# An examination of two case studies used in building a decision-making model

**Rosemary Lindgren Gatfield**
Queensland Institute of Business and Technology, Australia
**Merv Hyde**
School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Australia
*m.hyde@griffith.edu.au*

*Higher education in Australia contributed almost $3 billion to the Australian economy in 2000 and education has become an essential source of export profits. Australia now provides university places for over six per cent of the global student population. However, there is little empirical research undertaken in that domain. The research underpinning this paper addresses this problem by focusing on students from Singapore, which represent an overseas student client group of Asia. It sets out to explore personal, environmental and behavioural factors that influence educational decisions of students from Singapore, and to build a model that represents the complex interaction of factors and processes involved. While a built model is the major objective, the focus of this paper is on one component, the two interpretive, in-depth case studies. These present an interpretive phenomenological perspective that represents the complexity of individual experiences and supplements the quantitative research and building of a descriptive decision-making model.*

Decision-making, Singapore students, Australian universities

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education contributed $2.7 billion to the Australia economy in 2000 (DEETYA, 2002) and continues to be an essential source of export revenue (Kemp, Madden and Simpson, 1998). As the 37 universities in Australia receive a proportion of their funding through a Government contribution of $6.2 billion (Department of Education, Science and Training, DEST, 2002) they must rely on income from full-fee paying overseas students. With the prediction that the global international student population is estimated to increase from 1.8 billion to 7.2 billion by 2025 (International Development Program 2002), there will be a continuing need to meet the demand of increasing overseas student enrolments.

Overseas students have been attending Australian universities since 1904 (Bromilow and Zubrsycki, 1990). By 1998, the international student population had risen to over six per cent with its current primary overseas students group, or 39 per cent, being from Asia (UNESCO, 1999). Of this sector, Singapore is an Asian supply nation of full-fee paying higher education students to Australia (Selected Higher Education Statistics, 2002; Blackburn, 1997). This Asian market continues to be a major one (Bohm et al., 2002). The research in this paper is directed at Singaporean students for the purpose of examining the factors that influence their choice of a higher education destination in Australia.

A model has been designed to track the complexity and interactivity of factors in student decision-making about country, institution and course issues. This is shown in Figure 1. The data for the model building about country were obtained, first, through a quantitative approach involving an exploration of personal traits among Singaporean students proposing to study in Australia. The

second study component was qualitative and consisted of interviews that isolated factors in the environment of students that were influential in their decision-making.

The third study component, which is the subject of this paper, focuses upon the complexities that cannot be displayed as data in the decision-making model, but illustrate its operation. Two illustrative in-depth interviews record the experiences of subjects, and explore the meaning and interpretation given to them by the subjects, as they affect the choices they made. Finally, a study of the operations of the Australian Education International (AEI), as an educational distributor and agent, is undertaken.

This paper is directed towards these two case studies, which illustrate the multiple motives of prospective students, the referential networks that exist in the Confucian society of Singapore (Schutte and Ciarlante, 1998) and the close relationship the subjects feel with Australians, as ex-colonial, close neighbours geographically. Finally, these studies show that students of Singapore seek participatory education that engages them in broader Western education that is to some degree transformative.

## BACKGROUND

International higher education currently represents net earnings of around $3 billion to the Australian economy (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, DEETYA, 2002). For this reason it ranks amongst the top Australian service industries, being third as a global service provider after Europe (32%) and the United States, (28%) according to UNESCO (1999). International education represented Australia's eighth largest export sector with the financial contribution jumping in gross earnings from $2.8 billion in 2000 to $5 billion by 2002 (Bohm, Daris, Meares and Pearce, 2002). Thus it represents a strong, and still growing industry that assists Australia's balance of trade payments, and universities' budgets in particular.

Higher education is today a central factor in preparing students for the challenges of the technological age. The government of Singapore desires a highly educated workforce (EIU World Outlook, 2000; Jolley, 1997). Yet, while the need for higher education places increases, Singaporean universities have not been able to meet the demand, particularly in business, science and technology studies (Song, 1998; Paul, 1993).

