

Keeping the 'Customer' Satisfied: Parents in the Higher Education Marketplace

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interface between higher education and the family. Drawing on research data from south-east Wales, the paper specifically addresses the relationships within families and the choice of university. In recasting parents as consumers in a higher education marketplace, the paper discusses the tacit concerns and issues which help to frame the decision-making processes involved in selecting a place to study. Qualitative data are used to provide a thematic analysis of factors which parents identify as significant to the exercise of choice. In concluding, the paper considers how universities are responding to the parent as consumer, and why it will remain crucial for them to do so.

Introduction

The election of the Thatcher government in 1979 crystallized the policy shift towards anti-statism and the free market in the provision of services. This philosophy was reinforced through the 1980s and continued to gather momentum into and beyond the election of the Labour government in the spring of 1997. The introduction of a 'quasi-market' (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993) was met with considerable research interest in the field of education, most especially with regard to issues of school choice. Researchers focused on the ways in which parents (rather than pupils) responded to their new, recast

role as consumers of education (David et al., 1994; Hughes et al., 1994; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Gorard, 1996).

This gave weight to the suggestion of a third wave in the socio-historical development of British education. Following the introduction of a meritocratic system of secondary education (post-1944), and the pursuit of equality of opportunity through comprehensivization in the 1960s, the 1980s saw the rise of parentocracy, where 'a child's education is increasingly dependent upon the wealth and wishes of the parent, rather than the ability and effort of the pupils' (Brown, 1997: 393). This growth of parentocracy at the compulsory education level has depended upon a number of initiatives explicitly put in place to make schools more responsive to the needs and wishes of 'clients' (read 'parents'). The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced the notion of choice by presenting a range of different school types (for example, locally managed, grant-maintained, city technology colleges). Open enrolment and *per capita* funding, coupled with the introduction of a National Curriculum, key stage assessments and the publication of league tables have all contributed to the development and establishment of the quasi-market in the sphere of compulsory education. However, commentators have argued that, although the rhetoric has largely been concerned with issues of devolution and autonomy for parents and schools, the reality has been the creation of a powerful funding agency at national level (see Whitty, 1997).

One of the underlying themes of these recent (and indeed ongoing) educational reforms has been a reconceptualization of rational choice. It has been a taken-for-granted assumption that parents will make informed decisions about choice of school. Moreover these decisions will be based primarily on an appraisal of the academic standards and achievements of individual schools (thereby forcing schools to address their standards and improve their performance). In practice the evidence that this has occurred is not easily discernible. Indeed, schools have adopted a range of marketing strategies in their quest to attract parents. Focusing on the semiotic systems which schools employ to market themselves has allowed researchers to identify a number of ways in which image management is given ever increasing prominence in the school sector (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Headington and Howson, 1995; Smedley, 1995). Schools, keen to locate themselves within particular market niches, appear to do so through a system of signs and symbols, which they use as visible markers of the values, ethos and status of their particular institution. The professional logo, prospectus and an explicit management style form part of what has been coined the marketization and 'glossification' of the school (Gewirtz et al., 1995: 127). Schools are now open competitors in a volatile and

fluid marketplace. To compete effectively (and hence attract pupils, their parents and the requisite funding that follows) schools have had to engage in a new level of public relations and marketing strategies.

The development of this school market, and the consolidation of the parent as education consumer, has been paralleled by policy shifts in the higher education sector. The expansionist agenda which began with the Robbins Report (1963) has marked the move from an elite to a mass university system. In addition, the more recent changes in the funding methodologies, for example, from block grants to *per capita* funding, have arguably resulted in a loss of institutional autonomy. They have certainly provided a competitive framework within which higher education institutions must now operate. The university sector has been forced into even greater competition of late, with the 1997 announcement of the introduction of tuition fees, payable by students (or their parents) and implemented from the beginning of the academic year 1998/9 (notwithstanding the general shift to open comparison and marketization with an increasing emphasis on research assessment, teaching quality and associated league tables). Tuition fees marked the latest in a sequence of changes to the funding of higher education students.

