

PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING FOR  
INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE  
EDUCATION:

*A Study of Vietnamese Families*

By

MINH LE PHAM

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For my parents Phong Pham and Anh Le,  
my wife Chau Nguyen, and my family  
for all their love, encouragement and support

## ABSTRACT

Every year, thousands of Vietnamese students finish high school and travel to foreign countries for tertiary education. For these teenagers, this is one of the first major decisions in their lives, as they must leave families for a number of years while living and studying alone overseas. The significance of this event requires Vietnamese families to undertake an extensive planning and decision-making process, in which possible country, university and major options are carefully evaluated with respect to available resources of the families, before the final selection is made.

The existing literature on international education describes this activity as a multi-stage decision-making process, in which the protagonist is the student, treated as decision-making unit, subject to various internal and external influences, such as parental influence, as they proceed through sequential stages of a decision-making process. Existing models of the education decision-making process have limitations for the current research context of Vietnam. Firstly, little work has been undertaken to explain the university choice behaviour of international undergraduate students. Secondly, existing process models do not present all possible outcomes of the activity, thereby risking over-simplification of the complexity and dynamics of the planning and decision-making process. Lastly, none of the existing models have considered the family as the decision-making unit, which is likely to be the case in the Vietnamese context, due to the distinctive cultural values of Vietnam that emphasise collective harmony, responsibilities and achievements.

This study, therefore, aims to fill the aforementioned gaps by constructing a model that reports the process of planning and later choosing international undergraduate education by Vietnamese families, with an emphasis on the role of the family. This study employs a longitudinal qualitative approach, in which 24 families recruited in Vietnam participated in two rounds of in-depth interviews over a period of ten months, while they carried out their international education decision-making. Data analysis was then undertaken using two methods: analysis of decision-making for each family unit and thematic analysis.

The research results in a model (termed the PIUE model) consisting of four stages that depict the planning and decision-making processes of the 24 Vietnamese families in the sample. The four stages are *Predisposition*; *Search*, *Consideration*, *Selection & Application*; *Final Choice*; and *Admission*. The model captures the period from the

moment the aspiration for international education first emerges within the family, to the time when families complete the admission process and students are ready for departure. The findings indicate that the choice of international undergraduate education is the result of a long-term process that can take years to complete. At the undergraduate level, the Vietnamese family, consisting of the parents and student, is usually the collective decision-making unit throughout the process. The research advances the relevant literature by highlighting the role of long-term goals of the family and student as the main driver for all the planning and decision-making activities. Another new concept that is introduced is resource preparation, which comprises all key resources that family members need to accumulate to enact their choice of international education. For each component decision in the process, the decision-making unit employs a range of criteria to evaluate and compare available options. Information is fed to family members from various information sources and external influences. The path that the decision-making unit undertakes to arrive at the final choice is more dynamic than previously described by the literature, as a result of facilitating and constraining factors. Besides the standard route of decision-making through four stages, facilitating factors can allow the decision-making unit to bypass specific component decisions, while constraining factors may prevent the family from reaching an agreed alternative and, in the worst circumstances, cause them to drop the international education plan altogether.

The research makes a number of contributions to both theory and practice. On the theoretical side, the research challenges fundamental aspects of the existing literature on decision-making process for international education and proposes the addition of two important concepts, long-term goals and resource accumulation. On the practical side, the research provides marketing practitioners of international universities with valuable insights into the thinking and behaviours of the Vietnamese market when choosing an institution abroad for education and more importantly, recommendations on how to better approach and attract them.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	i
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP .....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ix
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Rationale and significance of the thesis .....	2
1.2 Research question and objectives.....	4
1.3 The methodological approach and research design .....	6
1.4 Contributions of the thesis .....	6
1.5 Outline of the thesis .....	7
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
2.1 Theoretical foundations.....	10
2.1.1 Ecological systems theory.....	10
2.1.2 Consumer decision-making.....	12
2.1.3 Facilitators and constraints framework .....	14
2.2 Empirical foundations .....	16
2.2.1 Family decision-making.....	16
2.2.2 Decision-making processes for choice of university by domestic students .....	22
2.2.3 Factors influencing domestic students' choice of university .....	27
2.2.4 Factors influencing international students' choice of university .....	34
2.2.5 Decision-making processes for choice of university by international students .....	41
2.2.6 Vietnamese cultural values influencing decision-making.....	49
2.3 Conceptual model.....	52
2.4 Chapter conclusion.....	63
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY.....	64

3.1	Research paradigm .....	66
3.2	A qualitative approach .....	67
3.3	Semi-structured interviews with family units .....	69
3.4	Sample.....	71
3.5	Considerations in qualitative interviewing of families .....	75
3.6	Interview schedule and interview guide.....	77
3.7	Data analysis .....	81
3.7.1	Analysis of the decision process for each family unit.....	81
3.7.2	Thematic analysis across the dataset.....	81
3.7.3	Developing the final model of decision-making for international education .....	82
CHAPTER 4	FINDINGS .....	84
4.1	Analysis of the decision process for each family unit.....	85
4.2	Results of the thematic analysis .....	105
4.3	The initial decision-making process.....	109
CHAPTER 5	THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION.....	112
5.1	The Planning for International Undergraduate Education (PIUE) model.....	113
5.2	The story.....	116
CHAPTER 6	DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS .....	129
6.1	Implications for theory .....	130
6.1.1	Reflections upon the three theoretical foundations.....	132
6.1.2	Implications for the international education decision-making literature ....	133
6.1.3	Implications for the family decision-making literature.....	138
6.2	Implications for practice .....	140
6.2.1	Who makes the decisions? .....	141
6.2.2	The education plan is goal-driven and constraint-bound .....	142
6.2.3	The differences in choice criteria between parents and students .....	143
6.2.4	The importance of the cost factor.....	144

6.2.5	The role of the senior high school environment.....	145
6.2.6	The importance of different types of information sources.....	146
6.3	Implications for methodology .....	148
CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH .....		150
7.1	Theoretical and managerial contributions.....	150
7.2	Limitations .....	151
7.3	Future research .....	152
7.4	Thesis conclusion .....	153
REFERENCES.....		154
APPENDICES.....		170
Appendix A	Ethics Approval Letter .....	171
Appendix B	Consent Form .....	172
Appendix C	Information Sheet.....	174
Appendix D	Case Summaries .....	176
Appendix E	Case Decision Maps.....	202

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986) .....	10
Figure 2: Facilitators and Constraints framework (Jackson, 1997; Raymore, 2002).....	15
Figure 3: Cubillo et al. (2006) model of international students' preferences .....	42
Figure 4: Chen's (2007) synthesis model of East-Asian graduate students.....	44
Figure 5: Conceptual model of the decision-making process of Vietnamese families ...	54
Figure 6: Research design .....	65
Figure 7: Decision map of HCM – 04, a complete decision-making process.....	88
Figure 8: Decision map of HN – 01, an incomplete decision-making process.....	92
Figure 9: Decision map of HCM – 10, a derailed decision-making .....	96
Figure 10: Decision map of HN – 10, an incomplete decision-making process.....	100
Figure 11: Decision map of HCM – 02, a complete decision-making process.....	104
Figure 12: Initial model of the decision-making process.....	111
Figure 13: The PIUE model .....	114
Figure 14: Detailed information of component decisions in Stage 2.....	115

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Key sections of the literature review .....	9
Table 2: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice .....	24
Table 3: Type of family of the 24 sampling units .....	73
Table 4: List of all categorical codes .....	106
Table 5: Summary of reflections on theoretical and empirical foundations .....	131

## **ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgement), nor material, which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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# **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter One commences with a discussion of the rationale and significance for conducting research on the choice of international education, especially for the Vietnamese market. This is followed by an outline of the research question and objectives, which lead to the selection of the research design and methodology to be used to address the research question. The chapter then highlights the main contributions of the research to both theory and practice. Chapter One ends with an outline of the thesis, in which the structure and content of the thesis are presented.



## **1.1 Rationale and significance of the thesis**

Over the past decade Vietnam has become globally recognised as a key international education market in Asia (ICEF Monitor, 2015; World Education Services, 2012). In 2017, over 130,000 Vietnamese students pursued studies overseas, a 22.5% increase from 106,104 students in 2012 (ICEF Monitor, 2014, 2017). Vietnam is currently known to be one of the top sources of international students from the Southeast Asian region (ASEAN) for popular educational destinations, such as Australia and the USA. In 2014, Vietnam was ranked 8th in the USA and 3rd in Australia amongst top source countries (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2014; Institute of International Education, 2014). In New Zealand, Vietnam was also listed as the second largest source country from ASEAN (Education New Zealand, 2014). Ninety percent of Vietnamese overseas education is self-financed, totalling approximately \$USD 1.6 billion per annum (ICEF Monitor, 2013).

The reasons for this phenomenon are apparent. Firstly, education is highly valued in Vietnamese society (Diversicare, 2009; Pham & Fry, 2004). Traditionally an agricultural nation, the Vietnamese see education as a path for family advancement, financially and socially, and thus people place a higher value on education than on material wealth (C. K. C. Lee & Morrish, 2012). The tradition of education advocacy has been passed on through generations of Vietnamese people. Parents encourage their children to excel in education and pursue higher academic qualifications, which are believed to bring about successful lives for individuals, as well as honour for their families. Higher education, in particular, has a long history of establishment in Vietnam. In fact, Vietnam has the oldest higher education institution recorded in the Southeast Asian region, named the Royal College of the Temple of Literature in the year 1076 (Pham & Fry, 2004). “This cultural heritage demonstrates the great significance placed on learning and the special respect and honour bestowed by the Vietnamese on teachers, scholars, students, and mentors” (Pham & Fry, 2004, p. 201).

Secondly, the recent emergence of Vietnam as one of most attractive destinations in the region for foreign investment has significantly affected the way the Vietnamese consider education. The operation of several global corporations and companies in Vietnam has prompted the local labour force to realise that they not only need to have tertiary education but, more importantly, obtain world-accredited qualifications and experience, in order to gain worthwhile employment locally. Vietnam is a young nation, with nearly 45% of its 92 million population being 25 years of age or younger (ICEF Monitor, 2014a). The number of annual enrolments in tertiary education has

experienced a thirteen-fold increase in the last twenty years, from 162,000 students in 1992/93 to over two million students in 2010 (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Services, 2012; World Education Services, 2014). However, such lavish demand has not yet been sufficiently met by the local higher education system (Healey, 2008), either in terms of the quantity or quality, which results in an increase in the search for international education alternatives. Despite the steady growth in the number of tertiary institutions in recent years, at the average rate of eight new universities and 12 colleges a year (ICEF Monitor, 2015), the local higher education system can only accommodate approximately a third of the total yearly applications (World Education Services, 2014). On the supply side, institutions are facing the issue of a shortage of teaching staff, represented by the high student to lecturer ratio of 28:1 in 2009, due to a failure in the education system to keep up with market growth (World Education Services, 2010).

Of equal concern to the quantity issue is the quality of teaching: domestic teaching methods at the tertiary level are very traditional; a slow-moving and bureaucratic process of curriculum renewal due to excessive regulatory controls; teaching staff are not involved in research and academic publication; and there is a lack of depth in management experience and skills within institutions (Hayden & Lam, 2007; ICEF Monitor, 2014b). This problem results in the absence of Vietnamese universities on the world's list of top 200 universities and, more importantly, the struggling of Vietnamese graduates to find employment due to a lack of practical and up-to-date knowledge and skills (Hayden & Lam, 2007; ICEF Monitor, 2015; World Education Services, 2010).

The Vietnamese government considers higher education to be critical for the establishment of a strong and sustainable economy (Welch, 2010). Understanding current drawbacks of the domestic educational system, the government rolled out long-term education reform in 2005, called Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA), with an aim to develop a modernised higher education system by 2020 (Hayden & Lam, 2007). One key element of the HERA strategy, as part of the effort to solve the quantity and quality issues, is “the development of a more internationally integrated higher education system, involving more international commitments and agreements, improvements in the teaching and learning of foreign languages (especially English), and the development of conditions favourable to increased foreign investment in the higher education system” (Harman, Hayden, & Nghi, 2010, p. 3). This strategy has resulted in a significant increase in the number of strategic partnerships between local and overseas universities; joint programmes that allow students to graduate with international qualifications; as well as the establishment of off-shore campuses in Vietnam, led by Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2000 and Troy University

in 2006 (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Harman, 2004; RMIT University, 2000; Troy University, 2006).

## **1.2 Research question and objectives**

For Vietnamese teenagers and young adults, the decision to study abroad in a foreign country is one of the first major events in their lives, and the choice of international tertiary education is a critical decision that can shape these students' future career and success (Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010; Padlee, Kamaruddin, & Baharun, 2010). The importance of such a decision encourages Vietnamese students to undertake a thorough decision-making process, in which available options for institution and programme are carefully considered, before a final decision on destination country, institution and programme is made.

This research seeks to construct a model that explains the process by which the Vietnamese make choices of international undergraduate education. The current literature on international education has generally presented this behaviour as a multi-stage decision-making process, in which the focus of research treats the student as the decision-making unit, subject to various internal and external influences as they proceed through sequential stages of a decision-making process. For instance, Chen's (2007) model of international university choice describes graduate students going through a three-stage process of decision-making: predisposition, search/selection/application, and choice. At each stage, various attributes of the home and host country, city, institutions and programme are taken into consideration by the students (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006). Chen's model is developed based on a three-stage model of domestic college choice and a push-pull factor model for choice of international education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

While being clear and detailed, existing models of the international education decision-making process exhibit limitations when applied to the current research context of Vietnam. Firstly, little work has been undertaken to explain the international education choices for undergraduate students. The decision process for this group of students is potentially different from that of graduate students (such as those studied by Chen, 2007) due to the differences in level of independence, academic motivation, and self-regulation (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Sheard, Markham, & Dick, 2003). Therefore, the explanatory power of any model for graduate students can be questioned when applied to the undergraduate counterpart.

Secondly, existing university choice process models are depicted as pre-determined, meaning the outcome of the process is always the same: a successful choice of institution for enrolment, without any possible divergence (R. G. Chapman, 1986; Chen, 2007; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). But the successful choice of institution for enrolment might not always be the outcome of the decision-making process. The facilitators and constraints framework (E. L. Jackson, 1997; Raymore, 2002) provides an additional perspective on this issue as it suggests that the existence of facilitating and/or constraining factors may result in potential alternative routes and outcomes for the decision-making process.

Lastly, the explanatory power of existing models of educational choice in the Vietnamese context can be further challenged when considering the decision-making unit. All current university choice models treat the student as the decision maker throughout the process, which may not be entirely accurate for the Vietnamese people. Rooted in Asian ideologies, especially Confucianism, Vietnamese culture emphasises a hierarchy in the society and family, in which people work toward a sense of collective harmony (Gillespie & Nicholson, 2005). Young people are taught to respect and be subordinate to their elders; individual goals and opinions must be restrained for the purpose of collective or familial goals; and parents have a life-long responsibility to assure the success and well-being of their offspring (Hofstede, 2003; Phinney & Ong, 2002; Smith & Pham, 1996; Yan & Sorenson, 2006). As a result, for major decisions such as the choice of international education, the Vietnamese family is likely to be involved as a collective decision-making unit.

The primary research question addressed in this thesis is:

***How does the Vietnamese family unit make the decision regarding choice of international undergraduate education?***

The objectives of the thesis are:

- To gain a comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process of the Vietnamese regarding choices of international undergraduate education
- To identify factors influencing the international undergraduate education decision as the decision-making unit proceeds through the process
- To determine who is the decision-making unit for choice of international undergraduate education in the case of the Vietnamese

- To contribute to the body of literature on international higher education choice behaviour by constructing a comprehensive undergraduate university choice model
- To contribute to the methodological body of knowledge by applying a longitudinal qualitative approach to studying choice of international higher education
- To provide practitioners in this field with valuable market intelligence regarding international education for the Vietnamese market.

### **1.3 The methodological approach and research design**

This study adopts the post-positivist paradigm and takes a qualitative approach, as it addresses a complicated phenomenon not previously researched: the decision-making process of Vietnamese regarding choice of international undergraduate education; the process likely involves a large number of influencing factors; the effect of each factor may vary during progress through the steps in decision-making; and the whole activity functions within the distinctive social and cultural context of Vietnam, which likely impacts how the process proceeds.

This study adopts a longitudinal research, meaning that data was collected more than once, due to the extended nature of the educational decision-making process. In-depth interviews were employed to gather information from 24 Vietnamese families whose students anticipate going overseas for undergraduate study. This sample was selected using maximum variation sampling, which is a purposeful sampling strategy. Data collection process proceeded from March to December of 2016, with two interviews taking place as follows:

- First interview: March – April, face-to-face interview
- Second interview: June – December, online interview via Skype

Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese by the primary researcher, and he was also responsible for the transcribing task. Transcripts were translated back to English for analysis. Data analysis was carried out using qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo.

### **1.4 Contributions of the thesis**

This research provides significant advancements for the two bodies of literature, namely the international education decision-making literature and the family decision-making literature, as well as valuable implications for marketing practitioners in the higher

education industry. Firstly, the research proposes a different approach to studying the decision-making process for international higher education, a planning perspective, which better captures the entirety of the phenomenon. The research calls for structural changes to current decision-making models with the addition of two new concepts, resource accumulation and long-term goals, in order to sufficiently reflect the complexity of decision-making activity. Secondly, the research highlights the dynamics of the involvement and influence of different family members in a major familial decision-making situation, such as the choice of international education. Adolescents appear to have an equally strong influence as their parents in making these decisions.

On the practical side, the research provides insights into the planning and decision-making of Vietnamese families for choice of international education. The recognition of families as the collective decision-making unit is crucial for all international universities that are trying to approach this market. An understanding of the thinking and reasoning of Vietnamese parents and students while proceeding through the decision-making process is of great value to practitioners for identifying the right market segment to target and developing effective marketing messages to convey to Vietnamese families. The research also highlights the role of the senior high school environment as a platform for international universities to communicate with Vietnamese students because the three years of senior high school is when students' aspiration for international education reaches its peak. Finally, the research proposes the inclusion of informal information sources, such as overseas relatives, friends of parents and students, and university alumni, as an integral part of the marketing and communication channels for the Vietnamese market.

## **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

The thesis is presented in seven chapters. Chapter Two is the Literature Review, where literature relevant to the development of the thesis is presented: theoretical foundations (ecological system theory, consumer decision-making, and the facilitators and constraints framework), empirical foundations (decision-making processes for choice of university by domestic and international students, influencing factors in the domestic and international contexts, and the cultural values of Vietnam influencing decision-making). The chapter concludes with a conceptual model, derived from the review of literature, which seeks to explain the decision-making process of the Vietnamese regarding international undergraduate education.

Chapter Three presents the research design and methodological approach. The chapter commences with an explanation of the choice of qualitative approach that is used in this research. The next sections describe in detail the research process, including sample description, sampling method, and recruitment plan and interview protocol. The chapter also describes the methods of data analysis.

Chapter Four presents in detail the findings from interviews with the 24 family units. Two methods were used to analyse data: analysis of individual family's decision process and thematic analysis. Chapter Five presents the final outcome of the research, which is a model of the planning and decision-making for international undergraduate education of Vietnamese families. This model was constructed using results of the two data analysis methods.

Chapter Six presents discussion of the key implications of the study for theory, practice and research methodology. The chapter also reflects on any limitations in the conduct of the study, and ideas for future research on decision-making processes for choice of international undergraduate education.

Chapter Seven presents a conclusion for the thesis.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the research question of “*How does the Vietnamese family unit make the decision regarding choice of international undergraduate education?*” Firstly, the three theoretical foundations of the research are presented, namely ecological systems theory, consumer decision-making theory, and the facilitators and constraints framework. This is followed by the empirical foundations section, which discusses the family decision-making and tertiary decision-making literature, two key bodies of literature that are directly related to the international undergraduate education decision-making activity. This section also explores the literature on Vietnamese cultural values in order to understand how the decision-making of Vietnamese people may be influenced from a cultural perspective. The chapter ends with a conceptual model, deriving from all literature reviewed, which seeks to describe the decision-making of Vietnamese families for choice of international undergraduate education. Table 1 summarizes key content of the Chapter Two.

Table 1: Key sections of the literature review

Theoretical foundations	Ecological systems theory
	Consumer decision-making
	Facilitators and constraints framework
Empirical foundations	Family decision-making
	Decision-making processes for choice of university by domestic students
	Factors influencing domestic students’ choice of university
	Factors influencing the international students’ choice of university
	Decision-making processes for choice of university by international students
	Vietnamese cultural values influencing decision-making
Conceptual model	



## 2.1 Theoretical foundations

The literature review starts with an exploration of the theoretical foundations of the research: ecological systems theory, consumer buying decision-making, and facilitators and constraints framework. The consumer buying decision-making foundation provides the basic understanding of consumer behaviours, while ecological systems theory and facilitators and constraints framework help explain the complexity and dynamics of the international education decision-making activity.

### 2.1.1 Ecological systems theory

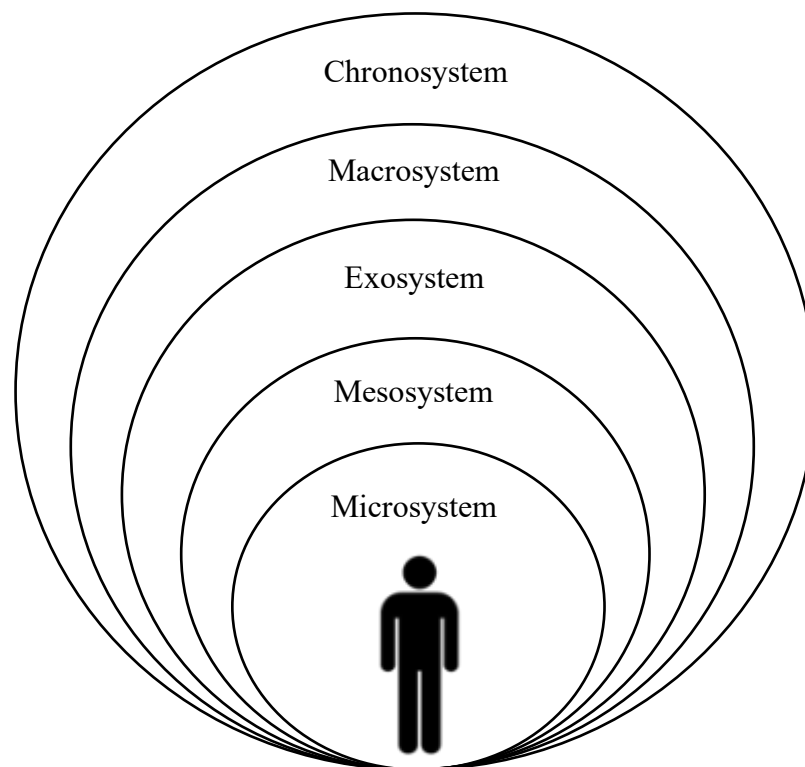


Figure 1: Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986)

In 1979, Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the ecological systems theory as a theoretical framework for studying human development. At the core of his theory, Bronfenbrenner proposes that an individual resides within a number of social settings, with which he or she deeply interacts on a daily basis (e.g. family, school, workplace, etc.). The development of that person, therefore, is the outcome of the ongoing interaction and interdependence between him or her and the outside world (Becker & Todd, 2018; Neal & Neal, 2013). As a result, in order to fully understand the development of an individual, researchers must understand his or her environs, and more importantly, examine the interactions between that focal individual and all elements

of the surrounding context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Darling, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The ecological systems model originally consists of four environmental levels: *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) (see Figure 1). A *microsystem* involves all immediate settings in which the individual directly interacts, such as the family, classroom, neighbourhood and religious institution. The second level, *mesosystem*, contains all interrelations between different microsystems that the individual actively participates in. For instance, a child's experiences at home may influence his or her performance at school. *Exosystem* is the third layer and it "refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). To put it simply, a child's experiences at home may be influenced by his or her father's experiences at work. The fourth layer *Macrosystem* represents the larger cultural context surrounding the individual and encompasses all other systems. It includes social belief systems, cultural norms, ideologies, policies or law that indirectly influence the development of the individual. In his later revision of the theory, Bronfenbrenner added the fifth layer, termed *Chronosystem*, which refers to the transition of the individual over time that may influence his or her development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Common examples of life transition include normative transition such as school entry, higher education entry, marriage and retirement, as well as non-normative transition such as death of a loved one or divorce.

Originated from developmental psychology, the ecological systems theory has been applied extensively as the guiding framework in research on the human development and education of children and adolescents (Bluteau, Clouder, & Cureton, 2017; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Chipuer, 2001; Criss, Shaw, Moilanen, Hitchings, & Ingoldsby, 2009; Duerden & Witt, 2010; Durlak et al., 2007; Herselman, Botha, Mayindi, & Reid, 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Rose-Krasnor, 2009; Seidman, 1991; Seidman et al., 1995). However, its application has expanded further to explain other social phenomena, including transgender acceptability, sexual revictimization, travel and leisure behaviours, higher education teaching and learning experience, and even corporate management (Bluteau et al., 2017; McLinden, 2017; Musgrave & Woodward, 2016; Pittenger, Pogue, & Hansen, 2018; Woodside, Caldwell, & Spurr, 2006). When viewing the decision-making process for international undergraduate education of Vietnamese people from an ecological perspective, it is clear that this is not an isolated phenomenon, instead this activity is deeply embedded in the social context of the individuals who are making these decisions. Ecological systems

theory gives the researcher a necessary foundation to understand how different social forces within the surrounding environment can influence decisions made. The pursuit of international degrees and qualifications is a way for high school graduates to further develop their knowledge, skills and experiences. Throughout childhood and the teenage years, students live in different microsystems, of which the family and high school are two critical environments for the development of an aspiration for international education in students. They continuously interact with members of these settings, such as parents, friends and classmates, and such conversations and exchanges help shape students' perceptions on the type of higher education they want to pursue later. If there is a tradition of studying abroad running within a student's family, or his or her high school has a tradition of its graduates going abroad for higher education, then the likelihood of this student following this path is higher.

In addition to students potentially developing aspirations for studying abroad, their parents' views on international education can be reinforced if high ability students are encouraged by high school teachers to pursue tertiary education overseas. This represents a mesosystem in action. Moving one step further to the exosystem, parents' perceptions may be further influenced by their friends and colleagues, who have had offsprings studying abroad, which in turn has an effect on the parents' level of encouragement toward their children. Finally, the society in which the students live – the macrosystem, possesses distinctive cultural and social norms, and governmental policies that either encourage or hinder international education activities. For instance, many people in Vietnam believe that an investment in international education is worthwhile because it will result in an increased level of employability in the Vietnamese job market due to the high regard for international qualifications here. Furthermore, the influence of social forces may not be limited to just the first decision – whether to study abroad – it is likely to carry on in later decisions as well. Students and their parents continue to receive information and advice from informal (e.g. extended family, students' friends and teachers, and parents' friends and colleagues) and formal (e.g. university representatives and education agents) sources about where to study, what major to take, and what university to apply to.

### **2.1.2 Consumer decision-making**

The second theoretical foundation for this study is consumer decision-making. Everyday, consumers make many decisions regarding the purchase, consumption and disposal of goods and services. Each buying decision is unique in its subject, purpose, and relative importance to the consumer, as well as in the factors that influence the

decision. There are a number of approaches to gaining an understanding of consumer decision-making. *Rational Choice Theory* (RCT), which is founded on the basic assumption that any complex social phenomenon can be interpreted as the result of individual actions, suggests that decision-making regarding such actions is intentional toward a specific goal(s), with rational individuals possessing full knowledge of available information, a well-defined and stable preference order for all alternatives; and the ability to calculate accurately which alternative provides the best outcome with maximum value (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Crews, 2016; Hoque, 2006; Oppenheimer, 2008; Scott, 2000; H. A. Simon, 1955). However, other scholars have criticised RCT as an incomplete or flawed approach to understanding consumer decision-making because in reality, perfect information is not available; goals are not always well-defined in advance; and RCT fails to explain other types of choices, such as impulsive and emotionally charged decisions (Dowding, 1994; Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997; Hoque, 2006; March, 1978; H. A. Simon, 1972). Based on such criticisms, H. A. Simon (1972) introduced the concept of “bounded rationality”, which is a more pragmatic view on human choice behaviours. This theory suggests that choices are determined by the limited cognitive capacity of the decision maker in accessing and processing information, combined with the complex characteristics of the decision environment. Furthermore, inherent limitations of human beings makes optimisation less practically achievable and, thus, individuals may have to settle with satisficing options in certain decision situations (H. A. Simon, 1972).

Bounded-rationality theory provides a necessary foundation to the information-processing approach, which has been a dominant view in the consumer behaviour literature over the past few decades Bettman et al. (1998). This approach views consumer behaviour from a problem-solving perspective, focusing on the decisions consumers make in order to solve problems they face everyday (Solomon, 2009). The decision-making process here consists of five general stages, which are (1) *problem recognition*, (2) *information search*, (3) *alternative evaluation*, (4) *purchase*, and (5) *post-purchase* (Hawkins, Neal, & Quester, 1998). Each stage is governed by psychological mechanisms of the individuals involved in the decision task (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). For instance, in the first stage *problem recognition*, consumers recognise a discrepancy between the ideal or desired state of affairs and the actual state at the moment of consideration, and this difference triggers the decision process (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2006). Here, consumers receive inputs from their memories, personal characteristics and resources, as well as external influences from the surrounding environment from which the need is formed. During stages (2), (3) and (4),

consumers continue to be affected by psychological processes, such as knowledge, attitudes and personality, along with environmental forces from the outside, such as culture, family and social class. The decision-making process ends with the post-purchase evaluation stage, in which consumers express their level of satisfaction with the choice they made, which then informs their future decisions.

The five-step process of consumer decision-making fits well with the context of this research, since prospective students are facing a problem of determining the most suitable international tertiary institution for enrolment. This problem calls for an extensive information search for various university alternatives available, from which only a few will be selected for further consideration and application. The process ends when prospective students enrol in a university that has accepted their application. The only exception was that the last stage of the standard consumer decision-making process, post-purchase evaluation, would not be taken into account in this study since the research question only attempts to explore the international education decision-making process up to the point of students finalising their choice of university for enrolment. A post-purchase evaluation, therefore, would not be available since students have not yet commenced their study. In short, the five-step of consumer decision-making process provides an essential foundation upon which a specific decision model for the choice of international undergraduate education of Vietnamese students will be developed.

### **2.1.3 Facilitators and constraints framework**

The third and final theoretical foundation for this research is the facilitators and constraints framework. Facilitators (sometimes called promoters) and constraints (sometimes called barriers or inhibitors) are two concepts that are found in the literature of many disciplines in the social sciences. Health, sociology, education, and leisure are areas where these terms have been widely researched (E. L. Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993; Kissman, 1990; Peloquin, Doering, Alley, & Rebar, 2017; Raymore, 2002; Sach, 2015). In general, facilitators and constraints describe a number of internal and external factors that can positively or negatively affect the implementation of an action or programme. For instance, Sach (2015) researched the factors that either facilitate or constrain the employment of effective formative assessment practices in schools. She reported that teacher autonomy and ownership, support from school leaders and senior managers, and an effective network between schools, professionals and parents are needed in order to establish good formative assessment practices in schools. By contrast, teachers may find it challenging to practice effective assessment

protocols if they have conflicting views with schools about the learning process, or they are not given the necessary autonomy and ownership, or there are incongruities in management and teaching at schools (Sach, 2015).