Since the inception of universities in 1852, Australia has adopted a largely vocational model of higher education (Edmonds, 1989) that is compatible with educational needs of Singapore. Singapore also has transitioned to the user-pay system of higher education in line with the economic rationalist philosophy prevailing in most Western nations, yet has an increasing student population seeking university places (Bohm et al., 2002). As the Government of Singapore has not correspondingly increased the number of places in universities, the undersupply has led to students seeking university education abroad. There is also an increasing recognition of degrees from foreign universities that favour most Australian institutions. Further, businessmen often favour graduates who have had a Western education (Mazzarol, Choo and Nair, 2000).

Confucian philosophy underpins education and lifestyle in Singapore. The Confucian principles govern society, ethically and morally and in social and business practices and is the cornerstone of Chinese society (Hall and Ames, 1987). Yet Singapore has an education system founded in British colonialism so that students from Singapore coalesce with Australian education and lifestyle and are advantaged by English being their primary business language (Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart and Choo, 2001).

Australia is also geographically advantaged, offering higher education and accommodation at a comparatively lower cost than other Western nations (Mazzarol et al., 2001). Further, cultural barriers are limited, Australia is geophysically well endowed, and many Singapore students have relatives and friends resident in most Australian States (Mazzarol et al., 2001). Thus, besides an

endowment of colonial similarities, Singapore and Australia share complementary educational, politically liberal-democratic-styled governments, regional interests, economic and societal systems favouring cultural, vocational and educational exchange. These elements comprise some of the external factors reported in the literature as providing a context for Singaporean students seeking to study in Australian universities. However, little has been known about the personal, cultural and environmental factors that may influence students' decision-making and how these factors may interact in producing decision outcomes.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND RESULTS

In consequence, three research components were designed to examine and explore factors that influenced the choice of prospective students in Singapore to study in Australian institutions and to assist in building a decision model that described how personal, environmental and behavioural factors interacted to enable students to reach their decisions.

The first component of the research is an exploratory study to examine the potential role of personal factors in decision-making, using a quantitative approach. The 16 Personal Factors procedure (IPAT, 1986) was used to survey students, and examine the personal characteristics likely to be found in prospective educational clients at the Australian Education Centre (AEI) in Singapore. The results of this study component are reported in more detail elsewhere but essentially show that one trait most characterising these students from Singapore was a capacity for 'abstract thinking'.

The second component of the research is a qualitative study comprising structured interviews with 18 prospective students looking specifically at environmental factors that influenced their decision-making. Through refining and collating the textual data from these interviews, three key themes emerged and these were used as constructs in the building of the decision-making model. In addition, two extensive in-depth interviews or case studies were conducted to explore elements of the inner life of the subjects, the meanings placed on events, and how these linked lived experiences to the decisions they made. In this way some detail that was sacrificed during the refining and collating process was reclaimed.

The third component of research is a focused observation study to investigate the contribution of the AEI office as an education agent, and a marketing channel for Australian universities in Singapore. The results of this study component demonstrate that the AEI in Singapore informed, recruited and delivered quality services to prospective students that informed and supported their individual choices of courses, locations and preferred universities.

The combined data contributed to building a theoretical model of decision-making contextualised in Singapore. The model built on the data obtained from the 16PF study component the interviews, observations in the AEI and contributions from the literature are presented in Figure 1.

The first set of 18 interviews involved short, structured, open-ended questions of approximately 20-30 minutes duration while the two in-depth interviews or case studies were of over one hour's duration and open-ended. Data from the 18 interviews were subjected to a comprehensive system of refining, collating and organising text elements (Tesch 1990), while the two case studies returned some detail lost in the refining and categorisation processes. Finally, themes extrapolated from the 18 interviews were compared with those identified in the literature and those with strong congruence were used in building the explanatory model.

