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SOUTHAMPTON EDUCATION SCHOOL

Volume 1 of 1

Parents' experiences of their child's Higher Education choice process

by

Helen Haywood

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education

December 2015

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF SOCIAL, HUMAN AND MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THEIR CHILD'S HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICE PROCESS

Helen Susan Haywood

This thesis considers a critical aspect of marketing: choice and decision-making in a context experiencing change and marketisation – HE. Its aim is to explore the HE choice process from parents' perspective, at a time of increasing parental involvement. Much of the literature on choice and decision-making takes a quantitative approach with an underlying assumption that choices are rational. Contrastingly, there is a body of literature which looks at under-represented groups. My study responds to this by adopting an interpretivist approach, informed by aspects of phenomenology, which captures the accounts of 16 parents' lived experiences of this choice process and of the meanings that they attribute to them. It examines their experiences holistically, recognising the situated and extended nature of this process and noting that it is a choice made with and for someone else. It also considers parents' different approaches to involvement and the various roles they play.

Participants experienced this process as parents, not as consumers. Choice in an HE context is about relationships and relationship maintenance. Participants described working hard to avoid conflict and trying to be persuasive and occasions when they worked as a team with their child. This relationship also often influenced the type and degree of involvement they had. Working with their child generated a range of emotions. This relational aspect is missing from much of the marketing literature which privileges individual choice. It matters because not only are many choices intra-relational, but also in the context of HE, assumptions are made that this choice is 'rational' and approached from a consumer perspective and that providing more information will result in 'better' choices. However, this is a highly complex experience which is all about the relationship at a crucial phase, resulting in parents working hard to maintain it, including by being prepared to compromise.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Helen Haywood, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

'Parents' experiences of their child's Higher Education choice process'

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:

I presented parts of these findings at the Academy of Marketing Conference in July 2014. Details below:

Haywood, H. (2014) 'Wading through water' – parental experiences of their child's HE choice process. In: *Proceedings of 2014 Academy of Marketing Conference*, Bournemouth University: Bournemouth. 8–10th July 2014.

Signed:

Date:

x

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their help and support:

- My supervisors, Dr Martin Dyke and Dr Michaela Brockmann, for their on-going guidance, useful advice and endless patience.
- My colleagues – particularly RS for his continued interest and advice, but thanks too to so many other colleagues and also thanks to my institution for funding me.
- My husband for his help and reassurance (and to my children who got used to me sat preoccupied at the computer).
- My contact at the school, and other staff there, for helping me to find participants and most of all, to all the participants themselves for giving up their time to help me and without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

Definitions and Abbreviations

DMU – Decision–making Unit

EPS – Extended Problem Solving

FLAG – Fits Like a Glove (Allen, 2002)

HE – Higher Education

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI – Higher Education Institute

Chapter 1:   **Introduction**

1.1   Overview

This chapter will present an overview of my thesis, examine the role of parents in the Higher Education (HE) choice process, discuss the thesis' rationale and scholarly location and contextualise it with reference to the background to HE including its marketisation, concluding with a brief overview of subsequent chapters.

The aim of my study is to explore parents' accounts of their experiences and involvement in the process leading up to the choice of where and what their child will study at HE. This study was prompted by the increased involvement by parents, as reported widely in the media (e.g. Redmond, 2008; Moorhead, 2009 – see section 1.2), and also as experienced by the author. It was felt that this involvement might grow even further with the increased tuition fees, which might make this choice seem even more significant. I intend to explore parents' role and thus aim to ascertain if and how they impact on the choices made, as well as to investigate this choice process in more detail and from their perspective.

This thesis relates to choice and decision-making within the academic areas of marketing and consumer behaviour and in the context of HE. It will provide a unique perspective by examining parental choice using a qualitative methodology which focuses on parents' accounts of their experiences. These subjective accounts of choice experiences will allow me to make a contribution to the existing literature, by providing a more in-depth understanding of how choice is actually experienced, using rich detailed descriptions.

Understanding the student choice process has become significant for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in an increasingly marketised UK HE environment (Molesworth *et al.*, 2011), as they want to not only maximise student numbers, but also to ensure that they have the 'right' students for their courses (Kinnell, 1998; Baldwin and James, 2000). 'Marketisation' in this context is discussed in section 1.4. HEIs and policy makers need to consider the growing role of parents in this process (Cozens, 2013), as this is an area which is currently under-researched. For example, HEIs may overestimate the parental role,

assuming that their involvement leads to a more informed, thorough choice process regarding what and where students choose to study (Haywood, 2014). I am thus interested in exploring whether this is the case. This is a complex choice process, which involves a relationship between parent and child and which is taking place against a changing landscape.

My research took place soon after the publication of the government's White Paper (BIS, 2011) which was much discussed in the media. The White Paper's assumptions about choice and its depiction of the student as 'consumer' and of this as a consumer choice may well have influenced parents' views of this experience and of their role in it. These may then form part of their narratives and the ways in which they structure their stories and make sense of their experiences. The policies' underlying assumptions about how choices are made are also worthy of further investigation. My research will thus explore this choice process in detail to see how far these underlying assumptions are borne out, by looking more closely at how this choice is experienced by parents, including whether or not they see themselves as consumers. (This is discussed further in section 1.4).

1.2   Parents' role in education and HE

Williams (2011:177) notes that since the 1980 Education Act:

> parents have been encouraged to exercise consumer choice when actively selecting primary and secondary schools for their children in the educational *market place*

(emphasis added; also Redmond, 2008). Reay (1998:203) supports this noting that parents are now cast as consumers (also Pugsley and Coffey, 2002) and cites the "prevailing discourses which, at least rhetorically, give primacy to parental power and choice." Gewirtz *et al.* (1995:21) note that in the context of schooling, choice has been framed as positive as "it extends individual freedom" and thus it is presented as the fairest way of allocating school places. However, this increased choice is based on the assumption that "responsible parents will invest a great deal of energy in ensuring that they have made the right choice" (ibid., p.21) and thus the 'responsible parent' is one who will engage in this choice process like a "responsible, rational consumer" (p.21). The word 'rational' is noteworthy here, as it assumes that consumer choices

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are rational and that there is a 'right' choice to be made (discussed in section 6.1.1). My study will investigate how far these underlying assumptions of rationality are borne out in people's actual lived experiences of choice.

This parental involvement and the fact that parents are now encouraged to see themselves as consumers, has extended from schooling to HE, where involvement has increased amongst certain groups of parents and this discussion has played out in the media from where much of this section is sourced (Coughlan, 2008; Redmond, 2008; Moorhead, 2009; Fearn, 2010; Thorpe, 2011; Machan, 2011; White, 2012; Cozens, 2013). Williams (2011:177) notes that "parents become co-consumers in what is considered to be a family purchase". Reasons attributed to this greater involvement vary. Cozens (2013; also White, 2012) feels that parental involvement has increased as a result of higher tuition fees. Others however attribute it to changes in parenting styles (Coughlan, 2008) – discussed more fully in the next section. Coughlan cites Cooper who notes that as children's success contributes to parental status "parents are also using their children as surrogates for their own ambitions"[1] which can lead to heavy involvement. Media coverage may also play a part, as some newspaper articles detail the role that parents can (or should) play. This includes suggesting that "Open Days are also an ideal way for parents to get involved" (Thorpe, 2011). Machan (2011) echoes this and suggests that parents should "set aside time to go to any meetings the school offers, read the university prospectuses, attend their open days, and fill in the relevant forms." Redmond (2008) found that some parents' involvement even extends beyond this to include attending inductions. White (2012) supports this, noting mothers smoothing their child's early days at university by attending freshers' week with them. Redmond (2008) describes this increasing involvement as a 'generational shift'.

Universities have responded to parents' increasing role by holding special talks for them, including evening talks (e.g. University of Aberdeen). Keele University has 'Parent Ambassadors' who give talks to schools and at Open Days. Many universities have special sections on their web sites and/or guides and newsletters for parents (e.g. University of Sheffield and Swansea

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[1] Many of the sources in this section are electronic and thus there are no page numbers with the direct quotes.

University). The UCAS web site and the Complete University Guide both have sections for parents and as from 2008/9 parents can act as agents for their child in the UCAS application process, whereas previously UCAS had to deal with the applicants themselves (Coughlan, 2008). The Complete University Guide web site suggests that if necessary parents "can help to ensure that the process runs as smoothly as possible". Redmond (2008) also describes "parent packs" and "'family liaison officers' to help new parents 'settle in'". The child's school often also encourages parental involvement. Thus, parents are now catered for and their presence and involvement has become expected and perhaps to a degree normalised. University communications and Open Days, as well as media coverage, may lead parents to form expectations about their role and how involved they should be. These may then form part of the narratives which they present. It will be interesting to examine what exactly is taking place with regard to this process from their perspective and what they feel that their role is and should be.

However, there is a debate playing out in certain sections of the media about how involved parents should be in their child's education. Parental involvement is both derided as "helicopter parenting" (Williams, 2011:177), but also presented as "a benevolent act of parental duty" (p.177). Furedi (2001) notes a shift in views of parenting saying that being over-protective, once frowned upon, is now seen as "responsible parenting". 'Helicopter parents' has become a popular term, as "parents particularly those from middle-class backgrounds, are behaving more like consumers: they pay their money, they expect to see results" (Redmond, 2008). However, Moorhead (2010) defends what can be termed "pushiness" in education as "good parenting" and she says that "pushing for our child's success is one of the greatest gifts we can give them". It seems important to unpack these notions from prior literature, to see if parents experience a dilemma between wanting to be a 'responsible parent', and also wanting to encourage their child's independence, and if so, how it is experienced.

1.2.1   Parental involvement in their child's life

The greater involvement by parents in their child's education is part of a broad societal trend which is referred to as 'child-centered' (sic) parenting (Belkin, 2010) or the 'negotiated family' (Willmott and Nelson, 2004). This is where

children are more involved in family decisions including purchases and are listened to and consulted more (Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007) (see 2.2.5). However, this type of parenting can result in some negative consequences, discussed below, and aspects of it are critiqued by Furedi (2001) as 'parental paranoia'.

Williams (2011:177) feels that the marketisation of HE (discussed in section 1.4) plays a part in encouraging "children and parents to consider childhood as a prolonged period extending into the university years, with parents entitled to be involved in decision-making..." Furedi (2003) observes societal acceptance now of people becoming adults at a much later age which he attributes to a number of causes including the increased anxiety and insecurity felt by both students and parents (Furedi, 2001; 2003). Williams feels that students see themselves as vulnerable, which pushes them into increased dependence on their parents, who in turn behave like 'co-consumers'. She notes that students are not rebelling against parental involvement with many of them seeming to want their parents to accompany them to Open Days (also Furedi, 2003). Thus, parents remain significant in their child's life for longer and so they may well have an important role to play in the HE choice process.

1.3   Locating my project within the choice literature

One of the ways my thesis can contribute to existing literature is in terms of its methodology. In the context of HE choice, much existing research is quantitative, focusing on the factors examined and sources used, mainly from the student perspective (e.g. Moogan *et al.*, 1999; see sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 for more discussion). It is thus often underpinned by positivist ideas of 'rational choice' which make assumptions about how choices are and should be made. Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) support this saying that much research into educational choice falls into two categories. The afore-mentioned is the type which "treats choice as a decontextualised, undifferentiated and neutral mechanism" (p.20) which is linked to "the discourse of market theory" and lacks any focus on the "meanings and processes of choice and [of] the constraints" (ibid.) that some families face. The second category looks at how certain groups are disadvantaged by the current system. Whilst studies in this area are mainly qualitative, most of them focus on students' perspectives of their parents' involvement. Only a small number feature interviews with parents themselves (e.g. Reay *et al.*, 2001; 2005; see section 2.4.4) and they

reveal contradictions in terms of how gender, class, and ethnicity influence this choice process.

My research will purposefully respond to this by adopting a different methodological approach. This is not of course to denigrate either of the two strands of existing literature, as both make important contributions, but simply to offer a different, but equally valid, complementary approach. I want to look at the situated nature of choice and decision-making in the HE context and at the 'meanings and processes' of choice, but not with a focus on difference or disadvantage, or looking for ways to group parents. Rather, the methodological approach I take will allow me to explore this academic area from a new perspective. This is because it focuses on individual participant's holistic experiences of the HE choice process and on the subjective meanings they attribute to them and on how these experiences fit into their everyday lives and relationships. It also contributes by detailing the complex experiences of choice processes which are with and for someone else and experienced over time. Thus, I am moving away from a focus on choice factors and sources to how parents actually experience choices and make sense of them. There is also a gap in the literature with regard to studies in HE choice from a parental perspective, particularly at a time of rapid change in the HE landscape, discussed in the next section.

The objectives and my own assumptions relating to this topic can be found in Chapter 3 (3.1 and 3.9).

1.4   Background to HE

The purpose of this section is to provide a description of the current context of HE as background to this study. It is not intended to present a particular philosophical position, merely to present an overview of the sector and in particular one aspect, which is its marketisation. This is because, as discussed earlier, the underlying assumptions in the White Paper, which were widely discussed in the media at the time this research was conducted, may have influenced the views of parents and the narratives they present.

The HE sector has been changing rapidly. There has been an increase in the number of universities over the last 30 years and they range from research intensive universities to former polytechnics with more focus on teaching and

there are also a small number of private providers (Nedbalova *et al.*, 2014). There has been a corresponding increase in student numbers (HESA, 2015) and in the number and range of courses available. Tuition fees have also increased. The latest increase, with fees tripling to a maximum of £9000, would affect the children of the participants in this study, as they would be the first cohort to pay these increased fees.

Part of the changes within HE at this time of rapid expansion include what is felt to be an increasing marketisation (Molesworth *et al.*, 2011), both in terms of universities adopting more marketing approaches to recruitment and changes to the sector including strategies to encourage wider participation and to encourage more competition between providers. Foskett (2011) and Sauntson and Morrish (2011:73) note that it began in the 1980s with "...reforms [which] were imposed on institutions ..." by the Thatcher government. Despite changes in government this approach has broadly continued. One of the underlying premises of the 2011 White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS) is that by creating a market and increasing competition, academic quality will improve and good providers will expand whilst others shrink as "students would dictate which universities flourished and which did not" (Vasagar and Shepherd, 2010).

In order to achieve the desired level of competition in HE, two things are needed: the provision of information and then the prospective student to search for and examine this information and 'shop around' to make an appropriate choice. The White Paper tells us that "better information will enable students to make informed choices about where to study" (BIS, 2011:46) and consequently it dedicates several sections to explaining how more information will be provided in more accessible ways to assist both students and their parents. New information sources include the consumer magazine 'Which?' – this further reinforces the idea that choosing a university is a consumer choice. Thus, the assumption is that more information will result in more informed choices, which will result in competition between HEIs, which will improve standards. It is important to examine these assumptions. Given the changes within HE, including higher tuition fees and the provision of more information, it will thus be interesting to see if parents undertake the sort of detailed 'rational' choice process on which government policy is based (the notion of

'rational' choice is unpacked in section 6.1.1). This is particularly pertinent given the recent increase in tuition fees.

However, there are criticisms of some of the core assumptions which underpin much of this White Paper and whilst they will be more fully discussed where relevant in the literature review, the key arguments will be briefly summarised here. For example the idea that more information equals better choices is disputed. Schwartz (2004:221) warns of the dangers of the "overabundance of choice" which can lead to poorer not better outcomes, and Gabriel and Lang (1999) identify increased concerns about making a good choice (discussed further in section 2.1.3). In the context of HE, Moogan and Baron (2003) find that students can become overwhelmed by the amount of information available. A university registrar (cited by Boffey, 2011) points out that the large amount of information already available is not helping students to make informed decisions. This is also supported by recent Hefce research (Matthews, 2014) which finds that too many HE choices "can lead to 'decision-making paralysis'" (p.9) for prospective students and may lead to "'sub-optimal' decisions".

In addition to the problem of the abundance of information is the issue with interpreting it. For example, Abrams (2011) describes different ways graduate employment figures can be presented, making it difficult for prospective students to make sense of them when trying to compare HEIs with regard to their employability (also Swain, 2011). So that an abundance of information may not lead to more informed choice and indeed, as Schwartz and Matthews suggest, it might even have the opposite effect. So there is no simple relationship between the amount of information provided and the quality of the decision made. This information is targeted not only at prospective students, but also their parents. It will be interesting to explore how they feel about the available information, as well as to explore their actual choice process in this context to better understand what is actually taking place from their perspective.

1.5   Brief overview of subsequent chapters

The next chapter explores the literature on choice and decision-making. It starts with a broad discussion and critique of rational choice, and then looks at

choice and decision-making from two additional perspectives. It then examines choice in the context of joint/family decision-making, noting the added complexities of making choices with other people. It concludes with a section which explores existing studies of student and parental HE choice. Chapter 3 lays the methodological foundations for this highly interpretivist study informed by existential-phenomenology. Chapter 4 presents the findings which are then analysed in Chapter 5. The findings and analysis are presented separately to allow some of the richness of participants' voices to be heard. The final chapter concludes by examining how the objectives have been met, how this study could be taken forward, and with some outline recommendations to HEIs.

Chapter 2:   **Literature Review**

This chapter is structured as follows: an overview of the literature on choice and decision-making, including rational choice and a discussion of two additional perspectives – emotional and social. Choice in the context of joint/family decision-making will then be examined, followed by an overview of the student and parental HE choice literature.

2.1   Section 1 – Overview of choice (including rational choice)

2.1.1   Introduction

Given the underlying assumptions about choice, and the implicit view that choice is rational, contained in the White Paper (see Chapter 1) and in much HE choice literature, it is important to review the literature in the area of choice. This section will present an academic overview of choice, focusing particularly on choice within consumer behaviour and marketing. A critique of rational choice will be presented before alternative perspectives are considered.

The academic areas of marketing and consumer behaviour have borrowed from other more established disciplines such as economics from where core underlying principles emanate. Within these areas, consumer choice and decision-making have been of central concern. This stems from a desire to model consumers' decision-making processes, leading to the development of increasingly complex, comprehensive buyer behaviour and decision-making models (e.g. Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993). These models operate on the premise that consumers are rational and that by modelling their behaviour it can be understood and predicted.

2.1.2   Rational Choice

Rational choice theory is predicated on the assumption that people are rational and thus that their choices will be too, "individuals make choices by considering all relevant information available …, and…choose that option which maximises some utility function…" (Meyer and Kahn, 1991:87). Bettman *et al.* (1991) say that thus the key issue from an economic perspective is

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"understanding the values that different consumers use to make choices" (p.53), in order to understand how they maximise utility. Hargreaves-Heap *et al.* (1999:62) refer to 'homo economicus' who always acts on his/her "own preferences" and is characterised by "instrumental, calculating behaviour in relation to the attainment of ...[his or her] own ends."

March (1978:589) describes rational choice as primarily a theory of two guesses – "guesses about future consequences of current actions and guesses about future preferences" for these. He then discusses how difficult it is to predict either of these things with any certainty. He says that Simon's (1955) theory of 'bounded rationality' was developed to counteract criticisms relating to the first 'guess' and the idea that consumers had either the motivation or necessary computational abilities to be able to compare a wide range of alternatives in order to be able to predict consequences. Bounded rationality thus acknowledges the limitations on consumers' ability to process information (Bettman *et al.*, 1998). March (1978:589) criticises the second 'guess' by saying that it is based on the assumption that "future preferences are exogenous, stable, and known with adequate precision", whereas they are often "fuzzy and inconsistent".

2.1.2.1   **Constructive choice**

Following on from this is the idea of 'constructive choice', which not only acknowledges bounded rationality, but says that decisions can be made "on the fly" (Bettman *et al.*, 1998:188) and in response to situational factors. Constructive choice employs "heuristic processing" (Allen, 2002:518) to explain this, with a variety of choice-making strategies which range from very complex decision rules, to much more simple heuristics ("mental rules-of-thumb that lead to a speedy decision", Solomon, 2002:274) like 'choose the same brand' as last time (Allen, 2002). This is still rational however; heuristics and the related decision rules are drawn from our past experiences. Constructive choice is rational choice with caveats, which allows for more limited processing and for the use of past experiences to identify appropriate shortcuts.

Bettman *et al.* (1998) contrast constructive choice with earlier forms of rational choice theory by refuting the assumptions of earlier models that consumers have "well-defined preferences that do not depend on particular descriptions

of the options…" (p.187). Their view is that preferences are constructed and not pre-existing, nor stable, nor "well-defined" (p.188), echoing March's (1987) earlier criticism. They identify some factors influencing consumer choice such as the "complexity of the decision…how one is asked; how the choice set is represented (framed)", the context, as well as the goals, which can be multiple and contradictory. Thus, consumers may make different choices in different contexts and if the choice is 'framed' differently, so their choices and what is a rational choice are not stable. What is rational in one situation may not be in another. So this is a way of redefining rational choice, but still with an underlying rationality.

2.1.3   Choice and individualism

With regard to contemporary views of choice, Bauman (2000) says that in modern society we have moved from producers to consumers and that a consumer society privileges "consumer activity and consumer choice" (Smart, 2010:39). Thus, as discussed earlier in the context of schooling (section 1.2), choice is now deemed positive: "There is a very high premium placed on consumer choice in wealthy, late modern, neo-liberal 'consumer societies.'" (Smart, 2010:42). However, Bauman (2000:87) reminds us that choice is not always pleasurable and that: "…uncertainty is bound to remain for ever a rather nasty fly in the otherwise tasty ointment of free choice". Smart (2010:57) echoes this noting that choice has "…costs as well as benefits" including "stress and anxiety, disappointment and frustration" about making a good choice. Issues with the abundance of choice were discussed earlier (section 1.4 e.g. Schwartz, 2004). Thus, with choice comes responsibility and uncertainty and Bauman (2000) notes that in an increasingly individualised society people are left to make choices on their own without "traditional patterns, codes, rules or 'pre-allocated reference groups'…" for guidance (Gane, 2001:269). Rose (1998:150) supports the view of this individualism referring to the new "enterprise culture" which necessitated a new type of being, whose role is "…to interpret its reality and destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice." This links to the idea of choice being related to identity construction (Gabriel and Lang, 1999). Giddens (1991:82) asserts that this lack of trust in authority, the plurality of experts' views and the lack of "signposts established by tradition" can lead to a reduction in ontological security, which increases anxiety. Reay

(2005:205) echoes this in an educational context, noting that "a market ethos generates competition and individualism, it appears to generate maternal anxiety". Thus, in a modern, individualistic, consumer society, there is no choice but to choose (Giddens, 1991). However, choice is stressful and makes people anxious, as increasingly they have to do it alone, without expert guidance or traditions to call on and thus they worry about the wide range of choices open to them and about choices not made, as well as those made. How participants experience choice and whether they find it positive or stressful will be explored.

2.1.4   Information processing and decision-making models

Information processing describes how people respond to and process stimuli and information. It acknowledges bounded rationality (Bettman *et al.,* 1998). Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy (1984:46) describe this process as one which "views the consumer as a decision-maker who searches for, attends to, perceives, and evaluates data to make brand choices."

Hansen (2005) feels that this approach is best suited for highly involved consumers who would be predicted to search thoroughly. Hargreaves-Heap *et al.* (1999) echo this noting that in some situations a thorough search will not be undertaken. Thus, as discussed, it may be that decision approaches are context specific with situations where consumers are prepared to engage in a more thorough search and times when this is neither desirable nor possible.

Decision-making models which view consumers as problem solvers (Solomon, 2002) are linked to notions of information processing, based on an underlying belief in a form of rationality. The Engel-Blackwell-Miniard (1993) classic decision-making model has at its core a widely-cited 5-stage decision-making process (e.g. Solomon, 2002):

