University as compared to some of its key competitors. These characteristics appear to increase the perceptions of an environment that is caring and where the one-on-one relationship with the academic staff is possible.

8.1.3. Why do students accept influence in this context?

The research introduced an integrative theoretical framework composed of three theoretical perspectives: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of HEI choice, goals of accuracy, affiliation and maintaining a positive self-concept that underpins the acceptance of influence (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), and the processes of compliance, internalisation and identification through which the influence is accepted (Kelman 2006). Consequently, students' recollections of their lived experiences were analysed through the application of this lens.

During phases of search and choice, the acceptance of influence was analysed across four broad areas - parents and close family members; peers and other significant persons, HEI communication, and secondary school activities.

8.1.3.1. Parents and close family members

The acceptance of influence from parents and other close family members was found to predominantly satisfy the criteria of compliance (specific response to a specific request). Not all participants reported on the acceptance of influence from these sources; however, the participants who did were predominantly from migrant families that recently arrived in Australia and generally attended the selective entry secondary schools. For them, the continuation of education at the tertiary level was expected and reflected the aspirations of their families and the desire to create a 'better life'. In this context, the influence appears to be accepted to satisfy the specific social setting's characteristics rather than as an extension of participants' values. Consequently, the behaviour (continuation of education at the post-secondary level) reflected family rules and norms and served a goal of maintaining social relationships through adherence to these norms.

For participants with siblings currently attending HEIs, or siblings that attended HEIs in the past, or tertiary-educated parents, in addition to normative forms of influence described in the previous paragraph, the influence appears to be accepted as it provided a valuable source of information. This informational influence fulfilled a goal of forming an accurate perception of reality and, in this context, it is reasonable to assume that it emerged in recollections of those participants who have strong reason to accept the information from these sources as reliable and credible.

8.1.3.2. Peers and other significant persons

While peers' influence was not generally reported to be of significance, those participants that indicated the acceptance of influence from this source specifically highlighted a superior knowledge of their peers. Like

siblings currently attending or have attended HEIs in the past, these peers provided a valuable source of information if participants could confirm that the relevant knowledge that peers possessed was superior to their own.

Nevertheless, participants appeared to rely on these sources to a lesser degree than on the advice of other significant persons. While in both instances, the influence was accepted to form and improve the accurate perceptions of reality, the significant persons where frequently perceived in a more positive light with greater assigned credibility. The reason for the superior role of the significant persons may be due to their perceived greater experience and knowledgeability. Also, the significant persons reported by participants constituted of people with whom participants had a close and personal relationship which allowed them to satisfy not only the criteria of credibility but also of sincerity with which the advice was provided.

It appears that advice obtained from significant persons had frequently greater relevance with participants' values set and greater emotional underpinning. Consequently, the influence on behaviour extended from informational influence to processes of identification and internalisation that highlight the importance of the relationship between the individual and the influencing agent.

8.1.3.3. HEI communication

The impact of HEI communication was ambiguous and highly dependent on the specific characteristics of the encounter between the participant and the HEI. In those situations where the encounter was more personal, it appears that this personalisation shifted the HEI staff member from a random stranger to a 'temporary significant person'. This subtle adjustment activated the processes of identification and internalisation and the influenced behaviour aimed at the development of desired relationships (enrolment at the specific HEI) and intrinsic rewards (value compatibility with specific HEI). Subsequently, these forms of influence appear to be operational online those situations which allow for the more

personal encounters between prospective students and HEI staff members - i.e. during open days at HEI campuses.

8.1.3.4. Secondary school activities

Secondary school activities were shown to generally yield a minimal influence, and those cases where the influence was reported to be of greater significance were predominantly restricted to selective entry schools that established specific norms of behaviour. Frequently, these norms of behaviour were congruent with parental expectations and yielded influence through processes of compliance with key motivation being concern about the social effects of the influenced behaviour. For the selective entry schools, the progression to higher education, and especially to the prestigious universities and courses, improved the marketability of the school. Consequently, the pressure to encourage the desired behaviour was greater and students may have felt the need to comply with the real or perceived expectations of the secondary school especially in the situations where these expectations were further enhanced by parental or family norms and rules.

8.2. Contribution to knowledge

This thesis has used a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of students embarking on one of the first significant decisions as an adult - the choice of the university to attend. While the students' choice of the HEI has been studied previously, the phenomenological approach offers a novel and innovative way to gain a greater understanding of the complex processes involved and the external pressures that impact on them. In-depth interviews provided an environment conducive to uncovering subtle changes in the intensity of external pressures and delicate variations between the importance of different sources during the three stages of choice processes.

The focal point of the interviews was to explore the participants' lived experiences and, to allow for the broadest possible understanding of these experiences. The participants' stories were augmented with the

researcher's own field notes and reflections compiled immediately after each of the interviews concluded. Interview transcripts expressed the verbal communication between the researcher and the participants, and the verbal aspect of their reflections on the lived experiences of HEI choice. It did dismiss, however, the non-verbal aspects that, during some of the interviews, provided a valuable source of information and reflected the dynamics of the researcher-participant encounter.