The two students selected for the in-depth interviews were considered to display features that were representative of the range of segments reported in the 18 earlier interviews. The role of the in-depth interviews or case studies was to give credence to the personal interpretation of experiences that shape decisions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 1993). These in-depth interviews further revealed the attitudes and understanding of the subjects about family and community, pressures,

privacy, unspoken family conventions, moments that shape the future, expectations, and personal and educational circumstances that impact upon choice. Portions of the two interviewees' stories were used to enrich the overall findings and provide some intimacy lost in thematic presentations based on collective rather than personal understanding. This, then, is the focus of the present paper.
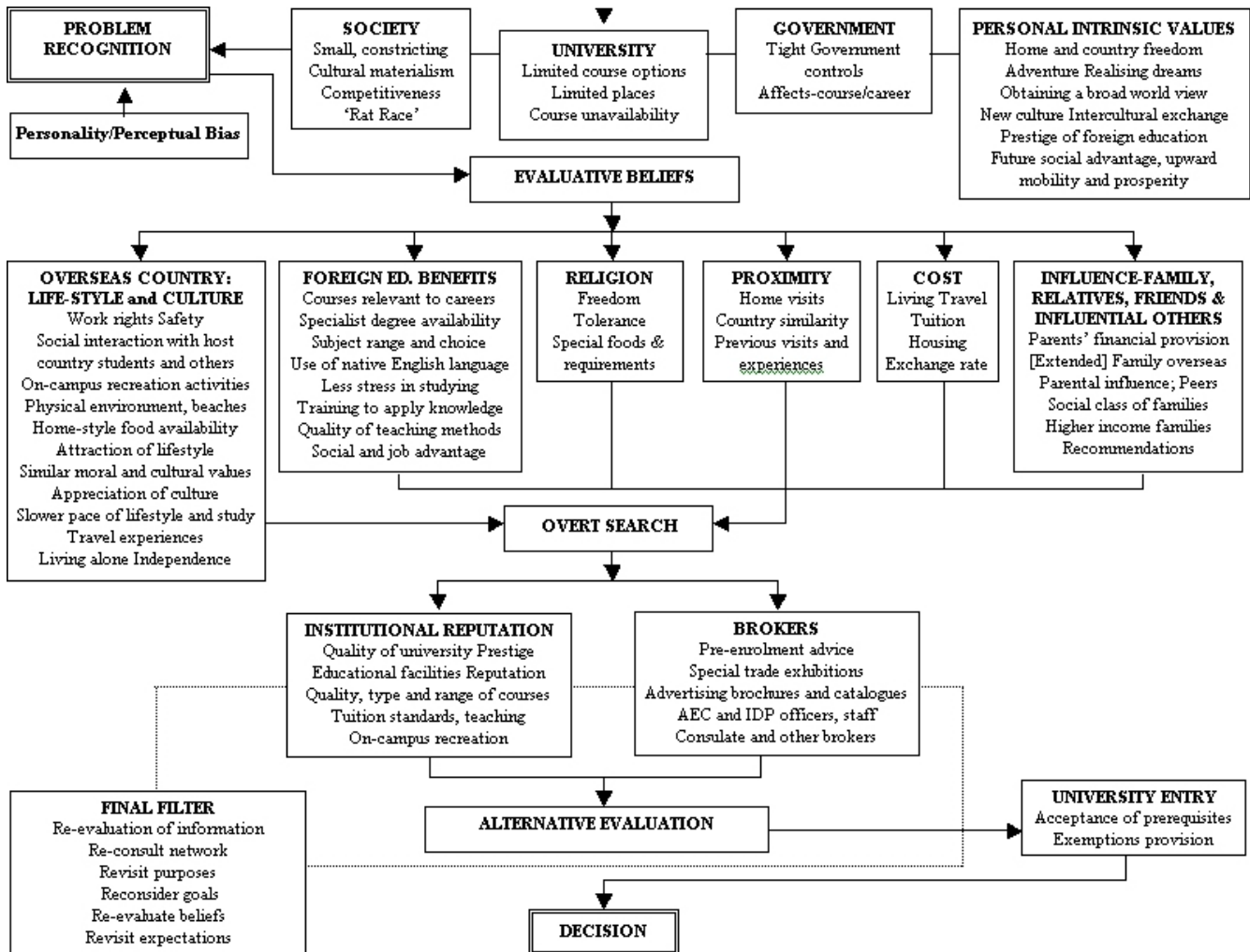


**Figure 1. A multi factor model of decision making**

## FRAMEWORK FOR THE CASE STUDIES

The subjects were students seeking information on Australian higher education: one was male and the other female. The Manager of the AEI office in Singapore selected both subjects, having previously briefly interviewed them. The male subject was considering undergraduate enrolment in Australia and the female wished to return to Australia for further postgraduate study. It was agreed that topical guidance should be given so that they were directed towards identification of a broad framework of influences, internal and external. Therefore, exploration was predominantly of personal themes, motivations and factors that influenced their personal choices.