In 1990 a system of mixed grants and top-up loans was introduced to provide financial support for students in HE. The aim of the student loan was to compensate for the financial shortfalls which were experienced with the freezing of the student grant in 1988/9. This shortfall was compounded by the earlier changes in benefit entitlement which meant that, from 1986/7, student entitlement to either income support, or unemployment benefit during the shorter vacation periods ended. In 1991, students also lost entitlement to claim welfare support over the long summer vacation. The combined changes to university funding and student support have fundamentally altered the equality of access to the university sector. Students, and in most cases their parents, have been recast as consumers in an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace. The 1997 Dearing Report on Higher Education reinforced this view, recommending a 'compact' agreement between the various stakeholders. Dearing suggested that government, students and their parents, the universities and employers should *all* contribute towards the financing of higher education. The report recommended that students should be *encouraged* to invest in themselves and suggested that undergraduates make a flat-rate contribution of approximately 25 per cent of the average tuition cost, likely to be about £1,000 per annum.

Many of the suggestions contained in the Dearing Report have been implemented and its recommendations for funding and increasing the

responsibilities of the various stakeholders have been taken seriously. On the same day as the Dearing Report was published, David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, announced alternative plans for funding under the auspices of the Teaching in Higher Education Bill. The Bill, passed in June 1998, put in place a funding scheme operational from the start of the 1998/9 academic year. This required *all students*, except those from families below the minimum level of income, to contribute towards their tuition fees annually up to a maximum of £1,000. Whereas Dearing had supported retaining the means-tested maintenance grant, the government proposals actually introduced enhanced income-contingent loans which replaced the maintenance grant from the year 1999/2000.

Concerns were expressed on a variety of fronts regarding the various funding initiatives and their impact on student maintenance. In Wales, the response by the National Assembly was to commission an Independent Investigation Group on Student Hardship and Funding (IIGSHF). Its main concern was to address the question 'how can potential "learners" (people engaged in formal learning through any form of provision in FE and HE) be financially supported through their studies most effectively, according to their need?' (IIGSHF, 2001: 1). In total the investigation group put forward fifty-four recommendations concerning improved financial support for Welsh students. These suggest a more strategic approach to the funding of and support for students. Nevertheless, students and their families are in the main, still being required to pay 'up front' for a university education. Crucially as Stroud (2001: 102) notes in his commentary on the recommendations of the IIGSHF (2001), 'the investigation group itself must be viewed as part of a wider strategy to combat social exclusion'.

Bourdieu (1986) has described how families are reliant on a similarity of 'taste' between the school and the home as a means of aspiring towards the same goal. A corpus of literature serves to illustrate the ways in which, within the current market paradigm, particular family groups are 'information rich', thus maximizing their educational choices (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Ball et al.; 2000; Vincent, 2002). But a diminution of maintenance, increased emphasis on student loans and a complex system of financial support can serve to reinforce patterns of exclusion and impact on 'choices' in terms of participation in higher education.

Decisions and Choices

The consequences of the market-led changes outlined above, coupled with

the expansion of the HE sector have served to increase diversity and available choices, while potentially further stratifying the client group. Students and parents are now customers, with perceived consumerist needs which include the desire to 'know' what it is that they are paying for. Specifically, this expanding HE sector now embraces a new type of consumer, namely parents and students experiencing HE for the first time. This paper addresses the interface between the university and these first-time consumers. It parallels the body of work on relationships between consumers and education in general, and the school in particular.

Drawing on qualitative data, derived as part of a larger study,¹ the paper considers the concerns of these potential clients of higher education, and how their needs are being addressed by universities. In particular the paper explores factors which contribute to the parental choice of university, and indicates ways in which universities may accommodate the concerns of parents. Research on school choice indicates that parents are often more influenced by affective factors such as the happiness of the child and the proximity of the school to home than by any crude classification of academic performance (Hughes et al., 1994; Coldron and Boulton, 1991; Adler et al., 1989). We argue, in this paper, that parents also express similar concerns when faced with the prospect of making university choices. It follows that the increased reliance on financial support from individual students (and their families) will demand that universities take into account what parents, as consumers, value when making a choice of institution with and for their children.