Research on facilitators and constraints is particularly prevalent in the leisure literature, in which researchers have tried to identify factors that affect people's participation and non-participation in leisure activities. In the leisure context, facilitating and constraining factors are systemized into a framework consisting of three layers: *intrapersonal*, *interpersonal*, and *structural* (see Figure 2) (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; E. L. Jackson, 1997; Raymore, 2002). According to this model, *intrapersonal* facilitators or constraints shape leisure preferences based on the psychological states and attributes of each person, such as personalities and past experiences. The next layer, *interpersonal*, represents the relationships between the decision maker and different individuals in his or her surrounding settings, such as family members, friends and even strangers. The final layer of facilitators and constraints are *structural*, representing the outer context and all of its social belief systems to which the person belongs. This framework suggests that the decision to take part in leisure activities and, sequentially, the choice of leisure destination, are heavily shaped by these three groups of facilitators and constraints.

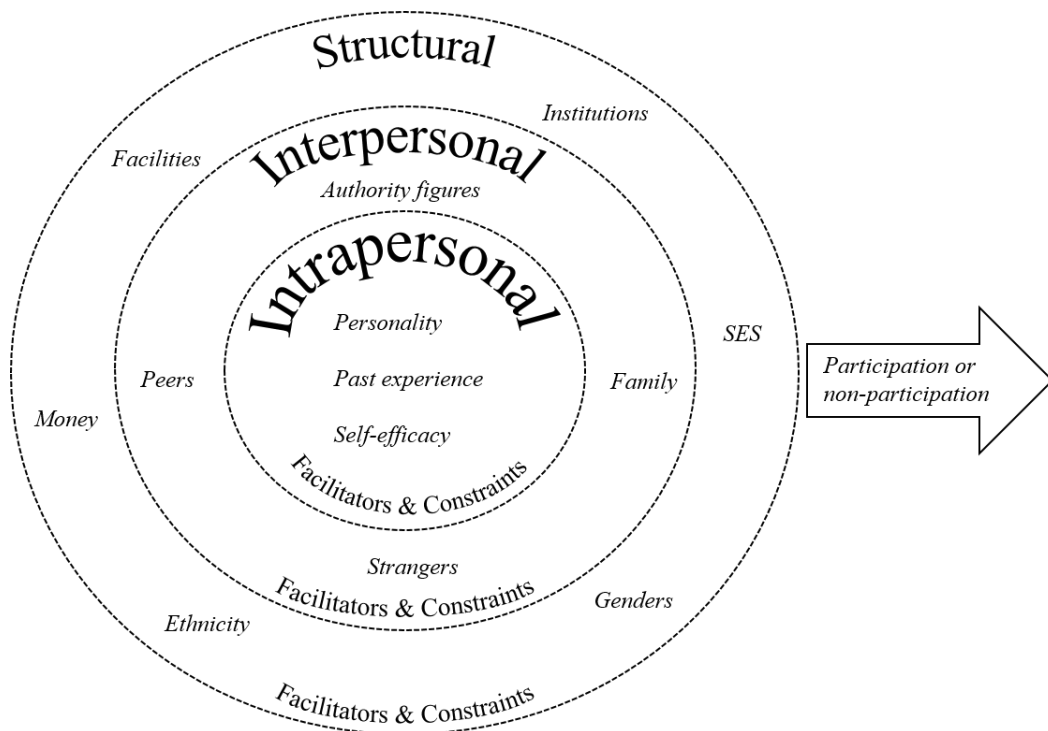


Figure 2: Facilitators and Constraints framework (Jackson, 1997; Raymore, 2002)

While facilitators and constraints have not been previously considered in the international education decision-making context, the potential applicability of this framework in explaining this choice process is evident. The decision to go abroad for tertiary education is a complex and highly involved decision, which can take a considerable amount of time for completion, and potentially require the involvement of more than just one decision maker (L.-H. Chen, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Students have personal characteristics, academic abilities and educational motivations that either enable or limit the formation of overseas study preferences. Economic, social and cultural values of the home and various host countries may facilitate or inhibit the choices of certain destinations. Finally, situational conditions taking place in the process may significantly affect the outcome. For example, having relatives living abroad or winning a scholarship from a university may highly promote that particular country or institution, thereby shortening the otherwise normal search process for countries or universities. By contrast, failing to get a visa at the end will prevent students from travelling to the overseas country and starting their study, which may result in a significant change in their overall educational plan. It is reasonable, therefore, to propose the possible existence of facilitators and constraints in the decision-making process for choice of overseas education, which can affect the actual path that the decision maker takes to get to the final result. Since there is no already established framework of facilitators and constraints for the international education choice-making context, this research attempts to explore this framework in this context.

## **2.2 Empirical foundations**

This section discusses the findings of extant empirical research on family decision-making and international education decision-making. Also, unique cultural aspects of Vietnam that may be relevant to international education decision-making activity are examined. The chapter concludes with a conceptual model of how the Vietnamese family may choose an overseas university for their children's undergraduate education.

### **2.2.1 Family decision-making**

Considerable research on family decision-making has been undertaken over the past five decades due to the fact many products and services are bought and used by the household rather than the individual consumer (Martinez & Polo, 1999). A new house, a new car, a family holiday or the choice of a child's education are typical examples of expensive and highly involved purchases that often require the involvement of more than one family member (Davis, 1976; C. K. C. Lee & Collins, 2000). Even with buying

decisions of inexpensive and routine items for family use, such as breakfast cereal or family eat out, the buyer takes into account the preferences of other members in the family and ensures the final choice best satisfies everyone's need (M. A. Belch, Belch, & Sciglimpaglia, 1980; Davis, 1976). Making decisions in these group contexts is likely to be more complex than that of a single consumer due to the potential conflicts arising from members having different goals that they expect to achieve with the decision, different preferences regarding available alternatives, and the overall dynamics in relationships and interaction between members (Davis, 1974; Kang & Hsu, 2004; Kirchler, 1993; Sheth, 1974). The group-oriented nature of family decision-making raises several challenges to the applicability of existing theories and models of individual consumer decision-making in the familial decision context: how family members work together in their decision-making, who exerts the most influence, what are the stages of the decision-making process in the family context, and are they similar or different from those of individual decision-making? These questions call for a separate approach to understanding.

The literature on family decision-making has focused on (1) the roles of different household members in the decision-making and (2) conflict resolution strategies in family decision-making. Early work in the 1970s and 1980s primarily examined the involvement of husband and wife in various family purchase situations because the traditional concept of 'family' centred on the husband and wife (Davis, 1976). The general finding in this context is that the participation and influence of husbands and wives are dynamic and vary by product category, by stages of the decision-making process and by decision areas (G. E. Belch, Belch, & Ceresino, 1985; Davis, 1974, 1976; Lackman & Lanasa, 1993; H. L. Nguyen, Westberg, Stavros, & Robinson, 2018; Sheth, 1974). Research examining the role of family members across different product categories reported husbands demonstrated a clearer sense of role specialization, meaning husbands considered themselves to be the controlling member in the buying of 'big-ticket', technical and financial investment items such as automobile, television set, insurance and saving, whereas in purchases of inexpensive and routine products for family use, such as breakfast cereal, they exerted little influence (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Qualls, 1982). Wives, on the other hand, reported to be at least moderately involved in all product categories, regardless of whether they are major or inexpensive purchases, and more importantly, they considered joint decision-making to be common in most product categories (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Qualls, 1982). Wives demonstrated a more dominant role in decisions that are related to running the household (e.g. dining out, purchase of food, household appliances and furniture) (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; C.



K. C. Lee & Beatty, 2002), and child education (Goldhaber, 1999; Morgan, Dunn, Cairns, & Fraser, 1993; West, David, Hailes, & Ribbens, 1995). Regarding the choice of education, father and mother are both involved in the process, yet wives still appears to have a more dominant voice in the final selection of school for their child (West et al., 1995).

The roles of husband and wife also changed as members went through the stages of the decision-making process (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Davis, 1976; Davis & Rigaux, 1974; Kancheva, 2017). For all product categories for household consumption, the husband and wife were involved at all three stages, yet the level of influence of each member varied according to product category (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Soni & Singh, 2003). Husbands were found to exert the most influence in the problem recognition stage of major technical purchases (e.g. TV and automobile), and their influence increased at the two successive stages of the decision-making process for these products, while wives dominated the initiation stage of household items (e.g. home appliances and furniture), and their influence remained consistent throughout the process (G. E. Belch et al., 1985). This point about wife's influence is somewhat different from the finding of C. K. C. Lee and Beatty's (2002) research on family decision to eat out, in which the wife initiated the need for family eating out, yet her influence declined in later stages where influence among family members become more balanced. Housing is another product category that often saw wives dominating the problem recognition stage, possibly due to the maternal characteristics of wanting to build a good living environment for children to grow (Levy, Murphy, & Lee, 2008). Husbands and wives were equally involved in the second stage of searching for information about house alternatives, while the final decision was heavily influenced by whoever contributes most resources (e.g. money, experience and knowledge about the property, property market and finance) in the process (Levy et al., 2008). Wives also expressed more domination in most stages of the decision-making process for family vacation, except for the destination finalization stage, which was equally influenced by both husbands and wives (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Srnec, Loncaric, & Prodan, 2016). In terms of how the task and/or decision at each stage is made, joint decision-making was commonly seen at the initiation and decision finalization stages for major purchases such as holiday and real estate, whereas the information search in stage two usually carried out autonomously because this task required time availability and expertise/competence of each member (Kancheva, 2017; Rojas-de-Gracia, Alarcon-Urbistondo, & Gonzalez Robles, 2018; Sheth, 1974).

Lastly, the influence of husband and wife varies depended on the decision areas (also known as sub-decisions) of a purchase situation. Traditionally, husbands were considered to be in charge of the functional (or instrumental) aspects of a purchase, while wives exerted stronger opinions on expressive attributes (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Jenkins, 1978). For instance, regarding the buying of a house, husbands were likely to be dominant in deciding the budget, type, age, maintenance, and the resale value of the house, whereas wives cared more about the characteristics of the house that are directly related to living conditions, such as number of bedrooms, layout of the house and living area, and condition of bathroom and kitchen (Kancheva, 2017; Levy et al., 2008). Similarly, in case of automobile purchase, husbands decided when to buy and how much to spend, while wives selected the make, style and colour of the car (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Lackman & Lanasa, 1993).

However, this role specialization has been blurred considerably by the recent shift in the perceptions of men and women regarding their appropriate distribution of responsibilities within the household as well as in the society. More women go out to work and become important resource contributors in the family, and at the same time, more husbands are actively involved in household activities (Lackman & Lanasa, 1993; Qualls, 1982). This movement in roles has caused husbands' influence to diminish in some previously male-dominated decision areas, and at the same time allowed women to express stronger voices in more functional aspects of many family buying decisions. In Kancheva (2017) research on family decision-making of real estate, the three key financial sub-decisions of "how much to spend", "when to buy", and "how to buy" are no longer controlled by husbands, instead they are jointly decided by both spouses. Family holidays are another product category that witnesses joint decision-making taking place across most decision areas, and for sub-decisions that are not jointly made, they are even dominated by wives (Jenkins, 1978; Rojas-de-Gracia et al., 2018; Srncet et al., 2016).

One common criticism of many early studies of family decision-making is that they focus mainly on the role of husbands and wives, and overlook the involvement of other potentially influential members (G. E. Belch et al., 1985). Children in the family, including adolescents, who were originally ignored in the literature, has been recognized in recent years as one significant element of family decision-making due to their potential influence to the process (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Davis, 1976; Lackman & Lanasa, 1993). Children and adolescents are found to have extensive involvement in many family purchase decisions and they influence the outcome of such

decisions (Douglas, 1983; Flurry, 2007; Hamilton & Catterall, 2007; C. K. C. Lee & Beatty, 2002). Many studies on the roles of parents and children in family decision-making have reported a similar theme, that is, children's influence is not as strong as that of parents in the decision-making process and at all sub-decisions, and in general father and mother are still dominant members (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Nørgaard & Brunsø, 2011; Soni & Singh, 2003). However, the level of influence of children varies by different product categories, different stages of the process and by their available resources (Lackman & Lanasa, 1993). Children exert stronger influence on purchase decisions of inexpensive items and items of their direct use (e.g. breakfast cereal), than expensive items or items of household consumption (e.g. home décor) (Beatty & Talpade, 1994; Foxman, Tansuhaj, & Ekstrom, 1989; Shoham & Dalakas, 2005). In the decision-making process, children are active in the problem recognition and information searching stages, either by suggesting new products to family or learning about new product available, but their influence tends to decline toward the final decision stage (Beatty & Talpade, 1994; G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Shoham & Dalakas, 2005). Regarding decision areas, children's influence is stronger on expressive aspects of the purchase than decisions on budget or where and when to buy (G. E. Belch et al., 1985). As the children enter teenage years, their influence in family buying decisions not only increases in intensity, but it also extends beyond products or services of direct use, as adolescents are able to contribute financially to the purchase, and they are more likely to have good knowledge through increasingly available access to information (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Dauphin, El Lahga, Fortin, & Lacroix, 2011; Flurry, 2007; Palan & Wilkes, 1997).

The second focus of the family decision-making literature is on the conflict resolution strategies employed by family members in different decision situations, since conflict is an inherent attribute of group decision-making that separates it from individual decision-making. With more than one member involved in the decision task, there is a higher chance of disagreement occurring, and the potential of conflict is even higher in families with children, especially adolescent children, as they can shop for themselves and are heavily influenced by peers (Hamilton & Catterall, 2007). Conflicts also tend to happen in purchase decisions of expensive and/or highly involved items (M. A. Belch et al., 1980). In the family purchase context, there are two types of conflict that may occur between members: 1) different desired outcomes and 2) different perceptions about available alternatives (Davis, 1974, 1976; Sheth, 1974). Davis (1976) outlined two general types of family decision-making depending on the types of conflict: 1) consensual decision-making – meaning members agree about the goals, and they look

for one alternative that can satisfy the requirements and expectations of all members; and 2) accommodative decision-making – meaning members have irreconcilable priorities and preferences, and thus the final choice is not consensual, instead it involves some level of compromises. For any given purchase situation, based on the type of decision-making, Davis (1976) detailed a number of conflict resolution strategies available for members to adopt. In a consensual situation, members can resolve conflicts either by role structure, budget or problem-solving strategies, all of which assure a satisfactory result approved by all members. In contrast, if differences are irreconcilable, members can persuade or bargain with each other to reach a workable outcome. Davis's work (1976) became a crucial foundation for later studies that explore further conflict resolution strategies used by families when making purchases. Among consensus strategies, problem-solving is found to be the most frequently used strategy by families in decision-making of housing, holiday, food, clothing and other product categories (M. A. Belch et al., 1980; Holdert & Antonides, 1997; Kang & Hsu, 2004; Qualls, 1984). This strategy entails active information searching and continuous discussion among members in order to come up with the best alternative that is otherwise unable to reach autonomously (Holdert & Antonides, 1997). Other commonly used strategies in both consensus and accommodative decision-making include reasoning, integrative bargaining, overtly expressing preferences and coalition (Kirchler, 1993). In case of families with children, the pool of conflict resolution strategies expands further, as children tend to rely on emotions, both positive and negative, when dealing with their parents. Begging and pleading, whining, express anger, pouting, ask nicely, sweet talk, and appeal to guilt are some common strategies used by children and adolescents (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Cowan, Drinkard, & MacGavin, 1984; Palan & Wilkes, 1997; Williams & Burns, 2000). However, children, and especially teenagers, are also able to use cognitive strategies, such as reasoning, making a deal, calling for third person's opinion, and directly asking and expressing preferences, in order to drive the decision-making toward their preferred outcome (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Cowan et al., 1984; Palan & Wilkes, 1997; Williams & Burns, 2000). Given the wide range of conflict resolution strategies available, the choice of what strategy to be adopted by the family is determined by a number of factors, including socio-demographic characteristics of the family, gender role orientation, family life cycle, members' perceptions of preferable outcomes, and time available to make decisions (Douglas, 1983; Frikha, 2010; Kang & Hsu, 2004).

The context of international education decision-making of Vietnamese people is likely to involve family decision-making. Similar to other major decisions such as the

purchase of real estate or family holiday, there may be more than one member who wants to participate in the discussion and have their opinions taken into consideration regarding where a student should study overseas. It is valuable, therefore, to explore how the decision is made, what are the roles of students, parents as well as other potential family members at different stages of the decision process, and what strategy may families employ to resolve possible conflicts in their discussion.

### **2.2.2 Decision-making processes for choice of university by domestic students**

In addition to family decision-making, the literature on tertiary education decision-making is the second key empirical foundation supporting the current study. The decision-making of high school leavers regarding choice of domestic tertiary education has been researched extensively for the past few decades (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). In the 1970s, scholars started to explore why and how students select domestic tertiary institutions. It is important to note that in the literature review, the two words *college* and *university* are used interchangeably when the researcher reviews the literature, as studies in the USA used the term “college” to identify tertiary or higher educational institutions that are elsewhere recognised as universities. Early studies looked at the college choice from either the econometric (Fuller, Manski, & Wise, 1982; Kohn, Manski, & Mundel, 1976; Mundel, 1974) or sociological (Alwin & Otto, 1977; Boyle, 1966; Sewell & Shah, 1968) perspective, and these two aspects dominate the college literature in the 1970s (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Paulsen, 1990). Econometric models suggest that students treat college choice like an investment, in which they weigh all the costs and benefits of each college attendance option. Students assess the benefits using the following criteria: geographic location, academic factors and economic factors (Fuller et al., 1982; G. A. Jackson, 1982; Mundel, 1974; Smith-Vosper, 1997). The goal of this process is to maximise the benefits students can receive from a college, compared to other alternatives, including the non-college option. Sociological models, on the other hand, identify a variety of individual and social factors that lead to educational and occupational aspirations, which then determine the levels of educational and occupational attainment (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). Educational aspiration is said to be impacted by social factors like socioeconomic status, academic performance, the influence of significant others and the types of high schools attended (Alwin & Otto, 1977; Boyle, 1966; Sewell & Shah, 1968).

The econometric and sociological models attempt to explain the behaviour of students regarding the pursuit of tertiary education. However, neither of these approaches offer a

satisfactory explanation that include a complete range of influential factors, nor explain the process through which students arrive at their final institution choice (Smith-Vosper, 1997). Still, they are useful, in terms of providing the necessary inputs for the third group of college choice studies – the combined models (D. W. Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; G. A. Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). Models in this group not only incorporate a more comprehensive range of determining attributes but, more importantly, they focus on rationalising the longitudinal nature of the college choice decision more logically through a progressive, stage-based process. The strength of combined models has made them the critical foundation for all later research on higher education decision making.

The literature is in agreement that college choice is a complex process that involves sequential stages, and different factors of influence at each stage (Navratilova, 2013). At the center of the model is the student, who is viewed as the individual responsible for the choice task (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014). Despite some minor variations, most models are built on the same basis of the five-step model of consumer decision-making (Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999; Solomon, 2009). For example, R. G. Chapman (1986) proposed a behavioural model of the college selection process that consists of five steps: pre-search behaviour, search behaviour, application decision, choice decision and matriculation decision. This model stays relatively close to the foundational five-step process of consumer behaviour: students recognise the need and desire to attend college, seek information to evaluate possible options, make their applications, select the most suitable institution and finally begin their college lives. The naming of each step is, of course, adjusted to fit the educational context. Prospective students can start the process in their early high school years, work their ways through several steps as the process progresses, and end up with the decision to pursue tertiary education at a specific school by the time high school finishes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

Other research has taken slightly different approach. They worked on the same core tasks stated above but divided the choice process into three phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; G. A. Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). This three-phase model was firstly introduced by Litten and G. A. Jackson in 1982, but only made well-known by Hossler and Gallagher in their 1987 paper. Hereafter, three-phase college choice process will be described using the model of Hossler and Gallagher (see Table 2).

Table 2: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice

Phases	Influential Factors		Student Outcomes
	<i>Individual factors</i>	<i>Organisational factors</i>	
Disposition (phase 1)	Students characteristics Significant others Educational activities	School characteristics	Search for: a) College options b) Other options
Search (phase 2)	Student preliminary college values Student search activities	College and university search activities (search for students)	a) Choice set b) Other options
Choice (phase 3)	Choice set	College and university courtship activities	Choice

The process starts with the first phase, *Predisposition* (G. A. Jackson called it *Preference* while Litten did not give any name to the three phases), in which students establish an aspiration for higher education. This aspiration is so strong that it leads students to the decision to attend colleges (Litten, 1982). The Predisposition phase, therefore, is equal to the pre-search step in R. G. Chapman's model. The second phase is *Search* (*Exclusion*, according to G. A. Jackson). As the name implies, students actively and extensively acquire a great deal of information about available institutions from multiple sources, such as printed brochures, institution websites, family members, relatives, peers, teachers and counsellors (S. T. Nguyen, 2017). This information seek gives rise to a choice set (R. G. Chapman, 1986). The choice set (or application set as called by G. A. Jackson) is the list of colleges and universities that receive serious consideration from students and are seen as highly potential for selection and enrolment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The choice set is established when students have gathered a certain amount of information and decide to stop the search because they believe further search will no longer bring about new information or resolve any remaining uncertainty (R. G. Chapman, 1986). G. A. Jackson (1982) emphasised the aspect of exclusion in this phase, that is students do not consider all alternatives in their information search (Mundel, 1974), and the choice set emerges after students have eliminated all non-feasible options. The choice set in Hossler and Galagher's model also includes the option of not attending college, given that no satisfactory institution is found after the search phase.

*Choice* is the final phase in the process, in which students evaluate all possibilities in the choice set, including the "no-go" option and make the final selection. Students have a much clearer idea at this stage, in terms of which schools are high desirable to them;

G. A. Jackson (1982) suggests that students develop a rating scheme for assessing the benefits and cost of each college option in the choice set, as well as the “no-go” option. Students can apply to one or more institutions in their choice sets and, in case more than one school accepts them, the rating scheme helps students settle on the optimal choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; G. A. Jackson, 1982). R. G. Chapman (1986), based on the post-purchase step in the five-step model, took the college choice decision a step further, when including not only the college application step but also the enrolment or matriculation step into this phase. The reason here is that, even though students have made the decision to attend a particular college or university, formal enrolments usually take months to happen, and things can change during this waiting time. Prospective students could still face a sudden no-go option, despite all preparations, if, for example, their college funds are no longer available.

In short, most college choice studies build their models from a similar foundation of multiple sequential phases. These steps are not mutually exclusive but instead they are interrelated and interact with each other closely; that is, the prior phase determines what happens in the next step (Moogan et al., 1999). Also, students walk through the process in a funnel-like manner: they start generally at first, perhaps with many ideas about higher education and several institutions to think of. Then they become more serious and critical as they go further into the process. Students see the number of alternatives in their final choice set to be much smaller than originally planned, from which only one institution will be selected for enrolment (Litten, 1982).

College choice research not only depicts the step-based process through which high-school graduates arrive at their tertiary institution selections, but also explains how several types of factors affect the outcomes of each step in the process (Bers & Smith, 1987; Bradshaw, Espinoza, & Hausman, 2001; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; R. G. Chapman, 1986; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; G. A. Jackson, 1982; Jacob, 2011; Litten, 1982; Moogan et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). In the first phase of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, *predisposition*, the characteristics, abilities, achievements and educational activity involvement of students, as well as significant others’ opinions are important determinants of students’ educational aspirations. People with different socioeconomic statuses (SES), academic abilities and achievements have different attitudes toward attending colleges, and these factors remain active throughout the whole process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Leslie, Johnson, & Carlson, 1977; Litten, 1982). Parents and peers (friends and classmates) have a strong role in influencing one’s plan of pursuing higher education: parental encouragement determines the educational aspiration and the types of college attended, and students tend to follow friends who are



college-going (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Students who actively participate in extra-curriculum activities during high schools have a higher tendency of attending colleges (Hearn, 1984). G. A. Jackson (1982) ranked: (1) academic achievements, (2) social context (peers, schools and neighbours), and (3) student background to be the three most important types of factors in the *predisposition* phase, while parental encouragement was pointed out as the strongest factor predicting the higher educational plans of students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Stage & Hossler, 1989).

High school and college attributes also impact the attitude of students' regarding pursuing college education (Hearn, 1984; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Leslie et al., 1977; Litten, 1982). A positive relationship is found between college matriculation and students' graduating from high-status high schools, high schools with curriculums focusing on maths, science and other pre-college courses. Location affects enrolment rates, as students living nearby are more likely to attend colleges or universities, and students who live in cities are more likely to go to college, compared to those who live in rural areas.

The search activity, from which the choice set is derived, takes place in the *search* phase under the influence of several factors. As mentioned before, parents continue their major roles (Jacob, 2011), either looking for more information about cost and financial aid for their children's college plans (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) or introducing students to more knowledgeable sources regarding tertiary education (Bradshaw et al., 2001), or in some cases act like an independent influencer (Litten, 1982). At this stage, students look for information on various college attributes, such as academic quality, career prospects, life quality, cost and location (R. G. Chapman, 1986; Moogan et al., 1999) to match their abilities and SES (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), and the quality of this information is determined by the students' access to information through relevant sources, high school counsellors and college search activities. Information access is critical in the search phase because the richer the information gathered, the more comprehensive the choice set will be, and a lack of information can result in students missing out on potentially desirable options (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Compared to high-SES students, low-SES students and their parents have fewer sources of educational information, and thus they find themselves relying more on counsellors when considering education beyond high schools (Leslie et al., 1977; M. L. Tierney, 1980). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) underlined the recruitment activities carried out by colleges and universities toward prospective students, because this is one of the formal channels through which a large amount of information about school characteristics is

provided to students. Letters and brochures from potential institutions, invitations to campus open days and educational fair promotions are typical activities that colleges and universities employ to earn themselves a place in students' choice sets (R. G. Chapman, 1986; Moogan et al., 1999).

The last phase in the process, *choice*, witnesses a significant focus of students and their parents on specific school characteristics, as they are weighing one college against another for the final selection. Students approach this phase from a cost-benefit perspective: they typically conduct a cost-benefit analysis on the choice set, using predetermined criteria, to choose the institution that provides the best value on the greatest number of benefits (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; G. A. Jackson, 1982; Moogan et al., 1999). Attributes like academic quality, reputation and location are seen across several studies as some key criteria that students use to evaluate the options (R. G. Chapman, 1986; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; G. A. Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; Moogan et al., 1999). Despite some contradictory findings, which suggest the influence of cost is more in the *predisposition* stage, many researchers have found the role of cost to be important in the choice stage (D. W. Chapman, 1981). Cost and financial aid are taken into consideration because they determine the students' ability to afford the study, while the qualifications and degree they receive at the end, and more importantly employment prospects, are influenced largely by the academic quality (including course availability) of the faculty and institution. Location is an important factor in students' choice set formation, yet its influence will dissolve once students have applied to a number of schools (R. G. Chapman, 1979). Value-based characteristics are important factors, but communication activities from schools are equally essential. Students prefer institutions that show a good level of professionalism at this stage, illustrated by personalised letters or promotional material sent to students by faculties or schools (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982). The final choice, therefore, is likely to be the college that best satisfies most of the students' criteria, and is seen by both the students and their parents as the best place to pursue higher education.

The next section examines the factors that are found to be important in influencing the college decision-making of domestic students.

### **2.2.3 Factors influencing domestic students' choice of university**

Having discussed the empirical research on the decision-making process of university education by domestic students, we now examine empirical research that focus particularly on the factors influencing such process. With the recent growth in the higher education market around the world, especially the competition between

universities and colleges, recruitment managers are looking for ways to target and approach prospective students more effectively and efficiently, thereby differentiating their institutions from the competition. As a result, scholars have tried to provide practitioners with an answer to the critical question, “What affects students when they select their college or university?” They have examined students mostly in their final year of high school or just starting colleges or universities (Hoyt & Brown, 2003), who are facing or have just made one of the most important decisions in their lives, the choice of college to attend (Litten, 1982). The majority of studies on college choice factors has been conducted in North America (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Canale & Dunlap, 1996; Cook & Zallocco, 1983; Hiscocks, 1996; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; O’Neil, 2013; Wajeesh & Micceri, 1997) and the UK (Anderson, 1999; Briggs, 2006). In Asia, Malaysian students have been put under examination for determining what factors influence their higher education decisions (Ming, 2010; Misran, Sahuri, Arsad, Hussan, & Zaki, 2012; Zain, Jan, & Ibrahim, 2013).

A number of factors influence the college choice of students. Several studies report a list of 10 to 30 elements that are considered important by students when making their college-going decisions (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Anderson, 1999; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Power & Gertzel, 1990; Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004; Wajeesh & Micceri, 1997; Weiler, 1996). These factors can be systematically categorised into two general groups: student characteristics and external influences (D. W. Chapman, 1981). Student characteristics consist of personal and background factors of students, such as socioeconomic status (SES), ability and high school performance/achievements; while external influences are made up of three primary factors: significant persons, institutional characteristics and college communication efforts (Brown, Hernandez, Mitchell, & Turner, 1999; D. W. Chapman, 1981). According to Chapman’s model, individual factors within these groups help shape students’ expectations of college life, which consequently affects their choices. At the same time, institutions reach out to find suitable prospective students for recruitment based on various personal characteristics.

#### *Student characteristics*

SES appears to be a strong factor within student characteristics, as applicants from different family backgrounds will behave differently in deciding to attend colleges as well as selecting the type of colleges or universities (D. W. Chapman, 1981). For example, high-SES students have a stronger tendency to continue their studies after high school, compared to low- and middle-SES students (Sewell & Shah, 1967). Also, high-SES students are more selective when choosing tertiary institutions (Brown et al., 1999;

Hearn, 1984) and, for the programmes, they are more likely to pursue four-year college or university programmes than two-year community college (D. W. Chapman, 1981). Family income and educational level are two major aspects of SES that determine the likelihood of attending college, the feasibility of students attending college as well as the type of school attended. Students from high-income families with college-educated parents are encouraged to pursue higher education at more selective private institutions, whereas middle- and low-income students lean more toward choosing state universities/colleges and community colleges because their tuition fees are more affordable (Brown et al., 1999; D. W. Chapman, 1981).

Student ability and high school achievements affect their college plans in many ways (Boyle, 1966; Sewell & Shah, 1968). First of all, high-ability students are independent, and possess high levels of self-esteem regarding their future educational and occupational successes, and thus these features make them more selective when choosing tertiary institutions (Brown et al., 1999; D. W. Chapman, 1981; Hoyt & Brown, 2003). They prefer highly-ranked schools, and are willing to move away from their hometowns if no good institution is found locally (Brown et al., 1999). This group of students also use their aptitudes and high school achievements as college selection criteria, because they want to go to schools that can provide them with an academically challenging environment, and compete with students whose abilities are similar to theirs (D. W. Chapman, 1981). At the same time, these students' colleges plans and choices are often affected by a number of external sources due to their abilities and achievements, according to D. W. Chapman (1981). High-ability students are more likely to be given educational advice from families and friends, teachers and high school counsellors, while colleges tend to approach this type of student for recruitment and scholarship offerings.