The guiding principle was that the interviews should be open-ended with subjects sharing any parts of their decision-making they considered had contributed to the current prospect of study in Australia. Both required prompts to give some continuity to the interviews and probes were used to encourage more detailed information of particular experiences. The parameters were set around the subjects' lives, environments and experiences, which included personal events, social and religious environments, family histories, cultural and educational experiences and developments

that shaped their lives. Further, it involved experiences of friendship, beliefs, obstacles, guidance, misfortune, future direction and significant events that affected life decisions or in some ways brought them to their current place of making a future educational decision.

The two participants were Singaporean Chinese in heritage, a female of 24 years of age (Subject 1, S1) and a male of 20 years (Subject 2, S2). Both students were proposing study in Australia and were willing to shed light on their life stories. Subject 1 had applied for a postgraduate Art College place, and Subject 2 was investigating an application for an undergraduate engineering course.

Though within a shared context and societal norms, the life stories of the two students varied greatly. Each subject had experienced personal sufferings in differing ways, and opposition from a difficult family member, yet possessed a hope for the future for which both were striving to fulfil. Although extended family relationships helped shape their views of society, they continued to be the cause of joy and pain, though integral to their lives. Living in close proximity to neighbours was expressed as both a satisfaction and a burden and the concept of solitude lingered in both subjects' minds as both a positive, yet not always desired, force.

The first subject, the female, perceived that the sufferings she experienced were due to being born a girl, which her mother had expressed endlessly as a bad omen for the family. Philosophically, her life became bound up in astrology, ancient ancestry and Eastern religion, while aesthetically, she wrapped her life in Japanese art and beauty. She wished to experience again the freedom she had known in earlier study in Australia and was wrestling with returning to postgraduate study in Australia when her duty was to her ailing mother whose health was slowly deteriorating.

This subject perceived her life as being in bondage to ancestors and sought enlightenment through astrological and ancestral studies. She seemed to have been woven into a tapestry of pain and hurt that darkened her spirit; it could be lightened only through the beauty of music, paintings, visual artistry and graphic design. Her reward for years of pain and a lonely existence were transformed by short visits with her father to Australia, fine arts study in Australia, and her years of graphic design in Japan for which her successful career was richly rewarded. Yet, she desired more and her quest for inner resolution would be in her philosophical study and a future beyond Singapore.

The central influence upon the male subject was from his mother and her family, with its proud Paranakan ancestry of Chinese-Malay origins and patriarchal authority. Remembering the past was a duty and endowed upon the family a royal and refined history in the shadow of which they could live today. Duty to his family was instilled from birth. This brought personal conflict as he tried to understand inner leadings and sought guidance.

The female subject was controlled throughout her formative years by her mother, while her father observed in silence. Both parents had traditional Chinese backgrounds, her mother coming from a wealthy Buddhist family from Mainland China while her father had been intelligent but poor. Although he became a successful, self-made man, it was his wife, a concert artist and teacher, who had retained the status and power in the home. Her behaviour became eccentric and she was superstitious, blaming bad luck on her only daughter whom she had disciplined by beatings throughout her life, causing a deep rift, which was still being healed:

> With my mother, before all the things that happened to her she was a busy person with teaching music, training students, singing and she was very active at home because students would come over and sing together. It has made me frustrated because my mum is supposed to be an art person but she's treated me like this, in spite of her learning in this area of music. After all, music and art are the same. But why? Because of her traditional values. I think it is a hindrance.

