Inertia, friendships or effective relationship marketing? Remaining at the same University for a taught Master's degree

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the influencing factors of individual students who remain at the same University for their postgraduate study. By interviewing students on an MSc Management course, we found some interesting motivations about where to continue studying a taught postgraduate course. These factors included such issues as the importance of developing and maintaining personal effective relationships, peer group influence and a sense of belonging.

Introduction
It has been argued that the recent economic recession gave a short-term boost to recruitment onto postgraduate (PG) programmes as graduates struggled to find suitable employment and sought to remain in higher education for one further year (Crouch & Goulding, 2013; Tobin, 2012), in part seeking to differentiate themselves from the growing number of graduates entering the highly competitive graduate jobs market (Nordling, 2005). The short-term influence of the economic downturn appears to have compounded a long established pattern of growth in the number of students attracted to Master's level study in the UK, which increased from 406,905 in 2001/02 to 536,440 in 2013/14 (http://www.hesa.ac.uk). In addition, future numbers enrolling on Masters courses could significantly increase given the Autumn 2014 budget statement detailing that government funding will be made available.

Several works have examined the motivating factors behind the student decision-making process. In particular, Glover et al. (2008) found that physiotherapy students were motivated by the desire to enhance professional credentials. Similarly, Harvey et al. (2005) in their study of teachers found professional development to be a key driver. Moreover, Donaldson and McNicholas (2004) and Liu (2010) found that it was the perceived opportunity to enhance career prospects through gaining additional skills that was the main driver for students to engage with PG study. An opportunity is therefore emerging for Universities to retain their successful undergraduate (UG) students for a further year of study to complete a taught Master's course. This is of particular relevance at a time when there has been increased pressure on Universities to diversify their income streams (Robertson, 2010) and where graduate positions are increasingly competitive.

Retention and progression
The strategy to retain existing UG students within the institution, and facilitate progression to Masters level study, makes commercial sense. Yet, academic works on student retention have largely focused on keeping students 'on-programme' rather than progression to PG study. Here, Crosling and Heagney (2009) advocate the use of engagement activities throughout the entire learning period, including an extensive induction, understanding students' needs, student-centred learning and the integration of study skills throughout the programme. In addition, facilitating social interactions is seen to be useful (Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013), especially through the use of recreation facilities (Miller, 2011). Providing a caring, supportive environment has also been found to be influential in keeping students on-programme (O'Keefe, 2013; Pearson, 2012).

Nonetheless, there is a significant difference between students remaining on-programme to complete their UG studies, and returning to an institution to undertake a higher level of study. Research has been undertaken on factors that affect the choice of University for new entrants, with Blackburn (2011) and Whitehead et al. (2006) both noting the importance of the perceived reputation of the University. However, Obermeit (2012) recognises that the decision regarding choice of higher education institutions (HEIs) is comprised of a complex set of variables, although Callender and Jackson (2008) and Denzler (2011) found that socio-economic factors were particularly influential, especially when linked to student debt. Moreover, Briggs and Wilson (2007) highlight the level of sophistication that students apply to information gathering and the subsequent decision-making process, taking into account all relevant costs associated with studying at University such as tuition fees, living expenses and social outlays. Consequently, researchers (including Jepson & Varhegyi, 2011) have examined the effectiveness of HEIs' marketing strategies on PG recruitment, highlighting the importance of raising individuals' awareness and knowledge of the prevailing PG opportunities.

While some authors advocate the deployment of a coherent marketing strategy (Lui, 2010; Naidoo & Wu, 2011; Stimac & Simic, 2012), not all University interventions have been found to successfully influence students' decision to enrol (Jepson & Neumann, 2010). Nonetheless, these marketing actions are primarily directed at influencing the initial choice of institution, rather than encouraging individuals to remain at the same institution to undertake further study. As a consequence, the focus of this paper is concerned with student loyalty and retention rather than with student acquisition.

Loyalty and Relationship Marketing

Bowden (2011) found that student loyalty is influenced by a 'psychological attachment' and a feeling of belonging to the institutional brand, while Helgesen (2008) and Thomas (2011) both cited satisfaction and institutional reputation as key contributors to student loyalty. However, what appears to underpin loyalty is the creation and development of shared values between the institution and the individual (Arnett et al., 2003), which in turn, is driven by developing and maintaining effective personal relationships (Helgesen, 2008). In this context, relationship marketing is geared to retaining and sustaining 'customer' relationships over the long term (Egan, 2011).