#### *Significant persons*

Family, friends, high school teachers and counsellors have significant impacts on how post-secondary students plan their tertiary education (Alexander & Campbell, 1964; Bradshaw et al., 2001; Ceja, 2006; T. K. Chapman, Contreras, & Martinez, 2018; Maramba, Palmer, Kang, & Yull, 2018; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna et al., 2008). They encourage students to attend college and provide students with information regarding tertiary education and types of schools and programmes available. Parents give students advice on what college life is, the values of a college degree to students' future life and career, and what institution should be considered (D. W. Chapman, 1981; T. K. Chapman et al., 2018). In some cases, parents' expectations of students'

educational successes are imposed, such that students decide to go to college because they do not want to disappoint their parents (Archer & Hutchings, 2000). Parents talk with students about specific schools also because they are responsible for the financial aspect of their children's college attendance (Flint, 1992). In certain situations, when parents are not able to assist their children with educational planning, students will turn to their brothers or sisters for advice (Ceja, 2006). Also, parents can introduce their children to acquaintances who are very knowledgeable about college education (e.g. a professor at one university or a colleague who is an alumnus of a particular institution), from whom the information is highly influential (Bradshaw et al., 2001; Brown et al., 1999).

Beside family, many students have friends and classmates as other important influences on their college-attending decision (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Starting during high school, students have conversations with their friends and classmates regarding whether to continue studying upon graduation and, if yes, where and what school (Alexander & Campbell, 1964). Close friends are seen as trustworthy, and friends who share similar background, abilities and aspirations tend to have a stronger effect on students' college aspirations and attendance (Hallinan & Williams, 1990). When the college decision is a mutual agreement between friends, and one of them actually enrolls, others are more likely to follow (Alexander & Campbell, 1964).

High school teachers and counsellors are also common sources of college information for students (Galotti & Mark, 1994). Teachers inspire students to pursue academic successes at college, and give them useful recommendations (D. W. Chapman, 1981) while, at the same time, putting extra pressure on many students (Bradshaw et al., 2001). Gifted students report having to bear a continuous pressure on being academically excellent beyond secondary schools, as their high school teachers talk about them going to prestigious universities like Harvard or MIT during high school years. On the other hand, the role of counsellors is less emotionally imposing and more information focused, yet results in a positive influence on students' college motivations and expectations (W. G. Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). Normally, counsellors introduce students and parents to tertiary education, open them up to all college opportunities, and provide them with official information regarding different school options, along with advice and recommendations on suitability (McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). Counsellors interact with both students and parents, and their roles become more significant to students where their parents' educational levels are limited, suggesting such parents may have failed to provide adequate information on potential institutions (Muhammad, 2008).

### *Institutional characteristics*

A large number of studies have particularly looked at different attributes of colleges and universities in order to identify critical factors influencing students' college choice decisions. Academic quality and reputation, college cost and financial aid, location, campus environment and programme availability are among the most frequently cited criteria by students when they decide their future college attendance (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Brown et al., 1999; D. W. Chapman, 1981; R. G. Chapman, 1979; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Ming, 2010; Sidin, Hussin, & Soon, 2003; Veloutsou et al., 2004). Students evaluate an institution's academic quality and reputation through various elements, such as its reputation at the university and faculty/department levels, qualifications offered, course content, staff and research quality, quality of instruction and campus facilities (e.g. computer labs and library) (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Anderson, 1999; Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Veloutsou et al., 2004; Wajeih & Micceri, 1997). Powers, Douglas, and Choroszy (1983) emphasised the importance of an intellectually stimulating environment within the schools, along with good interaction between professors and students during their studying in order to attract top students. Students reported to Wajeih and Micceri (1997) that they would like to see a quality college or university to have cutting edge technology and, more importantly, apply educational technology in courses. High-ability students pay special attention to academic quality of schools, as they expect the prestigious, selective universities to provide them with the best learning experience and the best preparation for their futures (Bradshaw et al., 2001). Broekemier and Seshadri (2000) compared the institutional factors considered important by students and parents, and found that the programme/course of study and facilities quality are among the top criteria for both students and parents, but parents are concerned more about the school reputation while their children want to make sure that the qualifications they have will help them find jobs after graduation. Academic reputation and quality are important determinants that, if perceived as highly important, can affect the weight of other choice factors (Brown et al., 1999). For example, an institution that is well-known for its academic quality, but is located in a remote area and does not provide accommodation on campus, can still be selected by a student who values high quality of education as the most important choice criterion. In this case, the student is exercising a compensatory decision-making mindset – he or she is willing to put up with one or more less preferable attributes (distant campus location and lack of convenient accommodation) in exchange for other more highly regarded attributes (academic quality) (Payne, 1976).

In addition to academic quality and reputation, the total cost of attending college is the second most important factor in college choice (R. G. Chapman, 1979). Cost influences a majority of students when it comes to choice of college (Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999; Chatfield, Lee, & Chatfield, 2012; Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Workman, 2015), and an increase in cost is more likely to cause a decrease in tertiary enrolment (Kane, 1994). Tuition fees determine the affordability of a particular institution, and because the fee varies from school to school, this factor is said to have an interaction with parents' income in influencing the evaluation of options (D. W. Chapman, 1981). That is, students from different SES backgrounds will find themselves matched to certain ranges of college cost, and thus keep their selections within these ranges. The effect is stronger with low-SES students, as they tend to exclude higher-resource and higher-cost institutions, while high-income and high-ability students generally do not care as much about college cost (Hearn, 1984; Hoyt & Brown, 2003). High-income students rate cost as less important because their families can afford it (Leslie et al., 1977), whereas high-ability students do not see cost as a major barrier because they expect to get scholarships from schools.

Most tertiary institutions provide scholarships as a form of financial aid to their enrolled students, along with student loans and allowances from the government. If cost raises a monetary challenge to college attendance, financial aid helps decrease or eliminate this obstacle, thereby increasing the possibility of college attendance (Heller, 1999; M. L. Tierney, 1980). Financial aid is frequently reported as one of the most highly cited pulling factors that influence students' enrolment decision (Chatfield et al., 2012; L.-H. Chen, 2007; Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Li & Bray, 2007) and, in general, the majority of students express a positive attitude towards attending schools that provide both grants and loans (D. Kim, 2004). Cost and financial aid are so intertwined that D. W. Chapman (1981) suggested these two factors be analysed together when looking at institutional characteristics. High-ability students, for example, aim for prestigious private schools, which are usually very expensive but, at the same time, very attractive because these students are confident in their abilities, which can help them get scholarships (Hoyt & Brown, 2003). They rate scholarship offerings as the most important college factor for their choices (Bradshaw et al., 2001) and their preference for a university would increase significantly if scholarships were offered (Baksh & Hoyt, 2001). Similar findings can be found for low- and middle-income students, who may choose the non-college option if the cost of studying at college is high and financial aid selective (Himler, 1998).

Academic and monetary attributes are indeed dominant factors for college choices, yet prospective students also take other non-academic and non-monetary features into account and treat them as equally important (Weiler, 1996). Campus location is one of the commonly considered school criteria (Briggs, 2006; Brown et al., 1999; Powers et al., 1983; Vaugh, Pitlik, & Hansotia, 1978): the majority of students prefer to stay close to home while attending college (D. W. Chapman, 1981), yet it may also mean that they have fewer school options from which to choose, compared to people who live further away (Weiler, 1994). Attending a local campus is preferred by mature working students, who also have family and work responsibilities during their studies (Paulsen, 1990; Wajeih & Micceri, 1997). Academic ability and family income of students further affect their mobility (D. W. Chapman, 1981). High-income and high-ability students can consider a wider range of schools, because they do not have financial barriers, as opposed to low-ability students, who tend to be less mobile. Parents care about geographic location more than students, though one of their main concerns is safety of the campus and hosting city (ranked second on the parents' college choice criteria) (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000). On the other hand, students prefer studying in a lively city with lots of opportunities for socialising, as they are not only purchasing an educational qualification, but also expecting a good life experience (Powers et al., 1983; Veloutsou et al., 2004).

#### *College communication efforts*

Colleges and universities sell educational services in a highly competitive market, so they need to promote their offerings to target customers, students and parents, if they want to win students over competitors (D. W. Chapman, 1981). Communication efforts are carried out by institutions to approach potential students, such as school brochures, telemarketing, campus visits, and contacts with recruitment/admission personnel (Brown et al., 1999). The information and messages communicated to students via direct communication channels with schools, such as the university website, brochures and university representatives, have proven to influence their college choice to a certain extent (Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Kealy & Rockel, 1987). Students rank marketing material and brochures from universities and colleges as important sources of information, ranked just after the importance of parents and friends (Galotti & Mark, 1994). Students visit colleges on open days, while admission representatives come to high schools for consulting. They report that these activities are particularly helpful for students in terms of developing their perceptions of the institution considered (Brown et al., 1999). In fact, open days are rated as one of the most important marketer-controlled factors that



influence students' college choice decisions (Po, Gibson, & Muthaly, 2014). Bowers and Pugh (1972) note the importance of colleges' and universities' alumni as another channel to reach out to students. Alumni are former students at a particular school, thus they are seen to be experienced and knowledgeable about the institution (Nicholls, Harris, Morgan, Clarke, & Sims, 1995). Their voices, as a result, are viewed as trustworthy and, thus, have a positive impact on prospective students' interest in a specific programme (Flint, 1992; Kallio, 1995).

The next section examines the factors influencing the college decision-making of students, but in an international context.

#### **2.2.4 Factors influencing international students' choice of university**

So far, literature on factors determining the college choice of domestic students has been reviewed. When the decision is carried out in an international context – that is, students making choices of overseas education – the number of influential factors and the interaction between them are expected to be more complex. Indeed, international students are facing not only a long-term and expensive investment in education but, more importantly, they will have to leave their home country for a few years, to move to an entirely new place, where racial, cultural and social differences are prevalent. This phenomenon results in a significant increase in uncertainty and, consequently, risks associated with students' decision-making (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

While influential factors of domestic students' college choices revolve mostly around the aspects of schools' academic quality and cost of attending (R. G. Chapman, 1979), under the guidance and encouragement of families and friends, international students often consider a much wider range of criteria. In addition to personal and institutional attributes, economic, political, social and educational characteristics of the home and host countries are taken into account, comprising *push* and *pull* forces (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). Push forces are defined as attributes of the home countries that trigger their needs for overseas education, whereas pull forces are the level of attractiveness of the hosting countries that “pull” students toward a particular destination for studying (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992).

##### *Push factors*

Firstly, the economic strength of the home country has an effect on the number of students going abroad, though the findings are rather contradictory from study to study. McMahon (1992) and later Maringe and Carter (2007) concluded that students are more likely to seek international study if their home countries face an economic downturn,

while Rafi and Lewis (2013) found that the rise of middle class households in the Indian economy contributes positively to the rise in the nation's demand for overseas education. The former aspect can be explained as the students, due to their home countries' economic weakness, opt to go away so that they can help their families back home. On the other hand, middle and high class households in a growing economy have a stronger financial base to support their children's overseas education (Z. Wang, 2007).

Secondly, some developing countries in Asia place a higher value on international universities, compared to their local counterparts, with the exception of a few top domestic institutions (Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Kemp, Madden, & Simpson, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Therefore, students who graduate from overseas universities are seen as highly valued in these societies, since they bring prestige and honour to themselves and their families. This perception of foreign superiority does not only affect students socially, but also determines their chances of getting employment when they return. As many countries have become more economically involved in international trade (McMahon, 1992), firms and companies at home are looking for employees who have good qualifications and, more importantly, are familiar with the international working environment (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Also, the fact that more international graduates are returning to their home countries has raised the bar for the local labour market (Dimmock & Leong, 2010), thereby putting even more pressure on high school graduates to pursue overseas degrees, if they want to stay professionally competitive (Wu, 2014). In short, studies in Asian source countries report that preparation for a better career future at home after graduation is one of the strong motivations for pushing international tertiary education (Foster, 2014; Mpinganjira, 2009; Sanchez, Fornerino, & Zhang, 2006; Zwart, 2012).

Emphasis on education in the home country and its current educational situation are two contributing factors to the outbound mobility of students. The country's focus on education may provide students with more opportunities regarding studying abroad, in the form of joint/exchange programmes and scholarship offerings, while the effect on the domestic educational situation is the opposite (McMahon, 1992). For example, India has the second largest tertiary education sector in the world, yet its performance is constrained by a number of issues, including the lack of staff, quality of teaching and programme suitability (Rafi & Lewis, 2013). Parallels can be drawn with the educational system in China (Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Tan, 2015). In addition to the quality problem, many students find university entry requirements at home challenging (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McCarthy, Sen, & Garrity, 2012), especially for Asian students who have to sit and pass the competitive university entrance examination

(Padlee et al., 2010; Sanchez et al., 2006). Programme unavailability and lack of university places prevent students from taking the courses domestically (Maringe & Carter, 2007; McCarthy et al., 2012; Mpinganjira, 2009) and thus lead them toward overseas enrolments (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

While many students from developing countries, seek education internationally as a result of domestic demands, others decide to study abroad for more personal reasons (Li & Bray, 2007). Students see overseas programmes as opportunities for them to travel (C.-F. Lee, 2017), gain new living experiences in different places (Foster, 2014; Kemp et al., 1998; McCarthy et al., 2012; Mpinganjira, 2009; Tan, 2015), enrich their overall cultural knowledge (Doyle et al., 2010; Wu, 2014), and make international friendships (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2018). Social and cultural interactions with local and foreign people also help students improve their understanding of their own cultural values (Nunan, 2006). Furthermore, through the students' immersion in the foreign environment, they can also improve themselves as individuals (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Students have a chance to test their level of independence, train their self-confidence, and learn whether an overseas life would suit them (Doyle et al., 2010; Nunan, 2006). This is especially important for self-development of students from Asian countries like China and Vietnam, who have not usually been exposed to external environments outside of their families (Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Being away from family for a long period of time are also perceived by international students as freedom to do new things that they might have not been able to do while living at home (Tan, 2015). Language improvement is one particularly essential aspect in the self-development process of international students (Bourke, 2000; Foster, 2014; Jon, Lee, & Byun, 2014; Kobayashi, 2007; Tan, 2015; Yao & Garcia, 2018). As the world is becoming socially and professionally united, students have developed an interest in foreign language proficiency and, for them, the best way to learn common languages like English is to embed themselves in the English-speaking environment (Wu, 2014).

### *Pull factors*

International students develop their intentions to study abroad from a series of internal and external push factors, but their final choice of destination is influenced by many pull factors from each host country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Several studies on popular host nations like the US, the UK and Australia have identified a number of attributes that determine the educational attractiveness of a country for overseas students.

Firstly, the economic strength of a nation has a positive effect on its educational image. Students associate a strong economy with high quality education and innovation, and thus studying in the world's most prosperous countries is seen as high status (Mpinganjira, 2009). The level of trade exchange between the home and the hosting countries also influences the outbound flow of student (McMahon, 1992). For instance, the presence of several American companies and organisations in Vietnam may make the US a preferable destination for education for Vietnamese students, as they expect to have better chances of working for those international corporations once they return to Vietnam with a US-awarded degree (Zwart, 2012). Indeed, the recognition of qualifications is repeatedly highlighted as one of the key reasons why a destination is selected (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; McCarthy et al., 2012; Yao & Garcia, 2018; Zwart, 2012). Students believe that worldwide-recognised degrees will give them an edge when competing in the domestic labour market, as well as open up employment opportunities in other countries (Bhati & Lee, 2014; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mpinganjira, 2011; Wu, 2014; Yao & Garcia, 2018). These findings were echoed in studies on international students from developed nations (McCarthy et al., 2012). Mazzarol (1998) highlighted the focus on job market recognition as one of the critical strategies for success in marketing international education.

Much of a country's educational attractiveness is determined by the quality of its colleges and universities (Mpinganjira, 2011). The term 'quality' reflects many aspects of the destination's education system, such as institutions' reputation, high academic capability, excellent teaching staff and style, technologically advanced facilities and equipment, and the overall learning-inducing environment (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Bhati & Lee, 2014; Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Mazzarol, 1998). University rankings are a common source for comparing the educational performance between countries and, within this, the US and the UK have an advantage over other countries (Kemp et al., 1998; Zwart, 2012). Exposure to innovative knowledge and technologies under the instruction and guidance of high-quality teaching staff are expected to provide students with long-term benefits for professional and personal improvement (Dimmock & Leong, 2010). Short programme length and diversified content are also reported as being preferred by students over the more traditional and longer curriculum at home (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Even among selecting alternatives, there are differences between how programmes are structured, and students tend to prioritise countries that can provide the best value for money and time (Wu, 2014). For example, a British master's programme only takes one year, which makes the UK more

competitive than elsewhere where students may be required to take one and a half to two years for the same degree.

The overall attractiveness of a destination is also explained by its university admissions and immigration processes. Students take into account the amount of paperwork and procedures that the countries they are planning on going to require them to fulfil and, in general, students prefer a simple and straightforward process (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Academically reputable places like the US can be down-ranked by students, compared to the UK or Australia, because the former requires applicants to go through long and difficult visa application processes (Dalglish & Chan, 2005). The ease of university admissions and immigration procedures is frequently reported as one of the most important factors for the choice of country for education (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Alfattal, 2017; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Tan, 2015). In addition to entry immigration requirements, the possibility of permanent immigration after graduation attracts many students to certain countries (Zwart, 2012). For example, Australia is among countries that allow international graduates to stay and work after graduation, and the Australian skilled migration policy permits IT and accounting graduates to gain extra immigration points, thereby increasing their chances of getting permanent residency visas (Rafi & Lewis, 2013). Yang (2007) confirmed the influence of immigration policies on students' choices of educational destinations citing 75% of Chinese students deciding to go to Australia do so primarily to obtain permanent residence. As a result, Australia, New Zealand and other countries are preferable to the US or the UK, where international graduates often see themselves returning home due to stricter immigration policies.

Thirdly, cost has always been an important factor regarding college planning and, in the international education context, this factor becomes critical (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Alfattal, 2017; Bhati & Lee, 2014; Eder et al., 2010; Jon et al., 2014; Singh, Schapper, & Jack, 2014; Yao & Garcia, 2018). Unlike domestic students, whose college costs revolve mainly around tuition fees, international students also need to consider the cost of living and travelling because they are going to live in a different place where living expenses are different from expenses at home (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The effect of cost is demonstrated in students constantly comparing the education cost and living expenses of different countries (Foster, 2014), in relation to other attributes, to come up with the most academically and financially appropriate destination for their college-going plans. In this aspect, lower ranked countries like Canada and Australia usually have an advantage over the US or the UK because they are seen as more affordable places for educational investments (Zwart, 2012). Dimmock and Leong (2010) found

similar results among Chinese students who chose to go to Singapore, with the following striking statement from a student: “The course fee and the cost of living in Singapore is almost one-half of what I would expect to pay for the same degree in the UK.” (p. 31) The concern over cost is further compounded for international students due to the exchange rates between the home and hosting countries’ currencies, which explains why places like Australia, with strong currencies, are often seen as less favourable, compared to other destinations (Rafi & Lewis, 2013).

In line with the overall cost is a consideration of financial aid and part-time work opportunities in the hosting countries. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) concluded that the chance of finding part-time jobs is of greater importance to many international students than the cost itself, while other studies reported the ability to obtain scholarships as one of the key reasons for their choice of host countries (Alfattal, 2017; Foster, 2014; Li & Bray, 2007; Yao & Garcia, 2018). The US, with its strict policy of forbidding international students from working during their study, would not be as attractive to prospective international students in this regard as other countries with more open working policies, such as Canada and New Zealand (Government of Canada; Immigration New Zealand; USCIS, 2011). To better position themselves in the global market, host nations can lower their tuition fees; provide international students with financial aid, scholarships and other social benefits; and, at the same time, have less rigid working policies (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Mpinganjira, 2011; Wilkinson, Mahara, & Quester, 1996).

International students also have personal safety concerns stemming from adjusting to an unfamiliar society (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Bhati & Lee, 2014; Eder et al., 2010; Jon et al., 2014). Low crime and discrimination toward foreign people are rated as important factors for the choice of country (Kemp et al., 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), especially after reports of incidents in which international students were victimised due to their ethnicity or religious beliefs (Rafi & Lewis, 2013). For instance, Malaysia is seen as a good option to choose by Middle Eastern students because it is a Muslim country, and thus these students are likely to find themselves more accepted (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Singh et al., 2014). The safety issue is extremely important for Chinese students, as in most cases their parents are sending the only child of the family away (Z. Wang, 2007; Zwart, 2012). Recent acts of terrorism in some western countries in North America and Europe have certainly affected the students’ perceptions of personal safety (Maringe & Carter, 2007), and led to the trend of students shifting their priorities towards ‘safer’ places. In addition to safety issues, students also weigh up other characteristics of the host country by trying to answer the following questions:

does it have a nice climate and weather for living? Is the community lively and exciting to live in? Does it offer a studious and less distracting environment for study? And does it provide multi-national and multi-cultural surroundings, ideal for developing social capabilities and global networks (Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Along with the attributes of host countries discussed above, there are other pull factors that potentially influence students' choices of overseas destinations. Prospective college attendants think about the geographic proximity of the host country to home, and their selections may significantly depend on the physical location of the nation if, for them, convenience in visiting home during study is critically important (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Jon et al., 2014; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2014). In line with location, students may be concerned about language in the host country and whether they are able to communicate with the locals. The potential language barrier makes countries that speak the same languages or use universal languages preferable to international students (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Foster, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 1996). Also, the availability of academic, financial and social information is of great interest to international students, because the more they know about the host country and its educational system, the easier it is for students to evaluate the benefits it can provide, and thus the better chance for this country to be selected (Doyle et al., 2010; Kemp et al., 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Mazzarol (1998) suggested the use of governmental promotion agencies and recruitment agents, besides traditional advertising and promotional activities of institutions, as key channels to advertise the country's educational system to the target audience.

When it comes to choosing the specific college or university to enrol in, students rely heavily on several characteristics of institutions. They prefer schools that provide them with the most suitable programmes or courses for their interests (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; McCarthy et al., 2012; McFadden, Maahs-Fladung, & Mallett, 2012). Reputation, academic quality and teaching expertise are taken into account as key determinants of the educational performance of a school (Bhati & Lee, 2014; Bourke, 2000; Jon et al., 2014; Mazzarol, 1998). International students use school and course rankings as a guideline to evaluate the quality of each provider, because they have very limited information on physical aspects of universities, due to geographic distance (J. J. Lee, 2007; Wu, 2014). Entry requirements are also strongly considered because some universities can be more selective than others, and thus students need to make sure they have a good chance of being accepted (Alfattal, 2017; Bhati & Lee, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Speed of acceptance has also been shown to be important for both

undergraduate and postgraduate students and, in general, students favour quick application processes (McFadden et al., 2012; Tan, 2015). In addition, international students show a positive attitude toward universities that are not only good academically, but also internationally cooperative – the ones that have strong connections with other institutions worldwide, possibly for future exchange opportunities (Wu, 2014). A strong alumni is a good information source for prospective students, as well as evidence of professional successes of the school's graduates (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

### **2.2.5 Decision-making processes for choice of university by international students**

The extant literature on international education choices has provided an understanding of the factors involved in a student's decision to study abroad and, more specifically, the selection of country and the institution. Through research, numerous determinants, both internal and external, domestic and international, have been identified, along with explanations of their influences on final choices. However, once all factors have been examined, it is equally important to study how these elements play a role during the student's decision-making, how students manage these influences, in order to achieve the most satisfactory solution. In other words, the process that international students go through to make their choices of overseas education is a critical element to be investigated in this literature. The literature on the decision-making process for domestic students is a useful base for this research, yet fails to capture the complexity of the process in the international context (Bohman, 2014). The college choice of foreign students is complicated by a range of additional factors, such as currency rates, language proficiency and economic ties between home and host countries, which are absent in the domestic context. As a result, improved models, in terms of context appropriateness, are needed, to better explain the decision-making process of international students regarding overseas education.

In contrast to the robust pool of studies on influencing factors, the decision-making process has not received the same level of attention from the marketing and education academia. A number of researchers have attempted to develop models of the decision-making process of international students in higher education (Fang & Wang, 2014; Migin, Falahat, & Khatibi, 2015; Perna, 2006), one of which was the work of Cubillo, Sanchez, and Cervino (2006) (see Figure 3). These three researchers proposed a model in which the students' educational service purchase intention is explained by a number of internal and external factors, grouped into five categories: *personal reasons*, *country*



*image effect, city effect, and institution image and programme evaluation.* The first category, *personal reasons*, contains push factors, such as personal improvement and advice from significant others, that encourage students to study abroad. The other four categories are comprised of various pull factors from the host destination. Pull forces from the country are broken into two categories, *country image effect* and *city image*, in which the former consists of overall cultural and social attributes of the nation, whereas the latter specifies the living conditions of the location hosting the institution. At the institutional level, the model details how different characteristics of the school (*institution image*) and its programmes (*programme evaluation*) are used as criteria to evaluate different alternatives. These four groups of factors interact with each other, and together with *personal reasons*, determine the preferences of students regarding where to study overseas. In this research, the purchase intention is the result of the students' evaluation of available alternatives, based on the consideration and trade-off of different attributes.

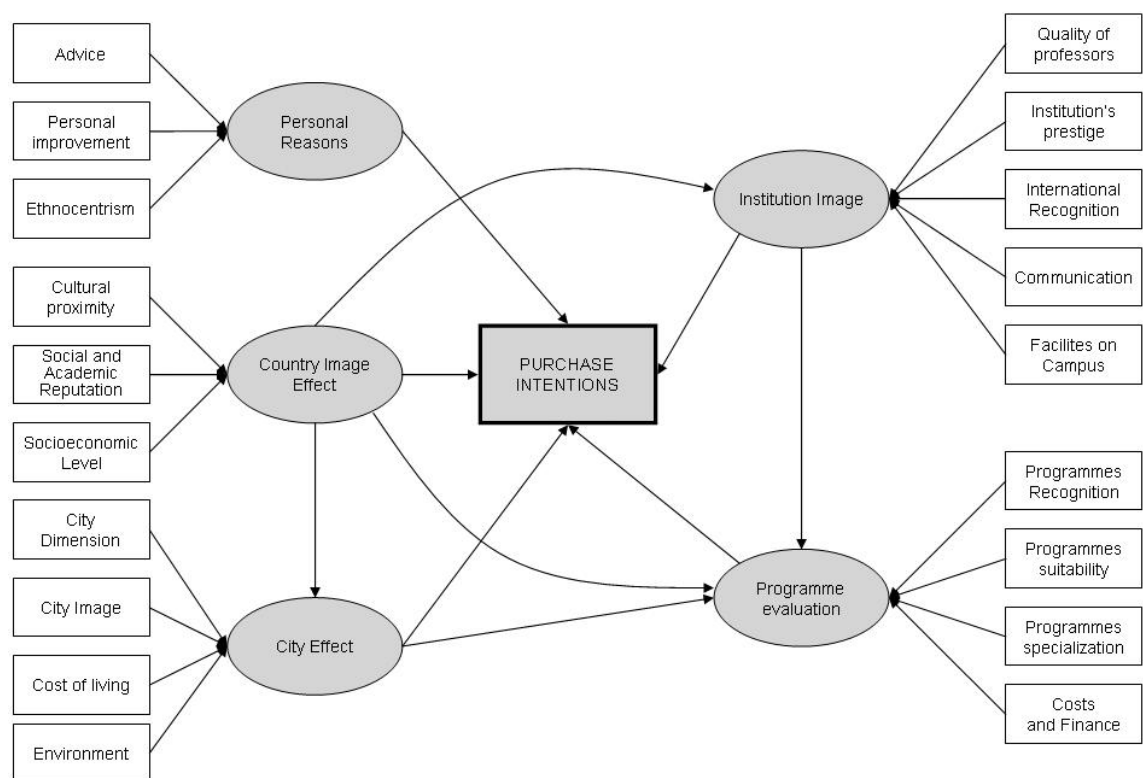


Figure 3: Cubillo et al. (2006) model of international students' preferences

Cubillo et al.'s (2006) conceptual model has systemised all identified factors into an integrated map, instead of examining different elements separately as in previous studies. This can be considered as the most valuable contribution of their research to the international education decision-making literature. However, despite terming their work "international students' decision-making process", this group of studies falls short in

achieving the most important objective - describing the longitudinal nature of the international education decision-making process, as the name implies. They fail to paint a picture of a buying process that may contain sequential steps within which students consider different aspects of their final choices. Finally, they do not measure the weight each factor has on the final choice, or the relative importance of each element within each group of factors.

Another line of research on this topic has taken a step further by focusing specifically on the method by which international students make their higher education choices (Bohman, 2010; L.-H. Chen, 2007). These studies are based on the three-stage college choice model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and the aforementioned factor models. In 2007, L.-H. Chen looked at the choice of Canadian universities made by graduate East Asian students and synthesised his choice model on the foundation of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model and Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull model. L.-H. Chen's (2007) model presents a sequential process with multiple stages, illustrating the progress students make during their decision-making, and each stage contains a set of influential factors that drive the outcome of that stage (see Figure 4).