The paper draws on data which focus on a cohort of 760 sixth form students (in south-east Wales), as they and their families engage in identifying their higher education institution of choice. The young people in the study were drawn from ten different educational settings, which included public-sector comprehensives, voluntary-aided church schools, both Catholic and Anglican (Church in Wales), a grant-maintained school, an FE college and independent-sector day and boarding schools for girls.² The majority of students in the sample intended to enter higher education in the academic year 1997/8. This therefore provided the opportunity to capture the process of choice and higher educational decision-making of post-Robbins, but pre-Dearing, applicants. This cohort represent some of the last group of students to enter and attend university prior to the introduction of the tuition fee levy. The research project tracked the sixth form students through their two-year A-level career, and observed the higher education choice process as it unfolded over that period.

Collecting data from both parents and the prospective student simultaneously enabled a detailed analysis of the micro-politics of the family (cf.

Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995), which contextualized and to some extent governed this decision-making process. Our specific analysis here uses data generated in school-based focus group interviews with the students and home-based interviews with twenty families. All the family interviews were qualitative and drew upon a flexible interview schedule. They were semi-structured to allow for some comparative framework. The intention was to provide the opportunity for family members to describe the processes of university choice and the tacit factors which influenced and contributed to their decisions. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Throughout the research process, students, families and schools were assured confidentiality and pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

The analytic discussion that follows is in two sections. First we explore the concerns of parents which help to inform the university decision-making process. This firmly casts the family, more especially the parents, as consumers of higher education. Secondly, we consider some of the ways in which institutions of higher education have responded, and can respond to and accommodate this particular group of consumers.

Going to university

Studies of school transfer, for example from primary to secondary school, have shown that young people acknowledge the process of change from an early age (Bryan, 1980; Measor and Woods, 1986; Delamont and Galton, 1986; Pugsley *et al.*, 1996). However although young people may be ready to move on, and acknowledge the inevitability of change, they may remain fearful of the unknown. New settings may require a certain amount of demystification (*cf.* Delamont and Galton, 1986). Likewise, the university experience is also one of transition, with both academic and personal challenges. Beginning a university 'career' can carry both anxieties and anticipation (Becker *et al.*, 1968; Moffatt, 1989; Rickinson, 1998). The sixth form students and their families identified a set of concerns with regard to this process of transition or transfer, which begin as HE institutions are identified and chosen.

This process of HE choice is mediated by some explicit and tangible factors, such as the schemes of study being offered, the A-level scores required, the completion of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) form and, where applicable, formal interviews. Our data suggest, however, that these do not reflect the full range of concerns of young people and specifically their parents. A wider, though less tangible, set of decision-making criteria are present and enacted upon. A number of recurrent themes were present in both

the family- and the school-based focus group interviews. For ease of discussion here, we have identified substantive thematic areas: happiness, safety, finance, employment and 'the academy'. These themes were identified by families and students from across socio-economic and gender categories. Some (particularly finance and the academy) can be particularly identifiable as 'first-time' concerns.

Student happiness

Just as research has found that parents make affective choices of school (Boulton and Coldron, 1991; West and Varlaam, 1991; David et al., 1994), university choices also involve emotional energy on the part of prospective students and their parents. The majority of parents interviewed regarded their child's decision to apply to university as a good and positive step. Most were both proud and supportive of the decision. Many stressed that ultimately they wanted their son or daughter to 'be happy', a sentiment recognized by the students themselves.

well my parents are really chuffed to bits about it. They think it's great like. But then they really just want me to do what I want, what'll make me happy. (Clare)

I want her to enjoy herself, that's the main thing. She has to be happy. She is a very clever girl and she needs to be with other like-minded people and be happy. Yes that's it, that it's essential she must be happy and enjoy her time there. (Mrs Hughes, mother of Louise)

I think it's marvellous, I am all for it. I think it's wonderful. But I just hope it turns out all right. I mean I want him to be happy, you know, settle in and that. (Mrs Hutchins, mother of Gavin)

Parents expressed the desire for university to provide a happy supportive setting for their son or daughter. For many this was their first experience of higher education and they felt that they wanted to be involved in the decision-making process. Many parents visited potential university choices with their children, and were often disappointed not to be included in formal open day proceedings.