While this approach, at least to some extent, contradicts the adoption of bracketing, it acknowledges the difficulties in maintaining true objectivity required for the authentic bracketing in situations where the researcher has had previous experiences with the phenomena investigated (Bednall 2006). Consequently, rather than engage in a futile attempt to seek true objectivity, the possible impact of the researcher's own experiences on data analysis was explored and disclosed. While supplementing participants' stories with researcher's interpretation of the pertinent non-verbal aspects of the interviews added richness to data analysis, it did not discharge the processes of bracketing but simply avowed the existence of additional elements that may have contributed to the true interpretation of participants' stories.

8.3. Practical implications

As the higher education environment globally is becoming increasingly competitive, the marketisation of higher education became a driving force in the sector. The research outcomes provide a practical benefit to universities, and their marketing teams, in their effort to recruit local students.

Prospective students are faced with the overwhelming choice of higher education institutions offering a similar range of courses, facilities, delivery modes, and social opportunities. Any knowledge leading to the increased positive perceptions of the HEI may improve the likelihood that this HEI will be included in the choice set and, eventually, result in an enrolment.

Increased understanding of social pressures that impact students during the search and choice stages allows for more efficient interaction with students and the development of a closer relationship between higher education institutions and the potential students. This is especially important during the pre-selection stages during which the choice set is formed. Greater knowledge of students' responses to university generated a range of activities (e.g., open days, visits to secondary schools and career expos) and marketing communication directed at the student during this stage, provides for an increased capacity to develop more targeted recruitment campaigns and, consequently, greater likelihood of the specific higher education institution being included in the choice set. The outcomes of this research identify opportunities for increased engagement with the potential student and the changes necessary for that to happen are frequently relatively minor as they do not require an adjustment to recruitment activities but rather how these activities are conducted.

During the choice stage when the final decision regarding the enrolment is made by students, the greater ability for understanding social influence determinants that underpin this decision may contribute to the modification of marketing effort and a stronger focus on these factors and higher education characteristics (e.g., more intimate academic environment and smaller class sizes in case of Victoria University) that were identified to be of particular importance.

While some of the research outcomes, such as the value placed by students on the personalisation of their encounter with the HEI staff, may be difficult to directly translate to the change in behaviour due to practical reasons, nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the significance of these factors. Sincerity and credibility identified in this research to be of special importance in the last two stages of student choice processes share a common thread of personalisation of communication and the perceived benevolence of the information source. With perceptions of sincerity and credibility formed at the time of the encounter with the influencing agent, the higher education institutions may benefit greatly

with some modifications of their communication with students especially during the critical contact points such as university open days, career expos, and visits to schools.

8.4. Limitations of the study

The adoption of the qualitative, interpretive methodology provided an environment suitable for the exploration of the topic concerned with the complex interplay of social issues. However, it is important to acknowledge the existence of reservations surrounding this type of methodology and the possible subjectivity and lack of generalisability (Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick and Lavoie-Tremblay 2020). To address the possible subjectivity, researcher's experiences with that phenomenon were identified, described and set aside. This bracketing process was introduced to minimise any prejudgements and reduce the influence of the researcher's past experiences on the phenomena.

While the issues regarding subjectivity have been explored in the previous section and in Chapter 3, the potential lack of generalisability is recognised. In a practical sense, this study aims for transferability of findings rather than strive for generalisability; however, it also proposes theoretical generalisability (Barker, Pistrang, Elliott and Chapman 2016) where the presented evidence was evaluated in the context of the existing knowledge.

The sampling method adopted may also involve biased selection and be more vulnerable to errors in judgement. It needs to be acknowledged that the participants in this research were drawn from just one university. The small sample size and participants representing a somewhat limited range of undergraduate courses also must be noted. While careful attention has been paid to the inclusion of students from a range of courses, a broader group of participants may be of advantage in further research.

8.5. Opportunities for further research

Several issues have been outlined as deserving further investigation. This thesis outlined and highlighted the emergence of concepts of sincerity and credibility as the very essence underpinning the acceptance of influence in the context of HEI choice. These elements, frequently operate together and appear to hold a special significance, especially during the stages of search and choice and deserve further research.

Also, the research briefly addressed the applicability of the Persuasion Knowledge Model in the HEI choice processes and, while this model may not be appropriate to this study due to the age of the participants and consequently limited opportunity to gain the broad general experiences required to develop the persuasion knowledge, it acknowledges that fast developments in technology and resulting increased access to information through electronic platforms are likely to result in a greater persuasion knowledge among secondary-school children. This area, especially in conjunction with addressing an increase in the marketing communication targeting ever-younger audiences, may benefit from further studies.