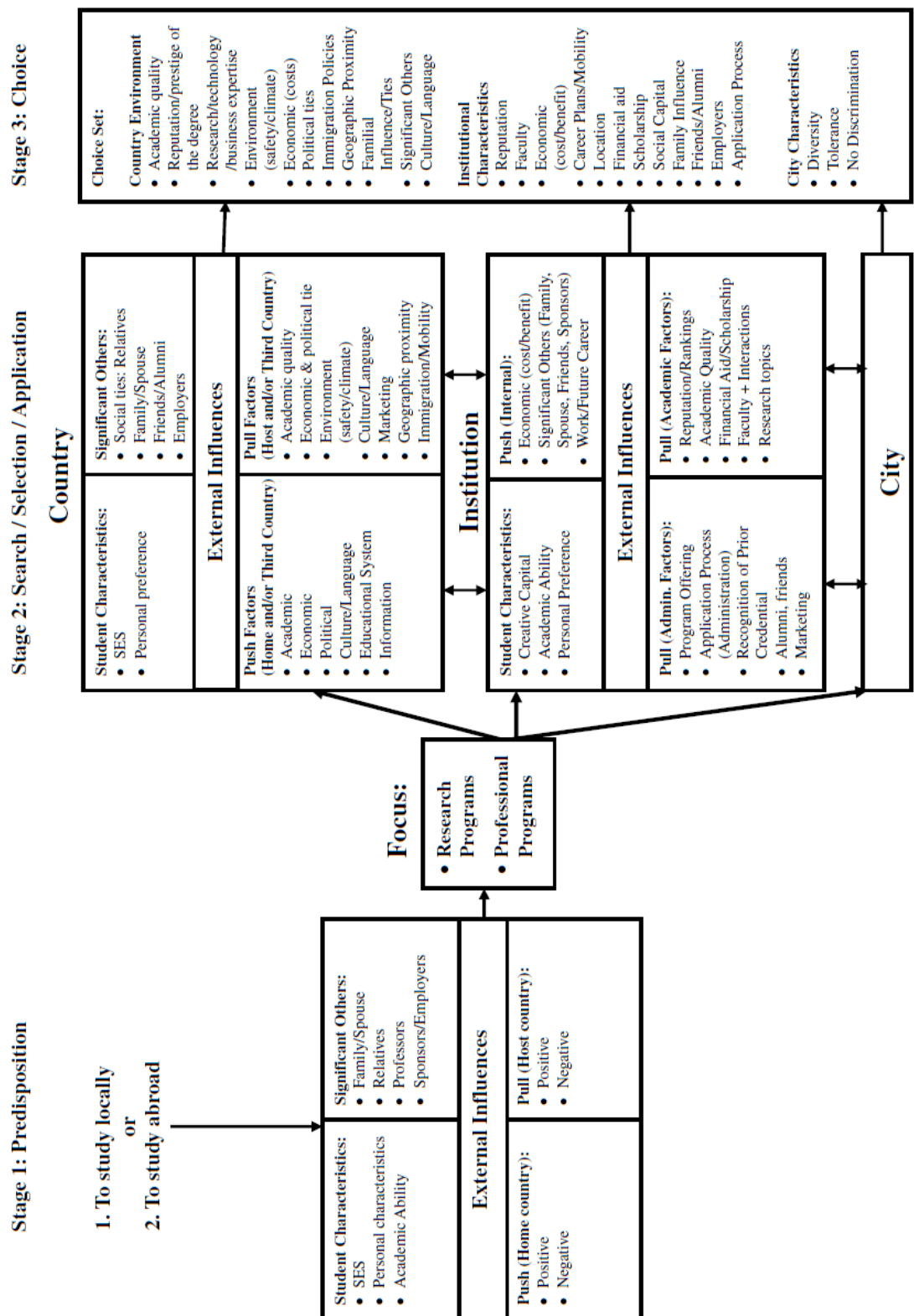


Figure 4: Chen's (2007) synthesis model of East-Asian graduate students

The model starts with the first stage, *predisposition*, in which graduate students decide to conduct their post-graduate studies locally or overseas. Similarly to the choice model of domestic students, *predisposition* is a critical step in the whole decision-making process, because its outcome will determine whether the subsequent stages actually take place. In this first stage, students' decisions are shaped under the influence of different push and pull factors, both internally and externally. Student characteristics, ability, academic and occupational goals, along with advice and support from significant others (parents, family, friends and peers) are suggested as the most influential push forces that send students overseas. In addition to this, the poor social, economic and educational conditions of the home country also contribute to the student's decision to undertake their studies abroad. On the other hand, different host countries will have economic and educational characteristics that are attractive to international students, thereby pulling them toward the idea of pursuing international education. According to L.-H. Chen (2007), students' decisions to study abroad at the end of the *predisposition* stage are based on a combination of these push and pull factors.

In L.-H. Chen's (2007) research, the outcome of the students' *predisposition* stage was not just the decision to study abroad, but they also choose specifically the type of programmes they would pursue. At the post-graduate level, there are usually two kinds of programme: research and professional, which are tailored for two different paths of study: the former is for graduate students who want to follow an academic career, whereas the latter is more suitable for those seeking a career in the private sector.

The second stage in the model is *search/selection/application*, in which students start their search for educational information and finish with applications to a number of universities. Typically, students need to gather and evaluate information about the country they want to travel to, the most suitable institution for their educational needs from that country, as well as the city where the campus is located. Personal characteristics such as socio-economic status and academic ability continue to influence students' perceptions of various potential destinations and schools; families, friends and other social acquaintances act both as supporters/advisors and information providers for students; push and pull features of the home and host countries, the city and the institution together complete the level of educational attractiveness of each alternative. As mentioned above, the difference in study goals between research and professional students results in two different approaches toward information gathering and destination selection between the two groups. Research students' choices of countries and institutions are mainly determined by their interests in academic research, and guided mostly by their current or future professors/supervisors (Maringe & Carter,

2007). These students often contact authors of articles and books, meet researchers/professors at international conferences or through exchange programmes, or seek advice from their current lecturers/supervisors about further education, and from these sources, gain knowledge of the programme availability and even the appropriate school to apply to. A reference from a previous lecturer or a supervision acceptance from a professor overseas can outweigh all other factors, and thus be the determining reason for choice of a institution choice.

On the other hand, professional students appear to make their choices of institutions for application after considering a number of criteria derived from different internal and external factors (L.-H. Chen, 2007). At the country level, many characteristics of the host nations, including the economic and political conditions, environment and educational reputation will be assessed. Normally, students evaluate several alternatives for comparison, since each country has its own advantage on one (or more) feature. When searching for schools, many professional students rely on multiple institutional characteristics, such as school and programme rankings, academic quality, cost and financial aid, location and the environment and society of the hosting city. Besides advice/recommendations from significant others, prospective applicants intentionally seek official information from institutions through their websites, advertising and also school visits (Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Moogan & Baron, 2003). Despite the geographic distance, some students take a campus tour to assess potential universities and they report that information gathered from these visits is critical for them in finding suitable universities and programmes (Armstrong & Lumsden, 2000).

Besides pull factors that increase the attractiveness of a country and a school to international students, L.-H. Chen (2007) also pointed out the impact of various negative push factors which result in some host countries not making it to the final choice set. Typical reasons for turning students away from certain countries are the academic credibility, higher cost of studying, length and time of the programme, the environmental, social and political conditions and the visa/immigration procedures. For example, the US and Australia may have world-class universities, but the difficult visa application for the US and the different academic year cycle in Australia can be problematic for many students, and thus make these two destinations less attractive. This group of negative push factors also explains why the final choice is not necessarily the most preferred alternative, but rather the most satisfactory option.

The last stage in L.-H. Chen's model is *choice*, in which students make their enrolment decision from all offers of admission received from institutions. Again, students base

their choices on three types of pull factors at this stage: country characteristics, city characteristics and institutional/programme characteristics. However, as the image of the final option is becoming clearer at the end of their decision-making process, students pay more attention to personal-level factors, such as programme quality and reputation, cost and financial aid, and location and safety of the hosting city. Within this group of decision factors, financial aid is reported to be a crucial pulling force for students' enrolment decisions because in many cases, financial aid determines whether applicants can afford overseas study. Students need to secure their financial sources before any enrolment is made.

L.-H. Chen's (2007) model of international students' university choice is more advanced than previous models in several respects. It inherits the descriptive power of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), Cubillo et al. (2006) and Miglin et al. (2015) models in providing a comprehensive picture of various types of influencing factors. Personal attributes and motivations, recommendations from significant others, as well as specific characteristics of the home and host countries, cities and institutions altogether contribute to the overseas educational choice. However, L.-H. Chen's (2007) model departs from those models because it not only describes the factors involved but, more importantly, explains how decision-making happens. Founded upon the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-stage model, L.-H. Chen's (2007) model details the distinct steps that international students go through in order to arrive their final choice, a specific institution for enrolment. During each step, the role of influencing factors is highlighted, thereby illustrating how the final decision is gradually shaped by those stimuli as students progress through the process.

L.-H. Chen's (2007) model is not without limitations. There are three main issues with the generalizability of L.-H. Chen's (2007) model. Firstly, her subjects were graduate students, whose thinking and behaviours can be very different from those of undergraduate students. Graduate students are more mature and independent, which translates to increased self-motivation and investment in decisions about their future education (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Schmiesing & Hollis, 2002). Their reliance on families and other social acquaintances tends to be weaker (except for research students) as they often live on their own and self-fund their study (Maringe & Carter, 2007). When deciding which schools to apply to, graduate students consider career prospects more seriously, and take into account advice and recommendations from spouses, while undergraduate students are more heavily influenced by parents (Kallio, 1995). As a result, the explanatory power of L.-H. Chen's (2007) model can be challenged when applied to describe the decision-making process of international undergraduate students.

Secondly, L.-H. Chen portrays the university choice model of international students as a pre-determined process, meaning students will always progress through three stages sequentially and complete the process at stage three *Choice* with a university selected for enrolment. One issue with this approach is that it may oversimplify actual decision-making behaviour by assuming all students follow this procedure in exactly the same way. L.-H. Chen's (2007) model ignores the situation where one (or more) factors may appear, disappear or change during the second or third stage that makes the selected alternative no longer feasible, hence students must return to their choice sets for re-evaluating the remaining options. For instance, a student fails to obtain a USA visa even though he or she has got the offer of admission from a USA university. In other words, this model does not take into account the dynamic nature of the international education decision-making process, which does not necessarily follow a linear progression and includes possible feedback and re-evaluation loops.

Lastly, in L.-H. Chen's (2007) model, family is treated as one external factor that influences students' views on studying abroad, and their perceptions of different host countries and institutions considered in the process. This is in line with other studies' results, in which family members provide a good source of information and advice for students, while parents, in particular, provide financial sponsorships for their children's overseas education. However, in the case of Vietnamese students and Asian students in general, the role of family may exceed what has been established in the literature. Research has shown that Asian families not only take the advisor or supporter role, but in many cases, they are the initiators of the overseas study plan (Bohman, 2010), the persuaders who lead students towards what their parents believe to be the ideal destination for them (Pimpa, 2003a), or even the final decision makers who actively select the university for their children (M.-K. Lee, 2013). This active behaviour is possibly explained by the distinctive cultural characteristics of many Asian countries, including Vietnam, emphasising the role of parents in assuring their children's success in life. In collective societies, including those with major Asian philosophical influences like Confucianism, social norms state that children should respect their parents' opinions, and conformity is preferred whenever the situation involves both parents and children (Bodycott, 2009). Asian cultures stress the preservation of harmony within the family, even though the final call made by parents may not be what their children want. These views suggest that for complicated and important decisions like children's education, the final outcome may be a collective decision of the family – students and their parents working together to determine the best course of action. This aspect has not been portrayed in current college choice models, and thus it is worth reconsidering

the role of students and family in the process with the possibility of treating them (the family and the students) together as one collective decision-making unit. The following section will discuss in more detail the impact of specific Asian cultural aspects on the way international students may choose their overseas education.

### **2.2.6 Vietnamese cultural values influencing decision-making**

One of the drawbacks of current educational choice models for international students is the treatment of the decision-making unit as individuals. All models see the students as the main decision maker, which may be correct when used to explain the educational choice behaviour of Western students or students coming from countries with high levels of individualism. These students make their education choices, and only refer to other groups, such as parents, families, peers and friends, as external influences. However, as this study's subject is high-school graduates from Vietnam, an Asian nation with a long-established Eastern set of traditions, does the explanatory power of existing models still hold true? There is evidence in the literature of Vietnamese culture and education to suggest that the decision-making unit for the Vietnamese undergraduate students' college choice may not be an individual, but a collective group: the family.

Vietnam is located in the Southeast region of Asia, and neighboured by China in the North, and Laos and Cambodia in the West. During its history, Vietnam was under China's rule for over 1,000 years, and later was colonised by the French and Americans, before gaining its independence in 1975. Because of its unique geographic and historical features, the Vietnamese culture is a blend of East Asian values (from China), Southeast Asian values, and its own indigenous traditions (Hirschman & Vu, 1996). In general, the culture of Vietnam is rooted in three ideologies, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (Gillespie & Nicholson, 2005; Phinney & Ong, 2002; Tran & Marginson, 2014), of which Confucianism had a considerable contribution to the shaping of core cultural values of Vietnam. Despite the Western influences resulting from the time of the Vietnam War, Confucian traits are still pervasive in many aspects of the society today (H. H. Nguyen, 1998; Welch, 2010).

Introduced to Vietnam around 2,000 years ago from China, Confucianism is not a religion, but rather a set of principles that guide people as to how they should live their lives. A person should display the following attributes: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness in order to be called a person of virtue (Penner & Tran, 1977). Under the Confucian view, people's lives are deeply embedded in the



ongoing interactions they have with their social surroundings, which are all based on five basic relationships: father and son, ruler and ruled, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and friend and friend (Yan & Sorenson, 2006; Yum, 1988). Confucian ideology stresses the sense of collectivism to be a core characteristic of a society, that is, people are members of a family, a village and a country (Gillespie & Nicholson, 2005). The society is constructed by different groups of people, of which families are the nuclear unit and the prototype of all other organisations (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Family members, especially children, do not live individually and independently, but belong to familial groups, and their primary responsibility is to serve their families (M. Park & Chesla, 2007). In accordance with this view, Confucianism highlights important values that all families need to preserve: harmony, filial piety, mutual obligation, obedience and discipline (Phan, 2004).

Vietnamese families are structured in a hierarchical order, in which children demonstrate a high level of filial piety toward their parents by respecting and obeying their opinions, as well as the opinions of other older members, throughout their childhood and even adulthood (Hofstede, 2003; McLaughlin & Braun, 1998). In contrast, parents treat their children with kindness and care, protecting and supporting their sons and daughters. Parents bear an important responsibility in ensuring the success of their children, especially in major aspects such as education and career (Phinney & Ong, 2002). Families appreciate internal harmony, meaning people of lower social positions, usually young members, need to avoid having conflicts with older people or people with higher social positions as much as possible, and this harmony should be preserved in all aspects of life (Gillespie & Nicholson, 2005). Different or opposing voices from inferior individuals are considered negative and, when such disagreement exists, young members are taught to be subordinate to the elders; individuals should restrain their personal wants and needs to serve the family, as family goals are always more important than those of individuals (Smith & Pham, 1996; Yan & Sorenson, 2006). As a result, Vietnamese families display strong cooperation in solving everyday problems and decisions are often made by the group as a whole, even if the outcomes may be only for certain individuals (McLaughlin & Braun, 1998).

The idea of harmony also reflects the notion of maintaining individual face (Quang & Vuong, 2002). This concept embraces a person's dignity, honour and prestige that he has within his social groups (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Face is preserved through the fostering of harmony as members understand their own positions and others' in the family, avoiding any disagreement, conflict and confrontation that can damage the face of others, especially elders. The Asian culture considers face to be the most important

value of a human being, and thus people are willing to sacrifice monetary and other tangible wealth in order to save face (J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998). Furthermore, living in a strong collectivist society, the Vietnamese see face as a group value that should be preserved by all in-group members. Family members share the collective pride whenever their family face is improved, and at the same time, they would bear the shame if a negative behaviour or wrong doing of one member was made public, such as failing to meet expectations or infringing law and regulations (Ho, 1976; Hofstede, 2003).

One of the typical aspects of Vietnamese family culture is the emphasis on education (Phan, 2004). The Vietnamese generally have high academic expectations for school effort and performance, since they view education as a ticket for children to a brighter future with good employment and high earnings (C. K. C. Lee & Morrish, 2012). Well-educated individuals have a better chance to move up the social ladder and, along with it, gain the admiration and esteem from family and community members for their successes (Phan, 2004). Vietnamese parents believe that educational achievements can be gained through effort and not just solely ability, which helps explain their push for children to pursue as much education as possible (Xie & Goyette, 2003). Also, they link educational accomplishments closely to filial piety. That is, they believe children show their respect, obedience and love toward their parents by studying hard and succeeding in school. In return, parents are willing to invest in their children's education, even if it means they have to sacrifice their time, effort and money because, as stated, parents have a life-long responsibility for their children's success (C. K. C. Lee & Morrish, 2012).

Distinctive cultural characteristics, especially the sense of collectivist families and educational appreciation, support the argument that Vietnamese students may approach the decision-making process of overseas tertiary education differently from other cultures. The school choice decision is likely to be made by the family, rather than the students only, for the following reasons: (1) overseas study is a major decision that not only determines the educational quality students will receive, but also helps in shaping their future careers and lives; (2) high school graduates may need support from more experienced people in considering and evaluating available university options, since there are a wide range of factors and criteria involved in this decision; (3) sending students abroad is a big investment for Vietnamese families, financially and socially; (4) Vietnamese parents want to be involved, not just because of the complexity of the decision but also because they want to make sure that their offspring have the best educational experience; (5) Vietnamese parents may have specific educational goals and

expectations they expect their children to fulfil; and (6) the final university selection has an impact on the individual and familial face, which are important for Vietnamese people.

### **2.3 Conceptual model**

So far, the literature review has provided a sound understanding of the decision-making process for choice of university in the international education context. The literature also details factors and criteria that are considered important by prospective students when choosing overseas tertiary institutions. It also groups factors into categories, and describes the potential effect they have on the choice of university. However, there are still shortcomings and gaps found when examining the applicability of current models to the context of interest.

All existing models view the prospective student to be the decision-making unit throughout the choice process (R. G. Chapman, 1986; L.-H. Chen, 2007; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In these models, the student is solely responsible for making all component decisions that lead up to the final outcome. As Chapman's and Hossler and Gallagher's studies were on the decision-making process of Western students for tertiary education, their treatment of student as decision maker is in line with the independent construal found in the Western culture (M. S. Kim & Sharkey, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In Chen's study, even though his research subjects were East-Asian students, the treatment of student as decision maker was still valid since Chen studied graduate students' choices of graduate schools. His sample comprised master's and doctoral students, who were more mature and experienced, and thus, were more likely to have control over their choices of education.

By contrast, the present study aims at a completely different set of research subjects: Vietnamese high-school graduates. These 18 or 19 years olds have just finished 12 years of schooling or, in some cases, have just entered domestic tertiary institutions, and are facing the first major decision in their lives. Being a Vietnamese means that they have lived in an Eastern culture heavily influenced by Confucianism. This ideology reflects an interdependent construal by stressing the sense of collectivism among people of a community, and emphasising the role of family in all aspects of one's life (Gillespie & Nicholson, 2005). Family goals are valued more than those of individuals, and maintaining harmony within the family is viewed as the ultimate duty of all family members (M. Park & Chesla, 2007). Also, Vietnamese society expects parents to be responsible for their children's well-being and success throughout their lives. This, in return, places a stress on parents to assure that their offspring make the correct

decisions, particularly in major choices like education and career choices (Phinney & Ong, 2002). As a result, there is enough evidence to propose that, for Vietnamese undergraduate students, their overseas university choices may be a group decision made by their direct families (parents and students) as a whole. The decision-making unit that goes through each step of the process may be the family, instead of just students, and they work together to make all component decisions at each stage, as well as the final decision of institution choices.

Figure 5 presents the conceptual model for this research. This is a comprehensive and dynamic model that incorporates the process models and factor models from the literature on international education, and is embedded within the distinctive Vietnamese cultural context. The process is based on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) original three-phase university choice model, and builds on L.-H. Chen's (2007) synthesis model of international graduate students' university choice. Push-pull theories, which explain international student mobility in the higher education context (McMahon, 1992), provide necessary elements to examine how, at each stage of the process, specific factors may have an effect on the international education decision. Vietnamese cultural values indicate the appropriate decision-making unit to be studied is the family. Finally, concepts of facilitators and constraints are employed to describe the complexity and dynamics of the conceptual model.

According to the conceptual model, the process of choosing to study at an international university consists of four separate stages: (1) the decision to study abroad/locally, (2) the search for information and application to study, (3) the selection by admitting universities, and (4) the final enrolment activity. The direct family of students, which may comprise one or more parents and grandparents, will go through these stages together as a whole, from the beginning to the end. At each stage, the decisions are influenced by different personal, relational and external push-pull factors, except for the final stage. Details of each stage and their relevant influential factors will be described next.

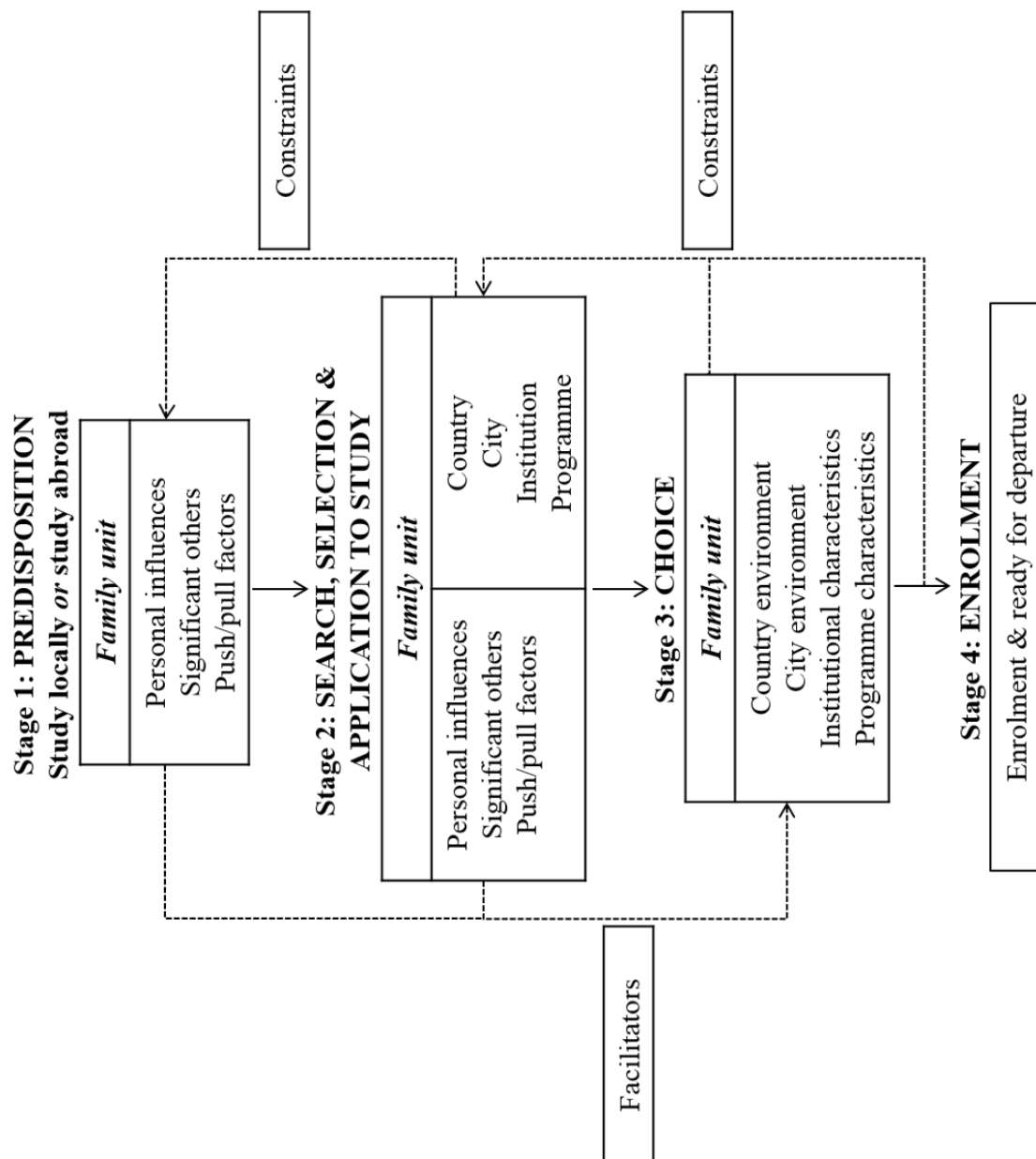


Figure 5: Conceptual model of the decision-making process of Vietnamese families

### *Predisposition*

At the first stage, *Predisposition*, Vietnamese families decide whether their offspring's tertiary education will be domestic or overseas. This decision is influenced by the family's socio-economic status, characteristics and ability of the student. Families also need to consider the finance necessary for the education plan. Other relatives and friends of the family and student, as well as recommendations from the student's teachers, can also influence this decision. Externally, certain economic, social and educational conditions of the home and host countries, such as the low quality of domestic education and/or the global educational reputation of some destinations, can trigger the desire to pursue international education. If families choose the international education path, they then proceed to the choice process, in which families select the host country, host city, institution and the programme for enrolment.

The literature suggests a wide range of factors may be involved at this stage in influencing the decision to go abroad for education. Firstly, research has found that students studying abroad tend to come from middle-class or higher families, whose parents have tertiary education, are internationally oriented and have overseas travelling or living experience (Li & Bray, 2007; McInnis, Coates, Jensz, & Vu, 2004; J. Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). A global orientation and international experience within the family allows the student to feel comfortable with foreign cultures, which in turn opens up the possibility of overseas education as a reasonable goal to pursue (J. Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). Such socioeconomic backgrounds not only encourage and inspire students to think about overseas education but, more importantly, it provides them with the financial support necessary to make the plan a reality (Carlson, 1990). For Asian countries, China in particular, parents and students see overseas education as more than just a chance to access better quality of education, but also a good way to move up the social status ladder or maintain their upper-middle class status (Li & Bray, 2007).

An aspiration for international education is expected to be strong with high ability high school students. This group of students is more likely to pursue tertiary education (Sewell et al., 1969), and given the current state of the Vietnamese education, these students will see international education as a good way to obtain high quality knowledge and skills. To learn a new foreign language is also a noteworthy reason why students decide to take part in study abroad (Goldstein & Kim, 2006). Research on students from non-English-speaking countries, such as Japan, Thailand and Malaysia, reported that they consider being able to use an international language proficiently to be very important for their future professional development (Bourke, 2000). According to

Chinese respondents, studying and living in a native-English-speaking country such as Britain, allows them to see how English is actually used by local people and then learn from them (Wu, 2014). In addition to language, students see study abroad as a good opportunity for them to broaden their cultural knowledge and understanding (Carlson, 1990; Kasravi, 2009). This cross-cultural experience leads to another significant factor: personal growth and development. Students want to expand their independence, to see whether they can be adaptive and thrive in a foreign environment without the support they normally get if they live at home (Doyle et al., 2010; Wu, 2014).

Personal attributes of the student also influence other key decisions in the process. Students from high socio-economic families tend to favour private and highly prestigious universities because their parents can afford the high tuition fees of these institutions (Brown et al., 1999; Hearn, 1984). Also, high ability students prefer academically well-known countries because they want to enrol in top-ranked universities, where they can compete with other equally talented students (D. W. Chapman, 1981; Hoyt & Brown, 2003). Furthermore, the choices of country and institution can be further impacted by the personalities of the students, as independent and extrovert students may want to escape their comfort zones and explore new cultures, thereby choosing destinations where cultural and social values and practices are greatly different from their home countries (Carlson, 1990; Wu, 2014).

The economic and social conditions of the home country have been found to affect the flow of overseas students. As McMahon (1992) pointed out in his influential study, third world countries that have weak economies but are highly involved in international trade and have a strong priority on education tend to have a high number of students pursuing overseas education. A weak domestic education system also appears to be a strong factor in encouraging students to seek education elsewhere, as people in developing countries, such as China, India and Indonesia, tend to perceive overseas education to be of a better quality than their domestic tertiary education systems, which are often criticised. It is said that they: (1) do not have adequate supply of university places, (2) do not have majors or programmes available, (3) have low quality of teaching, (4) lack staff, (5) have entry requirements that are too strict, (4) have traditional teaching style and lack a student focus, and (5) lack an international experience (Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2012; McMahon, 1992; Mpinganjira, 2009; Rafi & Lewis, 2013). This common perception of a quality gap between domestic and overseas education, combined with the high level of involvement in global commerce, creates a pressure on the labour market of the home country for current and future job seekers to have international qualifications, in order to

be professionally competitive (Bodycott, 2009; Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; Wu, 2014).

In addition to the outbound effect from the home country, students' interest in overseas education can be enhanced by attractive attributes of different host countries. Economically strong countries with high levels of global trade involvement tend to be regarded favourably in relation to their education quality (McMahon, 1992; Mpinganjira, 2009). Students are also more attracted to countries that have achieved world-wide recognition for higher likelihood of employability after graduation (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; McCarthy et al., 2012; Zwart, 2012). Since students studying abroad will have to live away from home for a number of years, they are greatly concerned about environmental and social conditions of the destination country, such as living costs, part-time employment opportunities, weather and climate, culture and people and personal safety (Foster, 2014; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Z. Wang, 2007).

#### *Search, Selection and Application to Study*

The second stage is called *Search, Selection and Application to Study*. During this stage, families search for information about countries that provide international education services, cities that are famous educational destinations, and institutions that offer programmes appropriate to the student's needs. Personal and external influences, along with opinions/advice/recommendations from significant others, continue to influence the decision-making unit in this stage. Families usually search for multiple education options available and compare them based on various criteria, such as academic quality, tuition fees and living costs, financial aid, programme availability, location and campus facilities. The choices of country, city and institution do not necessarily follow a sequential order, meaning they can be made simultaneously or even, in some cases, families predetermine the host country, and thus, jump straight to choosing the institution. This stage ends with the application to one or more universities that families believe are suitable for the students.

Much of the educational attractiveness of a destination is determined by its institutions. The literature has identified several academic factors as key determinants for students' choices of international university: (1) university and programme rankings, (2) university reputation, (3) academic quality and teaching expertise, (4) entry requirements, (5) programme availability, (5) length of programmes, (6) international partnerships, and (7) employment prospects (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; J. J. Lee, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol, 1998; Mazzarol &



Soutar, 2002). Along with reputable academic performance, prospective students appreciate institutions that have fast admission processes, as well as good support services, especially for international students (Bodycott, 2009; McFadden et al., 2012). Cost is unquestionably one of the main factors that concern students greatly when choosing between universities and, in general, students are in favour of institutions that have reasonable tuition fees, as well as having scholarships/financial aid available (Bohman, 2010; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Li & Bray, 2007; Maringe, 2006). In addition, students also care about the campus at which they will study. They expect the campus to be located conveniently for easy commuting, have technologically advanced facilities, include on-campus accommodation, and provide a social life via student clubs and societies (McFadden et al., 2012; Migin et al., 2015).

Consumers do not make purchase decisions in a vacuum; instead, their choices of products and services are often shaped and influenced by the social surroundings in which they live (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). People who have influences on the consumer's evaluation, aspirations or behaviour, are defined as the reference group (C. W. Park & Lessig, 1977), and they can be categorised into two types: (1) representative or normative referents, such as parents, teachers, and peers, who provide an individual with norms, attitudes and values through direct interaction; and (2) comparative referents, such as celebrity or heroic figures, who indirectly provide an individual with a standard of achievement for aspiration (Childers & Rao, 1992). From the consumer behaviour perspective, there are three ways in which the influence of reference group can manifest: (1) informational influence – uncertain consumers seek experts or experienced individuals for information, (2) utilitarian influence – consumers comply with other people in the group in order to get reward or avoid punishment, and (3) value-expressive influence – consumers want to affiliate with the group of value-enhancing purpose (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

In the context of international education, past research has examined the influences that normative referents, such as family, relatives, peers, high school teachers and educational agents, have on the decision maker throughout the choice process (Kasravi, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003b; Pimpa, 2004, 2005; J. Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). Among different types of normative referents, family and relatives are suggested to have the strongest overall impact on the education plan of students. Pimpa (2004) identified five ways through which family and relatives can influence students' choices of education. Firstly, students who self-fund their education are usually dependent on their parents regarding the finance necessary to pursue overseas study. The financial support from family will determine whether the plan is feasible

and, if yes, what option is practically possible for consideration. Secondly, family and relatives often have educational expectations for students, and for those family members who used to study abroad or have previous international experience, they often expect students to follow in their footsteps (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; J. Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). In addition to expectations, family and relatives also provide students with knowledge-based information and advice in the hope that it will help students make the right decisions. Again, family or other relatives who graduated from a particular university or had positive studying experience in a specific country are very likely to recommend it to students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Another form of influence from family and relatives is competition between family members with respect to academic achievement (Pimpa, 2004). Familial expectations create an environment within the family in which students compare themselves academically with other members, such as siblings or cousins, and international education participation is one of the common ways to demonstrate one's academic prowess. The last type of familial influence reported in Pimpa's (2004) study was persuasion. Parents employ the persuasive technique of either raising an opinion strongly agreed by members in the family or pointing to a role model who arrived at a particular outcome, in the hope that this will lure students in the same direction (Pimpa, 2004).