Yet, adopting commercially oriented relationship marketing in an educational environment implies that students are perceived by the HEI as customers (Bejou, 2005). This is a perspective that has its supporters (Gaska, 2003), as well as its critics (Bishton, 2005, Clayson & Haley, 2005; Saje, 2005). Consequently, an alternative informal and personal relationship is recommended to be adopted by HEIs rather than a formal, customer-service oriented relationship (Pitman, 2000). Since students will have worked with academic and support staff throughout their UG studies, the HE experience lends itself to what Bay and Daniel (2001) refer to as a 'partnership approach' to relationship development, which could be a useful contributory factor in convincing students to remain at the institution to pursue postgraduate study.

Focus of this study

The contemporary graduate employment market provides an opportunity for Universities to 'upsell' (Shajahan, 2004) PG programmes to existing UG students. Yet the factors influencing loyalty and behaviour are complex, and this raises numerous questions that provide a focus for this study. In particular, at what point in their UG studies do students decide to progress on to a taught Masters level course? What factors influence their decision to remain at the same University to undertake PG study? Are these related decisions, to do a taught Masters course, and seek an institution, simultaneously determined? To what extent are students influenced by the marketing activities of a University? How do members of staff contribute to the decision making process? How do social and personal relationships influence students' decisions?

These questions prepare the ground for the objective of this research, which is to explore the key factors and key influencers that resulted in students choosing to undertake taught PG study at the same University they had previously completed their UG degree. The postgraduate focus in this study are those progressing onto taught Masters degrees such as an MA or MSc, rather than a research-based Masters programme of study (e.g. MPhil or MRes).

Method
Selecting the Research Sample

The research participants for this study were MSc Management students of a post-92 University located in a small city in the UK, who were engaged in full-time study during 2012/13, and who had previously completed their UG studies, in a range of disciplines, at the same institution. This HEI was selected because of the links with the researchers, so it was deemed that students would be more willing to participate in this enquiry. MSc Management students were selected since they comprised the majority of full-time postgraduate students at the chosen University.

The Research Process

Ethical approval was granted by the University, as a mandatory requirement for academic research using human participants. A request for participants to be interviewed was thereafter issued via an e-mail early in the academic year 2012/13 that was targeted at 16 taught Masters students who had completed their undergraduate studies at the same institution. To ensure strict ethical compliance no incentive to participate in the study was offered. Nine positive responses were received from students agreeing to be interviewed.

Breakdown of student profile

Since the purpose of this study was to go beyond the responses associated with a quantitative based survey and explore in more depth the perceptions and motivations of students who remain at the same HEI, it was felt that each individual would make a useful contribution. The interview was completely anonymous and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any point if they did not wish to proceed. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers to ensure a consistent and reliable approach in the process.

Semi-structured interviews were held with each of the Masters students in a location within the University. The nine students included three males and six females, all 22 or 23 years of age. Four were from the UK, two from the EU and three from outside Europe. The interview was based around 14 questions (see Appendix 1) covering

their decision to progress to PG study, the information gathering process, and the influencers in the decision to remain at the same institution. Students were encouraged to talk freely about their reasons for remaining at the University and their decision to progress to the taught PG study. Given the small overall sample size, no pilot study was conducted. The interviews were not recorded as it was thought that this might inhibit discussion. Instead, shorthand notes were taken. The responses were word-processed and participants were requested to confirm them to ensure correct representation of their views. The interviews were subsequently written-up, and commonality within the responses identified. The common themes that were derived centred on the decision to progress, the factors influencing the decision to remain at the same institution, and the role of personal relationships.

Findings and Discussion
The decision to progress

The findings suggest that progression onto taught Masters level study is not a route borne out of desperation because suitable graduate employment has not been found, but one derived from deliberate contemplation, information gathering and consultation. There was a broad range of responses relating to when students began to contemplate PG study. The earliest consideration extended back to when one student was a child, while another 'signed up' immediately prior to the PG programme induction event. However, these are extremes, with the majority of respondents claiming to have considered PG study at some point during their UG studies.

