

Chapter 8

A Place for STEM: Probing the Reasons for Undergraduate Course Choices

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Introduction: Place and Belonging

According to Pretty et al. (2003), the place where young people live contributes to their identity. It is particularly significant for prospective university students who are in a transitional period of their lives. At this time many are suspending ties and attachments to family and friends and moving away from home to attend university. In doing so, they will develop new social and cultural environments and will experience increasing levels of personal autonomy. Moving far away from home to attend university also facilitates independence (Fisher and Hood 1987) and impacts on the student's self-image, identity development and furthermore, 'place attachment' as students consider who they are, how they see themselves, and how they would like others to see them (Cassidy and Trew 2001). Chow and Healey (2008) found that first-year university students in England were concerned with the loss of sense of place, the sense of belonging and the detachment from their home-town. The process of moving from home to university was, in effect, undermining the home-town's capacity to symbolise the student's sense of self.

An individual's evolving self influences decisions being considered such as what course to study at university or even what university to attend. The place where a student chooses to live and the people they choose to spend time with, are likely to either be compatible or incompatible with their self or evolving self. In this chapter we consider the importance and significance of place in the decision-making process. In this way, we propose place as more than an independent variable but as a means of mediating social life (as suggested by Gieryn 2000). Throughout the chapter we draw on literature from a variety of fields, including geography, environmental psychology and sociology to position our argument. For a complete

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overview of place literature, see Trentelman (2009), Lewicka (2011), Gustafson (2001) and Scannell and Gifford (2010).

Why Is Place Important? And What Is It?

Place plays a key role in the social world and the symbolic meanings and emotional attachments that individuals hold about particular settings. Consequently, places become a key component of identity as individuals ‘draw on a range of social processes, symbols and values to describe themselves’ and become ‘important conduits in the cultural production of the self’ (Sampson and Goodrich 2009, p. 902). The concept of place, or sense of place, is found in a wide range of literature within, for instance, social science, geography, architecture, urban planning, sociology, leisure and tourism and environmental psychology (Kudryavtsev et al. 2012; Lee 2011; Eijck and Roth (2010). A settled community, or a locality with a distinct character, is often synonymous with place (Massey 1995). However, place literature contains many terms that are inconsistent (Kudryavtsev et al. 2012), with much of the research concentrating on the relationship between people and places or the connection or disconnection between people and their environment. Examples of the variety of terms in use include sense of place (or Malpas (2008), ‘sense of belonging to places and the character of places’), place attachment (or Burdge and Ludtke (1972) ‘identification with place’), place meaning and place identity.

Place is defined by Low and Altman (1992) as a physical space imbued with meaning, a meaningful location (Lewicka 2011). Place has three features, a geographic location (the distinction between here and there), a material form, and investment with meaning and value (Gieryn 2000). A geographic location can take a variety of forms from a chair to a room to a district to a country or a destination to go to for a particular purpose or function. It has, therefore, physicality: place is stuff and it is identified or named. It is also the space filled by people, practices, objects and representations and, as such, the meaning or value of the same place is flexible and malleable depending on the person or culture. For a review of the literature on scale of place such as home, neighbourhood, city, region, country, and continent, see Lewicka (2011).

Gieryn (2000) makes a distinction between place and space, the latter being abstract and detached from material form and cultural interpretation. He claims that place is not just a setting or context but a force that exerts effects on social life. Other writers (Canter 1977; Sack 1997; Stedman 2002) have identified the physical setting, the person (an individual’s internal psychological and social processes and attributes) and the activities or rituals done at the place (Smaldone et al. 2005). Gustafson (2001) proposes a tri-polar analytical framework of Self—Others—Setting. However, Gustafson (2001) noted that, within his proposed framework, the ‘meanings of place are not forced into three discrete categories but mapped around and between the three poles of self, other and environment’ (p. 12).

Places bring people together resulting in either engagement or estrangement, which will also depend on whether practices that an individual prefers (identifies with) are appropriate or inappropriate in those locations.