Beyond family and relatives, peers, high school teachers and educational agents also prove to have significant influences on the choice of overseas education. According to the literature, the impact of social network groups other than family on students is strongest in the form of providing valuable information and recommendations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003b). Similarly to the family and relatives, friends and classmates who are studying abroad or international alumni are likely to share with students detailed information about the country, institution, programme and application process (J. Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). Alumni networks are also frequently emphasised as a useful source of word-of-mouth referral for choices of country and institution (C.-H. Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Besides providing information, Pimpa (2003b) further suggested that peers could create a competitive environment, much like the familial one, in which students would want to go abroad in order to compete academically with classmates, or simply follow the trend as seen at high school or among friends.

In addition to peers, students also approach high school teachers/advisors and educational agents regarding higher education plans. These two groups of referents act

mainly in the form of information sources for students when they are searching for education options (J. J. Lee, 2007; Pimpa, 2003b). While the influence of teachers/advisors and educational agents is suggested to be generally less than that of other more personal groups, like family or peers (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), they can actually be influential referents among students who have fewer relatives or friends who have had international experience (Kasravi, 2009; J. J. Lee, 2007). The influence of educational agents is more evident in the later stages of the choice process, as students reported that they had usually already decided to study abroad before approaching agents (Pimpa, 2003b). One interesting finding by (Pimpa, 2001) was that on one hand educational agents are often seen as professionally informative about country and university options but, on the other hand, they may be seen as untrustworthy because their advice and recommendations are perceived as biased toward institutions that pay them the highest commissions.

The literature has presented the international education choice as a complex process, in which the decision maker goes through different stages to make several component decisions, before arriving at the end result of enrolment. Throughout the process, a wide range of factors, both internal and external, emerge and influence how each component and the final decision is made. Cubillo et al. (2006) categorised these factors into five groups: personal reasons, country image, city image, institution image and programme evaluation. They argued that these five groups of factors do not work separately, but in tandem, influencing the international student's intention to purchase an overseas education. This finding was echoed in the L.-H. Chen (2007) study, in which he confirmed that the final choice is the result of multiple influential factors interacting simultaneously. Furthermore, Chen also pointed out that the order in which component decisions of choices of country, city, institution and major are made is much more dynamic and interchangeable, compared to the rigid sequential order suggested in earlier choice process models. This dynamic raises a critical question: how is the final choice of overseas education actually made?

### *Choice*

*Choice* is the third stage in the process. As a result of the applications to universities made at the end of the second stage of the decision-making, offers of admission may be received from the institutions applied to. In the case of only one offer of admission, families then proceed to the next step. However, if more than one university accepts the application, families now need to choose the preferred institution for enrolment. At this stage, families continue to receive advice and recommendations from relatives and

friends on which university to attend; however, they become more active comparing the pros and cons of alternatives. Here, the set of influencing factors for evaluation remains relatively similar to those in previous stages, however families focus strongly on institutional and programme characteristics, because these attributes directly determine the success of their educational plans. Universities' academic quality and reputation, campus and facility, tuition fee and cost, programme availability and length are typical criteria for evaluating options. Also, the final decision is further influenced by administration factors of institutions and faculties, such as the enrolment process and international student support, as well as marketing activities.

Standard rational choice theory suggests that the decision maker will employ the maximisation strategy (Grüne-Yanoff, Marchionni, & Moscati, 2014). This strategy seeks optimality, meaning the choice process will result in the best possible option being selected, given the decision maker has all knowledge or information about all alternatives available in that particular scenario (Sproles, 1983). In the educational context, a student following the maximisation strategy will have the ability to collect all information about all available overseas institutions, from which he or she will then choose the best university for enrolment. However, choice theory scholars also argue that such perfect maximisation is virtually unachievable because, in real life, the decision maker has to consider different constraints that prevent them from accessing all information about all possible alternatives (H. A. Simon, 1972; Sproles, 1983). As a result, scholars have put forward bounded rationality as a more realistic concept to explain the choice behaviour in practice.

Ideas of bounded rationality stress the task of simplification on the decision problem because the decision maker acknowledges that available resources are limited and, thus, it is impossible to consider all options for an optimal outcome to be reached (March, 1978). Satisficing is another concept that goes hand-in-hand with bounded rationality, which means instead of trying to reach the best result, the decision will seek a 'good enough' option, the one that meets his or her minimum level of aspiration (March, 1978; H. A. Simon, 1972; Sproles, 1983). There is evidence of bounded rationality and satisficing being employed in making international education decisions. L.-H. Chen (2007) reported that 49% of East Asian students in his study, who went to Canada for postgraduate studying, said that Canada was not their first choice of destination. Many Chinese students in Chen's study reported that they originally aimed for the US, but failed to obtain the student visa, and ended up going to Canada, which has an easier and faster visa process. M.-K. Lee (2013) reported that bounded rationality and satisficing were indeed employed by Chinese students in their decisions to study in Korea. These

students acknowledged Korea was less educationally attractive than popular European and Northern American destinations. However, due to financial, parental or academic constraints, the Asian country was selected as a good enough choice - a satisficing option that allowed these students to have the aspired-for international education without having to violate any existing constraints. It is, therefore, suspected that the ultimate choice of institution for enrolment may not necessarily be the alternative that scores the highest on all important criteria, but would rather be the one that best suits the specific bounded situation of the decision maker.

Current models of international education choices share a common attribute: they describe the decision-making activity as a rigid, linear, stage-based process. In these models, the decision maker sequentially goes through each stage, starting from identifying the educational need, to looking for information on country, city, institution and programme, shortlisting alternatives for application, and selecting the final option for enrolment. These models imply that the decision maker always arrives at a successful component decision at the end of each stage, which together contribute to the final positive outcome of the whole process. While they may correctly portray a standard decision-making action, these models can be argued to be oversimplified by ignoring the potential dynamic nature of such a complicated and highly involved decision.

### *Enrolment*

The third stage ends when a university is selected for enrolment, and brings families to the last stage of the decision process, *Enrolment*. The final stage of *Enrolment* includes the administrative and immigration work that families need to complete, in order to get their students ready for departure. During stage 3 *Choice* and stage 4 *Enrolment*, situational factors can arise and alter the direction of the decision process. For example, while families are considering different institutions, there may be a scholarship opportunity that prompts them to pause their decision-making and consider a previously ignored option. Failure of a visa application can prevent the student from obtaining the legal right to enter the host country of the selected university. Also, sudden financial changes can affect the funds allocated for education, and thus require families to reconsider their student's education plan. Such factors act as facilitators or constraints to the decision-making process. As a result, the actual decision process may not be simplistic as suggested by previous models, instead it may contain a loop of "do and redo", mainly in stages 2 and 3, before the decision maker arrives at stage 4.

## **2.4 Chapter conclusion**

Chapter Two explored the theoretical foundations and empirical literature addressing the research question. This chapter first considered ecological systems theory, consumer decision-making and the facilitators and constraints framework, the three relevant theoretical foundations of the research. The review then examined three bodies of empirical literature, family decision-making, international education decision-making, and Vietnamese cultural values that may affect Vietnamese people's consumption choices. These three areas of literature provide the researcher with an in-depth understanding on what has been established to date regarding consumer decision-making for international education, and any gaps in the extant literature regarding the research context of Vietnam. Given the discrepancies found between existing choice process for education models and the Vietnamese context, Chapter Two developed a conceptual model that proposes the family unit as the center of the choice task, who work their way through a dynamic process, consisting of a number of stages, to achieve an enrolment in a university overseas. The next chapter, Chapter Three, will discuss the methodology employed in the research.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three presents the research approach adopted to address the research question. It starts with a discussion on post-positivism, with an ontological view of critical realism, to serve as an appropriate philosophical and theoretical framework underpinning the research. Based on this research paradigm, the selection of multiple semi-structured in-depth interviews with family units over a period of time as the data collection method, is then discussed and explained in detail. This is followed by a comprehensive description of the sampling process, which includes the sampling technique, sampling criteria, sample size and research site selection. The chapter then highlights several key concerns in conducting in-depth interviews, which precedes a complete description of the data collection process. Chapter Three ends with an outline of two techniques used in analysing the data collected.

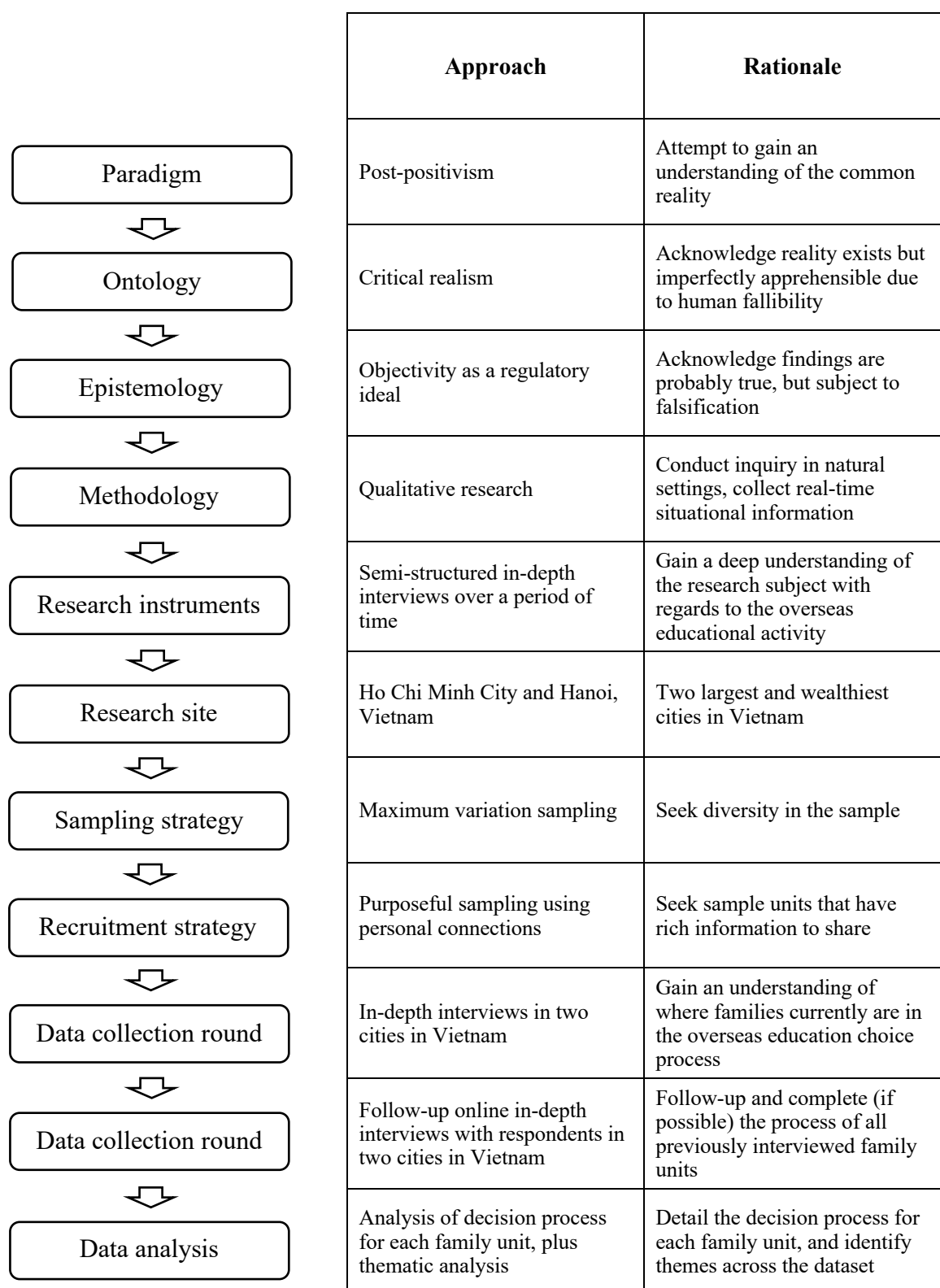


Figure 6: Research design

(Sources: Denzin and Lincoln (2003); Guba and Lincoln (1994); Patton (1990); Woodside (2010))



### **3.1 Research paradigm**

As defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994), a research paradigm is a basic philosophical and theoretical framework revolving around three key elements: ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. At the highest level, the ontology of a scientific inquiry deals with the nature of reality - whether there exists a real world outside of human minds, or a dependent one interpreted and constructed entirely by people's ideas and perceptions, which in turn determines what can be known about reality through research. Secondly, the epistemological framework refers to the relationship between the researcher and what he or she wants to know about – whether the inquirer is totally detached from the inquired knowledge, or deeply immersed in the process and plays a role in shaping the findings. Lastly, the methodology of the research aligns with the ontological and epistemological positions, and determines the way by which the researcher can obtain the knowledge of interest.

This research adopts post-positivism, a paradigm that embraces critical realism as its ontological position. Critical realists acknowledge the existence of an independent reality that can be learnt and understood, yet argue that the real world can only be imperfectly and incompletely apprehensible due to humans' flawed intellectual mechanisms (Easton, 2010; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Research inquiries taken under a critical realism perspective, therefore, attempt to obtain the most accurate, though never perfect, model of reality and try to improve the accuracy of the findings through the application of critical examinations to the research process.

Under the epistemology of post-positivism, the inquirer is not completely detached, and value-free from the inquiry; instead the inquirer is responsible for shaping the research process, and his or her involvement is considered to be a characteristic of the research process (Clark, 1998). Also, due to the subjectivity and proneness to biases of individuals, including the researcher, knowledge generated from post-positivist studies is seen to be socially and relatively constructed, and thus “not universally generalizable to all cases and all situations” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 1246). Given the interpretive nature of human inquiries embraced by post-positivism, there is one key epistemological difference between post-positivism and that of highly interpretive paradigms, such as constructivism, which is that despite absolute objectivity being seen as unobtainable, objectivity is still a preferred goal, and serves as a regulatory ideal throughout the process (Glesne, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Post-positivist researchers maintain objectivity through a procedure of triangulation, in which their findings are externally examined and replicated not only to assure the validity and

accuracy of the research process and findings, but also to improve the generalisation of knowledge (Cooper, 1997; Decrop, 1999).

The ontological and epistemological positions of post-positivism allow the present study to employ a qualitative research approach in the form of semi-structured interview with family units. The exploratory nature of the research question – how Vietnamese families make the choice of international undergraduate education – is best answered by examining multiple instances of family decision-making over a significant period of time, in order to generate a comprehensive model that sufficiently explains the decision-making process. Depth-interview is the main technique for data collection, as it facilitates the gathering of exploratory, situational data from respondents in their natural settings, thereby getting the researcher closer to the meanings, reasons and purposes respondents ascribe to their actions.

### **3.2 A qualitative approach**

The purpose of this research is to understand the process by which the international tertiary education choices of Vietnamese students are made. The research seeks to construct a model that (1) describes in detail all steps in the decision process, (2) shows the route by which decision makers progress through the stages in this process, along with (3) identifies the key factors influencing the choices made at each step. The literature on international educational choices provides a necessary foundation for this study, yet no theoretical or empirical work has been conducted focusing particularly on the context of Vietnamese high school graduates. This study, therefore, is going to explore the phenomenon and shed light onto the choice behaviour of these young people.

To achieve its objective, this study employed qualitative research. This broad umbrella term contains a wide range of methodologies, all of which emphasise “a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 195). Qualitative research focuses on a comprehension of reality, meanings of entities, and the processes by which activities take place (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative methodologies help answer the important “how” question (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2003) by allowing the researcher to explore, learn about, and make sense of a new and complex phenomenon in depth and detail (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is suitable for studying topics about which little is known (Hoepfl, 1997). Using qualitative methods, the researcher is able to benefit from the flexibility and

openness of techniques employed and the richness of data collected (Patton, 1990), as opposed to highly structured measuring, testing and confirming tasks usually found in quantitative and statistical methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999).

One of the distinctive features of qualitative research is that it examines an issue from the perspective of those who experience it (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). The researcher approaches the respondents with an open mind and a willingness to listen, while participants have control over how their stories are told and what they mean to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This logic ensures a study reveals a person's true-to-life thoughts, opinions and behaviours (Creswell, 2013). Also, the subject is studied in their natural settings, meaning that the researcher keeps the conditions in which the phenomenon of interest occurs as realistic as possible (Patton, 1990). The research context is of great importance in qualitative studies, and thus the researcher seeks to understand how contextual elements, such as economic, social and cultural aspects, influence the experiences of respondents.

This research aims to address a new and complicated phenomenon: the decision-making process of Vietnamese students regarding choice of overseas higher education; the process involves a large number of influencing factors; the effect of each factor may vary during different stages of the decision-making process; and the whole activity functions within the distinctive social and cultural context of Vietnam, which in return affects how the process takes place. In this case, the research subjects were interviewed within a naturalistic setting: the Vietnamese home. The student's family is introduced as the core unit for research. Propositions arising from the literature review suggest the Vietnamese family unit is in charge of the decision process, rather than individual students making this decision alone. However, little is known about whether this is the case and, if so, how the family works together in choosing the university for their child and, in general, how this process unfolds. To successfully construct such a model, this study requires a large amount of in-depth data that helps the researcher identify each step in the process, determines the relationships between those steps, classifies different types of influence existing during each step, identifies decision makers' progress throughout the process, and finally understands how cultural values affect the choice task of Vietnamese families and students. Reflecting on the checklist provided by Hennink et al. (2011) to identify when a researcher should employ a qualitative approach, this study possesses most of these criteria, which are to (1) understand behaviour from the perspective of participants, (2) understand processes of how people make decisions and other tasks, (3) understand the context in which activities take

place, (4) study complex issues and (5) provide depth, detail and nuance to the research issues.

### **3.3 Semi-structured interviews with family units**

In order to address the research question, the in-depth interview technique was selected. Longitudinal research examines a small group of subjects over a long period of time, and periodically restudies them, so that any change in perceptions, attitudes or behaviours will be recognized (Saldana, 2003). The distinguishing feature of longitudinal research is that the researcher collects data from the same group of subjects on more than one occasion (Holland, Thomson, & Henderson, 2006). The strategy behind longitudinal research is that, by contacting respondents multiple times for information requests, the researcher is able to build a comprehensive understanding of how participants progress and evolve throughout the experience of a phenomenon and identify the source of potential changes. Longitudinal study, despite being less commonly used in qualitative research (Flick, 2006), has proven its value in a number of research contexts, including tourism, human communication, and organisational behaviours (Decrop & Snelders, 2004; Kuhn & Poole, 2000; Schweiger, Anderson, & Locke, 1985). Such studies share one common theme, that is, the phenomenon under investigation lasts for a significant period of time, usually months or even years, which prompts researchers to collect data over an extended period. Similarly, the university decision-making process of Vietnamese students likely takes place over a relatively long period of time and involves multiple activities, such as information search, discussion between students and families and friends. This complexity makes one-off data collection ineffective in capturing the whole process. For a better approach, the researcher established plans to contact each subject two to three times during their periods of the decision-making process. In each encounter, the researcher gathered information relevant to the specific stage of decision-making that the subject was at, as well as confirming any changes that have occurred since the last interaction between the researcher and subject. The richness and accuracy of data, therefore, were preserved, because data was gathered as it occurred, instead of depending on memory recall. This is one of the key advantages of longitudinal study, compared to other types of research that collect data only once.

In qualitative research, the data is usually collected in the field via two key ways: *interviews* and *observation* (Hoepfl, 1997). Observation, being the most basic form of data collection, only requires the researcher to monitor subjects and record their behaviours, thereby effectively preserving the natural settings of the subjects.

Observation can provide a complete description of the targeted activity, including certain details that may be ignored, overlooked or sometimes hidden in an interview (Patton, 1990). Observation, when executed correctly, can result in highly accurate data, due to the subjects' lack of awareness of being observed, and thus displaying natural and honest actions. However, observation, while portraying such attributes, also bears two inherent weaknesses. Firstly, not all activities can be practically observed. In the present study, it is not feasible for the researcher to follow the subject to observe and record all activities occurring during the decision-making process. Secondly, observation can only record external behaviours, which leaves the subjects' feelings, thoughts and intentions inaccessible. This research requires input from students and their families regarding their evaluation of factors influencing the decision process, as well as how the process takes place. Such data is less likely to be gathered by direct observation. As a result, the present study employed qualitative interviews as the method for collecting data. Interviews allow the researcher to gather information from the subjects, and at the same time overcome the two stated weaknesses of observation. The researcher does not have to follow participants all the time during the data collection task, and he or she is also able to capture participants' inner thoughts and opinions as they are expressed. Qualitative interviews focus on describing the core themes of the experience lived by subjects, as well as understanding the meanings of those themes in the real life of the subjects (Kvale, 1996). Using qualitative interviews, the researcher is able to examine the phenomenon in great depth and, through direct conversations with participants, aspects of the lived experience will be reflected from their points of view.

Qualitative interviews generally take one of the following three approaches: (1) informal conversational interviews, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) standardised open-ended interviews (Patton, 1990). In this research, semi-structured interviews will be used. The semi-structured interview is a qualitative interview because it provides the participants with flexibility and openness when telling their stories to the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). However, the whole conversation is constructed around an interview guide, consisting of a set of predetermined open-ended questions, which lead the overall direction of the interview (Myers & Newman, 2007). Even though the aim of this study is exploratory, the researcher enters data collection with a general focus on what is to be examined (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The questions asked, despite being open-ended and flexible, are still theory-driven, which is why this interview method was selected (Flick, 2006). This is to make sure that the data collected

is relevant and will help the researcher answer the research questions. A detailed interview guide will be provided later in this chapter.

### **3.4 Sample**

This research seeks to construct a model that describes in detail the decision-making process of Vietnamese students and their families regarding choice of international undergraduate education. The target population for this study is Vietnamese families living in Vietnam whose adolescents are graduating from high schools or are studying at local tertiary institutions. More specifically, all recruited units were families with students who were in the process of making choices, and thus had not yet made the final decision of country and university to enrol in at the time of the first interview. This criterion was necessary because it assured that the information collected would be as real-time as possible, instead of recalled memories from past actions.

Students pursuing international qualifications come from all parts of Vietnam, including the North, the Central and the South regions. The present study is qualitative, which does not emphasise the statistical generalisability of the sample. What is more important here is to have participants who are highly relevant to the topic, and willing to commit to the project until completion. Therefore, the small sample to be drawn for this research does not have to be representative of all geographic areas in Vietnam, but rather contains information-rich units for data collection. Also, the researcher had to consider the issue of reachability, in terms of recruiting families for the sample, as well as travelling to conduct interviews. As a result, the two selected areas for sample recruitment were Hanoi in the North and Ho Chi Minh City in the South. The former is the capital and the latter is the economic centre of Vietnam. These two cities have the largest populations, together accounting for nearly 16.7% of the total population of the country (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2014). The economic prosperity of these two leading cities, illustrated by their high GDP indexes (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2014), provides the necessary foundation for people to have the financial means to pay for their children's overseas education. The strong economies of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City also attract international companies and corporations to establish their operations there, which in return increases the demand for skilled employees, especially young people with overseas degrees and experience.

This study recruited respondents for interviews using a purposeful sampling method. According to Patton (1990), the logic behind purposeful sampling is that the researcher intentionally pick units that are of high appropriateness to the phenomenon under examination. The focus here is not on the size or the generalisability of the sample, but

how much information the recruited units can provide (Morse, 1991). Patton terms these respondents *information-rich cases*. He also lists 16 different strategies within the umbrella of purposeful sampling, and for this study, *maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling* will be employed. This strategy is suitable for situations where there is a high level of variation among the research subjects, and the researcher wants to capture the core universal themes that run across different kinds of unit (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Indeed, the concept of family has many different constructions: (1) a nuclear family with parents and children, (2) a single-parent family with only a mother or father (and a deceased spouse), and (3) a single-parent family with a divorced/separated father or mother (who may still have influence on the child's future education). In the case of Vietnam, one common family structure that can be added to this list is when parents and children live together with grandparents of either side. Here, the grandparents are also likely to have a voice in the educational plans of the students, which may complicate the decision-making process even further.

The next concern in this section was the issue of sample size. In qualitative research, there are no hard and fast rules for sample size, and as Patton (1990) stressed “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 245). However, other methodologists have warned researchers on any underestimation of sample size in qualitative inquiries and, according to them, the question of “how many units to be recruited?” is equally as important to qualitative research as it is to quantitative studies (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Sandelowski, 1995). To answer this question, Morse (2000) recommended qualitative researchers take the nature of the topic, the study design and the quality of data into account when deciding the sample size. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) summarised a general strategy for the qualitative sampling task, that is, that the sample size should be large enough for the data to reach the saturation or redundancy point – the stage when no new information is found through further interviewing - without it being too difficult for data analysis within the scope of the study. Patton (1990) suggested researchers set an initial minimum number during the designing stage, which then can be adjusted through validation and judgement.

Considering the advice and recommendations from the literature, this study had a minimum sample size of 20, and the actual number of units recruited was 24. This sample size was large enough for the purpose of maximising the variation among respondents (families), yet it was still feasible enough to be researched successfully

within the timeframe of the study. Given the longitudinal nature of this study, one key concern was the commitment of sampling units to remain with the research until the data collection was completed. That is why four extra units were recruited and interviewed, in case of any drop out. In practice, 24 units in the sample were interviewed twice, with three units having only one interview due to drop out. Within these 24 units, 11 families were recruited in Hanoi and 13 families were recruited in Ho Chi Minh City. 22 out of 24 recruited families came from one source: personal contacts of the researcher. International education fairs taking place in Vietnam during March and April of 2016 also provided two units. In the recruitment, the researcher ensured that participants were aware of the length of the data collection process, how it would be conducted, how many interviews would take place, and the importance of them remaining committed to the study. The recruitment attempted to invite the following types of family to participate in the research:

1. Standard family (parents, sibling (if any) and the student)
2. Extended family (grandparents, parents, sibling (if any) and the student)
3. Single-parent family (father/mother, sibling (if any) and the student)

In addition to these three categories, the recruitment invited families with male students, female students, the first child going overseas for study, and the second or later child going overseas for study, to assure all potential different decision-making routes were captured from the sample. Table 3 provides a profile of each of the 24 families in the sample, along with information about the student, including his or her academic state at the time of interviews, and whether he or she was the first child to go abroad for education.

Table 3: Type of family of the 24 sampling units

<b>Sample unit</b>	<b>Type of family</b>	<b>The academic state of the student at the time of interview</b>	<b>Round 1 participant(s)</b>	<b>Round 2 participant(s)</b>
HCM – 01	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12 (last year)	Father and student	Dropped out
HCM – 02	Standard family, first child going abroad	University first year	Father and student	Student
HCM – 03	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 11	Parents and student	Student
HCM – 04	Single-parent family, second child going abroad	High school year 12	Student	Student



HCM – 05	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 11	Mother and student	Student
HCM – 06	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Father	Father
HCM – 07	Standard family, first child going abroad	University third year	Student	Student
HCM – 08	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 10	Parents and student	Father
HCM – 09	Standard family, second child going abroad	University first year	Student	Student
HCM – 10	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Student	Student
HCM – 11	Standard family, second child going abroad	High school year 11	Father and student	Student
HCM – 12	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Student	Student
HCM – 13	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Student	Student
HN – 01	Standard family, second child going abroad	High school year 11	Parent and student	Student
HN – 02	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Father and student	Student
HN – 03	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Mother and student	Student
HN – 04	Standard family, second child going abroad	High school year 12	Mother and student	Mother and student
HN – 05	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Mother and student	Student
HN – 06	Single-parent family, first child going abroad	High school year 11	Mother and student	Student
HN – 07	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 11	Parents and student	Dropped out
HN – 08	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 11	Parents and student	Dropped out
HN – 09	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Mother and student	Student

HN – 10	Standard family, second child going abroad	High school year 12	Father and student	Student
HN – 11	Standard family, first child going abroad	High school year 12	Father and student	Student

### 3.5 Considerations in qualitative interviewing of families

In family research, the traditional approach is to have one individual from the family responsible for the task of providing information (Uphold & Strickland, 1989). Depending on the research topic, that family “spokesperson” can either be the husband, wife or the child. In the majority of the cases, wives and mothers are seen as the preferable informants for family research, and researchers following this approach believe that one member can provide valuable data on various family issues (Astedt-Kurki, Paavilainen, & Lehti, 2001). This method of using one informant, despite having the advantages of convenience and relevance in topics related to the individual development of members within the family context, has lost its significance due to potential biases in explaining familial phenomenon (Uphold & Strickland, 1989). When the focus is placed on the experiences, values and meanings shared by members within a family, interviewing or observing one member becomes problematic, because the data collected only reflects his or her reality, instead of the collective quality or characteristics of the family unit (Astedt-Kurki et al., 2001). As a result, for many social topics, including health and marriage, methodologists raise the need to treat the family as one research unit, with data collection tasks should be applied to the family, instead of individual members. This point was adopted in the present study, and each unit was interviewed with different family members sitting down and sharing information with the researcher collectively.

The key benefit of interviewing the family together is the interaction between members when reflecting their feelings, attitudes and behaviours toward a shared phenomenon (Allan, 1980). Because the phenomenon of interest is collective, talking simultaneously with everyone involved will provide a broader perspective that is challenging or impossible to gather separately (Astedt-Kurki et al., 2001; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). During the interview with the family, members are able to corroborate others’ opinions, as well as supplement each other on different issues, thereby increasing the depth of the discussion (Allan, 1980). The process of mediation and negotiation between family members in producing the unified response is of great interest of the researcher, because it can shed light on how they actually experience the phenomenon (Valentine, 1999). The family as one informant is the only unit that can produce true family data, and when

this is what the researcher is looking for, the family should be interviewed together (Astedt-Kurki et al., 2001).

Along with the strengths and advantages of family interviewing, the researcher acknowledged important concerns that require careful attention. Firstly, family interviewing is usually more challenging to arrange, as members have to attend the interview session together (Allan, 1980; Beitin, 2008). Secondly, the conversation can be longer, compared to individual interviews, as respondents need time to work out a response. Also, the task of articulating a response may hinder some respondents and thus make them unresponsive. Lastly, the location of the interview is critical, because it determines the amount and quality of the data collected. Recruiting sample units through personal connections helped the researcher address the first two concerns, as potential participants were more likely to be cooperative with someone who was introduced to them by a person they know. Regarding the last point, interviews took place at the interviewees' homes for the purposes of providing comfort and preserving natural living settings of the family unit (Astedt-Kurki et al., 2001). Before commencing the interview session, the researcher set out some ground rules regarding the way interviewees take the conversation, such as allowing both the parents and student to give answers to each question, and facilitating further discussion between family members in case they have conflicting opinions (Bennett & McAvity, 1985).