Oh we will take her to all of the universities. Yes most definitely we will all go. In fact we are going to Birmingham next week. She has got an interview there. I don't expect they will ask us in. But we will be around. We'll take her there and we'll be around because we want to see it. You know, get to see the place, see if she will be happy. (Mr Clarke, father of Victoria)

Student happiness was expressed in a number of ways. Terms like making friends, settling in, and enjoying the course were frequently used. Happiness was seen as a crucial factor in making any final decision. Parents wanted to be sure, and to try to ensure, that their child would enjoy a happy university career. Moreover, many saw this as going hand-in-hand with a safe university experience.

Student safety

Ensuring a safe living environment is a concern that cannot easily be separated from that of happiness. However, many of the parents particularly stressed the requirement of the new setting to protect and care for their children. Boarding school was not the experience of the majority of the families interviewed. At eighteen years of age, going to university represented the first experience of prolonged separation between young people and the security of the home. This was perceived by parents as a potentially dangerous transition and one for which they demanded reassurance. The environs of the university needed to be 'safe' and secure, to replace the perceived security of home, and themselves as protectors. This was an issue for the parents of both young men and young women.

Well I mean at the moment she doesn't walk anywhere. Wherever she goes we know. And more to the point we take her if we can and she *always* gets a lift home. (Mr Lang, father of Stacy)

I mean Caitlin is taken from A to B or she is taxied, she doesn't walk anywhere, not because of laziness but because of her safety. That's the main thing for us, she must be safe. Wherever she goes she *must* be. And we must feel confident that she is in the safest place. (Mrs Smith, mother of Caitlin)

Well Rhys is a home bird really, if he went to Bangor [University] then he could live with my wife's mother, my mother-in-law, she lives near there and we are back and forth so it's a home from home. (Mr Joyce, father of Rhys)

Parents often said that they would want to visit the university site of choice, as well as the accommodation and surrounding areas, to be confident that this was a safe place to 'leave' their child.

I would want to check out the security in the halls [of residence] and on the campus you know, make sure that it's all right. (Mr Smith, father of Caitlin)

Well there are some places you know that I wouldn't want him to go. I mean some areas that there are fights, I mean you hear about gangs attacking students and that, in some areas. No I wouldn't want him there. (Mrs Jones, mother of David)

For parents, the safety aspects were more often than not expressed in relation to danger from 'outsiders'. In essence parents expressed concerns in relation to the 'town' rather than 'the gown'. Other students were not considered to be a risk, or a threat to their children, possibly because the similarity of status afforded a sense of security in belonging. They could be readily classified as the same sort. But the safety of the living accommodation and the reputation of the local area were issues which parents felt they could justifiably seek reassurances about.

Student finance

As we highlighted in our introduction, increasingly the responsibility for financing a degree has fallen on the family and the individual student. With the introduction of tuition fees for the academic year beginning 1998, student finances have been the topic of considerable media attention. Indeed, as Hesketh (1996: 1) noted, 'higher education is expensive'. While the parents interviewed were, in many cases, less than happy about the cost factors, none explicitly expressed the view that the costs were prohibitively high. However, for those parents who were new to higher education it was not always clear what the total financial implications were likely to be.

I haven't had the finances explained to me no, but I have heard people talk about them. (Mr Istance, father of Mark)

To be honest with you . . . I don't have any idea of the costs. It'll be a lot I know that much, but exactly how much and where it comes from, well I don't know. (Mr Jones, father of David)

While parents recognized that it was impossible to put precise figures on living expenses, the majority of sixth formers and their families seemed reluctant or unable to estimate the financial realities. Their concerns were less with the overall costs and more with the realities of how their child would manage without incurring severe debts. These were shared by the young people themselves.