Sense of place is the ability to locate and attribute meaning to a form or spot (Gieryn 2000). It is considered to comprise place attachment (how strongly an individual is attracted to a place) and place meaning (how they describe the reasons they are attracted to the place). Kudryavtsev et al.'s (2012) review of sense of place in environmental education outlines a number of key definitions within the sense of place literature. Place attachment is thought to be the bond between people and places, or the degree to which a place is important to people (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001) and as such also involves social relations. This bond can invoke 'the extent to which an individual values or identifies with a particular environmental setting' (Kyle et al. (2003) and is usually a positive association, linked both by the place and the people attached to it. Place attachment is usually measured using quantitative measures from Likert scale surveys (see Marcouyeux and Fleury-Bahi (2011) for an example). The environment where an individual lives has a strong role in an individual's life, creating a sense of meaning, and is often related to personal identity. A sense of place impacts on identity through the experiences an individual has where they live (Proshansky et al. 1983). As such, places are endlessly made through material form and interpretative understandings or experiences (Gieryn 2000).

Place dependence is the potential a place has to satisfy an individual's needs and it can emerge if the place provides the setting for preferred activities (Halpenny 2010; Vaske and Kobrin 2001). **Place identity** is another term that describes the relationship between people and place (Proshansky et al. 1983). It is the extent to which a place becomes a part of an individual's definition of self or their personal identity (Hauge 2007; Korpela 1989; Proshansky et al. 1983), how it influences the individual's sense of self-identity and how it can result in a sense of purpose and belonging. It can be considered a cognitive structure that contributes to the social identity process and self-categorization developing 'from acts of locating oneself within environmental contexts through daily routines as well as during exceptional circumstances' (Cicognani et al. 2008, p. 34). The symbolic meanings that individuals ascribe to settings is called place meaning, often defined by answers to questions such as 'what does this place mean to you?' (Smaldone et al. 2005). Place meaning is a multidimensional construct reflecting an individual's social interactions, culture, politics and economics (Ardoin 2006). In that context, place meanings are attributed to different themes such as 'environment', 'self' and 'others' (Gustafson 2001).

The idea of place and sense of place has been explored in relation to moving from home to university (Chow and Healey 2008). Preferences for urban and rural locations (urbanophilia versus urbanophobia, see Félonneau 2004) also exist with individuals seeing themselves as either city people or country people (Hummon 1992). Lewicka (2010) writes that distinctions between types of place are closely linked to social capital (bonding and bridging) and that people with many distant

friends and acquaintances (bridging social capital) tend to have many more close friends and strong family ties (bonding social capital).

The most consistent predictor of place attachment is length of residence but socio-demographic, social, and physical-environmental are others. Since place identity is a closely related construct to attachment, place identity may also be seen as a predictor. Feldman (1990) suggests that with an increase in mobility within society that attachments shift from place to what he calls 'settlement identity', such as 'city person', 'mountain person', 'rural person', etc. The aspects of place theory that little is known about are the processes through which people become attached to places. Lewicka (2010) also presents an alternative perspective to the concept of attachment, discussed by Beckley (2003), who claims that 'magnets' are factors that attract people to a place and 'anchors' are the factors that prevent people from moving from a place. 'Magnet'/'anchors' and 'settlement identity' are particularly relevant concepts in terms of students' decisions about university. Place attachment develops independently of residence and the physical or recreational assets of place. Magnets potentially draw people away from home attachments; social and community factors potentially anchor them to home locations. The consequences for students of such place attachment include decreased mobility and subsequent potential restrictions on life opportunities.

Decision-Making in Higher Education

Participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is a concern to researchers and policy makers (European Commission 2010; Bøe et al. 2011). In most OECD countries there has been a large increase in the numbers of students attending higher education over the past 15 years; however, despite the absolute numbers of students in STEM fields also experiencing an increase, the proportion of STEM students has steadily decreased during the same period (OECD 2006). This trend is particularly prominent in disciplines such as mathematics and the physical sciences. In the UK, young people are 20 % more likely to go on to higher education than was the case in the mid-1990s (Thompson and Bekjradina 2009) but it is thought that there are not enough young people studying STEM at the higher education level to sustain desired economic growth (HM Treasury 2004). [This notion is contested by Smith and Gorard (2011) who have shown that, following graduation, the majority of science degree holders enter occupations that are not directly related to science.] To address the perceived problem, the UK Economic and Social Science Research Council commissioned research to provide evidence for policy proposals that could boost applications for STEM courses at university and, a year later, in 2008, the Higher Education Funding Council for England launched a £350 million rescue plan to attempt to counteract the decline in the number of students taking science and mathematics (Royal Society 2007).