The subject of this study is Vietnamese families living in Vietnam, a country with deep-rooted Asian social and cultural values. The characteristics of Vietnamese people and Vietnamese families, therefore, should be taken into consideration when planning the interview session. T. Q. T. Nguyen (2015) created a detailed guideline as to how to interview Vietnamese qualitatively using a semi-structured interviewing technique. A fundamental rule to keep in mind is to always respect the *face* of the interviewee, as *face* is the most important value of a Vietnamese person, and this rule should be applied to every action before, during and after the interview. For Vietnamese:

1. Interpersonal relationships are critical in determining the willingness for cooperation, so the researcher should first exhaust sources from personal connections and via educational agencies, for recruitment of family units.
2. It is an advantage to have a same-ethnicity researcher to work with respondents. In Vietnamese culture, people tend not to share with strangers and 'outsiders'. Also, Vietnamese people often use proverbs and idioms in their conversations, so having a Vietnamese researcher helps increase the level of respondent and data understanding significantly.

3. Completion of consent forms should be carried out with great care, since this procedure, when asked by the researcher, may be misunderstood as not fully trusting and appreciating the interviewees.
4. In the interview, the bond between the researcher and respondents is crucial. A bond can be created by attention to verbal and non-verbal cues, and proper use of communication skills (respectful asking, eye contact, listening, nodding and probing using the third person). It is necessary to make interviewees aware that they are not being judged, as that the researcher shares similar values to them.
5. Simple, general questions should be limited to avoid lack of elaboration. Instead, the researcher should ask specific, context-based questions.
6. After the interview, the researcher can show his appreciation to participants by giving a gift (T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2015).

The present study adhered to these guidelines, which offered useful advice regarding the sample recruitment, data collection and the actual conducting of the interview.

### **3.6 Interview schedule and interview guide**

#### *Interview schedule*

Vietnamese students have three years of senior high school, which finishes at the end of Class 12. The academic calendar in Vietnam starts in early September and lasts until the end of May the following year. This term length is generally suitable for students who want to enrol in the first (or Spring) semester of the following year at institutions in the USA, the UK, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, which normally commence between mid-January (in the US, UK and Singapore) and late-February (in Australia/New Zealand). The deadline for application for the first/Spring semester is around November and December of the previous year. For instance, if a Vietnamese student wants to enrol in January or February of 2018, he or she has to meet the deadline by November or December of 2017, meaning that the period between January and October of 2017 is critical for him or her to finalise the decision and submit the application, even though the thought of studying internationally may have first occurred months or even years earlier. For high-ability students who want to apply for US scholarships for the same early 2018 commencement, they need to complete the application process as early as January 2017. At this stage, students actively contact educational agencies for consultancy, as well as engage in conversations directly with institutions via email. Educational fairs are another popular source of information, as people see these events as a valuable chance to talk in person with university

representatives for any programme or enrolment enquiry before the final education decision is made. These fairs are held throughout the year in several major cities in Vietnam, including Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, but March, July-August, and October are peak periods for recruitment for several major markets such as the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

Based on the annual cycle of decision-making, this research framed the interview period between March and December of 2016. This schedule gave the researcher ten months for data collection.

### *The first round of data collection*

The first round of interviews was conducted face-to-face by the researcher in Vietnam. Thirteen interviews took place in Ho Chi Minh City in March, while the remaining 11 interviews were carried out in Hanoi in April. The average length of interview time was 45 minutes, and the sample consisted of different types of family, as previously discussed. The sample includes families whose students are in year 10, 11 and 12 of senior high school, as well as students who have already enrolled in domestic universities. It was important to acknowledge that some students and families had already commenced their decision-making process for international education prior to being recruited. However, as they were still going through the process and had not yet made a final decision, the interviewer was still able to help them recall past memories, as well as gain real-time information regarding their ongoing decision-making activities.

The interview guide was originally developed in English, and then translated into Vietnamese using professional translation services. This step was necessary because all interviewees are Vietnamese, who may not have the English proficiency required for having an effective conversation in English. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in Vietnamese, and then translated back into English prior to data analysis.

### **Part 1: Introduction and warm up**

The researcher greeted the family. He showed appreciation for their participation, and introduced himself to all family members. The researcher then provided a brief description of the research purpose(s). The researcher outlined the structure of the interview session for interviewees, and then carefully explained the reasons for having the Participant Consent Form signed by them. This form should be completed before any interview commences.

## Part 2: Questions

In Vietnamese, there are different words to address different people according to their ages. In the following questions, the word “you” stand for and one member (father, mother or student) or the whole family collectively. Also, appropriate probing was used for each question to assure the quality of responses given. Below are questions that were used in the first round of interviews:

- 1) How did you come up with the idea of studying overseas? Whose idea was it initially, who participated in the discussion of this idea, and what made you decide to invest in an international qualification? Was it an individual or collective decision for you?*
- 2) What came to mind first when considering your students’ overseas study plan? I mean, did you choose a particular programme that you are interested in first, or did you choose a country or a city, or is there a special university that you targeted straight away? Which one is more important for you and why? Please explain.*
- 3) How did you start looking for information? What information did you seek? Who was involved in the information-seeking task? How did you communicate with each other regarding the information collected? Where did you get this information? What information sources did you consider valuable?*
- 4) How many options did you initially think of considering? Why did you think of those options? (also why did you exclude certain options?). What criteria did you consider important for an option? Is there any factor that prevented or supported you in including an option in your choice pool? (For example, did you prioritise or exclude certain countries or universities due to specific characteristics.) How did you compare and contrast between different options? Who made the comparison and why?*
- 5) What are your current considerations at the moment? (in terms of education alternatives)*

Question 5 ended the first interview, to capture the current stage of the family, which then became the starting point for the second interview.

### *The second round of data collection*

The second round of interviews took place over a period of six months, from June to November of 2016, and was conducted online via Skype. From the data collected in the first round, it was clear that each family in the sample had a different timeline for their overseas education plan and, thus, it was virtually impossible to pick out a solid 2-month period in which all units would have new and relevant information to provide. As

a result, in this round the researcher decided to use online interviews via Skype to collect data, instead of going back to Vietnam for a second time. Since the education plan varies from one unit to another, questions being asked in the second round of interviews were less standardised compared to the first round. Instead, the researcher tailored each interview to suit the actual need of information from each family, following a semi-structured interview format. Below is an example of interview questions being used in the second round; this family has a year 12 high school student, and, from data collected in the first round, it was clear that the family had already selected the country and city, and was considering options for institution to apply to:

*1) Last time we spoke, you told me that your parents and you have selected Melbourne, Australia to be the destination, and you had picked out two universities for application. However, since your relatives said that these two options are a bit far away from their house, they said they would find more universities for you to consider. Did they come back with more university options?*

- If yes, how did you find those additional options? Did they make it to the final list for application? Why or why not?*
- If not, have you applied to your original two universities? How were the results? Have you made the final choice of university for enrolment? If yes, what were the reasons for your final choice?*

*2) During the last three months, was there any other new information/event/issue coming across that had a significant impact on your original plan to go to Australia in July or August, 2016?*

- If there is then what is it? What kind of change did it make? How is the discussion between members of your family regarding the emergence of new information/event/issue? Any new voice? How did involved members exchange information at this stage?*
- If there is not, will you go ahead as originally planned?*

*3) Have you started your visa application and who is involved in the visa application? What did you think about the visa application process?*

*4) Have you got a specific time for departure yet?*

*5) Is there any concern/issue that prevents you from leaving or which you have to resolve before your departure?*

### **3.7 Data analysis**

The research employed two techniques for data analysis: in-depth analysis for exploring the planning and decision-making process of each family in the sample, and thematic analysis for identifying similarity across family units' processes. The construction of decision maps and summaries for 24 family units, and the thematic analysis were carried out by the researcher. The development of the final model and written story from results of these three techniques was closely supervised and validated by the primary and secondary supervisors.

#### **3.7.1 Analysis of the decision process for each family unit**

Two rounds of interviews provided a large volume of detailed information about the international education decision-making process for each family unit – a complex behaviour that involves several people and many activities taking place over a period of time. Given the research question of “how such behaviour takes place”, *chronologies* were constructed for each unit, arranging the events that occurred and the people involved in chronological order (Yin, 2009). For each family unit, the two interview transcripts were used to develop a decision map, in which the decision-making process is presented from start to finish (for those families who have not completed this process, the map is up to the point of the second interview). The map systematically describes the evolution of the phenomenon from an initial educational aspiration to a carefully thought-out overseas education plan. It details all the steps taken and decisions made throughout the process, including any derailing or reversing that occurred, along with important decision criteria at each stage. In addition to activities, the decision map identifies key family members involved, both those who contributed to the decision-making and, more importantly, those who were directly responsible for making component decisions. Furthermore, the map lists out important external influences that had an impact on the decision maker(s) in each component decision, as well as information sources who provided relevant information at each stage of the process. Along with each of the 24 decision maps, a one-page summary of transcript was also developed to highlight all unique characteristics of each family's story.

#### **3.7.2 Thematic analysis across the dataset**

In addition to constructing decision maps and summaries of the 24 family units, thematic analysis of the dataset was undertaken via Nvivo software. The synthesis of data across 24 units helps strengthen the findings, thereby enhancing the analytical generalisability of the result (Yin, 2009). As the foundational method for qualitative



analysis, thematic analysis allows the researcher to search, identify, analyse and report themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Under this definition, a theme is a pattern of phenomenon relevant or important to the research question that occurs repeatedly across the entire researched data set. Due to the complex nature of qualitative data, thematic analysis helps make sense of seemingly unrelated data in a systematic way by minimally organising and describing datasets in rich detail, which provides the necessary condition for themes to arise (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Full interview transcripts of 24 families were uploaded to Nvivo software for coding and analysing. In the first round of coding, full transcripts were broken down into detail by coding every small meaningful phrase and sentence in each transcript. For instance, when being asked of how the aspiration for international education came about within the family, the mother in unit HCM 05 said *“This is my idea”*. This sentence was then coded into the code “Who initiated the idea”, which contains phrases and sentences expressing a similar idea from all other units. These codes were termed individual codes. Once the first round of coding was completed for all transcripts of 24 families, individual codes were then classified into higher level codes, termed categorical codes, based on the meaning and the stage each individual code belongs to. For example, the categorical code “Building resources” contains individual codes that describe different things a family needs to prepare in order for the education plan to take place, such as “Saving money”, “Study foreign language”, “Maintain good academic performance at school” and “Participate in extra-curriculum activities”. The second round of coding helps reduce the number of codes for analysis significantly, thereby allowing the researcher to have a comprehensive view of the data without missing out any important detail. The second round of coding would result in a more manageable list of categorical codes. Based on this list, a generic decision-making map for choice of international undergraduate education was developed, and this map served as the first version of the final decision-making process model that could represent all 24 units in the sample.

### **3.7.3 Developing the final model of decision-making for international education**

The last stage of data analysis would be to develop the final model that could describe sufficiently the decision-making for international undergraduate education of Vietnamese families. This model was created using 24 decision maps and summaries and the generic decision-making map, and from the results of the thematic analyses. The generic decision-making map serves as the backbone of the final model, while 24 decision-maps and summaries provide insights into distinctive attributes of each

family's story that should be included in the final model for better representativeness. Along with the visual development of the final model, a written description was also created to support understanding.

To ensure the applicability of the model, once the final model and the written story were completed, three families in the sample were requested to read and give feedback. Apart from minor suggestions, all three families agreed with accuracy of the model and the written story in representing their processes.

## **CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the findings of the data analysis. It starts with in-depth analysis, in which a summary and decision map for each of the five families is presented. These units were chosen to present a wide spectrum of types of planning and decision-making process from the 24 units. The chapter proceeds to provide a list of 66 categorical codes, along with a description for each code, deriving from the thematic analysis. Chapter Four ends with an initial version of the decision-making process for undergraduate international education of Vietnamese students, which was conceptualised from the 66 categorical codes.

## 4.1 Analysis of the decision process for each family unit

Each of the 24 families in this study provides a unique perspective on how the decision-making process for their children's international education was initiated, took place and, in some cases, completed. Each family unit, therefore, was analysed thoroughly, which resulted in 24 decision maps and 24 summaries. However, since there are similarities between units to a certain extent, five typical units were selected to be detailed in this section. The five units demonstrate alternative decision scenarios:

- Unit 1 (HCM – 04): A completed decision process resulting in the student travelling to Japan for tertiary education
- Unit 2 (HN – 01): An incomplete decision process in which the decision-making unit is currently waiting for application results
- Unit 3 (HCM – 10): A derailed decision process in which the decision-making unit decided to stop the international education plan during the stage of choosing a university to apply to
- Unit 4 (HN – 10): An incomplete decision process in which the father's personal connection with one university in the USA acts as a facilitator in the choice of university to apply to
- Unit 5 (HCM – 02): A complete decision process in which the student is already enrolled in a domestic university but has decided to pursue overseas education instead

**Unit 1 (HCM – 04): A completed decision process resulting in the student travelling to Japan for tertiary education (an extended family with grandparents, parents and the student)**

### *Summary*

This interview was conducted with a high school year 12 student. Her parents have postgraduate degrees from Japan, where the student was born, so her mother has guided her into overseas study, especially the possibility of studying in Japan, since junior high school. Her parents saw the challenges domestic graduates face in finding good employment in Vietnam, and at the same time, recognised that their child would have a better chance of getting good employment with an international qualification.

*“My parents saw that if I graduated from a domestic university, the job that I can find would not have good salary, especially if I decide to work for the Vietnamese government. If I want to work for private companies, I should*

*study overseas. In that conversation about studying domestically vs. overseas, my parents told me that studying in Japan will guarantee me to have a good job, better thinking ability and knowledge. I will have international connections, which allow me to work in Vietnam or other countries, my degree will be recognized world-wide.” – Student of HCM 04.*

The idea came about during the student’s junior high school years, and was driven by her parents, as well as her relatives, whose children also study overseas. It is also a tradition within her family, that her grandparents, and then her parents, studied overseas, which has an influence on her in terms of trying to continue the family tradition. Personally, the student likes the Japanese culture and admires the Japanese people. The decision to go abroad is a shared decision between the student and her parents, with the student being the leading decision maker, with full support received from her parents and relatives.

*“It’s a 50/50 decision... My mom and dad each have their own opinion, but I am the decision maker.” – Student of HCM 04.*

The family selected the country to study in, then the major, then the university.

Regarding the choice of country, Japan is preferred because it has offered good quality education, a good environment, familiar culture and people. It provides international students and workers with good support services and policies. The student prefers a familiar living environment, such as Japan, to Western societies like America or Britain. Japan and Vietnam also have good education support policies. Moreover, the student has been exposed to Japan by her mother for a long time, from which her interest grew. Therefore, despite her dad’s suggestion of going to the USA, the student insisted on choosing Japan.

Regarding the choice of major, the student originally liked biology, but later changed to international relations, which is an easier major to study if she goes abroad.

Regarding the choice of university to apply to, there were two options: Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) and Tokyo International University (TIU). The criteria considered in this decision included: availability of preferred major, syllabus, living environment, tuition fee, scholarship availability, quality of education, the number of Vietnamese students on campus, and support services for international students.

The student and her mother used a number of information sources for their information search: education expos, student’s classmates, university representative, university website, and feedback/review of current students.

*Update from the second interview:* The student was accepted at the two universities and offered a scholarship by each university. TIU was finally selected for enrolment, even though it is less famous and its tuition fee is slightly higher than that of APU, for the following reasons: perceived better teaching quality, better campus location, small class size, reasonable number of Vietnamese students, and more language classes available. The student discussed the two options with her mother and relatives, and selected TIU, despite her mother and relatives leaning more toward APU.

*“To select TIU over APU, I did talk with my mother and my relatives. I am mainly responsible for this decision, even though most relatives disliked TIU due to higher tuition fee. They also concern about my social life on campus at TIU due to having a small number of Vietnamese students. At the moment, APU is the most selected universities for Vietnamese students who want to study in Japan. After considering all of these pros and cons, I still decided to go for TIU.” – Student of HCM 04.*

Throughout the decision process, the student worked closely with her mother in looking for information, evaluating options and making decisions. For the visa application, the student used services provided by a local education agency. The visa process was not difficult, but long, with many documents required. Her mother helped her prepare the required family financial statements, and according to the student, this task took the most of time in the whole visa application process.

Figure 7 provides the decision map for this unit. There are four major stages presented in the map, *Predisposition*; *Search, Selection & Application to Study*; *Choice*; and *Enrolment*. Stage one details reasons of parents and students for having an aspiration for international education, whereas selecting criteria of parents and students regarding the choices of country, major and university are presented in stage two and three. On the right side of the map, there are four columns that list the main decision maker(s) for each stage's decision, family member(s) who were involved in the decision-making in each stage, external influencer(s) that contributed to the decision in each stage, and information source(s) that provided relevant information for decision-making in each stage. On the left side of the map, any facilitator or constraint taking place in the process is presented, along with the timeframe for each stage to complete.

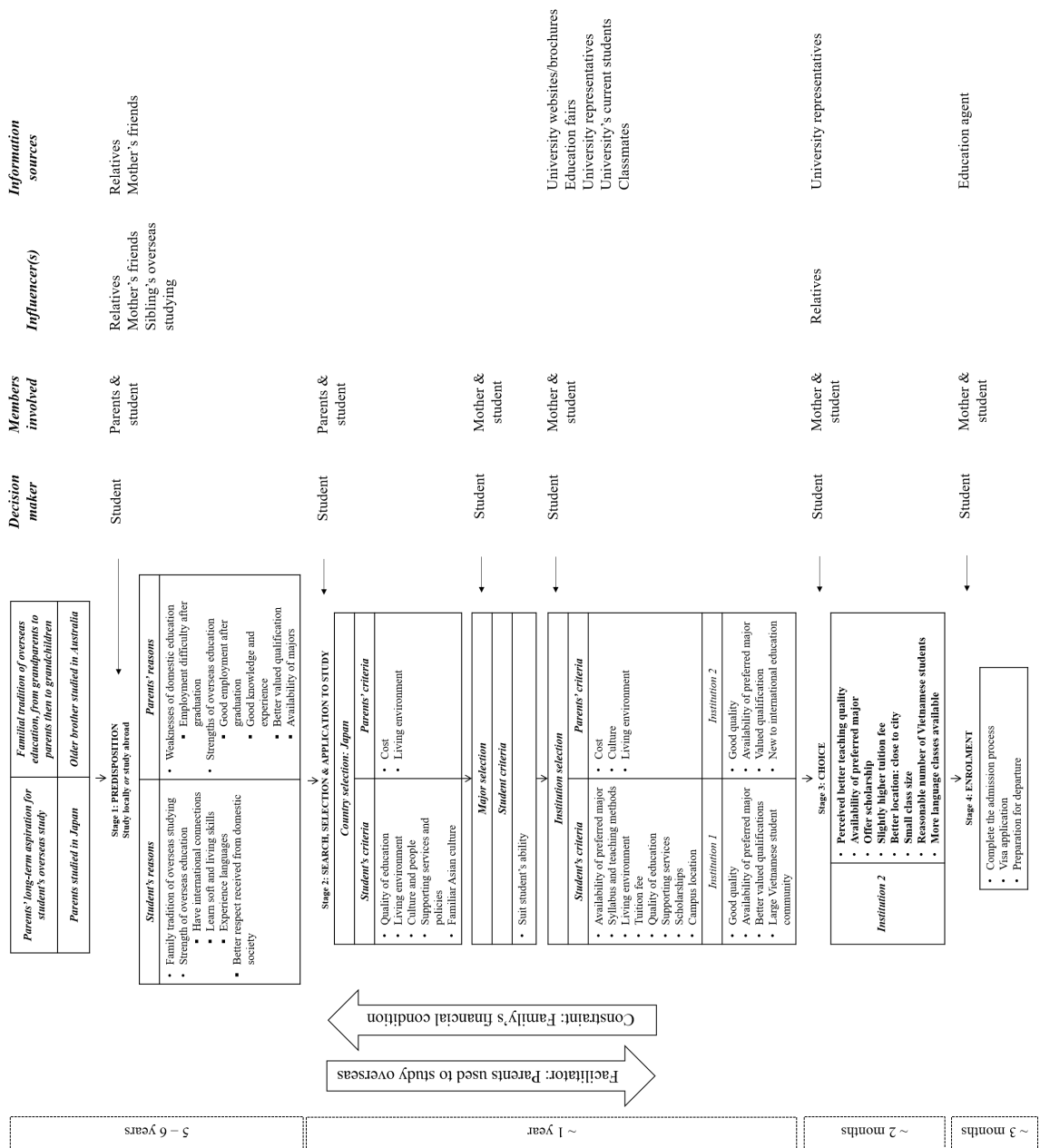


Figure 7: Decision map of HCM – 04, a complete decision-making process

For this family, international education is a relatively long-term plan that started during the student's junior high school years. Originally initiated by parents, the idea of overseas studying later became the student's own aspiration. The student realised the value she would gain with an international studying experience, and at the same time, would want to continue the family's tradition of the pursuit of international education. The sense of collectivism is quite significant here, as the student acknowledged the involvement of her immediate family throughout the process, even though she still claimed to have the strongest voice in each decision. Her parents were heavily involved during the first two stages: deciding to go abroad and the choice of country, while the mother worked more closely with the student in choosing the major, which universities to apply to and the university to enrol in. The extended family and relatives also have an ongoing influence on the decision-making unit during important stages, such as the decision to go abroad and the choice of university to enrol in.

**Unit 2 (HN – 01): An incomplete decision process in which the decision-making unit is currently waiting for application results (a nuclear family with parents, the student and his older brother who studied abroad)**

### *Summary*

This interview was conducted with a high school year 11 student and his parents. He is studying at a Vietnamese high school for the gifted, from which graduates tend to go abroad for tertiary education. The idea came to the family very naturally, as the student's older brother went abroad for education and is still working overseas. The student's parents want him to go overseas because they see the weaknesses of domestic education, and thus expect their child to seek a better education elsewhere, yet the father expressed that he still wants the student to return to Vietnam after graduation. The student also likes the idea because he is an extrovert and has strong English. He once visited Korea and Japan and became interested in the more advanced quality of living of these countries. Similar to his parents, the student thinks the Vietnamese education has poor academic syllabus and teaching methods.

*"His plan takes place very naturally because he has his older brother already studying in the US after getting a scholarship... The idea for him to go abroad emerged a long time ago, and very naturally, because his brother already created the path. When his brother got the scholarship, I realized overseas education is not really out of our reach as once thought."* – Mother of HN 01



Due to the family's financial situation, the student must receive a scholarship, otherwise he will have to complete his undergraduate study in Vietnam. Since year 5 or 6 of junior high school, the student's parents have guided him to build up the necessary resources for the scholarship application, such as good academic performance and an international English certificate.

*"But if he cannot get a scholarship, then he will stay at home to complete his undergraduate study in Vietnam and perhaps pursue postgraduate study overseas later... We don't have enough financial resources to self-fund his studying in Britain, so we need to aim at places that are good, and have scholarships available."* – Father of HN 01

*"We guide him to prepare all the necessary requirements for scholarship application, for example: have good performance at school, get into Hanoi-Amsterdam high school, which is well known by international universities, get good TOEFL and SAT scores. The idea for him came about when his brother got the scholarship, meaning about 5 or 6 year ago."* – Mother of HN 01

The family, including parents, student and older brother, have worked together in making the decision for the student to go abroad. They selected country, major and university.

Regarding the choice of country, the family targeted the US because America has world-class education and, more importantly, it has the highest number of scholarships available to international students. The family's financial situation plays a crucial role in determining which country the student is able to consider: the parents set a maximum annual budget for the student's study, which does not cover all yearly studying and living costs, meaning the student needs to choose a country where he has the highest chance of getting a scholarship.

*"For us, we have limited financial resources, and thus we need to aim at options that require us to contribute as less as possible. The US is the best alternative for this strategy."* – Father of HN 01

The second country option is Taiwan, because his mother has a good relationship with a Taiwanese university. Other equally good countries such as Australia and New Zealand were eliminated due to fewer scholarships being available. Country selection criteria included: scholarships available, high quality of education, and English-speaking country.

Regarding the choice of major, the student preferred marketing, while his parents preferred agriculture, due to the fact that Vietnam is an agricultural country, and thus it is easier for the student to find employment in Vietnam with a degree in agriculture.

Regarding the choice of university to apply to, the family has not researched in detail, but they will select universities based on: university ranking, scholarship availability, entry requirements, high standing in the preferred major, campus social environment and class size.

Information sources include the student's older brother who gives advice on the decision to go abroad, the choices of major and university to consider; the student's classmates; online forums of overseas goers; a university ranking website; the US Embassy in Hanoi; and parents' friends whose children have gone abroad.

*Update from the second interview:* The student has finalised his university preference, and he will focus on the top nine best US universities, because getting into one of these universities will guarantee his future employability. Regarding the choice of major, the student has selected agriculture and environment, as these majors will assure a higher chance of getting accepted, and are better for future employability. During the university consideration stage, the family started using services provided by a local education agency.

Figure 8 provides the decision map for this unit.

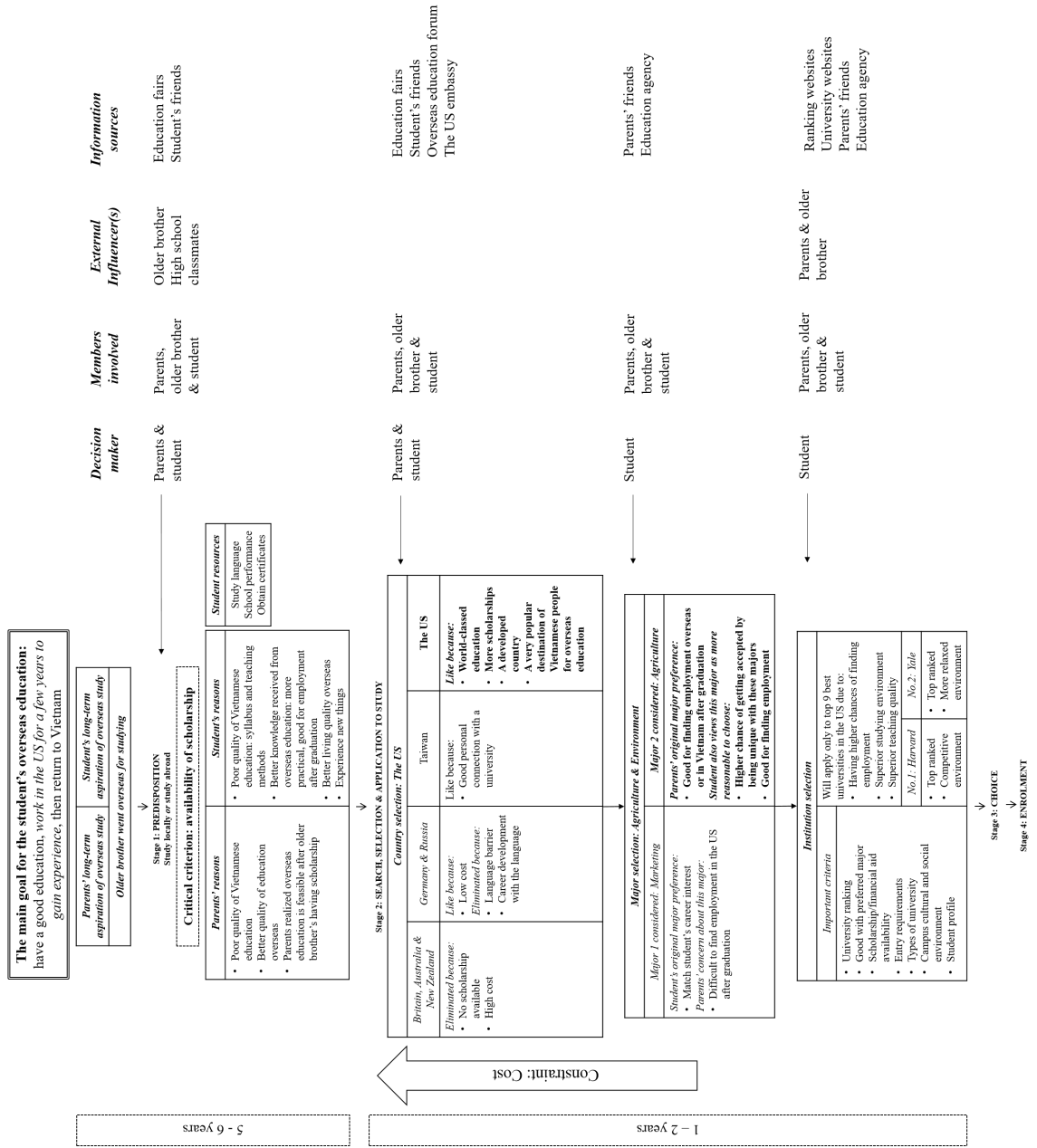


Figure 8: Decision map of HN – 01, an incomplete decision-making process

For this family, international education seems to be a natural academic progression for the student from high school to tertiary education, as his older brother also went abroad for university and is still living in the US. Witnessing his brother receiving a US scholarship, the student has been inspired to do the same since year 5 or 6 of junior high school. His parents fully support his aspiration, yet require him to get a scholarship as they can only afford part of the total annual cost. The family's financial situation essentially dictates what countries are available for the family to consider, as they have to select one that gives the student the highest chance of getting a scholarship. The US was eventually selected, with Taiwan being the backup country due to a relationship the student's mother has with a Taiwanese university. Unlike the decision to go abroad and the choice of country, in which the family collectively made decisions, the choices of major and university to apply to saw the student take a more prominent role, even though his parents and older brother were still actively part of the discussion. The student has compiled a list of nine top US universities that he wants to apply to, and was preparing his applications. Regarding the overseas education plan, the family not only wants the student to have a good education, but also to gain valuable overseas working experience, before returning to Vietnam.

**Unit 3 (HCM – 10): A derailed decision process in which the decision-making unit decided to stop the international education plan during the stage of choosing a university to apply to (a nuclear family with parents and the student)**

*Summary*

The interview was conducted with a high school year 12 student. She is studying at a Vietnamese high school for the gifted. Many students from her school are pursuing overseas education. The idea first came from her father in her year 6 of junior high school. The family has relatives living overseas, so the father had a chance to observe the overseas living environment and education during his visits to relatives. The reasons for the father's overseas education aspirations include: poor domestic education, better educational environment overseas and the opportunity for migration. After the first failed attempt in year 6, the idea was reactivated at the beginning of the student's senior high school (year 10). Driven by her father's aspiration and encouragement from relatives, the idea gradually became the student's own goal.

The decision to go abroad was made by the family, with the involvement of parents, the student and overseas relatives. Relatives had a significant influence throughout the plan, as they would provide the student with accommodation and living funds.

*“It’s my family decision. To go or not is up to me, but whether my study can be afforded is up to my parents. If my parents have the financial resource but I don’t want to go, they would not force, and at the same time, I cannot go, even if I want to, if my parents cannot afford it financially. My parents respect my thought, yet in general it’s still a familial decision.” – Student of HCM 10*

*“Members directly involved: my parents, and my uncles and aunties.” – Student of HCM 10*

The family first selected country, then the city, major and finally the university.

Regarding the choices of country and city, the family wanted to save on costs, so they required the student to live with their relatives, meaning the family only considered countries where they have relatives. The USA, Japan and Australia were considered, and Australia was finally selected to be the best option for the student, because she has more relatives living in Australia, which assures better financial support for the student.