Figure 1 Stages of Decision-Making

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┌─────────────┐   ┌─────────────┐   ┌─────────────┐   ┌─────────────┐   ┌─────────────┐
│   Problem   │──▶│ Information  │──▶│ Evaluation  │──▶│  Purchase   │──▶│    Post     │
│ Recognition │   │   Search     │   │     of      │   │  Decision   │   │  Purchase   │
│             │   │              │   │ Alternatives│   │             │   │  Behaviour  │
└─────────────┘   └─────────────┘   └─────────────┘   └─────────────┘   └─────────────┘
```
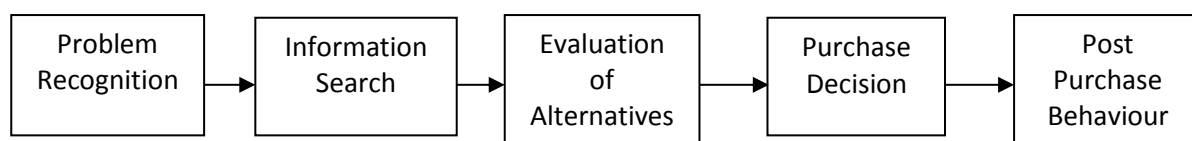
Source: Kotler (2003:204)

Risk and involvement are important influences on how extensive the problem solving process is. Extended Problem Solving (EPS) leads to the collection of much information and the careful evaluation of alternatives (Solomon, 2002). The higher the perceived risk and the more involved the consumer is, the more extensive the problem solving approach would be expected to be (Hansen, 2005). Hansen (2005:420) feels that consumers who have low involvement "may use simple decision rules" or heuristics (as discussed earlier) to help reduce risk, including cues for quality such as "price, brand name, advertising..." (p.421). In the context of HE, prestigious universities might be seen as 'brands' and choosing these could be a way to reduce risk. How much risk parents feel will be interesting to investigate.

Whilst it is not intended to model parents' behaviour in my study, this sort of model and its inherent assumptions are presented as they underpin future sections (e.g. joint/family decision-making – section 2.2) and link to earlier assumptions about how choices are made (section 1.4).

2.1.5 Criticisms of rational choice and decision-making

The literature on rational choice and decision-making has been widely criticised, including for the lack of empirical evidence and concerns about its predictive abilities. It is also felt to ignore other aspects of choice such as emotional and experiential aspects (see section 2.1.6).

The main criticism of rational choice, however, which has been touched upon previously, is simply that people do not behave 'rationally' in an economic sense. As Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999:290) state, "the characterization of the consumer in previous decision-making research as a 'thinking machine', driven purely by cognitions, is a poor reflection of reality..." They continue by saying that research finds consumers to be "more often mindless rather than mindful decision makers" with neither the time nor inclination to examine options thoroughly.

Thaler (1980; also March, 1978) suggests that economic models such as rational choice tend to describe what rational consumers should do (normative) but present them as descriptive (predicts what they actually do). However, what people should do can of course influence what they actually do, but this link is

not as clear cut as the rational choice literature suggests. Thus, rational choice theory might be said to present an idealised form of behaviour.

Olshavsky and Granbois (1979), note that "for many purchases a decision process never occurs" (p.98) not even the first time. They also say that where a process does occur it is probably "very limited" (p.99) with few criteria or alternatives employed and little external search (Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979). A limited search can still be rational of course, but Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) are critiquing the assumptions of an extensive process inherent in complex consumer decision-making models, saying that some decisions are "random or superficial…" (p.98). They note that regarding the little empirical evidence supporting these theories, "to some extent research instruments measure what their designers expect to find" (p.94). They also say that consumers may overstate what they feel to be "desirable as well as expected behaviour" (p.84), wanting to appear 'rational' and be able to account for their choices in a 'rational' way. This also echoes findings by Schwartz (2004) and Allen (2002) that consumers sometimes struggle to articulate why they made choices and when asked may feel the need to present logical reasons, even when this may not be the case. When conducting my research, I need to be aware of this issue.

Decision-making models have been criticised for being "too cognitive" (Hansen, 2005:422) and for ignoring instances where consumers' behaviour is a "response to cues in the purchase situation" (also Mowen, 1988). My study will address these issues by exploring accounts of how choice-making is actually experienced, taking a holistic approach, and not assuming that a cognitive process is followed. Decision-making models are also criticised for ignoring the role of emotion. Holbrook and Hirschman, (1982:135) feel that there needs to be more emphasis on the context of choice and on a 'hedonic approach' which considers "fun, amusement, fantasy…and enjoyment."

2.1.6   Additional perspectives on choice – emotional and social

The preceding section notes concerns about rational choice theory. Two additional and often complementary ways of considering choice will now be discussed. These approaches address some of the earlier concerns and perhaps better reflect the complex processes which consumers undertake.

2.1.6.1   Emotional perspectives on choice

As discussed, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) feel that reasons for choices can be symbolic or subjective, rather than purely rational. Emotions have been written about extensively, and whilst this literature, deriving from psychology, provides some interesting ways of complementing a more rational approach to decision-making, my focus is on its use within marketing and consumer behaviour.

In view of the large number of emotional descriptors, (Laros and Steenkamp, 2005:1440 present an extensive list derived from 10 "seminal studies"), many authors have tried to devise ways of grouping them (typologies), so that they can be used more easily. Laros and Steenkamp (2005) identify eight basic emotions – four negative (anger, fear, sadness and shame) and four positive (contentment, happiness, love and pride). Richins (1997) discusses a range of basic or 'primary' emotions, which she then adapts to form her Consumption Emotions Set (CES), specifically for researching consumption-related emotion.

Thus, one way of classifying emotions is whether they are positive or negative and the literature notes more negative than positive emotional terms in almost all classifications (see Huang, 2001 for a review). Babin *et al.* (1998) support this and also note that in some situations a range of both positive and negative emotions can be linked to an experience, including simultaneously. Similarly, Johnson and Stewart (2005:21) suggest that "multiple or mixed emotions occur" both at the same time and at different points in time. Babin *et al.* (1998) argue for caution when using bipolar measures which assume that experiences can only be either positive or negative. This reveals the limitations of research which attempts to measure emotions as a single score, or assumes that only one emotion was experienced, when the reality is much more nuanced (Babin *et al.,* 1998). It can also be noted that some emotions are linked to stronger feelings and more intensity than others e.g. contentment as less intense than happiness (Laros and Steenkamp, 2005).

Loewenstein and Lerner (2003) distinguish between two types of emotion – immediate (experienced at the point the decision is made) and the expected (or anticipatory) emotion (how someone expects to feel once they have made the choice). They also note that most consumer research focuses on expected rather than immediate emotions. However, a distinction must be made

between present emotions that are about the future (for example, worry about an outcome) but which are being experienced now (rather than being predicted). This contrasts with those emotions which are about imagining how someone would feel after a particular outcome, or if a particular goal is achieved "imagining the possible" (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999:200) e.g. happy to have lost weight. Pham (2004:364) makes this distinction between "genuinely experienced feelings" including those which are experienced "anticipatorily at the thought of the object" and "mere affective beliefs (e.g. anticipated anger)." He describes these latter emotions as less intense than current emotions, giving the example of someone predicting the guilt they would feel when breaking their diet as less vivid than the desire for cake now! Schwarz (2000) notes that people are often not good at predicting future emotions (how they think they will feel) (also Pham, 2004).

Many authors believe that cognitive and affective elements can co-exist; for example, Holbrook and O'Shaugnessy (1984:46) note that "choices can be based as much on affective-emotional factors as on rational-factual inputs." Holbrook and Hirschman (1982:138) echo this, feeling that their hedonic approach should be about "supplementing and enriching" the traditional information processing approach, not replacing it (also Hansen 2005; Hoyer and MacInnis, 2001). However, in contrast to this, Elliott (1998) develops a conceptual model to examine choice using emotional rather than cognitive processing. He says that choice processes driven by emotion are "motivated by the interpretation of symbolic meaning and the construction of self and social identity" (p.100). He also views emotions as "sociocultural constructions" (p.96) and thus advocates moving the focus from individual choices to take account of their broader social context. However, this model is not discussed further as it is about choice as process, and it places emphasis on emotional aspects, whereas my study is about how people experience choice and the cognitive and emotive responses which are generated when making choices with and for someone else. The focus of analysis is on the meanings that participants attributed to their recalled experiences.

Marcus *et al.* (2005) extend the earlier idea of the interaction between cognitive and affective factors by not only advocating that the two elements be considered together, but also explaining how they can interact. They argue against the separation of "affect and cognition" (p.961) which they feel "fosters

the normative presumption that reason should be..." the main way to make judgements. This results in prejudice against emotional responses, which leads to people wanting to give 'rational' reasons for their choices (Elliott, 1998), as discussed earlier. Marcus and Mackuen (1993) show that affect can trigger a more cognitive response; thus, that "explicit deliberation is a mental practice initiated, at least in part, by preconscious affective processes" (Marcus *et al.*, 2005:961). Their research shows how anxiety leads participants to abandon their "predispositions" and "heuristics" (p.951) and instead pay attention to the environment and to new and current information and stimuli, in order to make a decision (also Marcus and Mackuen, 1993). Loewenstein and Lerner (2003:629) support this, noting that, as with anxiety, situations of uncertainty "lead decision makers to scrutinise information carefully." Bagozzi *et al.* (1999:198) echo this view, noting that negative emotions lead to "systematic processing". Thus, strong emotions force people to reconsider their routine choices, preferences and ways of making choices and think carefully about what they want, paying attention to the context and to new information. Thus, certain types of strong emotion can cause more cognitive engagement.

However, others argue that strong emotions such as anxiety may provoke different responses depending on the context, such as avoiding a situation, relying on other people to make a choice, using heuristics, or making a low-risk, low-reward choice (Pham, 2004). Thus, how emotions influence decision-making is complex. It depends on a number of issues including familiarity with the object being chosen (Bagozzi *et al.,* 1999), which in the case of HE could be low for many people, and the intensity of the emotion (Loewenstein and Lerner, 2003).

The limitations of this literature are that it is mainly quantitative and often based on either 'self-report' or artificial situations (experiments) where participants are asked to imagine how they would feel in a particular context (e.g. McGill and Anand, 1989), or on trying to predict how emotions will impact on their choices. This is different to my study which looks at how emotions are actually experienced during a long choice process, allowing me to offer a new perspective.

2.1.6.2 **Social perspectives on choice**

Hargreaves–Heap *et al.*'s (1999:63) 'Homo sociologicus' considers the impact of the social world and "rules, roles and relations" on choice and thus it can be differentiated from "'homo economicus' by a focus on the social notion of norms rather than the individualist concept of preference" (p.64). Thus, our choices and preferences are socially shaped, "choice is thoroughly social; it is a process powerfully informed by the lives people lead and their biographies – …their positions within a social network" (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995:24). Zafirovski (1999) echoes this, reminding us that although choices may seem to be made by and be about individuals, they are nevertheless heavily influenced by social institutions and structures. Ball and Vincent (1998:393) link this to social comparison, as we compare ourselves and our choices with "others 'like us'" or not "'like us'."

Bourdieu's theories of types of capital and habitus are used by some authors to examine the social constructions of choice within education (e.g. Reay *et al.,* 2005 – see section 2.4.2). Cultural capital is "a broad array of linguistic competences, manners, preferences and orientations" (Reay *et al.,* 2005:20) and social capital is "generated through social processes between the family and wider society and is made up of social networks" (p.21). Solomon (2002: 401) says that the differential and unequal access to these forms of capital allow certain classes to "perpetuate their privileged position in society." Reay *et al.* (2005:23) state that while the "habitus allows for individual agency it also predisposes individuals toward certain ways of behaviour", thus it influences the choices made and the preferences held. Choice is thus constrained by an internalised framework "which makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable" (p.27).

In addition to Bourdieu's work, social class can impact on the choice process and on how choices are made in other ways. For example, some of Allen's (2002:529) respondents dispute "what might be considered a more middle-class, academic view of how choices are (or should be made)." They felt that his research was trying to make something quite simple complicated such that "middle-class academics do not know how people make many of their everyday choices" (p.529). He also notes that the more middle-class respondents "exhibit more extensive and elaborate information-search …strategies" (p.525) and undergo a more detailed search process. He observes

that they "are socialized in a social milieu more pervaded by abstract, noninstrumental thinking…" (p.523), which better prepares them for making detailed comparisons between alternatives. Ball *et al.*'s (2002b) typology of 'choosers' also makes links to class (discussed in 2.3.3). Both these studies relate to HE choice.

Having looked at two additional perspectives on choice which many authors feel complement more rational perspectives, one model which develops this idea further is described below.

2.1.6.3   The FLAG framework

Allen (2002:520) devised the 'FLAG' ('Fits Like a Glove') framework which explores the broader influences on choice, including social and contextual factors which "entails embodied, holistic perceptual comprehension characterised by the experience of perfect fit" and which considers the importance of the in situ context of choice. It links choice to Bourdieu's notions of practice and habitus. Allen differentiates this approach from both rational and constructive choice saying that "informed by practice theory, the FLAG choice theory…views choice as a microcosm of individual-level, contextual and sociohistorical conditions" (ibid.). He goes on to say that it "is constructed during the in situ encounter between a consumer's habitus and an object of choice" (ibid.). Choices made during this encounter are based strongly on emotion and what 'feels right' and these strong feelings "block more analytical or calculative concerns" (p.521). Thus even when respondents had a list of attributes, these were ignored in favour of the vividness of the actual experience. He locates the rationale for the feeling of 'fit' in the students' habitus which shapes their FLAG choices. Thus choices are not neutral and objective, they are holistic and embodied and my research method will allow me to explore how they are actually experienced, reflecting their situated and social nature.

2.2   Section 2 – Choice in the context of family and joint decision-making

The previous section examined choice, discussing the limitations of considering it as purely rational, and then looking at it from two additional

perspectives. This section now looks at choice in the context of joint and family decision-making.

2.2.1 Background and introduction

Despite the increasing focus in the choice literature on individuals (see 2.1.3), there is a literature strand relating to joint and family decision-making. Much of this literature draws on models and research dating from the 1970s and 80s (Flurry, 2006) and it often relates to purchases for a child or for a product used by the whole family (e.g. car/holiday), or to spousal decision-making (Lackman and Lanasa, 1993). As such there is little specifically on adolescents and on purchases for or with them and what there is on adolescent influence dates from the 1980s and 90s (Wang *et al.,* 2007). Joint decision-making is also an area which is under researched. Nørgaard *et al.* (2007:198) note that "many studies...focus on the individual consumer's decision-making". This is because the choice literature, following the neo-liberal turn, now privileges the individual and individualism (see section 2.1.3). Commuri and Gentry (2000:1) support this, noting that "as findings became repetitive...interest in family decision making began to wane" which they attribute to the focus on individuals in the underpinning theories of behaviour and personality.

Much of the early research was quantitative focusing on outcomes and measurement (Thomson *et al.,* 2007) often with a view to modelling and predicting purchases (e.g. Sheth, 1974; Park, 1982; Belch *et al.,* 1985). Ekstrom (2007:206) notes that this trend has continued and that "research on family consumption" still mainly takes a quantitative approach. However, there are some more recent qualitative studies which explore choice, focusing mainly on influence (e.g. Thomson *et al.,* 2007; Hamilton and Catterall, 2006; Nørgaard *et al.,* 2007 and Ekstrom, 2007) with a few on conflict avoidance/resolution (Hamilton, 2009; Nørgaard and Brunsø, 2011), including examples of persuasion and negotiation. There are also two studies which present discussions between parents and their adolescent children in the context of careers and health, which, although not about choices, do reveal influencing and negotiating approaches (Young *et al.,* 1997; 2001). These studies are discussed more fully in the following sections.

When examining family decision-making, a few parallels can be drawn with organisational ('buyer') behaviour, and the associated models, as this involves

groups of people. It includes Decision-Making Units (DMUs) and the idea of different people having different roles. Within the family, decision-making roles can include (adapted from Lackman and Lanasa, 1993; also Kotler, 2003): initiator; the gatekeeper (who may decide the criteria and influence the 'evaluation of alternatives'); the influencer; the decision-maker; the buyer and the user. Sheth's comprehensive model of family decision-making includes a wide range of influencing variables, such as family values, and individual personalities. Park (1982) discusses the idea of role and task specialisation by spouses, which focuses on their expertise. My study will explore what role(s) parents play in the HE choice process.

Lee and Collins (2000) emphasise the importance for marketers of understanding family decision-making which can be seen as unique due to the long standing relationships within families (also Jacobs *et al.,* 1993). Davis (1976:255) describes the benefits of group decision-making as that more information can be gathered and that it "can produce a 'better solution' than that put forth by any of the members individually." However, the downside to group decision-making is the potential for conflict. Sheth (1974:46) describes it as complex and often more time-consuming due to the variety in participants' "cognitive worlds" which can lead to conflict. Within this academic area, the focus is mainly conflict avoidance/resolution, and influence and influencing strategies and these areas overlap. They will now be discussed, followed by a brief section on adolescence and its impact on family relationships and choice processes.

2.2.2   Conflict – avoidance and resolution

In addition to Sheth's observation above, other reasons for conflict within family decision-making include: that individuals' power and resources are unequal (Jacobs *et al.*, 1993); family members do not make decisions in the same way (Nørgaard and Brunsø, 2011), plus there are age and gender differences (Sheth, 1974). Additionally, family members have different predispositions towards and perceptions of products and brands; they use different sources and they may also respond to information and sources differently (Sheth, 1974). Davis (1976) also notes that there can be additional pressures on families and that times when the whole family are around can be limited, so that it can be hard to find the time and energy to discuss choices.

However, coupled with the potential for conflict is the desire for harmony – which makes family decision-making different to organisational decision-making (Davis, 1976). The need to maintain long term relationships affects the process, and expertise by one family member may be sacrificed in the interests of harmony (Davis, 1976). Hamilton and Catterall's study (2008) found more evidence of cooperation than conflict.

Sheth (1974) describes four strategies to resolve conflict: problem solving; persuasion; bargaining and politics (including coalitions within the family). Davis (1976) develops two models of decision-making strategies – the consensus model which "encompasses Sheth's idea of problem solving, [amongst other areas] and accommodation which encompasses persuasion, bargaining and politics" (Lee and Collins, 2000:1182). Nagging can be incorporated into bargaining and persuasion (Lee and Collins, 2000). Lee and Collins (2000) review a range of models of decision-making strategies for conflict resolution and identify five of the most common components: experience, legitimate (focus on role structure e.g. as parent), coalition, emotion and bargaining (also Thomson *et al.*, 2007). Davis (1976:252) finds that families are more likely to "bargain, compromise, and coerce", the 'accommodative' approach, rather than engage in problem solving to reach decisions and resolve disagreements, which he attributes to the need for "group maintenance" (p.253). This is supported by Spiro (1983:399) who notes in spousal decision-making that "greater attempts at being persuasive", using a range of influence types, will be used if the goal is conflict avoidance. Hamilton (2009) notes a tendency to use conflict avoidance as a coping strategy and three avoidance strategies are identified: individual control (one person becomes the specialist and takes charge); giving in and open communication. How far parents describe conflict avoidance strategies and whether and how they describe experiencing conflict will be interesting to explore.

2.2.3   Influence and negotiation

Influence and negotiation strategies overlap with many of the above conflict strategies. Spiro (1983) lists them as: expert, legitimate, bargaining, reward/referent, emotional (including anger, crying or sulking) and impression management. Influence is also linked to power, but there are issues which

militate against using power in family decision-making, such as the desire to be liked, avoid conflict and preserve the relationship (Corfman and Lehmann, 1987). In the family, influence can be passive or indirect as family members are aware of each other's preferences (Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007) (discussed in relation to education in section 2.4.2.1) and types of influence vary from non and light to heavy (Spiro, 1983).

With specific regard to negotiation, Contento *et al.* (2006:580) found that negotiating was one way that adolescents dealt with the conflict between their "personal autonomy...[and] the needs of others in the family". Young *et al.* (1997) in their study relating to career conversations found that negotiating was one of three joint actions used, along with 'struggle' and 'exploration'. In terms of negotiation styles and effectiveness, children learn to "tailor[ing] their argument to the family or particular individuals" (Thomson *et al.*, 2007:188). Jacobs *et al.* (1993) echo this, noting that adolescents use a variety of influence strategies and learn which work for them over time (Palan and Wilkes, 1997). It will be interesting to discover whether parents use, or admit to using, influencing and negotiation strategies and the detail of these and of how they are experienced.

2.2.4   Difficulties of family/joint decision-making

As already discussed, there are particular issues in family decision-making. Davis (1976:252) describes the theoretical "ideal representation" which is that 'satisficing' would take place until an alternative is found which "satisfies the minimum level of expectations of all members" (ibid.). Park (1982:152) critiques the idea that the dyad is "rational, analytical, and plans comprehensively to maximize joint utility – ...[as being] simply not convincing." He continues by saying that in attempting to minimise conflict what results is a "groping through a recursive, discontinuous process", and a "muddling-through" (ibid.; also Nørgaard and Brunsø, 2011). Park notes that decisions are reached (rather than made) using a "set of conflict avoiding heuristics" (p.152) such as 'task specialization' between spouses, as illustrated in Hamilton's (2009) findings. Nørgaard and Brunsø (2011:143) echo this, referring to the perception that decisions are made jointly when they are not and to the idea of family members trying to avoid conflict by "pretending to agree."

2.2.5   Impact of adolescence on family choice process

As outlined in section 1.2.1, changes in family structure now result in more open communications between parents and children (Nørgaard *et al.,* 2007) and in adolescents having more influence in the family and more involvement in choices (Thomson *et al.*, 2007; Foxman and Tansuhaj, 1988). This is particularly, as might be expected, with regard to choices relating to them (Beatty and Talpade, 1994; Kim *et al.*, 2009).

Parents start giving children more responsibility for making choices from late childhood to early adolescence (Jacobs *et al.*, 1993). Different information is important to parents and adolescents (Jacobs *et al.*, 1993) with the latter being more concerned about what their friends think, and Young *et al.* (2001:49) note different goals with parents wanting to ensure that "the adolescent maximize his or her potential" (here in the context of health). This is also illustrated by Nørgaard and Brunsø (2011) in their discussion on food choices, where healthy choices are left to parents leaving the young adolescent to focus on other things. Parents' focus is on health and safety as they are "responsible for their offspring's well-being" (Jacobs *et al.*, 1993:260).

Adolescence is a key phase in terms of development (Mann *et al.*, 1989) and one of its characteristics is the adolescent wanting more autonomy and independence. However, at the same time parents often still want to maintain some influence, if not actual control. Steinberg (2001:8) describes the importance of facilitating adolescent independence ("psychological autonomy granting"), as opposed to parents exerting too much psychological control. This changing relationship creates conflict in the parent between pride at the child's independence, and sadness at the separation that this independence entails (Hallden, 1991). My study takes place at this transformative phase in the relationship.

With specific regard to research into interactions between parents and adolescents, Young *et al.* (2001:41) note that adolescents' relationship with their parents changes but it is "transformed rather than abandoned", as they still seek parental support. It is important for them to interact with family as well as friends in order to achieve growth (Epp and Price, 2008). Contento *et al.* (2006) note that adolescents' desire for control is balanced with wanting to maintain family relationships, and that it can be a stressful time for them too,

as they strive for independence but also "remain emotionally connected to their parents" (Kracke, 1997:342).

Concerning adolescent education and career choices, Young *et al.* (1999:535) note that "parents have a significant impact". Young *et al.* (1997:82) also note that all conversations about education or career are "implicitly grounded in the long-term (past and future) parent–adolescent relationship", as they touch on the adolescent's impending independence, and "...involve developing a new relationship with parents that is characterized by living independently..." These conversations, however banal or brief, also implicitly acknowledge a change in this relationship, thus having considerable significance to both parties.

In a later study, Young *et al.* (2001) note that parents felt it important to maintain communication, but that there could be disagreements over the adolescent's desire for greater freedom, with one of their respondents describing the frustration of not being listened to. In their earlier study (1997), there is conflict between a mother and daughter where the latter felt she was being nagged, but the mother still wanted involvement in her education. These studies illustrate the tensions which can occur between adolescents and their parents, and it will be interesting to see any evidence of them in my research.

2.2.6   Limitations in previous studies of joint/family decision-making

There is a need for research on the process not outcomes of family decision-making (Davis, 1976; Hamilton, 2009) and on how the decision was made, not on who was involved in making it (Davis, 1976). Thomson *et al.* (2007:183) echo this saying that "little is known about the processes and complexities of family purchasing", including "influence behaviour" and communication. My study will contribute by focusing in detail on this process. There is also the issue of respondents giving socially desirable responses. Lee and Collins (2000:1184) observe that respondents "may be reluctant to report a high level of conflict" during the process, avoiding terms like "politics" or "bargaining". Corfman and Lehmann (1987) support this as they found negative connotations attributed to the term 'bargaining skill' which they feel may explain its low score in their research. Spiro (1983:398) echoes this, acknowledging the possibility of some "under-reporting of influence attempts by the influencer". Thus, respondents can be conscious of how they present

themselves and I will need to be sensitive to this when conducting my research.

Hamilton and Catterall (2006:1044) also note the lack of focus on emotions particularly love, but also sympathy and guilt, and their study finds support for the role of love as a "main motivating factor influencing purchasing". They support the view (discussed in 2.1.6) that emotions are neglected in rational choice theory and that "rationality and emotionality can coexist" (p.1046). My study's holistic approach to choice will address this by allowing participants to discuss all aspects of their experience.

I shall now look at the literature on how students choose HE and parents' role in it.

2.3   Student HE choice and parental role

In the preceding section, issues in family/joint decision-making were discussed. The focus now narrows to review the literature on how students choose universities, followed by parents' role in this. Students' choices are examined because of course they play a key role in this decision and also because most previous studies focus on them (e.g. Connor, 2001). Many of these studies take a quantitative approach (Moogan, *et al.*, 2001; Maringe, 2006) with an underlying assumption that choices are rational and that a structured process is followed. They often focus on the factors (Briggs, 2006) and sources which are used. As discussed (section 1.3), there is also a body of research on UK students which, contrastingly, takes a qualitative approach looking at non-traditional applicants' choices (e.g. Reay *et al.*, 2001).

Whilst my focus is not on choice factors or information sources, it will be useful to review some of the most common findings, to provide some context for my study and because these may form part of the narratives which parents provide and the ways in which they structure their stories and make sense of their experiences. This chapter briefly reviews these and then looks at the search process in more detail and how this can vary by student, before looking at literature specifically on parental involvement.

2.3.1   Student HE choice factors

Moogan *et al.* (2001:181) summarise the three main attributes as: "course specifics…location…and reputation of the institution…" Maringe's (2006) more recent study found an increasing emphasis on "economic factors" (p.470) such as costs of living, opportunities for part-time work, careers and even a return on investment, at the expense of any "interest and love" for the chosen subject (p.476). He attributes this to the increasing marketisation and impact of tuition fees. As tuition fees recently increased again (section 1.4) it will be interesting to see if and how this marketisation manifests itself in parents' accounts of their experiences. However, Haywood and Molesworth's (2010) research found that students focused more on what they term 'peripheral' aspects of the HE service offering (i.e. the facilities, location, social life and perceived 'student experience'), rather than on details of the course. Ball *et al.* (2002a) note that choice factors vary by student and note differences in the importance of criteria for different groups (also Brooks, 2002).

2.3.1.1   Constraints on choices and 'fitting in'

Reay *et al.* (2001:861) refer to some students as having "geographical constraints" which they term " localism" where travel costs and the need to live at home restrict choices (also Pugsley, 1998). These students also discussed "emotional constraints" (p.863) such as 'fitting in' and their preference for "low risk universities" (p.865) where they felt comfortable, which can be linked to both race and class (also Ball *et al.*, 2002b). Haywood and Molesworth's research (2010) echoes this, noting that students made 'safe' choices. Ball *et al.*, (2002b) find that for white students, ethnic mix was not specifically raised as a concern; instead 'social mix' was considered in terms of similarity of class and other students' ability. Hemsley-Brown's (1999) findings support this; with students choosing colleges which matched their self-image. This desire to be with people "'like them'" (Ball *et al.*, 2002a:60) is often implicit and not openly discussed and Hemsley-Brown (1999) finds that these influences were sometimes hidden behind the expression of more apparently 'rational' reasons. Recent Hefce data (Matthews, 2014) also supports this, noting that courses were chosen dependent on whether they 'felt right', (also Haywood and Molesworth, 2010) which was described as being an "'emotional' and 'non rational' basis" for choice (p.9). Allen's (2002) FLAG framework, (section

2.1.6.3) echoes this, as it examines how choices can be made during Open Days. He describes the vivid emotional experiences students recount and how they feel at home, choosing universities which seemed to 'fit' with them, which he links to their habitus and background.

It will be interesting to see if parents experience this sense of 'fit' for their child and if so, how this is articulated, particularly if they accompany them to Open Days or, if not, whether and how they discuss any sense of 'fitting in' which their child describes.

2.3.2   Student HE information sources

Sources can be personal: e.g. school, friends, career officers and family, or non-personal such as prospectuses, websites, or league tables (Moogan *et al.*, 2001; Brooks, 2002). Ball and Vincent (1998:380) make a distinction between official (or 'cold') knowledge and 'grapevine' (or 'hot') knowledge; where the latter includes personal recommendations, "affective responses or direct experience" (also Ball et al., 2002b – section 2.3.3). Brooks (2002) notes that as with choice factors, different students use different sources and some consult more widely than others.

HEIs' marketing materials have been described as 'promotional materials' (Moogan *et al.*, 2001). Kinnell (1998) describes their tendency to focus more on "'selling' of courses" (p.17) rather than "informing students about the realities of university life" (p.18). Some students feel that information is not accurate and they distrust it (James, 2001). Certainly there is evidence that the information does not always correspond with what students require (Briggs, 2006). With regard to missing content or lack of sufficient detail, this includes: "programme of study" (Moogan *et al.*, 1999:223); and "...assessment models, post qualifying employment rates,..." (Maringe and Carter, 2007:471). Baldwin and James (2000) argue for it to be made clear how institutions approach subjects in different ways, so that students may select the approach which best suits their needs.   Hemsley–Brown (1999:95) notes that many of her respondents were unable to give "coherent" reasons for choosing colleges until they had experienced colleges' marketing material. Once they had made their decisions, many referred to these promotional messages as ways of rationalising and explaining their choices, even when the information was incorrect, or inconsistent with their earlier preferences. Thus, the marketing

materials played a significant role in shaping their preferences, including giving them more 'acceptable' reasons to explain and justify their choices. How parents interpret such material, which is not always aimed at them, and the role it plays in the choice process will form part of my study.

2.3.3   Student HE choice process

It is recognised that this heading implies that there is a process and that it will be experienced and articulated as such. Whilst these views derive from some of the literature, this normative perspective will not shape my study, rather I will seek to explore any process which does take place and how it is experienced.

Moogan *et al.* (1999:221) note that "the evaluation process was difficult for pupils." This was due to the large number of universities and courses, many apparently similar, the quantity of information to process, the lack of experience in choosing and lack of help with the decision (ibid.). Brooks (2002:225) also questions the idea that more information would lead to better choices, noting differences "in how such information is interpreted" by different groups of students. Hefce research supports this (as discussed in section 1.4), finding that "too much information can lead to 'cognitive overload'" (Matthews, 2014:9), which then negatively affects the decision.

Authors differ in their view of how effectively students carry out the search process, although this may be based on the normative view that there is a 'correct' way to choose. James (2001:3) sees many students as "poorly informed... not active information seekers". However, more recently, Maringe's study (2006:477) suggests that they are "no longer passive consumers... Applicants are becoming discerning choosers..." which again he partly attributes to increased tuition fees. Thus, there are different views on the search process which my study can explore; including the possible role of marketisation.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) find differences in the way that the HE search is conducted between "higher-ability" students and those whose parents were less educated. Brooks (2002) supports this counselling against seeing students as a "homogenous group" (p.220; also Reay *et al.*, 2001). This is linked to Ball *et al.*'s (2002b) typology of two types of choosers (introduced in section 2.1.6.2), who have different approaches and constraints. For 'contingent'

choosers, choosing involves balancing "practical constraints with a limited number of positive criteria" (p.341), resulting in some "haphazard.." choices which they link to lack of "grapevine" or hot knowledge (p.353) and their limited time and resources. For 'embedded' choosers, HE is part of their "normal biography" (p.342). It would be unthinkable for them not to go to university "and certainly unacceptable to parents" (ibid.) who are normally directly involved. They use a lot of information, both 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge and unlike contingent choosers; cost and location are not limiting factors. Ball *et al.* (2002b:352) acknowledge that these two types of chooser are essentially "class based." Thus, this echoes the earlier point that criteria, information sources and the type of process undertaken vary by student, which some authors attribute to class.

2.3.3.1 **Student Choice Experience**

There is little literature specifically on how students experience the choice process. A few exceptions are a study which finds that they feel unsure, daunted by the process, or "panicky" (Haywood and Molesworth, 2010:840), although one felt excited. Another example is Moogan *et al.* (1999:225) who say that students find it "complicated and risky". Ball *et al.*'s research (2002b:341) echoes the point about panic and rush, with one participant being "confused... we were all finding it hard to choose" and Brooks (2003a:250) describes one participant as "quite nervous."

Some students were happy to defer the decision to both teachers and, importantly for my study, parents. Thus, it is now appropriate to look in more detail at existing research on the parental role.

2.4 Parental involvement in HE choice

Many studies see parents as an important information source (Carbrera and Nasa, 2000; Broekemier and Seshadri, 2000; Brooks, 2004). However, Brooks (2002) notes that although they are the most widely consulted source, they are not always the most useful and Reay *et al.*'s (2005) study supports this with students having differing views of their parents' influence and usefulness.

The literature on parental involvement in education focuses mainly on the school sector (for example Reay, 1996; Bogenschneider, 1997) and whilst there

may be some common themes, the issues are thought to be different for HE choice, where students would be expected to play a much more active role (Brooks, 2003a). The role students and parents play in this process and the interactions between them will be explored in my study.

2.4.1   Different HE choice criteria between parent and child

Several studies, mainly US, have looked at different choice criteria between students and their parents (e.g. Broekemier and Seshadri, 2000). For example, students placed more value on "social life, friends attending...and athletic programs" than their parents, who attached more importance to "program of study, cost...and academic reputation..." (Broekemier and Seshadri, 2000:8; MacDermott *et al.*, 1987). Haywood and Molesworth (2010) note a few examples of parents carrying out a more detailed analysis of factors (including league tables, employment and 'drop out' rates), whereas their child was content to rely more on feelings and impressions. This echoes the earlier discussion by Nørgaard and Brunsø (2011) in the context of food choices (section 2.2.5), which finds that children and their parents focus on different aspects. Ball *et al.* (2002b) also have an example of a mother and son differing over the importance of the university social life and Reay *et al.* (2005) have several examples of students who do not want their parents accompanying them to Open Days, as their focus would be different. Pugsley and Coffey (2002) discuss parental concerns in terms of the happiness and safety of their child. The criteria that are most salient for parents and if, and how, they differ from their child's criteria could be explored in my study.

The fairly limited number of studies on parental involvement in UK HE examine it from three overlapping perspectives: social class linked to social and cultural capital and parental education levels; gender and ethnicity.

2.4.2   Role of parental social class and gender

2.4.2.1   Social class including parental educational levels

Many studies look at differential access to 'social and cultural capital', (section 2.1.6.2) examining parental involvement from the perspective of under-represented groups (e.g. David *et al.*, 2003). This links closely to social class. David *et al.* (2003) find that with regard to HE choices, "the middle classes

attempted to reproduce their own educational patterns" (p.29; also Ball *et al.*, 2002a), whilst the working classes are trying to "transform their children's educational fates" (David *et al.*, 2003:29). However, Brooks counsels against seeing the middle classes as one homogeneous group (2003b). In her studies of this class, she identifies subtle differences between them, including education level (Brooks, 2004) and access to social capital through work contacts (Brooks, 2003b). Thus, although her sample are 'middle class', they are mainly drawn from those without higher level qualifications who have more in common with working class students than with those from the educated middle classes with university educated parents (2003a); this impacts on the help these parents can provide.

Pugsley (1998:81) describes the sense of alienation and isolation felt by the working class families in her research, who "felt out of their depth", as whilst "much of what needs to be known is taken for granted by the middle class" (p.81) it needs to be made explicit to them. The middle classes feel comfortable in an educational environment and in making educational choices. With regard to this group, she discusses the "implicit assumptions in some families which served to make choices invisible" (p.74); these parents do not think that they have influenced their child's university choice, because it has been assumed all along (also Reay *et al.*, 2005). This links back to earlier discussions of a 'normal biography' (Ball *et al.*, 2002b – section 2.3.3).

Reay *et al.*'s study (2005:72) illustrates the importance of "educational social capital". Examples include a friend who is an ex-Oxford student with lots of "insider comments" (p.72) and family connections at a Cambridge college and with an Oxford Don. These educated middle class families have a natural awareness of the good universities (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Pusgley, 1998). For them, it is no longer about their child going to university, but about going to the 'right' university, whereas Pugsley (1998:82) finds that working class parents were "unaware of, or unconcerned about, the ranking of universities" and were more concerned with their child staying local. Careers which follow on from degrees are also carefully researched using networks and contacts (Brooks, 2004). Brooks (2002) notes that students from working class backgrounds whose parents have no HE experience, have to be more independent, as they cannot draw on their families' 'capital'. They felt that

"their parents lacked the competences required to engage constructively" (Reay *et al.*, 2005:65) and that the support provided was often primarily emotional.

Linking to 'educational social capital' is "institutional habitus" (David *et al.*, 2003:29). They note that schools had "different approaches to parental involvement" (ibid.) and that some parents of privately educated children were able to leave the process mainly to the school, due to their shared values and expectations. Whereas in the state sector, some middle class families were less happy with the school support and felt that they had to get involved (ibid.).

Studies show differences in the link between parents' educational levels and their involvement. Al-Yousef's (2009:788) study revealed that parents' HE experiences were "seldom suggested" as helping their daughters' searches, regardless of how educated parents were. However, other studies have deemed parents' educational levels and experiences to be important (e.g. Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Pugsley, 1998; David *et al.*, 2003). Whether and how parents' educational experiences feature in this process may be an area to explore in my study.

2.4.2.2 Gender

Gender relates both to different parental roles (Brooks, 2004; Al-Yousef, 2009; Pugsley, 1998) and also to differences between male and female students relating to the parental involvement they want. For example, some boys seemed keen to minimise involvement, particularly those attending state school (David *et al.*, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005).

As with parental education levels, findings vary with regard to gender and parental involvement. For example, Ball (2003, in Brooks, 2004) found that mothers did much of the active work of collecting information and attending Open Days. This is supported by David *et al.*'s (2003:35) study (also Reay *et al.*, 2005), whereas fathers "tried to control the choice process" and were more involved in confirming choices. However, Al-Yousef's (2009) study, which focuses solely on female students, finds lots of involvement from fathers. Brooks' study (2004) echoes this, describing the detailed involvement of some fathers, including visiting all the Open Days, reading the materials and making suggestions about courses, in contrast to the mothers. Even when both parents have HE experience, Pugsley (1998:88) found that "the father is much more visible" in choosing. She speculates that this could be because unlike school

choice which might be considered as "domestic" (female) (p.90), university choice is more significant and more to do with "status, career, money" (p.90) and, being more public, fathers become more involved. Another explanation for the difference could be mothers' and fathers' "differential access to relevant cultural and social capital" (Brooks, 2004:511), as some fathers could access it through their jobs and work contacts.

Thus the stereotype of "over-solicitous mothers and less involved" fathers (Reay *et al.*, 2005:76) does not always hold true and parental roles are complicated by factors such as class, parental education and gender of the child. Thus gender brings a further level of complexity with different relationships between fathers and mothers and their sons and daughters (Brooks, 2004). For example, David *et al.* (2003:35) found that mothers of daughters were heavily involved, with working class mothers being perceived as "unnecessarily overprotective" (Reay *et al.*, 2005:75).

The authors in these sections (2.4.2 relating to social class and gender) do recognise that parental involvement is complex and acknowledge other influences, such as "...family dynamics and commitment to higher education", not just parental HE experience (David *et al.*, 2003:30). Reay *et al.* (2005:69) echo this, adding "student peer group culture" as an influence, as well as the "vagaries of personality" (p.71). Reay *et al.*, (2001:3) refer to "overlapping circles of the individual, family, friends and institution." Reay (1998:528) feels that "macro studies of access to higher education do not provide any explanation or understanding of the underlying complexities of choice..." Nevertheless, despite these acknowledgements, these studies tend to approach this process from the perspective of class, gender and/or ethnicity. Thus, my study can make a contribution by looking at it through an alternative lens – parents' experiences and the meanings that they attribute to them, rather than by trying to categorise them by class or gender.

2.4.2.3   Parental involvement – other influences

<u>Level and type of involvement</u>

The level and type of involvement could be another perspective from which to explore this topic, although it may well overlap with the other perspectives. For example, as discussed, for 'embedded' choosers, parents normally play an active role (Ball *et al.*, 2002b). Some parents in these studies are heavily

involved, printing off syllabuses (Reay *et al.*, 2005), ringing up admissions tutors and poring over prospectuses (Pugsley, 1998). Of course, not all this involvement is welcomed by their child, (e.g. Reay *et al.*, 2005). Brooks (2004) identifies three different levels of involvement by her participants' parents, who all came from broadly similar ('middle class') backgrounds, as high, medium and low. She then details the contrasting behaviours of each, in terms of things like making "specific suggestions" about HEIs and accompanying the child on "all or most university visits" (p.500) for those most highly involved. Whilst she does find differences despite the relative homogeneity of her sample, she attributes at least some of these to whether parents have HE experience or not, and then discusses patterns of involvement by gender. She also distinguishes between involvement and influence, noting that the former does not necessarily lead to the latter, and echoes earlier discussions (see section 2.4.2.1) where Pugsley (1998) describes implicit assumptions. David *et al.*'s (2003:21) findings support this, identifying different facets of involvement as: "interest, influence and support, investment and intrusion" (also Reay *et al.*, 2005). Thus, involvement is a complex area and although some prior literature has categorised 'levels' of involvement, it has not explored how these are experienced, nor what it means to parents to be involved, which my study will do.

2.4.2.4   Parental experiences of this process

There is very little research into the detail of parental experiences of HE choice and what there is often links it to gender and/or class, including access to relevant 'capital', and types of school ('institutional habitus'). So that, as discussed, middle class parents with children at state schools may have to get more involved, and thus may have a more stressful experience, than parents of children at private schools (David *et al.*, 2003). For Pugsley's 'working classes' the process may be one of "almost total bewilderment" (1998:81) and left to the child, with parents providing encouragement and emotional support. Reay *et al.* (2005:69) describe one parent's experience as "emotionally intense, if at times fractious" with mothers "investing heavily emotionally in their child's futures" (p.68).

2.4.3 Overview of these findings

There are thus complex interactions between parents, schools, students and their peers (Brooks, 2003b). Findings between studies vary as these are 'messy' processes which take place over an extended period and which are subject to a range of inter-locking and overlapping influences. These influences impact on parents' ability and desire to get involved as well as on the type of involvement they undertake and their experiences of the process, which may be stressful and/or confusing. There is clearly a need for further research to illuminate and explore these perspectives in more detail. Specifically, whilst previous studies have approached parental choice from a number of perspectives, such as class, I am intending to focus on the process in terms of how it is experienced for each parent and to consider their stories holistically.

2.4.4 Previous research methods

Whilst many of the studies discussed take a qualitative approach (Brooks, 2004; 2003a; 2003b; Al-Yousef, 2009; Pugsley, 1998; Hemsley-Brown, 1999), few interview parents themselves. Some notable exceptions include: David *et al.* (2003); Reay *et al.* (2001); Reay *et al.* (2005); (all using the same sample); Reay (1998); Pugsley (1998) and Pugsley and Coffey (2002). The first three studies' data derives from a large number of interviews with both students and their parents (interviewed separately), Reay's (1998) study is a small pilot study and Pugsley (1998) interviews 20 families, interviewing parents together with their child, all at once.

However, these studies are very much in the minority and research in the area of parental involvement focuses mainly on the student perspective (Brooks, 2004; 2003b; Al-Yousef, 2009). Even in the studies discussed above, the focus seems to be mainly on the student, with parents sometimes a secondary focus to inform and contextualise the study. Also, as previously discussed, parental involvement is not a main area of research with most studies focussing on other aspects of students' choices. My study responds to this by having parents and their accounts of their experiences as its focus; in addition to exploring some of the apparent inconsistencies in previous studies with regard to the detail of parental involvement and their role.

2.5   Overall – chapter summary

The literature review has discussed a number of aspects of choice and decision–making. It has discussed and critiqued the idea of rational choice and looked at two complementary perspectives: emotional and social. It has then examined issues in joint and family decision–making, including strategies for influence and conflict avoidance; and at how adolescence impacts on family decision–making. In the final section, previous literature on how students choose universities and parents' role in this has been reviewed, noting that one approach to the latter is to consider it from a sociological perspective (looking at class, gender and/or ethnicity). In the relevant sections, I have noted issues and limitations in previous research methodologies, including often a focus on quantitative research, as well as contradictions or gaps in the findings to which my study can contribute.

I will now discuss my methodology.

Chapter 3: **Methodology Chapter**

3.1 Overview and aims and objectives

This chapter will explain and justify the methodological process followed and its epistemological and ontological underpinnings. It will detail the sample and how and why it was chosen, the approach to interviews, and give consideration to important areas such as assessing the quality of the data, and to ethics. As discussed in Chapter 1, parents' increasing role in the HE choice process means that it is important to understand their experiences. My observations of changes in parents' behaviour, as well as going through the same process with my own child contributed to my interest in researching this area. The literature review has revealed gaps, contradictions, and areas to develop and further explore, and thus where my work can make a contribution. The following aim and objectives are expressed in a way which is consistent with the philosophical and methodological stance taken:

The <u>aim</u> of my study is to explore parents' accounts of their experiences and involvement in the process leading up to the choice of where and what their child will study at HE.

<u>Objective 1.</u> To explore how parents account for their experiences of being involved in the HE choice process and what meaning they attribute to it; including what they think and feel during this process.

<u>Objective 2.</u> To explore choice and the decision-making process in a holistic way; taking into account the situated and extended nature of this process and that it is with and for someone else.

<u>Objective 3.</u> To explore parents' experiences of the levels and types of involvement they have in this choice process.

3.2 Research philosophy

Ontology is about our understanding of the world – what constitutes knowledge and reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). A form of constructivism is the ontology I have chosen, with its view that there is no single truth, or reality

'out there', the latter exists through being subjectively experienced (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986). However, although reality is subjectively experienced, we share a frame of reference which means that we act as if we all share one reality: "Taking for granted that we intersubjectively share the same reality..." Holstein and Gubrium (2005:485). In a similar way, knowledge is socially constructed (Golafshani, 2003), not 'out there', including through the interview process and the interactions between interviewer and participant (Bryman, 2004:500), where the former "is viewed as implicated in the construction of knowledge." Thus s/he is not extracting knowledge from passive participants (so called *"vessels of answers",* Holstein and Gubrium, 1995:7, authors' italics). Knowledge in this sense is akin to meaning (which is also socially constructed), and knowledge can be seen as "perspective–bound and partial" (Usher, 1996:19), given that we make sense of it from our own perspective.

Epistemology relates to how we can investigate what we deem to be acceptable knowledge, including exploring the "relationship between the knower...and what can be known?" (Guba and Lincoln, 1998:201). My epistemological position is interpretivism, which holds the view that "there is more than one way that reality can be understood" (Savigny and Marsden, 2011:27), due to it being experienced and also because understanding is about interpretation (Schwandt, 2000). As my thesis relates to how parents understand and make meaning from their choice experiences, rather than seeking explanations of their behaviour, an epistemology which is sensitive to interpreting understanding and meaning is appropriate.

Hermeneutics links to my interpretivist epistemology, and can be seen as an epistemology in its own right (Usher, 1996). It relates to interpretation in two particular ways. One is the idea of 'part–to–whole' interpretation (Usher 1996), the 'hermeneutic circle', which is about trying to achieve understanding through relating participants' words back to their overall story and not taking them out of context. It is about trying to contextualise their experiences in terms of their broader life: "existential–phenomenologists do not seek to study individuals separate from the environment in which they live or the interaction of the two (which implies separation)" (Thompson *et al.*, 1989:135). The second way is the 'double hermeneutic' which refers to the researcher interpreting the participant's own interpretations (Bryman, 2004). This acknowledges that both parties come to the interview with their own 'pre–

understandings' (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006) and that participants too are meaning makers (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Thus, during the interview meaning is created (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), which derives from participants accounting for their experiences. This involvement by the researcher necessitates reflexivity (see section 3.9).

Phenemonology informs this thesis as a type of epistemology (Bryman, 2004) which then impacts on the method and specifically the type of interviews. It will be explored in the next section.

I have tried to explain how I am using key terms and what I mean by them, as one issue with research philosophy is that terminology is used differently by authors, which can be confusing (Goulding, 1999). A few examples include describing constructivism not as an ontology, but a paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1998), or interpretivism as a theoretical perspective, rather than an epistemology (Crotty, 1998). Bryman (2004) notes differences between constructivism and constructionism, but finds that some authors see them as synonymous.

3.3   Existential-Phenomenology

Phenomenology "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (van Manen, 1990:9) through studying participants' accounts of their lived experiences, and then at how they attribute meaning to them. It provides a "richness of data unobtainable through other means" (Perrone and Vickers, 2003:72) and is appropriate for my study because it provides insightful contextualised descriptions of people's experiences of choice, rather than focusing on their attitudes or beliefs.

There are different types of phenomenology (Dowling, 2007; Patton, 2002) and the type I shall be using is existential-phenomenology. This is "concerned with entering the individual's unique lifeworld" (Greasley and Ashworth 2009:822) focusing on the 'lived experience' and the meaning attributed to it (Cresswell, 1998). The lifeworld is described as "...the experiential world every person *takes for granted* – [how it] is produced and experienced *by members*" (Holstein and Gubrium 1994:263 authors' italics). Another key characteristic of existential-phenomenology is bracketing which is described as "the setting

aside [of] one's taken-for-granted assumptions..." in order to focus on participants' lived experiences (Goulding, 1999:864). It will be discussed more fully later (section 3.9).

I will be using an adapted form of existential-phenomenology. How and why I have adapted it will be discussed in section 3.5.1.

3.4   Sampling

3.4.1   Sampling approach

In terms of the sample for existential-phenomenology, participants are selected on the basis that they have "*directly*" experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2002:104, author's italics; Cresswell, 1998; Daymon and Holloway, 2002) and are able and prepared to talk about it. The sampling was convenience and purposive, so that participants needed to have 'experienced' (i.e. gone through) their child's HE choice process (the phenomenon). Thus, they were parents or guardians of a child in year 13 at school who had applied to university. Participants were recruited in two ways either via:

The Head of Sixth Form at a local (Dorset) comprehensive secondary school (see letter sent in Appendix A)

Or

My own personal network where acquaintances provided me with contact details of someone who I had not met and who might be interested in participating (a 'friend of a friend').

Using the local school had the advantage of allowing me to broaden the pool of potential participants to try to get a slightly wider range of experiences than might be afforded by just using personal referrals. For the second approach, the advantage was that there was a mutual friend, so something we had in common, which at times led to a more relaxed start to the interview. This latter approach has been used by a number of authors including Thompson (1996) and Woodruffe-Burton *et al.* (2002).

Whichever route was taken, participants were contacted and if they were interested in finding out more, they were sent the Participation Information Sheet (P.I.S.) (Appendix B), and if they were happy with that, the interview was arranged. In two-parent families, where both parents had experienced some involvement and asked who should participate, I suggested the parent with more involvement or for whom the experience was more vivid.

3.4.2   Sample size

My sample consisted of 16 parents interviewed once with interviews ranging from 1 hour 20 minutes to 2 hours 8 minutes; generating 27 hours of data (see Table 1 Participants' Details). With regard to sample size, within both interpretivism and phenomenology, samples are small because the interviews are in-depth and long, often between 1-2 hours (Thompson *et al.*, 1990), resulting in a large amount of data which then takes a long time to transcribe and interpret. Thompson (1996:392) justifies this, saying that his study:

> ...follows in a tradition of consumer research that emphasizes developing a more in-depth analysis of the life stories expressed by a relatively small number of participants.

Within educational phenomenological research, sample sizes include: six students three times each (Greasley and Ashworth, 2009), 10 (Lucas, 2000), and five participants (Van der Mescht, 2004). Within consumer behaviour and marketing, Thompson *et al.* (1994) interview three women in one study and 10 in another (1990); Thompson (1996) interviews seven women twice each and Woodruffe-Burton *et al.* (2002) eight. With regard to long interpretivist interviews more generally, Creswell (1998) suggests 10 respondents, McCracken (1988) eight and Miles and Huberman (1994) 15. Smith (2003:54) suggests that the sample size depends on the "richness of the individual cases."

3.4.3   Sample composition

My aim was to recruit participants with a variety of experiences (such as having attended university themselves, or having been through the process with an older child, or not). This was broadly achieved (see Table 1). The purpose of

my study was to talk to parents about their experiences as parents and the focus was always on the parent/child relationship, so I was not seeking to make comparisons between them using criteria such as class or gender, as in previous studies (see section 2.4.2). Thus, although it must be acknowledged that given the location of the school and my use of 'friends of friends', the sample was drawn predominantly from the middle classes (noting Brooks' (2003b; 2004) discussion (section 2.4.2.1) about how broad this group can be, including with regard to education levels), there were big differences in participants' experiences. Thompson *et al.* (1994:436) support this, noting quite different stories in their research despite the fact that "...many other sociocultural commonalities also existed among the participants."

3.5   Method – long interpretive, phenomenological interviews

Phenomenology is mainly associated with in-depth unstructured interviews (Cresswell, 1998). McCracken (1988:40) asserts that the aim of the long interview is to give participants the "room to talk" and express themselves in their own way (also Van der Mescht, 2004). This is because "consumers' voices are often better vehicles than a researcher synthesis for conveying the experience that a consumer has lived through" (Caru and Cova, 2006:7). McCracken suggests starting the interview with very broad, open questions; these are then followed by "planned prompts" (p.35), as needed.