The literature on student college choice from the 1980s suggests a three-stage process in decision-making: the predisposition phase, the search phase and the choice phase (Jackson 1982; Litten 1982; Chapman 1981; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Hossler et al. 1998). The choice phase involves deciding which university a student will actually attend and is influenced by educational and occupational aspirations, costs and financial concerns and university courtship activities (Hossler and Gallagher 1987; St. John 1990). According to the National Union of Students' Student Experience report (NUS 2008) a large proportion of students (31 %) are motivated to choose a university close to home, particularly students from lower socio-economic groupings. This figure is, perhaps, not surprising given that universities are able to charge fees of up to £9k per year to most students. These factors do not pay attention to external factors such as fulfilling entry requirements.

In 2005, the UK Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) launched a major programme of research (longitudinal study, named Futuretrack), designed to explore the process of entry into and through higher education of all applicants to full-time UK higher education courses who applied through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in 2006. The project aims to provide robust and comprehensive evidence to clarify the socio-economic and educational factors that determine career choices, and outcomes. A fourth survey, conducted in winter 2011–2012 five years after most respondents embarked on their courses, is currently under analysis.

According to Purcell et al. (2008) once students have made the decision to apply to a university, they start the process by either choosing the institution or location in which they hope to study and the area of study or discipline they are interested in, or have a very precise idea about the exact course they aspire to enter. The most frequent order of choice of 'traditional' students appeared to be broad subject area, followed by institution. For older students or students with a less established tradition of HE participation, most choose location first, thus restricting their options.

The most popular reasons for choosing to study a particular course were interest in the course and employment or career-related reasons (Purcell et al. 2008). Age and social class affected the order of these reasons, with younger applicants more likely to choose subjects they were good at or enjoyed, and less likely than older applicants to give instrumental, employment-related reasons for choosing their course. Applicants from higher social classes were also more likely to choose subjects they enjoyed or were good at, whilst those from lower social classes were more likely to give employment-related reasons. Older applicants generally had clearer reasons for choosing their course. Students coming from homes where progression to HE was regarded as the norm were likely to perceive themselves as having wider choices and greater likelihood of having had encouragement from parents, teachers and friends to apply for HE. However, they may be more likely to progress directly from subjects they enjoyed at school to study of these same subjects in higher education without considering the implications of choices. Purcell et al. (2008) state that 'prior achievement and experience of a subject are good reasons for studying it but there is a danger that other options – and the

longer-term implications of choices – may not be considered adequately in cases where students proceed without much thought or guidance to opt for their best school subject’ p. 71. Subject choice remained profoundly gendered, and women exhibited greater clarity in ideas about the career they aspired to in the analysis of vocational subject choices (Purcell et al. 2008).

IRIS and Choosing Undergraduate Courses

This chapter reports on one English research strand within the IRIS project, the Choosing Undergraduate Courses (CUC) study. The CUC study examines university students’ understandings of choosing undergraduate courses. Based on an analysis of focus groups and biographic interviews, the CUC project explores the way university students make sense of the priorities, considerations, values and experiences on which they base their educational choice. We explore how young people’s educational priorities can be interpreted through perspectives on late modern societies as outlined by Bøe and Henriksen in Chap. 2, and identity, outlined by Holmegaard, Ulriksen and Madsen in Chap. 3. Although all students in our focus groups discussed more typical factors of influence such as interest, achievement, family, and teachers, the significance of place to the participants was clear. Consequently, this chapter focuses on students in one university and examines the role of place in the course choice decision-making process using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of focus group narratives.

Methods

The CUC approach is a qualitative study based on 20 focus groups (Vaughn et al. 1996) of STEM and non-STEM first-year undergraduate students (male and female) in four different English universities (one northern, one western, and two based in London) and biographical interviews that explore the critical pertinent features in their lives (social as well as educational) that led them to study STEM (or other courses). Students were invited to participate through their university email system and, following the focus groups, a subset were invited to participate in an in-depth biographical interview. The STEM students were selected from undergraduate programmes in eight subject areas, identified by ISCED codes: Biology; Physics; Chemistry; Mathematics; Statistics; Computer Science; Engineering Mechanics and Metal Work; Engineering Electronics and Automation; and Engineering Electronics and Process. The non-STEM students were selected from undergraduate programmes in six subject areas: Arts; Humanities; Social and behavioural science; Journalism; Business; Law. While the intention of the research was to study the attitudes and experiences of English university students, several foreign national students participated, reflecting the diversity of the student