*“The reason I aim for Australia is because I have relatives there who can support me financially regarding living cost.” – Student of HCM 10*

Regarding the choices of major and university, the student consulted with a local education agency, which provided her with a list of potential universities based on the majors she prefers. Her parents, after consulting with overseas relatives, encouraged the student to choose a major that would help her employability in Australia after graduation. The student, however, wanted to choose a major that fits her personality. Criteria for choosing which university to apply to include: close to relatives, reasonable tuition fee, scholarships available, good academic ranking and high standing in the preferred major. The most important criteria are cost and proximity to relatives.

There was a conflict in long-term goals between the student and her relatives. Her relatives weighed the tuition fee and proximity to relatives more heavily than the university academic ranking, as they wish to encourage her to maximize the opportunities for migration. On the other hand, the student wanted to choose a good university because she cares more about good quality of education. Information sources used by the family include: the education agency, university websites, relatives and education expos.

*Update from the second interview:* The student decided to postpone her plan for overseas education, after failing to resolve the conflict with her relatives regarding the choice of university to apply to. Her family’s financial situation does not allow her to have the flexibility to select a university at her will, and so she decided to enrol in a

domestic university to finish her undergraduate degree first, and then possibly pursue postgraduate study later.

*“I waited for my relatives to send me better options. Frankly speaking, my uncle does not have much information about universities in Australia, so his original suggestion, Victoria University, was given because this university is located very close to his house, hence it is easier for my daily commuting. With Victoria University, I already told him from the beginning that I would not apply because this is not a good university... If I want to reduce the cost by living with my relatives, I have to accept their recommendation of university, which I do not personally like. This conflict could not be resolved, and thus in the end I told my mother that I will finish my undergraduate degree in Vietnam, and would try to find a way to go for postgraduate later on.” – Student of HCM 10*

Figure 10 provides the decision map for this unit.

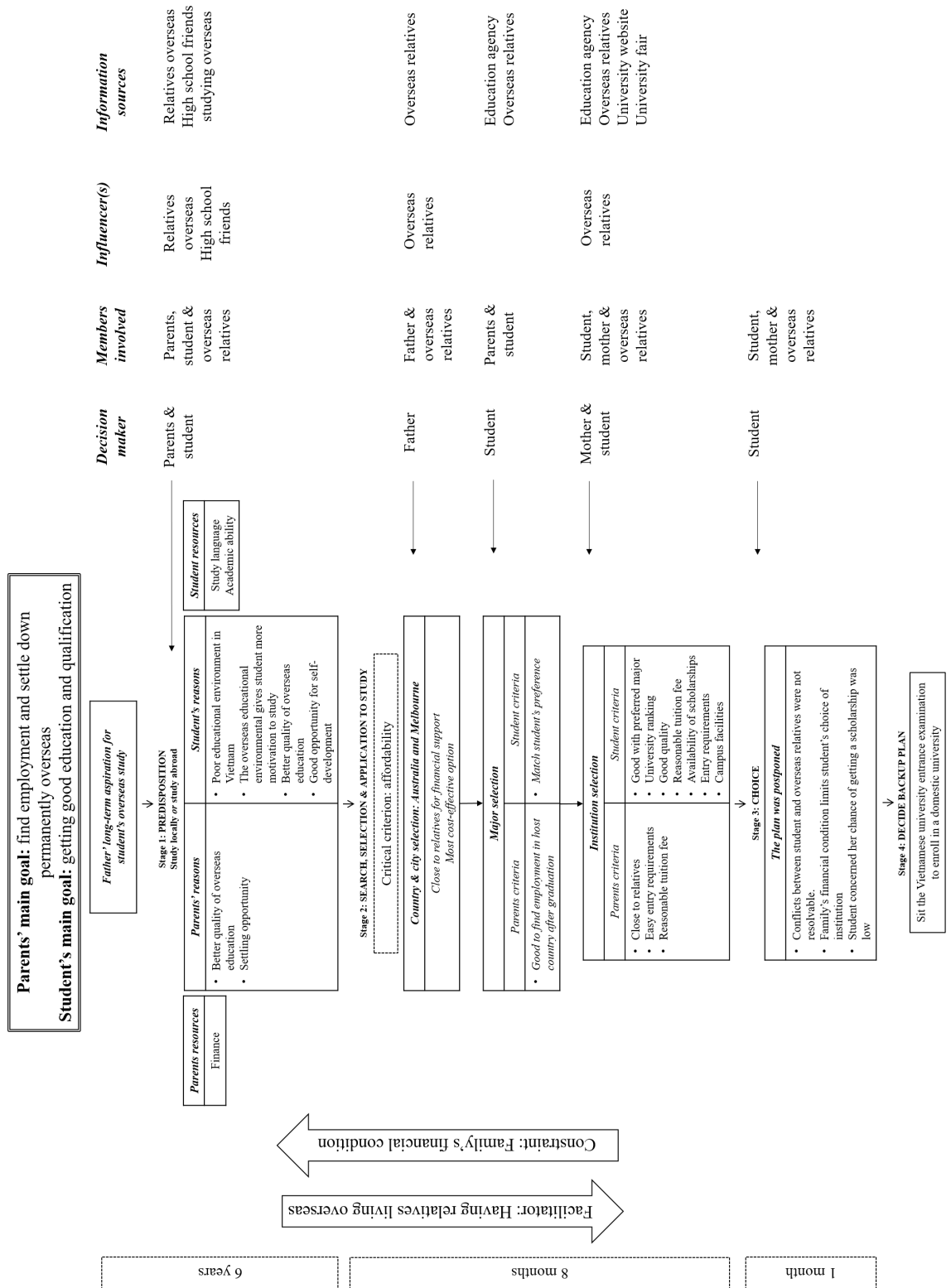


Figure 9: Decision map of HCM – 10, a detailed decision-making

This is an example of an unexpected derailing of the decision process. The international education aspiration was originated by the father, and later adopted by the student to become an official plan within the family. The decision to go abroad was made by the student and her parents collectively, based on influences from their relatives living abroad and the student's classmates. The choices of country and city were essentially made by the father, with a rather limited range of possible options, as the student was required to live close to her relatives. However, the student had a stronger voice on the choice of major, and with the choice of university to apply to the student worked more closely with her mother instead of both parents. There were conflicting opinions between the student and her parents and relatives when considering the choices of major and university to apply to. Her family focused more on the opportunity for migration, and thus they encouraged her to choose a university with easy entry requirements, and to select a major that is in demand for a better chance of gaining employment in the host country after graduation. On the other hand, the student valued the quality of education, and thus she preferred a good university, and wanted a major that fits her career preference. Upon the application stage, the student could not resolve this conflict with her family, which led to her decision to stop the plan.

**Unit 4 (HN – 10): An incomplete decision process in which the father's personal connection with one university in the USA acts as a facilitator in the choice of university to apply to (a nuclear family with parents, the student and his older sister who studied abroad)**

#### *Summary*

This interview was conducted with a high school year 12 student and his father. He is studying at a private senior high school that follows the international teaching style. The idea came from his parents from the time of primary school, as they recognised the weaknesses of domestic education including: poor teaching style, and the lack of teaching necessary practical knowledge and working skills. The parents then preferred the student to experience a better education overseas. The student has also been interested in the idea since primary school, partly due to being inspired by his older sister overseas studying. He expects not only to gain good knowledge, but also a chance to experience international cultures and people, as well as to develop his international networks.

*"I used to work in the education field, and my current work is about international relationships, so since he [the student] was a small child, I*



*have set out my goal to let him approach Western education.” – Father of HN 10*

*“In year 5 or 6, the idea was already pretty clear for me.” – Student of HN 10*

The father realised that his son may not be capable of getting a scholarship, and thus he encouraged his son to look for affordable country and university options. The family worked together in deciding the education plan for the student, yet parents only encouraged and inspired, they did not impose their opinions on the student. His older sister, who used to study abroad, also participates in the work, yet her role is not as strong as the parents.

*“I think it’s a family’s decision, because both sides have to agree on it. If he wants to go but his parents cannot afford it, he still cannot go, and vice versa. It has to be familial consensus... In our family, parents and student are directly involved in this plan.” – Father of HN 10*

The family decided first on the major, and then the choices of country and university were made simultaneously.

Regarding the choice of major, the family has not finalised the choice, but already identified a few majors that match the student’s abilities, such as information technology.

Regarding the choice of country, the family has looked at the USA, Singapore and Germany. The USA is currently the number one option, because the father has a very good relationship with Boise State University (BSU) in the USA, which may assist the student in obtaining a scholarship. Other attributes that make the USA the most attractive country option include: English-speaking environment, diverse culture, friendly people, and civilised and democratic society.

*“The US was selected because: reasonable cost thank to financial aid and an English-speaking environment.” – Father of HN 10*

*“In general, America is a dream destination of many people, including me. The US has a diversified culture, friendly people, and the 2 most impressive characteristics of the US are their civilization and democracy.” – Student of HN 10*

Singapore was considered because the student’s sister used to study in Singapore, yet was later eliminated due to high cost, heavy syllabus and a stressful lifestyle. Germany was attractive due to its free tuition fee policy for international students, yet the student is required to study German, which can be a challenge not only during his studying, but also for future employability.

Regarding the choice of university to apply to, the father immediately aimed at BSU, even before the discussion of major or country took place, due to his personal relationship with this university. BSU is not the best university in the USA for studying IT, yet its academic quality is acceptable, and its campus is located in a peaceful city. Other institutional criteria that the family used to discuss university options included: personal safety, a small number of Vietnamese students, and good potential employability in the host city. According to the family, BSU may not be the best university option, but it is the most feasible option for the student to pursue overseas education.

Information sources included the student's older sister, education expos held at school, the student's classmates, BSU alumni, a university representative, the university website, and online university reviews.

*Update from the second interview:* The student has finalised his major to be software engineering, after further discussion with his father. This major allows the student to find employment more easily overseas as well as in Vietnam. Regarding the choice of university to apply to, BSU continues to be the number one option because of a high chance of getting a scholarship, preferred major available, reasonably good quality, support from the Vietnamese student association at BSU, and the student has a friend who is also going to BSU. In addition, the student also has another USA university as a backup option, in case BSU refuses to provide a scholarship. This backup university has higher tuition fees, more majors available, and stricter entry requirements.

Figure 10 provides the decision map for this unit.

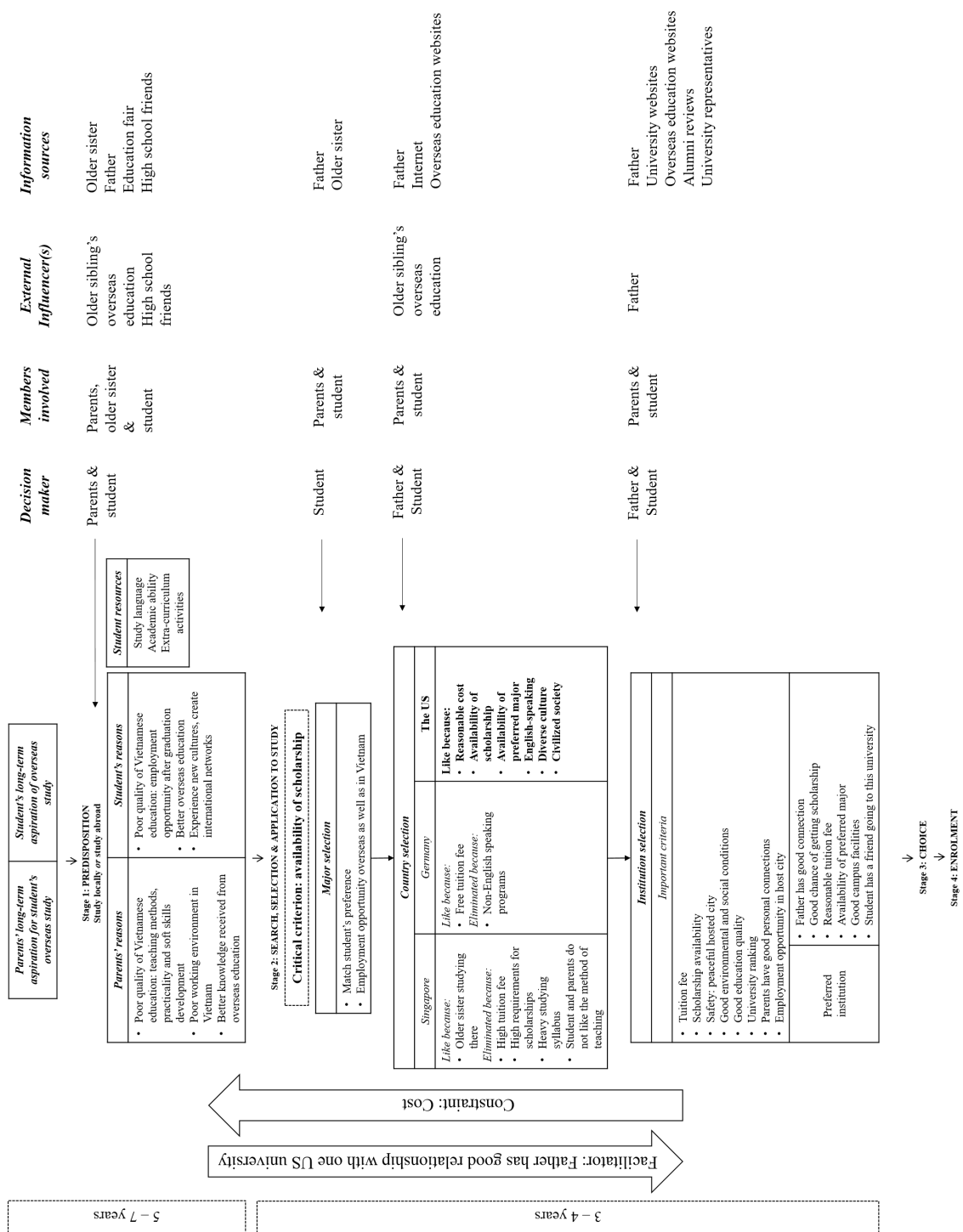


Figure 10: Decision map of HN – 10, an incomplete decision-making process

This is another example in which the aspiration for international education was originated by the parents, but later grew to become the student's own interest. The student was inspired by his older sister overseas studying, and also adopted the aspiration after experiencing poor education in Vietnam. The family worked together in making the decision to go abroad, yet the mother seemed to step back and let the father and student continue working with each other on later decisions, such as the choices of country and university to apply to. The choice of major, however, was made by the student. For this family, cost is a critical factor, and the student has to get a scholarship in order for the plan to proceed. A unique aspect of this family's decision-making process is the existence of a facilitator at the choice of country and university to apply to. The father has a good relationship with one university in the US, which significantly improves the chance of his son getting a scholarship. From the father's perspective, this US university immediately became the number one option to apply to. The father's connection allowed the family to move quickly through the choices of country and university to apply to, even though the father and student did consider a few other country options.

**Unit 5 (HCM – 02): A complete decision process in which the student is already enrolled in a domestic university but has decided to pursue overseas education instead (a nuclear family with parents and the student)**

*Summary*

The interview was conducted with a university year 1 student and his father. He is studying at a domestic university in Ho Chi Minh City. The student first came up with the idea of overseas studying during his first year at university because he found his current studies to be boring, and his preferred major is better taught overseas.

*"I don't like the major I am studying at my current university, and my preferred major is better taught overseas, with better quality."* – Student of HCM 02

He discussed his aspiration with the family and received agreement and support, and, according to his father, two critical factors have been met when they discussed the idea: (1) the family has sufficient finance to support the study, and (2) the student wants to go abroad for education. The student's parents think overseas education is a very popular trend in Vietnam nowadays and, thus, they want their son to get better knowledge and experience in an international environment.

The decision to go abroad was made by the student, based on his aspiration, but with the consensus and support of the family throughout the plan. The parents respected the

student's opinions and let him lead the decision process. Parents, student and siblings all contributed to the process.

*"I am the first one who came up with the idea... After the idea emerged, I talked with my parents."* – Student of HCM 02

*"I am very fair about his choice of career. We agree that parents should respect his aspiration, we should let him choose the way he want to go. Forcing him will not be effective... The decision to go was made by the family, based on his aspiration. We support him. It's his future, so it's essentially his choice."* – Father of HCM 02

The international education plan requires the student to build up his foreign language ability. The student first selected the major, then the country and then the university.

Regarding the choice of country, the student first looked at the USA, but later thought that the social conditions in the USA are not good and suitable for him, so he shifted his interest to Australia. This option was also supported by the father, and was believed to be the best country option for his family due to meeting the following criteria: good quality of education, high standard of living, relatively small population and reasonable total cost. Australia was finally selected by the family.

*"I selected Australia. At first, I intended to go the US, but later I read on the Internet and found out that the social life there is not as good as Australia due to racial discrimination."* – Student of HCM 02

*"With Australia and America on the table, we parents also selected Australia. Firstly, the quality of life in Australia is high, they have rich natural resources, their population is not really big, so the social life is good for his studying. Australia is suitable for our financial condition. With all these factors being met, we all agreed on the choice of Australia."* – Father of HCM 02

Regarding the choice of university to apply to, the student used services from a local education agency, which provided him with a list of possible universities based on his choice of major. Among the list was International College of Management, a college in New South Wales that caught the student's attention even before he consulted with the agency, and after receiving a confirmation from the agency about the quality of education of this institution, the student selected it for application. The college replied to the student with a conditional offer of place, in which it required him to sit a language test in order to confirm his English ability.

Information sources used by the family included: educational agency, university website, and relatives studying overseas.

*Update from the second interview:* The student took the English test and the result was sufficient to allow him to enrol in a foundational English course prior to commencing his bachelor degree. However, the student decided to delay his departure for a few months, in order to study English further and take the IELTS test, so that he could enrol directly in the main course.

The visa application process took the family about a month to complete, and the student used services from the agency. His mother helped him prepare financial statements for his visa application.

Figure 11 provides the decision map for this unit.

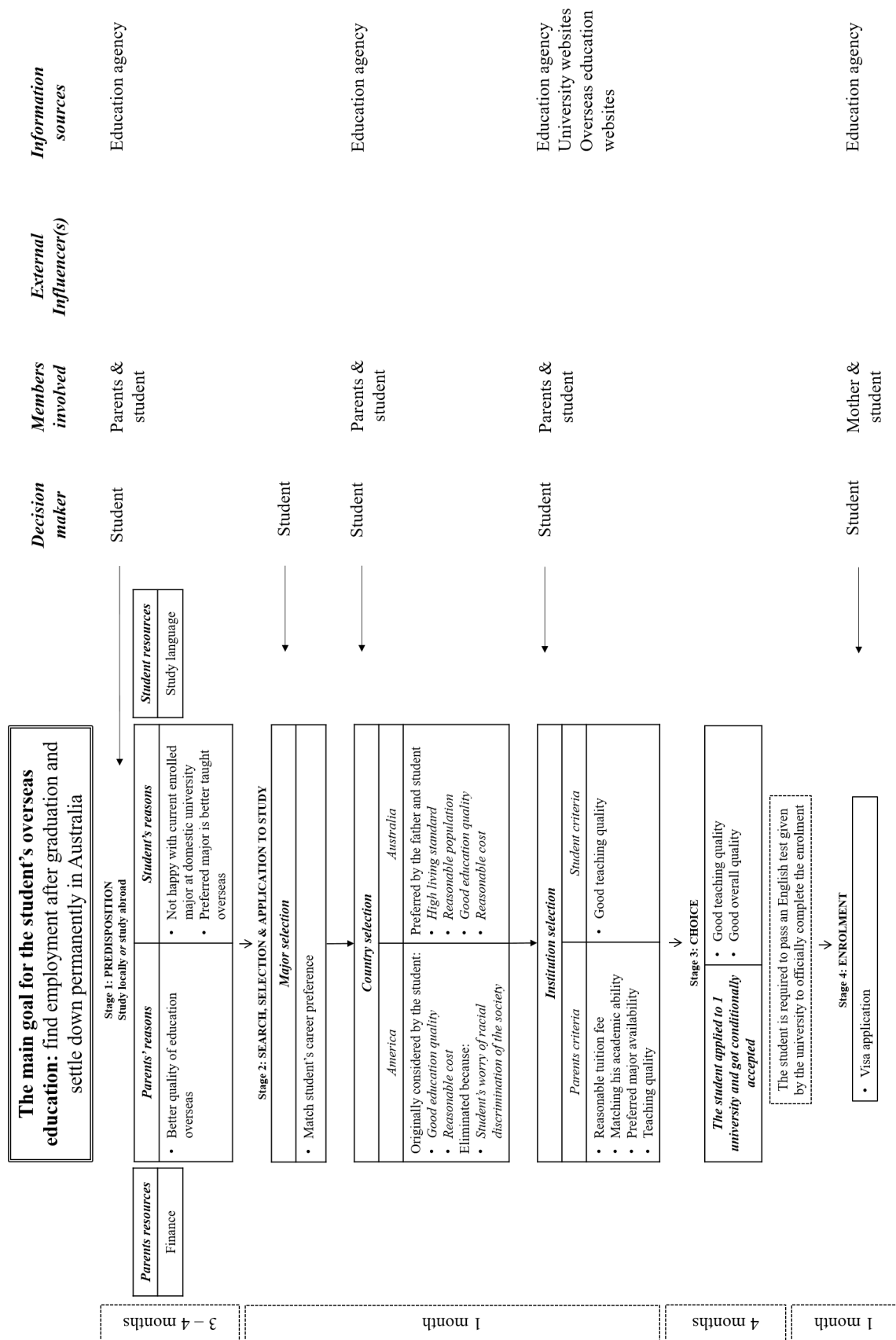


Figure 11: Decision map of HCM – 02, a complete decision-making process

With this family, the student had already completed high school and was studying at a domestic university when he decided to pursue international education. The aspiration originated with the student and, after discussing this with his family, he received consensus support from his parents and older siblings. The decision to go abroad was made by the family, but with the student playing a leading role. The sense of collectivism is relatively strong with this family, as the student constantly mentioned the discussions he had with his parents and siblings throughout the process. Despite being a very important decision in the student's life, the whole decision-making process took place in less than a year, which is rather short compared to the typical six to ten years period commonly seen in other families in this study. The student was accepted by one Australian university, which was also the only university that he applied to, with a requirement that the student sits an English test in order to determine his language skill. The main goal of the student's overseas education plan is to find employment in Australia after graduation that allows him to migrate permanently.

## **4.2 Results of the thematic analysis**

The first round of coding resulted in 618 individual codes. They were later classified into 66 categorical codes, which were presented in Table 4. The numbers 618 and 66 codes were not pre-determined, instead, they were reached when each round of coding was completed. A short description is also provided for each code to clarify their meanings. The list contains codes that describe key component decisions and actions in the decision process (e.g. *decision of country*), selection criteria used in each decision (e.g. *criteria to select country*), factors involved in each decision (e.g. *influencers* or *information sources*), and key members' opinions and thoughts at each stage (e.g. *parents' thoughts of benefits of overseas education*).



Table 4: List of all categorical codes

No.	Codes	Description
1	<i>Backup plans</i>	Alternative plan for the overseas studying plan can be enrolling in a domestic university in Vietnam, or enrolling in an international university in Vietnam
2	<i>Benefits of overseas education</i>	The value of overseas education as perceived by the family
3	<i>Building resources</i>	Family members prepare necessary resources for the plan to proceed
4	<i>Conflicts between members</i>	Different opinions between family members in making decisions
5	<i>Constraints</i>	Obstacles and barriers occur during the process that may limit the availability of certain options
6	<i>Criteria to make decisions</i>	Important criteria for family members to take into account when making decisions
7	<i>Critical criteria to decide to go</i>	Most important criteria for family members to consider when deciding to go abroad
8	<i>Critical criteria to select country</i>	Most important criteria for family members to consider when selecting country
9	<i>Critical criteria to select university for application</i>	Most important criteria for family members to consider when selecting university for application
10	<i>Critical criteria to select university for enrolment</i>	Most important criteria for family members to consider when selecting university for enrolment
11	<i>Decision of country</i>	Family members make the choice of country
12	<i>Decision of major</i>	Family members make the choice of major
13	<i>Decision of university for application</i>	Family members make the choice of university for application
14	<i>Decision of university for enrolment</i>	Family members make the choice of university for enrolment
15	<i>Decision to go</i>	Family members decide the student will go abroad
16	<i>Decision to go is made when all necessary resources are ready</i>	The decision to go abroad is made when parents and student have successfully prepared all necessary resources and requirements.
17	<i>Decision to stop the plan</i>	The overseas education plan was delayed or cancelled by the decision-making unit due to unexpected reasons
18	<i>Evolution of student's interest in the idea of studying abroad</i>	The gradual change in student's interest in the idea of studying abroad over time
19	<i>Evolution of student's preference on country through personal experience</i>	The gradual change in student's preference of the country over time due to personal experience
20	<i>Facilitators</i>	Conditions or events occur during the process that may encourage the decision to go, the preference of certain country, city or institution options

21	<i>Family balances out criteria when making decisions</i>	Family members evaluate and trade off criteria when making different decisions in the process
22	<i>Family uses the funnel approach to select university</i>	The reduction of number of universities for application over time through the evaluation of criteria made by family members
23	<i>Family work together in making decisions</i>	Family members discuss options and come up with decisions together
24	<i>Friendly and relaxed family discussion about the plan</i>	The discussion between family members regarding the decision to go and different component decisions (e.g. country, major and institution) happened in a friendly and relaxing way
25	<i>Having close connections overseas</i>	The family has close relationships with different people living overseas, who may provide information or have influence on the plan
26	<i>How the overseas education idea came about</i>	The way the idea of overseas education came about and evolved within the family
27	<i>Idea initiator</i>	The person who first brought up the idea of overseas studying
28	<i>Influencers</i>	People or organisations that have made an impact on how the family or family members make their choices
29	<i>Information searcher</i>	Family member who did the information search for the plan
30	<i>Information sources</i>	People or organisations that provided family members with information that is useful for making decisions
31	<i>Members involved in the plan</i>	Everyone who had an involvement in the discussion, information-searching and decision-making of the plan
32	<i>Order of decisions</i>	The order in which different decisions of country, city, university and major were made
33	<i>Parents' current concerns</i>	Parents' concerns or worries about the plan, at the time of the 1st round interview
34	<i>Parents' influences on student's choice of country</i>	Parents have an effect on student's choice of country
35	<i>Parents' long-term effort to expose student to the international educational and living lifestyle</i>	Parents tried to encourage the creation of overseas education aspiration in the student by exposing them to the international studying/living environment
36	<i>Parents' long-term goals for student</i>	Parents have long-term goals and targets that they expect their students to achieve with the overseas study plan
37	<i>Parents' original attitude about the idea of studying abroad</i>	What parents originally thought about the idea of studying abroad for their students
38	<i>Parents' preferences</i>	Different preferences of parents regarding choices of country, city, institution or major
39	<i>Parents prepare student to be ready for the future overseas</i>	Parents' attempts to get the student ready for the future plan of overseas studying (e.g. studying

	<i>studying plan</i>	English, get certificates)
40	<i>Parents' pull factors for the idea of studying abroad</i>	Factors or characteristics of overseas education, country, city, or cultures, that draw parents toward the idea of overseas study
41	<i>Parents' push factors for the idea of studying abroad</i>	Factors or characteristics of domestic education or Vietnam as a country that encourage parents to prefer the idea of overseas study
42	<i>Parents' thoughts of benefits of overseas education</i>	Parents' perceptions of values that overseas education can bring about for student
43	<i>Parents' thoughts of the ideal overseas education plan for student</i>	Parents' perceptions of what the best education plan for the student
44	<i>Parents understanding of resources and requirements</i>	Parents understand what is required for the plan to be feasible
45	<i>Parents used to study overseas before</i>	Parents who experienced overseas education themselves before, which may influence their thinking on their student's education
46	<i>Relatives overseas encourage the settling plan</i>	Relatives living overseas encourage the family or family members to think about the opportunity for student to settle down permanently after graduation
47	<i>Relatives overseas provides financial support for the plan</i>	Relatives living overseas provide the family with financial support for the student to go abroad
48	<i>Safe application strategy</i>	The family applies for more than one university, in order to maximise the chance of getting accepted
49	<i>Student balances out criteria</i>	The student evaluates and trades off criteria when making different decisions in the process
50	<i>Student delays departing time for better preparation</i>	Student decides to delay the departing time in order to have time for better preparation
51	<i>Student still keeps the overseas education aspiration even after the plan has been changed</i>	The aspiration for overseas education still stays with the student even if they did not go through with the original plan
52	<i>Student was too far in his preparation to change country option</i>	The student decides not to consider other country options because he has already been in the process of preparing necessary resources for a particular country
53	<i>Student's current concerns</i>	Student's concerns or worries about the plan, at the time of the interview
54	<i>Student's long-term goals</i>	Students have long-term goals and targets that they expect to achieve with the overseas studying plan
55	<i>Student's original attitude about the idea of studying abroad</i>	What students originally thought about the idea of studying abroad
56	<i>Student's preferences</i>	Different preferences of student regarding choices of country, city, institution or major
57	<i>Student's pull factors for the idea of studying abroad</i>	Factors or characteristics of overseas education, country, city, or cultures, that draw student toward the idea of overseas studying

58	<i>Student's push factor for the choice of country</i>	Things happened or characteristics of student that encourage student to prefer a particular country
59	<i>Student's push factors for the idea of studying abroad</i>	Factors or characteristics of domestic education or Vietnam as a country that encourage student to think about studying overseas
60	<i>Student's thoughts of benefits of overseas education</i>	What student thinks of the value received from studying overseas
61	<i>Student's thoughts of benefits of US education</i>	What student thinks to be the value received when studying in the US
62	<i>Student's thoughts on the selected country</i>	What students think about the selected country
63	<i>Vietnamese parents over caring for their children</i>	The cultural feature of Vietnam of having Vietnamese parents take very good care of their children from childhood to adulthood
64	<i>Visa application process</i>	Tasks, issues, requirements and members involved while applying for visa
65	<i>When the idea first emerged</i>	When the idea of overseas education first emerged within the family
66	<i>When the idea gets serious</i>	When the idea of overseas education gets more serious within the family

### 4.3 The initial decision-making process

This section presents the original version of the decision-making process for international undergraduate education of Vietnamese people. 66 categorical codes were arranged in chronological order, which outlines the decision process from the emergence of the international education aspiration to the last stage of obtaining a visa for enrolment in a specific university overseas. In Figure 12, there are two types of codes: codes in red boxes represent core steps of the planning and decision-making process, and codes in black boxes are other codes that either directly belong to a particular step, or are related to the process as a whole. The map is chronological from left to right (indicated by the time line), starting with an emergence of the aspiration for overseas study and ending with either the student successfully obtaining a visa for departure or a delay or even derailing of the plan due to unexpected circumstances. Once an aspiration for overseas study has been initiated, this idea is then nurtured within the family and it evolves until it becomes a serious thought of parents and/or students. When the time comes, families make the first major decision, the decision to study abroad. This decision is followed by four other important decisions: the choice of country, the choice of major and the choice of university for application and the choice of university for enrolment.