Students appeared to think carefully about the Masters course before applying, with evidence of both a clear information gathering process and period of reflection. This was supported by consultation and negotiation with 'key advisors', particularly parents, with students commenting that 'ever since I was little my parents wanted me to do it (Masters)' [Female EU student] and 'after graduating from the degree in May, my parents wanted me to work but I preferred to study' [Female International student]. Similarly, others discussed the notion of progression to Masters with friends with one Female International student stating that 'I thought about the masters before and after undergraduate. Agreed with friends to do it'.

Yet, this suggests a 'collective decision' to progress onto Masters level study, and one that is influenced by peers, whether in a desire to conform or to compete, rather than a decision to propel an individual's career in a predetermined or chosen direction. Nonetheless, the role of key influencers (whether parents or peers) in the decision making process, is clearly a significant factor in an individual's decision to progress from UG to PG study.

Influencing Factors to remain at the same HEI

Three areas emerged from the interviews as key influencers in the decision to remain at the same University for a Master's degree: the city, the University and the staff. Comments regarding the city revolved around its size and safe environment. The small size of the city was appealing, as it was deemed small enough to get around without the need for a car. Female students in particular were keen to emphasise how safe and secure they felt in the city, with one International female student commenting, 'Safety is important. Parents keep asking about safety, so I took pictures to show my parents. I have friends in other countries; they have to go home before 9pm'. Another student said it was peaceful and therefore more conducive to study. While this would not necessarily appeal to all prospective students, particularly those who favour a more vibrant social scene, it would have been relevant in the initial decision to join the University as an UG student some years earlier.

Familiarity with the University, its processes, where to go for support and generally 'how it works' were deemed to be important factors for all participants. This does suggest an element of inertia on the part of the students, being content and settled at the University, rather than having to relocate and be a 'fresher' again, albeit at PG level. Avoiding upheaval was a factor raised by more than one student. One female EU student stated that 'I know the city. I am at home here and most importantly we have a house and a dog. My fiancé is also here' while a female international student said 'I do not need the stress of moving'.

One student who had studied at another campus was happy to stay at the same University but relished moving to a different campus, while another, who excelled at sport, was reluctant to move University as it had taken him a long time to build up his sporting network. Contentment and familiarity also extended to the staff encountered at undergraduate level. In this research, Business School staff who taught some of the participants on their degree course was noted by all students as being an important reason for staying at the institution. Participants commented particularly on how they liked the teaching staff and as a consequence determined at UG level, that if this was representative of the staff on the Masters course, then they would be happy to remain. Moreover, academic staff had a key role in convincing students to remain at the University, especially in the final year of UG study. Only one student relied solely on web-based information to make the decision to remain at the University stating 'I relied on the web' [Female EU student], while eight of the participants commented on the usefulness of discussions with 'their favourite' final year Tutor, and also the importance of presentations and face-to-face discussions with the Admissions Tutor at that time.

Importance of relationships in the decision to remain

The role that the Admissions Tutor and other members of academic staff have in helping the University to develop a personal relationship with students is critical to the individual's decision to remain at the HEI for their PG studies. Participants stressed how valuable discussions with the Admissions Tutor were, especially in defining the structure of the programme. In addition, subject Tutors helped reinforce the benefits of progressing onto a Masters course. The contribution of support staff at the University was seen to be minimal, with no participants referring to support services such as Registry or the International Office. Seemingly these were outside the individual's personal relationship context. International students did however base their decision on advice from the recruiting agent in their home country, seemingly trusting the opinions and advice offered, even though this could be motivated by financial gain rather than any objective assessment. Interestingly, none of the participants sought the advice of previous students, although given the nature of the one-year Masters course in the UK, such alumni might not have been readily accessible.

It was interesting to note that none of the participants remained at the institution because of the 10% fee reduction given to progressing students, even though all students were paying course fees themselves. It seems that financial implications were not a significant consideration in the decision to remain at the same institution to continue their studies.

Conclusion

This study did not expressly examine the process of decision making, but sought to examine the influencing factors for individuals to remain at the same University for a postgraduate qualification. Nonetheless, there is clearly a cross-over with previous works on the decision making process for choosing an HEI (Blackburn, 2011; Obermeit, 2012; Whitehead et al., 2006). Whether this reflects an extension of the original decision making process, albeit with some personal experience of the institution, rather than a zero-based decision has not been differentiated here. Yet, while some of the students exhibited a lengthy information gathering process, consulting multiple information sources (Briggs & Wilson, 2007), others simply 'talked it over' with trusted advisors.