Table 8.1 Breakdown of the CUC sample

Focus group	Category	Gender	Number of participants (n)
1	STEM	Male	4
2	STEM	Male	7
3	STEM	Female	9
4	Non-STEM	Male	3
5	Non-STEM	Female	10

population and recruitment to English universities. According to Keown (1983, p. 66) ‘homogeneous groups . . . are generally more comfortable and open with each other, whereas mixed sex, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups make it more difficult to achieve a high degree of group interaction’. Consequently, the groups were organised by gender and STEM/non-STEM participation.

Students enrolled in STEM and non-STEM undergraduate programmes were asked to share their thoughts, experiences and feelings about educational choice within each focus group. The discussions, which lasted 120 min were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Morgan 1996) facilitating collective sense-making (Wilkinson (1998a, p. 186) and the ‘co-construction of meaning in action’ (Wilkinson 1998b, p. 338). The sample (see Table 8.1) on which this chapter is based came from one university in the north of England (n = 33) – the total number of focus group participants across all four universities was 119; 70 were female and 39 male. Recruitment to the study was challenging despite the assistance of gatekeepers within each university. As a result, the number of participants in each focus group varied from the ideal sample of 6–8. All focus groups were arranged with a minimum of six participants; however, several did not turn up on the day of the focus group.

Findings

The students at this northern university acknowledged the importance and significance of place in their educational decision-making. The primary focus of the group discussion was on how the students came to the decision to study either their STEM or non-STEM course. However, what continually surfaced across all the groups were the meanings that students attached to the location/place of the university. Their discourse reveals thinking about the attractions of that place, engagement or estrangement with it and meaningful places. Both the STEM and non-STEM groups offered similar perspectives on how they were influenced in their degree and university choice by both engagement and estrangement with places. Students’ discussions around educational choice and decision-making resulted in a diverse range of perceptions and experiences both within and between the groups in this case study. However, several overarching issues, and also common themes, were identified. Firstly, overarching issues included students’ reflections that the decisions that they made on the basis of place were superficial

and secondly their sense of place as a part of their self identity. Common themes for place meanings include the reputation of the university, the promise of a social life and the influence of friends and family.

In the exploration of the findings that follow, themes common across both groups are presented. The central difference between the groups is where we will begin: the non-STEM students' perception that an acknowledgement of 'place' considerations equated to the superficial nature of choice, whereas STEM students considered place to be key in terms of identifying with their chosen location of study.

Place, Important Yet Superficial

International literature highlights that there are multiple influences on student choice (James 2000; Sjaastad 2011) and the range of factors deemed to be most influential. From the opening of the 'place' discussion with the male non-STEM group, it became clear that for this group of students the choice, in their opinion, was possibly careless, frivolous and perhaps lacking in thorough considerations. Jim, a psychology student, introduces himself to the group and claims immediately 'X is a good city for going to concerts and shows and it's one of the main reasons I chose to come here, I think'. Connor is a first-year student enrolled on geography with transport planning course with varied interests ranging from sport to music. He comments on his reflections on educational choice that he had prior to attending the focus group believing that, overall, despite considerations of whether he would be accepted with the grades he had, that the choice he (centered on place) and many others make, is highly superficial. The students (all male) acknowledge the importance of place as a component of choosing their undergraduate course but view such considerations in a negative light. While discussing their choice process, students reflected on the shallowness of their decisions, such as giving considerations to the city as a social scene rather than considering the programme of study.

One of the thoughts I had is that when people are choosing their courses its relatively superficial. We've mentioned nightlife, everyone mentioned music and night life. Obviously some universities only offer certain courses and when you're applying it can narrow it down massively, but actually the choices people make can be highly superficial.

These students are, perhaps, being a little over-critical of their decisions given that, in most cases, their thoughts of place have come after considering the A-levels they possess, their options with the grades they are likely to achieve, and choosing an area of study. The decisions made are not inconsequential but are certainly not what one (or one's parents) might think is important such as the quality of teaching.

A similar thread was observed in the female non-STEM group with Norah's primary concern being location over the course choice.