But what are we talking about? How much is it? I really have no idea of the costs involved. (Mrs Walsh, mother of John)

I don't know much about the costs, but I do know it costs a load and people get into more and more debt and it's all going to pile up. It's frightening really. (Claire)

I can't think about it now. It's [university] too far off and it's [costs] too scary. (Ruth)

Parents and young people reflected the concerns outlined by Hesketh (1996) in his study of undergraduate student finances. In particular there was opposition to the idea of accumulating debt over the course of degree study. Hesketh has noted that some students, once at university, adopt a *laissez-faire* approach to debt, while parents have varying perceptions of strategies such as the student loan system – ranging from a warm embrace to deep suspicion. The parents interviewed in south-east Wales mirrored this mixed response, within a framework of uncertainty over what the anticipated and real costs of a university education would be. What was clear was that the financial implications of the university choice were being thought about by parents and young people, albeit with a shadow of inevitability. While finance did not seem to be directly relevant to HE choice, the implications meant that parents, as well as students, were factoring in the costs of their protracted education. Decision-making strategies were mediated by considerations of expected and anticipated costs and debts.

Graduate employment

Over half the parents interviewed expressed concern about the graduate labour market and possible future career trajectories that would be open to their children. Some remained unsure of whether the anticipated costs of a university education would be rewarded in the labour market. Although supportive of their children's decisions to enter higher education, these parents seemed anxious about the job prospects after graduation. They sought both information and reassurance that deferred entry into the labour market would be rewarding in terms of employment and future prospects: 'Well to be honest I am just concerned about what happens after. I mean I do wonder whether he might not be better off getting a job now when he's got his A levels and taking it from there' (Mr Istance, father of Mark).

Parents were realistic in that they did not seek guarantees of future employment for their children, but worried about the possibilities and prospects. This was particularly the case where degrees in arts, humanities and social science subjects were being considered. Science or business schemes appeared, at least on the surface, to pose less of a problem in terms of a post-

university future. To some extent this reflects a concern about the 'pay back' of considerable financial investment. But it is also caught up with wider issues of future happiness and security for their children. The concerns about the employability of graduates may be a particular concern for 'first-time' HE parents, although the contemporary labour market may mean this is a more general issue. Either way we would argue that labour-market trajectories are a significant element of the HE decision-making process.

The academy

There is now in excess of 30 per cent participation in higher education (HE) and university in England and Wales. Inevitably this means an increasing number of 'first-time' families, for whom HE is a new experience. As Bourdieu et al. (1994) have noted, the academy chooses to retain a pedagogic style which privileges the elite middle-class groups and in doing so effectively serves to disadvantage the very group which the rhetoric of mass higher education would seem to be encouraging. In consequence the culture and the language can serve to confuse the uninitiated. In many instances the families interviewed here found it difficult to decode the language of entry. Some did not easily differentiate between courses and universities. Modules, multi-disciplinary first years, honours, university schools and so forth were all relatively new concepts. In turn this meant that many parents and sixth form students found the very process of applying alienating or confusing. In undertaking the formal processes of application they looked for explanation, simplification and interpretation.

The application process for entry to higher education in the UK is mediated through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, UCAS. This is a central agency whose role is to collate and process all university applications. UCAS has its own temporal framework, to which individuals, schools and higher education institutions must adhere. Applicants are required to complete and return forms to UCAS, usually via their school or sixth form college and these contain, in addition to academic information, a personal statement upon which university admissions officers base their decisions. Since, with the exception of Oxbridge and medical schools, most universities have moved away from the interview process for prospective candidates, the UCAS form is crucial for successful entry to HE. Some families in the study experienced difficulties over understanding and completing the UCAS form. In addition to which, many found university prospectus layouts confusing. Yet the prospectus is often the first point of contact between the parent, young person and the university.

To be honest you need a degree to be able to understand the forms [UCAS applications]. (Mrs Lang, mother of Stacy)

Well my head has been spinning just looking at all the forms and the brochures and that. I have lost track of it all to be honest with you, I really don't understand any of it. (Mr Bateman, father of Glyn)

Well she knows we are here for her, she knows we will help if we can. But to be honest with you, she knows more about the forms and that than we do. I mean I never went to university, nor her dad, and we just don't understand any of it. (Mrs Thomas, mother of Maria)

For many parents, the university was not a place with which they had had personal experience. Most had not, for example, ever visited their local universities. For many, accompanying their children on university visits offered their first opportunity to go inside university buildings and talk to academic staff: 'Would we be allowed? I mean you can't just walk in off the street can you? Not if it's not like the proper day for it' (Mr Bateman, father of Glyn).