Both subjects suffered childhood illness and injury, the young boy finding deep compassion from the clan family, while the girl suffered rejection. From childhood, Subject 2 explained how he was driven by a need to develop friendships and to connect deeply with society positively through community aid and care work. This he now saw was a means of justifying his existence. He felt he was both child and adult, a conqueror of life, through what he could do for others, and conquered by life, who struggled to make sense of pain and suffering. Often he was overwhelmed by his own poor health and the pressing needs of others close to him. Yet he valued times with his father who had taken him to places in his thoughts, ideas and stories that were based in old Chinese fables of Han Zhong Li, who was a noble warrior who defeated his enemies and won in battle the respect of emperor and god.

He experienced an illness when he was eight that doctors could not diagnose. His mother resolved to take him to Chinese doctors in Malaysia for treatment so that he was separated from school companions, friends and family. On returning after a prolonged period of separation, he experienced some loneliness. During this time, his father finally was able to share his own stories of life:

> I became close to my father during my illness. He left work early to spend time with me. He read to me, told me stories of his childhood in old Singapore. [He and his father] shared secrets and [his] father collected special cards with collector cars on them that were [stored] away in the wall. What I have today is a memory to my father. I hope what I achieve will be in thanks to my father.

Despite terrible stab wounds to her ribs at a young age by a deranged neighbour that brought years of operations on her spine, loneliness, and a sense of being trapped by injuries, Subject 1 reported that she found her freedom through study, work and career. The choice of studying abroad encapsulated for her a sense of liberty, free-will, choice, and separation from the nightmare. To her, decision-making was as much about leaving Singapore and immersing herself in something she loved and which freed her, as about studying abroad. To the second subject it was about honouring the family, repaying a debt, while also providing a challenge.

Their current commitment was seen by both the male and female subjects as due to all that had happened in their lives, bringing strong desires to apply themselves completely to their studies:

> Even when I went away for my studies I was not like my friends. When I was in Australia, I spent most of my time at school attending lectures, working on projects. All the time I was working and doing part-time work in a design company. (Subject 1)

> I spent most of my time at school working hard, working on projects, challenging myself. I will never change because I believe individuals can either grow in society, by hardships or through challenges that can come through study. I need time away from the system in Singapore. I have seen others stay in Singapore and go back to what they feel safe with but I don't want that just yet. I want to grow and be challenged much further yet. (Subject 2)

> I actually did have a strong interest in peoples' culture, language and the way of life. I think that was [an important] motive for going away, to know other people's life, to get to see how other people live, to know what are the differences between their lifestyle and my lifestyle. I wanted to compare why there are so many problems existing in my country that is not happening elsewhere because I was thinking that such knowledge would help me in my work, in my art. (Subject 1)

Discussions led both subjects to the political environment in which their lives were grounded, whose perceptions of government in Singapore was stark and real. They accepted that their

contemporary views were unacceptable to older generations who had benefitted from the post-independence policies of Singapore that now seemed outdated to many of the younger generation:

> I think it is hard for you to understand because in Singapore the Government actually plans your whole life from high school through college. It is good to structure the society, but it is to the extent where it interferes with your private life that I don't think is right. Everybody has the choice of what they will do. You can't use authority to force people to accept it and most people are forced by the Government to accept the fact that it is like this.

> Our Government actually structured the education system so that between 18 to 22-23 are the years of university. Then by 25-26 you can't really get in. Lately they have started the Open University for adults to study. It is now working very well.

> Our Government has made Singapore a very competitive society. It is a place where everybody is trying both to prove and to improve themselves. In Singapore you must find a way to survive despite the Government that plays a very important role in decision-making as well as in our careers and for our future. The older generation supports what the Government has achieved but for this younger generation they feel manipulated. (Subject 1)

And for Subject 2:

> Of course national service was a regimented life. It is no doubt an extension of the control of Government that is in Singapore at every corner and in every aspect of life. Duty and service are important to people in Singapore and this does not only relate to national service. I'm glad this is at an end for me, as I know the army would never be a career of choice. You have to use it to grow as a person but move on at the right time.

> I will not let the Government take any further role in planning my life or career. I have served in the army and I have obeyed the laws. Now it is time for me and I will support any politics I think is right for Singapore when I return. I would like some change although my family never want to change anything. I understand from their background why they must continue to support the present structure. They are in debt for the good life they now have but I think they have earned it.