I didn't choose my course first, everyone, like, chose their uni based on where it was, I wanted to be in the city, in a lively area.

Elizabeth, a geography student with strong musical interests, discussed her choice process. Elizabeth decided to base her choice on whether she would like the university and the place of study because in her view, the degree programmes would be largely similar:

I thought that everywhere is going to have a bit of the same stuff that you've done before and I'm going to have no idea whether I'm going to enjoy it, so I better concentrate more on whether I actually liked the uni, rather than the actual modules that we would be doing.

Sense of Self

A primary rationale for the choice of degree course by a majority of students in this case study was related to the experiences associated with the place and how that would contribute to their sense of self or evolving self. For both Emily and Max the fact that their chosen university offered work experience and placements as part of their degree programme was a particular draw for them. Both work placements and field-work were seen as important group and socialising experiences whereby students could build attachments and friendships while gaining valuable experience to take forward to their future job applications. Placement and study abroad options illustrate aspects of their evolving sense of self and how they see themselves both currently and in the future.

Feldman (1990) found that the majority of his sample identified as being a 'city person', a 'suburban person', a 'small town person', or a 'country/mountain person' in his study of the identification of self with settlement type in Denver. Clear from the students' discussions in our focus groups was students' identification of self with a type of settlement, in this case, with a city. Although some students originated in smaller, rural areas, the magnet of the city was strong. A vibrant city with a vibrant nightlife was more appealing than quiet country settings for some students. Furthermore, these identifications with city extended to participants' view of their future selves and aligned with their evolving sense of self. In Jackie's case, a mathematics student, that meant studying in the city now and working in a city in the future. The importance of place is evident in her views of her life trajectory, including career and family:

For me, I know I definitely want to work in the city and I think that's something that I've had to think about. I mean, obviously, it's not a firm decision yet, but I know that I'm going to have to wait a good 10 years to get my career, 'cause I want to aim high, so I want to be very focused for 10 years or so before having a family.

Similarly, chemistry student Cathy's future plans include a life in the city:

I don't know, like I do want to do something to do with chemistry but I'm not sure what, but I know that I do want to move to London after I've done my degree and be like, not a business woman but like, you know, just like a 'London gal'.

For some students, the thought of moving from home was difficult, mainly on financial grounds. However, the draw to the university experience was enough of a

pull to overcome this barrier. Although cost is not often seen as an influential factor (Brennan 2001) it often limits choice to particular locations (Connor et al. 2001). Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) report that many students from lower income families live at home, as a debt avoidance strategy. Caroline considered living at home as an option, exploring training as an accountant and earning a salary. Her aspirations aligned more with middle-class families completing the first step towards independence by moving away to university. Her desire for independence resulted in her decision to study business at university because ultimately, she couldn't *'see myself moving on with my life enough'*:

I know it's a big price tag and I'll probably still end up as an accountant in the long run but I couldn't see myself moving out of my house. If I was to be an accountant at home, I'd be living with my parents still and I'm almost 20, I couldn't see myself gaining any independence and so that's a big factor that made me decide.

Caroline was not alone in these types of deliberations. Emily, a chemistry and Spanish student, also shows the importance placed on the spatial practices of young people and their transition to university (see Holdsworth 2009; Cicognani, Menezes, & Nata 2010):

The main issue was finance really, that was the only concern. My problem was either to move away from home or stay at home. I needed to be aware that if I do move away, I'm going to have X amount more debt than you would have at home. But at the end of the day, I wanted the whole university experience, so I think moving away has helped me a lot more and I was willing to risk the debt kind of thing.

Place Meaning – The Attractions to Place

Proshansky (1978) proposed that people's psychological bonds with places transcend a relationship to a specific locale and are influenced by an individual's unique environmental experiences as well as those experiences common to all individuals living in similar or particular settings. The students discuss attractions to place and the meanings ascribed, and descriptions of why place was important in their decision to choose their undergraduate courses. The students discussed some key attractions to place, notably the reputation of the university, the social life of the city-based university, and the prospect of friendships. These articulations of place and decision-making show that the students had generalised conceptions of places developed by direct experience and through more informal communications.