8.6. Final conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of social influences that may impact the student choice process, leading to the HEI selection. Through the development of the conceptual framework that composes three theoretical perspectives - the tripartite model of higher education student choice, goals that underlie the acceptance of influence, and the processes through which the influence is accepted - this research makes valuable methodological, theoretical and practical contributions. At the same time, the study acknowledges limitations resulting from the sample method and identifies the opportunities for further research.

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APPENDIX A - Student Recruitment Flyer

STUDENT RECRUITMENT FLYER

Invitation to Participate in Research Study

My name is Joanna Krezel and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Business at Victoria University. You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the effect of social influence on students' choice of university.

I am asking for your help by participating in an individual interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. While there is no direct financial payment made to you for participating in the study, you will be provided with a double movie pass as recompense for your time.

Your participation in this study would be voluntary and all information will be kept confidential. For more information please refer to the Informed Consent Form and the Information to Participants Involved in Research. Both documents are enclosed to the Expression of Interest to Participate in Research Study spreadsheet located in your lecture theatre.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at joanna.krezel@live.vu.edu.au or by phone on 0419 275 689.

Thank you, Joanna Krezel

Doctoral Candidate

College of Business, Victoria University

APPENDIX B - Information to Participants Involved in Research

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled *Effects of social influence on students' choice of higher education institution - case study of Victoria University*.

This project is being conducted by a student researcher Joanna Krezel as part of a professional doctorate study at Victoria University under the supervision of Dr Romana Garma from the College of Business.

Project explanation

The aim of this research project is to investigate the role that students' social network play on student choice of university.

What will I be asked to do?

Your participation in the study will involve a 60 minutes recorded interview during which you will be asked a number of questions pertaining to your decision to study at Victoria University. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to become involved. If you do consent, you are entitled to refuse to answer any question if you do not feel comfortable and may withdraw from further participation in the study at any stage.

What will I gain from participating?

There will be no direct financial payment made to you for participating in the study. However, you will be provided with a double movie pass as recompense for your time.

How will the information I give be used?

The findings of this research will be published in my DBA thesis, journal articles and conference presentations. In all publications you will not be identifiable.

What are the potential risks of participating in this project? There are no risks associated with participation in this project. **How will this project be conducted?**

This project will consist of 25 voice recorded interviews conducted with the first year local students from the selection of Victoria University bachelor degree courses. Following the completion of the interviews, the recordings will be transcribed and the data will be coded, categorised and analysed using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software.

Who is conducting the study?

Chief Investigator: Dr Romana Garma
romana.garma@vu.edu.au Student Researcher:
Joanna Krezel joanna.krezel@live.vu.edu.au

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator listed above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

APPENDIX C - Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study into the...

“Effects of social influence on students’ choice of higher education institution - case study of Victoria University”. The aim of this research project is to investigate students' choice and, specifically, to identify social influence factors that impact on students’ choice of higher education institutions and investigate how these factors effect students’ choice.

CERTIFICATION BY PARTICIPANT

I,

of

certify that I am at least 18 years old* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study: “Effects of social influence on students’ choice of higher education institution - case study of Victoria University” being conducted at Victoria University by:

Dr Romana Garma,
Chief Investigator
Joanna Krezel,
Student
Investigator

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by Joanna Krezel:

and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

- 60 minutes interview

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will
be kept confidential. Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

APPENDIX D - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. *Introduce myself and thank the student for making time to participate in the interview.*

2. *Confirm the course that the student is enrolled in.*

3. *General discussion regarding student background (e.g., parent's educational levels, siblings attending universities, immediate reference group - current and previous university attendance, previous experience with Victoria University)*

4. *Could you tell me about the time when you decided to go to university? When did you first started to think about it?*

   Who did you talk about it?

   How did you go about seeking information about different universities and courses?

5. *Could you tell me about the last year of high school (or the last year before making VCAT application)?*

   With whom did you discuss the options available?

   How did you source information regarding options available?

6. *Looking back at all the communication and interactions you had during this time (last years of high school), who were the different groups of people with whom you have communicated/ had discussions about your choice of university?*

   How did you communicate with them?

   Do you think that it was important to have this

communication/discussions during that time? If so, why?

7. *Was any of these groups/people more influential than others in your decision to attend Victoria University?*

   If so, which group/who was it?

   Why do you think they were more influential?

8. *If you were to identify the most influential factor in your decision to attend Victoria University, what would it be?*

   Why was that the most influential factor in your decision?

(Susceptibility to interpersonal influence, adopted from Bearden, 1989)

9. *Looking back at some major purchases that you made in the past, could you tell me if it was important to you that your friends approve of them? What about others (e.g. family)? Why/ (why not) was that important?*

10. *Do you think that you are more likely to buy products that make good impressions on others? (prompts: friends? celebrities? other people? if so, who?)*

11. *How does it make you feel when you buy the same products or brands that others buy?*

12. *Looking back at some major or important purchases that you made in the past, could you tell me how you decided on the specific product that you bought? (prompts: observe others? ask friends? consult others? if so, whom?)*