Regardless of his strong views on the government and its control over society, the male subject's attitude to his environment and his motivations confirmed an appreciation for its benefits and the legacy children of this society had received. It also demonstrates the resilience and resourcefulness of the Chinese spirit in the younger generation as he commented:

> I have visited many countries and seen the way other people live and although I enjoy these experiences for a time I know I want to live my life in Singapore making the most of life surrounded by good friends. My family care more that we find what is right for us as individuals and believe that we know what is right for our lives, what will bring us happiness. They ignore my bad behaviour at times but I do know the limits and I try always to stay within those.

> My parents have always been supportive of me. My dad has had a successful business career as an industrial manufacturer and I seem to have inherited that interest. Because Singapore is mainly a provider of service industries, a career in business is a better option, although engineering could always be a possibility as there is a shortage in Singapore. Basically, the people of Singapore are its main resources so a business that uses manpower has a certain future in Singapore. In Singapore and with my family I can make the most of life surrounded by good friends.

> I completed national service and now I am looking for a business career. I found it a time for self-development but it is time I moved off into a new venture. I feel I am now ready for study and it will be good to use my skills in a new situation. Everything I do I want to be a new adventure and study will be this challenge. I shall mix experiences in a new culture and I should experience growth in new areas. I look forward to this challenge. I have seen others stay in Singapore and go back to what they feel safe with. I want to grow and be challenged much further yet.

This willingness to accept and rise above circumstances in life that cannot be controlled reflected many of the views of students in earlier interviews. In sharing their philosophical positions on life, the two subjects revealed the attitudes, beliefs and understandings they had formed and their learning and information processing capacity:

> Some of the best kind of learning does not come from textbooks or just from libraries, which is a limited source of information. We learn things through life: just sitting on a bus looking out of the bus, this is part of the experience. [With people who] have love and happiness you know they know how to treasure happiness. If they have happiness you can feel it. People who are always happy then there is no obstacle they can't overcome. How fortunate they are.

> I realised when I was younger there was an anger growing inside but I vented my anger by leaving home, by going away. I found release only last year when my mother fell sick and that changed the whole perspective of my life. I want to be self-contented. It's not the achievement that you have in life that makes you a better person. It is something inside you.

> To me, whether you are of the Chinese, Japanese, Australian or any other culture you are all the same except that you are of different parents, with different skin colour and features but that's all. It very much depends upon the individual, how you view life, your perspective. I want to ask of myself as I think about my life in Singapore, is it like this everywhere? I want to see the other side of the world to see why people stay in another country.

> If you publicly announce anything against the Government and you are caught by the police, you will end up in jail. A typical Singaporean attitude is that you are told that it is bad to stand up and say something. That is why I don't like my own country and don't wish to stay here. (Subject 1)

> I have little experience of other cultures apart from business travel with my father. I do believe that all people are basically the same. We all want to have the same opportunities that others in the world have as it affects our view of life.

> It doesn't take much courage to live in Singapore. [With terrible illness], it is then that the real person shows and it is a test of friendship because it is very easy to desert someone who can no longer join in. That is the real test. Life in Singapore is not difficult - except it is difficult to enter your choice of study. (Subject 2)

Satisfaction with the social environment did not overflow into the educational arena for either subject, sharing the same disdain as the political system in many aspects:

> Now as a teacher I can feel for the students even at a young age like 12 and 13 bringing piles and piles of textbooks to school and the focus of school is a score, to learn and gain results. They don't care whether the students are coping with it. A lot of students commit suicide when they are in the primary school. The reason behind this is the education system.

What I like about arts is that I can vent my anger in my life here: I can release the pressure. It's me, it reflects me and my outlook on life but I can't reveal it in everyday life.

Everybody has to shut up. If you speak, the next day you will have [to appear] at the police station. I question also that, as teenagers, why are we always under pressure? (Subject 1)

I want to study in Australia for three years. I need time away from the system in Singapore. I know it is really the reason most young people go overseas. I need to study a course for employment and at a university where my degree will be well recognised as that is an important start in business here in Singapore. I could, if I need to, work with my father but I know other families in business who could employ me. I have to think I can work somewhere else. That may change. (Subject 2)

Past experience in other cultures was seen as a shaping influence on the female subject in particular, but the following discourse by both subjects shows some of the processing prospective students engage in as they seek to discern what is the right course of action for the future and their assessments of competing cultures:

For three years I went to Australia and for two years to Japan. It is quite different in Japan to the west; I think one reason being, it is 'Asianised' because it is restricted by our traditional thinking. It's not free, not totally free.