Thompson *et al.* (1989:138) describe the benefits of these types of interviews as "attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experiences" and of providing each participant with the chance to "reflect on past experiences and consider their personal significance and meaning" (Thompson *et al.*, 1994:434). This method was appropriate for my study which is about understanding participants' actual lived experience of HE choice and of the meanings they attribute to it. Studies using this method within marketing and consumer behaviour include: Thompson *et al.* (1990); Thompson (1994); Woodruffe-Burton *et al.* (2002) and Stevens and Maclaran (2005).

As the focus of phenomenological interviewing is participants' lived experience, they set the agenda and decide what to discuss in the interview, not the researcher, as might happen with more structured interviewing (Smith,

2003). The aim is "to attain a first–person description of some specified domain of experience", (Thompson *et al.*, 1989:138), through adopting a conversational approach. After the initial 'open' question, (see 3.5.2 for the question I used) "the course of the dialogue is largely set by the respondent" (ibid.) with the interviewer just asking short, descriptive follow–up questions as needed. This might be to clarify something, or to get participants to expand on their description of the experience (Thompson, 1996), or to probe specific meanings. The focus is the "specific experience rather than an abstraction" (Thompson *et al.*, 1989:138), on the concrete, and on a particular 'time when' to reduce the tendency for participants to generalise. Thus, asking 'why' is avoided as it can lead to rationalisation and explanation and a move away from the actual experience and from *what* participants did, to them attempting to explain *why* they did it. This took some effort to achieve, as it can be natural in conversation to ask 'why' and invariably there were a few times when this happened, but I then tried to move the focus back to the experience, with questions such as "can you give me an example of..?" Asking for specific details also helped to try to ensure that participants were focusing on the actual experience, not idealising or rationalising it (see section 3.9.2). For example, where participants said that 'we' did something, I would ask them to clarify who did it. I also looked for examples of where they corrected themselves by moving from 'we' to 's/he' and followed that up by asking for more detail.

Also, interviewers must not start the interview thinking that they know more than the participant (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Clearly, participants must be the "expert" (p.138) when describing their own experiences. Thus, despite my experiences in HE and of undergoing the process with my child, I was careful not to appear to be more knowledgeable than participants (discussed more fully in section 3.9.2).

The richness which can be achieved through phenomenological interviews is in direct contrast to much previous literature on choice and decision–making which takes a quantitative approach (as outlined in the introduction (1.3) and discussed in the literature review). The limitations of this approach include the fact that the complexity of the choice process may be ignored, leading to the conclusion that choices are purely rational, individual and that a structured

process is followed. With regard to the relatively small number of qualitative studies, I can make a valuable contribution through the different focus of my study – parents' experiences and the meanings that they attribute to them. Also, my study explores choice in a holistic way which conveys the complexity and situated nature of this longitudinal process.

3.5.1 Summary and justification of my approach – in-depth interpretive interviews infused by aspects of existential-phenomenology

I shall now clarify and justify the way I am using existential-phenomenology and detail how I have adapted it for my study. Thus, the aspects of existential-phenomenology to which I have attempted to adhere are: not asking 'why' questions; having a loose open-ended initial question, allowing participants to direct the flow of the interview, with prompts used where needed; using the 'part-to-whole' interpretation approach; focusing on the 'lived experience' and taking a holistic view of choice-making; and attempting 'bracketing'. Additionally, the primary focus is participants' experiences, and on them accounting for these experiences (not providing explanations or motivations), and exploring aspects of them which are most salient.

With regard to one aspect of more traditional phenomenology, the idea of the 'lifeworld', I am not claiming to locate participants' experiences in their lifeworld, as I conducted only one interview, and on its own it probably was not sufficiently substantial to allow for this. However, I did make an effort to get some sense of each participant as a person by initially asking about their child and in the 'part-to-whole' analysis I have further tried to contextualise their experiences by relating quotes back to the whole interview.

Another point to note is that some interviews had more prompts than might be considered usual in phenomenological interviewing. Reasons for this include that the experience of HE choice is co-constructed with the child and as s/he makes some of the key decisions, it could be seen at times to be a more 'indirect' experience. This resulted in the need for more probing to get some participants to talk in depth and to get a sense of how it fitted into their everyday lives. This is discussed further below. Linked to this is the fact that after reflecting on the first interview, I decided to disclose more about my own experiences to try to encourage participants to be more relaxed. I also hoped

this would make the interview more conversational and make it clear that I was not there to judge them and that I could empathise with their experiences.

3.5.2   Data instrument

In phenomenology, the first question is key as it must focus not just on the phenomenon, but also on participants' lived experience of it. The following statement framed the research as part of the introduction:

> I'm talking to you today because I'm trying to find out more about how parents are involved in the decisions their child makes about going to university, so I'd like to ask you about your experiences relating to your child and the process s/he went through in choosing the course and university s/he has chosen.

Participants were then asked to tell me a bit about their child. The following statement, or a version of it, was introduced, if needed, to then focus more specifically on the topic:

> It would be great if you could tell me in as much detail as possible about this whole process from your point of view from when you first got involved
>
> (**prompt as needed** – in how your child has come to be going to x to study y):

However, as discussed, although there was an attempt to stay as true to phenomenological interviewing as possible by letting participants then direct the flow of the interview, with only short descriptive questions and prompts, (see section 3.5.1), where this did not work, I did prompt and probe more fully. This meant going back to topics they had raised, or asking more about aspects of the experience, or even sharing my own experiences. Of course, I did not use all the broad topics or probes in the discussion guide (Appendix C) with each participant, and different cues and question framings were used depending on the individual interview. There was no attempt to structure the interview either – topics were discussed in any order, depending on the flow of the interview. Participants led the discussion and the conversation flowed naturally. The interview guide was simply there for reassurance, to help me phrase questions and to give me some areas to introduce if needed. It was a

"conversational agenda" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995:76) with questions focusing on the experience, to ensure that I avoided asking 'why'.

3.5.3   Piloting

I conducted two pilot interviews with friends to practice and help me to gain more confidence with interviewing. The main change made as a result was that I reflected on the need to be more relaxed and not to focus too much on aspects of the process which I felt to be important, when following up questions or probing. I also rephrased some statements and prompts to make them more conversational, and as the first pilot was a bit short, I added in a few possible areas, such as when the child had first started to think about going to university and the parents' own educational experiences, to discuss if needed. I also decided to start the interview by asking about the child. These changes were made in order to try to achieve as full and open a discussion as possible.

3.6   Data Collection

Data was collected between May and July 2012. This period was chosen as May is the point where the final two university choices normally have to be confirmed; this ensured that the experience was recent, vivid and salient to participants (Freiden and Goldsmith, 1989; Lee and Marlowe, 2003). Where possible, interviews were conducted in participants' homes to create a relaxed atmosphere, (see Table 1, column one for exceptions) and also to allow further insights into their family life (Hamilton, 2009).

As the interviews progressed, I reflected on them and made some minor adjustments to the way I was conducting them, particularly early on, and then again after six interviews, when there was a gap in my schedule. This was after a first interview which was focused on the sources and factors with little on how it felt to undergo the experience. I subsequently made a few adaptations to my approach, to try to get more focus on participants' experiences and changed the way I worded a few prompts. As discussed earlier, I also decided to disclose more of myself.

3.7   Data interpretation

I interpreted my findings using the 2-stage process described by Thompson *et al.* (1989; 1990) and now discussed. When interpreting existential-phenomenology they identify two important concepts: the 'hermeneutic circle' (see section 3.2) and 'global themes'. The first stage of the hermeneutic circle ('part-to-whole' analysis) is where the researcher aims for "an idiographic (individual) understanding of each interview" (1989:141) as a whole to better understand the participant and his/her lifeworld. Where sections of interest are identified, care is taken to relate them back to the whole interview, and not take them out of context (Thompson *et al.*, 1989).

The second stage involves examining "patterns (and differences)" (Thompson, 1997:441) and 'global themes' (Thompson *et al.*, 1989) across all the interviews. However, evidence for each theme must be available in the transcripts (ibid.) and the interpretation must clearly derive from the interviews. Researchers must take care not to impose their own interpretations on the data by moving too far away from it (Smith *et al.,* 2003). Thompson *et al.* (1989:141) echo this, explaining that interpretations must be supported by evidence in the transcript in the "respondent's *own* words" (authors' italics). Thus, when interpreting my data, I took care to keep the focus on participants' words. The researcher also goes back to re-examine earlier interviews when insights are subsequently revealed, thus it is an iterative process (Thompson, 1997).

Other important aspects of phenomenological interpretation include using participants' own "terms and category systems" (Thompson *et al.*, 1989:140)*.* Goulding (1999:864) echoes this saying that the "researcher's conceptual categories are secondary to the participant's experiential ones". There is thus a focus on the terms *participants* use and the meanings that *they* attribute to them. Thus, what is meant by a 'good' university was determined by participants, rather than corresponding to any university league tables. It is also important to note that there is "no attempt to corroborate a respondent's descriptions" (Thompson *et al.*, 1989:140) by independently checking them, as "we are less interested in the factual status" of things (van Manen, 1990:10). What is important is participants' actual experiences and the meanings that

they attribute to them and the need to try to understand them from their perspective. When conducting the interviews, I took care not to correct participants who mentioned things which I believed to be incorrect, nor did I offer alternative views. Woodruffe-Burton *et al.* (2002:243) remind us that "interpretation rests solely on the evidence provided by the transcript" without speculation from the researcher as to what participants might mean.

In accordance with an interpretivist epistemology it must be acknowledged that the interpretation offered here is one interpretation and that others are possible (Thompson *et al.*, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This means that although they are "offered as plausible and textually supportable, there is no pretence to have developed an exhaustive account" (Thompson, 1996:404). Additionally, the researcher's influence and involvement must be acknowledged, which I reflect on in section 3.9.2.

3.7.1   Details of my data interpretation – including role of theory

Whilst conducting the interviews, I took notes, both of points to follow up on, or questions to ask, but also notes of tone of voice and any relevant non-verbal cues for the interpretation. As soon as possible after each interview, I added to these notes, reflecting on my initial impressions and identifying anything which might have affected the interview, such as interruptions. Once all the interviews were complete, I listened to each interview recording several times, as unlike the transcripts these convey a sense of participants' feelings, expressions and tone of voice. I added to my notes as I listened to the recordings, identifying any particular phrases, changes in emphasis, or pauses. Next I read each transcript through several times, including once while listening to the recording at the same time and I began highlighting passages of particular interest, related to my study's aim. In accordance with the hermeneutic interpretation process, I read the whole transcript through first to try to get a sense of each participant and his/her story, and I prepared a short profile of each one to assist with this (see participant profiles in Appendix D). I then noted key themes in each transcript and made summaries. This was an iterative process to understand the relationship between the parts and the whole. Once I had interpreted each interview individually, I started to synthesise them relating them to each other, identifying recurring or 'global themes'. This was also iterative, as if I identified a possible new theme; I then

returned to the previous interviews to search for evidence. Themes were modified as new insights were revealed.

During this initial interpretation phase, which took place after all the interviews were conducted, I worked hard to bracket any theoretical 'pre-understandings' as far as possible, to allow me to fully focus on participants' experiences and to begin to identify initial themes. Once I had revised and reworked these themes and this stage was complete (discussed more fully in section 4.2), I then 'removed the brackets'. In other words, I more consciously focused on the literature, purposefully relating the themes and initial interpretations back to existing theory. This included finding additional literature to try to further explore some themes such as the relationship between parent and child (e.g. joint/family decision-making). However, interpretation remained firmly focused on the data itself and theory was applied to it, not vice versa, so that the findings were not adapted to fit existing theories.

As discussed, phenomenology is about understanding the meaning of lived experiences through detailed descriptions and as such it does not attempt to generate theory (van Manen, 1990). Thus, my thesis is not an attempt to develop a new theory of choice. Instead it is about exploring how participants experience choice in their everyday lives, and then attribute meaning to it. In doing this, I hope to contribute to theory, by exploring the value and limitations of existing choice theory and adding to what is known about what choice-making means to people (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

3.8 Assessing research findings

Unlike with quantitative data, there are no specific rules for interpreting qualitative data, making it harder for the reader to judge its quality (Bryman, 2004). One issue is that there can be a lack of detail or 'transparency' (Bryman, 2004; Hammersley, 2007) relating to the research process, including the sample and how participants were chosen, and the data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2004). Meyrick (2006:805) states that researchers should supply sufficient detail to "allow the reader to judge if the methods used and decisions made during data collection were reasonable" (also Fade, 2003; Stenbacka, 2001). I detail the process I followed in section 3.8.1.

The close involvement of the researcher can also be criticised by positivists, who see it as too subjective (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). However, as discussed in section 3.2, for constructivists this is not an issue, as they acknowledge that meaning is co-constructed in the interview and thus "the observer is always part of the story of the observed" (Todres, 2007:31).

Whether and how far qualitative research can be generalised can be another concern and phenomenology does not aim to produce findings which can be generalised (van Manen, 1990). However, there can be a tension between the desire to focus on the detail of the individual's lived experience, and to make points which are more broadly applicable and which can make some contribution to previous literature. Todres (2007:9) describes this challenge as the need:

> ...to find a level of discourse that reflects both the individual particulars of 'this' experience or situation...and how such particularity reflects more typical and general themes...

with which the reader can identify, despite the differences in context. He then articulates the problems of going too far one way or the other – so that either the particular loses its vitality or a description lacks any "general implications" (p.9), for the reader, so that s/he cannot identify with it at all. My aim is that some of my findings will resonate with the reader and that it can be seen that this relational aspect to choice could be applicable to other contexts and other relationships.

3.8.1   Criteria for assessing interpretivist research

Within the interpretivist tradition authors have identified alternative criteria which are felt to be more suitable than the more positivist criteria of reliability and validity; for example, Lincoln and Guba's (1985, in Bryman, 2004) framework: trustworthiness and authenticity.

Criteria to judge interpretivist research need to be suitable for the type of study – here participants accounting for their experiences. One interesting framework is by Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) which Hogg and Maclaran (2008) discuss. The criteria are: authenticity, plausibility and criticality and whilst the original framework relates to ethnography, there are some useful ways to think about writing up data which are more widely applicable. Hogg

and Maclaran illustrate the criteria with reference to interpretivist consumer studies. It should be noted, that they say that these criteria are not about being "prescriptive" (p.142), but about providing interesting areas for researcher reflection.

Authenticity is about demonstrating that the interpretation derives from the data and that the researcher has experienced the participant's lived world (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). It includes the researcher "qualifying personal biases" (p.133), thus linking to reflexivity (section 3.9) and is also about transparency. **Plausibility** is about the "…degree of well argued 'fit'" (p.133) between the data and its interpretation, and whether the "the study make[s] sense to the reader" (p.134) and has a contribution to make to existing literature. With regard to **criticality**, this is about "reader reflexivity" (p.140) with the researcher trying to "provoke a re-examination of [the reader's] underlying assumptions" (p.134). I shall now demonstrate how I have attempted to address each of them in my study.

With regard to **authenticity**, and particularly transparency, I demonstrate this by separating out the findings and analysis chapters, and also by using long verbatim quotes, which were consistent with the participant's whole story ('part–to–whole' analysis). I am also careful to differentiate between what participants actually said and my interpretation (Smith, 2003). I can provide a clear audit trail (Bryman, 2004) of my data recordings, all transcripts, all my notes – both those made during and after the interviews, copies of the P.I.S and signed consent forms and all correspondence with the participants. Reflexivity is discussed in the next section. With regard to **plausibility**, this relates to my endeavours to ensure that participants focused on their actual experiences and not on rationalising or idealising them (section 3.9.2). I detail and justify how I developed themes from the findings in the next chapter (4.2). I then relate my findings back to theory in Chapter 5 to show the contributions I can make. **Criticality** is about the reader's response. It concerns whether the account has helped to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon and how it is experienced: "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne 1989:46 in Cresswell, 1998:55), or as McCracken (1988:61) says: "whether the research allows you to see the world

as your respondent sees it". Van Manen (1990:27) supports this, with the idea of the

> 'phenomenological nod' as a way of indicating that a good phenomenological description is something we can nod to, recognizing it as an experience that we have had or could have had.

Readers can also have confidence in my research because I am using both established ways of interpreting my findings (phenomenological and hermeneutical interpretation) and of conducting my research (interviews informed by existential–phenomenology).

3.9   Reflexivity and bracketing

This relates to the earlier point (section 3.2) that meaning is created in the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) through the interactions between the researcher and participant, which results in the need for reflexivity (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). In interpreting research "we may draw on the richness of our own experience, particularly if what we are studying we also have experienced" (Hertz, 1997:xii), as is the case for me.

As part of this reflexivity, as discussed, phenomenological researchers attempt to bracket their 'pre–understandings'. Within my thesis I am not of course attempting to be objective, which would be impossible: "bracketing does not imply a neutral view, as researchers must always see and describe the world from some perspective" (Thompson *et al.*, 1989:140). However, I have tried to bracket my preconceptions about the choice process, as far as possible, to ensure that I remain faithful to participants' actual accounts. In practical terms, this means I articulated my own relevant experiences and the areas from theory most salient to me before starting this research, in order to try to set them aside (see Appendix E). For example, I began by assuming that exploring this process would be quite straightforward and would be all about choice factors and sources. This was borne out in part by previous studies (e.g. Moogan *et al.*, 2001). I also had a sense that there was a right and wrong way to engage with the process. I now recognise both these as very normative views and they have changed over the course of undertaking this thesis. I have thus tried to be reflexive at each stage of the process.

Mauthner and Doucet (2003:425) feel that it can take time and "detachment from the research" to identify and set aside some "influences" and that "it may be more useful to think in terms of *'degrees of reflexivity'*" (emphasis added). Van der Mescht supports this, viewing bracketing as "perhaps unattainable in its purist form" (2004:3). However, as detailed I have tried to be reflexive, but I recognise that this is an attempt and that bracketing can only be partial (see Appendix E).

3.9.1   Writing reflexively

Language is not neutral and objective. In interpreting and writing up my findings, it was important to reflect all the participants' voices and not allow the ones who I agreed with most, or who were the most articulate, to dominate (see participant profiles in Appendix D), and to include the unexpected; findings which "surprise" me (Woodruffe-Burton *et al.*, 2002:243). I have tried to privilege participants' words by having a separate Findings Chapter. I need to be mindful too of participants wanting to make their choices seem more logical than they actually were, as people like to appear rational (Elliott, 1998). They might also wish to present themselves in a positive light by being very involved in the process for example (see section 1.2 on discourses), this is discussed further below.

3.9.2   Limitations of and further reflections on the research

Issues with phenomenology

There are a few issues relating to phenomenology, some of which are common to other forms of interpretivist research and which will now be discussed. These include: the ability of participants to express themselves and whether they are describing what they actually experienced. Participants' experiences have to be conveyed through language; however language is not a mirror (Usher 1996:27) "a transparent vehicle for conveying the meaning of an independent external reality". Thus, participants can be constrained by their abilities to express themselves. Whilst this was not a big issue for most of my participants, one of them illustrates it well, as he struggled to articulate what he meant by a university 'feeling right'.

As outlined above, another concern is that when participants focus at length on their experiences, they may start to reflect on them and perhaps attempt to present themselves more positively by either rationalising their choices, or idealising their experiences. Of course it could also be that they have simply forgotten some of the details. I attempted to address this both by conducting the interviews as close to the time the HE choice was made as possible and by gently probing their experiences in detail. I encouraged them to focus on their actual experience (not on an idealised or rationalised version), by asking for specific examples, or referring to a 'time when'. It also needs to be borne in mind that participants are recounting a past experience – the researcher can never directly experience it, and it is already in the past for the participant – thus it is always second-hand and indirect. Van Manen (1990:54) describes these experiences as having "already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence". The ability of the researcher to 'bracket', which can be another concern, has already been discussed.

Reflections on the research

Whilst I was conducting the research, I was also undergoing this choice process with my own child (as discussed earlier); consequently, I had to work hard to ensure that I focussed on participants' experiences and not my own. Of course as acknowledged, any such bracketing is only ever partial (Van der Mescht, 2004; van Manen, 1990). So I had to try not to react too much and thus 'lead' the discussions (for example by showing surprise at certain responses, or by nodding when experiences chimed with my own, or offering an opinion on a particular course or HEI). This was quite difficult at times, and as I had found the experience a bit stressful, there were occasions when I wanted to share my own experiences. I tried to keep most of my input to the end of the interviews, in some cases after the recording, but there were times when I disclosed things or had a discussion about my own experiences during the interviews. Participants were keen to hear my story and to offer me help and guidance and I thought it only fair to share things with them. As discussed, I hoped that by opening up a bit and sharing my own experiences, both positive and negative, I could put them more at ease, as sometimes they seemed to need reassurance. One participant contacted me several times afterwards to ask how things were going for me. I also tried to be reassuring to those who at times revealed frustrations with their child. The interview experience itself can be

quite intense for both parties. Several times participants said things like "*I don't know where I've got that from*" as they came up with something they had not thought of before and some of them were surprisingly candid.

I also found the interviewing quite demanding, as sometimes participants did not have much to say because they had not been very involved; the process had been very straightforward; or they talked a lot about what the child had done; or gave opinions about HE in general. I then had to try to open up the discussion to find out more about what they had done or felt, or I had to steer the conversation away from their views and back to their experiences. Sometimes the timing of the interviews meant that there were interruptions, such as someone coming home, and this made me conscious of all the demands on participants' time, and thus that I should not impose on them for too long.

Listening back to the recordings, there were times when I interrupted participants in my eagerness to clarify or follow up on something, or when I missed an opportunity to pursue an interesting idea. I tried to learn from this by reflecting after each interview and then after the first six, but of course each interview was different.

3.10   Ethical considerations

Bryman (2004) identifies four key ethical issues: harm to participants, including confidentiality; informed consent; invasion of privacy and deception. The key areas that apply to my study are now discussed. Anonymity and Confidentiality – whilst the topic was not felt likely to cause harm; at times aspects of it could be quite sensitive, as parents reflected on their relationship with their child and their aspirations for him/her, their own education, and their finances. In order to protect participants' identities, pseudonyms have been used. Informed consent – the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time were incorporated into my P.I.S. (Appendix B) which was sent to participants at least 24 hours before the interview. This gave them time to read it and ensured that they were aware of, and happy with, the purpose of the study. I also went over the key points relating to ethical issues

at the beginning of each interview before participants signed the consent form (Appendix F).

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Southampton (Appendix G).

3.11   Chapter summary

This chapter has explained and justified the research method adopted (highly interpretive interviews informed by existential–phenomenology) and its philosophical underpinnings. I have attempted to present a reflexive and transparent approach to data collection and interpretation, including using 'part-to-whole' analysis, and making the layers of interpretation more explicit by presenting the findings in a separate chapter. This chapter now follows.

Chapter 4:   **Findings Chapter**

4.1   Overview of chapter

This chapter will focus on my research findings, which will be analysed in depth and with reference to prior literature in Chapter 5: As discussed, the purpose of this chapter is to convey some of the richness of participants' descriptions of their experiences, as well as to try to make my process of interpretation more explicit. All direct quotes are italicised and labelled and I have tried to remain as close as possible to participants' own meanings by presenting them largely verbatim. I have included lengthy quotations, where space permits, so that the context of the quotation can be more fully appreciated.

Given the type of research conducted (interpretivist and informed by aspects of existential-phenomenology), it is important to establish the nature of these findings. I am presenting my interpretation of the most prevalent and salient themes, and not claiming that this is the only possible interpretation, nor that I have included every possible theme. Whilst I am presenting a rough diagram of the findings to assist the reader in understanding my approach (see Figure 2), I am not attempting to model these findings. In trying to structure the findings into themes, I acknowledge that people's lives and experiences are much more complicated and messy than any attempts to categorise them would suggest. People's accounting for their experiences is contradictory and there are clearly overlaps between the categories I have developed.

4.2   Identifying and grouping the themes

The process of initially interpreting the data was explained in the Methodology Chapter, but I will outline here more details of how I arrived at the themes and decided what constituted a theme. I summarised each interview and once I had conducted them all, I reflected on the nature of the findings and on what seemed to be early themes, roughly grouping them together. Once I had reviewed each transcript and recording in full idiographically (Thompson *et al.*, 1989) I made a note of the themes which emerged and began to highlight areas of interest in particular transcripts. I noted down for each theme, for

whom it was either particularly significant or in the background to help me to get a sense of the nature of each one and also to help me to see links between themes and to identify possible sources for quotes. I then returned to my initial interpretations and modified them as needed to better reflect my further thinking. This was an iterative process as I reviewed the data both within individual interviews and then across participants, as over time I changed the way I labelled the themes and reviewed where people seemed to fit. Whilst I did not uncover any new themes, I did review and amend some of them. To be consistent with my phenomenologically infused approach, I ensured that I selected quotations from participants' accounts which were in keeping with their overall story; this was to try to adhere to the idea of 'part–to–whole' interpretation (Thompson *et al.*, 1989 – section 3.7).   A brief overview of each participant is presented in Appendix D (Participants' Profiles) to provide some background and to allow the reader to understand participants within their own context and to further assist with this and to help immerse readers in the findings, the Table of Participants' Details now follows. However, my approach to interpretation is to focus on themes not individuals.

Table 1 **Participants' Details**

Name*; interview date & time. Location – participant's home unless stated	Marital Status	Occupation	Interview Duration (plus total time spent there)	Had either parent attended university?	Gender of child	Older child at or been to university?
Megan 14.5.12 3.50pm	M**	School careers & library support	1:22 (2hrs)	No	M	Yes
Jackie 21.5.12 2pm	M	Supply teacher	1:31	No	F	Yes
Chloe 22.5.12 4pm	M	University librarian	1:53	Both + Masters	M	N/A – is older child
Clare 23.5.12 3.30pm	M	Nurse	1: 43	No (mum studying p/t)	M	Yes
Tina 28.5.12 2pm	Single parent	Checkout staff	1:24 (1:40)	No	M	N/A
Laura 29.5.12 2pm	M	P.A.	1:28	No	M	Yes
Jane 14.6.12 3pm	Divorced	Bra fitter	1:29 (1:39)	No	M	No
Jasmine 15.6.12 2.30pm	M	Assistant hotel manager	2:02	No	M	Only child
Rachel 18.6.12 4pm	M	P.E. teacher	1:39 (1:49)	Both	F	Only child
Natalie 20.6.12 6.30pm Researcher's house	M	Administrator	1:48	No	F	Older child did 1 year
Mary 21.6.12 2pm Researcher's house	M	Healthcare assistant	1:44 (1:52)	Husband	F	Yes
Mark 26.6.12 8pm	M	Admin & audit manager	2hrs (2:10)	No	F	Yes
Sarah 2.7.12 6.30pm	Divorced	Admin officer	1:37	She had, (ex) husband not	M	N/A
Lizzie 6.7.12 9am	Divorced	Counsellor (trained nurse)	2:08 (2:23)	No	M	Yes
Wendy 9.7.12 2pm Researcher's house	M	Social worker	1:20 (1:30)	Both	M	Yes
Alison 12.7.12 2pm	M	Admin/accounts at dental surgery	1.56 (2hrs)	No	F	N/A

Total: 27 hours. 16 participants. Arithmetic mean – 1 hour 41 mins each.

Notes: * Pseudonyms have been used – see Methodology Chapter section 3.10.

** M means married.

Participants whose names are italicised were recruited via friends, not the school.

Figure 2 Overview of Themes

Emotions*				Parenting*			
1. Present/recent past				**Discussion & Negotiation**	**Balance & Control**	**Knowledge of Child**	**Transition (Prep. for Adult Life)**
Guilt/regret	Frustration	Trust	Relief	Finding right time to discuss (e.g. visitor or on car journey)*	Letting go vs. keeping control – doing it 'properly'. Use of 'we' - as in 'we' decided.	In general terms for all	Encourage child to do things for him/herself
Disappointment	Envy	Tension /Stress	Pride**				
Reassurance	Resigned	Relaxed/ Laidback	Fun	Not wanting to say what they think	Wanting child to do more; be more involved	Know what suits him or her - heavy for some	See process as one of 'letting go'
Tedious							
2. Future				Child won't discuss (vs. detailed discussions) & tactics used to start discussions	Providing 'support and encouragement'	Sense of somewhere 'feeling right' for child	Not all are ready yet
Feelings of anticipation of child's departure							
Worry (anxiety)							
*underlined emotions will be the ones discussed in detail **Pride can be present or future				*Explanations for words and phrases used here with examples will be provided in the subsequent sections.			

Approach to involvement in the process

High involvement	**Low involvement**
- Thorough and detailed	- Happy with low involvement - trust child, comfortable, not stressed
- Well informed and logical	- Unhappy with low involvement
- Focus and determination	

As can be seen in Figure 2, I have grouped the findings into three themes; these are the main ways in which parents accounted for how they experienced the choice process, and were discussed by them at most length and with most feeling. They are: 'Parenting', 'Approach to Involvement' and 'Emotions'. The three themes are not mutually exclusive, so participants experienced aspects of all three of them. Under each, I have identified a number of subthemes and then under these, I have articulated some further detail of how these were actually experienced. For the themes, sometimes the experiences are mutually exclusive, for example within 'Approach to Involvement' parents can only appear in one of the two subthemes ('high' or 'low'), but this is not the case for the other two themes. Thus, parents may appear within any or all of the four subthemes of 'Parenting' and have experienced any number of the emotions.

The subthemes were developed in two ways – one is by identifying experiences which were significant for many people (such as 'Discussion and Negotiation'), whereas others were significant for just a few, but were in the background for others (e.g. 'Transition').

I now provide a brief overview of each of the three themes, which are subsequently explored more fully.

A. <u>Parenting</u>

This is the primary way that this choice process was experienced – it was mainly experienced as part of the overall parenting experience. Much of the discussions were about how participants managed this process with their child. There was often a sense of them working as a team, but with varying degrees of perceived effectiveness and with one or other of them taking the lead (and this could change during the process).

It should be noted that the term 'child' is used throughout this thesis to emphasise the relational aspect and in particular the relationship between parent and child (see section 5.1). For a parent a child is always their child regardless of his or her age. This term is also used because it was the main term used by participants and in keeping with the methodological approach adopted, participant terms are used whenever possible (Thompson *et al.*,1989). However, it is recognised that the term is value–laden and it should be noted that there is no intention to present them as necessarily vulnerable or

in need of help.   This term is felt to provide the required emphasis on this core relationship and to be the best fit with the term 'parent'. Where there is particular focus on the stage of development, the term 'adolescent' is used (for example, see section 2.2.5).

Within this theme, I have identified four often overlapping subthemes: Discussion and Negotiation; Balance and Control; Knowledge of Child and Transition/Preparation for Adult Life[2], as discussed in Haywood (2014).

Discussion and Negotiation – This theme was salient for many parents and in the background for almost all of them. It was about not only the experiences of extensive discussions which took place, but also included experiences characterised by a noted lack of discussion. The latter is my focus, as it was the more common experience. However, these two experiences were not mutually exclusive, and both could be experienced (periods of discussion and lack of discussion). Also interesting was that some parents felt that they needed to find the right time for discussions, with times when their child was quite chatty and other times when s/he was not and they discussed tactics for trying to initiate conversation. I also note that some parents talked about how they held back on what they said, so as not to either put the child off, or influence the choice process too much. These two elements in particular are what I term 'negotiation', as at times it seemed that parents were very much 'tiptoeing' round their child.

Balance and Control – This theme sometimes overlapped with the theme of 'High Involvement', as it was about parents who were heavily involved and who were then trying to stand back and get the child to do more. Thus, they were trying to achieve a better balance of involvement in the choice process between them and their child. However, at times, this was tempered by a feeling that if they did not control the process, then it would not be done 'properly', and so there was a tension for some between them feeling that they should be less involved, but also wanting the choice to be made 'properly', and being reluctant to stand back. This theme is about the tensions experienced when

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[2] Parts of this 'Findings' section ('A. Parenting') formed the basis of a conference paper which I delivered. There are other sections in the Introduction and Conclusion which also appeared in it and which are referenced accordingly.

trying to give up control of the situation, to encourage the child to become more independent, but at the same time wanting the best outcome.

Knowledge of Child – Whilst of course all parents knew their child, the focus of my interpretation is where parents spoke at length about how a particular course or institution would suit their child. This included at times that somewhere just 'felt right' for him/her, perhaps a sense of matching the child to the HEI or course. Some parents were then heavily involved, spending a lot of time and effort trying to find the 'right' course/institution for their particular child.

Transition (Preparation for Adult Life) – this was experienced by a few participants in terms of feeling that the child was prepared for 'adult' life and independence, or that they were preparing them for this. For a few others, however, there was a sense that the child was not yet ready. This theme could sometimes be linked with parents' anticipation of the child's departure (under the 'Emotion' theme).

B. Approach to involvement

It should be noted that the term 'involvement' is used here to describe participants' experiences, as this is the term they used. Thompson *et al.* (1989:140) say that using respondent terms helps to "stay at the level of [their] lived experience". This term is used though in the ordinary sense of the word i.e. 'being involved in' something; meaning 'interacting with' or 'taking part in' something. It is not used in the more traditional consumer behaviour (decision-making) sense, where it is a specific construct relating to the personal relevance of a choice, which is then felt to impact on the extent of the search process (Hansen, 2005). This usually leads to the assumption that, for example, a more highly involved consumer would engage in a more extensive search (discussed briefly in 2.1.4): this is not so in this work.

The approach to involvement came through most clearly in those parents who were heavily involved in the process, but there was also a small group who were less involved.

It is also important to note that for many parents, even if their approach was predominantly high or low involvement, it could vary during the process. For example, parents who were less involved would perhaps have one or two areas

that they did research and even for some heavily involved parents, there would be areas that they might leave to the child, such as details of the course. This reiterates the idea of teamwork, which is discussed in the next chapter (5.3.2). It also illustrates the fact that people's stories are much more nuanced than any way of categorising them would suggest. Some parents' accounts also seemed paradoxical, as they would say that they were not involved, and that 'it was the child's choice', but would then discuss lots of detailed involvement. This could sometimes be illustrated by them describing something that 'we' did, and then when questioned, they would revert to saying that s/he did it. This idea of presenting more socially desirable answers is discussed more fully in section 5.3.3.1.

High involvement – I have identified three ways in which being heavily involved was experienced which are mutually exclusive. The first is participants who were very thorough and detailed, with a sense of looking into everything fully. The second group were very informed about HE due to their professions and thus took a clear and logical approach. The final group had a focus and determination about their involvement – a sense of wanting their child to achieve something and having a plan of action.

Low involvement – This was a small group who were quite happy to be distant from the process and this was sometimes expressed as having 'trust' in their child to make 'good' decisions. There were also a few participants who experienced low involvement but were unhappy with this.

C. Emotions

One of the ways of understanding parental experiences is through the array of emotions that the experience entails and this section examines some of the predominant ones. Given the length and nature of the process and for some parents its importance and their heavy involvement in it, it is perhaps to be expected that a range of emotions were experienced. These included guilt, regret, trust, resignation, envy, relief and stress. However, the following four will be the focus, as they were either significant for many parents or experienced very strongly for a few and in the background for others: pride, worry, frustration and anticipating the child's departure. Whilst the majority of emotions were negative, not all were, and some parents described the

university visits as fun, as they enjoyed spending time together. The focus here is on parents' emotions, not on those felt by the child (or how they hope the child will feel) such as wanting the child to be happy.

These emotions are divided into those experienced during the process and those which were about either the past or anticipating the future (see section 5.5.3.3). Whilst all participants discussed emotions at some point, it was more of an emotional experience for some than others.

4.3   Detailed presentation of findings by theme

I shall now further explore the themes illustrating them with participants' own words. For each theme, I shall focus on participants who best represent it and primarily those for whom that particular theme was notable and whose experience was particularly rich. Thus, it may be that not all participants feature in this chapter. This is because although everyone is associated with a number of themes, and thus they have all contributed to the overall findings, I have chosen to focus on the quotes which best illustrate each theme, not on ensuring that each participant features. Inevitably some interviews were richer than others. Not all themes and experiences are equally significant and this is reflected in the amount of space devoted to them in the subsequent sections.

4.4   Parenting

(4 subthemes: Discussion and Negotiation; Balance and Control; Knowledge of Child and Transition/preparation for adult life) – see Figure 2 for full details.

4.4.1   Discussion and negotiation

Whilst there were examples of parents and children having long conversations, '*And [we] have very, very big discussions, we talk very well together*' (Jasmine), some parents found the situation more akin to a '<u>lack of discussion</u>' and so the experience was about trying to initiate a discussion and the variety of tactics used:

> *Well, I suppose I quite like to have the opportunity to talk about it*
> *whereas she just doesn't really want to, whereas I would quite happily*
> *have a sort of longer chat about something that -- As I say, it's almost*

> *well you can't say anything sort of twice or sort of - She's very, you*
> *know, ..--.... has her own sort of thought process and works things*
> *through and, you know, will make her own decision. You can only sort*
> *of put little bits in there and say, well, you need to consider x, x, and x*
> *and see what she comes up with* (Mary).

Two things are interesting here, one was the child insisting that she did not want things repeated and also the tactic which Mary and her husband have adopted of '*throw it out there and let her mull it over*' in the hope that she would at least consider a particular point and listen to them. Their other tactic to try to initiate discussion was asking '*what's your thoughts at the moment, what are you thinking*?' Mary later describes how they have been discussing the process amongst themselves, but despite Mary's efforts, it is described as trying to 'eke' information out:

> *Yes, sort of quietly we've been sort of ...my husband was saying to me,*
> *well has she made up her mind yet, you know, and I said, well, I keep*
> *trying to ask, you know.....we'd be driving to school or something and I'd*
> *be saying, well, obviously you've only got a couple of weeks, you know,*
> *have you sort of, ...have you made your choices, you know. And I'm*
> *sort of trying to eke out of her what she's deciding and, you know, it has*
> *been hard but I don't think that's because of any fault in the university*
> *application process, I think that's just our particular child and how she*
> *is.*

It is interesting that her conversations with her husband take place '*quietly*'; presumably to avoid provoking an argument. This lack of discussion was a particular feature of this participant's experience, but it is not just about the lack of discussion, but about the nature of the discussions themselves. The process is tense and fragmented and has to be handled very carefully, with Mary trying to choose the right moment and grabbing an opportunity to talk when she can, such as when they are in the car together. Natalie also describes how she knows her daughter and that '*once B's made up her mind about something it's really difficult to change her*'. Her experience was again one of almost having to work round her daughter. For example, once she'd decided on a particular university, she refuses to visit any more, despite her mother's

concerns, but her mother is resigned to this: '*she's not a child you can tell her what needs and has to be done...*'

Another aspect of this experience was the idea of having to find the right time for discussions. One tactic to facilitate this could be the presence of a visitor who would start a conversation. This is illustrated by Sarah who says about her son, that it was '*quite hard to get him to sit down and chat about things. It was quite hard work*' and continues in response to a follow up question about how things had gone:

> *It hasn't gone as well as I'd hoped it would go but -- I have to get him in the right frame of mind. Sometimes he'll sit and chat, very chatty, other times he won't and other times I can't -- I know there's not even worth trying to get anything out of him. He's got to be in the right frame of mind to want to chat to me. I do employ my very close friend who used to be part of xxe education, quite high up and a counsellor to boot, she's retired now. So I do -- I would go to her and say I don't know, you know, J -- you know, we're not really talking here. I need to know and she would say, 'well, what about this, J, and what about that, J,' and draw him out a bit more so --...-- a bit more than I could...*

This friend would ask questions which concerned Sarah, but which she felt she could not ask ('*oh no I can't say that to him*') such as why that particular choice (*L will say it and say what I want to say but because it doesn't come from me I'm happier*'). This is an experience of deferring to a friend who is less emotionally involved and who can '*draw him out*', as Sarah tries to get her son to 'open up' and talk, echoing Mary's experience of having to 'eke' out information. Sarah is happier with a friend asking certain questions and we see again that the experience is one of not wanting to upset the child, of being happier for certain questions to come from someone else, of feeling that there are things that she cannot ask. She might feel relief that she has the answers to these questions. In this case, she has purposefully invited someone round, but in other cases, parents were able to take advantage of a visitor's arrival to glean information and here the feeling was more of serendipity – welcoming the chance to get answers without having to ask, of being able to sit back and listen, so that the experience is more indirect and less stressful.

Another tactic to try to engage with the child is illustrated by Lizzie who seems to cajole her son, and talks to him as if talking to a much younger child. Again she is trying to manage the process by 'jollying him along' and not upsetting him, she seems desperately keen to be positive and to say that whatever he chooses is fine, whilst also trying to persuade him to go. Considerable effort might be needed to be so calm and positive:

> *'Right'. 'Well, I'm not sure'. 'Okay, you're not sure. So would it be a good idea to go just to take a look and then your options are open? If you don't even do this that's fine but you know what you're choosing about. Would that be a good idea?' 'Yes, all right then'. So it's been kind of like that.*

A final element to this experience is parents holding back and not wanting to say too much. This was illustrated in a number of ways. For Jackie it related to not appearing too enthusiastic about a university, for fear of putting her daughter off:

> *But, you know, I just have to keep quiet a lot of the time because if I say too much she's one of these, you know, you say black and it'll be white. So I have to keep my mouth shut a bit.*

Here we have a sense of a child who can be contrary and of a mother who has learnt to keep quiet for fear of provoking her child to do the opposite of what she wants; so she adopts a cautious approach and discussions are carefully managed. For others, it was feeling that either a subject or course was not right for the child, but not actually saying it. For example, Sarah felt that accounting was '*not quite him'* and Clare felt that her son would not cope with a particular course, but did not say it as '*he needs to come to that conclusion'* himself. So parents are again careful about what they say, but here it is not to avoid upsetting the child, but more about not influencing their decisions too much (either positively or negatively) with perhaps a sense that the child needs to be making these decisions (see 'Balance and Control').

With regard to these discussions, the difficult balance between wanting to guide her daughter, but not wanting to tell her what to do, is further illustrated by Alison:

Well, I've always tried to not say, 'well, if I was you' because I'm not the one who's doing it and you know, sometimes I've said 'if I' and she says, go on, say what you're going to say. I said, no, I'm not going to, I said, because I don't want you turning round in four years' time and saying, well, you said to me if I, you know, blah, blah. And I said, no,...because this is your life and your experience, and I said if you make the wrong decision, I said, it's your fault not mine. But obviously try and be supportive but try -- I don't know, try and lead them in the right direction.

Here she is trying to avoid any future blame and whilst she wants to '*lead*' her daughter and be supportive, she does not want to tell her what she would do, as she recognises that this is a choice her daughter must make. There is a sense of having to 'hold things back' here and not say what you think, and again of watching what you say and choosing your words carefully.

So this experience is about parents having to carefully choose the timing of any conversations and the words they use; consider if or how they express an opinion and choose a range of tactics in order to start a discussion. These include having someone else ask questions for them, or putting ideas 'out there' for the child. The need to develop such tactics is why this section is termed 'negotiation' – this is not a discussion between equals. It is about parents having to manage a relationship and tread carefully to get what they want and to avoid the child withdrawing completely and taking offense, or rejecting an idea or choice. It feels like quite hard work and can be tense and stressful, as there is the constant worry about saying the wrong thing.

4.4.2   Balance and control

For many of the parents who were heavily involved, there was a difficult balance to achieve between them wanting to get the child more involved, but either not being able to do so, or not quite trusting the child to do it properly. Thus, this is often experienced as tension.

Lizzie, who is finding it difficult to get her son involved, resorts to a technique of 'handing it back'. She says that she has been finding it hard to know how to both handle him and the process and to get the balance right. When asked '*the balance of what?'* she says:

> *Of gently encouraging and standing back and saying, look, it's up to you, you know, it's your choice. I'm not going to say anything now for the next -- We've had this one when -- you know, with regards to work and stuff and then I've said, right, I'm recognising this is just turning into what's sounding like nagging to you and I said I'm taking responsibility for what you should be doing, I said. So I'm going to give you that back and he goes, oh, don't give it me back and I say, no, I am and I'm actually -- I said for a couple of weeks I said I'm not going to say anything at all for however long. I'll literally lay it out. It's like on the parenting courses this is and I've said, you know, I'm going to leave it with you, D, and I said what do you want me to do? Do you want me to sort of say how's it going or would you want -- He said well I don't know and I said, well, okay, I'm going to leave it with you then and I'm not going to remind you or say anything,.., because it is up to you. I said so we'll take a break and we'll perhaps review things and then that's it.*

So to avoid arguments and appearing to nag him and to reduce what she finds a very stressful experience, she formally 'hands it back' to him. This means insisting that he takes on more responsibility for '*what he should be doing'.*

A similar idea is expressed by Chloe as a form of 'letting go':

> *But I've sort of had to get it into my head he is 18. If he stuffs this up it's him stuffing it up not me and likewise he has to make the decision about accommodation...*

So she has 'had to' accept that he needs to make certain decisions and be allowed to make mistakes, but the language used shows that giving up control and trying to stand back has not been easy. However, she then gives an example which shows the pitfalls of 'letting go' and leaving things to him:

> *When actually it was his decision whether or not, you know, we get it done. But at the end of the day I don't want him to lose out on this opportunity for the sake of not ticking a box at the right moment because there is a lot of bureaucracy involved in this process,...*

Here, she checks the student finance form which she has left him to complete, but finds he has not ticked the box actually requesting the loan. Thus when it comes to it, she is not able to leave it to him to '*stuff it up'.* This illustrates this

common and uncomfortable tension for parents between on the one hand, trying to let go and leave it to the child, as they feel they should, but on the other hand not wanting their child to miss out, or to make a 'wrong' decision. So parents still feel that they have to be involved in the process and cannot quite let go and give up control even though they know that soon their child will have to become more independent.

Whilst some parents are very involved and are trying to hand some of the responsibility back, others, who were less involved, were already regretting not being more involved and not being more forceful in expressing their views. They were worried that their child would not get the necessary grades for their chosen university (see section 4.5.2 where Mary illustrates this).

Even Clare, a heavily involved participant, who describes herself as reasonably happy with that, does recount one instance where she felt that she was doing too much and that her son needed to do more:

> *I feel happy it's probably about right where I would like to be. I probably am a bit of a control person, I like things organised and so in doing it myself then I knew that it had been done. That sounds awful, doesn't it, but it's where it's at. So I probably did -- I quite like being involved to that level and also -- but I -- He was involved completely. I seem to remember a conversation at one point where I did -- I can't think what it was but did he really have to go or whatever and I thought, no, come on, you're just letting me do all of it here and you do need to be a bit practical which is why I would bring him over to the computer and say look through this syllabus...*

She again illustrates this tension between doing it herself, so that she knows it has been done, and wanting the child to be more involved so that their involvement is more equally balanced between them. Her nature is to be organised and in control, and this is what she feels comfortable with.

It is also interesting that she says '*he was involved completely',* this seems to be contradicted by other sections in the interview where she details her heavy involvement.

This paradox between saying that it is important that it is the child's choice, and yet describing their heavy involvement, is further illustrated by parents such as Jasmine and Rachel (see section 4.4.4 where Rachel illustrates this). For example, Jasmine is keen for her son to ask questions at Open Days, to create a good impression:

> *[what] I also observe is whether the parents are asking the questions or whether the pupils are asking the questions, because I think it's more important that the pupils ask question because I said to J, you know, go prepared with a couple of questions. I'll ask a couple of questions, parent type questions, but I want you to ask as well some more, you know, course type questions. So I'll do the parent bit, you do the course – you know, the course bit and he goes to me, oh, why is it [important] to ask questions? I said because it's important to be shown to be interested and actually he did then start spurring on with questions but he was better on the one-to-one. So when the teacher was there he was then chattering and I just stood back and didn't interfere then at that point. I just leave him to get on with it.*

However, the fact that she has to suggest this to him, including what sort of questions to ask, again illustrates this attempt at creating balance between leaving it to him and getting involved, as she wants him to do well. It also reinforces the idea of a team, as they each have their own focus. So whilst she consciously '*stands back'* this is only after she has got him organised with what to ask, and she has her own role to play asking '*parent type'* questions.

Thus, parents are trying to encourage their child to become more involved, as they feel they should be, but on the other hand they are balancing this with feeling that they cannot quite let go, as the child either cannot be trusted to do it 'properly', or will not get on with it within the deadlines. This is exacerbated by the timing of the decision, as parents realise that soon their child will need to take control of his/her own life. This is a transformative phase in the relationship. In order to achieve a better balance of involvement, parents need to give up some control, and try to stand back, so the experience is often quite uncomfortable. It is about feelings of having to let go, of having to accept their child's choices, or ways of doing things and to try to find a way of working with him/her, so it can be about frustration, doubt and stress, where decisions

reached are compromises. Thus, despite the heading 'Balance and Control' which perhaps suggests a positive experience, this was far from the case.

4.4.3   Knowledge of child

This subtheme underpins many of the others and there are different types of 'knowledge of child'. It is about parents' experiences of their relationship with their child, as well as their knowledge of him/her. For example, parents' tactics for negotiation and their level of involvement in the process are underpinned by knowledge of how best to engage with their child and how far they can leave them to get on with things, or whether they have to take charge. However, my main focus is where participants described how a particular course, university or even career would suit their child, including whether they felt that it would be right for him/her. For example, Alison discusses the way her daughter visualises things and explains why she thinks a particular type of course (more practical) will suit her, describing her elsewhere as "*doey*":

> *So I just think if she's -- You know, if the course was really interesting and they say, right, you know, I want you to go down Bournemouth beach now for an hour and take what you think is a good shot of a seagull, that would be great because she's doing and she'd sort of think about it, is the light right and blah, blah, blah. Whereas if you were in just a classroom just looking at a board, writing down, maybe discussing which is all fine, it's all part of it, but she'd always I think be looking for that little bit more.*

Participant's knowledge of their child was also expressed in terms of what would not suit them '*this isn't actually your character, J, you know, this isn't you*' says Jasmine referring to one university's focus on the social life. Rachel has a strong sense that Cambridge would not be right for her child:

> *I was quite keen that she didn't go actually just because I'm not certain it was -- it'd be the right thing for her. I mean she's still adamant that that's where she wanted but I just feel that she'll get a better, more rounded education if she goes to somewhere not quite as snooty, you know, and not quite as high flying. I think she'll -- to go to Cambridge and to struggle all the way through it and to be amongst people who come from very different social backgrounds, I don't think that she*

> *would enjoy, you know. She'd always be trying to keep up with the, you know, the other students and I think a lot of them will come from very privileged backgrounds.*

However, when she tries to suggest that she does not put Cambridge, this is misinterpreted by her daughter who replies: '*....why, do you not think I'm good enough? and, of course, what can you [say] back to that you know? You don't say no...*' (Rachel). This illustrates the fine balance between trying to give advice and giving offense. This knowledge, or assumed knowledge, of the child is not always welcome. Rachel has to accept that her own views of Cambridge and whether it would suit her daughter are not shared. Thus, we have an example of two types of knowledge of child, one relating to the child's ability and what might suit her, but the other relating to how the child will react to such a discussion and a sense of how defensive she might become. With regard to the latter, Rachel seems to have misjudged her.

Taking this knowledge of child a step further, a few participants also describe having a feeling for what would or would not suit their child – matching the child with a place and actually visualising them somewhere – '*I could see D there'* (Lizzie). It is again about certainty and knowing their child and what would suit him/her. Natalie illustrates this: '*I knew it wouldn't be for B really...in some respects I feel the same way you go very much on how you feel about the place*'. Jasmine echoes this, discussing one university and a common concern amongst parents of whether their child would be happy somewhere:

> *...and I think he flourishes better in a smaller environment. So that's what I was looking for, what kind of environment it was. You know, would he get lost in all of this? Would he be happy as a person in this environment?*

She continues:

> *...But, yes, I think I was looking for him as a person, whether he would actually like it. I was actually looking at what kind of people were walking around and looking. I know that sounds strange.*

So that for her, part of the 'right feeling' for a place comes from the other people she sees there.

For Mark it seems to be how he chooses, a sense of an instinctive, 'gut' feel that he has for things. He describes one university as '*just her sort of university'* with '*her style of people'* and that *'she has to feel comfortable'* there.