Many parents recognized that their children would be entering a world of which they had had little direct experience themselves. At the same time they felt compelled to be involved in the decision-making process, in order to ensure that their children went to the 'best' place for them. They were keen to find out about the academic and, perhaps more importantly, the pastoral support and care on offer, yet were hampered by their perceived physical and social distance from the academy. Parents were uneasy about the strangeness of the setting and their unfamiliarity with the process and experience of HE.

Responding to the parent as customer

Thus far we have identified a number of parameters through which these, mainly 'first-time' HE parents consider the higher education choices available to themselves and their children. It is important to stress here that both parents and young people were not making these choices in a cultural vacuum. Many clearly had an awareness of relative university status, especially with regard to Oxbridge. However, only a small minority specifically addressed HE 'league tables' as part of their decision-making strategy. Indeed the processes and outcomes of teaching quality and research assessment exercises were notably absent from the accounts parents and students gave of the factors determining the university of choice.

What is significant is the intangible or indeterminate nature of many of the

factors which parents identify as of potential importance. While aspects such as happiness and safety are vitally important to parents, it is difficult for any institution to absolutely guarantee either one. Finance is perhaps more straightforward to provide information about. Indeed the imposition of the tuition fee may make the individual costs of a university education more transparent. Yet one suspects that it will remain extremely difficult to provide more than an estimate of total direct and indirect financial costs to be endured by students and their families. Graduate prospects and outcomes are to a large extent outside the control of universities *per se*, although that does not mean that 'what comes after the degree?' will not remain a question from the point of application. Over and above these specific concerns, interviews with prospective university parents reveal that, for many, 'the academy' remains both aloof and elusive. Many of the factors which concern parents in the choice of university are tied to their understandings of the care and services that their children, and themselves, are actually being offered and can reasonably expect.

Engaging parents in the education market is an ever increasing aspect of the compulsory schooling sector. Recent research has shown the variety of ways in which both schools and parents are experiencing the shift to a market economy in state education. (Fitz et al., 1993; Deem et al., 1994; Whitty et al., 1993). Todd and Higgins (1998: 235) argue, however, that the parent/school partnership remains relatively powerless, serving as a tool to maintain professional control. Indeed they contend that, within a market framework, professionals need to develop greater flexibility in order to allow for the interests of the 'client' group to be seen to be satisfactorily addressed. As we have argued, the imposition of the tuition fee is part of a more incremental process towards the establishment of a higher education market in which parents as stakeholders may play an increasingly larger role. If this is indeed the case then universities too must also ensure that attention be given to the factors which most concern the 'lay' parent. In spite of increased access into higher education, the main student intake remains with young adults leaving home for the first time. What informs, influences and guides their parents as main stakeholders in the financing process contextualizes the complex relationship between the academy and the family.

There are a number of ways in which universities are responding and will need to continue to do so in future marketing. While universities have always provided pastoral support and guidance, safe accommodation, careers advice and so on, they are now having to sell these aspects of their work more vigorously to their consumers, 'before sale'. Like schools, universities have

turned to increasingly sophisticated semiotic systems in order to market themselves. Unlike schools, universities have always used the prospectus as a point of information. However the style of these has changed in recent years to reflect the 'glossification' of the system. Prospectuses are now glossy brochures, with professional logos, colour photographs, an increasing emphasis on accommodation, student support and the general environs of the university, rather than academic content. The prospectus must now be for marketing and 'selling' rather than simply informing academic choice.

University open days have also taken on a greater and more significant role, with institutions offering sessions for parents giving them insights into student life (MacLeod, 1998). Conventionally the university open day was a relatively low-key affair, usually organized by individual departments to give applicants the opportunity to visit the campus and meet academic staff, often combined with an interview. Sometimes parents were invited to attend. More often than not, however, parents accompanying their children were left to their own devices, without the opportunity to meet staff members or ask questions. It is recognizable that 'super' open days, more encompassing, reflecting the needs of parents as well as the applicants, are becoming more commonplace and, we predict, will continue to become so (MacLeod, 1998).