Japan is a totally different society compared to Singapore or even Australia. They are very regimental. The generation gap is wider there even than in Singapore. In Japan they are governed by their traditional values Before I went to Australia I heard Australian people are lazy, don't work hard, laid-back, slow-paced, back-dated. Looking at their work, especially in art, in the performing arts, drama, visual arts, if they are laid-back they couldn't produce work like this. It is actually a very superficial understanding of people.

[Australia] is not very materialistic: it's not really commercialised. It is more to my liking and it's why I prefer Australia to Singapore. It is very commercialised and everyone's objective is to earn a lot of money, to own cars, to own houses. Japan is worse than Singapore. All the clothes you wear have to be labelled. Designer labels are what count. (Subject 1)

What I have learned from my friends and other family who have lived in Australia, they liked the freedom of the lifestyle and the different ways of doing things. They also say that Australians are relaxed, unstressed people. They aren't design conscious in clothes and I think that is good because it makes you acceptable for who you are, not your image. They say that universities use different teaching approaches to Singapore and the system here is very outdated and it would be good to have new experiences in that way.

My family has [given me] the option of studying in the United States or Australia. I would like to go to Yale or Harvard but I don't think I would be good enough. I don't know many people who have studied in the US but I know many in Australia and there is family there. I understand that the Americans are different, very different, so I am happy to go to Australia and maybe later I can do some postgraduate study at Harvard. (Subject 2)

## How the case studies relate to the study findings

The case studies focused on personal experiences of the two subjects from Chinese families with a predominantly Confucian ideology. They revealed complex thinking on issues about their lives, education and society that impacts on the way they engaged in decision-making. The view they presented of the Singaporean environment was of a sophisticated, highly competitive and increasingly Westernised society as well as a somewhat superstitious, Easternised, family-oriented society. They articulated the pressure that striving for success brings and showed that they recognised the value of the different style of learning from those of Singapore. The subjects confirmed that their desire to study in Australia was stimulated by cultural expectations of a freer, less image-conscious society.

The stories unfolded some portions of the pain and joy of 'lived experiences' (Van Manen 1984) and the way it shaped mind and spirit, so that decision-making could be seen in a context of personal history and lived experience. Subject 1 had lived in some degree of personal suffering and remained bound as an adult to the expectations of her traditional Chinese parents. She was bound to a debilitated parent who had enjoyed her own long musical career yet would not free her daughter to pursue hers. Freedom was another land, another culture and a time of intense absorption in study of art before a new career in another place at another time. She sought every benefit that Australian education at its best and fullest could offer her and was hungry to devour it, piece by piece, enjoying the most diverse of teaching and learning applications.

The second subject was seeking a challenge in the educational arena of Australia so that he could be prepared for a future business career where success was the only perceived outcome. This was the debt he owed his family and a trust placed upon him that would show his filial piety to the strongly Confucian family with a proud Paranakan heritage. Behind his educational decision rested the weight of tradition and obligation.

The two case studies were an important part of the research into factors involved in these students' decision-making as were the data from the 18 interviews that had been subjected to a refining process so that the themes emerged that could be used as constructs in the mode (Figure 1). The primary 97 narrative segments were grouped into smaller segments where they contained similar meanings. In this way 97 segments were grouped and "coded into categories" (Tesch 1990) thus reducing them to 79. The educational marketing literature was then used as a baseline for comparison and 51 narrative segments in the research findings were found to be congruent with those in the literature. This was a confirmatory finding.

The research data were subjected to two further reduction processes to concentrate factors that were similar in content and strengthened each category. Thus, the segments were regrouped into categories (Tesh, 1990) of Cost and Finances; Australian Education; and Australia. Of these, three were significantly different in their content to previous studies and were considered to be new to the current understandings. The three segments are represented in the following descriptions and incorporate some student terminology, shown in italics.