So there are parents with a strong sense of their child, who think that they know their child well and know not only what would suit them, but also what would not. These parents are certain and confident in their knowledge of their child. In some cases this allows them to match him/her to a university and actually visualise their child somewhere. It also interlinks with another experience which is the sense they have of whether they feel that their child was ready for university (discussed next).

4.4.4   Transition (preparation for adulthood)

The final experience is the sense that some participants had of having prepared their child for leaving home and their child's readiness for independence. This experience was less overtly prevalent than the other experiences discussed, but it was in the background for many of them, due to changes taking place in this relationship. Rachel illustrates it:

> *I remember when I went to university I went to both the interview and off to uni on my own because my parents didn't have no involvement and I think E was the same. And so it's this balance really of what you had and what you want to give them and, you know, you do -- We call it adult training in our house, you know, and we try and do as much as we can to make her do as much and she quite often says, no, I don't want to do that. I don't want to do that and we say, well, what are you going to do when we're not about to do it for you? You know things like ringing up and making an appointment.*

In addition to '*adult training'*, where Rachel is trying to help her daughter achieve independence, this echoes experiences of 'Balance and Control'. She is trying to get her daughter to do things for herself, as was her own experience, but this is coupled elsewhere in the interview with evidence of her heavy involvement (see next section – 4.5.1). Chloe though describes how her son is ready for independence:

> *He's a September boy, yes. So he's at the stage where he needs to strike out and do his own thing. It comes to all boys and girls at some point and his time has come.*
>
> *Yes, and he's quite happy. I mean he's, you know -- he can cook. Part of his job is cleaning toilets so he should be able to do that although I've not seen evidence of this at home...he's old enough to stand on his own two feet. You know, he's had a bank account for a year so he's pretty well set up and if he needs to find work there he's got qualifications...*

This overlaps with her knowledge of him – he is ready for this next step and she reveals pride in both him and herself as a parent – she has got him ready for the next phase in his life. Going through this process is helping her to recognise this; she describes it as a '*growing up experience for me'.*

For a few others though there was a sense that their child was not quite ready to leave home yet and in both cases the child had chosen to live at home: '...*you don't have to go to uni now, you can always go later...* (Alison). This led to much anxiety from one mother.

Thus, we have some participants who feel confident that their child is ready for the next step and when reflecting on the experience they perhaps feel some pride in themselves and their parenting. However, for others the experience is one of worry and doubt, as they feel that their child is not quite ready.

4.5   Experiences related to approaches to involvement

(2 subthemes: high and low involvement). See Figure 2 for more details.

As explained earlier, this theme is different from the other two, because the subthemes are mutually exclusive, thus participants discussed here had an approach to involvement which was either high or low. Given that the research was about exploring parents' accounts of their experience of involvement in the HE process, unsurprisingly there were lots of discussions about this experience. As discussed, one potentially interesting way to reflect on this theme is to consider the idea of participants experiencing it as teamwork and this is discussed in the next chapter (5.3.2).

4.5.1   High involvement

For many parents their involvement was high and their stories illustrate the effort and commitment they put into the process. They describe it as: '...we *did what we had to do to get where we wanted to go...'* (Natalie) and *'that's what you have to do and that's what you do'* says Alison, here explaining the cost and commitment of attending Open Days. In both examples there is a sense of duty and obligation; of doing what is needed to ensure that their child gets the best chance or the 'right' experience.

Clare illustrates the <u>detailed involvement</u> she had in researching courses for her son:

> *Yes, it was...all within either film and TV, film and video, film and moving image. They all called it something slightly different but they -- you know, you had to drill down on then the university websites and really drill down into the make-up of the course. And actually some I was looking in great detail at what they were suggesting, what you had to do, and just the wording of it like the difference between Bournemouth Uni and AUCB. The difference: AUCB was talking much more about - well and Newport where he wants to go - much more about you learn through practical experience. Whereas some of the others were, well, we will teach you these modules,...and you will learn a bit about the cameras things. I thought, oh, no, he needs hands-on.*

This shows how thorough she is; she is becoming very knowledgeable and is keeping control of the process. It shows the overlap between this experience and that of 'Knowledge of Child', as Clare is looking for a particular type of course which she feels would suit her son, looking in depth at the detail, including the language used. She continues this heavy involvement by asking all the questions at Open Days. Mark also exhibits heavy involvement, partly illustrated by the spread sheet he devises for his daughter which included university rankings and points needed. However, despite this detailed input in some areas, he leaves the choice of course to his daughter, involving himself in other areas, such as accommodation where his financial and legal expertise are relevant. So whilst this is heavy involvement, it is also focused in particular areas, with him and his daughter working as a team and dividing up the roles.

In the areas he looks at, he is precise and meticulous and it seemed important for him to be knowledgeable and to demonstrate this to me.

Rachel also exhibits heavy involvement in the process, but here this is manifest through a <u>focus and determination</u> to help her child to achieve her ambition:

> *But anyway that made us realise at that point that a career in medicine and getting into med school meant that you had to, as a parent, actively go out and help your child get the experience they needed which if you are already a doctor is fine. If you're not it's incredibly difficult and so -- I mean I think it was in her Year 10 summer holiday so between Year 10 and Year 11 we made her ring up all the local GPs and hospitals and healthcare trusts to try and get some sort of experience. She got nowhere.*
>
> *So finally I took it over, sort of took the gauntlet over and I did the same, just ring up and cold call, and eventually found -- got her two placements...*

Here she is trying to help her child to get into medical school, but in doing so has to take over the task, despite initially having '*made*' her daughter do the work. This was a common experience for some heavily involved parents, who would start with good intentions about getting the child to do things, but would then take over. This echoes the sense of obligation and expectation of what you have to do 'as a parent'. This heavy involvement continues throughout the process, which Rachel describes as a '*big family project for all of us*' and a '*journey*'. In addition to taking the child to interviews, she and her husband contact GPs for advice and even carry out mock interviews. Rachel has a clear sense of purpose and a goal. However, as discussed earlier, she also tries to step back, describing it as '*her decision...[we] wanted it to come from her',* so her heavy involvement is overlaid with a sense that it should be the child's decision.

Jasmine is also '*very focused'* saying that people refer to her son as '*my project'* and she describes the two of them as '*operation education'* as they visit Open Days together. As discussed earlier, while she says that it is '*entirely your choice'*, this is again done against a back drop of her keen interest and involvement: '*I've supported him and helped him and pushed him in the right*

direction to actually achieve what he wants to do.' The word '*push*' is significant here, rather than 'guide' or 'encourage' which are words more commonly used by participants, and reflects her dominant role in the process.

In some cases participants' heavy involvement is about trying to get the child more involved, perhaps a sense of pushing the child, but hoping that eventually s/he will become fully involved. For example, Sarah starts off the process for her son by suggesting the idea of going to university, then ordering prospectuses and booking the Open Days, but nevertheless she is keen for him to "*own it*":

> *Oh, no, he hadn't owned it by then. When we were looking through the prospectuses this was me going through the options and him just not being prepared to look at the options. So in a sense I was -- had to do that for him I felt.*

A third way of experiencing high involvement (<u>well informed and logical</u>) is illustrated by Megan whose job involves careers and university advice. Here she explains how she and her son decide which university to put first:

> *So that night we sat down and we got the web pages up of Oxford. We got -- Basically we decided Exeter was nice but it wasn't in a league with Imperial or Oxford, and looking at the facilities and the league tables as well but he thought he preferred Imperial and Oxford... But then it was between Imperial and Oxford to make a firm choice and your second choice. So he was still in a quandary wondering what to do. So he decided -- Well, he sat down with me one evening. We got the two web pages up on his laptop and we did a pro and con list, Oxford to Imperial, and Imperial won against Oxford six to one.*

> *There was different things. It was like overseas students: we were going how many overseas students, facilities, league tables, career prospects, graduate prospects, things like bursaries and scholarships. All those type of things and every time Imperial was coming out above Oxford and we -- I think the industry links with Imperial, because he's doing a science and technology course, I think Imperial so outstrips Oxford.*

> *We went round to the department at Oxford and it was shabby, it was rundown and it was just assumed, you know, oh, it'll be really great if you could get in here, you know, it's the elite...*

She demonstrates a very logical, considered process with a range of factors being carefully compared between two institutions. During the interview she repeats the phrase '*informed decision*' and the importance of criteria such as: the course, league tables and employability. She describes how she and her son worked together, and this seems to have been quite harmonious, a good example of teamwork, but she also describes her heavy involvement. Due to her knowledge, experience, and meticulous approach, the process goes smoothly and is less stressful than many of the other highly involved participants. She is quite confident with the choice that has been made; partly because she has been able to contribute to it. This is a very 'logical' and considered process and the most like rational choice theory. It is significant that only one participant undergoes the sort of process that the literature and government policies might lead us to expect and this is because of her detailed sector knowledge.

So we see parents who have put in a lot of time and effort to help their child, and whilst they approach it in different ways, for many of them it is about being in control and being involved in the process. Whilst some feel that they have more involvement than they would like, for a few, they are either comfortable about being highly involved, or they and their child have achieved a balance of responsibilities/involvement with which they are happy.

4.5.2   Low involvement

On the other hand, there were a few participants who were quite happy having low involvement, and they were content to leave much of the process and decisions to their child. They had a limited amount of involvement and were quite content with that. They did not feel any of the strong negative emotions such as frustration with the process, indeed their main emotion, if any, was pride and/or trust. They thus did not follow a thorough approach, and were not particularly well informed, but they were quite comfortable with this situation. Jackie explains:

> *Well, I think once they do their A levels it's not a huge amount of -- I mean there are -- I suppose there are different options but she very much looked at all the courses. She got -- ordered the prospectuses, she looked through them all. She did her own research. She decided which ones she's going to visit. She spoke to people at school, she spoke to her drama teacher, her theatre studies teacher, her classics teacher, and she took advice every -- you know, from everyone she knew about where she should apply to, where she should consider and, you know, etc., ...but, yes, she did that pretty much by herself so I --*

> *No, we didn't really get involved in the choice of universities...*

Later she explains how she trusts her daughter to do it properly, and her lack of involvement extends to not looking at her daughter's personal statement, nor at the prospectuses which her daughter orders. She was quite relaxed and was content for her daughter to get any help from school. She was there when she was needed, but this was not very often.

For Tina her lack of involvement is partly down to her son, who keeps his final choice of universities from her even when she asks: '*he said when I've made the choice and when it comes to the deadline I'll let you know*' and in fact the chosen universities are not what she expected. When asked how she felt about not being kept informed, she said:

> *That was just M, he's -- he keeps his cards close to his chest, that's the expression I could use for him. He's -- He doesn't let on a lot. He's very -- as I say, very quiet and he keeps him - his thoughts to himself and everything. He'd made it -- He looked into it, he made his decisions and I thought it was -- he obviously didn't want me saying, oh, well I want you to go there because. So he said on the deadline day, he said, right, I've applied to Warwick as my first choice and Bath the second, so that's it.*

So, as with other mothers, there is acceptance here that this is what my child is like. This of course also links to 'Discussion and Negotiation', but unlike the mothers cited earlier, Tina is quite happy not to be involved, as like Jackie she 'trusts' him to make the choice and feels that he has researched it thoroughly. She describes him as a child who would '*weigh [things] up*' and make a '*sensible decision*,' expressing pride. However, even with this lack of

involvement, she does check the location of his first choice university and the accommodation, "*But what I liked about Warwick when I looked at -- I did a sneaky look up online...*" The word '*sneaky*' is significant here; as it implies that she feels that she should not be looking, not be getting involved, or that she would not want him to find out. This echoes the idea of parents who do not want to risk annoying their child by appearing too interested, or interfering, so they are careful about what they do and say.

Mary is one of a small number of participants in this group who has <u>low involvement but is not happy with this</u> (her experience is discussed more fully in 'Discussion and Negotiation'). Here she explains her concerns about her daughter's second choice university and her regret at not being more involved:

> '*So it would have been a safer back-up and I suppose because she isn't very chatty and responsive we've sort of very much left it up to her and, as I say, now I sort of, you know, do have a little regret that I think, well, perhaps we should have tried to put our foot down and gone, well, actually that's –... you look at what you're doing here.*'

However, as illustrated earlier, their relationship and her daughter's refusal to discuss things, has precluded much involvement. All she can do is wait for her daughter's results and hope that they are good enough for the chosen university. Wendy echoes this experience: '*he doesn't want me too involved in his decisions, you know, and I've had to take a bit of a step bac*k'. When asked how she felt, she says '...*I sort of like felt a bit redundant I suppose*'. In both cases, participants are left anxious and experiencing some regret, perhaps feeling excluded from the process.

Thus, we have participants who are not very involved in the process. This can either be their choice and the experience is then a mixture of trust and of feeling comfortable with the situation (with perhaps an element of pride), or it can be because of their child's lack of willingness to engage with them. This is then experienced as being unhappy and feeling excluded.

In summary, parents' experiences were of varying degrees and approaches to involvement, and whilst some were happy with the level of involvement they had, others would have liked less (or sometimes more). For many parents this was a stressful time, as they negotiated with their child and put in the work needed to navigate their way through the process. This gap between the

amount of involvement that they wanted and what they had, which could occur at either end of the involvement spectrum, resulted in feelings of not being in control, of not being where they wanted to be. It led to a range of emotions which will be discussed next.

4.6   Emotional experiences

Table 2 Emotions Experienced by Participants during the Process

<u>Name</u>	<u>Emotions Experienced</u>
Mary	**Worry,** anticipation of child's departure, resigned, regret, relieved, (pride)
Lizzie	**Worry, frustration,** stress, want reassurance, guilt, fun
Megan	<u>**Pride**</u>
Chloe	**Anticipation of child's departure,** (pride), (tension), <u>frustration</u>
Jane	**Pride,** worry, anticipation of child's departure
Natalie	**Tedious**, <u>anticipation of child's departure</u>, guilt, responsibility, resigned
Tina	**Pride, trust, anticipation of child's departure, worry, dread**
Jackie	**Trust,** (<u>pride</u>)
Wendy	**Worry,** want reassurance, (vulnerable)
Alison	**Laid back,** <u>frustration</u>, relaxed, happy
Mark	<u>Anticipation of child's departure</u>, envy, <u>pride</u>, (regret)
Laura	**Laidback**, **resigned,** envy, <u>anticipation of child's departure</u>, (<u>worry</u>)
Rachel	Regret, <u>pride, worry</u>, want reassurance, fun
Clare	<u>Frustration</u>, relief, <u>anticipation of child's departure</u>, stress, regret
Jasmine	<u>Pride (frustration).</u>
(Sarah)	<u>(Pride) (anticipation of child's departure)</u>

<u>Key</u>: in bold = strong emotion or emotional experience (also where participant's name is in bold); normal text = medium experience; and in brackets = low or light experience. There is no significance in the order of the emotions listed left to right. Underlined emotions will be discussed.

The emotions can also be related temporally: past/present and future (see Figure 2). For example, all the emotions were experienced in the present or recent past, except 'worry' and 'anticipation of the child's departure', which were about the future. 'Pride' could be about the past/present or the future.

Over the long HE choice process, there were a range of emotions experienced, and some participants experienced more emotions than others. It should also be noted, that the experiences were described in emotional terms with wide ranging degrees of salience. Although emotions have been considered as a separate theme, it should be noted that they influence the other two themes ('Parenting' and 'Approach to Involvement') and are then affected by them, so there are complex interactions taking place.

From the wide array of emotions experienced (see Figure 2 or Table 2) four will be explored here: pride, frustration, worry, and anticipation of the child's departure. As discussed earlier, this is because they were either more prevalent overall, or experienced very strongly by a few participants and in the background for others.

4.6.1   Discussion of the four main emotions

Pride was a strong emotional experience for many participants. Here Megan responds to a question about when her son first thought of going to university:

> when he started his GCSEs because he's always gifted and talented. So I think from about sort of 14 that he wanted to go and he hasn't thought about getting an apprenticeship or anything else that -- He just knows that he is -- because he is very bright, that he wants -- he wanted to go down that route but, of course, we hit the £9,000 tuition fees at the moment. But Imperial are very good, they've given him a £3,500 bursary and they've waived some of his tuition fees which is quite unknown actually.

She mentions the 'gifted and talented' scheme several times and also that he was offered a place at Oxford and is keen to tell me why he rejected it and to justify his final choice, and this rare bursary. Similarly, Jane describes her son as '*exceptionally bright*'.

Thus pride is mainly about the child now and their successes to date, which participants were keen to recount, and for some, pride was also conveyed when they described how they trusted their child and how independent they were.

Another common emotional experience and one very much connected with the actual process was <u>frustration</u> and this was felt particularly strongly by some of the more heavily involved participants, especially those who might have preferred less involvement. It was often caused by the child not getting involved or on with it, or the child's reluctance to talk or listen to the parent. Lizzie describes her frustration with the school about what she feels to be a lack of guidance on post–18 choices and on suitable courses for her child, who has no idea about what to study:

> *But we were quite stuck on what he would do, he just didn't have the faintest idea and basically the advice I seemed to get was, you know, almost don't worry too much about what --...*

> *...-- but go to university, get the degree. Loads of people do a degree and end up working in something completely different anyway which I know to be true. But it left me a bit frustrated because I thought that still doesn't help me because he's still got to apply to a subject.*

So here the frustration is experienced as feeling helpless.

Even Alison, who has been quite laidback during most of the process, describes some frustration at her daughter's inability to make a choice:

> *But I suppose as a parent you just want to think, oh, you know, make a decision because if it's what you want to do it's what you want to do. But I suppose with something like photography that's got so many fields to it...*

This again echoes a feeling of helplessness, and perhaps irritation, and of being dependent on the child to make their choice and of parents just wanting a decision to be made. Other participants expressed frustration more as irritation with the process itself particularly the online forms.

<u>Worry</u> was not felt as widely by participants as 'pride', but where it was experienced it was felt very strongly. Unlike pride which is often related to the

child now or to their past achievements, worry was about the child in the future and how s/he would cope away from home.

Here Mary expresses her anxieties about the fees and the amount of debt involved:

> *Well, I worry about it a little bit and think, oh, gosh, it's just a shame. I think it's just a shame that they're going to come away, you know, with that much debt, you know, and I know..., as I say, that they say, oh, well, you know, unless you're earning over x amount you're not going to have to pay anything back but the debt's still there in my mind. I suppose it's cautious parent to monetary, sort of fairly careful, then to think your child's going to have a debt which is almost what our house cost is quite sort of -- quite worrying really.*

Worry is a recurring theme for Mary and it might be exacerbated by her lack of involvement and input into the decisions.

For Lizzie, the whole experience had been one of strong, mainly negative emotions, such as feeling stressed and lonely. She says that she feels that '*parents go through hell*', during the process, but particularly with regard to the personal statement. She describes vividly how she burst into tears when her son finally produces it:

> *Yes, I know but he read it and, of course, it sounded absolutely brilliant because he's very articulate and everything and I just burst into tears. That said it all and he was going, oh, mum, and I said I'm sorry, I'm just so worried, I want you to do what's right for you and I want you to work out and I said it's just so hard when you do nothing, D. I said I don't know how to help you, I said, and to a certain extent you have got to help yourself, I said, and when you don't, ...it's just -- I said I'm sorry for weeping on you. So it's been an emotional process.*

Here she echoes her feeling of helplessness, and desire for her son to get more involved, and her worries about how to achieve this.

A final emotion, which was less prevalent than the others discussed, was the anticipation of the child's departure. This is about what parents think things will be like for them when their child goes to university and the sense of a new

relationship. So unlike the other emotions, this is both future oriented and focused on the parent not the child. Where it was experienced it was often a very strong emotion, here almost of dread:

> *Yes, it's going to break my heart when he leaves. Well, I say leaves home, I mean it's not sort of technically leaving but as such he'll be away for the next four years and I can't think what it'll be like here without him, you know. But it's the right thing for him to do and I do think, especially that -- I suppose the difference is where he was so ill and at one point we were told he might not make it...When you're in that sort of situation...(Tina).*

So this is a very intense experience, but tempered by the feeling that it is the right thing for him. However, these emotions could also be positive, and some parents were looking forward to the practical benefits of not having a teenager around:

> *I might have a moment of empty nest-iness but then I'll look at the pile of laundry being so much smaller and that things were where I left them and things aren't where I didn't leave them. Yes, I'm quite looking forward to that and I think we're at the stage, you know, as I say he's going to be 19. He needs to strike out on his own and I mean I'm not the sort of person who'd want him to stay at home because that's -- No, that -- He needs to do his own thing. He needs to grow up, he needs to do his own thing, find his own way in the world, and hopefully we've equipped him to do that...(Chloe).*

This overlaps with her feeling that her son was ready to leave home and for independence (section 4.4.4).

Thus, for many participants there are a range of emotions experienced, some of which either underpin the whole experience or are particularly intense at certain moments and this will be explored more fully in the next chapter. Some emotions link to the child, others are about the parent and some relate to the past, present or future.

4.7   Chapter summary

So the findings show that the choice process is experienced in different ways by each parent. For one, it is a highly emotional and largely negative experience; for another it is a very logical process which goes very smoothly. It is about the ways parents engage and interact with their child to try to keep the peace through careful negotiation. It is a significant time in this relationship, as it is also about 'letting go' and about the child becoming independent (Haywood, 2014) and this underlies the whole experience. Thus, for some parents there was a tension between wanting to 'let go' and knowing that they would soon have to do so, and also worrying that the child will not make a 'good' choice or do what is needed. A fear of being too controlling, contrasted with wanting the best for the child and their happiness (Haywood, 2014). There was a sense perhaps that this might be one of the last shared experiences and one of the last areas in which parents will be involved. For all of them it is about the next stage in their child's life and indeed their own. This idea of parenting and relationships will be further explored next.

Chapter 5:   **Analysis chapter**

5.1   Development of meta-narrative and analytical categories

As discussed in the methodology (section 3.7.1), the initial themes were developed without explicit consideration of theory, but instead by an in-depth focus on participants' experiences. The analytical categories discussed in this chapter came from reflecting further on the findings, but also considering them in terms of the existing literature, including in the area of family and joint decision-making which was only accessed at this point. It was noted in the Literature Review (section 2.2.1) that conflict avoidance/resolution and influence are key topics within joint decision-making and some of this theory resonated with participants' recounted experiences, particularly within my 'Parenting' theme. Further reflection led to the view that participants' experiences were all about relationships and that this was impacting on all three themes, so this is the meta-narrative. The themes were then reconfigured to more clearly show this relational focus. It was also felt that 'Parenting' was the central analytical category and this is represented in the diagram (Figure 3) by making it the largest circle and locating it in the centre. The three categories within 'Parenting' replace the four themes from the findings (Discussion and Negotiation; Balance and Control; Knowledge of Child and Transition) to better reflect the relational aspects of this experience. It was felt that these themes were best expressed as: ways of avoiding conflict – persuasion and compromise; teamwork; and relationship maintenance. Explicit links between these categories and my objectives (section 3.1) will be drawn in the conclusion (section 6.1.2).

As discussed earlier (section 3.7.1), I am not seeking to either prove existing theories of choice or decision-making, or to develop a model or theory. Instead, I am seeking to explore and expand on existing theory by examining how choice processes are actually experienced by people in their everyday lives.

As already discussed, the term 'child' is used in this thesis (see section 4.2 for a fuller discussion) to emphasise the parent/child relationship which is foregrounded in this chapter and also because it was a term used by

participants. The term is not intended to convey any sense of them as necessarily helpless or vulnerable, but to emphasise this core relationship; a relationship that affects the way my participants engaged with the HE choice process.

5.2   Overarching meta-narrative

Contemporary theory on choice sees it as both positive and something mainly practiced by individuals (the idea of personal choice) (Smart, 2010) with an emphasis on freedom of choice (discussed in section 2.1.3). However, what my study has shown is that the very notion of choice in some contexts is a deeply collective, intrapersonal, relational concept which is very different and distinct from neo-liberal views which privilege individual choice. There is also often an underlying assumption that choice is 'rational', for example in government rhetoric, and again my findings show that choices made with and for other people are often based on compromise, rather than the sorts of thorough analysis of alternatives that some of the literature would suggest (e.g. Meyer and Kahn, 1991). This is not to suggest that compromising to preserve a relationship is 'irrational' of course, but these sorts of nuances are not recognised by some of the literature (discussed more fully in section 6.1.1). The key narrative for my analysis and the main area of contribution is that the experience of HE choice is fundamentally about relationship maintenance. This relationship perspective does not feature prominently in the choice literature. All the primary experiences described by participants during this choice process were in some senses about interacting and working with their child. This relationship moderated the emotions they felt, the involvement they could or had to have in the process, and the discussions that took place, thus it impacts on all three themes from my findings. This chapter will analyse these findings around the central idea of HE choice being about relationships and it is then divided into the three analytical categories. This is summarised diagrammatically (Figure 3), to show the link between the original themes and the revised analytical categories. The analytical categories are then outlined. Of course, given the nature of my data and methodological approach, there are overlaps within and between these sections which reflect the messy nature of participants' actual experiences.

Figure 3 Link between Findings and Analysis

Themes from findings:

Emotions

(4 main)*

Parenting

(4 subthemes)*

Approach to Involvement

(2 subthemes)*

Overarching meta-narrative:

Choice linked to relationships/intra-relational choice

Analytical categories:

Parenting

Parenting as:
- Conflict avoidance -
  persuasion and compromise;
- Teamwork;
- Relationship maintenance.

Emotions

Involvement
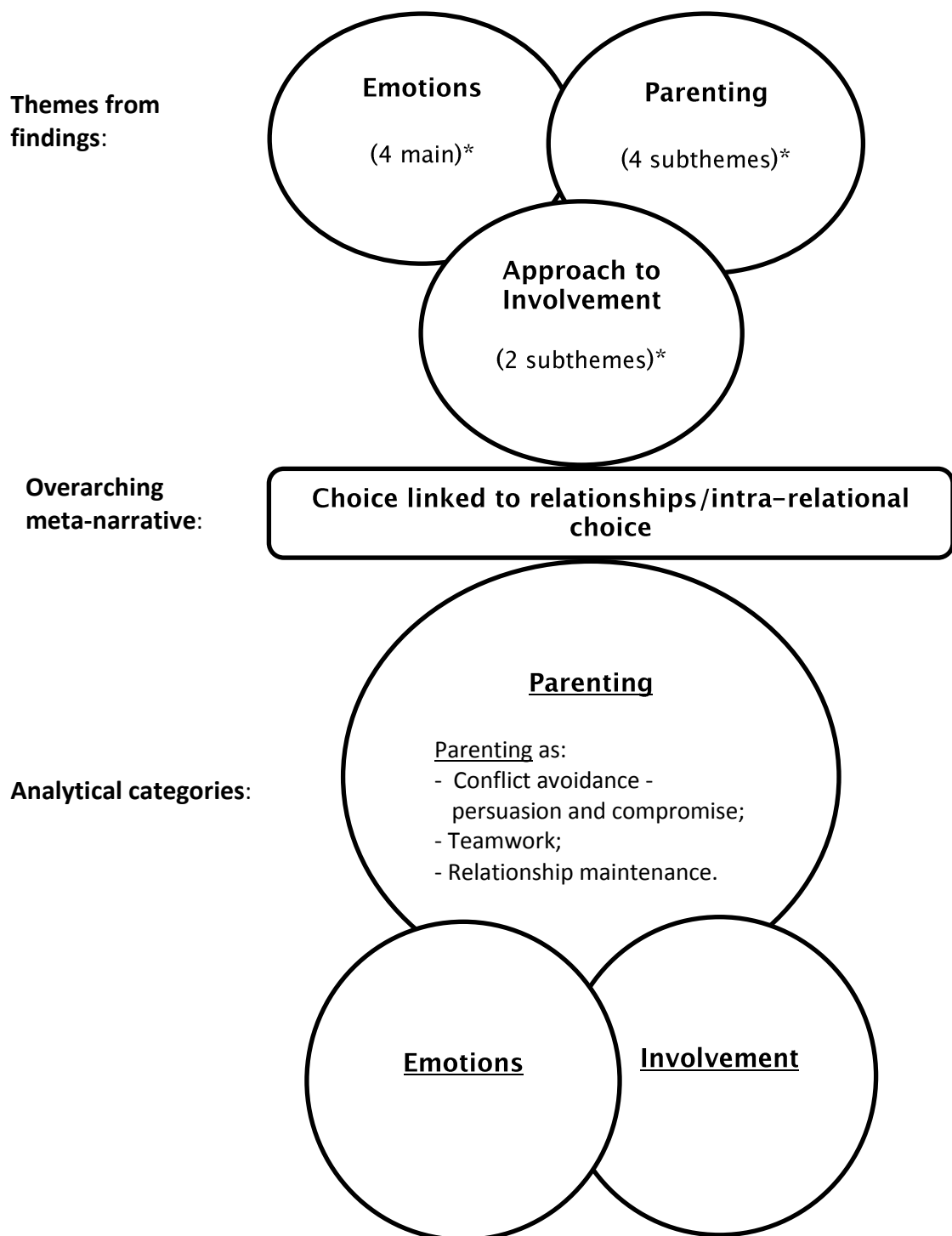
*see Figure 2 for details of subthemes and the four main emotions.

These categories are briefly explained here and then explored more fully in the following sections.

1. <u>Parenting</u> – this is the central category in terms of exploring the role of relationships in choice. It is all about relationship maintenance. It is then sub-divided into three overlapping experiences, as discussed (section 5.1), and presented in Figure 2.

2. <u>Involvement</u> in the choice process. This includes how involvement was experienced and how it is affected by the relationship with, and knowledge of, the child.

3. <u>Emotions</u> – experienced during the choice process. This is about how emotions are influenced and impacted by working with someone over a long period, plus a discussion of the predominant emotional experiences.

5.3   Parenting category

(<u>Findings themes</u>: discussion and negotiation; balance and control; knowledge of child and transition/preparation for adult life).

This section explores the central theme of 'Parenting' and suggests that one key narrative helping us to understand parental experiences in the context of their child's HE choice is to see this process as a form of parenting, and about a relationship.

My study details the experiences of working together with someone over a long period of time. It looks at the idea of a DMU, but in a family rather than the usual organisational context (see section 2.2.1). It details a complicated and evolving relationship which is not about equals and can be about parents wanting to achieve something that the child may want less or be less concerned about, so that at times parents feel they need to coerce and persuade. This process is also taking place at a key point in the child and parent's relationship in view of the child's imminent departure.

As discussed earlier (see also sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.6), many previous studies on choice focus on the individual (Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007), rather than on people working together and having to negotiate choice. Existing literature on joint and family decision-making and its limitations has been reviewed (2.2.4),

noting that there are relatively few examples of the detailed discussions which form part of conflict avoidance or persuasion. Therefore I am contributing to the literature through an in-depth exploration of the conversations and negotiations which take place and the strategies which parents adopt. With regard to the small number of qualitative studies in this area, I can extend these by examining other ways in which joint choice processes are experienced, and by exploring this area from a different perspective. There are also a small number of qualitative studies in the context of HE choice, and again the limitations of these have been discussed (sections 2.4.2.2 and 2.4.4). My overall contribution derives from my different focus of interest, which is parents' experiences and the meanings that they attribute to them.

This section examines specific aspects of parenting looking at conflict avoidance through compromise and persuasion; at parenting as teamwork and at parenting as relationship maintenance and how this experience illustrates the changing relationship between parent and child, giving parents a chance to reflect on their parenting experiences. My findings will now be further explored structured round these three overlapping categories. It should be noted that these categories are not mutually exclusive, so that parents can experience any or all of them.

5.3.1   Parenting as conflict avoidance – persuasion and compromise

It was noticeable the lengths participants described going to in order to avoid conflict with their child and to try to maintain a good relationship. Conflict avoidance includes minimizing expressions of disagreement and is illustrated by participants in section 4.4.1 by holding back and not saying what they thought: '*so I have to keep my mouth shut a bit*' (Jackie). Participants experienced this at times as treading carefully, being guarded and standing back. Nørgaard and Brunsø's (2011) study echoes this, finding evidence of parents' efforts to avoid conflict and maintain harmony as they engage in trade-offs and negotiations with their children. Conflict avoidance could be experienced in a number of ways, but two primary ways from my findings are the use of persuasion and compromise. Persuasion is one of Sheth's (1974) strategies for conflict avoidance and resolution.

<u>**Persuasion**</u> – Participants made considerable efforts to avoid conflict and maintain the relationship by being persuasive rather than using alternative

approaches to negotiation. These might include laying down the law or using their power or status (strategies termed 'experience' or 'legitimate', Lee and Collins, 2000, or 'expertise', Spiro, 1983). Persuasion is illustrated in many sections of the Parenting theme where it was experienced as taking advantage of knowing the child (Knowledge of Child) and choosing appropriate approaches and altering these as needed. This is illustrated by Lizzie's very persuasive language when trying to persuade her son to attend an Open Day. Persuasion was about parents trying to have some involvement and express their views, but at the same time doing this carefully and persuasively. It was about being careful with what they said and when they said it and taking advantage of when the child was in a good mood, or when an opportunity presented itself, such as being in a car with them: '*he's got to be in the right frame of mind to want to chat to me*' (Sarah). Some participants also used a close friend or family member to initiate a discussion and ask their child 'difficult' questions. Reay *et al.* (2005) echo this, detailing one participant who brings in a family friend to advise her daughter, who is resistant to her mother's advice. In my study, this was experienced by participants as relief, a way of getting answers without any rows and of trying to keep the communication going, so that they could find out things without having to keep asking. Participants were careful to avoid appearing to nag, which has negative connotations, although at times some of them acknowledged that they were either nagging or that this was how it was perceived: '*I'm recognising that this is just turning into what's sounding like nagging to you*' (Lizzie).

The heavy use of persuasion could be for several reasons. One is that the child is now much older and thus the type of negotiation has changed and there is little point in trying to insist or lay down the law. The second reason is that the choice needs to be one with which the child is happy and also involved. It should also be noted that persuasion here is mainly in the context of persuading the child to engage with the process, rather than explicitly about persuasion to study at a particular university or a particular subject.

Compromise – compromise as conflict avoidance is about getting the best result you can from a situation. In my findings, it was about feeling that the need to maintain the relationship, and for some also that a decision was reached, was more important than the detail of the decision. If parents do not

succeed with their attempts at being persuasive, the importance of the relationship may well entail some compromise (so compromise follows persuasion).

Compromise is about parents choosing which of the choices were important to them and which they were prepared to leave to the child and thus where they were prepared to compromise. Nørgaard and Brunsø (2011:147) support this, finding evidence of parents having to "choose their fights". So that for some participants it was sufficient that their child went to university at all, and the details of where and/or what they studied could be left to the child. For example, Sarah knew that accounting was not right for her child, but did not say anything, as she was just happy that he was at least engaging with the idea of going to university at all. This reflects the fact that the university choice process is multi-layered, with lots of choices to make at different stages (i.e. which subject, which university). Parents may decide that some choices matter more to them than others and thus they get involved with different aspects and at different stages in the process. Other parents, however, were involved right up to the final choice, but once they were sure that all the options under consideration were acceptable, this choice could be left to the child. Rachel illustrates this saying that her daughter made the final choice '*as soon as we'd sort of discussed that they were all good medical schools*'. This supports research by Lee and Beatty (2002), who find that parents set the parameters of choice with some options not even being offered to the child, as they had already been discounted. Thus, it may be that certain choices, such as not going to university at all, or going to a particular type of university, are dismissed by the parent (or the parent works hard to persuade the child to discount them), and then the child is allowed to make the final choice from within an approved group (termed an 'evoked set' by Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). For example, some participants tried to dissuade their child from universities which were perceived as too pressurised (Oxbridge) or unsafe (some city universities).

Compromise can thus either be in areas which are felt to be less important, or once certain parameters have been set. However, there were also examples of parents having to compromise on aspects which did matter to them and leave those choices to the child (such as Mary and Wendy who both express regrets at their child's choices and the fact that they were not listened to, despite their

efforts). As discussed, (section 2.2.2) Hamilton (2009) identifies three strategies for conflict avoidance, one of which is 'giving in' which links to compromise. This echoes Davis (1976) who notes the role of compromise in reaching a joint decision and that in some cases expertise and experience are sacrificed to maintain harmony and this is illustrated in my findings.

Another aspect of conflict avoidance (discussed more fully in section 5.4 – Involvement) is parents having to stand back and accept less involvement than they would like and/or having to get more involved, and sometimes take over, in order to get things done. Thompson's (1996:397) study of working mothers finds evidence that not only do they negotiate compromises with other family members, but also, to avoid conflict and "emotional stress", they end up doing things themselves rather than keep 'nagging'. It should also be noted that Lee and Collins (2000) speculate that participants may be reluctant to report conflict and so any conflict may be under-reported in my study. How parents present themselves is discussed later (section 5.3.3.1).

5.3.2   Parenting as teamwork

Another way of examining the experience of choice from a relationship perspective (here with a focus on relationship maintenance), is to consider parenting as teamwork (between parent and child). Teamwork was experienced in different ways by participants, ranging from some who worked harmoniously with their child for the most part, to others who barely worked as a team at all and for many participants it was a mixed experience. They worked as a team with varying degrees of success and in different ways at different times, with one or other of them leading it or doing all the work: sometimes the parent could feel excluded and at other times the child could accuse the parent of nagging.

One way teamwork was experienced is by the parent and child focusing on different areas of the choice process. This echoes Park's (1982) notion of task specialisation. Nørgaard and Brunsø's (2011) study (section 2.2.5) illustrates this in the context of food, where health considerations are left to parents. In the HE context, Haywood and Molesworth (2010) also find examples of tasks being shared and, as discussed in section 2.4.1, authors note different choice criteria between parent and child (e.g. Reay *et al.*, 2005). Part of a parent's role here could be seen as doing things for the child's benefit, in the hope that they

will subsequently appreciate it. Thus, parents' focus was: safety, accommodation, finance, dropout rates and employability, which then allowed the child to focus on areas such as the course, but also the social life. It was noteworthy that participants articulated this as teamwork ('*so yes we are a team*' and '*we're operation education*' (Jasmine)) and referred to asking '*parent type*' questions to show their different focus. However, it may be that the child does not see it like this, as s/he may not care about the parent's priorities. So it could be that at times it is teamwork, but at other times, it is more like two people working on a project separately, in parallel (perhaps with different aims and agendas and with different people leading it at different times), but with only one of them (the parent) actually wanting them to be a team and to discuss and work together. The child may be happy to get on with it themselves or just to forget about it altogether (leading to the parent having to remind and coerce them). However, it is important to note that participants described this experience as teamwork, even though it might not seem to be how teamwork is usually described or experienced.

This detail of the experiences of teamwork is not often foregrounded in the literature on choice and joint decisions. One of my contributions is to do this, by exploring the idea of people working together, as well as periods of working independently. Importantly it also considers the idea that one person is trying to keep the team together and will compromise to do so. It is illustrated by participants like Mary who struggle to get their child to talk and share their thoughts, or participants like Clare and Lizzie who struggle to get their child more involved in the process. It reinforces the idea of the lengths that parents are prepared to go to in order to maintain a relationship with their child and to be involved, and not to alienate or upset the child.

5.3.3   Parenting as relationship maintenance

The efforts that parents put in to maintain the relationship and avoid conflict have been discussed. Of course what is underlying and impacting on parents' attempts at having discussions and working as a team is that their child is growing up. So these choice experiences are partly about acknowledging a changing relationship. As discussed in the literature review (section 2.2.5), during adolescence there is the need for the adolescent to become more independent, but parents still want to feel listened to (Young *et al.*, 2001). The

struggles felt by parents to both encourage independence, but also to maintain some influence over their child were revealed in my findings (e.g. section 4.4.2). Parents are keen for the child to be involved in the choice process, but also want some input, as some are acutely aware that it is an important decision. The HE choice process is different to other choices parents will have made with their child, where they will have played a much bigger role, as this choice is about the next stage in the child's life. This is underlined by a sense of the child's growing autonomy, which can be experienced as an uncomfortable tension: '*It's quite difficult letting them go, isn't it*?' (Rachel). This is acknowledged by some participants in terms of the efforts being made to involve the child (however reluctant he or she is) and to ensure that the child is happy with the final choice. This is about parents still feeling responsible for the child despite his/her growing independence and about wanting to help make sure that the 'right' decision is made. Participants were also trying to help their child get accustomed to independence through measures such as '*adult training*' (Rachel). As discussed earlier (section 2.2.5), this impending separation creates conflicting emotions in parents (Hallden, 1991) and can result in frequent minor disagreements (Steinberg, 2001), hence the need for parents to work hard to try to maintain the relationship.

Although some participants did reveal lengthy discussions, in situations where the child was reluctant to engage with them, they made considerable efforts to initiate discussions and involve the child and to get them to share their views. This echoes Young *et al.* (2001) who note the importance of communications in maintaining relationships at this time of transition. Parents' efforts in trying to initiate conversations with reluctant adolescents result in experiences which are often tense. Chloe echoes this discomfort as she explains that negotiations change as the child matures:

> *It's also quite difficult to judge as a parent because obviously they're growing up as well and one minute an offer of help may be greeted with open arms, and another what you think is a similar offer of help might be treated with your head being bitten off and how dare you nag me about this, mum.*

This illustrates the fact that choice in the HE context is very much about parents having to change the way they negotiate and deal with the child over the long process, and about a changing relationship. This is also an example of

how her help is perceived as 'nagging' and of parents feeling uncomfortable and uncertain due to the different ways their comments are received as the relationship evolves. This inconsistency in adolescent behaviour further highlights the sense some participants had at times of 'walking on eggshells' and why for some the experience was stressful. These sorts of discussions add to the existing literature which, along with government policy, assumes a logical process and largely ignores the emotional and relational aspects which formed such an important part of participants' experiences.

5.3.3.1   Reflections on parenting

As parents experience this choice process, there is also a sense for some of reflecting on their parenting. Given the timing of this choice, it is clearly an opportunity to step back and also to look ahead in terms of this relationship. Part of this process involves considering themselves as parents and what they and their child have achieved together (or what they have achieved through their child). Some of the emotions that this reflection engenders are discussed in the third section and could be a mixture of pride, regret and disappointment.

There is some evidence of participants being keenly aware that their child should be making the decisions and being more independent. For example, Clare responds to a question about how her son found out about courses by saying '*I'm afraid that I would have to say that I'm the researcher...*' When asked more about it and why she is '*afraid*', she says '*Well only because I suppose you sort of hope that your children will do it themselves...*' Other parents said that '*we*' made decisions, but then amended it when questioned, to say that it was the child. Davis (1976) supports this, finding that some participants present more socially desirable responses, stating who they feel should make a decision rather than who actually did. Thus, participants are conscious of acceptable norms and of how they should be parenting, such as a move by middle class parents away from deciding for the child to "at least, a semblance of young people making their own minds up" (Reay *et al.*, 2005:66; Pugsley, 1998). Jasmine and Rachel clearly illustrate this tension between trying to stand back, but at the same time wanting to be involved and help. Reay *et al.* (2005:70) reinforce this reminding us that "parental transcripts cannot be read too literally. They require a degree of delving and decoding." Their study finds differences between how a mother and son each describe the

same HE choice process, noting "how opaque and multi-layered family dynamics in relation to higher education choice can be" (p.69).

As discussed, Spiro (1983:398) also acknowledges that influencing behaviour might be "under-reported". Parents may also underestimate their influence, as some of their views are implicit. Contento *et al.* (2006:580) describe this as "negotiation that was implicit" due to similar values which have grown up within the family over time. This also echoes literature on HE choice (section 2.4.2.3) which refers to influence and involvement (e.g. Brook, 2004), noting the "implicit assumptions" in families (Pugsley, 1998:74). So that even when participants try not to state their views or preferences outright, (for example Alison describes refusing to say '*if I was you...*'), given the closeness of the family relationships, the child would probably be aware of them. Rachel also illustrates this by mentioning the need to '*really try and rein that in...*' as she and her husband try hard not to express their own university preferences to their child, but allow her to make up her own mind.

This section has looked at the HE choice process through the lens of relationships, in this context between parent and child. It has found that the predominant experiences within parenting are conflict avoidance, teamwork, and relationship maintenance at a transitional time. Involvement will now be explored.

5.4   Involvement category

(<u>Findings theme:</u> Approach to involvement – High or Low).

5.4.1   Introduction

In keeping with the overarching narrative of choice being inextricably linked to relationships, this second section now looks at this in terms of parental experiences related to their approach to involvement. It encompasses how it feels to work with someone over a protracted period during which time for both parties the level and type of involvement varies. Overall participants' involvement is a direct reflection on their relationship with and knowledge of their child. Thus, they put in heavy involvement if they feel that the child needs to be coerced into managing the choice process and are denied the level of

involvement they would like by a child who is fiercely independent or very uncommunicative (this is discussed more fully later).

My contribution is thus to examine this experience of involvement in the choice process through the lens of relationships to show their impact and to show that people's experiences cannot be simply categorised by class, gender or ethnicity, as some literature suggests (sections 2.4.2.2 and 2.4.4). These experiences are much more nuanced, given the complexities of these relationships and of the individuals concerned. This analytical category will be structured around: the effort parents put in and how much of that is about relationship maintenance and an examination of how this involvement was experienced, including how this is moderated by the child.

5.4.2   Approach to involvement – effort linked to managing the relationship

One of the things which came through most strongly from participants is the effort that they put in during this process. A lot of their experience was about effort and commitment, but this went beyond practical tasks such as gathering information, to include putting effort into dealing with the child and working to maintain the relationship. This overlaps with the earlier discussions of 'persuasion' and 'compromise' (section 5.3.1). This is because some of this effort involves trying to negotiate with the child, including getting him or her to talk when they were uncommunicative; holding back and not expressing their views; and persuading him/her to engage with the process when they did not want to and at times taking on more responsibility for it. Thus, parents' experience of involvement is directly affected by working with the child.

This notion of the hard work and effort that parents put in is partly supported by the literature (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Pugsley, 1998 – section 2.4.2.3); however, the effort in their studies was focussed on practical tasks such as collecting information. By contrast, my study found that this effort was not always about getting deeply involved in the specifics of course or university selection. However, what was noticeable from nearly all participants regardless of their level of involvement were the efforts they made to engage with the child. This included their acceptance of having to work with him/her and do things his/her way, and of putting up with being excluded or ignored, and despite all their efforts, being prepared to compromise and go along with the child's

choice, or having to stand back and watch the child decide. Some parents, such as Clare, did get heavily involved with the practical aspects of the choice process such as collecting information, taking their child to Open Days and helping with the Personal Statement; others initiated thinking about going to university. This is what Ball *et al*. (1999:217) describe as the "'hands on' choice-work" part of it, but participants' efforts went beyond this and were often equally or even mainly about relationship maintenance.

Despite all this effort, there was a sense of uncomplaining obligation (only one participant confessed to finding the experience "*tedious*", although some did mention the time and money that they had spent). Overall, it seemed to be experienced as part of parenting – being a 'good parent' and doing your bit for your child; something you had to do. This might echo popular discourses, as discussed in Chapter 1 (section 1.2), which emphasise the importance of parents "taking responsibility for their child's educational future" (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995:21) by making 'good' choices and being involved in the process.

5.4.3 Experiences of involvement – impact of the relationship with the child

5.4.3.1 Level of involvement

The type and level of involvement participants experienced ranged from very high to less involvement and standing back. Heavy involvement was about feeling in control, being thorough and putting in much effort, or about persuasion and a feeling of leading the child. Whereas, less involved participants were largely content to leave most of the choices to the child, expressing their trust; although a few were unhappy with being less involved.

Thus, maintaining, or attempting to maintain, the relationship with the child is achieved through many different ways and levels of being involved (section 4.5). There was variety both in terms of different levels of involvement ranging from high to low, but also differences within how high or low involvement was experienced. What is important to note though is that one of the main things which moderates parents' involvement in the process is the relationship with their child and this is partly influenced by the personalities of each and by parents' knowledge of their child. My analysis of Natalie and Mary illustrates this point, as both have to accept their child's reluctance to engage with them

at times (see section 4.4.1). Other parents who were concerned that their child would not engage with the process, do it properly, or hit the deadlines, had to become heavily involved (Clare, Sarah and Lizzie). Whereas still others wanted to get more involved, but their child was very independent and largely rejected their involvement (Wendy). This echoes the literature, which finds that some students do not want their parents too involved; that involvement can be read as intrusion and that "the transition to higher education is a process of developing some autonomy" (Reay *et al.*, 2005:69) which impacts on how adolescents feel about parental involvement.

As discussed earlier, one way of avoiding conflict might be to either accept that you have to stand back from the process completely and have little involvement, or conversely take over certain parts of it, so that they get done. Thus, experiences of both high and low involvement are influenced by the child and the nature of the relationship.

During this choice process, parents are acknowledging their child's growing independence and that the relationship between them is being transformed; so that, as discussed, this experience is about trying to maintain a relationship at a time of change. This also impacts on their involvement because it influences their perceptions of their role. This includes whether they feel that this is to get the best possible outcome for their child ('right' choice for him/her), or alternatively and taking into account their child's increasing maturity, to stand back to give the child the skills s/he needs to become more independent and learn how to make choices for themselves. This tension is illustrated well by Rachel who is aware of this balance, as she both tries to stand back, but also wants to help her child and be closely involved.

5.4.3.2   Type of involvement

The relationship with the child, led to different types of parental involvement. This ranged from parents who were heavily involved; to those who stood back and felt that they were there simply to 'support and encourage' their child with the choices s/he made along the way. This was a phrase which recurred throughout the interviews and will be discussed later. However for many parents the experience of involvement was quite mixed and the types of involvement varied. There were times when they were leading it and times when it was the child; resulting in a variety of emotions. This was discussed in

section 5.3.2, where it was noted too that their involvement could focus on different things. The experiences that they describe and the level and type of involvement that they had were moderated by the relationship with their child.

Parents did not discuss with me the details of the actual process in as much depth as the literature might suggest (Allen, 2002), for example by recounting conversations with the child during which they weighed up alternative courses or universities. Indeed there were examples of a much more pragmatic approach with Clare describing the process of narrowing down choices as a '*nightmare*' and Rachel describing it as '*a little bit of a muddle*'. Discussions tended to be predominantly about the relationship with the child, not the choices themselves.

Where parents were heavily involved, one of the main reasons for this was that without it they felt that their child would not hit the deadlines or get on with it. Thus, reasons for their involvement were again pragmatic and here again relate to their knowledge of, and relationship with, their child. So that these parents are getting heavily involved when they feel they have to, and when the child will allow it; reflecting the changing relationship and the transition to adulthood. This also echoes the earlier point that most of their efforts went into ensuring that the child engaged with the process, rather than them trying to get involved with the detail of the actual choices made. Much of the literature on HE choice misses the complexities and nuances of this relationship perspective and tends to simplify parental behaviour by trying to categorise it by class, gender and/or ethnicity. My study makes an important contribution here.

Nor did my study reveal a simple relationship between participants' HE experience and their level of involvement. In the literature, this is often one of the main reasons given for differing parental involvement (Pugsley, 1998). It is also worth noting that some of the activities, such as attending Open Days, which is one way Brooks' categorises levels of involvement by her participants, were constrained by the child in my study, again showing the importance of considering this relationship. Participants often found that they did not have the level of involvement with which they felt comfortable and/or wanted, with some having to get more involved and some being less involved than they would have liked. This was due to their child and their relationship with him/her which they strived to manage, rather than their education level. For

example, parents such as Jasmine who has '*never even looked round a university*' prior to this experience, was keen to attend all her son's university visits and indeed to take a real interest in directing his behaviour. Reasons for parents' level of involvement were complex, including how much help the child got from the school; their willingness to allow parental involvement; how independent they were and the personalities of each.

As discussed earlier in this section, almost all my participants used the phrase '<u>support and encourage</u>' in one form or another to describe their involvement and what they felt they provided during this choice process. This phrase is used in Ball *et al.*'s study (2002b), where it is linked to 'contingent choosers' who typically have no previous HE experience and Reay *et al.*'s study (2005: 68) where working class participants mainly provide "emotional engagement …and support", as it is felt to be all they can provide. However, in my study, this was a very common sentiment and regardless of participants' prior educational experiences and of what other help they provided, they felt that they offered, or at least tried to offer, this. Offering someone 'support and encouragement' is an important way of trying to maintain a relationship and so in my study it was not limited to parents with certain types of education.

Thus, my study shows that the choice process becomes one of negotiation and managing the relationship with the child to try to avoid conflict, as s/he in many cases moderates and mediates the parents' experiences of involvement. Parents' efforts to maintain this relationship and to keep it stable during a period of flux result in them expending considerable efforts to work with the child, even if at times it means that they are more or less involved in the process than they would like to be. Thus, theoretical notions of rational choice as well as class or gender based typologies are inadequate to explain this sort of process and the experiences it generates. My study with its focus on relationships can make an important contribution to the literature, which rarely foregrounds this important dimension, through its lens of parental experiences.

I will now examine the final category 'emotions'.

5.5 Emotion category

(<u>4 main emotions</u>: Worry; Frustration; Pride and Anticipation of the child's departure).

5.5.1 Introduction

Continuing to explore the meta-narrative of choice and relationships, this section explores 'Emotions'. Its main contribution is to look at the emotions experienced when working with someone else. These experiences of mixed emotions, and of having to curtail or suppress emotions to maintain a relationship, are areas which do not feature prominently in the existing choice literature.

The literature on emotions in consumption and choice experiences (section 2.1.6.1), including with regard to education, focuses mainly on individuals making a choice, (e.g. Ruth *et al.*, 2002), not on the emotions people experience when making a choice with (and for) someone else, where issues of conflict avoidance and relationship maintenance play a role. There is also little on how emotions are experienced over a long decision-making process, including how they can co-exist (Babin *et al.*, 1998). Limitations of this literature strand have been discussed (section 2.1.6.1) and include that the main focus seems to be on trying to develop typologies of emotion and to predict a link between emotions and behaviour, often using quantitative approaches, and focused on expected rather than actual emotions (e.g. McGill and Anand, 1989).

Whilst the emotions described here derive from this particular context (HE choice), it may be that in any significant, joint decision which is made over a period of time and with somebody else, such as a couple buying a house, some of these emotional experiences will resonate.

This analytical category will be structured around two overlapping areas: the intra-relationship between people's emotions, and a discussion of the predominant emotional experiences.

5.5.2   Intra-relationship between parent and child's emotions

The main aspect to consider in this section and one which links to the overall narrative of choice and relationships is that participants were dealing with the child's emotions and also with emotions triggered by working with someone else over a long choice process. Thus, the parent and child's emotions are inextricably interlinked and the nature of this relationship directly impacts on the emotions experienced and so it is through this lens that emotions need to be explored. Therefore, although some of the emotions experienced are about the participants themselves (self) and their own feelings (e.g. guilt or regret), others relate more directly to their feelings for/with the child and their interactions with him/her (e.g. frustration or pride) and so are 'other directed' or interpersonal (Laros and Steenkamp, 2005). It is noteworthy, that all four of the main emotions are either interpersonal or have this element. For example, pride can be both in the child, but also in themselves as parents and in this latter case, the pride derives directly from the relationship with their child. Likewise, anticipation of the child's departure is about both the child and the parents themselves, as they anticipate their new relationship: '*It's a moment when you have to step back from them and they're starting their adult life*' (Rachel).