Not all the students mentioned the internet as a source of information. However, all students stated how contributions, either requested or not, from a third person helped in their decision making. In this case, the third person included the recruiting agent, trusted tutor or admission tutor. No respondents commented on friends, work colleagues or social networks that were established during their UG studies as influencers.

There is a clear implication here that students have a 'psychological attachment' and feeling of belonging to the institutional brand as proposed by Bowden (2011). This does however manifest itself as an attachment to the University rather than the PG award, but the two are intertwined. Li et al. (2012) highlight the importance that international students attach to a perceived 'safe-environment'. This is evident in the comments put forward by the students, with safety mentioned as being key, especially amongst female students.

Implications for HEIs: Marketing and the role of staff

This study has shown how students are seeking information, advice and guidance, and possibly even inspiration from sources other than the website. The advice sought from trusted third parties is used to reinforce their decision.

It is very likely that some Universities will, perhaps due to their size and complexity, rely on their website as their key communications media. This small scale research has shown how the intervention of trusted third parties is important to students as they consider progression to PG study. Universities will not be able to change the environment they work in but it would appear to be beneficial to accentuate those factors that are likely to influence student choice, such as safety, on their website and in their promotional literature.

Universities have a significant financial incentive to seek opportunities to increase progression of UG student's onto PG programmes. Such approaches have potential to have an immediate impact upon financial performance of the Institution. There is also an opportunity to enhance the reputation of the University if a greater proportion of graduates are demonstrated to be able to enter graduate level careers or PG studies following graduation. There are also potential benefits to individuals as they seek to differentiate themselves in the competitive graduate employment market, whether through gaining a Masters level qualification in a cognate discipline or a non-cognate employment-focussed Masters course such as a 'conversion' Masters in Business Management, where the Masters course is designed to provide enhanced opportunities for students to progress in their chosen field.

A critical opportunity for HEIs is now to further develop the concept of the Integrated Master's degree: a degree that incorporates 4 years of study, taking students seamlessly from entry at Year 1 to complete a 4-year programme of study. This has been a long-established approach in disciplines such as Engineering, and is becoming increasingly common approach across a range of disciplines.

Future Research

A model of influence has started to emerge that deserves to be investigated further, particularly concerning the influence of peers. This research has yielded some interesting factors that influence the decision to remain at an HEI for a taught PG course. Given the small sample size, based at a single post-92 university, there is an apparent opportunity for further research to investigate the range of factors that influence students' choice to progress, across a range of HEIs and discipline areas. In particular, further research activity concerning integrated Masters, particularly within the wider social sciences would be useful. Moreover, this study focused on students progressing onto a taught Masters award. It would therefore be appropriate to explore whether similar factors influenced the decision to remain for a research-based Masters, or whether relationships with staff cultivated at UG level and who would eventually provide supervisory support, is a key factor in the decision to remain at a particular University. In addition, the students' relationships with peers and others were seen to be important in this study, and this might emerge even more strongly as a factor in further research

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to do a Masters course?
2. Why choose Business Management? Did you consider studying any other discipline?
3. When did you decide to do a Masters course?
4. How is your Masters funded? Has this changed from undergraduate level?
5. Why did you choose to stay at UW for your Masters degree?
6. When did you decide to stay at this university?
7. What do you especially like about the University and the City? What was the primarily reason to stay at the University (NB The Order winning factor)?
8. Did you consider applying or did actually apply to any other university for a Masters course before choosing this University? (Explain why yes or no)
9. How did you find out about the Masters programme at UW?
10. Before registering for the Masters programme, did you speak with a member of staff (such as Careers, or the Course Leader) about the course? If so, how useful was this?
11. Did you speak with any existing University Masters students about the course? If yes, how useful was this?
12. Did you read any literature, either printed or on the web about the course? If so, how useful was this?
13. Did the Course Leader or a Lecturer on the undergraduate course encourage speak to you about the Masters or encourage you to apply for it?
14. Did you have any concerns about studying both UG and PG at the same institution? If so, what reassured you it would be OK?