*Singaporean Environment*. This focused on the effect on students of pressures brought about by controls over education, universities, courses and enrolments by the Government of Singapore. In society, this was expressed in status conferral either through high achievement or success indicators, such as the acquisition of the '6Cs' (Condominium, Car, Credit Card, Cash and Certificates). This control was further expressed in perceived social engineering, with the Government controlling life from the cradle to the grave. Educationally students felt a degree of disempowerment and frustration at the shortage of university places. Thus, the combined effects are a perceived lack of educational and personal freedoms and a stifling social and academic competitiveness.

*Australia and Education.* This related to the attractions of a more resourceful education system awarding higher status degrees in an environment that was conducive to study with course prerequisites easier to meet and degrees of choice more available. Also, being at a low cost, increased the social advantage of undertaking an Australian education. An added attraction was knowledge passed on through friends of a different kind of teaching and learning than was experienced in Singapore. A further advantage was the attractions of a vast land, oceans, beaches and inland mysteries, of an attractive physical environment that offered a relaxed lifestyle, complementary to the academic focus. Intrinsic to this experience was the perceived societal and political freedom that they could enter during this time of study. Many, however, carried an inherent need to succeed academically to honour the sacrifice of their families.

*Individual Experiences*. This signified the need in studying abroad to be initiated into adulthood, presented with new opportunities and confronting challenges while in Australia. This offered an opportunity to validate their existences through their own efforts. Thus, new freedoms were seen as a catalyst for growth, maturity and to prepare them for future uncertainties in life. It further involved some degree of intercultural exchange in Australia where they could interact in a Western culture that was in some ways different to their experiences in an Eastern society founded on Confucian values. Thus, the strong desire was to be independent and to live and study in a more challenging environment, with low risk but high opportunity to exercise their independence. This provided an escape from the tightly controlled perimeters of a small, highly concentrated community, that for many was perceived as stifling their individuality and inhibiting creative opportunities. For some this small nation-state often felt imprisoning and the perceived need of students was for a short escape to prepare and refresh them before embarking on a future career.

## CONCLUSIONS

The case studies and the interviews point to a strong degree of cognitive ability among the individuals, a complex response to situations in their environment and a sound philosophical understanding of themselves and their society. This indicates abstract thinking ability, not generally accorded to Chinese students, that adds an enriching dimension to understanding the decision-making process depicted in the model where philosophy and a human perspective is not easily represented. It further supports indications of high abstract thinking in the personal factors study.

The decision-making model in Figure 1 is a high-involvement one, as high personal and economic investments are made for the outcome. The process begins with 'problem recognition', incorporating factors from the physical and psychological domain, motivating prospective students to examine their 'problem' in socio-cultural and political, as well as personal and educational terms. Then may follow engagement in evaluative beliefs about the Australian education offering and any perceived personal and psychological advancement, educational development and career opportunities. Concurrent is the rite of passage into adulthood through achievement. This may lead to a covert search, with students evaluating hardships alongside opportunities and cognisance of possibility as well as responsibility. Overtly, networks are consulted and information evaluated. Finally, through an alternative evaluation a clear pathway of choice may emerge; or a more turgid evaluation and re-evaluation of choices lead to a desired outcome.

Thus, this model represents an ostensibly simple process of educational choice, overlaid with a complexity of factors including: personal emotions and desires, psychological reasonings and rationalisations, political, social and cultural influences, educational indoctrinations, referent group expectations and social norms, and societal traditions and spiritual directions. The simple becomes the complex. This model, therefore, represents a fragment of the social, personal and

behavioural interaction that occurs during decision-making and a representation of the variables that are at play during this process.

Finally, consideration should be given by university administrators to the need expressed in this research by Chinese students not only for a safe, economical, geographically close location and awards from institutions recognised by their home government, but for personal and cultural outcomes. Advertising material, therefore, might promote an Australian study environment where independence, growth, new experiences, unique friendships, self-management, new life opportunities, and time responsibility are possible. Universities could reinforce this desire for new educational experiences that direction students towards educational autonomy that complements personal aspirations.

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