5.5.2.1   Influence of past experiences on emotions

As parents work with their child over this long process, what might be causing or contributing to some of the emotions is their reflections on their own experiences of being parented and leaving home. Additionally, their knowledge of and relationship with their child and their own experiences of education and HE, including going through this process with an older child, may all be playing a role. This is about the relationship between this experience and their prior experiences and of how they parent compared to how they were parented and the emotions that this generates. For example, the sense of impending loss and separation may be influencing their negotiation strategy, leading to an emphasis on maintaining the relationship and avoiding conflict. The literature suggests that this kind of knowledge and experience can act as an "important antecedent of emotional processing" (Johnson and Stewart, 2005:12).

Some participants were keen to show that they would be trying to parent differently to how they were parented when it came to decisions relating to the child's future. Mark describes his father's attempts at organising his career:

> *My father said I was going to join the Navy as soon as I left school. I never did and part of me wishes I did join the Navy but I think because of my father saying you will join the Navy I resisted and didn't go...*

Tina tells a similar story of how her mother tried to fix her up with a job "*Right, she said, well I've found one...you start Monday*" which again she rejected. So this links back to the idea of parents reflecting on their own parenting and on their relationship with their child (discussed in section 5.3.3.1), but it is extended here to include reflections on similarities and differences with their own experiences of both being parented and of leaving home.

5.5.2.2   Emotional support and curtailing emotions

Some participants described the emotional support they provided for their child, as they discussed how their child felt at various points during the process, so that they have to deal not only with their own emotions, but also those of their child. Instances to illustrate this include the child feeling nervous or anxious at an Open Day, or starting to worry about leaving home. The following example is of a mother having to calm down her daughter after one of the interview tests goes badly: *'You could see she was almost in tears. She said I've just messed that up completely...'* (Natalie). She then describes how she tries to reassure her daughter *'But I think she was grateful for the fact that I was there and I could calm her down...'* and afterwards she reflects that the main thing she provided during the whole choice process was this sort of *'moral support'*. This echoes the earlier discussion of support and encouragement (section 5.4.3.2).

Lizzie's whole HE choice experience is underpinned by her concerns about her son possibly being '*mildly depressed*', which impacts on how she responds to him and also makes it a very emotional process for her. Thus, again parents have to be careful about what they do and say and hide their own concerns, so as not to make a child any more nervous or add to their stress and to reassure him/her, however they might be feeling themselves. Parents have to respond to and deal with their child's emotions and this entails moderating their own

emotional responses. Rachel describes how she tries not to increase the pressure on her daughter, by showing excitement at one prestigious university '*you can talk to them too much about it and put them under more pressure than they need.*' Thus it is not only negative emotions that parents have to be careful of expressing. Once again this illustrates the importance of context, emotions and relationships to this choice experience.

Lizzie also describes feeling that she is absorbing most of the emotional stress during the process, whereas her son appears to be less concerned:

> *Because actually us mums tend to take it up for them and I still haven't got it right because I'm still stressed. But when I ...said, right, I mean actually this is your thing and I'm getting myself in a right stress...*

Thus, parents have to be calm when the child is nervous, positive when s/he is discouraged, hide their excitement to avoid adding any pressure and be firm when s/he is procrastinating. They may also at times do most of the worrying or soak up the tension when the child seems more laidback. Sometimes they feel that in order to avoid conflict and to try to maintain this relationship that they have no choice but to curtail or suppress their emotions. Thus, they hold back any anger or irritation, and hide their worries: so that just as they cannot always say what they think, they cannot always express their feelings either. There is little in the choice literature, including in the HE context, which describes how emotions are experienced during a joint process (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006) where relationships play a key role and generate emotions. However, the need to maintain the relationship means that whilst emotions may be experienced strongly, they may also need to be suppressed.

5.5.3   Examining emotions experienced during this process

In order to examine this experience from an emotional perspective, this section is further sub-divided into: the range of emotions experienced; focus on negative emotions and anxiety; and the intensity of emotions.

5.5.3.1   Range of emotions experienced, including simultaneously

Over such a long period as the HE choice process, and given that this process is carried out by people in a close relationship working together, it might be expected that they experience a variety of emotions. As discussed (section

2.1.6.1.), Babin *et al.* (1998) support this idea, noting that a range of both positive and negative emotions can be experienced, including simultaneously. Participants tended to experience several emotions (Table 2), although some only experienced one emotion strongly and some talked more about their emotions than others (discussed later). This emotional perspective is rarely foregrounded in the choice literature, nor is it taken into consideration by government polices (see section 1.4).

It is also noteworthy that some of these emotions were experienced simultaneously and thus the experience is in part one of a changing set of emotions and the emotional experience has contrasts within it. The combination of emotions varied so that participants' experiences were more complex and nuanced than the literature suggests. However, there was no pattern to their grouping, and emotions existed for people in unique combinations. The four main emotions could be experienced alone or in combination either with each other or with other emotions. Thus any focus in the literature on either a single emotion or the assumption of a simple grouping of emotions in order to predict behaviour, risks missing the subtle interactions between them. For example, Wendy describes her mixed and contrasting emotions at her son's plans: '*I'm quite happy for him to stay at home. I'm just worried about the journey for him that's all...*' and Lizzie sums up her whole experience of university choice as both '*fun and tense'.*

5.5.3.2   Negative emotions (including anxiety)

Although a range of emotions were experienced (see Table 2), the majority of them were negative: (worry, guilt, regret, frustration, resigned, envy and tension/stress) with fewer being positive (pride, trust, being laidback, having fun), and one being either positive or negative (anticipation of the child's departure). For some participants the main emotions experienced are all or mainly negative; for a small group they are all or mainly positive and the rest are a mixture; again showing that emotions can co-exist. It is interesting to note that this experience is predominantly negative, despite the fact that participants seemed to have a good relationship with their child on the whole, describing him/her in mainly positive terms. However, reasons for the predominantly negative emotions include that, as discussed earlier (section 2.2.5) this period is a key one in the child/parent relationship, as it is partly about the changing nature of this relationship (Young *et al.*, 2001) and these

changes can be stressful. This is illustrated by the subthemes 'Discussion and negotiation' and 'Balance and control' (sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2). It is also because the period of HE choice coincides with the child being under pressure academically to complete his/her 'A' levels and of course these exam results directly affect this choice. This is all combined with the added potential for conflict where people work together to make choices (Sheth, 1974). Also some of the negative emotions relate to anxiety (discussed in the next section) which is mainly about the future, so that not all negative emotions relate to the present. Some anxieties relating to the future may also be about the relationship and how it will change. It can also be noted that the literature supports a predominance of negative emotions (Huang, 2001).

<u>Anxiety</u>

With regard to the four main emotions experienced in my study, anxiety (or worry) is the only one which is discussed in any detail in the choice literature. Anxiety was experienced by participants often quite strongly and this could be anxiety about a range of things. These included how the child would cope with university and living away from home; with the increased debt due to higher tuition fees, and whether the child would get a job or not in the current recession – a sense of an uncertain future, linking to notions of ontological security (Giddens, 1991 – see section 2.1.3).   For all but the participants most confident of their child's abilities, the choice experience was also tinged with concerns about whether the child would achieve the results needed and about whether s/he had made the 'right' choices. This was due to the number of courses available, the complexity of the application process and to difficulties in dealing with the child which led to several participants feeling that mistakes had been made and to some regret at the way it had gone. Thus, again we see that the relationship with the child and the experience of working with him/her are contributing to particular emotions. Zeelenberg (1999:102) notes that people worry more about the consequences of options of "roughly equal attractiveness" and to some extent many HE courses and universities could be perceived as similar, particularly those on the child's short list, and by people with little direct HE experience: '*I pretty much think that degrees are much of a muchness if you choose psychology...*' (Wendy).

However, participants' anxiety also derived from a lack of control which often came from a feeling of not being listened to and not being involved in the

process and again this is a reflection on the relationship between parent and child and the desire by parents to maintain it. Pham (2004:363) supports this, linking causes of anxiety typically with situations that are "uncertain and beyond control". Two anxious participants (Mary and Wendy) illustrate this, as they wish that their child had made a lower risk choice. This is one approach anxious people may take according to Pham (2004) (see section 2.1.6.1), but in both cases, participants' concerns were ignored by their child and these lower risk choices were not made. Thus, my findings show that in choices made with (and for) other people, there often has to be compromise and outcomes cannot simply be predicted on the basis of one party's emotions, as the literature would suggest.

Discussing negative emotions more generally, Bagozzi *et al.* (1999:198) note that they lead to "systematic processing" (although this is a complex area – see section 2.1.6.1). By contrast, again, for my participants any more thorough decision-making that they may have wanted to engage in would have been moderated and mediated by their relationship with the child. Thus, there is no obvious link between negative emotions and a heavier approach to involvement. In fact, just as with anxiety, some of the negative emotions experienced were caused by a lack of involvement and less opportunity to engage in the process than they would like. So the relationship between parent and child is again moderating any link between emotion and behaviour. Indeed if there was anything that would help to predict behaviour based on emotions in joint decision-making, it would be the nature of the relationship between the parties. Given that this relationship is highly personalised and nuanced, particularly in this context where it is evolving, this is clearly not possible.

5.5.3.3   Emotional intensity and emotions experienced temporally

When accounting for their emotional experiences, some participants described a particular emotion or emotional incident with visceral intensity (e.g. Tina and her '*dread*' at her son's departure and Lizzie saying that '*parents go through hell*' during the HE choice process and who describes how she burst into tears). Again these emotional experiences are not prominent in much of the choice literature and many studies focus on choice at one particular moment, ignoring the emotional experiences during a lengthy, fluid process. Perhaps the intensity of emotions some participants experienced relates to their reflections on the child's departure and the inevitable changes to their relationship. In

many cases the child would be living away from home and embarking on a new phase in their life and this was clearly in the minds of some (see findings section 4.6.1 'anticipation of child's departure'). Huang (2001) notes that some emotions are linked to stronger feelings, and are more intense.

Another way of unpacking the emotional experiences over a long period of time and in the context of a close relationship is to consider them from a temporal perspective, relating to the present, the past, or anticipating the future. With regard to time and the four main emotions, pride is mainly about the past, but could also be about the future; frustration is about the present; and worry and anticipation of the child's departure are both mainly about the future.   So whilst these emotions are experienced in the present, some of them are also about the future. Clearly in the context of HE choice and the child's anticipated departure, some focus on the future is to be expected. Nevertheless, despite relating to the future, these emotions are what Pham (2004:364) terms "genuinely experienced feelings" albeit about the future, which he contrasts with "mere affective beliefs", saying that the former are experienced much more intensely (see section 2.1.6.1).

It should also be noted that some participants talked more about their emotions than others – for some, e.g. Lizzie, it was an important part of her experience, for others, their emotions played a lesser role, for example Megan (who mainly experienced only one emotion, and that was positive – pride). This could again be about how people present and what they disclose (section 5.3.3.1). So Megan could be conforming to the theory that people want to give rational rather than emotional reasons (Elliott, 1998). Thus, none of her experience was described in negative terms, and emotion played little part in her description of the process; or it could be just because her experience had gone smoothly and her son's achievements had exceeded expectations. However, another point of contribution my work makes is that we cannot assume that people will respond emotionally to particular situations, or to the same degree, or share the same emotions. The subtlety and nuances of how emotions are experienced, including simultaneously, when people in a close relationship are working together and reacting to and dealing with each other's emotions, particularly over a long period of time, does not feature widely in the choice literature. Working with other people can lead to strong emotions, but these may have to be suppressed or curtailed in order to maintain the

relationship. My study shows the need to consider these intra-personal relationships in further studies of emotions. This might well benefit from being examined longitudinally, as it is clear that over the HE choice process emotions and relationships change, as both parties adjust to the child's growing independence and parents start to relinquish some control. This changing pattern of emotions might occur in other contexts.

5.6   Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the three analytical categories and explored them through the overarching narrative of intra-relational choice. It has shown how relationships, and the desire to maintain this relationship, impact on these areas and that the choice literature often misses the detailed nuances of these experiences. Choice is shown to be complex and deeply embedded within people's daily lives, rather than a logical, calculative process of utility maximisation as some choice literature suggests (Meyer and Kahn, 1991).

Chapter 6:   **Conclusion**

The aim of my study was to explore parents' accounts of their experiences and involvement in the process leading up to the choice of where and what their child will study at HE. This chapter consists of four sections: an overview of how my findings make a contribution to the literature on choice and decision-making within marketing and consumer behaviour (in an educational context); a brief review of the areas from prior literature I was expecting to find; consideration of the implications of my study for HEIs and schools; and a review of my research including how to take this study forward.

6.1   My aim, objectives and contribution to the existing choice literature

6.1.1   Meeting the aim and my main contribution

The main finding from this study relates to relationships and the idea of intra-relational choice and how this is experienced. This includes the role of emotions and the notion of levels and types of involvement. This makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature in this academic area. For example, prior literature in the area of student HE choice might suggest that there would be more focus on the actual choice process from participants (such as choice factors and/or sources of information, Maringe, 2006; Briggs, 2006), but this was much less important to participants than managing and maintaining the relationship with their child. They accounted for their experiences of the HE choice process by detailing long conversations with their child, recounting stories of how they tried to engage their child in the process and of the tactics they used and the efforts they made. They discussed how they felt at different points along the way and illustrated how their relationship with their child influenced and impacted the process, and how this relationship was changing. These sorts of detailed discussions are not the focus of much of the existing literature, which tends to privilege individual choice (section 2.1.3) and thus my main contribution to this literature stream is the rich detail relating to the role of relationships and how the choice process is experienced. I found experiences of choice in the context of HE to be intrapersonal and

collective, about negotiation, compromise and conflict avoidance and the emotions that these create.

My findings also show that existing literature on parental involvement in HE choice (e.g. David *et al.*, 2003) takes too narrow a view of parents by trying to typologise them and their behaviour. It thus misses the complexities, nuances and messiness of people's lives and relationships, which my study's entry point (parents accounting for their experiences) foregrounds. This is not of course to question the value of these studies, but simply to offer an additional perspective; an alternative but equally valid way of viewing this choice process through a different lens – the meaning parents attribute to these experiences. My study also allows a focus on the deeply situated nature of this choice experience, which cannot be separated from other aspects of the interplay between parent and adolescent taking place at this time.

This main finding, relating to the role of relationships and the idea of choice as a form of social negotiation, is of interest because many choices have an intrapersonal element: they are not purely individual. For example, even when making a straightforward choice (such as buying an item of clothing) we might be influenced by the opinion of people we are close to and thus by what we feel that this choice says about us and how it contributes to our identity creation (Gabriel and Lang, 1999). We are intersubjective beings and many of our choices are constructed in response to others. Although my research is specific to a particular context and a particular combination of people (parent and child), it has relevance for choices in other contexts, particularly those made by more than one person and over an extended period and where intra–relational aspects are important to the experience.

With specific regard to choice and the idea of 'rational' choice, my thesis explores the idea that choices are not 'irrational', but they are personal and contextual, linking to Allen's (2002) FLAG concept (section 2.1.6.3). So that in situations like this, where two or more people are choosing together, it may be entirely 'rational' for one party to compromise if they cannot succeed by being persuasive. This would be done in order to preserve the relationship and to avoid conflict. However, the Literature Review has demonstrated that some literature does not acknowledge these nuances and variations in what might constitute 'rational' choice (section 2.1.2 e.g. 'homo economicus', Hargreaves Heap *et al.*, 1999; Bettman *et al.*, 1991). It assumes a simple cognitive process

and does not recognise how multi-dimensional choice processes can be. This literature also tends to simplify the process by ignoring the relational and emotional aspects, which were such an important part of participants' experiences. My study does not reject rational choice, but rather adds to our understanding of it by considering these aspects. However, it does reject the idea that there is one single, accepted, unified form of rationality, so that in any given situation, there would be only one rational choice that someone could make. Thus, what rational choice means for real people in terms of their lived experiences and in a particular context needs to be unpacked, and my thesis has done this.

6.1.2   Meeting the objectives

I shall now briefly summarise the main ways that parents accounted for their experiences, structured around each objective. My initial objectives focussed on areas I had expected to be significant (section 6.2), such as service marketing. They were then modified to more closely align with the way the thesis evolved over time. The depth, detail and richness to support these summaries, including lengthy quotations illustrating key themes, has already been presented in earlier chapters (particularly Chapter 4). The contributions I can make to the literature have likewise already been discussed, but some of the most important ones are briefly highlighted here.

<u>Objective 1</u> To explore how parents account for their experiences of being involved in the HE choice process and what meaning they attribute to it; including what they think and feel during this process.

In summary, participants accounted for their experiences as parents, and not as consumers. They mainly discussed their relationship with their child (see objective 2) rather than details of the HE choice process in terms of course selection, for example. These experiences did not seem to have been influenced by whether participants had been to university themselves, or been through the process with an older child (see section on sample composition 3.4.3) but instead seemed to reflect the relationship with that particular child.

They also discussed how they felt. One of my contributions is to look at the subtlety and nuances of the range of emotions experienced with and in response to someone else, when working with someone over an extended

period, and when there is a desire to maintain a relationship, such that emotions sometimes have to be curtailed. In the same way that parents have to be careful about what they say, they also have to be careful about showing their feelings.

Objective 2 To explore choice and the decision-making process in a holistic way; taking into account the situated and extended nature of this process and that it is with and for someone else.

Considering this specific choice context holistically, my findings reveal that this choice process is better understood as part of parenting and its challenges, rather than as a logical decision-making process, as both government policies and some of the literature seem to assume. Conflict avoidance, teamwork and relationship maintenance form key parts of this experience and the fact that the relationship is going through a period of considerable change is of significance. Literature on choice and decision-making often focuses on it at only one point in time, thus ignoring the way that relationships and emotions evolve over a long choice process.

Some of the key areas from my study which do not feature prominently in the current choice literature include: the experience of the dynamics of teamwork in a situation where only one party is interested in keeping the team together and will compromise to do so; and the idea of choice as multi-layered, so that parents will prioritise certain choices and leave others to the child. However, of most significance for me were the details of the lengths that parents went to in order to avoid conflict with their child. This included being persuasive and the different ways that this is enacted, including the tactics they develop to try to initiate discussions (for example, taking advantage of car journeys and/or the presence of a visitor – see section 4.4.1). They presented fascinating accounts of these conversations and of how they drew on their knowledge of and experience with their child to decide which tactics to use. They were very accepting of their child and his/her personality and ways of behaving: '*she's not a child you can tell her what needs and has to be done*' (Natalie); '*you can't say anything sort of twice'* (Mary). They put much effort into the choice process, at times seeming to 'tiptoe' round their child. These efforts seem to be connected to the child's imminent departure and thus their determination to maintain a good relationship with him/her.

<u>Objective 3</u> To explore parents' experiences of the levels and types of involvement they have in this choice process.

Considering parents' approach to involvement, this was directly affected by their relationship with and knowledge of their child; such that the child mediated the amount of involvement that they either could, or felt that they needed to have. In all cases participants put in some effort, and again much of this effort was about maintaining the relationship. Parents' perceptions of their role also affected the type and level of involvement that they felt appropriate, with many describing it as to 'support and encourage', despite evidence at times of much heavier involvement. Their vivid accounts of the tensions they experienced echoes the discussion in Chapter 1 about parents' changing role and the dilemmas they face between both wanting the best for their child, but also wanting to encourage his/her independence: '*It's a moment when you have to stand back from them...*' (Rachel).

6.2   Areas from prior literature which I was expecting to find

In exploring this topic, I was expecting to find evidence of the following areas: the 'FLAG' ('Fits Like a Glove') concept (Allen, 2002); parents experiencing this as a form of 'service' choice (Eagle and Brennan, 2007); parents feeling like consumers (Williams, 2011 – section 1.2) and the impact of the recently increased tuition fees. The absence of these topics from participants' accounts, despite their presence in the literature, is of course worthy of note. These aspects were there for some participants, they were just not significant experiences and it is noteworthy that when they were not specifically addressed, participants did not raise or discuss them in much detail, as they were not significant in recalling and making sense of their experience (discussed further in 6.4).

<u>'FLAG'</u> – as discussed, (section 2.1.6.3) there is a widely cited literature stream, which explores the idea of FLAG in an HE context (Allen, 2002) which finds that choices are made on the basis of what 'feels right'. However, it was not widely evidenced in my study and it was thus not a salient experience; although there was one person who epitomised FLAG and experienced it strongly. The fact that within this small sample I found someone who did feel this, tells us

something important, i.e. that FLAG may not be widespread, but when it is experienced, it is a very intense experience.

Also of interest from this participant (and echoed by a few others) was a sense of the FLAG concept being extended beyond FLAG for the individual concerned to include FLAG for someone else. The sense that some parents, and one in particular, knew their child well enough to have a clear feeling that a particular institution was right for them. This seems to extend the concept of FLAG in an interesting direction, ('FLAG for someone else') which subsequent research might take forward and this could include other joint decision–making processes, such as between spouses. In which circumstances and what influences whether and how it is experienced in joint choice processes, would be interesting to investigate further.

There was also little sense of HE choice as a form of service marketing choice. There is a growing stream of literature which looks at student HE choice from this perspective (e.g. Ng and Forbes, 2009; Gruber *et al.*, 2010), but again, whilst there were some points which resonated with this literature, experiencing this process as a service marketing choice was not a significant experience. Linked to this, I also found less on choices made based on feelings and intuition than the service literature would suggest.

There was also less sense of parents feeling like 'consumers' and discussion of tuition fees than might be expected from the literature and media coverage (see Chapter 1). With regard to the former, whilst there was some evidence of this, it was not a significant experience. However, some parents did comment on university marketing materials, with reactions varying from those who thought it was important for universities to 'sell' themselves and be overt about their offerings, to those who were sceptical or hostile to it. Whilst this absence is another contribution, what is more significant is the fact that participants' predominant feeling was of being a parent and not a consumer. In the context of HE, where governments and HEIs might expect applicants and their parents to feel and behave like consumers with a consumer oriented transactional approach to choice (section 1.4), it is noteworthy that actually parents do *not* feel like consumers. These experiences are not predominantly consumer experiences, they are about intrapersonal relationships and the existing literature neglects this aspect of choice. This is my key finding and is an important contribution that my study can make. Thus, assumptions by

government (and possibly HEIs) that parents behave like consumers and choose 'logically' (i.e. collect a lot of information and weigh up alternatives) are dispelled if their primary response is as a parent not a consumer. Providing more information or encouraging families to 'shop around' for a particular course or HEI may be to fundamentally misunderstand this process and how it is experienced. It may be too that labelling people as consumers in other contexts, such as healthcare, is equally inappropriate.

With regard to tuition fees, on the whole parents seemed to be resigned to the increase. Nevertheless, contact time and access to facilities were mentioned in the context of increased fees and value for money. Also the overall costs of university and concerns about future employability were mentioned and seemed to contribute to some parents' anxieties. However, discussion of this topic was not a salient experience. There was no explicit mention of and little sense that the increased tuition fees had impacted on the types of course or universities chosen.

6.3   Implications of my study for HEIs and schools

As universities take a more marketing oriented approach to recruitment (discussed in section 1.1), one of the areas I wanted to explore was whether they overestimate the sort of choice processes that students and their parents engage in (Baldwin and James, 2000; Haywood, 2014), by assuming this is a detailed and logical process undertaken by 'consumers'. For example, my previous research (Haywood and Molesworth, 2010) revealed that decisions about HEIs were sometimes made by students on the basis of feelings gained during a quick visit to an institution and on courses based on media depictions of careers (Haywood *et al.*, 2011). As discussed in the Introduction (section 1.2), the increasing involvement of some types of parents in this choice process (e.g. Moorhead, 2009) may perhaps reassure institutions and the government that the 'right' factors are being taken into consideration (the idea of '*parent type*' questions from my findings). However, my study reveals that parents' relationship with their child is a much bigger influence on the choice process than might have been expected; such that for many parents maintaining this relationship actually takes precedence over making what they themselves feel to be a 'good' choice (Haywood, 2014) and that they are prepared to compromise.

It is also clear from my study that whilst some parents do have a different focus to their child (e.g. employment rates; contact time and finance), they are not always knowledgeable about HE, including about different types of courses, HEIs and the application process. Even those parents who had been to university themselves, found that things had changed and that it was all more complicated. There are more HEIs and courses now, which offer a wider range of subjects than in the 1970s and 80s when my participants would probably have studied (Haywood, 2014).

Whilst it was not the purpose of my study, some of the implications of the above sections are discussed below. A few practical suggestions for HEIs and schools to improve their marketing and communication can be found in Appendix H. They include making sure that Open Days are run efficiently and giving more consideration to their timing and being welcoming to both parents and prospective students, but not appearing too 'desperate' to recruit.

However, the issue with trying to provide HEIs and schools with recommendations is that my study reveals that the type and level of involvement that parents had and wanted varied, as it reflects their relationship with their child. Thus, HEIs and schools need to be aware of this and of the different roles that parents can and want to play in this process, and not make assumptions that, for example, they are all willingly and heavily involved, or conversely have no involvement or influence. Just as there is not one type of student, there is not one type of parent, nor one type of relationship. There is also not one level of involvement which is appropriate for them each to have, as the levels they have reflect their relationship. HEIs also need to consider how to target both prospective students and their parents, separately and together, including at Open Days and with messages which are relevant to each. Coughlan (2008) notes that US universities are increasingly focusing their efforts on targeting parents, but my findings suggest that both parties need to be targeted. Even parents who exhibited low levels of involvement often had one or two areas they focused on and/or they may have been involved at an early stage in helping to draw up a shortlist or in vetoing certain options (Lee and Beatty, 2002). Perhaps some of the budgets HEIs currently devote to enhancing the 'Student Experience' for existing students, should be diverted into focusing on gaining a better understanding of the recruitment process.

HEIs and schools should be aware of the importance of this relationship to parents and that undergoing this choice process can put considerable strain on it. They need to reflect on how they can reduce the tension and better support parents and to consider how they can help facilitate this nuanced relationship into becoming as productive as possible. One outcome could then be a child who feels that s/he has the right level of independence and that a parent who may have wanted more involvement feels that their child is in safe hands (in terms of both the school and university). One way of trying to reduce the intra-relational tension might be for schools or careers services to become more involved in working with the child. Clearly this has resource implications, but it would allow those parents who so desire to stand back from some aspects of the process whilst being reassured that their child is getting good advice. This would reduce some of the stress, without excluding parents completely.

6.4   Research method and extending this research

My particular research approach (unstructured interpretivist interviews informed by existential–phenomenology) resulted in unexpected findings and in the primary theme of parenting being foregrounded. This was in part a result of allowing participants to talk in–depth about what was important to them during the process and with a different more directive research approach this finding may not have come to light. Instead participants would have focussed much more on the choice process itself in detail, and on tuition fees and HEIs marketing, despite the fact that these were secondary to relationship issues. Thus, this research approach has resulted in findings which add a new perspective to the current literature. This idea of allowing participants to focus on areas of importance to them rather than the researcher reduces the effect of what Silverman (1998:8) terms "stories provoked by a researcher", where particular aspects of a topic assume importance, because they are introduced by the interviewer. Instead, my research approach allowed participants to decide what was significant for them.

However, there are a number of ways that this study could be taken further to allow in–depth investigation into the most significant finding from my thesis - intra–relational choice. There needs to be consideration of the best ways to study relationships during a choice process, this would contrast with the current main area of focus which is researching individual choice. For

example, future research into parental involvement in HE choice should be conducted longitudinally, as this would allow more exploration of how this relationship evolves, particularly given the significance of the timing of this choice for the relationship. It would also be useful to interview all members of the 'core' relationship to get their perspectives – here both parent and child and where appropriate both parents, including where they are divorced, and/or any step-parents. In other studies additional family members such as siblings or grandparents could also be interviewed. Ideally this would be done with all family members both together and separately. This is because whilst there are many benefits of family group interviews (Hamilton, 2009); Pugsley (1998) suggests that her results, showing unexpectedly high involvement from fathers, could be a result of researching the whole family together. Hamilton and Catterall (2006:1037) echo this, noting some "inhibiting effects" of family group interviews, and also that one family member sometimes acts as spokesperson. Participants should also be interviewed in their home, as this allows further insight into the family (Hamilton, 2009). This was not always achieved in my study, as participants were given the choice of location (Table 1). Hoover and Clark's (2003) family research takes this a stage further, by choosing interviewers who themselves represent different parts of a family unit (e.g. mother, daughter etc.) so that the research could be interpreted by people from a wider range of perspectives. Young *et al.* (1999; 2001) use an interesting multi-stage research technique which involves recording interactions between family members discussing the topic and then showing them the recording individually and asking them to discuss it. These ideas could prove fruitful ways of extending this project.

Given that this choice process was all about relationships, clearly it is more of a sensitive topic than was first envisaged, and parenting is something about which parents may feel defensive. So whilst it might have been assumed at the start that HE choice is about sources, factors and a process, here it has been revealed to be much more about a relationship. As discussed, this has implications for HEIs and governments including in terms of how they may want to interact with parents, as they are actually communicating about parenting, not just about choosing, so this needs to be handled sensitively.

6.5   Final thoughts and reflections.

Final reflections on the research process

I have discussed the limitations of existential phenomenology in section 3.9.2 and how I tried to overcome them; limitations which were both methodological, but also in terms of the method itself and my experiences of conducting this method in practice. These limitations include the fact that whilst reflecting on their experiences participants may be rationalising or idealising them and also the difficulties I experienced at times in keeping the focus on participants' experiences and not those of their child, nor their own opinions on HE, nor their explanations or motivations. I also found it difficult at times not to ask 'why' and I had to deal with being close to the experience (discussed in the next paragraph). I was also concerned about ensuring that I elicited the meanings that participants attributed to these experiences and I reflected on whether and how that might be different to 'mere' descriptions of these experiences. I found that I needed to modify the approach to interviewing as one of my pilot interviews and the first actual interview did not give me the depth or focus that I was looking for (see section 3.5.3 for a fuller discussion).

As discussed, the topic area turned out to be more sensitive than I had expected, as it was about relationships not just a choice process and this also necessitated changes. I thus adapted the interviews by inserting more prompts than is usual in phenomenological interviewing and also by revealing details of myself and my own experiences to generate more of a conversation (see section 3.5.1) and to try to create a bond with participants. My closeness to the experience affords both advantages and disadvantages. It necessitated having to work hard to try not to influence participants by my responses to their comments and stories during the interviews (discussed more fully in section 3.9.2). I also had to ensure that I included the views of all participants, not just those who I agreed with most or who were most articulate (for more details on how the findings were interpreted see sections 4.1, 4.2 and 5.1 and for how quotes were chosen see section 4.3). I also added a question early on about the child. This was a pragmatic approach in response to my experiences. Consequently, I describe my approach as 'informed by phenomenology' and this was not what I set out to do. Nevertheless, despite the problems I had in using this method in a more methodologically pure way,

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I am pleased with participants' rich detailed descriptions, as they have allowed me to make an important contribution to the academic area of choice and decision-making through my main finding (the importance of the relational aspect to choice); a finding which was unexpected.

It also has to be acknowledged that the findings remain my own interpretation of participants' experiences, and indeed of their interpretations of their experiences, not the experiences themselves. There is always the question of how far researchers can capture anyone's actual lived experience. Thus, despite my attempt to privilege participants' own words by dedicating much of Chapter 4 to them, I am still only presenting these findings from my own perspective (my own horizon of interpretation (Gadamer, 1977)). The choices I have made in terms of what to include reflect the prism of my own experiences, perspectives and prior understanding of this topic, and how this shapes what is valued in this work, which is part of the essence of highly interpretivist consumer research. This is despite my attempts at bracketing, which can only ever be partial (see section 3.9 and Appendix E – Reflexive Statement), but which nevertheless, demonstrate my efforts to become a more reflexive research practitioner.

Final thoughts

Thus, in summary my findings are that the HE choice process is all about the relationship between parent and child and from the parental perspective it is about working to maintain this relationship at a critical juncture. Parents also discuss the emotions that this process causes and the variations in the levels and types of their involvement. The detailed findings have revealed how parents try to avoid conflict through persuasion, how they work as a team and how they will compromise if necessary on the final choice. They experience this process as parents, not as consumers. This makes a contribution to the literature on choice and decision-making as this relational dimension is under-researched. It also contributes specifically to the literature on HE choice and parental involvement, by offering a different perspective through its methodological approach and focus – parents accounting for their experiences. These findings matter because government policies, including the White Paper, are predicated on the basis that HE choice is a rational consumer choice (BIS, 2011; Matthews, 2014) and thus, for example, that providing more information for prospective students and their parents will be helpful and perhaps too that

parental involvement leads to a more rigorous process. My study does not support these views. HEIs too need to consider more carefully the relational dimension to this choice and consider how they can best work with each party, rather than making assumptions about how each behaves, or should behave.

Appendices

A. Letter from school to recruit parents.

B. Participant Information Sheet.

C. Interview discussion guide.

D. Participants' profiles – listed alphabetically.

E. My reflexive statement.

F. Blank consent form.

G. Ethics approval email from University of Southampton.

H. Tactical Advice for Schools and HEIs from findings.

I. One full transcript ('Jasmine').

Appendix A

Letter from School to recruit participants

(Please note that it was on headed paper.)

Dear   ,

Xxxxxxx School are supporting the work of a Doctoral Research student from the University of Southampton, Helen Haywood. Helen's research is focused on building a better understanding of the process of University applications from a parent's perspective.   Helen is interested to know how parents like you feel and what you think about the involvement you have had in your child's decision about going to university. Helen also hopes to explore how people make choices and decisions. The information collected will be kept strictly confidential and the findings will be anonymised. We have written to the parents of 20 students asking if they would be willing to participate in this research.

The research is based upon an interview with parents which will last about an hour. Helen would be happy to come to your home at a convenient time during May to July, or indeed meet at an alternative venue.

We hope that the findings of this research will help universities and schools to improve the way they provide information to students and their parents and in terms of the support and guidance which they provide.

The purpose of this letter is to ascertain whether you would be willing to consider taking part in this research, or would like to find out more about it. Participation is of course voluntary. If you are happy to do so, please could you return the reply slip below to xxxxxxxxx, our Post 18 Progression advisor in the 6th Form Office.   If you are happy to help, or would like to find out more about the project, without any obligation to proceed, then we will forward your contact details to the researcher, Helen Haywood, who will then contact you directly.

Kind regards,

xxxxxxxxxxx

Director of Sixth form

Appendix A

To: xxxxxxxxx (Post 18 Progression advisor)

Re: University Research

Name _____

I am happy to consider taking part in the Doctoral research about university   ☐
choices

I do not wish to take part in the research   ☐

My telephone contact number
is:_____

My Email address

is:_____

If possible, please provide a current email address that Helen Haywood can use
to contact you on directly.

Appendix B

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: The involvement of parents and their experiences of the process leading up to their child's university choice.

Researcher: Helen Haywood   **Ethics number**: 1243

Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

This research project is for the thesis part of my EdD (doctorate) studies at the University of Southampton.

This project is about how parents like you feel and what you think about the involvement you have had in your child's decision about where and what s/he is going to be studying at university. I also hope to explore how people make choices and decisions and how they experience these things.

Why have I been chosen?

I am inviting you to participate in this research because you are the parent or guardian of a child in Year 13 at school or college who has been looking at universities and courses over the past year or so and who is hoping to attend university this autumn. I'd like to ask you about your experiences relating to your child and the process s/he went through in choosing the course and university s/he has chosen.

What is involved?

You will be invited to be interviewed by me once. The interview will last about an hour.

You will be asked at the interview whether you would be prepared to check over a copy of the transcript of this interview, or my initial interpretations of it, at a later stage. You do <u>not</u> have to agree to this and you are free to participate in the research without doing this.

Before the interview starts, you will have the opportunity to ask questions about the project and your involvement in it. I will explain how the information you provide will be treated and stored confidentially, and that you will not be named in any reporting process. You will be invited to read and sign a consent form to indicate that you have understood what is involved and of your right to withdraw from the process at any time and without giving any explanation.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?
Your involvement will be much appreciated and will contribute greatly to the quality and usefulness of my research findings and to the outcomes of my study.

Appendix B

Additionally, I hope that my findings may help universities and schools to improve the way they provide information to students and their parents and in terms of the support and guidance which they provide.

Will my participation be confidential?

All the information collected during the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be seen by me, my thesis supervisor at the University of Southampton and any External Examiners. As required by the Data Protection Act, I will not pass on any person-identifiable data to any external agency. I will write up the finding for my thesis and will also use the research for articles in academic and professional journals and conferences. Any references in my thesis, and in any subsequent articles and conference papers, to data gathered in the interviews will be anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

I have also agreed to provide a summary of the main findings to xxxxxx School and will take care to ensure that the summary I provide anonymises data and presents only generalised trends, so that individuals cannot be identified. You can withdraw consent for your interview to be used in this way if you wish, and still take part in the research.

The data will be stored either at my home or office at work, with transcripts anonymised and stored on password protected computers, both at home and at work, and with hard copies kept in a locked cupboard (home) and a locked filing cabinet at work in my locked office.

What happens if I change my mind?

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the process at any time. If you do so, all record of the information you have provided will be destroyed and it will not be referred to in the research

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely event that you have concerns or complaints about the way the research has been conducted please contact Dr Martina Prude (Head of Research Governance for the University of Southampton (contact details: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx))

Where can I get more information?

If you would like any more information about this project including on how the data you provide will be used, please contact me:

Helen Haywood (my email address - xxxxxxxxxxx)   Home telephone number (xxxxxxxxxxxxxx)

Appendix C

Interview Discussion Guide

Notes to self – reminders: Tell me more; can you give me an example; can you explain that; use their terms back to them; so is it right to say.....; can you tell me what you mean by..... how did you feel; were you happy about.....what did you actually do/look for/at; what do you remember about; what did people tell you, can you remember a time when.

<Start recording> Say this is an interview with (name of interviewee) on (date).

Introduce myself.

Opening statement: I'm talking to you today because I'm trying to find out more about how parents are involved in the decisions their child makes about going to university, so I'd like to ask you about your experiences relating to x and the process s/he went through in choosing the course and university s/he has chosen (*or similar phrasing*).

Permission for interview

The first thing though, is to ask your permission to talk to you, and to tell you how I would like to do it. I think that you have already had the participation information sheet and read it? (If not, go through it with the interviewee).

Then go through the following issues with the interviewee

- *Interview will be recorded if that is ok*
- *Confidentiality*
- *We won't pass your details on to anybody else*
- *Interview data will be stored securely by me at home or at the university*
- *Interview data will be anonymised*
- *Right to withdraw at any point*
- *Copy of topline findings?*
- *Don't have to be included in topline findings going to xxxxxxxx school*
- *Any questions now?*
- *Any questions later? – See contact details at the end of the information sheet*

Interviewee to fill in and initial and sign the consent form (one copy for us, offer them a copy).

Plus: tell them that there's no right or wrong answers and that I'm looking for their stories and experiences; do ask me to clarify anything that's not clear or say if they can't remember; the time it will take, and if I pause it's to let them answer and to think, not because I'm questioning their views or choices, or judging them. Looking for detail. I will jot down a few notes of things to come back to, so please don't be put off.

Brief warm up – please tell me a bit about (yourself and) your child – (anything you like.....)

Appendix C

Introduction - So first of all what are his/her plans? Where's s/he hoping to study? What subject?

Follow up Statement (if needed, if conversation doesn't naturally flow onto it):

It would be great if you could tell me in as much detail as possible about this whole process from your point of view from when you first got involved   (**prompt as needed**) in how your child has come to be going to x to study y.

Then follow their lead with discussion in any of the below areas:

When/how did s/he decide which subject to choose? Tell me about it **(Probe if needed** *how did you feel about it?; can you remember discussing it? Where did his/her interest in that come from? Has s/he always been interested in it?)*

Tell me about the course– how did s/he come to choose that course and that uni? (Probe if needed: *Do many unis do it? Did you discuss it with him/her – if so, tell me about it. What do you think of his/her choice? (Probe course and uni separately). What were his/her other (uni) choices – tell me about them? How did s/he decide on this one? How involved were you in these choices – what did you do?/Tell me about it?)*

When did s/he first decide to go to university? Or start thinking about it. Tell me about it. **(Probe if** *needed* *how did you feel about it? Did you go to university yourself? Did you talk about that with your child? Can you remember the sorts of things you talked about?)*

What did you (or s/he) find out about the course/uni and where from? (Note for self - Information & sources) Tell me about it. (**Probe if needed:** *Did you look with your child and/or separately? Tell me about it – what and where. How did it go- working with your child? What did you talk about? Any thoughts about the info? What about school – what did they do?)*

Did you (or s/he) visit any universities while you were deciding? Tell me about it – what was it like? (**Probe if needed:** *Who went? Was it with your child? (Who else went: other parent/family members/friend etc.)? Were these Open Days or other visits? Tell me about these visits in as much detail as you can* (**further probe if needed** *what did you do/see; did you talk to anyone? What were your thoughts/feelings & impressions during the day? Sum it up and/or first impressions)*

(If the parent didn't visit any universities, but the child did: **Did you talk about it with him/her?** Tell me about it. (**Probe if needed**: *What did s/he say and what sort of things did you talk about? What were your thoughts/feelings?)*

Did you talk to anyone about the process? Tell me about it. (**Probe if needed:** *Who? - Friends, spouse, university staff etc. What sorts of things did you talk about? How was it? Was it useful? Were you talking about it a lot?)*

(Only if they mention it first – fees/feeling like a consumer/being 'sold to' – ask how it felt/what they thought/give an example)

How has it all gone? (**Probe if needed**: *How involved have you been? How have you/your child felt about this involvement? What's been your role? Can you tell me about some of the things you've done e.g.s? How have you felt about it all? How has it felt to be involved in this choice?*

How do you feel now? What do you think of his/her choices? What do you think about him/her going off to uni soon/how has working with him/her been?)

Finish: Is there anything else you would like to say about the process or anything we've been talking about today? What have I missed? What haven't we spoken about? Any final thoughts? Do you have any questions about what we have discussed?

Wrap up - Just check I have all personal details I need – their age, occupation (and that of spouse), did they go to H.E. (did spouse), did older children go if applicable? Child's details.

If I have any follow up questions may I contact you again and likewise if you think of anything you wish to add or amend please do contact me. (If I wanted to do a follow up interview would you be prepared to take part (**stress no obligation**) likewise would you be prepared to check through a summary of this interview (or my interpretations of it)).

Thank you very much

Appendix D

Participants' Profiles

As discussed in section 3.7.1, to be consistent with the hermeneutic interpretation process, it is necessary to stay close to each participant's whole story and experiences. Thus, brief profiles are offered of each participant, along with a brief summary of their description of their child and their relationship with him/her and their experiences of the choice process. There are also a few contextual notes and researcher reflections on each interview.

The profiles are now listed alphabetically (using participants' pseudonyms):

1. Alison
2. Chloe
3. Clare
4. Jacky
5. Jane
6. Jasmine
7. Laura
8. Lizzie
9. Mark
10. Mary
11. Megan
12. Natalie
13. Rachel
14. Sarah
15. Tina
16. Wendy

Please Note the Additional Abbreviations used in this section:

Info – information
OD – open day
PS – Personal Statement
Uni – university

1. <u>Participant Profile – Alison</u>

<u>Profile/Background</u>

Neither Alison nor her husband had been to H.E. or done A levels (he is a precision engineer). Their daughter, H, is hoping to do photography at BU (Arts Institute) and initially to do a foundation degree.

H is the older child with a younger brother.

A was quite happy to have been involved with all the visits and said she wanted to see where H would be living for the next 3 years.

She seemed quite calm and laid back, and said that she and H got on well, but that H and her dad clashed more – as both of them were '*always right'*.

She said that she'd been '*fairly*' involved and that she'd tried to say the '*right*' thing – including not saying what she'd do in her place. She said that they'd had lots of chats about it round the dinner table. She did say several times, that it's her daughter that has to go, and she said that when she went to say '*If I were you.....'* she bit it back as she wanted it to be her choice and she didn't want her turning to her later on and saying that it was a mistake and her fault.

She did describe feeling a bit left out with the P.S. as the school had helped H and although she'd had to chase her up, H hadn't wanted her input and the school had been involved, although she could see the sense in that as they must do them all the time.

She described friends boasting about their children's successes and said that she '*wouldn't bite'.*

<u>Her description of her child and of their relationship</u>

She wasn't sure that H was quite ready for university yet and said if she could leave it for a few years, she thought that she would. She would be living at home. But also that if she had to move away she would and that she was quite sociable.

 H had been to X secondary school at the time when it had quite a bad reputation, but had got on ok and got her 'head down' and made some nice friends.

She described her as sporty, sociable, and someone who had to work hard with her studies – it didn't come easily – but also that she had a strong work ethic and that if she didn't go to uni that she would find something. She also described her as '*doey*' which seemed to mean practical rather than purely academic and that she liked to be doing things not sitting in a classroom and she looked for language in prospectuses and to courses which reflected this. She said that she had an eye for what would make an attractive photo – although Alison is not artistic in the sense of being able to draw – she enjoys sewing and cake making.

She did also wonder if H would actually become a teacher as she was good with children – they were '*putty in her hands'* and she had experience through coaching at gym and helping the 'rooky' lifeguards.

Alison wondered if H would get the grades she'd needed as she'd struggled with maths, but Alison was quite laid back about it and when H had been worried about it, had said not to worry and that the 2 of them would go away for a break for a few days after the results (latter bit might be off tape). H did say she wouldn't retake maths and they'd had a ceremonial burning of the maths books! Alison did say that even if she got 1 A level this would be fine as she knew she'd done her best and worked hard.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

The interview took place in her living room with a dog which she had to control once or twice and also her husband came in and then her son during the interview. Despite her saying at the beginning that she didn't think she'd have much to say and to being a bit nervous about being taped and to the focus being on her, actually she was quite happy to chat, to answer all my questions and was quite reflective.

I was feeling quite relaxed, although I was a bit concerned initially when she said that she didn't think she'd have much to say!

Alison is a friend of a friend, so she did refer to our mutual friend and her son. We talked at the end (off the recording) about my son and his plans and our worries about August – she knew the results day and said it was '*etched in her memory'*.

2. **Participant Profile – Chloe**

Profile/Background

Chloe has a degree and a Masters; she has worked in HE and FE. Her husband has a degree and professional qualifications. C is their older child; they have a younger daughter. Chloe works at a university as a Research and Knowledge Exchange Officer, so she was very knowledgeable about unis. She is 45 and married.

She felt that with her HE experience she knew what to ask and where to find out information, but felt that it would be daunting for parents with no experience. Feelings did come into the decision.

She was preparing herself for C's departure – she'd started doing things without him – just the 3 of them. Although she said that she would miss him, she was also looking forward to a reduction in the laundry.

She described herself as someone who likes to have all the information when she's choosing and used the image of tossing a coin and seeing whether you regret the side that you get. She was keen to stress that it was his choice and that he must make the decisions.

C didn't go to a good secondary school, due to the catchment area they live in, and not many at his school got good GCSEs, although he did very well, but he's doing well in the 6th form at his new school.

She was frustrated at him having to attend so many interviews when he was so busy with schoolwork.

Her description of her son and their relationship

Personality wise she said that he '*knows best*'! She described him as well rounded with lots of interests – music, lifeguarding, and he has a part time job. He's quite confident and that he was nearly 19, as he was one of the oldest in the school year. She felt that he was ready for uni now and "*needed to make his own way in the world*". She felt they'd equipped him well for the transition to come – in terms of skills (cooking, budgeting), paying for lifeguard training so that he could get a p/t job. She said that she thought it was good practice and good for him too when she told him that he had to fill out the application forms and decide things himself. She was also keen for him to go to an Open Day on his own – including planning it – as it would do him good.

She'd had to push him to decide between his 2 second choices and that this had been done quite late on. She was keen to say that it was his choice and that he must make the decisions, as he would be living there. She said 'we' a lot but then amended it to say 'he'.

They seemed to have worked quite well together on the process, she had lots of advice and she described it as quite a thorough search, but she did say that there had been some tension at times and that had I spoken to her in March, she would have been a lot less calm than she was now.

Field Notes and a few reflections on the interview

The interview took place while she was cooking the family tea, so she had to get up to put the oven on and sort out her daughter to do the vegetables. Her husband also came in to say hello. So she was a bit distracted at times, due to this. After about an hour, it seemed as if it would end, and she said to one of the family that she wouldn't be much longer, but then we got talking and it went on for nearly two hours.

Chloe was very open, chatty and animated with lots of gestures and face pulling to emphasis points & phrases – she was also keen to advise me. She contacted me several times after the interview to ask me if I'd filled forms in on time and/or how it was going.

We chatted a bit at the end about my son and his/my experiences (after about 1 hour 45 mins) – I wonder if I chatted too much, but I did try to keep it to the end and she was very keen to hear about my experiences.

She said that she had enjoyed the interview and found it cathartic (but also that we'd '*done it to death*' by the end) and at one point said that now she's thinking about the process, it did go quite well.

I was pleased with the way that this interview had gone as she had been very open.

3. Participant Profile – Clare

Profile/Background

Clare is a part-time nurse and has just finished a part time course at the local Arts Institute. Neither she nor her husband are graduates although she did go to nursing college.

She has 3 children, an older child and twins. Both twins are deferring their uni entry, but J, the focus of the interview, has chosen his places ahead of his year away, whereas her daughter is waiting for her results to come out and will then choose. Her son wanted the security of having chosen, whereas her daughter didn't.

Clare was very heavily involved in the process, but was happy with this – she described herself as the '*researcher*' for the family. She said when asked to talk about her role and her being heavily involved in it, that '*I'm afraid*' – and then when I questioned her about why she was '*afraid*', she said that she felt that her children should do more of it. However, she also said later on that she is quite organised and likes to research things thoroughly (example of their holidays) which she contrasted with her husband (who says she 'over thinks' things). With regard to choice, she also said that she likes to research to try to reduce the chance of anyone having regrets and discussed this in the light of her son deciding on the day not to visit one of the unis, whereas she would have preferred him to go there to look.

She felt that if she didn't do it for J that he would miss the deadlines.

In one OD – she said that she didn't feel that the course was right for him, but let him discover that – I asked her why she didn't say anything to him; she said that it was better if it came from him.