Reputation

During the focus group discussions it became clear that the prestige, reputation or ranking of the university was an important consideration for most students. In line with Hinton (2011) and Briggs and Wilson (2007), the students in this study were driven by a desire to attend what they perceived to be a 'good university'. Max is

studying geological sciences, he explained: ‘It’s getting a reputable degree from a reputable university that’ll get you a job at the end of the day, with a good, reputable company’. This resonates with Soutar and Turner’s (2002) investigation of students’ preference for university selection: academic reputation and employment prospects are key factors. Similarly, Jessica, an economics student, struggled with her degree choice since she had not realised that her choices at 16 would influence her so much. Jessica studied economics, human biology, and philosophy to A-level and mathematics to AS level. Consequently, though she could have opted to do a STEM degree, she choose to do economics in order to attend a more prestigious university that would accept her with her subject combinations. As outlined in Pearson’s (1997) study, students are often poorly informed while making decisions about where to study, which in Jessica’s case stems from earlier decisions about A-levels.

The only uni that would have taken me for a science-based degree without the chemistry would have been the polytechnic kind of uni and I wanted to go to a Russell Group [higher status university]. I wanted to come out of a uni that had a good reputation, I didn’t want to come out of a uni that didn’t.

Social Life and City

For chemistry student Cathy, the social life expectations of her choice were strong, a factor which was linked to her sense of self and the rewards (‘good on your CV’) that would result from being involved in social activities:

I think social life is quite big, as in I chose X because I knew it was very social, there was a lot going on and there’s a lot of societies you can join and get involved in, which is good on your CV and stuff like that.

For many students, this aspect of university life was central to their decision-making process, together with the affordability of the scene. Students took advice on locations and social life from siblings and friends that were attending various universities and surprisingly, the weather at the time of visits also proved influential. Similarly to Hinton (2011), where moving away from home was part of achieving the ‘best’ experience, spatial mobility played a central role in our students’ discussion, particularly in light of the importance of enjoying the ‘best’ university experiences.

Influence of Family and Friends in Choosing Place

For some students, the influence of the city extended to a comparison to the capital city, particularly in relation to concerns about finance. Parental influence, or extended families, has been noted previously as an influence on student choice

(Cole and Thompson 1999) and Max's parents expressed concerns about a potential move away to university, primarily on cost grounds. Connor's parents were also influential.

Your parents and friends get involved with it, my parents and my mum especially tried to influence me, by making sure I chose the right course, so it varies on who you're talking to.

Anna however reflects on the role played by her brother, who also attends the university she has chosen, and her friends in her decision.

My brother's here and so I came up for weekends, to go out and everything like that. I didn't do an open day, but what I did do was better because, you know, you get to experience how cheap a taxi is, how much a dinner is, what the halls are like. A lot of my friends from the year above, what they said also helped me decide.

For Connor, the attraction of university as a new place in his life involved the development of new social and cultural experiences. He and Sean discussed the merits of attending a new place and breaking old ties and attachments to existing friends. This process would ensure that their home-town and home ties would no longer symbolise the self:

Connor: A part of going to university for me was actually making new friends. From experience, I think that it's good that you go to university where you haven't got a lot of friends that you know from home, because it means that you're a lot more, I don't know how's the best way to. . .

Sean: You're forced into making friends.

Connor: Yeah, you're forced into making new friends and I know lots of people from where I live go to [another university] and friends have sort of stuck together with each other, which is good and nice, but haven't necessarily made the same new friends that they would have made.

Conclusions

As Cresswell (2004) has noted, place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world, and students' relationships to places are complex (Chow and Healey 2008). In this chapter we have explored how students utilise place as a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world of educational choice. This study has shown how young people invest their sense of self in their educational choices and the meanings attached to place that attract them. Similar to Purcell et al. (2008) our participants discussed the process of either choosing the institution or location in which they hoped to study through place attachments and attractions. This process followed their initial decision to apply to a university, or the area of study or discipline they were interested in, highlighting the social and the academic factors that influence students' aspirations, goals and intentions. Unlike Chow and Healey's participants (2008), our students did not discuss a loss of sense of place or belonging and detachment from their hometown. Instead, their articulations of place centred on experiences that affected their sense of self and evolving self, and the attractions to new places of study and residence based on reputation, social

life and the city, and how significant persons affected their choices. Deciding on an undergraduate course and a university programme marks a significant transition in the lives of students as they contemplate the move from home and school to university. Place attachments held and their sense of self or place identity are shaped during this transition.

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