At Cardiff University, for example, the faculty of Humanities and Social Studies runs a number of open days each year to which applicants and their families are invited. To accommodate the needs of individual departments, potential students and parents, a separate parents' programme operates on each of the days. While applicants spend the majority of the day with departments and visiting the students' union, parents have the opportunity to talk to senior academic members of staff, residences and catering staff, careers advisers, counsellors and welfare staff, library staff and finance officers. Both parents and potential students also view a residences video and have the opportunity to explore the campus. This organization to some extent mirrors main university open days, which have become a common feature of many university calendars – a once-a-year occasion where the whole university is open to the local community and the public more generally.

Centrally co-ordinated, such days involve departments in guest lectures, displays, advice stalls and an open-door policy. Some run targeted sessions over the course of the day on aspects which we have argued in this paper are of particular concern to parents – student finance, residences and accommodation, the application procedure. A parents' panel also enables prospective university parents to talk to parents of children already at the university, as well as academic and pastoral support staff. These examples are by no means

unique, and indeed are increasingly commonplace in the university calendar. They serve to illustrate the ways in which the emergent higher education marketplace is adapting to the perceived needs of its consumers involved in the 'buying' process – not only students but also and importantly parents.

Conclusion

It has not been our intention here to attempt an evaluation of marketing initiatives and strategies of universities and higher education more generally. Rather the paper has sought to explore how parents fit into the new marketing realities of higher education. By placing parents explicitly in the marketplace, what is being sold and the ways in which it is sold become *more* rather than *less* complex. The sorts of concerns expressed by parents cannot be ignored in a context where parents are increasingly perceived, and perceive themselves, as active selectors rather than passive recipients. We have concentrated on exploring one particular aspect of the interface between parents and the university – the choice of institution and the marketing consequences. Clearly there are other aspects which could and should be understood and analysed: for example, the extent to which, following undergraduate enrolment, parents chose to involve themselves in the institutional practices. Parents routinely engage with the university once the academic session has begun – telephoning for examination results, intervening if a student is ill or distressed, continuing to provide financial support, both directly and indirectly. Additionally, if certain predictions are to be believed, more and more young people will choose to study locally in the future, with the result that an increasing proportion of students will continue to 'live at home' with their parents during their university career. This will serve to increase further the explicit relations between parents and the university. Parents and the wider family are also especially evident at graduation ceremonies. Indeed, it is a widely held view that 'graduation day' is actually for the families of graduands, rather than the graduands themselves – and that is why, for many institutions, it is the one point of the year when full academic dress and a considerable amount of academic ceremony is deemed necessary. All of these can be understood in terms of the complicated interface between the family as consumers, and higher education as marketplace.

For families, entry to higher education has traditionally been portrayed as a picture of proud parents basking in the glow of their offspring's academic success, cheerfully waving them off to a new and happy life at university. It has been assumed that the young adult eagerly anticipates the student status and is

anxious to fly the nest in a legitimated and approved fashion. In consequence little attention has focused on the family during this crucial status passage. The Dearing Report stressed that the way forward for higher education lay with the need to develop a 'compact' agreement which would include involving students (and their parents) more firmly in the university sector. More particularly in Wales, the findings from the IIGSF (2001: 14) acknowledge that there is 'tremendous goodwill to develop and deliver better systems, to widen access and to encourage non-traditional learners'.

If such aims are to be fulfilled, and, if the consumerist agenda is to be satisfied, then clearly policy initiatives must be set in train. In addition the academy must be prepared to promote its product by successfully adapting to and targeting the specific needs of the various client groups. The financial constraints placed on students and parents with the introduction of tuition fees lead potentially to a differentiated clientele. On the one hand it will mean a more demanding consumer base, with those students from the higher socio-economic groups actively engaging with the market. For those students from the lower socio-economic and non-traditional entry groups, the need to explore the various support options offered by individual institutions may well prove a major factor of the choice process. Such diverse imperatives will compel institutions to accommodate these various client-led agendas in order to ensure that they remain competitive players in the university marketplace.

Notes

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² In consequence there was a socio-economic and gender balance in the sample, although we do not specifically analyse those factors in this paper.

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