There were several references to the involvement of the whole family with his choices and with the film he had to make for one uni.

She did have some stress over the 2nd choice and about whether she could either not have one, or have one that was higher than the 1st choice. She couldn't find the answer to that anywhere and has now gone with one which is higher than the 1st choice.

There was a strong sense of involvement from Clare and of her determination to the best for her child. Lots of examples of 'we' and a strong sense that she

knows her children well and of what would suit J – she feels she's similar to him. Lots of time and effort spent on the process and on trying to find out what would suit him – she talks about which ones she'd like to go to too.

Perhaps a sense of her relief (and his?) that he's found something he's good at and her determination to find a course which will suit him and with which he can succeed?

Her description of her child and of their relationship

She described him as "*a child that's taken a long time to grow into himself, but I think he's getting there.*" He is the less academic one who has always been a bit in the shadow of his twin and his older brother academically (the latter's doing maths at Warwick – her daughter is hoping to go to either Oxbridge or a RG uni to do English and philosophy) and he's the least confident one, but he's always had a good group of friends. He was once referred to by a teacher as the '*black sheep'* of the family academically which upset him. She described him as being more practical in his skills and later as more creative.

Once she'd done the initial search, she got him to look at it and they looked together and discussed and debated it to draw up a short list – she described this as a harmonious process. They visited quite a few of the ODs together. She did a lot of the initial search '*drilling down'* looking for courses which had the right balance between theory and practice and those she felt '*that he could cope with'* and which were '*appropriate*' for him – which she linked to his attention span. She narrowed it down by looking firstly at UCAS requirements, as initially his grades hadn't been good.

She later described his as a '*country boy'* – who likes somewhere small; he liked the fact you could stay in the accommodation for all 3 years at one uni.

She also said that he was shy and wouldn't ask things at ODs, so she asked all the questions (including about deferring entry). When he went with her husband who is also shy, neither of them asked things. She enjoyed going to ODs with him and spending time together '*it's quite nice to trap your teenager in a car for four hours....and actually have a conversation with them*".

She described how proud J was when he found something he was good at and that he could go to uni as his siblings had/were going. Initially his marks had been quite low, but she was proud to tell me that they'd been improving a lot lately.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

The interview took place in the kitchen and started within ear shot of the son (J) so Clare lowered her voice at times. It was perhaps interesting however that she did keep the door open – eventually he went upstairs. The older son also came into the room at one point.

Her son had played football with my son, so we briefly discussed that. She was interested in his choices and what he was doing.

It was quite warm and Clare did have a bit of a cough.

After the previous interview, I went into this reasonably confidently, and Clare was very easy to talk to and very chatty. She disclosed lots on information about her and her family and how she felt. I chatted a lot too, perhaps too much at times?

4. Participant Profile – Jacky

Profile/Background

Jacky has done an OU degree and a PGCE (via 'SKIT' route) and her husband is currently doing an OU degree. She left school and worked as a trilingual secretary and came to studying and then teaching later in life – she felt that she wouldn't have been ready to go to uni at 18. But she is happy with the way it worked out. She did say before she got her degree that she wondered if she was inferior by not having a degree. She now teaches at a local secondary school part time. She's 50 and married with 2 children and 2 step-children; her husband runs his own business.

Her daughter M is at a local private school and has been there since reception. Her older daughter is finishing her 3rd year at York and of the 2 older step children – one didn't go to uni at all (dyslexic) and is now a farmer, and one dropped out after 1 term of retaking 1st year at Exeter. So her husband was a bit disappointed that neither of his older two, although bright enough, did go to uni and he was pleased that both these 2 children are going.

M is hoping to do Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway. Jacky didn't know much about the detail of the RH course and hadn't been very involved in the process. M did most of the search on her own, with help from the school. Jacky was not very involved, although she and her husband did take her to some Open Days (she went to one with a friend).

Her description of her child and of their relationship

M is very independent and 'larger than life' with a lot of personality and knows her own mind – she's confident and interested in people. Jacky gave a long description of her. Jacky is careful not to push her too hard – otherwise she would go the other way. So she worried that she'd gone a bit over the top about Royal Holloway and might have put her daughter off. However, she did say that if she'd had any real concerns and sat down with her daughter that she would listen to her – she's level headed. Jacky is happy with her doing theatre studies and said that she didn't know what she wanted to do at the end of it, but there were lots of choices on the RH course – she could see her daughter as a stand-up comedian.

Her older daughter (A) is *'more compliant'* and works harder. M has done less work, at times just doing *'the minimum'* up til now but is now working harder – now she has these grades to focus on – quite high grades. M has had a last minute wobble in the last day or two about whether she still wants to do

Theatre studies and perhaps would like to do Classics. Also if she doesn't get into her first or 2nd choice (Royal Holloway or Reading) she won't go this year. She's not prepared to compromise just for a lower offer. She might not even go to uni. Mum happy with that as long as M can find a way to make a living. Mum did point out but only briefly that she couldn't do classics, at the level she would want to do it, without doing Latin and Greek, but didn't push it too much for fear of putting M off, as she is in the middle of her exams and quite stressed.

She did say in a couple of places that the girls wouldn't put up with certain things – they are used to it being comfortable –saying that they were '*spoilt*' at the end of the interview – they wouldn't go anywhere dirty (accommodation).

She said that she thought that marks could be subjective – M's GCSEs were not good as she was ill, but also didn't work as hard as A. M was good at Biology but was frustrated by the fact you had to memorise it so that even though she knew the material, she didn't get good marks. Jacky felt that had M tried for Oxbridge, she could have got in on the interview, but she didn't want to fail (although she did fail one interview, but she didn't want to go there anyway).

Jacky liked to show that the children were all bright, even the ones who didn't go to uni. She was open about their faults, e.g. not saying too much to M so as not to put her off (black/white), but also when I asked her about it she did then qualify it – if she had had serious concerns then her daughter would listen. She was confident of M's abilities e.g. she could do a OU degree, as well as feeling that she could have passed Oxbridge interview.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

I felt a bit more relaxed with this one, and I did disclose more, but she did a lot of talking and was very happy to talk and to answer all the questions – she found the one about describing her child difficult initially but then gave a lengthy description; likewise with the 'choice' question. There was not so much on her, but then at the end in the context of job sharing, she did say she liked to be organised, and wasn't someone who '*winged*' it.

Her mobile rang at one point, which she ignored, but then the landline rang which she answered, it was a cold call, and she did also say that she had some errands to run. She was keen for me to meet her daughter, and when M arrived home effectively that ended the interview. She did email me the next day, to apologise for her daughter who was not '*her usual friendly self*'. She put this down to her daughter being stressed about her forthcoming exams.

5. Participant Profile – Jane

Profile/Background

Jane and her husband are divorced, rather messily, about 20 months ago. D is the youngest of 3 children the other 2 of whom did not go to university – or even do A levels – and nor did Jane or her ex-husband. Jane left school at 15 as her father felt that a woman's role was to have a family!

She is 55 and a bra fitter (she had been a journalist). She said that her husband worked in the building services. She said that he was good with his hands and that both she and he were bright, but they had not been to uni. Her husband had been to private school, but couldn't read when she first met him (she covered the recorder at this point). Jane said that at the moment she and her husband are not on speaking terms and that D has been a great support to her– even supporting the parents' decision to separate. So she will miss him when he leaves home.

She described her level of involvement as quite low feeling that she provided support including emotional support to him, but that he made the choices. She did also say that he asked her opinions though. She said that she looked online herself, from when he'd been doing GCSEs, and subsequently when she realised that it was possible for him to study medicine, and had looked at some unis .

D's interest in medicine comes in part from his uncle who's a consultant. D was interested in talking to him and has since then got experience working at hospitals/doctors and helping at the Macmillan cancer unit. She was keen to stress that he got all these placements himself.

She knew that the ones he'd chosen were good ones – referring to the grades. At the time she would have liked him to have gone to Oxford. He did apply to Oxford (and got an interview there) but didn't get offered it. She didn't go there; she only went with him to Birmingham. She was disappointed about Oxford, but had said to him that as he didn't go to Eton, he might not get in!

She did try to dissuade him from certain universities as she felt that they might be rough – including London and also Birmingham initially. She said that Birmingham had a high crime rate. But she liked the campus and what she described as the atmosphere and the feeling of the place. She was disappointed not to have been to Nottingham (his first choice), but said that it was only fair that he went with his dad to that one.

She did describe the detailed process she put into choosing primary schools, visiting all of them and at different times of day so that she should see the mums and the children – describing mums with tattoos and smoking.

Appendix D

Her description of her child and of their relationship

Jane is very proud of D and of his achievements, but is careful not to brag about them and is quite a private person. He had been on the front page of the local paper with his GCSE achievements. She fully researched primary schools for her children and it was her, not her husband, who looked round the schools and attended parents' evenings etc.

D knew he wanted to study medicine from an early age (11/12) and she describes him as '*focused*' and '*determined*'. She feels that he made most of the choices and said on several occasions that it was his choice and that she felt that it was important that he chose (she gave the example of her mum choosing a job for her, but she turned it down and went off to London). She didn't want to do the same for her child. She also feels that D was learning from the mistakes of his older siblings, who had clearly been a bit of a problem (she didn't elaborate) and she'd had a lot of support from the school and also been called into the school –as one of them had nearly been expelled.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

She'd moved the time of the interview back an hour which was helpful, as I was coming straight from work and would have been a bit rushed otherwise. As the last 2 had not been quite so long as earlier ones, I'd been a bit apprehensive. However, it seemed to go ok. It was getting close to tea time, and I was again conscious as we sat in the kitchen that she'd got food out ready to start cooking, so that time might be an issue, although she didn't seem pushed for time.

She covered the recorder when discussing her husband's illiteracy. She also checked that David's door was shut before starting the interview (and before she started talking about her older children who had been a bit of a problem) and lowered her voice on occasion. A cat and dog came into the kitchen repeatedly during the interview, so she got up lots of times to put the dog out and try to get the cat off the table and then to separate them. At one point it looked as if the cat was poised to jump on to me! She was very willing to chat and thought about questions and was quite happy to answer the open question at the beginning about her child. D came down (did she call him down?) at the end of the interview and we chatted – he had a slightly different perspective on the process and from his perspective it had not been quite so smooth and logical as she had made out.

She was quite open, including about her '*messy*' divorce.

6. Participant Profile – Jasmine

Profile/Background

Jasmine is very chatty and outgoing – she described herself as confident, (but qualified it by saying only where she feels at home). J is her only child and neither she nor her husband went to university. Her husband was initially a bit concerned about J going, as he worried about the money and whether J could just get an apprenticeship and achieve the same goals in another way.

She's 48 and is an assistant manager of a hotel; she commutes to Surrey 4 days a week. Her husband works in an office equipment company.

She was a bit worried about seeming a bit 'snobbish' – and put her hand over the recorder, at one point, when describing the students at one university. Likewise when describing the student accommodation at Falmouth, she said we have a nice house here, so why live somewhere grotty? They do live in a very nice house in a lovely area.

She described herself at various points as driven e.g. "*I'm very focused, quite driven, quite anal*"

J wants to study animation at Bournemouth University.

Her description of her son and of their relationship

 J (son) is dyslexic and this coloured his initial schooling (he attended private school) and meant that Jasmine had been involved with his education, helping him to read from when he was quite young. She also said that as it was just the 3 of them, she felt that they had influenced him – she said that they are people with a clear idea of where they want to go and that he had perhaps inherited this. They also involved him in all they do. But they never pushed any of these things but have "*tried to nurture positives as he's always struggled academically*". He's very focussed, has a stubborn streak and is laid back.

He's been interested in animation since he was 8 as he's quite arty, this is partly, she feels, as a result of his dyslexia. He'd chosen his A levels, and even his GCSEs with these uni courses in mind. 'We' sat down and went through the booklet for A levels. He has his career mapped out – he knows which sort of animation he wants to do and even which company he wants to work for.

She said that although he was quite sociable, he liked to do his own thing. She did say that a lot of the unis put too much emphasis on the social side and drinking and that he doesn't drink or socialise that much.

She was pleased that he'd decided to live at home. She said that he was her 'baby' and she was happy to have him at home, but also that she and her husband had both left home at 16 and that if the right course had been somewhere else, she would have been happy for him to go.

At one point she said that he had been described by friends as her '*project*'. She seemed to want some reassurance at one point in the interview ("*they all go through this don't they?*").

She was confident that she knew him well and what would suit him, but said that she was also careful to sit back and let him make his own decisions. She was keen to emphasise that it was all him, but did use 'we' a lot and also got involved herself e.g. with chasing up one interview. *So some contradiction here*? She said that she knew when he liked somewhere. She also said that she'd felt that the Falmouth course (photography) was not for him but hadn't said it – due to focus on social side, "*this is not your character, this isn't you*".

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

Jasmine was very welcoming and chatty, at times so much so that it was hard to take it all in and remember what to go back to and hard to get a word in! After about 1 hour 40mins her son came in and she introduced him and all 3 of us chatted for a while, including about my son and our mutual friend. She was keen for me to meet and talk to him. After he left we finished off the interview and then chatted some more after the tape was switched off. After the interview, she showed me his photo portfolio and some paintings he'd done, with some pride.

Her phone rang at one point (around 11 mins) but she ignored it. I had emailed her to say that the interview might last a bit longer than an hour, but she was fine with that and when I got there, said she'd set aside the whole afternoon!

I thought that this interview went well, as Jasmine was very chatty and relaxed, but I did find it hard to keep on track. Afterwards, although I was happy with it, I did have a headache!

7. Participant Profile – Laura

Profile/Background

Laura has 2 sons – A and J and J has already been through uni and has graduated and is now in New Zealand. Having been through the experience once before she said that she is now a bit more relaxed about it. However, she also talked about having a '*backup plan*' and despite being quite relaxed, she did say on several occasions that it might not work out and talked about clearing.

She said that the school had given him a lot of help and at one stage that she felt a bit left out, but then when I asked her more about it, she said that no it was fine and that the school knew more about it than she did. She didn't really seem to have had to push him to get it all done, but she did say later that she had to nag him to do his homework and that you had to '*feel you'd done your bit*' with regard to their schooling.

A had originally hoped to do medicine and had done the sciences and did some work experience with his aunt, but they realised that he wouldn't get the

grades he needed, although she felt that he would have made a good doctor. He then thought of a course in bio science at Exeter, but again they realised that the grades needed were too high. So he'd had to have a rethink. He's now hoping to do Marine Biology.

She said that she was happy with his choices and perhaps they would have had more of a discussion if she hadn't been happy. She also thought it would be nice for him not to be too far away.

At times she seemed quite fatalistic "*what will be, will be, you can't change it*". She was quite a relaxed, laid back person, but reflecting more on the interview there was this undercurrent of anxiety and perhaps of disappointment, as her son hadn't done as well academically as she'd hoped (AS results) and thus couldn't pursue his chosen career.

Her description of her child and of their relationship

She described him as: '*pretty outgoing, you know, articulate. He's got a part-time job as well* as .... *He's a cocktail waiter. So he does it, so he's sort of quite, you know, out there and doing lots of things'*. She felt that he was ready for uni and was quite independent.

She was a bit disappointed that he'd decided not to do history as she'd seen him doing it and perhaps teaching it, but she was very philosophical and laid back about his decision not to study it. She said she saw him doing more outdoor and practical work rather than being stuck in an office. She was fine with his choice, feeling that it's up to him to make the choice "*I've never pushed them to do – you know, they've got to choose what they want to do*".

He hadn't really discussed his back up choice with her, although she had pointed out that the points were higher than for his first choice and she said several times that it was important that his choices were '*realistic*' given his predicted grades and his problems with Chemistry.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

It was a very warm day. It turned out that I knew Laura a little bit through our sons playing football together, and we had a mutual friend, but I'd only met her once, very briefly. Again I was a bit disappointed that this interview didn't last any longer, but Laura hadn't been all that involved in the process and seemed happy with that, although she did mention clearing and having a '*backup plan*' and '*there is always a back-up or something he could do...*' a few times (and she had rung up about a foundation course). Just after we'd finished talking her mum arrived, so she may have been conscious of the time, although she seemed quite relaxed and happy to chat.

8. Participant Profile – Lizzie

Profile/Background

Lizzie is a counsellor and trained to be a nurse and a midwife. She's 50 and a single mum (separated). Although she went away to train as a nurse at college, and then trained to be a counsellor, she is not a graduate and nor is her ex-husband who didn't complete his A levels. She has 2 sons – 5 year age gap and the older one went to uni.

D's hoping to study mechanical engineering at Cardiff or Exeter.

She described the process as very different for D as compared with his older brother and said at various points that she was frustrated (with the system), stressed, lonely and later that the experience had been challenging. She is a religious person and said that she felt that God would help them to find a way through it and that she had prayed about it and hoped that God would '*take*' the decision. She also discussed the fact that they knew people through the church in Cardiff. She described how she felt a lot. At one point she said that '*parents go through hell*' during the process, and also described how she burst into tears when he finally produced his P.S. She was particularly upset by what she felt to be a lack of support from the school with regard to the P.S and that it put a lot of pressure on mums to help with it.

Her older child had been more independent and she hadn't been very involved in his uni process and described herself as '*clueless*' at that point.

She said that she'd been very involved in D's decision but had been happy with that as it was an important decision. They'd been to 5 open days and she'd tried to make them fun. One of them was Oxford which she wasn't sure would be right for him, but that he had to make his own mind up.

Money was an issue for her, and she'd need to buy the things he needed to take away with him a bit at a time, and fees were a concern for her – she doesn't like debt.

Her description of her child and of their relationship

D had had a difficult year 12, as he'd split up from a serious relationship, had glandular fever and she felt that he'd lost a bit of focus and motivation – he'd '*gone off the boil*' and she'd had to push him. He hadn't really been sure he wanted to go to uni, but it had almost been assumed (by the school), as he's very bright and she'd chatted with him about it, but said that if he didn't go, he'd have to have something else to do.

She described him as being sensitive, very bright, with a sense of humour and a '*quite peoply*' person – she said he wasn't the stereotypical maths geek. She thought that he enjoyed the combination of theory and practice in his chosen course.

She said that they were able to talk about things, but also that at times she had to find the right time to get him to talk. At one point she felt she had to '*hand it back*' to him as she felt she was '*nagging*'.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

Being a counsellor meant that she was quite thoughtful and reflective in her responses and also knowledgeable about behaviour or reasons for it – such as '*self sabotage*' and also the idea that procrastinating was making a choice – the idea of not making a choice as being a choice and of D as being both left and right brained (demonstrated through his A level choices).

She used lots of gestures and knocked the table for emphasis at times and pulled faces too – she was quite animated. I was feeling tired when I arrived, as I hadn't slept well and she hadn't been sure that she could commit to it, so I was half expecting her to cancel it. However, when we got talking it was all fascinating and she was very easy to talk to and happy to talk about her older son and interested in my son and in my project. We talked for another 10 minutes or so at the end (plus 5 minutes at the beginning).

We chatted in the kitchen with no interruptions as D was away (other than the washing machine!)

9. Participant Profile – Mark

Profile/Background

Mark is an Admin and Audit Manager and his wife T has just started a new admin job at the hospital. He's 50 and neither of them went to university, or even finished A levels. T started A levels but left after a year. He left with a few GCSEs and then went back and did a few more later on. He did struggle to express himself a few times and said that '*English'* wasn't his speciality. He hadn't been interested in education as a teenager and had been playing a lot of football. His father had tried to push him into joining the Navy, so he didn't want to push his views on his daughters.

Mark has 2 daughters, A and L. Although most of the interview was about A, the younger daughter, he did also talk about L too, as he felt he had been more involved in the process for her.

A is hoping to do History at Swansea.

He was keen to say that it was '*their choice.*' However, he did say that he and his wife provided a lot of support for both the girls, this included financial support as well as offering advice and going with her/them to ODs and visits. He said at one point that they would take them to all the ODs they wanted to go to.

He discussed '*the feel'* a lot and that the girls needed to '*feel comfortable'* where they would be going and that it was about where they felt comfortable not him. He struggled to articulate exactly what it was that made him '*feel comfortable'* or get the '*feel*' somewhere – and he described Exeter as '*her sort of un*i' – but was a little vague about what gave him this impression.

He and his wife were looking forward to being on their own once their second child had left home. He described this in terms of having a lie in, not getting a call in the early hours and to it being tidy.

His description of his child and their relationship

He described A as *happy* and *bubbly,* that she's quite ambitious and determined, knows what she wants, and has drive, and that she was more independent than his older daughter, and she got on with it more on her own, but that they did also talk about it.

He said that they'd talked about things as they went along, and he'd offered up views on say location, or accommodation, but that their suggestions were not always welcome. However, he did say that the 3 of them were quite a '*little unit*'.

Despite saying that it was their choice and emphasising that she chose the course, he did get involved in other areas, such as the accommodation. Reflecting on the interview I now get more sense of Mark as quite heavily involved and having quite a strong influence on the girls and liking to '*get things sorted'*. He also described himself as '*strict with them about money*' and liked to make sure that that's sorted. He drew up a spreadsheet of unis for both girls.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

Mark was chatty and liked to talk, with lots of detail. At times it was hard to either go back to review things he'd said, without interrupting his flow, or to get him off lots of detail which was not always relevant. His daughter was out, and his wife was in the next room with the door ajar. They had 2 dogs which were in the room and occasionally distracted us. At times Mark seemed to struggle for the right word and said several times that his girls were much more educated than he was. He struggled particularly in relation to the idea of the '*feel*' and feelings. A few times, he was quite opinionated, talking about uni education and also about the fees. He also seemed keen to show me his knowledge and expertise in certain areas.

This was quite a late interview, so I felt a bit tired going into it, but actually I felt fine once we got started. Mark had just got in from work and was rushing his dinner when I got there, so I spoke to his wife briefly first, who was very friendly. She said that although he was going to speak to me as he'd been most involved, in fact A had done most of it herself.

10. Participant Profile – Mary

Profile/Background

Mary is 49 and works in healthcare. She didn't go to H.E. although her husband, a pharmacist, did (his brother and father had been to Cambridge and the latter was keen for C to go there) and her older daughter E is just finishing a radiography course at Portsmouth uni.

C's doing maths, further maths and music.

Mary described feeling worried a lot and said that she just wanted her daughter to be happy. She didn't want her to go too far away and was a bit worried that some unis would be too stressful for her – e.g. Cambridge & Warwick.

She and her husband had shared uni visits with C as they couldn't get a lot of time off.

Her description of her child and of their relationship

Her daughter C is very musical and good at maths. She's also quiet, at least at home, and knows her own mind – she knows what she wants and when she decides something it's difficult to get her to change her mind. She's bright and very hard working, too much so and at times Mary thinks she needs to take a break. She described C as not very chatty, unlike her older daughter, and that they'd thus not had *'lengthy discussions'* with her about which uni to go to, but in fact they'd had to *'put things out there'* for C to consider (as well as asking what she was thinking). C didn't like them repeating things (*'you've told me that already'*) and she did keep on at her near the decision date. She feels that C chose very carefully though. However, later in the interview she said that she was a bit worried that C's back up choice was a bit high and reflected on whether they should have been a bit more insistent about her choosing something a bit lower, but then she said she wouldn't have listened to her. She felt that C had made her own decisions.

She described C as more independent than her sister. Mary saw quite a bit of her older daughter who was at a local uni and was much chattier and she was perhaps a little disappointed not to have the same relationship with her younger daughter. She felt that she wouldn't necessarily see C that often even if she did go to a local uni.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

She was happy to chat, but perhaps a little reserved at first and did say that she wouldn't be much use for my project as they hadn't had long conversations about it.

Mary came to my house. As she was not involved all that much in the process, it was a bit slow to start with and there seemed not much to say, but later she chatted quite happily and we also talked about her experiences with her older child, who was much more chatty and in whose experience she had been more

involved, and the problems with her accommodation in the first year. We chatted at the end too about the whole process and our worries etc. Also that perhaps we spoil our children a bit now. Mary's daughter rang wanting a lift after about 1 hour 15/20 mins, but she was adamant that she would stay and said that it wouldn't hurt C to get a bus. Obviously, I said that we'd nearly finished. I think again that I chatted too much, some of which was after the tape ended, but some of it was during the interview.

11. Participant Profile – Megan

Profile/Background

She's 53 and her current job title is Learning Resource Centre Manager at a secondary school, but she's changing jobs soon to be a lecturer in London. Neither she nor her husband has been to uni but her older son is at uni.

She felt that her son had wanted to go to uni from about the age of 15 – as he was identified as 'gifted and talented'. She was clearly very proud of him. She said that the process was easier second time round and with this child.

Megan was very well informed about the uni process due to her job and kept referring to the need to make an '*informed decision*'. Her job means that she provides guidance to students on UCAS and reads up about H.E. She appeared to approach the process very logically and commented on many occasions about the importance of factors such as the course and of league table and of employability. She liked to appear knowledgeable and logical and was keen to advise me. She was quite heavily involved and described starting his P.S. off.

Her son was offered a place at Oxford and Imperial and some of the discussion was on why not Oxford, perhaps about her wanting to clearly justify why he'd decided to turn it down. She described how she logically examined them both with her son comparing them on 2 laptops against key criteria: '*we did a pro and con list*'.

The other older son had done less well and got a place at Plymouth, which she described as less prestigious and he had only then got in because they had had extra places at the last minute!

Her description of her child and of their relationship

Her son is very bright and hardworking and mixes with similar people, he's also very confident.

She said her son had put a lot of work into the search process and that she and he had worked on it together and separately – she said he realised the importance of the decision. I asked how she got on in terms of working with her son (vs. doing the same thing at school with other pupils), but she said he was receptive to her suggestions. It had been more difficult with the older son.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

The interview took place in Megan's office, which was a portioned off corner of a larger room with the photocopier in it, and people did come in to use the copier while we were talking, but we ignored them.

I felt very nervous before the interview, as it was the first one, and quite concerned after it, as I felt that Megan had described the process to me, rather than discussing with me her experience of it or about how she felt about things. I had tried to stick very closely to phenomenology and too not disclosing much myself. Whilst she was forthcoming, I was not sure how honest she was being and whether it was really all that smooth and logical. However, it was clear that her son was very bright and had exceeded her expectations. She seemed to be keen to justify why not Oxford, even citing a recent survey where it had dropped below LSE. She seemed keen to show how knowledgeable she was, and after the interview, we chatted for a further 40 minutes or so when she tried to advise me and help me with my son's choices. She had quite strong views on H.E. saying for example that students shouldn't go to uni if they don't know what they want to do.

12. Participant Profile – Natalie

Profile/Background

Natalie was very open and chatty, a very jolly woman, lots of laughing. She was willing and happy to chat and to answer all the questions and was quite open, at one point joking about her daughter saying that she had '*Asperger like*' traits. She has 2 daughters and the interview focused on the younger one.

Natalie is an administrator working in the NHS with people with learning difficulties. She's 50 and neither she nor her husband has been to uni, she went to college, but S, the older child, did go to uni for a year and then left. Her husband has his own business.

Her daughter B had been hoping to be a ballet dancer and had attended a dance school for 2 years, but an operation had ruled that out.

She said that perhaps they had '*indulged*' her older daughter in letting her go to uni as reflecting on it, "*they knew it wasn't the right thing*" for her, but that it seemed like an easy option. She was however pleased that B was going to uni and wanted her to have a career. B wants to train to be a primary school teacher.

She did say that she felt a bit guilty at one point as some of her friends had taken their child to more open days than she had, but she hadn't been able to persuade B to go to any more uni visits after she'd made her choice.

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She described the process as a bit '*tedious'* and was glad when it was over, but that it was all worthwhile as B had somewhere where she felt '*comfortable'*.

Her description of her child and of their relationship

Natalie described B as serious, thoughtful, cautious and anxious and that she could be hard on herself. She also said on several occasions that when she makes her mind up about something it's hard to persuade her to change it, although she will listen to your point of view but "*we're not a family that imposes our will on our children*". She said that it was important that B made the choice and '*felt comfortable'* with where she was going. "*B's been happy with her choices*". Feeling comfortable was important to them and feelings were also important "*just a feeling about it*" and "*you go on what you feel*" and one option didn't '*feel right*'. For B it was also important that rules were followed and she didn't like the idea of shortcuts or rules being bent. Natalie said that B didn't like change and preferred smaller places.

Nathalie felt that she has '*encouraged and supported her'* in her decision but that it had been B's choice, although she did describe a lot of things that 'we' did. Even when choosing a secondary school at 11, they had felt it important for B to choose where she went and she didn't go to the school they'd wanted. (This was also the case with the older child). Natalie couldn't persuade B to visit one uni, as once she's made up her mind, she won't change it.

She described needing to push B at times to meet the deadlines.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

I was a bit tired as it was an early evening interview after a long day at work and Natalie had had to move it back 30 mins. I was also conscious that she'd come quite a long way (the interview took place at my house), straight from work and she probably hadn't eaten, so although she seemed quite happy, I didn't want the interview to go on for too long. I had however, emailed her to say that it would probably last more than an hour, and she was fine with this. I feel that because of her open, chatty nature that I ended up talking too much – we ended up discussing both my children as we found that we had lots of common experiences.

She sent me a nice email subsequently.

13. Participant Profile – Rachel

Profile/Background

Rachel is a teacher at a secondary school and her husband is an architect; they both went to uni. They were both very positive about the idea of H going to uni and could see lots of benefits: it's an '*important part of life*' and we see '*great value in going to uni'.*

H is an only child and they have always done things together – it has not been a '*child oriented'* childhood – she's mixed a lot with adults. She described herself as very heavily involved in the process and described lots of conversations that they'd had about it.

She felt they had provided a lot of support, including financially: '*big family project...a journey for all of us. We're all trying to work to the same goal*' and that they had been '*very proactive in the help that we've given her*', and "*you had to, as a parent, actively go out and help your child get the experience they needed*", but she also felt that the decision needed to come from the child and '*felt it was her decision and wanted it to come from her*". There seemed to be some tension here between getting involved and also wanting the final choice to be her daughter's. She describes how she and her husband tried not to influence her too much with regard to the unis they preferred.

H wanted to do medicine and there was a lot for her to do – tests, interviews and evidence of work experience. She had got good grades and was aiming for a '*good*' uni. They had put a lot of effort into the process – lots of visits, consulting league tables, talking to people, using their (limited) contacts in the medical profession to ask for advice on different unis and courses. Rachel had got the necessary work experience for her, after H had tried but with no luck.

Her description of her child and of their relationship

She described H as focused, determined and disciplined and bit shy – she said that H had '*driven*' the process, but now she was starting to have doubts about moving away. An example of her being focused is that Rachel had never had to ask or remind her daughter to do her homework – she organised herself. Also she was very disciplined in making up the work when she went to ODs. H was concerned about making friends at uni. She is quite mature.

They talked a lot about the process together.

Rachel was concerned about her going too far away and also going to Cambridge and doing medicine, but had helped a lot with her goal with regard to the latter.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

H was working in the next room, (the door was ajar), and Rachel lowered her voice at one point – referring to her as '*doesn't make friends easily'.*

Rachel was happy to chat, thoughtful and articulate and happy to answer questions. However, towards the end of the interview the phone rang

persistently and repeatedly which was a bit distracting, although she didn't stop the interview to take it. I'd also only been able to get 2 hours parking, so I was also mindful of that and of the time (allowing for the walk to the car). She'd also just finished work and I was conscious that it was getting close to tea time. It was quite warm in the room and I had to lean forward on my chair to jot down any notes and check the recorder, which was a bit uncomfortable. At one point I was distracted by a ball appearing to fly over the fence and straight at us!

I had turned up from a busy day at work, but was reasonably relaxed, as I hadn't known whether it would go ahead or not, as I'd not received her emails giving me her address and wasn't sure if she'd got mine which confirmed that I was coming. We had a chat beforehand and a little chat afterwards, but her daughter appeared asking where her trainers were, and she then seemed quite keen to get on.

14. <u>Participant Profile – Sarah</u>

<u>Profile/Background</u>

Sarah is 50 and is an admin officer at a local school. She has a kidney disease which means that she has regular dialysis and is a single parent to J and L (J is the older child and the focus of the interview). She had been to uni herself, but her husband had not and she was conscious of the fact that he had few qualifications and had moved from job to job with periods of unemployment, including at the moment, so she was keen that J avoided this and wanted him to get qualifications.

Her health is clearly a serious issue.

She described her role variously as having encouraged and persuaded him. He hadn't really known what he wanted to do and she had actively pushed the uni route to him, starting the discussion and then going online to look at the different options, ordering prospectuses and then booking ODs (including the ones his dad took him to).

He initially wanted to study finance and accounting *('I'm not sure where that came from')*, but he is good at maths and although she thought that it wasn't right for him (*'wasn't quite him')*, she didn't say so. She said that this was because, feeling that she's pushed him into the whole uni idea, that she was just pleased that he had found a subject. She said that she couldn't see him in an office situation.

She felt that she had been heavily involved in the process, more so than she would like to have been – she wished more of it had come from him. She talked about him not *'owning'* it.

He then changed focus to sports studies. She was much happier with this choice of subject. He had wanted to look at local unis and she felt that this was partly to support her as a single parent and with her significant health issues and partly as his girlfriend was local and his friends (and also due to him not liking change) and playing for the local football team. He was talking about coming home at weekends, which she wasn't keen on and indeed she had wanted him to go further afield to study.

Finance was a worry for her and she discussed this. She'd found getting the info complicated. She did worry about the amount of debt that he would have and how they would manage, but also knew of the struggles she'd had due to her (ex) husband's low paid jobs and unemployment – they'd struggled at times to keep their '*modest*' home.

Her description of her child and of their relationship

Sarah described J as thoughtful, reliable, responsible and later as very sociable, but also as someone who doesn't like change. She then described all the different schools he'd been to at primary school level as they'd moved around and then later to the upheaval of his parents' break up and the impact of her health problems.

Later she also described him as laid back and not someone who gets wound up. (This was also a negative in that he needed reminding of deadlines and also she booked the ODs as she thought that if not, he wouldn't get round to it and the opportunities would be lost).
He changed school from the grammar school to the local comprehensive school in the 6th form as she felt that the former was undermining his confidence academically – she suggested it. She feels that he has flourished there.

She also talked about a good friend, who'd been able to ask him questions she hadn't felt able to such as '*Why X uni?*' and about the wisdom of coming home every week end. She felt that her friend was able to ask much more direct questions than she felt able to. She described how he had to be in the '*right mood*' for them to be able to talk, as sometimes he would be unresponsive, but she also described how the two of them were close, he was closer to her than his dad.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

We conducted the interview in the lounge with the door open and at the beginning L sat in with us, before wandering off and towards the end I could see J outside the door, perhaps waiting for the interview to end for his tea. At one point he came in to get the laptop. He knew my son through football.

Sarah had forgotten about the interview but was fine with us doing it anyway, but I was conscious of the fact the evening meal was cooking in the background and of the presence of her son towards the end of the interview.

15. Participant Profile – Tina

Profile/Background

Tina is a single mum whose partner was never interested in her sons' education, whereas she's always been to all the parents' evenings. She sees education as very important and thinks that by going to uni "*he'll make something of himself*". She has 2 boys, M who's nearly 18 and his younger brother who's 16.

She said that his HE choice has been very much his decision and that in fact the boys have always made their own decisions and been '*very positive in their choices*" and she's always supported them – wanting them to be happy in what they do. She was quite articulate, but had not been very involved in the decision, but was happy with that.

She seemed a bit anxious about him going away and was reassured that at Warwick there were staff in the student accommodation who could keep an eye out and perhaps organise things for them. She said that she and her younger son would miss him dreadfully.

Neither she nor her ex-partner had been to university, although she's done a college course and she works as a checkout operator and doesn't drive. She lived in a small house in a rather rundown area. She also said that although she's a single parent, her sons have always had the proper uniform and that it depends what you choose to spend your money on ('*not cigarettes and booze*'). Her ex has not kept in contact with M at all and only very sporadically with S.

She also described how M had been seriously ill in year 8/9 with septicaemia and could have died and had been ill for 6 months. She described how she'd helped him choose his GCSEs as they'd had to do it from the booklet and missed the option evening. She later said that this experience had made him more determined.

He is hoping to study maths at Warwick.

Her description of her son and their relationship

She said that he was not chatty and that they hadn't discussed the process much – "*he keeps his cards close to his chest*" was how she described it. He didn't tell her which of the 5 unis he'd decided on until after he'd decided – she was sure it would be Bath and Cardiff and it wasn't. He didn't even tell her the dates of his exams. When he comes in from school he says hello and then goes straight upstairs to get on with his schoolwork.

She described M as very focussed and quiet, a few good friends but not one to be out all the time and not one to drink. He's a perfectionist, who redid some exams to improve his marks even though they were A grade. She thought that he was ready for university. She said that he was very thorough and had done a lot of research into his choices – she said that he was not like his brother, who was very impetuous, but he weighed things up and gave the example of if they had a bit of money to spend.

She said that it was his choice, but also that she would have given him advice if he'd asked for it, but was happy to support his decision. (She contrasted this with her own mother who tried to find her a job and consequently she was very keen not to push her children, but to let them make their own decisions). She was clearly very proud of his achievements.

Field Notes and a few reflections on the interview

After the last 2 longer interviews, I was a bit disappointed that this interview was a bit shorter and after about 20 minutes I did wonder how much longer it would last. This meant that I was less relaxed and focussing on what to say next. I had gone into it quite confident. Tina's younger son came through the room to get to the kitchen. There was one small interruption when someone came in to ask about parking outside. I did feel a bit awkward when I mentioned my son watching TV in his room, when she said that they only had one TV, and likewise she described going to ODs on the train, as she didn't have a car. She had set it up for us to sit in the lounge, but as there was nowhere for the recorder, we'd had to move, which had meant her moving to clear a space for us on the table. However, she was open and friendly.

16. Participant Profile – Wendy

Profile/Background

Wendy works as a social worker for a charity. She has an OU degree and also has another degree (teaching); her husband has a degree in social sciences. Her older son dropped out after the first year of A levels and is now unemployed (and lives back at home) and her married daughter has returned to study and is going into the final year of a social work degree at a local uni. She said that education was important to them; they were '*the sort of people*' who talked about things – not about the soap operas but who were interested in people. She also mentioned this in terms of her Christian faith and was wearing a cross.

She described feeling '*vulnerable*' at the end of the interview and wondered whether she should have persuaded her son to study at BU which would have been easier to get to. She also said that perhaps he should have chosen a more vocational course, as with psychology you have to go on to get further qualifications if you want to work in that field. She knew about psychology, and they talked about it together, talking about previous psychological studies – and she said that she thought that it was a modern subject which still had relevance, despite lots of studies being quite old, as it was about how people think.

They had a folder of info they'd collected and she'd looked through the info he'd brought back from his visits and online and she said that she was the sort of person who likes to '*find things out*', she later said that about ringing up .

They'd talked about the visits, but she hadn't been very specific about what they'd talked about.

She was keen to say that it was J's choice and that he'd filled out the form and she'd mostly been involved with helping him with the subject choice and talking about some of her experiences at uni (telling him that the first year was just about consolidation) and about colleagues' jobs in the field. However, she also described how she'd rung up Southampton and asked about the bursaries and also about the possibility of him staying in uni accommodation if the commuting became too much – but they weren't able to give her much help on that.

She said that she was someone who liked to have things planned (including a career).

She said that getting a job was a worry in the current climate and they had talked to him about other options, but that he'd wanted to go to uni, and she supported this.

Her description of her child and of their relationship

She described him as '*young*' for his age – a summer birthday and that she worried about him getting tired and about him needing to '*catch up'*. He'd had to catch up when he'd started at primary school and had fallen asleep while the others were working. However, she did say that he'd caught up now.

J had liked the fact the Southampton was 'vibrant' with people from different cultures which she contrasted with where we both live – she said that he thought that this was a good thing.

Location was a key factor as J wanted to live at home and this was partly down to his lack of confidence – none of his friends were going to the same unis and he was a bit worried about going on his own. She was quite happy with this (staying at home). She later said that she thought that all unis were the same for psychology and she would have rather he'd put BU first as it was nearer and all her concerns were about how he would get to Southampton and she was worried that he'd find commuting very tiring and didn't want him to cycle from the station. Her husband was going to go with him over the summer a few times both on a bike and on the bus to see how it worked out.

He went to all 3 ODs or visits with friends (she thinks it was 3) and he was quite independent – he hadn't wanted her or her husband to go along, she described feeling a bit hurt by this.

She was concerned about the debt he would come out with and they had talked about it. She'd done some research into it – echoing the point about liking to find out about things. She did say though that he was a typical student in that he liked studying, she never had to nag him to do his homework and he'd done well in his AS levels.

Field notes and a few reflections on the interview

This was rather a short interview and I found it a bit disconcerting as I wasn't sure that it would even last an hour, so I was clock watching a bit. Wendy

seemed a bit nervous or reserved and was quite measured in what she said. She did say at one point that she probably wasn't being much help. I found it hard getting her to open up much, although she was friendly and tried to answer all the questions. This plus her lack of much involvement in the process, made it quite difficult. She did seem to want reassurance at times – '*is Southampton a good uni'* for the course she asked for example. She asked me about where I worked and about the course I was undertaking and at the end after the recording we talked about problems of high tuition fees and unemployment and on inequality of opportunity.

Appendix E

Reflexive Statement

N.B. This was written before the research was conducted

My thesis is in an academic area about which I have already done some reading and in which I have already conducted a couple of pieces of research. I also work in HE and have some involvement in recruitment (helping at Open Days). Thus, I already hold some views on how and why students make choices. I also recognise that much work in this area – student choice – is quantitative and positivist, although my research will be qualitative, but this can lead to views about how students 'should' make choices (normative), which may also have influenced my opinions. There are certain strands of the HE choice literature which resonate with me, and I must be careful not to construct a literature review, and project, which simply reinforces these views.

Additionally, I am undertaking this experience myself with my child contemporaneously, so I must be mindful of privileging respondents in my analysis who share my views and experiences of the process and ensure that I fully represent all respondent views. In doing this, during the interviewing, I thus must be wary of 'leading' the discussion and of revealing support for certain views (even if only through body language such as nodding in agreement, or leaning in) and of moving the discussion into areas (or back into areas) which I feel to be important in the process, or which chime with my own experiences (see section 3.5.3 on piloting). I'm also naturally talkative, so I must be careful not to join in the interviews, when I have undergone similar experiences, or share the same views.

My own intellectual background is within marketing which tends to be normative and thus favours models and logical structures, so this may lead me to seek a more logical process from respondents than might have actually existed. This chimes with my disposition, as I am fairly pragmatic and like structure. I'm also someone who researches things thoroughly, and again I must be careful not to favour respondents' stories which take a similar approach. Discussing my views and interpretations with my supervisors and with colleagues who don't share my views on H.E. choice and who come from different theoretical perspectives, will help me to recognise my own prejudices and those times when I am not managing to 'bracket' my views effectively. I must also ensure that I consider alternative explanations and perspectives when I am interpreting my findings and that I make sure that there is evidence in the transcripts for the assertions that I am making.

I also need to note the context of the university where I work and of its students and of my direct experiences of teaching and interacting with them, and to think about how these might influence my perceptions of H.E. choice. For example, my feeling that the course and the academic side of the university experience should be prioritised over other aspects, must be put aside. The broader context for my research is the current state of Higher Education where students and their parents seem to increasingly see themselves as 'consumers' and thus to have certain expectations. There is a growing body of literature which critiques this marketisation, (see discussion in Chapter 1), so I need to be careful not to produce findings which simply

support this literature. I also need to note that my own experiences of education in the 1980s and my experiences of working in HE, may make me less tolerant of some students' and parents' views, so I need to be careful not to be judgemental and to listen with an open mind.

I have also read literature on the differing roles that schools, and certain types of parents, can play in the process by using social and cultural capital (David et al., 2003) and 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) to help their child and I must be careful not to let my personal feelings about this behaviour influence my thinking and attitudes to respondents.

I shall need to attempt to 'bracket' all these pre-understandings as far as possible, and certainly to acknowledge them, but I recognise that it would be naive to think that I can fully put them all aside, as bracketing can only ever be partial, never absolute (see methodology chapter section 3.9).

Brief Comments on the above statement after completing the thesis.

Although I tried to outline all the different influences on my thinking in the above statement, actually of course being reflexive is much more complex than just trying to identify possible areas of bias. In particular, the area I found most difficult to 'set aside' was the similarity and differences of participants' experiences to my own. I found it difficult not to join in with the discussion and not to react with surprise at certain statements they made (for example that their child hadn't visited his/her back up choice, or whose back up choice required higher grades than their first choice), or to offer an opinion on the choices (see section 3.9.2). Listening back to the recordings, I am aware of a few times when my questions or comments were 'leading' ('so is it a team then?') or when I gave an opinion ('they're all good universities...'). Additionally, where I agreed with a statement or said 'I'm hearing that a lot' which may have encouraged participants to continue discussing a particular topic, or to give it more emphasis as they seek to please me as the interviewer.

Discussions with my supervisors and colleagues helped me to realise too that at times my views were normative (for example my view that students should look at how universities approach subjects in different ways, so that they may select the approach which will best suit their needs (Baldwin and James, 2000 – section 2.3.2)). Also to understand that choices made for 'emotional' reasons could also be 'rational' and sensible and that the reality is that choices are often made for a wide variety of reasons, including a sense of what just 'feels right'. Looking back at my earlier article (Haywood and Molesworth, 2010) I note that our description of students focusing on 'peripheral' aspects of HE service offering (section 2.3.1), could be seen as normative. However, as my findings were quite different to my expectations (see conclusion 6.2), and I was genuinely surprised by them, this has reassured me that I did not manipulate them to support my beliefs, or the literature. They also resulted in my reflecting further on the HE choice process I underwent with my child and of how far it too reflected our relationship.

As I am finishing off my thesis, I am now undergoing the choice process again with my second child and am finding it a mixed experience which is quite difficult and stressful at times, but it is a quite different experience this time round. Again it is causing me to reflect further on our relationship.

Appendix F

UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton

CONSENT FORM *(version 1)*

Study title: The involvement of parents and their experiences of the process leading up to their child's university choice

Researcher name: Helen Haywood

Ethics reference: 1243

Please initial the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the participant information sheet (Feb 2012/version 1) and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

☐

I agree to the audio–recording of the interview

☐

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study

☐

I agree to my data being used as part of an anonymised summary of the overall findings to be presented to ▮▮▮▮ School

☐

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without consequence

☐

Data Protection

I understand that information collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on a password protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purpose of this study. All files containing any personal data will be made anonymous.

Name of participant (print name)..

Signature of participant..

Date..

Appendix G

Ethics Approval Email from University of Southampton Ethics Committee

From: ERGO [DoNotReply@ERGO.soton.ac.uk]
Sent: 15 March 2012 13:21
To: Haywood H.S.
Subject: Your Ethics Submission (Ethics ID:1243) has been
reviewed and approved

Submission Number: 1243
Submission Name: The Involvement of parents and their
experiences of the process leading up to their child's
university choice
This is email is to let you know your submission was approved by
the Ethics Committee.

You can begin your research unless you are still awaiting
specific Health and Safety approval (e.g. for a Genetic or
Biological Materials Risk Assessment)

Comments
1.This proposal has been carefully designed and has no ethical
concerns. Maybe only a minor thing: in the risk assessment form
the researcher could explain further why she thinks that she's
likely to be affected [by the research study].

2.Potential ethical problems have been well considered and the
proposal is thorough and detailed.

Click here to view your submission<http://www.ergo.soton.ac.uk>

ERGO : Ethics and Research Governance Online
http://www.ergo.soton.ac.uk

DO NOT REPLY TO THIS EMAIL

Appendix H

Practical tips for HEIs & schools derived from my data

HEIs

HEIs should not appear to be too desperate to recruit with regard to bombarding students with post offer communications and/or giving the impression in these or at Open Days that the student would be accepted almost regardless of their A level grades. Even offering too many incentives could be off-putting and cause parents to wonder about the institution's quality.

HEIs however should make an effort to appearing welcoming at interviews or Open Days – it was felt by some participants that the 'better' universities (e.g. Russell Group and Oxbridge) made no or little effort – one participant spoke angrily of a university running late with the interviews and reducing her child's interview to about 12 minutes. Some participants felt that these institutions gave the impression that you should be grateful to be even considered by them and that they made little effort on these occasions.

Linked to the above point, HEIs should not leave parents completely out of the Open Days or interviews – in some cases participants could not even wait with their child or have a look round the university themselves. They were just left to hang around. Some parents were keen to meet other applicants or current students and to get a 'feel' for the place.

HEIS should make sure that all communications during the application process are prompt and clear – universities that are very late making offers or do not reply to follow up questions, cause a lot of stress. Likewise HEIs need to have a clear, well organised web site (not like the UCAS one, about which many participants complained).

HEIs need to make sure that the Open Days are well run and that staff are well organised, informed, welcoming and efficient – parents and students make judgements about the whole university based on these things – '*well if they can't even run an Open Day...*' (Chloe). There was frustration that staff on hand could not always answer questions and/or appeared rushed. One Open Day was described as a bit like a 'production line' with talks being scheduled very tightly back-to-back and people being ushered out of the lecture theatre before they could ask any questions.

Appendix H

The timings of interviews and Open Days can also be an issue – and HEIs should ensure that they do not clash with A level exam periods (January) and very busy periods in the A level calendar. There was a sense from some participants that universities either were not aware of or did not care about these dates. Also interviews or Open Days which were held on week days (usually Wednesdays) with very early starts or late finishes which meant an overnight stay and the child and parent needing to take 2 days off school/work caused a problem and there was then often a lot of hanging about.

Schools

As many of my participants came from the same school, it is interesting to see how perspectives varied on the process and the amount of help they and their child got. For example, some participants felt that there was too much emphasis on Oxbridge and medical school applications, whereas some of those whose child was in this category felt that not enough was being done for this group (particularly in view of the early application deadline).

It was felt to be essential that schools provide guidance and support on the Personal Statement and ensure that students start the application process early. Also schools need to make sure that students and parents were aware of the key deadlines and were reminded of them frequently and provide detailed advice on the process, as well as one-to-one advice on individual universities and courses to the students. The school's use of the VLE rather than relying on children to pass on information was appreciated, as was holding separate meetings for parents, although not all parents could attend and this could then itself cause frustration. Given the stresses and frustrations that some parents experienced and the fact that this process became about parenting and maintaining the relationship with the child, some parents very much appreciated being able to pass some of the responsibility back to the school. They also appreciated being able to either unite with or delegate certain aspects to the school in terms of getting their child to hit the deadlines, so that they did not feel that it was all down to them to ensure that it was done on time.

Appendix I

'Jasmine' INTERVIEW – 15 JUNE 2012

Interviewer: I emailed it you. I don't know whether you had a chance to have a look at it.

Participant: I'm quite happy with it, yes.

Interviewer: Yes, that's fine and I'll just quickly summarise just a couple of things I'd like to sort of draw your attention to just very quickly. So I'm talking to you today just to find out a little bit more about parents and obviously you in this case are involved in the decisions about the child going to higher education. So it's J, isn't it?

Participant: Yes, it is, J, yes.

Interviewer: Yes, that's right. So the choices he's made and how far you've been involved in it but with regard to this, just very quickly I'd just like to just confirm a few points. Firstly, that obviously I don't -- won't pass your data on to anybody else or discuss this with anybody else. I'll store the data securely. When I write it up I'll just put pseudonyms for everybody so everybody will get a different name and their child will get a different name.

Participant: Yes, that's fine.

Interviewer: So, you know, it's anonymised in that sense. The right to withdraw at any point. If during the interview you don't want to carry on or after the interview you think, oh, I wasn't happy with that for some reason, you know. Obviously that's no problem, just email me and I can take your data out. I'm providing findings for (xxxx school) because they've put me in touch with a lot of the people. Again it'll be aggregated data and sort of top line findings but if you don't want to be part of that, that's fine. I can take anybody out who doesn't want to be, it doesn't matter. If you've got any questions now or as we're going through obviously ask me. If you have any questions later then you can obviously email me or my phone number's on the participant -- yes.

Participant: Yes, that's fine.

Interviewer: So if you're happy with all that, if you could just initial the boxes and just fill your name in there.

Participant: Yes, not a problem.

Interviewer: And, again, obviously if there's anything you don't want like the (xxxx school) you know, just leave that blank and I'll just take you out of that. So that's that.

Participant: What's the date today?

Interviewer: 15th.

[2.09 – 2.46 –General chat]

Interviewer: So, again, just to say there's no right or wrong answers. I'm not looking for anything other than just --

Participant: What process we went through, yes.

Interviewer: -- and how people have felt, what they thought about it, you know, and I'm just sort of talking to mums just to get a collection of stories. So there's nothing I'm looking for, I'm not sort of here to sort of judge or here to think, oh, I say, I didn't do that, no. And, as I say, I might jot the odd thing down but only -- it's just to sort of remind me to come back. Perhaps we'll be talking about something and you'll say something and I think, well, just jot that. So don't be put off, I'm not sort of --

Participant: Oh, no, you go ahead. I've done these sort of things myself before so don't worry.

Interviewer: Thank you. So if we could just start just as a sort of a warm up, if you could just tell me a little bit about you and J, I mean separately probably.

Participant: In what sense? What do you want me to tell you?

Interviewer: Well, a little bit about him that would just sort of give me -- just as a sort of, you know, quick, what do we call it, pen portrait or grand --

Participant: Of him as a character or of him as --

Interviewer: Yes, as a character as much as anything, yes.

Participant: Right, okay. Yes, well, J is dyslexic to start off with and he went to xxxx School the same as D, obviously that's when I met H.

Interviewer: Yes, I was thinking that.

Participant: And the reason for our choice to sending him there was because of his dyslexia because he was actually quite a shy child and struggled. So the system there at school was great for him and he came out into this very confident and well balanced individual which was really good. Him as a character, he's quite laid back. He's 6ft 4in so his height is good for him because it gives him the confidence I think but he's quite a laid back character but he's also very focused.

He runs and goes to the gym and he's done a couple of 10K runs and wants to do a marathon. So he's actually quite a channelled person, not over sociable, likes to do his own thing and quite comfortable just doing his own thing. But he's known what he's wanted to do since he was 8 years old and has tailored his choices along the way very much to what he wants to do. Now we did have a bit of a blip when it came to the actual (choicing) but again he went through the whole process, looked at everything, and he went back onto the channel that he's wanted to do right at the beginning.

Interviewer: Right, and what is that?

Participant: He wants to do animation art. He wants to be an animator.

Interviewer: Right, oh, I say and he's known that since he was 8.

Participant: Since he was 8, about 8.

Interviewer: So what sort of --

Participant: He's drawn ever since he was small so since he was 4 years old he's done a lot of drawing and I think when you're dyslexic your strengths become very much more artistic than they do become academic, so he's obviously playing to his strengths. He loves films, he loves the film industry. He loves the idea of working in the film industry and I think it's quite a solitary job as well, although you have to be quite part of a team player you have your project and you do your bit of your project. So although he is -- he can -- he is very sociable at college he does like his space and his own time as a person.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, because you said that, didn't you?

Participant: Yes, he doesn't drink. He doesn't drink, he doesn't go out partying. He prefers to go the gym, run and that. I've got a very unusual teenager.

Interviewer: Yes. Well, I have to say, you know, they're all different I think.

Participant: But not unusual in the sense that I'm not moaning. I can tell you he's --

Interviewer: No, I bet. No, that's right. No, I think sometimes you get such a lot of coverage that you -- of teenagers that everybody thinks that they are, you know, one size fits of all but, of course, they're not any more than any other age group is.

Participant: No.

Interviewer: So they're -- I mean there's a wide -- oh, right. So how do you feel about him doing animation?

Participant: I've championed it and supported it all the way through. I think if you have a goal and you want to do that then I've supported him and helped him and pushed him in the right directions to actually achieve what he wants to do. And we sat and we have very, very big discussions, we talk very well together and I've said, you know, you don't have to go university when we were going through all this process, we can sit and we can think of a different route. We can -- You can go in and try and get an apprenticeship doing something. So we looked at all of the options and I didn't say, oh, you've got to go to university, you've got to get a job. We'll look at what he wants to do in the best way possible but what he wants to do needs the skill so that's why the university has to be -- it has to be because he can't get into that industry not having the skill.

Interviewer: No, and he needs that through university to be --

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Oh, I see and where's this kind of talent come from? Are you and your husband sort of artistic?

Participant: I've always loved art and I've always loved films as well, and I think maybe as a child growing up we very much always did a lot of arty-farty things together and maybe that's just grown out of him really. But I don't if you saw painting on the wall on the way in of the big monster.

Interviewer: Yes, I didn't, no.

Participant: Okay, that's one of his but even this one here is one he did when he was about four years old which we've framed. So, you know, it's been there and I think we've tried to nurture out positives from him because he's always struggled academically.

Interviewer: Right, yes.

Participant: But he is -- he's very, very channelled -- very focused because when he was at school he was -- he struggled with English, not so much with Maths but he did with English, was all in there but couldn't get it back down on the paper and his -- he was in the bottom group for English. And he had a great English teacher at xxxxx school and basically he was told he wasn't able to do English Literature because they were in the bottom group, and they had to focus on getting them to get their English language, they didn't want to complicate it. But J said, well, I really want to do English Literature. Three of them stayed behind and did it as an after school activity on a Friday. So he used to stay at school for an extra two hours to do it because he wanted to do it.

And so then the teacher said, right, okay, we'll put you in for the lower tier which means the highest you could get is a C but he's very much like this, he hates being told you can't do something. So he said, no, I want to go into for the higher tier, what do I need to do to get to that and his teacher said, well, you know, we need to do a bit more extra work. So he went in on two or three Saturdays to study extra poems and everything else. They put in for higher tier and he said to his teacher I'm getting to get an A and his teacher went come on, J, let's be real here and he did, he got an A.

So anybody that he tells him something he can't do he really goes his best to get it. He's a bit too focused sometimes, I tell him to chill out a bit but --

Interviewer: Yes, because I was going to come back because -- sorry, because you were sort of saying laid back and focused. Can give you me some examples of what you mean by that?

Participant: What, as in laid back?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: He doesn't get stressed about things. He's very -- When you see him -- It's a pity because he's just nipped out but he might be back before we're finished. He's very -- He doesn't get phased. He doesn't get phased by things and he doesn't rush to do anything. He doesn't get angry, he doesn't get stressed. He's just very, very calm about everything.

Interviewer: Yes, that's nice and focused you were saying particularly (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Well, I think that's his running. I think that's with his running. His dad cycles. He's out actually in the Alps at the moment on this cycle challenge thing. So I think the exercise and everything has come from N's side but N's not pushed it but I think that's where it may be introduced him to it and it's something he can do on his own. Being an only child as well I think --

Interviewer: Yes, I was going to come onto that (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Yes, he's an only child and I think we've had quite a big influence on him because obviously everything we've done we've taken him along with us and -- You know, when N ran a few half marathons and a couple of marathons he -- J would be there with us as well. We'd go and champion him on, and obviously we'd take him to the cinema and I'd take him to the theatre. So he's been introduced to all of these things at an early age but we've never pushed any of it, he's chosen to take it up himself. But he's very, very laid back, even if you ask H he's very -- He's not your typical moody teenager, he doesn't play on the Xbox a lot, he doesn't sit in his room. He very much joins the family so we all have meals together all of the time. In the evening he won't be up in his room he'll sit down here with us and we'll be watching TV.

Interviewer: Yes, I hesitate to say unusual because of course it isn't, I mean kids are all different but it certainly isn't my teenage son but (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: No, he doesn't and I sometimes say because he says, oh, what are you going to watch on TV and we'll say, oh, we're going to watch so-and-so because obviously N and I both work. I say you can go to your room if you want to watch something yourself and he goes, no, I'll sit down here, and he'll just have his laptop on and -- He likes to be in our company.

Interviewer: Although you did say that he's also -- quite likes - I can't remember the phrase - likes his own company. So, yes, he's a sort of (inaudible - over speaking)

Participant: Yes, because I work Monday to Thursday so he's quite comfortable being here on his own all day every day and has done from the age of 16 really, 15, 16, and he's quite comfortable. He'll put the washing out for me or empty the dishwasher. Oh, yes, he's well trained.

Interviewer: I have to say, yes, because I've just about said to my son if it rains you will get the washing in thinking there's no chance. It could be a tsunami and he wouldn't notice, you know. So, you know, you're doing well with that one. Yes, because I think you said he was sociable but he also liked his own company.

Participant: Yes, he's very sociable at college with people when he's at college and he's just been on a trip to LA and he's -- with his college guys and he had a great time with them. But then he won't be spending every waking moment with mates, he'll have an odd mate every now -- round now and again. He prefers to do something constructive with his time I think.

Interviewer: Yes, which is interesting. As I say they are all different.

So where's he hoping to study? Well, it was animation I think you said.

Participant: Yes, Animation Art. Well, we looked at -- Obviously when we went through the process we looked at what courses were available where. So we looked at the whole country and -- then we had a big discussion about did he want to go away? Well actually, no, I will change my tact there slightly.

He had a thought - this is when we had the slight wobble beforehand - and he said I'm not sure if I want to go and do this now, but I think they all go through this like crisis in their heads, don't they, and I said, well, what do you want to do? He said, I don't know, I want to do something with photography because at the moment he's done really well in his A Level Photography and enjoys being outside with the camera and walking. He loves being outside and taking pictures, and he took some fantastic pictures, and I said, well, maybe we look at what courses are available, photography courses.

And so we searched the internet but he wanted to do wildlife photography, he didn't want to do fashion photography or

anything like that. So we found a course in Falmouth in Cornwall. So obviously this was during the processes. We looked at Bournemouth because Bournemouth has got the top animation courses, the top place to go for animation, and I will rewind slightly on this in a moment because I'll go back through slightly a different process than what we've done.

So he looked at Bournemouth and we looked at Falmouth and at that stage I said, well, let's go and look at animation in Bournemouth because that is what you wanted to do and we've not gone through this process, so off to Bournemouth we went. He came out, wasn't particularly fussed with it but I think his mind was on the photography now more than the animation. So we had a trip down to Cornwall all of us, we went down there, and we went and had a look at the photography and he didn't like the course at all. He very much buys into people does J, not so much into things, he buys into people. So if people turn him on he gets animated and very excited by it. If he finds people very flat and very deadpan it doesn't excite him so then he's not very good with dealing with that if you know what I mean.

Interviewer: Yes, I do.

Participant: Because he did well English because he really bought into his English teacher. He's done well in Photography because again the teacher and him have really, really clicked and the same with Film Studies. So any time he gets someone that really sort of inspires him he gets excited by it.

So this course anyway was naff. We just sat back, me and N, and just let him, you know, just make your choices and you have a look and see what you think.

Interviewer: So what did you think of it? Sorry to interrupt you. I mean because --

Participant: I didn't really -- I would of -- I would back him on anything he wanted to do. What did I think of the course? I thought it --

Interviewer: And the place? I mean did you --

Participant: I thought it was a long way away but I didn't again make my thoughts known because when I was 16 I went off to London on -- never having left home from Lincolnshire. I lived in Lincolnshire and got myself this like apprenticeship type thing in hotels, so I'd done it at 16. So I thought, no, I must sit back

because I did that for my -- to my parents if you know what I mean.

It felt a long way away and knowing J and his character I wasn't sure whether he would like it because they kept focusing on this great social life and going out drinking and going out surfing. And I'm thinking, well, this actually isn't your character, J, you know, this isn't you. So I didn't say any of that at the time.

So -- He quite liked Falmouth, he thought it was a nice place and anyway we went and had a look at the animation course as well while we were there. He lit up basically. We went in and sat through the talk on that and he said I've made a decision, I definitely want to go and do animation. So it was good for him to see something else to confirm to himself that, yes, this is what I want to do. So we had a look at the animation and then we sat down and N sort of said to him, well, if you're wanting to do animation then Falmouth we won't necessarily need to go to. Let's have a look at other places because obviously we were focusing on photography at this stage. This was in January I think or October sometime.

So he said, right, we want to go back and look at Bournemouth at again because there must have been something I missed because it's the top one in the country, so maybe my head wasn't in the right place and it was our first visit. So let's go and have a look at Bournemouth again and then he decided he wanted to actually live at home, okay.

So he decided he wanted to go locally because he thought -- We had a big discussion again about the social life and I said, J, you know what you're like, you're gym's important to you. You're not the biggest socialite, you don't go out drinking. You know, you might change, I don't know, but that's not you so do you really need to be away because going away to university that's what that experience -- you go there to do that experience and he said, no, I don't think I do. He said I think I would prefer to have a look locally and he's got his heart set on Bournemouth then at this stage because it was obviously the top one.

We went to look at Portsmouth and we went to look at Solent, Southampton Solent. So we went and looked at all three and he decided that Bournemouth was going to be his first choice and he liked Portsmouth. Southampton was okay but later on in the process he decided if Southampton was all he was offered and

he didn't get Bournemouth and he didn't get Portsmouth he wasn't going to go to university. So he was very set on what he wanted to do.

But then we have a friend who's in the film industry and she knows the guy that did all the special effects for the James Bond films, all of White Knight, the Batman films and so -- and Inception and he'd just won an Oscar. We'd met him before two or three times and anyway S gave J his email address and she says I've spoken to C, he's happy for you to email him to give you some advice which was great. So he emailed C and sort of said to him this is what I've been to look at, this is what I want to do, what do you think is going to be my best one to go for and it was great.

So they were emailing each other and he was giving him advice on if you want to do this you need to go to that one, if you want to focus on that you need to go to that one because animation's a big --

Interviewer: Yes, I was going to say it's obviously more -- there's obviously more to it than you think from the outside.

Participant: Yes, well you've got 2D animation which is just normal pen and drawings like the old-fashioned Walt Disney type original cartoons. Then you've got 3D animation which is what they use in a lot of advertising, apps on your telephone, so it's not just films. There's animation in absolutely everything and then you've got your special effects which is more of explosions and, yes, and tsunamis if you want -- yes, that sort of thing. So not necessarily cartoons it's more special effects.

So Bournemouth was ideal for the special effects which is what he wants to do initially. Portsmouth is very much focused on the 3D animation so more for films and for apps and things like that and maybe your Pixar type films, and then Southampton was more focused on your 2D, old-fashioned drawings. So he went -- He got offered at Solent but he's counted that one out and Portsmouth he -- oh, we had a bit of a blip on that one actually because they didn't get his -- They got his application but he didn't get an email back from them about the interview. So we got to the end of January and I said to J you really should have had this by now because we've got to get everything sorted. So he called them and they said, oh, yes, we did send you an email before Christmas, and he trawled through all his emails, nothing there. And she said -- he said, well, am I too

late now for my application because obviously he didn't want to put all his eggs in one basket with Bournemouth.

So anyway he had to scan all of his portfolio because he had to do a portfolio so -- which I can show you that afterwards as well if you want. He had to scan it all in and send it through something on the computer, I can't remember what they called it, Flickr or something. And then he got an interview through and he did get offered a place there. So it was lucky that he jumped on it and pursued it because otherwise he would have been too late.

And then Bournemouth he had to go and do their own entrance exams because, yes, they don't just go on grades, you have to go and do a life drawing test. They had to do a maths test and he had to do a -- oh, what was the other test called, like a situation test where he had to work out certain things, a logic test. So he had to do three tests and he had to get a certain amount of percentage like 90 something per cent to even be considered. So again, he put himself under a lot of pressure and he contacted his old maths teacher. She gave him some papers and stuff to revise from because he'd not done maths since GCSE, never done life drawing. He's done drawing. So he set himself up with his old teacher that he used to go to do art classes with when he was doing GCSE Art, and she went and did a bit of life drawing with him and everything.

So he pre-prepared himself really, really well. He had about six weeks in which to get himself sorted and he went and he passed them all with flying colours. But now he's got to get the exams, he needs two As and a B.

Interviewer: I have to say, I mean that's high but I know it's a very popular course so, yes. So two As and a B for that one and then Portsmouth is his second.

Participant: Portsmouth he will be fine because he's on for an A for his Film Studies, he's on for an A for his Photography but his stumbling block is going to be his Computing because at the moment he's sitting on a C and it's whether he can get that. He's done a re-sit a couple of weeks ago to try and get last year's up a little bit higher. But it's a possibility if he gets two As and a C they may still take him because he was only 20 marks -- 320 marks I think he needs but at Portsmouth he'll be fine.

Interviewer: Yes, and so he's not doing Art A Level?

Participant: No, he's doing Photography.

Interviewer: It's Photography, Film Studies, Photography and Computing, yes.

Participant: So how did we come to those choices, this is what you're going to say, aren't you?

Interviewer: Yes, I was -- There's lots of things. I keep writing things down and then of course my dreadful writing, I can't read it.

Participant: Well, he came to those choices because he -- when he was just about to go into Year 9 when he had to make his GCSE choices he was actually searching for universities --

Interviewer: Oh, gosh.

Participant: Yes, this is how focused he is. So he said, right, well if I want to do this what am I going to need, so at GCSE he even chose the subjects he needed to give him the right choices for that. So he already had in his mind it was Bournemouth he was focusing on all the time, and it sort of said they needed ICT, they needed Art, an art based subject, and I think he needed a science. Well, they had to do Science anyway but he did ICT GCSE and he did Art GCSE, so he needed both of those. So he'd already picked those and then when he went on to do college at B he then had a look again to see what A levels he needed to be able to do that. and he needed an art based subject, photography being one of them.

Interviewer: Oh, yes. Oh, I see, yes, because I would have thought art, I mean what do I know? But, yes, so it's not art (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: But Photography again is -- because they do all of the, what do you call it? What do you call it when you alter pictures?

Interviewer: Digital thingy?

Participant: Yes, so all that side of it and they use it in films and everything as well. So they do all that in Photography and he needed Computing and he needed --

Interviewer: I suppose you would, wouldn't you?

Participant: Yes, and if he was doing the actual computer programming he would have need a maths but because he wants to go down the

art route he doesn't need that, so he picked Film Studies. He was going to do Media but he liked actually the Film Studies side of it which is like English Literature of films basically. So they watch the films and write the essays and stuff and everything.

Interviewer: That sounds interesting.

Participant: So he's chosen his subjects all the way along the line with the fact of the end result of going to Bournemouth.

Interviewer: Yes, and did you discuss them -- I mean did you have any thoughts about the -- about his A levels?

Participant: Well, again because he knew what he wanted to do we just sat down and went through the whole booklet. He did History as well at AS level but he didn't -- because he did quite well in his History exam at GCSE because they had to pick four, didn't they?

Interviewer: Yes, that's right, yes.

Participant: But it was a bit of a bridge too far to be honest with you with his dyslexia. It wasn't --

Interviewer: No, and how about choosing B college because you've obviously had to sort of -- you've had to choose that, haven't you, because obviously xxxx school doesn't have the sixth form?

Participant: Yes. He was ready to go to a bigger school, I think, you know, his confidence and everything and we had a look at xxx school. We had a look at T college and we had a look at B college and where else? Did we go somewhere else? No, I think those were the only two but he decided he liked B college. My concern was he quite likes regimentation so obviously with xxxx school you've got that regimentation, with B college you've got -- you're a free spirit, aren't you?

Interviewer: Yes, you do -- Yes, you do hear that. I mean my son's, you know, stayed at school and I think there is -- people do say that the school's sixth forms and the colleges are different perhaps in that sense.

Participant: Yes, but he -- I know he's quite focused and quite self-motivated. He found it quite boring I'll be perfectly honest with you the first year at college where all the kids were loving because they're given all this freedom. He didn't like the fact

he had all of this spare time and it was all a bit lose. He quite likes that regimentation but the second year he enjoyed -- has enjoyed much more. The first six months he liked, the second six months of the first year he didn't enjoy. But I think also as well it knocked his confidence a bit because he did his exams that first Christmas and he didn't do very well, and I think that knocked his confidence a bit.

Interviewer: I think sometimes they do them too early because I mean it's before they have perhaps settled into the subject.

Participant: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Yes, because I know my son's results were a bit mixed.

Participant: He didn't do well at all and I think it knocked him a bit so we had to do a lot of building up again, and then he did well in the summer and I think that brought his confidence back. And the second year he's managed to deal with the whole thing a lot better I think, he's got a lot more casual about it all. But he did say the other day, he said I wish I was back at school, I do miss school. He said I do -- He loved school, loved every minute of it but a lot of kids didn't. He did, loved every minute of school.

Interviewer: Oh, right. So did he say what he -- you know.

Participant: Just likes working.

Interviewer: Yes, and more so than he's working even now in the second year?

Participant: He liked that, he likes a full day. He likes to do the full day in structure. He very much works well with structure.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, oh, that's interesting.

Sort of going back to some of the things you sort of said earlier. You sort of said 'we looked at a lot of things', so how much --

Participant: Oh, we very much did it --

Interviewer: Is it as a team I'm thinking?

Participant: I think so, yes, I think you're right. Some people say he's been my project and I say that's a terrible thing to say but I very much -- I -- In the early days when he was dyslexic I used to have to sit with him a lot to help him with homework and stuff

and everything. But as he got a little older I stepped back, stepped back because he has to sort it out himself. But when it came to making the choices for college we got the booklet and, as I said, I said go through and just tick what bits you're interested in and we'll go together and look at it. So, yes, we very much worked together on that and the same with N as well.

Me more so with J I think on the education side of things but, no, I think those choices need to be made together.

Interviewer: Yes, oh, yes. I was just -- It's just obviously -- you know, I'm just interested in how people approach it. So you talked about his A level choices together, you looked and he'd already thought ahead to what he needed but you and he had a look at the booklet and you went presumably to the -- they would have had an open evening.

Participant: We went to it twice. We went two times because we went -- the first time we went just to get a feel for the college, just to see what we thought of it and if he liked the environment and everything, and had a little bit of a dabble round. He didn't like one of the classrooms because it smelt, this is the sort of thing I was up against. He was, oh, I'm not going to that lesson because it smells in there, and then obviously we shortlisted it a little bit. And then when the next open day was on we went again and I said, right, you need to focus a little bit more on exactly what you want to do now so you need to ask the right questions and -- Oh, and then we just -- I just sat back and just let him deal with it himself really.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, because that's another thing you've said once or twice is that you've sort of sat back both at Falmouth and now you're saying then so --

Participant: Yes, because it's his decision. He's got to decide what he wants to do. I think he's at an age now when your parents' influence is not -- you know, I can't tell him now what to do, he's got to make those choices himself. And I like to think back to when I was his age, and N moved away from home at 16 and I moved away at 16, so we very much had to look after ourselves and make our own choices as well. So we're still there but in the background but not making his choices for him.

Interviewer: No, no, but on the other hand still --

Participant: But then he will turn round to me and go, well, what do you think, mum, because he -- He goes, well what do you think and I will -- I say, well, it's entirely up to you but my thoughts are x, y, z but it's up to you, you know, it's your choice now. So, yes, were are a team. I think we're very much a team and I'm pleased even at this age he still wants to talk to me because I know a lot of teenagers don't. So I'm still -- I'm glad we've still that line of communication.

Interviewer: No, that's right because, no, a lot of them don't.

Did you collect a lot of information? Did you -- Were you sort of looking at what was about university wise particularly or --

Participant: I didn't do it myself, no. He instigated everything. Again we'll have -- we'd have the discussions and then he would send for the prospectuses and then when they came we'd have a look at them together and he would sort of say, oh, yes, I like the looks of that, I like the looks of that. I said is that going to give you what you need to do and -- But he researches a lot on the internet anyway so --

Interviewer: Well, it's all online, isn't it, these days? It's all -- You know, there's so much they can look at. Do you look online as well?

Participant: What, with regard to his courses and stuff?

Interviewer: Yes, have you had a look at all?

Participant: No, not really. I've waited for him to come with a prospectus and then we sit and have a look at it, and very much when we were searching at the beginning we were doing it together. So I think we were sat here with the computer and I said, well, click in Animation Art, see what comes up. We'll look at those. No, that's no good because that doesn't give you so-and-so but he'd already done all of the groundwork on what he wanted.

Interviewer: Yes, so that's interesting, so if we can just sort of go back to that. So when you first thinking, okay, where can we do it. So you sat together and literally just keyed in 'Animation Art' and just saw what came up?

Participant: Yes, and we bought the book as well. I think it's The Top 100 Universities although I found it a bit -- for that particular subject I found it not brilliant. But we went through with a highlighter pen and had a quick look and saw what they put for

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animation, which universities they thought were the best for animation.

Interviewer: Right, yes, I haven't seen that.

Participant: Yes, it's in two sections. You've got like the top performers and then at the back it's the top performers for a particular subject and I think you can pick up Animation Art. I've actually thrown the book away now because I didn't need it but -- and then it sort of showed all the universities of what they actually do. So we went on to line then and had a quick look. We did have a couple of appointments at other ones but we ended up not bothering going to them once he'd seen the Bournemouth and Portsmouth. He'd sort of decided those were the two that were going to give him what he wanted.

Interviewer: Okay, and that was -- When you say 'what he wanted' that was specifically --

Participant: That particular course of what the end result was going to be and also their connection with the industry because obviously when we go to the talks and everything they say who their connections are and what companies because he knows what companies do what. So there's a company called Double Negative which is C's company and what they specialise in, and that did come up in a couple of talks, the one at Falmouth and it came up in Bournemouth, so they have a lot of industry connections. So he was listening to who -- what industries were connected to that particular course.

There's so much to this animation because a friend of his at school wants to do it but he wants to do stop-start animation which is -- I know, when you say animation people automatically just think cartoons.

Interviewer: Cartoons, yes, and special effects but I mean --

Participant: Yes, but like the Wallace and Grommit type of films that's stop-start animation.

Interviewer: Oh, is it?

Participant: Yes, because you have to stop and then you photograph it and you start it again so -- but that process would drive him nuts. I don't think – He wouldn't be interested in doing that I don't think.

Interviewer: No. So when you were looking together at the universities what sorts of things were you looking for?

Participant: To be honest with you I didn't have an opinion on it at all. I didn't got to university at all. I didn't really have an opinion, I just wanted -- I think I was looking at it for him as a person more so than the subject: would this suit his personality?

Interviewer: Yes, okay. So what sort of things were you looking for then that might or might not suit his personality? Can you think of anything where you thought, ooh, that's not him or, oh, that conversely?

Participant: Yes. I think when we went for Falmouth if he had wanted to go away I thought that was actually quite a nice environment. It was smaller because it's a small university. So it's -- He's better in smaller environments I think than he is in big -- because if, you know -- if you got to, I don't know -- My niece went off to have a look at Manchester University and she went to Sheffield University in the end but I think they're quite big establishments, and I think he flourishes better in a smaller environment. So that's what I was looking for, what kind of environment it was. You know, would he get lost in all of this? Would he be happy as a person in this environment?

But the animation side of it is quite specialised so they tend to have their own little section like at Portsmouth. Portsmouth is scattered all over Portsmouth, isn't it, the university?

Interviewer: Yes, I've heard that.

Participant: But, yes, I think I was looking for him as a person, whether he would actually like it. I was actually looking at what kind of people were walking around and looking. I know that sounds strange.

Interviewer: No, you see that's interesting. You know, that's interesting to me.

So other than size, I mean when you were looking online was there anything else that you were able to say, oh, that's him or that's not him or --

Participant: No, because I've never really had the experience of universities. I've never been to university, N has never been to university. I've never even looked round a university. So for me it was a whole new experience for me as well so I couldn't really put my

two-penneth in on what we were looking for. So when we went that first one at Bournemouth that was a bit of a, you know, education for both of us because neither of us had been in that environment before.

Interviewer: So did the three -- If you can -- If we can perhaps sort of -- If you could just tell me about that just in as much detail as you can remember. So did all three of you go?

Participant: Yes. No, it was myself and J just went because I think N might have been away on a cycling thing and sometimes J doesn't like it when we are all together as a *tour de force*, it puts him under a bit of pressure.

Interviewer: No, I can understand that, yes.

Participant: So N said -- I think N was doing an exhibition. That's right, he was doing one of his -- He runs his own company and he was doing an exhibition and I said, right, he obviously couldn't go. I said it's just me and you, J, is that all right and he goes, yes, yes, that's fine, just me and you go and I think he's better then because we're not all going at him from all angles, you know. So I think at the end of the day I said, well, you're going to lead the way on this way because, you know, you're the one who's going to have to go here. And, as I said, it was more of a familiarisation.

Interviewer: Yes. So what did you think? Can you tell me how you --

Participant: Well, I liked it. I thought it was a nice environment.

Interviewer: I have to say I work there. Sorry, but I mean not -- I'm just saying that now.

Participant: The one up at Poole? Is it the Poole site?

Interviewer: Yes. I mean I'm not doing this research for Bournemouth University so I've -- and I've got no vested interest. I mean I just wanted to say that.

Participant: No, we liked it.

Interviewer: I don't mind what you tell me it's not -- but I just didn't want you to find out afterwards from H at some point she works there. You think, oh, wish I'd said that.

Participant: I saw it on your email anyway.

Interviewer: That's all right, sorry, because, as I say, I literally want to hear people's stories about wherever they went, it's not of interest to me what --

Participant: I think the first time we went we weren't both in a brilliant frame of mind because in his mind -- we'd gone through this blip, hadn't we, because of what we wanted to do. So in his mind -- he'd got Falmouth in his mind because that's where he wanted to go and do the photography. So I think we went a bit half-hearted but I said let's just go and just see what it's all about. He loved the facilities and it's quite small the Media Centre, isn't it, and liked all of the equipment although we liked the equipment at Portsmouth better, that was quite interesting.

But he liked the set-up, he liked the feel about the place, thought there's some good looking girls, that's what he did mention to me. I thought, yes, okay, and, yes, and I said, you know, would you -- if you went here would you commute, would you live in, do you want to go look at the accommodation? No, he didn't want to go and look at the accommodation. He said if I go here then I'll commute either by train or by car because he can drive now.

So, yes, I liked it. I thought it was not much different feel about it than B College had because I think B college's a bit --

Interviewer: I've never been to B college to be honest.

Participant: Yes, it's a little bit -- I think they say it's quite a good stepping stone for university. So, yes, I think it had a good feel about it and I thought the people, I know it sounds -- that's really snobby, doesn't it, but I thought the quality of the people that were looking around were nice. If I compare that to Solent, now that does sound really snobby, the sort of quality of the people that were looking around there looked like they wanted to be there and wanted to work. And I think that's been one of J's biggest problems at B college is that half the students who are there don't actually want to be there and don't want to work. And I said the thing is when you get to university because people are, a, paying and, b, it's more specialised in what you want to do you're going to find more like-minded people to work with I think than just people who can't really be arsed. He can't be bothered with people who can't be arsed, he gets frustrated with that.

But, no, I liked the whole feel of Bournemouth.

Interviewer: Yes. So what -- Because when you say 'feel' what sort of -- you know, what did you like about it?

Participant: It felt friendly. It felt friendly and it -- I liked the facilities and I thought they were very up-to-date, and it looked like they invested the money in it.

Interviewer: Yes, because I don't know that side of it all that well.

Participant: Yes, and I think the students looked -- the ones that were showing us around and everything actually looked like they wanted to be there which I think is half the thing. No, I think that's it really, that's all I can describe.

Interviewer: Yes. No, no, that's fine and did you have -- did they have a talk? I mean what sorts of things did you do? So you got there, you looked at and you --

Participant: We got there and we had a tour round the whole of the facilities. So they take you round the whole of the Media Centre because obviously that's where he would be based.

Interviewer: Just the media or the whole -- Do they show you the whole thing?

Participant: No, just -- No, they -- You go to whichever course you're interested in and then they will take you round. So I think the first -- I'm trying to think because the first time we went there and we went a second time. So the first time we went and they just took us round all the Media Centre, showed us where all the facilities were, and then we went to a talk on animation and it was in a presentation room and the guy, the head of animation, was doing the talk on -- and showing us some films and some bits that people had done. And there was a question and answer thing, and then if you wanted to do a certain type of media I think it was we then branched off and went and talked to some of the students that were currently doing that course.

Interviewer: And what were they like? I mean how was that?

Participant: Yes, that was good. As I said to you they were all very positive and they were saying it's hard -- you know, it is hard work and you're only get out of it what you put into it because with animation as well it's -- a lot of it you've got to work on your own, work on your projects, and you've got to put the time in.

Interviewer: Yes, I think it is supposedly quite an intensive one.

Participant: Because tutoring time they don't get -- that's what I was quite interested in, how much teacher/pupil training time they actually got and I think it was only probably about 16 hours a week and the -- But they expect you to work a full week because you've got to go then and produce the stuff but it's like Art. He's been used to that with Art and with Photography of having to do the legwork then himself. So, you know, it's not like Maths, you just do your Maths and then you can forget about it. He's got to physically produced something so it's got to be done.

Interviewer: Yes. So did they tell you 16 hours or did you ask?

Participant: I think it's about 16 hours. No, I think some -- I don't know if someone asked. I might have asked that question actually. I think I might have asked that question and I was interested in that because I'd heard from other people that, you know, you pay all of these fees because money -- the money is a -- you know, is not -- is a biggy this year, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yes, indeed.

Participant: I wanted to know I was going to get value for money.

Interviewer: Okay, and how would you define value for money?

Participant: I think that is -- the one-to-one training time to me is the value and then also what support when they're working on their own do they then get. So if they've got to work 30 hours on their own a week are teachers and everyone, tutors, available for them to be able to glean the information?

Interviewer: So did you ask that?

Participant: Yes, I did.

Interviewer: And what did they say?

Participant: And it was yes, yes, it was that they're on call -- you know, they're around and they're on call and they're there but not physically teaching them. But they're there to work with and that was in both Portsmouth and Bournemouth that came up.

Interviewer: Yes, sorry, I'm thinking did you ask that do you remember or did they tell you?

Participant: Yes. I remember asking it. No, I remember asking that question.

Interviewer: Okay, because I'm interested in -- I'm going to say I'm interested in what you're interested in which sounds silly but you know what I mean?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes, so that was quite (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: To me that was what I wanted to know, knowing J again as a character he likes structure and he likes things to be in order. He's all right left to his own devices to a certain time but you need to know that he's going to get that tuition enough to be able to then run on his own and do his own stuff. So --

Interviewer: Yes. I mean how does 16 hours compare with B college? Do you know how many hours he has there?

Participant: I think, no, much more than that but we knew that in university that that's what happens.

Interviewer: Yes, that's right. You said with him it' particularly people, I mean what did he think of on the first visit the person who did the talk and the students because I think you said it's people with him?

Participant: He wasn't really switched in to the whole thing first time round. So I think the second time round because he had clear in his mind what he wanted to do he was then looking at the people a little bit more and whether there was a bit of a spark there. But he liked what the guy was saying the second time we went, you know, and he was actually stood chatting to him for quite a bit as well, and so I think he was gleaning off that person. It was a lady in Portsmouth actually and in Portsmouth he very much bought into her. She was great which is why -- it's not a big university for animation but he liked her. He quite switched into her straightaway and you can always tell with him because he will bother to make conversation. If he doesn't switch into you he won't bother making conversation with the people he's not interested.

Interviewer: No. So when you say Portsmouth's not big for animation?

Participant: It's because it's not an arts university. Although it has an arts section it's not -- you know, Bournemouth is much more known for it being an art based university and sport, isn't it, after the sport and the same with Falmouth. Falmouth is more of an arts type university whereas Portsmouth I think is -- although they do the arts side of it that's not their biggest section.

Interviewer: Right, so you meant big sort of in size as much as anything. Yes, I wasn't sure.

Participant: Yes, but not as in that's not predominantly their speciality, yes.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Sorry, I'm with you so -- but Portsmouth is his second choice not Falmouth. So what happened to Falmouth?

Participant: He thought it was too far away.

Interviewer: Right, okay.

Participant: Yes. When we came home and we said, well, it's up to you, you know, if you want to go to Falmouth and I think the money side of it as well, you know. We discussed do you need -- if you can get the same locally and live at home do we -- do you need because I said you're going to have to do this, do you need to spend another £7,000 a year to live and you will have to get a job to support yourself. Whereas if you live at home you won't need to get a job because the money that we would have had to help to do with your accommodation we can give you an allowance to help you, so that you can concentrate on what you're doing and not have to work and I think -- It's not that he doesn't want to work because he does have a job now but I think he likes the idea of being able to concentrate during the term time on what he was doing and not have to worry about getting money to be able to feed himself and stuff.

He can't take too much -- If his brain's overloaded with too much responsibility if you know what I mean because he would have to make sure that he ate well and looked after himself and did his washing, did his ironing. And although he does job for me here if he -- you've got all that to think about and you've got to think about your studies and he's got to put the legwork and timing on this. He didn't really need that extra hassle.

Interviewer: No, no, and how do you feel about him staying at home or carrying on staying at home?

Participant: He causes me no -- It causes me no hassle, it causes me no problems and I work up in Surrey four days a week so I leave at 6 o'clock in the morning and sometimes not back until 8 o'clock in the evening. So he's --

Interviewer: So, yes, it's not as if, yes you've been --

Participant: No, I go to bed at 9.30 because I've got to get up early.

Interviewer: Yes, so it's not as if you're under each other's feet too much.

Participant: No. He's a lovely person to have around and he causes me no hassles so there's no reason why I wouldn't him to live at home.

Interviewer: No, and how do you feel about him going to university because I know you said right early that it would something that you'd talked about but you also talked about alternatives?

Participant: My husband was very -- My husband, not so much me, was very pro him not going to university and I think that's because he'd never been to university. He didn't have a very good educational upbringing but he now runs his own business and has done for the last 20 years, and he very much felt that he should get a job and be earning money because of the economy and the way the situation is, you need to get working. And N did come to Falmouth with us, all three of us went there, and I think that slightly changed his perception because, again, he'd not really had to much involvement in universities. Although now he sells photocopies and printing machines he has sold to quite a few universities and that's because he targeted them after our visit to Falmouth.

So to him it's sort of switched into his brain a little bit and I think it's because he didn't really understand why you needed to spend all this money, and I think that -- the money side of it worried N probably more than anything. You know, do you need to really be getting yourself into this debt if you can just go and get yourself a job because there aren't jobs out there and you've got to get yourself on the ladder. But then he realised with what he wants to do he needs to have that backing and that even with a degree you'll have to possibly start at the bottom and work your way up. But they're more likely to look at someone with a degree than they are someone without one, employers.

Interviewer: Yes, yes. So how do you feel about the money because you -- it's come up once or twice?

Participant: I think at the end of the day I think it's what they've got to do. They've got to do that to get where they need to be and I think if we can help in the sense of him not having the expense of living away then I'm quite happy with that, you know. I think that's just a debt he's going to have to deal with and he was quite happy with that. But I think he's happier as well knowing that we're going to support him with regards to living at home and he's got the -- he's applied for the extra little bit of allowance which will help him with transport and travelling. You know, will help him with his car and so he's -- that side of the pressure is off, and I think money wise he doesn't need any more debt than that, does he?

Interviewer: No, no. Well, no, I mean it is a worrying amount now because they put it up so much, isn't it? If he went to Portsmouth would he be able to commute?

Participant: Yes, he'd go by train.

Interviewer: Right, yes, because of course you're slightly further -- yes.

Participant: Because we're right between. Well, we're probably the same distance both ways. It's 22 miles each to Bournemouth and 22 miles to Portsmouth but if he went to Portsmouth he'd go by train. But then he's got his car so he can just go and park at xxxxx Station or xxxxx Station and then just get the train to Portsmouth because the commute into Portsmouth is not as easy as the commute to Bournemouth.

Interviewer: No. As I have to say I don't know where the university is in Portsmouth although it's, as you say -- I have heard of (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Yes. You know where Gunwharf Quays is?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: So if you go to Gunwharf Quays and don't turn right to go to Gunwharf Quays and you carry straight on I think it's sort of up on the top if I remember rightly when we went to look. It's up on the top bit there so it's not far from Gunwharf Quays.

Interviewer: Yes. Now I think about it I've seen it on -- when we've been to Gunwharf Quays I've seen the sign and I've probably actually driven past it and not even realised it was a university but seen it.

Participant: Oh, God, there's about 12, 14 buildings variously. The one I think J is going to go to is up the top here which is -- you know, so I think the train going to Portsmouth would be the better option.

Interviewer: So perhaps we can go back to the day at Portsmouth. What do you think of Portsmouth because (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Well, we had -- I had to do a big psychology talk to him all the way going down there because he said I'm not going to Portsmouth. He said how can a Southampton football supporter going to Portsmouth? So I was going for God's sake just don't be so silly. I said -- No, we had actually a really nice day in Portsmouth, a really nice day so --

Interviewer: And it was the two of you again?

Participant: The two of us again, yes. We're operation education.

Interviewer: You certainly are but it was the three of you for Falmouth, the two of you for both Bournemouth visits and the two of you for Portsmouth.

Participant: And Southampton. No, Solent he went to -- oh, he went for the interview on his own. He went to the interviews, yes, because obviously they had to go and have interviews, didn't they? He had to have an interview for every single one.

Interviewer: And that -- Was that in addition to your other visits? So you had a sort of look round and then (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Yes, and then he had to actually go for an interview for every single one because he had to go with his portfolio.

Interviewer: Yes, yes.   So all right.   So we've got Portsmouth and Southampton Solent who --

Participant: Southampton Solent, now we went to look at that together as well.

Interviewer: Yes, and how was that?

Participant: Well, let's go back to Portsmouth. Portsmouth we liked. No, we very much liked it because that was -- we went to a big talk to start off with in the big hallway which was -- is the main faculty building of Portsmouth University, and they did a big talk on

Portsmouth as a city as they do. They all do the same. They do a big talk about the actual city itself, what it's got to offer as a student in Portsmouth life, and J always whispers to me, he said they talk a lot about drinking, don't they, talk a lot about nightlife and drinking. I went, yes, J. I said that's part of teenage life, you know, you don't do that but that's what it is and -- So they do focus a lot on social life and drinking and --

Interviewer: Yes. Well, I know because you said about Falmouth.

Participant: And Southampton. When we did the show round at Southampton that's one of the first things. He goes, oh, it's a great place to go, you know. We've got great clubs, great places to get cheap drinks and stuff, and I'm thinking is this what the world focuses on?

Interviewer: Yes, well, yes, you do wonder, don't you? I mean we had someone, bless them, who took us on these tours and you do think sometimes they're not giving out completely helpful messages, you know.

Participant: No. Let's talk about the university and the courses and not about the drinking and the social life.

Interviewer: So do I. I also think they don't sometimes look at the audience because they -- the kids might not be looking at that but they should look -- I mean the parents' faces you can think, um, you're not really -- you're not quite judging this right because you can see the parents, you know, thinking, you know, (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Thinking, yes, exactly, what are they going to get up to?

Interviewer: Yes, you know, well, I mean especially with -- you know, for a child going away, you know, from home for the first time it's not necessarily completely the message the parents want to hear, you know, even if it's true. You just think, you know, perhaps you could just ease off on that a bit because you're frightening me a bit now.

Participant: Yes, this is not party land this is -- we're paying £10,000 a year to learn not to have a party.

Interviewer: Yes, and if they're living away from home you're thinking even worse, you know, what are they going to be up to so --

Participant: Yes, exactly. So, yes, that was quite prominent, actually not so much at Bournemouth I don't think, that wasn't so much at Bournemouth but definitely Southampton and Portsmouth a little bit. But, no, we liked -- again liked the feel of it and again I sat back because he was teasing about Portsmouth and not being -- He said I don't want to go to Portsmouth, you know, blah, blah, and I said, well, just keep an open idea, very much just keep an open mind on everything and he actually liked it. I said so -- And I can always tell when he's liking something because he's quite bouncy about it and he was being quite positive and I can also tell when he's not interested. He just goes, right, come on, we're going to go now, shall we go now?

But, no, he was quite interested: oh, I just want to go and have a look at that one more time. You know, let's go and have a look at this bit again; oh, we've got to go back and look at this talk and so again we did -- there was a talk. We had a show round the facilities and we went to a presentation, and a question and answer thing, and then the lady at Portsmouth was great. She took us round all these other bits where they do model making and they do green screen, you know, the green screen and everything.

Interviewer: Yes, I've heard that phrase, not quite sure why.

Participant: Yes. I learnt so much I was enjoying it. Actually at Portsmouth because I'm quite good at my hands, I used to do sewing and model making and stuff, and I --

Interviewer: Ah, so this is some of where he gets it from then.

Participant: A little bit of arty-farty from me I think and I said, oh, J, I wish I had my time over again and I said I'd love this. I'd love this and I was chatting to the lady and I said I think I might sign up, and she was just laughing with me. But they would also do this special project of film, an animation film, which the students can get involved in in their own time. So he quite liked the idea of that as well so -- and they had all this new equipment which is all these massive screens with like the pens. So they actually drew it all in, drawing interactive and these screens are, God knows, about £3,000 each or something, and so he quite liked the set-up there as well.

A lot of the places in Bournemouth and in Portsmouth they have like a big room that's got lots of computers and like lounging area and stuff and everything because they have to sort of sit and be creative. All sort of laid back type of thing but -- So,

no, he liked the whole thing for Portsmouth and I did too actually, and he came away saying, yes, actually I really -- I could see myself going here. This is what he said himself, he said I could see myself going here.

Interviewer: About Portsmouth particularly?

Participant: About Portsmouth, Portsmouth and Bournemouth, those were the two. And then Southampton we went to and he again kept an open mind, and had a bit of a pre-thought about Southampton Solent because he said that's where people go, mum, who don't do very well in their exams. So he didn't like the idea of Solent. I said, well, again let's just go, keep an open mind.

Interviewer: And where had he got that from? I mean is that something --

Participant: No, it is actually a known fact. You don't need very high grades at all.

Interviewer: No, and did you know that as well?

Participant: Yes, I knew that as well, only from researching because they were asking for how many UCAS points.

Interviewer: And how much researching had you done?

Participant: No, we just clicked on (inaudible).

Interviewer: The two of you together?

Participant: Yes. We looked at how many UCAS points and --

Interviewer: Right. So that's what you're kind of thinking (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: And we have a friend whose son goes to the Solent and J thinks he's a bit of an idiot. So I think that was slightly in his brain because they only needed something like 180 UCAS points. Now when you go from 180 UCAS points to 320 for Bournemouth part of you is slightly thinking --

Interviewer: Yes, something quite --

Participant: -- not quite right here and it was all very dingy. It was in a dark room, it was like nearly underground and the guy was -- the teacher was very scruffy and he sort of sat there and --

Although J quite liked what -- you know, what he was talking about he said I can't see myself going there, mum, at all. He said we'll keep it as a reserve but we -- I can't see myself going there because they were told by B college that they had to go and see five universities. They had to apply to five.

Interviewer: Well, yes, they said -- well the form has space for five, doesn't it?

Participant: Yes. So they need to go and see and apply for five. Well we didn't, we applied for four and actually then ended up only with three because he pulled out -- he declined Falmouth. He didn't go for an interview even to Falmouth because he got offered an interview which he was supposed to go to after Christmas and he said I don't think I'm going to go to that interview. So we had a big discussion about that: well, I think you should just go, J, because you never know. No, I've decided in my mind I don't want to go away to university so there's no point. So he goes there's no point, I've decided I don't want to go away.

Because I was very much for him going just to get some experience of what the interview was going to be because I said, you know, you've not done this sort of interview before. It would be a good way for you to see what's expected of you and what you're going to get asked and he said -- but, no, he -- I said, well, you decide, don't decline until the day before and think about it and so -- But I said it's up to you, it's up to you, and my husband was saying, yes, J, I think you should go and get some experience. But, no, he said, no, I don't want to go, it's a waste of time because it's a long -- it is a long way, it's 4½ hours all the way down to Falmouth, country roads. He said I can't be bothered. He said, no, there's no point so I said, okay, it's fine.

Interviewer: And how did you feel about that?

Participant: I think he -- I personally felt he should have gone. From my own experience I felt he should have gone just to -- but he did all right. You know, he did fine with the other ones so --

Interviewer: Yes. So actually, yes, perhaps --

Participant: Yes. I think if he hadn't had done so well then I'd had said, well, I told you, you know. Now the old told you so but --

Interviewer: Yes, the temptation would have been there a bit, wouldn't it? But you knew best, didn't you, which we do try not to do.

Participant: Exactly.

Interviewer: But what did you think of Solent then? I mean I know --

Participant: I didn't like it.

Interviewer: No, and why?

Participant: I didn't like the people. Again I looked around and I looked at the students. I think knowing our friend's son who -- well, he works with N actually. I just felt with the tour round all they were focusing on was the party and the nightlife and not so much on the course. I thought the teacher was uninspiring and I thought the whole place was dingy.

Interviewer: Yes. As I say, I haven't been to it. I mean I haven't --

Participant: It was dingy compared to Portsmouth and Bournemouth that looked like that they were advancing with the whole thing, they had great equipment, you know. The place was light and airy and, you know, you could see yourself working in that environment. In Solent, no, no, but he kept it as a reserve and he did go for the interview. So I said it's always, you know, good experience, just go. So he did go for the interview but then obviously when it came to making the choices he abandoned that one.

Interviewer: Yes, well they can only choose two anyway, can't they so -- yes. So you could see yourself working there as well?

Participant: Yes, I think so.

Interviewer: Right, so that's interesting. So what sorts of things about the universities were important to you when you were going round?

Participant: I think with the fact of how much money, and I think that was a question came up from a few of the parents that were looking around, is with the amount of fees that we were paying how was that going to get ploughed back into the courses? I think with -- You know, it's difficult with Maths and things like that, I don't know because I have no experience of that, but I know on a creative side you need all the latest equipment and, you know, you need all the visits from the various industry people because that's how they make their contacts. So I just wanted to see that it was always evolving and that they were always going to be progressing with the equipment and stuff and everything.

And I felt that that, in both Bournemouth and Portsmouth, it looked like that is what was happening.

Interviewer: Did you ask about it or did they -- did you (inaudible - over speaking)

Participant: One of the other parents. I think one of the other ladies asked saying, you know, with the fees what -- how was that going to get re-invested back in.

Interviewer: And you'd also mentioned industry contacts. That's something they --

Participant: That's a big thing for that, it's a big thing for that.

Interviewer: Yes, for that sort of subject, isn't it, as you say rather than something like Maths where they're hardly going to have any.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: And again, do they tell you that or do parents ask?

Participant: That very much came up in the presentation that they often get projects from different industry companies, very much more -- so possibly at Portsmouth even than Bournemouth because it's a slightly different -- again it's close to what -- each other with the animation but it's slightly different. But, for instance, companies may ask them -- give a project to the university group to produce an advert, produce an animation for an advert so -- and then maybe one of them will actually get picked and that animation I'll be used in that advert. So already then they're starting to build their portfolio on, you know, I've created that character in, say for instance, the Frosties advert and that was me and so that's --

They get an opportunity throughout the three years to do special projects to build up their portfolio and get known in the industry, and that for me was quite important because I said to J you don't want to come to the end of your three years, have no contacts, and have no foot in any doors because you need -- you're going to need a foot in the door.

Interviewer: Yes, yes. So that was -- was that at both the universities?

Participant: Both of those, yes.

Interviewer: They were saying that so that was something that was --

Participant: Yes, and that was a big thing for N because he was asking a lot of those questions when we went down to Falmouth. You know, what are the job prospects at the end of this course and that's when they came up obviously telling us that, you know, they have these industry contacts and you get yourself known. But you're only going to be as good as the stuff you produce and the effort that you put in, and I think that's why it's going to suit J because I think he is quite focused and when he puts his mind to it he will get on with it.

So, yes. So hopefully, fingers crossed, who knows?

Interviewer: No, but that was something that you thought was important for you.

Participant: That was important, as important for N as well. He was the one that's saying, well, I want to know at the end of this that you've got a good chance of being employed.

Interviewer: Yes. I mean does he have career plans at this stage or is just, you know, he wants to work in that industry obviously but --

Participant: Oh, no, he wants to work for Double Negative which is C's company and he wants to do special effects, and he wants to go and live in LA eventually and retire at 50, and buy a fishing boat and go and live in the Florida Keys.

Interviewer: Well, that sounds all sorts. It sounds all very nice actually. I don't know quite where I -- Actually I'm not very good drawing so that is where I've gone wrong. Yes, it's a bit of a non-starter for me.

Participant: Yes, I think he's very much -- I think all three of us are very much visionaries. We want -- We know what we want and we know where we want to be and what we want to achieve, and I was like that in my career actually from 16.

Interviewer: Yes, because you said right at 16 you moved away.

Participant: Yes, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. So I think that's probably slightly rubbed off as well is that we're quite focused and always have goals and always have -- yes.

Interviewer: Oh, right. Yes, so even from -- Yes, so as you said, you know, from about 8 that's what he wanted to do and --

Participant: Yes, he's not going to university and then thinking, oh, Christ, well what am I going to do at the end of it?

Interviewer: Yes, which is quite a common type of thing I think with quite a few.

Participant: What now?

Interviewer: Yes, you know, it's a bit --

Participant: Well, my niece has actually just finished at Sheffield University and I said to my sister well what is she going to do now? Oh, she doesn't know now yet.

Interviewer: And what did she do?

Participant: Oh, she did sport management. She's going to be involved in the Olympics as well which is great so she's been employed to do something within the Olympics. But then beyond that, no, she's not really got a thought of which avenue to go down.

Interviewer: No, and yet that's quite vocational. I mean if you'd said, you know, she's just done English or Maths sometimes that, you, know, there is a bit of a kind of a 'well now what?' sense to it.

Participant: Exactly but a bit like J's it's got an endgame to it, hasn't it?

Interviewer: Yes, that's right. So you would think that.

Participant: Yes, but, no, my sister's completely opposite to me so -- I'm very focused, quite driven, quite anal, I think she'll say the word is whereas she's completely the opposite. She's very laid back and won't plan anything beyond tomorrow.

Interviewer: No, no, so -- and perhaps that's -- Yes, perhaps that's rubbed off (inaudible - over speaking)

Participant: And that's rubbed off on H, absolutely.

Interviewer: Yes, yes. So I mean you're -- are you quite pleased that he's got something then that's a bit more career focused?

Participant: Yes, and I think it suits him. I think it will suit -- it'll suit what he wants to do, whether it all pans out, who knows? Nobody knows, do they?

Interviewer: No, that's right, no, no.

And feel, I'm interested you sort of said at Southampton and at Portsmouth you liked the feel of it. Can you just tell me a bit about what that means to you?

Participant: Well, I think if it goes -- I think I'd probably say myself, and him as well, would I feel comfortable in this environment, you know? I work in hotels so to me when I go into a hotel it has to be a nice hotel and to me it has to be nicely decorated, it has to be nicely presented. I need to like the people inside the building. So I suppose I associate that with anything I go. If I go to a restaurant I like to know the way it's presented, you know, the way it's decorated, is it neat, is it tidy, and that's all quite important and I think the same with J. And it has to have quite a homely feel to it, it has to have a welcoming feel to it, and I felt that in Bournemouth and Portsmouth, it did. I felt people were interested that we were there, do you know what I mean by that?

Interviewer: Yes, I do.

Participant: So, you know, people weren't -- we weren't just people walking through, they actually wanted us to be there and, of course, someone sceptical could say of course they want you to be there because they want you to pay £10,000 a year, so of course they're going to sell it to you. But it felt genuine, it felt quite genuine that they wanted us to be there. They were quite interested in J, they were having conversations with him, and I felt they were actually quite interested in him as a person. They weren't just trying to just go for a hard sell because actually, I just remember now at Bournemouth we went -- That's right, I remember now.

This was the first time we went. We went into the hall and they had like a careers section where you go to pick up the particular courses that you're interested in doing. And there was about four different -- three different animation courses. So there's three different ones and you've got like Animation Art, and you've got -- where you get a Bachelor of, what is it, a BA, I can't remember now. There's one that's science based and there's one that's art based. So BA, you get a BA or a BSc maybe, Bachelor of Science, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Participant: So obviously at this stage we were just looking and trying to understand what the different ones were giving because there

was one that was Bachelor of Science which was very much science focused. There's one that was Bachelor of Arts which was very art focused, and then there was one that was a bit of a combination of the two. So obviously they can't do that one because it had maths in it but he needed the art one but he could have done the other one. And so we were looking -- maybe looking a little confused and so the lady said, oh, which one leaflet do you want? And I said, well, can we take all three because I wanted to sit down and read it all through, and she said, yes, you can but very high grades are very required for these courses. So I thought already she'd actually made a judgment on -- She said you do need two As and a B.

Interviewer: Probably thinking you were going to say, oh, sorry, wrong place, you know, I'm looking for something else with 2 Es and a U, oh, dear. So sorry, silly us.

Participant: Exactly. So, you know, we're not just here for a laugh, darling, we have actually done our research and so -- Actually J looked at me at that point and I looked at him as if to say well that's a bit -- that's a bit judgmental before we've even started. But again as a place do they get thousands of people coming through taking their leaflets, and I know paper costs money, but they do get them just picking up the leaflets when really they've got no hope in hell of doing it? But I thought that was a little bit naughty actually.

Interviewer: Well, yes, it does sound a bit --

Participant: And I went, no, that's fine, could you just give me all three?

Interviewer: Yes, yes, and if you've got anything for 3 A stars I'll take that as well. What else have you got?

Participant: Yes, so I thought -- I've actually remembered that. I just remember that and I thought, well, actually you're a bit judgmental there.

Interviewer: Yes, that's right, yes, as if, yes. So that's not -- No, that's not --

Participant: So that was a bit funny but, no, I thought -- Yes, and I suppose the feel to me is how does something feel. I have to feel comfortable in the surroundings and I think -- because although I come across as quite a confident person I'm only confident in my own comfort zone. So this was out of my comfort zone because I don't know about universities.

Interviewer: No, and this was the first time you'd been.

Participant: So it was a first for me. So did I feel -- I didn't feel uncomfortable probably only at that point. I didn't feel uncomfortable and I felt, yes, actually me as a person I would feel comfortable here and so I think J would too, and I can tell by his body language. I can tell whether he likes something or whether he's -- if he's not interested I sort of say have you see enough, J? Do you want to go and see anything else? No, I just want to go back and look at that. Then I know then he's really taking it in and he's interested in what he's looking at.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, that's right, yes, because you said again people are important to him so he's looking and trying to get a sense of people, and you're looking at other people you were saying so --

Participant: Yes, I'm looking at the kind of people that are going to -- he's going to be mixing with. Not that you pick and choose, you can't, can you, but, you know, did they look like they were quite nice people and not roughnecks like they were at Solent.

Interviewer: But I mean again what sort of people would you think, oh, they look all right as opposed to roughnecks? Can you just give me a little sketch?

Participant: Yes, me and J have very funny conversations because you can't always -- I'm an observer, I very much observe. I look at people to the point where actually sometimes even at work I do it. When I'm introduced to someone I'm so busy actually looking and digesting them that I'm actually not listening to what they're saying. I've got no idea what their name is by the time I walk off. Did you see her shoes, you know, that sort of thing, and it's quite funny because -- So I was observing how the other pupils were responding to the questions as well and we would go out the room and J goes did you see ghost girl? This is what we do and I'd go, yes, I did. I said was she actually -- He says, no, she sits in a dark room. So he'll go, oh, she sits in a dark room playing on a computer 14 hours a day. I went, oh, right. So we just -- It's things like that, you know. He likes -- We both observe people but --

Interviewer: And you thought they looked all right at Bournemouth and Portsmouth?

Participant: Yes, I thought -- Bournemouth I thought, yes, and they were asking good questions as well. So they were coming up with good questions and they looked interested so -- and then at Southampton they weren't so much, no, but -- Even in Falmouth actually they weren't asking that many questions.

Interviewer: And what about the other students at Southampton Solent then, they didn't look --

Participant: No, they didn't look very switched into what they wanted to do, no. They looked more like they wanted -- more interested in the social life than actually in the subject.

Interviewer: And is this partly the talk (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: What about the other people that were sort of milling around?

Participant: I also observe is whether the parents are asking the questions or whether the pupils are asking the questions because I think it's more important that the pupils ask questions because I said to J, you know, go prepared with a couple of questions. I'll ask a couple of questions, parent type questions, but I want you to ask as well some more, you know, course type questions. So I'll do the parent bit, you do the course -- you know, the course bit and he goes to me, oh, why is it to ask questions? I said because it's important to be shown to be interested and actually he did then start spurring on with questions but he was better on the one-to-one. So when the teacher was there he was then chattering and I just stood back and didn't interfere then at that point. I just leave him to get on with it.

Interviewer: What were the parent type questions? This was the contact time you said.

Participant: So I think the contact time, the costings, the investment, all that sort of side of things. So more the logistically type questions I think.   But a lot of the kids weren't coming up with many questions. But Portsmouth actually, yes, because this woman was great, the woman that was actually -- She hold -- held court very well and she got them very much inspired and there was a lot of questions coming from the pupils which was good.

Interviewer: And he was focusing on the course type questions?

Participant: Yes, so actually, you know, what the technical side of the animation and he was coming out with all this stuff and I was thinking, Christ, I didn't even know you knew all that, J.

Interviewer: No, no. So you haven't really got too involved in that side of it?

Participant: I learnt so much. I learnt so much by the end of the four visits. I feel I can talk quite positive on animation now but, yes, he was asking -- I can't even think of the technical sides of it. He was going in about 2D and using certain things and do -- what kind of systems do you use, that's what he was asking, and would we need to invest in the systems ourselves. So he was asking that.

Interviewer: No, yes, I should think that was one where your ears pricked up a bit, didn't they, with the sort of frightening moment where you think surely not?

Participant: Yes, but most -- more that he would -- because he has an Apple Mac so he was asking, you know, is a Mac going to be suitable for these types of things. So he was thinking, you know, am I going to be able to come away and do some work at home on this.

Interviewer: Yes, because of course he would want to with only 16 hours contact time but --

Participant: Yes, not so much till Year 3 but he's quite happy to go in because I think it's better sometimes to be in that environment than away from the environment. I said, you know, you need to work with your colleagues because of projects they do together. They don't all do individual projects so they have to work together as a team on quite a few things so --

Interviewer: And he's, you know -- I mean he's quite happy with that?

Participant: He will be if he gets with people that want to actually do the work.

Interviewer: Yes, well, yes, that's always the issue though, isn't it, with group and team working. Yes.

Participant: He's good actually at pulling a team together. He's had to do it a few times aon a few courses and stuff -- on a few of his things where they've had to do presentations together but you always get one who doesn't do what they're supposed to do.

Interviewer: Well, yes, that's right, I know. I mean for both of mine that would be something. You mentioned sell but not hard sell at one of them that you were talking about. You sort of said there was a bit of selling but it wasn't too much hard sell. Have you been sold to a bit, do you think? I mean do you think that they are -- they're doing that?

Participant: I think obviously when they want -- Portsmouth actually followed up about four or five times with various postcards and thank you for your visit. Now we didn't --

Interviewer: I know, yes. We got that from one of T's, you know, to the point that it was actually, you know --

Participant: We just kept picking them up and putting them in the bin.

Interviewer: Yes. It was unfortunate because it was one that he decided quite early he wasn't going to go to but, you know --

Participant: Yes, so I think obviously but Portsmouth is a big university so as in -- although it's all in sections as a university itself I can't remember how many thousands of pupils they've got there. I don't know, 12, 000, 19,000 or something but it's a big university. So I think it's important for them to fill it, isn't it? So they are going to do the follow-up and actually I thought that was quite good to start off with. The first postcard I thought, you know, thank you for your visit and I thought, well, that's really nice, that's really good and we didn't have anything back from Portsmouth, and we had nothing back from the Solent either.

Interviewer: No, I have to say he seemed to get a lot from one particularly but then he may have got things on the email and I wouldn't now, you know. I mean I don't know whether they sent an email instead.

Participant: I don't know whether J did actually, no.

Interviewer: And what about when you were there did you feel any of them were selling to you or maybe -- You see I have written down 'sell' but it might just be my writing.

Participant: No, I don't -- No, I don't think so. I don't think we were given -- No, I don't think we were given the hard sell at all, no.

Interviewer: No. I think perhaps that's when you said you were at Bournemouth when you said at least they weren't -- you know,

they were interested in him rather than you feeling perhaps that they were just looking at you.

Participant: That you were just a number, yes. I think very much they felt they wanted you as a person and not as a number, and I think after the interviews, after the interview process, I think from what he said because obviously I didn't go to the interviews with him --

Interviewer: Did you go -- Did you take him to these?

Participant: Only to -- I took him to Bournemouth but I literally -- because it was a whole day thing for that one because he had to do the drawing and all this stuff.

Interviewer: Yes, sorry, you said there were three different things -- bits to it.

Participant: Yes, so -- and then he had an interview afterwards. So he went to do the three tests and then the interview and then had to wait a week to find out whether he'd actually succeeded or not. But he -- I took him to Bournemouth because I didn't want him -- because he had to do all of these tests I didn't want him the hassle of -- because he'd only passed his driving test in the beginning of December so it was only a couple of months after that. So I thought I don't want the pressure of you trying to find the place on your own and then having to do all of these tests and worry about that as well. That's just me being an over-protective mum.

So I ran him down, dropped him off, came back home and said just call me when you've finished and I'll come back and pick you up. So I didn't hang around, just left him to it. Southampton Solent he went just on his own because obviously he drove himself in, parked at my husband's offices and then just walked down to the thing, and N took him to Portsmouth.

Interviewer: Yes. Oh, right, and that was his first -- because he hadn't been when you two had been previously so that was his first sort of taste of Portsmouth.

Participant: No, so that was his first, yes, taste of what it was about. So he dropped him off at Portsmouth and then went to Gunwharf, and then J walked to Gunwharf and met him for a coffee and then they came home.

Interviewer: I'm thinking that's quite a nice location with Gunwharf Quay being --

Participant: It is nice.

Interviewer: Yes, I was thinking that would have an advantage.

[1.18.43 – 1.19.41 Interruption]

Participant: I think all the way through this process I thought it was very important that J was driving the process because I'm sure a lot of parents do all of it for them, and I think even probably more so with boys because, you know, boys tend to be a little bit lazy notoriously, don't they? So I thought it was important that he drove the whole thing right from beginning to end. So although I helped, assisted, he was the one who had to instigate it all.

Interviewer: Yes, because you kind of said at some point 'sat back' but then if we -- when you were talking about, if I remember this rightly, I might not have done, when you were talking about he hadn't heard from Portsmouth, I thought that was you with the trigger there.

Participant: That was me with the trigger there because --

Interviewer: Yes, you were suddenly saying, you know, hang on, why -- you know, it's end of January what's happened and then --

Participant: Yes, you know, have you not heard? Are you sure you've not had emails from anything yet because I would have thought something would have come through by now because everything else had come through. And he said, no, no, definitely haven't got, definitely haven't got. I said, well, you need to send -- I think you need to send them an email to say that you've not heard anything because obviously he was the one checking the UCAS site and everything regularly, and doing all of that malarkey. We did that, again we'd sat and filled that in together and --

So, yes, then he sent an email. So he sent an email to them saying, you know, I have not heard anything but that was possibly me because that's his laid back approach again, you see, oh, it'll be fine. It'll be fine, it's on there, you know, it's on the UCAS site, it'll be there.

Interviewer: Yes, and then nothing. Yes, because I think -- and once or twice you sort of said 'we' and I'm sort of thinking, you know,

was it both of you together, was it him? Who actually started the process off?

Participant: He did because they do that at college so obviously we went to B college and they do a talk on the university and, you know, about the process, of how they process is going to work. So with regard to the UCAS site they -- his tutor and him sit together and they sort of get it all up and running. So, yes, that was fine, that was all done by him and I think then when he had to pick the university things he had to go on himself, and obviously I sat with him while he was doing it just so that I could understand the process, not necessarily to --

Interviewer: Yes, but it's new to you, isn't it?

Participant: It's new to me.

Interviewer: And it is a bit of a -- I mean, you know, there's all sorts of things that you need to do at certain times. It's not immediately straightforward, is it? You've got to get kind of your head round it a bit.

Participant: No, and the finance thing I found extremely tricky. In the end I made a phone call because I didn't understand what I was supposed to be doing. Because I didn't realise that you actually to have had accepted your -- all your choices before you get -- before you could get to that bit because everyone kept saying to me, you know, various mums I was talking to, oh, have you done the finance bit yet? No, no, and I used to come home, J, J, I haven't done the finance bit yet. Are we supposed to have done that yet? Oh, I don't know, mum, I don't know. Well, let's have a look online and that bit I don't think was over keen but I spoke to a lady on the phone.

We sat at the computer both of us and I spoke to this lady and she told me exactly what we needed to do and I thought that -- right, okay, now I'm clear on what we're supposed to do here now.

Interviewer: But there are lots of dates and I -- you know, and the date by which you had --

Participant: Has all to be done by certain times and –

Interviewer: Yes, because I did read to my horror that if you hadn't made a decision by whatever it was in May they just decline them all.

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Participant: Yes, 31ˢᵗ May, yes.

Interviewer: Yes, and there was that kind of feeling of, oh, you know, that sort of horror after you've kind of gone through all this. I thought, no, let's not suddenly find that we've left it and it was midday and you thought it might be midnight and he was just still fiddling around in the middle of the afternoon.

Participant: And we're back to square one.

Interviewer: No, no. So certainly with B college's kind of perhaps input and you'd gone to the talk, then he sort of started it off and then you looked and he looked?

Participant: I had a semi understanding of what we sort of needed to do but I asked him a lot of the time because obviously he spoke to his tutor. And very much when we were at xxxx school obviously as a parent you got more involved but with a college, no, you know, it's very much left to the pupil, and then that was good. So if I had any questions I said can you next time you see your tutor just ask her this, just so that I could understand what certain things.

Interviewer: And did he remember?

Participant: Oh, yes, yes. No, he's very good.

Interviewer: Yes, oh, well he's quite -- Yes, because my son usually asks about half the questions I suggest and then he seems to give you half the answer. So you end up with a sort of diminishing return (inaudible - over speaking)

Participant: Yes. No, he'll write them down and say, okay, well I'll just ask her that when, you know.

Interviewer: Yes, that's right but, as you say, you don't get the contacts so you're not able to sort of, you know, mop up and say, oh, can I just, you know, it's all --

Participant: And like you say it's a new process so I'm not -- so I didn't really understand and I've got no older siblings who've been or anything.

Interviewer: No, that's right. No, so -- no. So were you talking about it a lot? I know you said friends, I mean the process perhaps rather than the actual detail of the course because presumably your friends' children are not going to the same.

Participant: Yes, I possibly actually spoke to my friend A more so because her son wanted to do animation as well. So we were actually comparing notes quite a bit but although he wanted to do a different style of animation we were having quite a long conversation about which universities we'd been to see. And although again, you know, friends you have to keep it quite confidential because you think, my God, if there's only four places, you know. We don't want too be keen on certain things.

Interviewer: No, you don't want to tell him anything that might be useful.

Participant: But actually he didn't apply to Bournemouth which was quite interesting because actually he didn't want to do the entry tests which was -- felt a bit too much under pressure with that I think so --

Interviewer: So where had he looked? I mean did you have a sense of --

Participant: He -- Well they're actually moving back off north now but -- unfortunately she's been diagnosed with cancer. So they're actually going to move back up north but he's going to Preston, that's where he's got his mind set on going. But, again, he didn't mind going to live away so -- But they're more focused on -- It's a different type of animation and the course that he's looking at he focuses more on the stop-start animation which is what he wants to do.

Interviewer: Right. Were there other people you talked about, sorry, talked to?

Participant: Well, H, I obviously talked to H but again that was more on the technical side of what we needed to do by certain times, you know. I sort of said, you know, do you have to go -- you know, have you gone and done your choices, blah, blah, and that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Yes. Oh, yes, I've had a lot of conversations with other people in that (inaudible - over speaking)

Participant: She's goes, oh, God, and D doesn't -- you know, he's not getting on and doing this and vice versa and I'll say, oh, yes, J is so laid back he thinks the whole world's going to, you know, go at his pace.

Interviewer: Yes, that's right.

Participant: So we're quite similar in character. So, yes, that was quite funny.

Interviewer: Yes, so can you -- So you were talking mainly about the process with other people --

Participant: More the process because obviously the subjects we want him to do are completely different and how many universities you'd been to actually see and, you know, that sort of thing, and which ones had you been to look at and more or less just the actual process of applying to university and things.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, and when you were looking in your book right at the beginning was that helpful in terms of drawing up any sort of shortlist?

Participant: Yes, because as I said to you it was all new to me. It was all -- I wouldn't even have known where to begin and, as I said, apart from looking on the internet. And then getting this book and it just sort of showed I think the employability and I think it showed all of that sort of thing. So I personally, J didn't get involved in that, I had a bit of a read and sort of said well, you know, these are the top four for animation.

Interviewer: Oh, right. Which are the top?

Participant: Well, Bournemouth is at the top, Falmouth is in the top -- was in the top five. I think Hertfordshire and Preston, Preston was one of the top ones whereas Portsmouth was very -- quite low down on that side of it but again the course was what J likes.

Interviewer: Yes, so that didn't worry you?

Participant: No.

Interviewer: You know, you didn't sort of think, oh, where's my yellow book?

Participant: No, I don't -- No, I didn't really, that was just a guide for me in my head, you know, and I was looking at other subjects as well in there as well. Okay, well if you're going to go for Maths or Physics or -- and it was more of an interest thing to me to sort of try and understand what the ratings were and what was a good university and what wasn't. But at the end of the day if he'd chose to go to Solent and he was comfortable with that and everything then that wouldn't have swayed my choice.

Interviewer: No, no, you wouldn't have -- no.

Participant: As I said to you before, it's all much about feel and what it's got to offer I think.

Interviewer: Yes, okay.

Participant: But I'm happy with the selections he's made I think.

Interviewer: Yes, and you kind of -- He's made them but you've --

Participant: Guided him possibly. Yes, yes, I think at the end of the day it would have been awful if he'd picked somewhere to go and I thought well, you know, J, this isn't really going to match you but you still have to go with it, don't you? My mum didn't want me to go to London but I did.

Interviewer: No, no, that's right. I mean as you say, you know, they're too old now for you to say, you know, I forbid, up to your room, isn't it?

Participant: No, you can't, you can't.

Interviewer: And you and your husband, have you had lots of chats with him?

Participant: About -- What about going to university?

Interviewer: Yes, I mean obviously.

Participant: No, not really.

Interviewer: I mean is he happy with what J is doing and you've --

Participant: Yes, absolutely because I think he -- as I said at the beginning he wasn't really pro university so I think now, yes, he's quite happy and I think he's happier with him living -- he's more happy with him living at home. I would have been quite happy for him to go away.

Interviewer: For what sort of reasons?

Participant: I don't know. I think he didn't want him to go and live in this horrible little room. I know that sounds awful because when we went to Falmouth we had a look round the accommodation and everything, and he sort of thought, oh, J, you know. We do live in a nice, little house and nice surroundings and I think he didn't like the idea of him having done all his private education,

doing all of this to then be stuck in a little room with a sink and shared kitchen and scabby toilet. I think he didn't like that idea. I said to J -- N, you're more of a snob than I am.

Interviewer: But, no, so --

Participant: Yes, I think he's quite happy because I think he thinks -- The money side of it probably worries N a bit more but I think he's happier now that he's only got to worry about the course fees and the rest will be -- you know, we can help and support him on that.

Interviewer: And you said you wouldn't have minded so much him moving away.

Participant: No, I think because I did, because I moved away at 16.

Interviewer: Yes. Well, mind you, of course, so did your husband I think you said.

Participant: Yes, well he went into digs so it wasn't different.

Interviewer: They must have been a bit grotty or were they nice?

Participant: No, it was a nice old lady that looked after them apparently, cooked their breakfast, did their washing and ironing.

Interviewer: Yes, but in that case, yes, in that case that's fine.

Participant: Because he trained as a mechanical fitter for the power station but that's because what his dad did but then he didn't continue with it. About five years later he abandoned it but then he was doing it because that's what he thought his dad thought was a good thing to get into.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, well, yes, it possibly was. Yes, and you've sort of talked a bit about early on about how you thought you influenced him, you know, as a couple perhaps because he's an only child and you were perhaps more of a unit than if they'd been another four children or something like that.

Participant: Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: But on the other hand you've said a lot that you definitely felt you've sat back, yes, in your sort of --

Participant: Yes, I think towards the latter years possibly. I would say from when he first started -- I think I started to pull back a bit from maybe from the time when he'd made his choices for GCSEs because by then he'd had all his extra LSU lessons and he was growing in confidence, and he didn't need me to sit and help him quite so much with homework because --

Interviewer: Yes. No, yes, sorry, you'd said that, hadn't you, that you you used to have to be quite --

Participant: Yes, because I used to have to sit with him and do his homework because he struggled to read the text, he struggled to write essays, not badly, badly but as in he needed a lot of reassurance and a lot of help in getting it. But xxxx school was great for him for that and once his confidence grew, you know, I didn't need to help him.

Interviewer: No, no, so he's got sufficient support now to be able to manage much better and I suppose partly the subjects perhaps that he's moved into. Subjects, I mean --

Participant: Yes, he's confident in those subjects.

Interviewer: Yes, I mean he must have plenty to write in them but perhaps you --

Participant: Yes, you know like History AS level he'd started and I think he knew it possibly was going to be a bridge too far before he even started, and I think halfway through he -- he didn't like the teacher at all, a nasty woman. Well, she was horrible. You know when you go to parents' evening, again she didn't even know his name. You know, she was trying to review him and she didn't even know who he was and I thought, right, I don't like you either. So, you know, there was a switch off there. And so, you know, halfway through that he decided he was going to give it up but then I did sort of say to him, well, look, see it through to the end of this year, and if you do crap in the exams there's no skin off your nose, is there?

Interviewer: No, that's right, no. So he carried on.

Participant: So he will listen to what I say but I know now I can give him the advice and he will either listen to it or he won't listen to it.

Interviewer: Yes, yes. I mean that's all you can do but certainly with his A levels you said you were -- you weren't -- in a way he'd already decided what he needed to do so you weren't sort of sitting

over him and sort of saying, oh, well -- You know, he had quite a clear idea of the ones he needed.

Participant: Of what he needed?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: So and that's right and that was --

Participant: Yes, because when we went for the interview at B college he went in to discuss what subjects because they have to go for an interview.

Interviewer: Do they?

Participant: Yes, you have to go for an interview again to discuss obviously what they want to do and he was in there 10 minutes if that, and the lady came out and said well -- because they have to get a signed form to say okay to do these subjects and stuff and everything. I think they have to make sure that they're suitable for the subjects that they've actually --

Interviewer: Yes. I wonder how they decide that because they've come in obviously from different schools by definition because it's only a sixth form college, isn't it?

Participant: Well, I think they get all their projected grades and everything from the schools that they've come from. So he went and he said, oh, well, I want to do this, this and this because I want to do this, this and this, and she said, well, there's no doubt here. He's very clear on what he wants to do so fine, he'll go there.

Interviewer: And you've been happy with B college for him?

Participant: Yes. It was a struggle the first year for me to watch him adjusting as in -- I had to coach him quite a bit in that first six months because he went from that very structured environment to a very unstructured environment, and he was getting very frustrated with people because they weren't turning up for lessons and then they were disrupting lessons and talking in the lessons which they were never allowed to do at school. So all of a sudden he had to educate himself that this is the way life works unfortunately and you're going to have to deal with it.

So, yes, no, I think it suited him. I've seen him flourish much more in the second year than I did in the first year.

Interviewer: Yes, that's right because I know you've said structure before with him so that's, yes, something that he's had to perhaps adjust to as you say, and again university again -- will be again something perhaps just to -- in terms of structure it'll be presumably less structured.

Participant: But I believe now he's at a stage where he can hold his own and he's very self-motivated and self-focused, so he's not going to rely too much on the peers around him to do that because I think he's in a good place with that now himself.

Interviewer: Good, good. So how's it all gone in sort of summary?

Participant: Well, I think the process for us has been quite straightforward because of him knowing what to do. I think the worse thing for me was when he had that blip and all of a sudden he decided he possibly didn't want to go to university, and then that was, oh, my God, a different ball game altogether. You know, what is he going to do?

Interviewer: Oh, I hadn't realised because I thought he'd just looked at photography. So it wasn't just looked at photography, it was looked at the whole uni thing.

Participant: The whole thing, yes, and just thought, well, you know, I don't really know if I want to do this but I think it might have just been the fear of something different again. You know, something to adjust himself again and, as I said, we sat and talked and I said, well, what are you going to do if you don't go to university and he hadn't really thought beyond that. He said I don't know really but I'm not sure. But everyone has one of those things, it's like a confidence crisis, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yes, yes, but how we -- how did you feel during this thing?

Participant: That threw me into, oh, my God, you know, well how are we going to deal with this now because what are you going to do? But again they have to make their own choices. I would have supported and helped him and guided him and tried to sort something. But, yes, no, it was okay. As I said, it was just I think just that moment of confidence crisis.

Interviewer: Yes, and where did that occur?

Participant: That before we went to Falmouth. So that's where we went to look at the photography.

Interviewer: Yes, and whose idea was that to actually go and look at a photography course?

Participant: That was me and him together. I said, well, what do you like? You know, what can you see yourself doing? What do you like doing? I said you've got to play to your strengths so what are your strengths? Well, I like photography. Okay, well why --

Interviewer: Right. So even though he wasn't -- sorry, even though he wasn't quite sure he wanted to go to university at that point you were saying well, you know, let's --

Participant: Let's brainstorm. You know, let's brainstorm and let's talk it out, let's think about what you want to do. Okay, well if -- I like photography. I'd quite like to do photography. Right, okay, what sort of photography? Well, I want to do wildlife photography. Well, let's Google universities wildlife photography courses and that's literally how we did it and he said, oh, yes, I quite like the sound of that because then he sat and read the course content and everything else. And I said, well, let's get everything set up with the interviews for all of the things for animation. Let's go and have a look, there's nothing to lose and we can make a decision after that.

Interviewer: Yes, so even though at that point or just before that he had been thinking of not going to university, you know, you sort of didn't think of approaching photographers and, you know -- So he (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: No, I said, well, let's eliminate the university side of it first. So I very much believe -- I said, you know, you've got to go and have a look because you don't know. We don't know what the universities are like because at this point we'd not even been to any universities.

Interviewer: That's right, no, of course, no.

Participant: And I don't know whether it was the thought of maybe all of a sudden another three years of education because they could -- they can sort of -- you know, who knows what goes on in people's minds sometimes? He could think well, oh, my God, I can't imagine doing this again for another three years and I think obviously B college, they're not putting pressure on them but it was all very much, you know, university, university,

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university. He maybe sort of questioned in his own head, well, is this really what I want to do?

Interviewer: Yes, because I think there is that assumption sometimes that they just all will carry on --

Participant: That's the natural progression.

Interviewer: Yes, and sometimes, yes, perhaps more of them perhaps just need to stop and just think, oh, hang on, you know, do I want to do this because otherwise, you know, it can be -- you know, it's an awful lot of time and money that, you know, perhaps, you know, if you're not completely sure. You know, it's not something you want to drift into, is it, and then sort of halfway through it think, oh, you know, why am I here?

Participant: No, you've got to go into it -- Yes, you've got to go in it 100% committed.

Interviewer: Yes, I think so. So other than that blip it's all been all right, has it?

Participant: It's all been quite straightforward, yes. I thought the whole process was quite straightforward. I thought the open days were very organised and making the choice selections and everything, again apart from that Portsmouth slight blip -- again -- but then there are blips in this world as we know. I think it's been fine and he's very comfortable and very confident in what he's going to do. So we'll just wait for the results and see what happens. Because I did say to him the other day, we sat down, I think it was maybe two or three weeks ago.

I said, look, if you don't get your grades, because there's always got to be that talk, I said are you 100% happy with your second choice of Portsmouth or are you -- because he's got his mind set on Bournemouth. And I said if you didn't get Bournemouth, because N said to him, he said, you know -- he said to me -- He said he's done all of this work, you know, he's done all the extra work that he needed to get into Bournemouth. He's got all of his hopes pinning on this. How crushed is he going to be if he doesn't get it? You know, are we going to have to pick up the pieces?

So I did sit and say to him if you don't get Bournemouth, if you don't get that how happy are you with going to Portsmouth? Are you doing it because it's just a second best or are you

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going to throw 100% into Portsmouth? He said if I don't get Bournemouth I am still 100% happy with Portsmouth.

Interviewer: Well, you did say he liked the course and the woman and the facilities were better. So there are things --

Participant: Yes, there were pluses but I just wanted to make sure because he'd pin all his focuses and all his efforts onto Bournemouth. It's like, you know -- It's like going for two jobs, isn't it, you know?

Interviewer: Yes, yes. Well, I was thinking it's almost like having sort of two fiancés and you think you would just never do that, would you? You know, here's the first one but, hey, if that doesn't work out I've got another -- a spare lined up.

Participant: I've got one in the cupboard you can have.

Interviewer: Yes, and you know it wouldn't -- Even with jobs you tend not to go to two at once, do you? You kind of go to one and don't get it and then have a proper look.

Participant: Yes, exactly. So I just said, you know, I just want to make sure because if you're not 100% sure it's a lot of money. We'll just -- I don't know. I said to him we'll just re-think your whole situation again but I want you to be 100%, you've got to be 100% happy in what either or. Because, you know, come 16th August when they get the results and if he gets 2 As and a C and then doesn't get into Bournemouth, okay, he'll be disappointed but I wanted him to make sure that Portsmouth he was still going to uni.

You'll get to meet him now.

Interviewer: Yes, all right, but you don't -- as you say, you don't want it to be on the day, do you, with this sort of ring round and --

Participant: No, I needed that reassurance of what I was up against.

Interviewer: Yes. No, I know what you mean otherwise it's a panic on the day and you --

[1.40 – 1.41 Interruption]

Interviewer: Hello, J, hello.

Participant: So that's it really. I've just been telling you all about the process of picking universities and whether you're happy with what you've picked and everything else, and talking about you as a character, what you're like as a person.

Interviewer: I mean I've got a teenage son of my own at home, J, so don't worry, yes, and I know DP. I know him quite well, yes, so I do – –

Participant: Well, D and you were very good friends, weren't you, when you were at xxxx school but not so much now. I think because of your interests and everything have slightly ––

J: Different course, different subjects as well really.

Interviewer: Yes, because –– Yes, because of course he's at B college too.

Participant: Yes, but once they do different courses and subjects they sometimes don't even see each other for two or three weeks, do you?

Interviewer: No, no. I mean it's such a –– Well, I imagine, I haven't been to it, but I imagine it's such a big place. But it's a bit the same with my son, I mean whoever's not –– if people are not in his tutor group or his subject group he just never seems them, you know, at all. And you think, well, surely, you know, you must bump into them but they don't. But then I remember that at school, don't you? The people in your class it was like a very small, little community and you didn't kind of mix with people from other classes.

Participant: No, exactly. Yes, I remember my sister saying, oh, well, I bumped into so-and-so, she was in the same year as you at school and I'm thinking, well, I don't know her.

Interviewer: No, no, she wasn't in my year, she wasn't in my little clan so it was a little bit like that so –– Well, crossed fingers for your results.

J: Thank you.

Participant: You've got one more exam, haven't you?

Interviewer: Yes, T's got two more but one of his two didn't go well last week.

Participant: He's the same age as J then, is he? So he's doing his A levels as well?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: Okay. What does he want to do?

Interviewer: History at Leicester but I don't think he's going to get the grades so we're kind of having that -- I'm not going have the 'what are you going to do if you don't' conversation till after he's done them I don't think but I think we're heading for that conversation.

Participant: What's his second choice?

Interviewer: Oxford Brookes but, you know, again we need to have the 'would you go there' but also I think possibly 'what happens when you don't get either of them' because, you know, we don't want on August whatever that date, August 16th, to suddenly be scrabbling round, you know, looking at something from scratch and ending up with something that is a bit of a oh, look, they've got a place, you know, without even thinking of it having visited it, you know. I mean it's --

Participant: Well, we didn't even -- we didn't want to be in that position but your Portsmouth one is pretty -- is comfortable, isn't it?

J: Yes.

Participant: So he knows if he doesn't get Bournemouth he's definitely got the grades but he's definitely already got enough UCAS points for -- yes, to go to -- Well, you've got 2 As -- No, you've got an A, B and C for your AS levels.

J: Yes, if I go into the exam -- for my Film Studies exam and get like a D or something I still get like 120 UCAS points because I got full marks from the Film Studies.

Interviewer: Oh, blimey. Oh, yes, no, well I'm afraid ours are a little bit more up in the air than that.

Participant: Which -- Yes, so I think, you know, he's in a strong -- Well, he's definitely got -- he will definitely have Portsmouth so that's a reassurance because you didn't want to go into Clearing, did you, and end up somewhere.

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Interviewer: No, well that's what I've said to my son is we're going -- you'll have to have a think what's going to happen.

Participant: Well, a friend of ours did, didn't he? O ended up in -- Where did he end up going to? Swansea I think. Again because it just had a place for the course he wanted to do.

Interviewer: Yes, well that's the trouble, isn't it, you know? You do feel for people because it's such a knee jerk thing, you know. If there's a place, you know, you feel you want to take it because it might not be there if you have time to think about it. But it's not really something you want to rush, not with the money and the time and the investment.

Participant: But also as well I think when you do your choices you've got to be realistic, haven't you?

Interviewer: Yes. So I think this might be where we went a bit wrong.

Participant: You've got to be slightly realistic, you know.

Interviewer: We may have made a little bit of a mistake there.

Participant: Well, you know Bournemouth was going to be, not a push for you but that was going to be --

J: It was a bit of a push, wasn't it?

Participant: It was going to be a push, yes, but Portsmouth you know you could sit quite comfortable with that one I think, wasn't it?

J: Yes.

Participant: But it's a -- no, it's not an easy. Is H going through this as well?

Interviewer: Yes, that's right. Yes, because last time I spoke to H we had one of those hair tearing out conversations where we were sort of trying to -- oh, I know, we were trying to decide which of the five to put. You know, do you go -- do you gamble and that, you know, that they'll do slightly better than they're expected or that the university will take something slightly lower, or do you put in something a bit a lower, and then if you get better than that you're disappointed. We had one of those kind of things where you -- at the end of it I think, you know, you're just thinking what I need now is a stiff drink.

Participant: But also as well you don't want them to get their hopes up too much which is why I just said to you we had that conversation, didn't we, the other week, when I said to you if you didn't get Bournemouth for any reason how comfortable are you with going to Portsmouth and you said, yes, you were.

Interviewer: Because it is difficult. Sometimes there's just one you want, isn't there, and then you sort of think you've put a second on but actually --

Participant: Do I really want to go there but then you're already only going with 40% attitude, aren't you? You're not going with the right attitude.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, that's right. No, no, and I think sometimes, yes, people have put five because they're told to. They've put a back-up because they're told to but actually they're not particularly committed to going to it at all in which case you think well, you know, you might have as well left it blank then if, you know, if you're really not going to go. But I think people feel, oh, they have to do it.

Participant: Yes, I think you've got to have a first and second choice.

Interviewer: But they've got to be ones that you're prepared to go to not just something that you've put on there because it fills the space.

Participant: Well, we got (inaudible – over speaking) at one stage, didn't we, because you were saying, well, I don't want to go to the Solent and I'm not sure about that, and I'm saying (inaudible – over speaking)

Interviewer: Well, that's how we were with the second, we were kind of -- He was keen on the first but then the second we were very -- and I haven't been to Oxford Brookes. He went on his own to that one, that's the only one we didn't go to. So also I don't have any sense of it at all myself and that's a funny thing because I'm thinking well, you know, he's old enough to know himself but you kind of think, well, when I went I had a clear idea and I knew what I wanted to know and what I wanted to find out. And I came back at the end of it thinking I knew a little bit about each one but that one I don't know.

And of course, you know, I said to him when he came back did you ask this, did you ask that. No, no, and I thought, no, he hasn't so -- But then, you know, what can you do?

Participant: You worked at Bournemouth University did you say?

Interviewer: I work at, yes, yes. I didn't actually recognise from the email, that's clever because does it say --

Participant: There is somewhere under the email. It says Bournemouth University at the bottom.

Interviewer: There's probably a whole disclaimer thing, isn't there at the bottom?

Participant: Yes, at the bottom.

Interviewer: Sorry, yes, because you can tell from the email address but only if you know that ac is universities not companies, you know, because it's got bournemouth.ac., and anything with an ac in --

Participant: No, I think it might have been that, the disclaimer at the bottom comes up with Bournemouth.

Interviewer: Right, oh, yes. I hadn't thought of that actually because I'm sort of emailing people because it's not that I don't want people to know. But I'm doing the research for Southampton University but also I want people to be able to say, well, we went to Bournemouth and we hated it without thinking, oh, I can't say. But I never thought of that when I've been sending people emails. Yes, because I never go down that far in an email. That's that then, isn't it?

Participant: But I know I said we didn't like it the first time but we possibly weren't in the right frame of mind the first time, were we?

J: No, because I was thinking of a different course, weren't I?

Participant: But the second time you really liked it, didn't you?

Interviewer: As I say, I don't always like it every day sometimes. No, I mean I've been there a long time but -- No, computer animation does have a very good reputation because we got the Queen's Award for it, didn't we? Yes, yes.

Participant: Yes, and it's also -- it's part of a skillset or something as well, isn't it, so --

Interviewer: Yes, yes that right. Well, we've got -- Yes, we've got something recent and it's on all the correspondence, the Queen's Award, whatever they do, and that was for computer animation and,

yes, its skillset and, you know, it is one of our sort of prestigious courses. Yes, so good luck with it.

So there were two types. How did you choose between the two? I have to say I'm more interested -- Yes, I'm more interested actually in Participant's perspective of it but I know you said when you went there, there were two, sorry, because --

Participant: Well, there were three to choose from if I remember right.

Interviewer: Yes, but one was very maths so it was kind of --

Participant: One was more the science side of it. So that was a Bachelor of Science which obviously not J because he's not doing A level Science and Maths.

Interviewer: And Maths I think you said because I know (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: That's more like building the programmes, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yes, because I know they do maths. You know, they do algebra and all sorts.

Participant: Well, you had to do a bit of maths if you (inaudible – over speaking)

J: Yes.

Participant: Well, there's three, isn't -- there was three, wasn't there? One was Animation Art which is the one you want to do, then there's one that was a bit of both, and then there's one that was just the Bachelor of Science. So obviously the science one is like building the programmes and everything which --

Interviewer: Yes, because I've seen them because they do algebra and all sorts and you go in seeing things I haven't seen for 30 years, you know, all that squiggle (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Binary and stuff and everything.

Interviewer: Oh, really, things that you've -- I've forgotten they still did all that sort of thing. Yes, it's a long time since I did anything like that.

Participant: (inaudible) talks about his computing. He talks about, I don't know, all these and you've got all these like numbers and dot

numbers and stuff and everything, and I'm thinking, Christ Almighty, what is all that?

Interviewer: Yes, no. My husband's a programmer actually but don't mean anything to me.

Participant: So that was that. So obviously the only one he could go for was the arts one but that's what he wanted to do anyway. It was more the creative than the -- yes, the sort of practical side to it. I was telling her about that lady. Do you remember when we first went to look around and she gave us those sheets and she said, well, you do need two As and a B?

J: Oh, yes.

Participant: J goes well she doesn't know me very well, does she?

Interviewer: Well, no. As I say, when I do open days, I have to say Computer Animation is always the one, you get so many people to -- who ask. I mean they don't ask me about it because I know nothing but you -- when you're on the stall it's the one everybody comes and says, oh, Computer Animation, Computer Animation. I know nothing about it but take it.

Participant: Yes but I think because -- I think a lot of youngsters and stuff who like games and stuff and everything think that's --

Interviewer: Yes, that's right, they're going to be sitting playing computer games all day, yes, because there are degrees in that kind of thing, aren't there, the gaming side of it and the interactivity.

Participant: Hertfordshire. Was it Hertfordshire?

Interviewer: The interactive media type ones where I think that's more those sorts of things.

Participant: But this is where, going back to what we were saying at the beginning, of the minefield of actually what you were looking for because the ones up in Hertfordshire. You could actually go and do courses that are -- Was it FX effects, special effects, and something to do with the gaming industry. There's all sorts of different umbrellas to go through to.

Interviewer: Yes, that's right, it's quite a big employer, you know, that, sort of the games industry although you perhaps wouldn't think it or perhaps not so much at our age you wouldn't. But I mean it's a big industry, isn't it?

Participant: Well, C who we spoke to obviously he's a specialist, a special effects company, but he is old-fashioned special effects and he blows -- as J goes, blows shit out, that's what he says. He actually --

Interviewer: That sounds a bit more fun actually, doesn't it?

Participant: Well, that's what you wanted to do originally, wasn't it?

Interviewer: It sounds a little bit more fun, doesn't it, than just doing it all or computer graphics or whatever it is. You know, you think you want to be actually out there, yes.

Participant: Yes, the old-fashioned way of doing special effects, you know, which is what you originally wanted to do. But when we met C at that party you were talking to him, weren't you?

J: And he said it wasn't the way forward because like health and safety gets involved now so --

Interviewer: How ridiculous. You can't just go out and blow stuff up in the middle of the New Forest.

Participant: No. So he said health and safety is -- has put paid to all of this, so it's now down the computer side of things.

J He would have taken me on as an apprenticeship, wouldn't he?

Interviewer: Ah, yes, because, yes. Yes, no, because we were, you know, we were talking there. So he's been -- So, not being rude but I'm kind of doing it from mum's perspective so do excuse me. So he's been useful in giving sort of J advice because I know you said earlier on he'd had -- he'd sort of --J had said to him there is where I'm thinking of going, this is what I'm thinking of doing. So he'd been quite useful just in sort of pointing?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: I mean did he say any that you were looking at were no good? I mean did he sort of say, oh, you don't want to go there type thing or --

Participant: No, he didn't because what you did is once you'd been to visit each one you sent C an email, didn't you, and said, right, this is what I'm looking -- these are the three I'm looking at. My understanding is if I do this one this will allow me to do this in

industry. If I do this one this will allow me to do this. A, have I understood this correctly and what is the best employ -- which one will I get the best employability out of? And that's when he spoke -- Well, he spoke to his colleague as well, didn't he, at --

J: Yes, because the second part of his business would then do the actual computer stuff as well so both parts.

Participant: And so basically he came back to him and said, yes, you're absolutely right, that will give you that, that you will give you that. If you go down that avenue there's more chance of employability because that's very much a growing industry and more people are looking for those kind of people than they are for that. And that's when Solent came up very much as a dying art I think with 2D animation, isn't it, which is why you weren't that interested in the end.

Interviewer: Ah, I see, well that's useful.

Participant: Yes, so the Portsmouth and the Bournemouth offered more of what industry is currently looking for. And one of the guys from Bournemouth actually from the previous year has actually got a job at Double Negative, didn't he? He got employed which is C's company.

Interviewer: Which is -- Ah, yes, which is I think you said. Yes, I have to say we do get emails round every now and again about somebody who's been involved in that film or that animation or won that prize but -- Yes, so that's -- Yes, lovely.

Right, so I'd asked you how it felt and we talked about that. We talked about -- I mean can you compare it with any other choice that you've had to make or you've been involved in rather because you haven't made this choice on your own? I mean obviously you -- we've talked about this and it's been -- a lot of it's been J's decisions.

Participant: I think we could probably even go back as well to the point of when we had to make a choice of sending him to xxxx school to be perfectly honest with you.

Interviewer: Yes, because I was going to say to you because we talked about moving to B college because obviously xxxx school doesn't have a sixth form, does it?

Participant: No, because at the time he was at xxxxx here in xxxxx and wasn't doing particularly well, and then we had a bit of an

incident with one of the teachers where he came out into the playground and told me that he was a daydreamer and didn't concentrate, and was just rubbish at everything. He needed to pull his socks up. I don't know how you can say that of a sort of 6 year, 7 year old really. And so at that point N sort of said to me I think -- We were going to look at sending him to private school anyway when he was 11 but not in the early years, we were going to do it for the sort of latter years.

So we had to -- Yes, so we had to make that choice at that point and friends of ours kids went to xxxx school. So -- Actually we didn't even go and look at any -- We didn't go and look at anything else but -- So we said let's go and have a look. So we set up an appointment to go and have a look around. But again it had to be J's choice because I said to N if we find it's good and it's going to be what we need then that will be great. But I need him to be happy because we're taking him away from his friends and everything as well.

Interviewer: How old was he at this point?

Participant: He was eight when he went there.

Interviewer: Okay, yes, yes. So he'd settled in at xxxxx and made friends.

Participant: Yes, and he had one -- I think he had -- He was in the first year of the senior side of it so he was eight. He was eight when he went to xxxx school.

So we went and had a look around, very much left J to do it, you know, see what he felt about the whole thing, and then said to him at the end, you know, it's got be your -- it's your choice, what do you think? And he said, yes, I want to go there and -- So I thought this is great. So off he went and then I think it was day two all of a sudden he was crying. He was in bed and he didn't want to get out of bed and he didn't want to go and I thought, oh, my God, have we made the right decision? Because all of a sudden you're taking him from a very casual environment to a very structured environment. All of a sudden he's got to wear a blazer, he had to get a minibus from xxxxx so I had to drop him at -- Oh, no, took him in the mornings and then coming home he used to get the minibus to xxxxx and I used to pick him up from xxxxxx.

And the first day I took him and brought him back, and then the second day I brought him and took him back, and I think it was about the third day he was going to get the minibus home and

he didn't want to go. So obviously we took him in and I worried all day at work, Christ, what's happened -- happening. So I rang the school: is he all right, is he settled, everything all right? He's been absolutely fine and got the minibus home and then we never looked back from that day onwards.

He was absolutely happy with it but it was all of a sudden because obviously he wasn't a very confident person and I remember it was the heat of the summer because he went for the last half term of the final year. So they suggested that would be a good idea to have six weeks to get used to it before we start the new year, and the teacher said, oh, he wouldn't take his blazer off. So he'd had like -- He'd got like a shirt, sweatshirt, blazer because he didn't want to lose his blazer. Do you remember that, J?

J: Yes.

Interviewer: So after that you tied it to him?

Participant: No, no, he was fine. I said it's okay you can take your blazer off, J, but it was all of that sort of side of it, you know. It was a very strict -- a much more strict environment but he loved it, flourished with it, and I think from his test day that he went for a taster day was when the headmaster called me and said, you know, I think he might be dyslexic (inaudible - over speaking) at school. So then obviously he had the LSU lessons and it all progressed.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, because you said you'd always thought he would go private at 11 anyway.

Participant: Yes, I think -- I don't know, I think that was just something in our heads that we want -- My husband didn't have a very good education and I had a grammar school education. But he wanted to do the best for him really I think and he thought that he would probably do well in that sort of environment. Wanted to give him a good leg up but then, you know, we did it.

Interviewer: Yes, you did it earlier which actually is (inaudible - over speaking)

Participant: And I'm pleased we did, you know, didn't find it easy because it's not cheap but it worked for him. He wouldn't be the person he is now I don't think if he hadn't had gone there.

Interviewer: No, and you perhaps wouldn't have had the -- You see, it's worrying, isn't it? He might not have had the dyslexia -- you know, and then all -- you know, then it would be very different. Yes, that's right, yes. Well, he'd probably out working in Tesco's as we speak, bless him, not that there's anything wrong with that.

Participant: Exactly. He would never had got his confidence and I think that was the thing and we always knew he was very -- he's very switched on but obviously didn't know how to get it on to the paper.

Interviewer: No, that's right. No, well that's -- Yes, that's classic, classic dyslexia, isn't it?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes, it's nothing to do with -- No, we -- I mean some of my brightest students are dyslexic.

So is there anything we haven't talked about about the process?

Participant: No, I don't think so. I think everything was pretty straightforward and, as I said, I think the only thing is that from my point of view I didn't understand the process so much. It was very much left to him because at college they did actually sort of point them and direct them through the whole process.

Interviewer: Yes, and you had the evening that you went where they gave you a quick overview, yes, this is what you've got to do.

Participant: What's going happen.

Interviewer: Yes, and that's right, and you're obviously pleased he's going to university even though neither you nor your husband went and that sort of thing.

Participant: Yes, I am. Yes, I'm pleased with his choices and I think it will suit him and, you know, as I say, I've never persuaded him to want to live at home. But we gave him the fors and against and as -- you know, let him make his decision. I think N was more pro for him living at home than possibly I was because I thought to myself, well, if it's -- if the right course means living away then I'll quite happy support that.

Interviewer: But in terms of the right course that would have been more J looking and knowing and --

Participant: Yes, and making that decision.

Interviewer: Because some of it was quite technical we decided, didn't we, that it wasn't something you were going to -- yes, be able to look at in too much detail.

So can I just jot down some details because, as I say, I will be putting in -- everybody will get a pseudonym but, you know, I'm just going to have a little table of, you know, Mary, you know, 48 type thing. So, sorry.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: I've obviously got Participant. How old are you, Jasmine?

Participant: 48.

Interviewer: And you work --

Participant: I work at xxxxx Hotel in Surrey.

Interviewer: Yes, and what do you do?

Participant: I'm assistant to the manager.

Interviewer: Right, okay, assistant manager, and what does your husband do?

Participant: He owns xxxxxx Office Equipment. N is his name, and he owns xxxxxxxx Office Equipment which sells risographs and printing machines to schools and loads of (inaudible – over speaking)

Interviewer: Lovely and we established neither of you went to HE and obviously you don't have an older child who did, so that's all I need on that.

If I think of anything or I have any other follow-up questions (inaudible – over speaking)

Participant: Yes, you've got my email, haven't you? So you can always drop me a note.

Interviewer: Yes, and you're always very good at replying. If you think of anything either that we didn't say that you wanted to or that you think I don't know whether I got that. Well, you know, if you think afterwards I didn't mean it quite like that I mean I'm

sure (inaudible – over speaking) but, you know, you can always get in touch with me.

Participant: Yes, sure.

Interviewer: I might do follow–up interviews. I don't know yet but would that be all right?

Participant: Yes, just let me know.

Interviewer: I mean I haven't sort of thought it through yet and I'd have to get it all approved so I don't know but it's just something --

Participant: No, whatever you need just let me know.

[End of interview]

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