Below the time line, every black code that is attached to a red code indicates that they contain information that is directly related to that respective core step. For example, under the red code ‘Decision of university for application’ there are three black codes: ‘critical criteria to select university for application’, ‘family uses the funnel approach to select university’ and ‘safe application strategy’. These black codes help explain what is involved at this stage of the process, that is to select university options for application, families may have one or more critical criteria that they use to eliminate alternatives. The process of filtering out final university options for application is called the funnel approach, meaning after evaluating all available options, the number of possible alternative is going to reduce to a smaller set. Furthermore, to maximise the chance of acceptance, families may include in their final set one or two ‘safe’ university options – less preferred institutions that are very likely to accept their applications. In contrast, black codes sitting above the time line are information that does not belong to any particular red code, instead they are related to the process as a whole. For instance, the code ‘information sources’ represents all sources that provide the family unit with information regarding international education. These sources, therefore, are involved in most steps of the process.

This model was the first attempt to develop the final model that could sufficiently represent all 24 units in the sample.

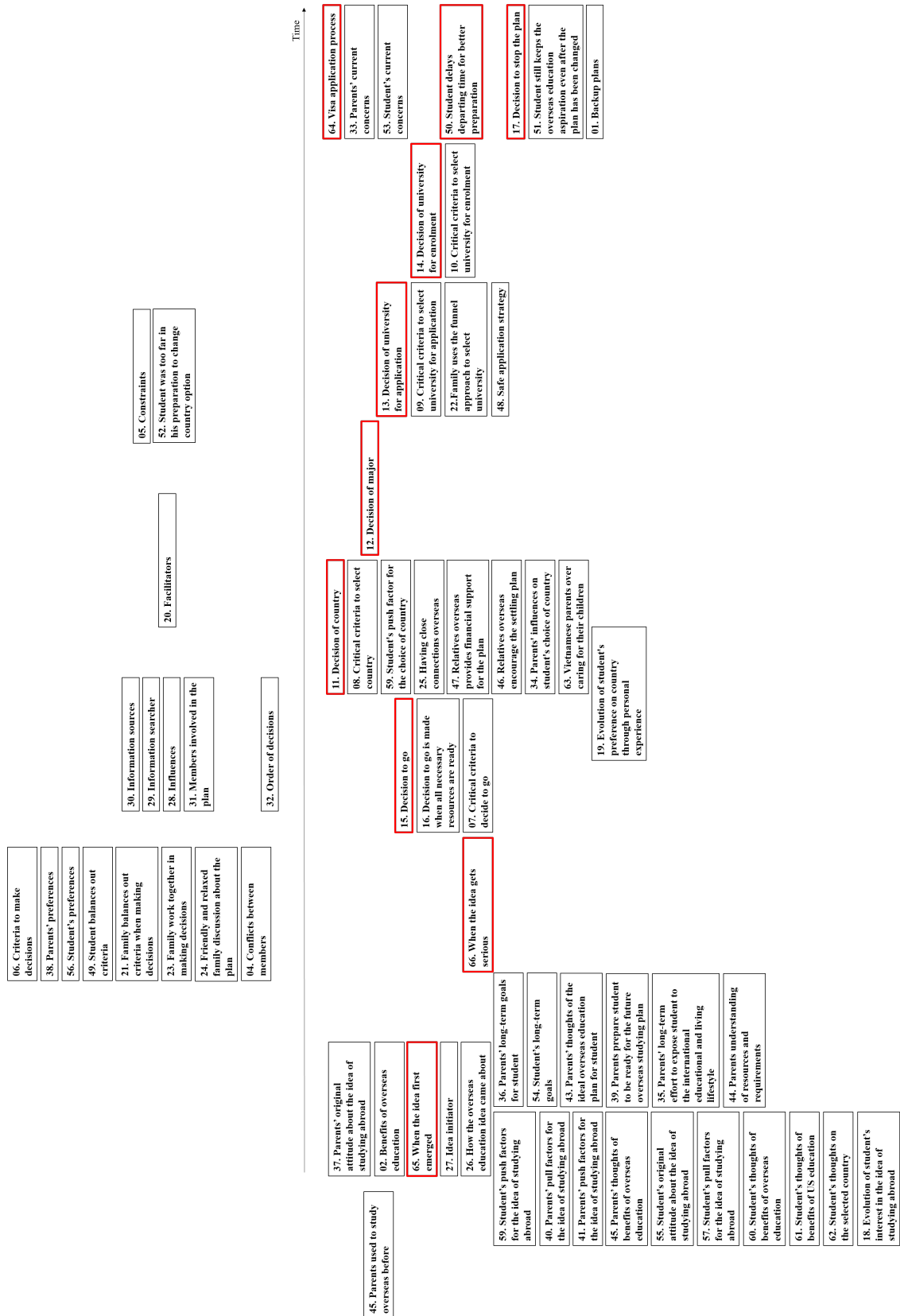


Figure 12: Initial model of the decision-making process

## **CHAPTER 5 THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION**

Chapter Five presents a synthesis of the research results using findings from Chapter Four. The results of the research should be able to answer the research question of, “How does the Vietnamese family unit make the decision regarding choice of international undergraduate education?” The chapter presents a model of planning and decision-making of Vietnamese families for international undergraduate hereafter referred to as the Planning for International Undergraduate Education (PIUE) model based on the initial model of 66 categorical codes and the 24 decision maps. The role of the PIUE model is to represent the planning and decision-making of all 24 Vietnamese families. The PIUE model does not specifically reflect any individual unit; instead it is generalisable across all 24 units. It is then expressed as a composite story that describes the complete planning and decision-making activities from start to finish, using material from the 24 summaries and decision maps.

## **5.1 The Planning for International Undergraduate Education (PIUE) model**

The PIUE model in Figure 13 consists of four stages: *Predisposition*; *Search, Consideration, Selection & Application*; *Final Choice*; and *Admission*. The core process of planning and decision-making is represented by the red boxes labelled A, D, E, F, G, H, I and J which flow from left to right. Component B represents the long-term goal(s) of parents and the student that drive the whole process. Component C details sources that provide the decision maker with information for decision-making at each stage, as well as external influences that affect each decision made by the family unit. Figure 14 presents the detailed contents of components E, F and G in stage two.





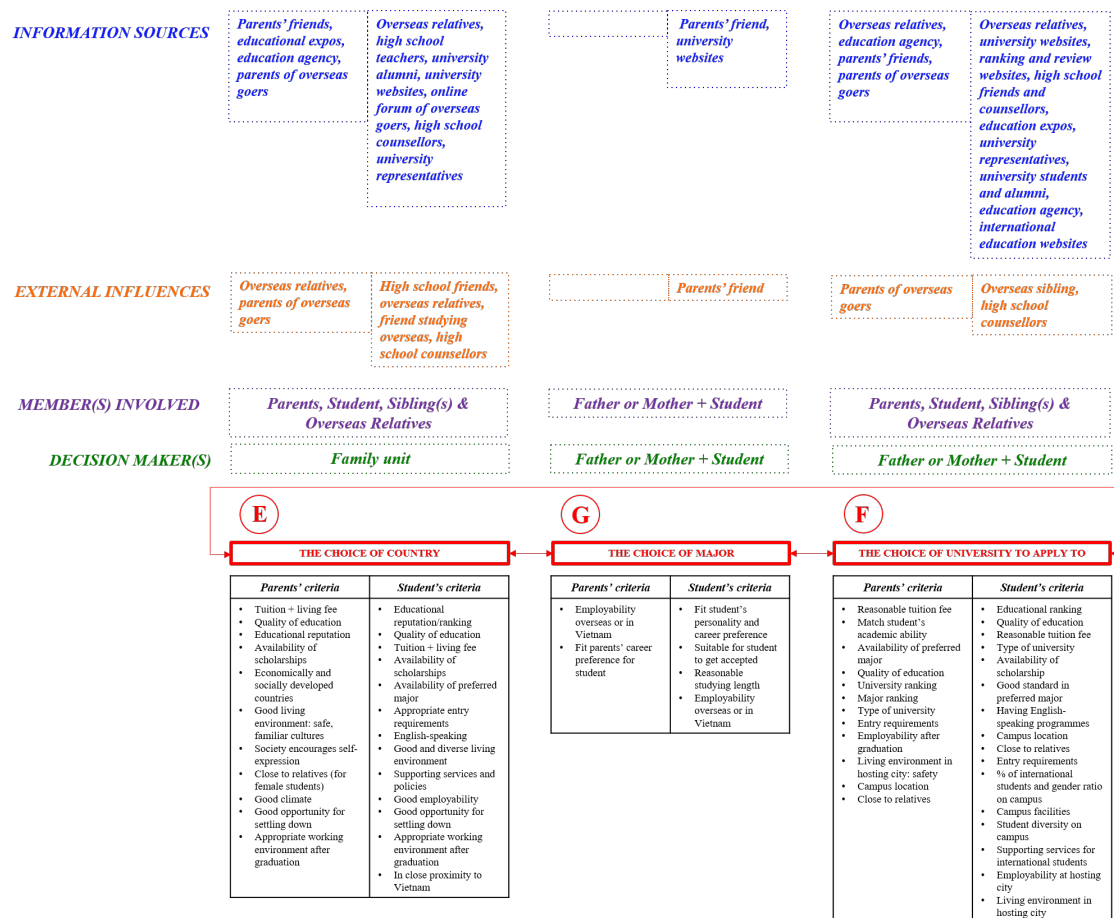


Figure 14: Detailed information of component decisions in Stage 2

## 5.2 The story

### A. *An idea emerges and becomes a plan*

The idea of going abroad for university education can emerge at a very early point in children's schooling for many Vietnamese families. In a large number of families this idea is initiated by the parents. In particular, parents who either used to study abroad themselves or experienced a poor education domestically often aspire for their children to undertake overseas study as early as 10 years before their offspring finish senior high school (the end of Year 12 in Vietnam). Occasionally, if the family has a tradition of pursuing educational excellence, going abroad becomes a norm within the family, and thus the idea can emerge even before the student is born.

*"My husband and I used to study overseas, so I have always thought of letting my son study overseas, since he was a small kid. I have guided him from the very early day that he should try his best to be able to go abroad when he grows up."* – Mother of HN 03

*"This is my idea. When my son entered year 1, I knew a colleague of mine whose son entered year 10 at senior high school for the gifted in Ho Chi Minh City. I admired that family very much, so I asked for more information about their educational plan for her son, and she told me that she had planned for her son to study French, get into this gifted high school, and will end up going to the US for tertiary education. I really like that plan so I copied her path."* – Mother of HCM 05

On the other hand, there are also older adolescents who have enrolled in domestic universities but later decide that they will pursue international education. With these students, they may be more grown up, and thus they themselves come up with the aspiration to study abroad.

*"Around a year ago, when I started my second year at domestic university. I did not enjoy the major I was studying at that time, so I thought of overseas education. I have spent 3 years at domestic university studying business administration to realize that this major does not suit me"* – Student of HCM 07

Regardless of who comes up with the idea, once it is successfully initiated, the idea becomes a plan for the family, which requires serious commitment from all members. Since 90% of those who go abroad are self-funded, parents need to plan the finances very early on, with financial saving starting long before high school finishes. Besides funding, parents also send their children to language teaching centres from primary school onwards, encourage them to participate in extra-curricular activities, and enrol their children in private or international schools, so the children are well exposed to both the international studying and living environment from an early age. These

activities are all part of a long-term educational plan that many parents have for their children, sometimes without students even knowing about their parents' ultimate goal of sending them overseas for university education, with an expectation that, by the time students complete Year 12, they will be academically and linguistically well-prepared. At the same time, early planning also allows parents to have enough time to prepare the budget required to see the plan come to fruition.

*"I thought our family couldn't afford America, and was told that it's cheaper to go to France, so I aimed for France. From that point, I've guided my son to aim for studying in France, it suits our family financially. Along with that educational plan, I needed to prepare the finance as well. At that time, I bought a few pieces of small lands and keep them there, thinking that after 10 years their values would go up."* – Mother of HCM 05

*"Firstly, you need to have the language skill. Since he entered Year 1, I thought of sending him to language school to study English, even though at that time we were not sure what country he would go. Along with studying language, we have also trained him to be independent, and encouraged him to participate in extra-curriculum activities. This is the necessary preparation."* – Mother of HN 03

There are a number of reasons why Vietnamese parents may have an aspiration for their children to study abroad, which include: 1) poor domestic education (poor syllabus, poor teaching method, poor teaching quality, preferred major not available, etc.), 2) poor domestic living and working environment, 3) domestic qualifications are not well regarded on the local job market, compared to international ones, and 4) parents want their students to develop their personal and living skills. At the same time, parents perceive overseas countries to have more advanced educational systems, and a better living and working environment for their children to experience. Many of these reasons are also agreed with and shared by students, who not only dislike domestic education, but also think that going abroad is a good way to: 1) experience new cultures and societies, 2) make international friends and connections, 3) practise English, and 4) have international qualifications and work experience that are useful for future employability.

*"I think if he studies abroad, he is able to learn better knowledge, experience better teaching methods and better cultures overseas. It is also good to study in Vietnam, but if our family has the finance, we should send him abroad, because it is a good environment to study and the experience can broaden one's knowledge and perspective. In addition, after he graduates, he will be able to approach companies and find a good job over there."* – Father of HCM 11

*"Firstly, it is the domestic education system. We parents experienced it, it only focuses on theories and lacks practice. When we started working, we truly saw the limitations of domestic education, both at the high school and tertiary levels. We know we cannot change the Vietnamese education system overnight, so we have to find a better path for my daughter to go. Ever since*

*we graduated from universities back in the day, we said to ourselves that we need to find a better environment for our children to grow. This thought then became the vision for all our thinking and actions regarding raising our children. My wife and I we both work in Vietnam and thus we saw the limitations of the domestic environment.” – Father of HN 08*

### *B. Parents’ and student’s long-term goals*

Families commonly raise the idea for the first time around Year 5 to Year 9 of the student’s high school, and from Year 10 to Year 12 is the typical period in which the idea becomes more serious, even though the first action for preparation can be dated back as early as primary school. There are cases in which students initially dislike or disagree with the idea of studying overseas proposed by their parents, and thus the aforementioned six to eight years is time either for parents to gradually convince students of the benefits of studying abroad, or for the international education aspirations of students to grow as a result of them experiencing the poor quality of domestic education. With these families, parents may have been the most active members during the early stage of the plan, in order not only to seek information, but also to keep convincing the student of the idea.

*“In short, my father came up with the idea, and worked with my relatives in Australia to encourage me. I eventually picked up the interest, and then I discussed with my mother and my relatives to come up with the decisions.” – Student of HCM 10*

*“When I enter senior high school, my mother told me that she did not want me to study at a domestic university because of the bad quality of Vietnamese education. When she shared with me her aspiration for me, I told her that I wanted to study in Vietnam. She then suggested RMIT Vietnam, an off-shore branch of RMIT Australia because this university has a 2 + 2 program. However, she later changed her mind, because eventually she still wants me to go abroad, so if I enrolled in that 2+2 program at RMIT Vietnam, I could only transfer to one university, RMIT Australia. So the RMIT option was dropped. At the end of year 11, I had a talk with my cousin who was studying hospitality in Switzerland, and I found myself being interested in the education and life over there.” – Student of HCM 13*

*“There were times when his aspiration was very strong, which is good, but then some other times it became weaker, to the point when he thought about staying in Vietnam for tertiary education. Because of that, I have had to always be there and keep his aspiration up. He decided that he wants to go, but I have stayed beside him to maintain his motivation.” – Mother of HN 04*

The conversation between family members regarding not only the decision to study abroad, but also other subsequent decisions such as the choice of country, major and university to apply to, takes place in a friendly and relaxed manner, despite the financial and personal significance of the plan to both the student and family. Families indicate that they often talk about the idea of overseas education, choice of country or university

options during dinner time or on the way to school, in which each member shares new information they have gathered, or raises issues for discussion. Many families consider these conversations not to be as formal as family meetings, but more casual, daily talks.

*“There is no formal family meeting, instead I occasionally mentioned overseas studying to my daughter, for instance every now and then I asked her “do you want to study overseas?”, and she answered no, because she think it’s boring living and studying overseas. I think part of the reason for this answer is because she has been used to bubble-wrapping when living in Vietnam with us, because Vietnamese parents are overcaring for our children, which make them depend on parents and afraid to be independent. Even with her brother, a boy, despite having relatives around, he shocked and was homesick when he first went overseas, so things are even more difficult for my daughter. Every now and then, I mention this idea to her, and she started to like it eventually after about 2 years.” – Father of HCM 06*

*“We usually talk during dinner time, when all members are there and can talk with each other.” – Student of HN 05*

*“I discussed with my mother when she was picking up from school... In general, the discussion happened in a friendly manner, we did not have formal family meetings.” - Student of HCM 10*

Along with the evolution of the idea of studying abroad from initial aspiration to actual plan, family members also develop goals they expect students to achieve out of this activity. Having a better quality of education, while being an obvious outcome, is not necessarily the only goal that families have. Many parents expect their students to have an international experience in which they can fully develop their living and soft skills, while other students may want to obtain real life and work experience. Some families even emphasise that overseas education for them is just the first step of a grander plan, in which their ultimate goals for their children will be finding employment and settling down in the host country permanently. The main goal that each family has for the student, whether it is simply a better place to study, or a long-term path to migration, is likely to have an overarching effect on all component decisions regarding overseas education.

*“[My goals are to] go to the USA for education and then settle down there permanently. Of these two goals, permanent migration is more important for me.” – Student of HCM 03*

### *C. Information sources and external influences*

Within this period, besides parents and students who are key members involved in the preparation of the plan, there are potentially a number of other external sources that either provide relevant and useful information, or significantly influence how family members think about the idea of studying abroad. Relatives and parents’ friends, either

in Vietnam or overseas, are two typical information sources, as well as external influences on parents' educational aspirations. Students, on the other hand, often get their inspirations from friends living abroad, high school friends and teachers, and relatives. These people continue to impact decision-making throughout the decision process.

*"My sister and brother in law who are living in Switzerland help me gather information over there. My sister gathered quite a lot of university options for me, for examples, what universities that have English or German programs." - Student of HCM 09*

*"There are websites about colleges and universities in the USA, such as bigfuture.org... International universities also come to my high school to have conferences about overseas education and meet up with parents and students. My high school has professional advisors as well, but I have not approached them yet. Besides, I talk with my friends, they are very good at searching for information. Those top students they have gathered more information than myself, and thank to them I know more about overseas studying or applying procedures, etc." – Student of HCM 03*

*"[Our sources are] mainly the Internet: university websites, and Facebook groups whose members are parents of overseas studying students. I join those Facebook groups, firstly to chat online, but later we meet up with other parents. They are very good and helpful. These groups are very important, because they have real experience and their sharing is genuine. Having information from this source is very important for me personally, they are very good, they know a lot about universities, application processes, and they know how to guide their children properly, and thus I can learn from them." – Mother of HN 03*

#### *D. The decision to go abroad*

The first major decision to be made is the decision to go abroad for tertiary education. For Vietnamese families, this decision is usually made collectively by the family. As stated previously, parents are responsible for preparing the finances, whereas students are responsible for meeting all the admission requirements, and thus parents and students come to an agreement about going abroad when all these necessary resources are ready. Even when students claim the decision to go was made by themselves, they also acknowledge that they need to get approval from their parents since parents provide funding. On the other hand, many parents, while confirming that the decision to go was made by the family, also emphasise that they give their students complete control over what they want to do, as going abroad is all about the future of the students. According to both parents and students, coercion and dictatorship would not work, and instead encouragement, persuasion and mutual agreement are common tactics that family members employ when making this first major decision.

*“It has to be a familial concensus because: having an aspiration is one thing, but making it a reality will depend on a number of factors.” – Father of HN 08*

*“It is a family decision, but at the stage of choosing institutions, my daughter will do it. She has teachers and advisors at school to give her advice on choosing suitable majors, so we do not force her. Similar to her older brother, we parents wanted him to study engineering, but he wanted to study business, and so be it.” – Father of HCM 03*

*“Our motto is that we only let him go when he himself wants to go, and not because we want him to go. It is an agreement between parents and student. I give him all possible alternatives, and explain to him the requirements of each option, but I do not force him to go abroad. Our aspiration is very strong, but again we do not make him do it.” – Mother of HN 03*

Following the decision to go abroad, there are three other key decisions that families need to make: the choice of country, the choice of major and the choice of institution. The sequence in which these three decisions take place varies from one family to another, as one family may have a favourite country that is selected first, whereas another family may have a favourite major that will dictate what country and university are selected. Given the dynamic nature of the process, there is still a common decision order that is seen in many Vietnamese families, which is, they will decide country, then major and then university for application.

#### *E. The choice of country*

For the choice of country, parents and students each would have a list of criteria that they consider important when scanning and filtering out what countries are suitable for further consideration. A wide range of criteria can be taken into account by the family, from academic criteria such as quality of the educational system, educational reputation, duration of programmes, entry requirements, and class size, to more social criteria like language used, support services for international students, safe living environment, availability of part-time work, future employability, and opportunity to settle permanently after graduation, and even personal criteria such as living with or close to relatives. For many parents, the total cost and availability of scholarships are the two most important criteria when they consider country options, as this will determine how much money is required.

*“Reasons for choosing Australia: high quality of education, internationally well-known universities, reasonably tuition fee, supporting policies for international students, and many people graduating from Australia find good employment in Vietnam.” – Student of HCM 12*

*“I eliminated Australia straight from the beginning. I never liked Australia. I like the Japanese culture, yet Japanese language is rather difficult to study,*



*and my family does not like the idea of going to an Asian country. Japan only came up as an option lately, which is rather late for preparation, so I eventually dropped this option too. I do not like Korea that much, also not Singapore, because I think studying overseas is about the experience, thus I want to go to Europe to experience the culture and life there.” – Student of HN 09*

*“We do not have a preset choice of country, our first criterion is cost. If he cannot get a scholarship, we will need to find a university in a country with affordable cost. It is very expensive to study in the USA, Britain, and Australia, whereas Germany has free tuition fee policy, and with Finland, another previously free-tuition-fee country, their universities start to charge tuition fee but it is still very cheap compared to other countries.” – Father of HCM 11*

At this stage, parents and students may have similar country preferences or different country preferences. In the case of conflicting opinions, parents and students will discuss and evaluate alternatives together using their already established choice criteria. There are certain decision rules that can be employed to identify the option that best satisfies both parents and students. For instance, compensatory vs. non-compensatory is one common decision rule found in the story of many Vietnamese families. In case of non-compensatory decision, parents may highlight one or more must-meet criteria, meaning they only accept country options that satisfy such criteria to be further considered, regardless of students’ preferences.

*“Australia is set to be the destination, because we have relatives there, so there is no discussion here. My daughter can only go to Australia.” – Father of HCM 06*

On the other hand, in case of compensatory decision-making, a country option that only scores highly on two out of five choice criteria can still be selected over another option that scores highly on the remaining three criteria, if families value the first two criteria to be most important for their decision, and these two high scores of the first country option is high enough to compensate for the low scores of its remaining three criteria.

*“I firstly wanted him to go to the USA, which is a very common destination nowadays for people in Vietnam... The American plan lasted until the middle of Year 11, after attending many education expos, I gradually realised that it is very challenging to get financial aid from a good university in the USA... For our family, we definitely need to have financial aid... Therefore, I search for other alternatives, and lately after my son entered Year 12, I looked into Canada as an option. I think Canada has good education, its tuition fee is more reasonable and even entry requirements are easier, compared to the USA.” – Mother of HN 03*

It is worth noting the existence of potential situational factors during this stage, that can act as facilitators or constraints. For example, if a family has close connections to a host country, either by having business operation or friends residing there, this particular

country is likely to be prioritised immediately, without much consideration for other options. In this instance, having close connections overseas allows the family to skip the aforementioned standard scanning and filtering procedure, and thus advance quickly through to the next stage. In a different scenario, if the family sets an annual budget threshold due to tight financial conditions, it will drastically limit the number of possible country options to be considered, and may even force the family to give up their original country preferences for other less favourable alternatives. Facilitators and constraints, if they exist, will play a role in determining not only how the choice of country is made, but potentially how later choices will be made as well.

*“Firstly, we have friends and acquaintances there [the USA]... We travel to the USA frequently, so it is convenient for us to visit our daughter while she is studying there. We have business operation there as well, so we fly to the USA very frequently.”* – Father of HCM 03

*“I want to say this point one more time, that is to go abroad, the foundation is finance. We do not have enough financial resources to self-fund his studying in Britain, so we need to aim at places that are good, and have scholarships available. We had to eliminate options like Australia and New Zealand because there is virtually no scholarship at the undergraduate level.”* – Father of HN 01

To help with the deliberation of country choice, families reach out to different sources for information and advice, ranging from personal sources such as relatives and friends, to more commercial sources like international education fairs and agencies. Parents tend to listen to overseas relatives for advice, as they appreciate their relatives’ practical experience and knowledge of the countries in which they reside, while students are often influenced by high school friends and teachers, or by having been exposed to the music, movies and culture of a host country since childhood. Relatives or siblings living overseas appear to have a significant voice in the discussion when parents prefer students to live with them, or when relatives or siblings agree to provide the student with financial support. The final choice of country may not be the highest scorer across all criteria, and is sometimes not necessarily the original preference of either parents or students; rather, in many cases it is the most satisfactory option, after all criteria, facilitators and constraints have been considered.

#### *F. The choice of major*

Choice of major will be the next decision made. To select a major, parents are mainly concerned with whether the chosen major will ensure students have a high chance of employability after graduation, either overseas or in Vietnam. This is also one of the

criteria for students, yet they also consider whether the major fits with their personality and academic abilities, and how long it will take to complete the programme.

*“At the moment we do not have to finalise the major, but we need to start thinking about what he should study. The foundations of this choice are: his interest and his future career in the USA and Vietnam.” – Mother of HN 01*

Families continue to discuss major options, yet students seem to have slightly more control over what major will be finally selected, compared to the previous two decisions, and this shift in power tends to carry on to the later stages of decision-making as well.

*“I showed her the pros and cons of different majors, because in the USA it is easier to get a job when you study a professional major, such as medical and health. However, she argued that business majors in the USA can be practical and professional too, unlike how they are taught in Vietnam. She has arguments and counterpoints, so I respect her choice.” – Mother of HCM 03*

Also, the involvement of parents from this stage onward can become a little more flexible, meaning instead of having both of them on board, parents now can ‘allocate’ the job to either the father or mother. This person continues working with the student, and will periodically report progress back to the other spouse. For the choice of major, parents continue to rely on friends and overseas relatives for information and advice on majors, whereas students also get them from education agencies, high school friends and teachers, as well as siblings.

#### *G. The choice of university to apply to*

Based on the chosen major, families will then move on to looking for potential universities to apply to. At this stage a wide range of selection criteria is taken into account. Some of the typical criteria shared by both parents and students are: affordable tuition fees, availability of preferred major, availability of scholarship, high standing in the preferred major, educational quality and reputation, entry requirements, campus facilities, social environment of campus and host city, employability after graduation and living close to relatives.

*“My criteria for searching universities in Canada are: famous for the preferred major, located in not too remote areas and with reasonable climate, and appropriate tuition fee... University ranking does not have to be very high, instead I care more about university’s reputation in teaching our preferred major.” – Mother of HN 03*

*“I am aiming at a university in Rotterdam, a coastal metropolitan city, yet it still preserves its peacefulness, unlike in the USA. This university is well ranked, its campus is large and has good facilities, and it provides supporting services for students. Tuition fee is not expensive in Netherlands,*

*compared to Britain or other European countries, and it also offers scholarships.” – Student of HN 09*

Beyond these commonly shared criteria, parents care a little bit more about the natural condition of the hosting city, such as the climate, to ensure the student will live comfortably, while students pay more attention to institutional and social factors, such as class size, support services for international students, internship opportunities and a high number of Vietnamese students on campus.

*“Additional criteria after we have shortlisted universities is climate and social conditions at the location, it should not be too remote or too cold.” - Mother of HN 04*

*“At the moment, I still prefer the institution in Indiana, USA [in comparison to another American university]. This one is small, with a reasonable number of international students, and especially it does not have too many Vietnamese students. I myself do not like big universities. This is one of the institutions that I have liked for quite a while.” – Student of HN 11*

The involvement of respective family members at this stage varies from family to family, as some parents may allocate the university search task 100% to the student, whereas in other families the father or mother will actively work with the student. In both scenarios, family members will discuss with each other and, even if students are responsible for choosing the university to apply to, they will likely get approval from their parents before they proceed with the application.

*“During the university considering stage, I realised that my parents preferred universities with more reasonable tuition fees. After I completed the list of universities that I wanted to apply, I gave the list to my parents for review and they told me that I should consider choosing universities with more reasonable fees... When I gave my parents the list, I tried to see their reactions, if they seem to agree with those options, I would then proceed to apply. In general, I was responsible for finding information, and my parents helped me discuss proposed options.” – Student of HCM 03*

Since there is more information to be processed at this stage, parents and students reach out to more sources for information and advice. Parents will browse university and ranking websites, ask overseas relatives, friends and acquaintances whose offspring have gone abroad for education, university alumni and representatives, education agencies, and online groups and communities of parents whose offspring are currently studying overseas. At the same time, students approach high school friends, teachers and counsellors, attend education fairs and meet up with education agencies. Both parents and students appear to put their trust more in people who have experience in international education, such as siblings, relatives and friends living abroad and parents whose offspring have studied overseas. Similarly to the choice of country, the final list

of universities for application may not contain the best of the best universities; instead they are the most satisfactory options, based on all important stated criteria, facilitators and constraints. It is worth noting that many families execute a safe application strategy, that is, they select more than one university to apply to, and at least one at which the acceptance is nearly 100% guaranteed, in order to enhance the chance of getting admitted.

#### *H. The choice of university to enrol in*

After finalising a number of universities for application and submitting applications, families will receive results, either acceptances or rejections. If only one university accepts the application, it will be clear that the student will enrol in that institution. However, if more than one university accepts the application, the next and final key decision in the process is to choose the university to enrol in. At this point, each accepting university has already had an arbitrary score on all important criteria identified in the previous stage, and now families will look at the criteria list again to do a second comparison between accepting alternatives, with a similar principle that critically important criteria will bear greater weight in the total score for each option. New criteria may also enter during this stage; for example, one university not only accepts the application but also offers a scholarship, making that institution more attractive compared to the rest.

*“I applied to two universities, and they all accepted me and granted me scholarships. I then discussed with my family, as well as met up with representatives from both institutions to learn more about pros and cons of each one. After this meeting, I decided to choose TIU over APU. TIU is the younger university, and has slightly higher tuition fee, but I believe TIU has good teaching staff... The location of TIU is better than APU. APU is located a bit far away from the city, so it is more difficult for me to commute around, as well as looking for part-time job. Furthermore, the number of Vietnamese students at TIU is not as high as that of APU. I think having too many Vietnamese students on campus is not good for me because the social life there would be more complicated. Another reason for me to prefer TIU is that it has small classes, with only 15 to 20 students per class. This size is smaller than APU’s classes, and thus, it will be better for me to focus on studying. Also, TIU offers many foreign language classes, which are useful for my international relations major. The main reason for me to select TIU over APU is the quality of education.” – Student of HCM 04*

Family members continue to seek information and advice from similar external sources to previous stages, yet at this stage they seem to trust people with real and/or official information, such as friends of parents or students living overseas or university representatives. Family members still work together, with students commonly leading the discussion, and they also tend to have a stronger voice in the final call, while parents play more of an internal advisor role. Once again, the final choice of university to enrol

in, in many cases, is the most satisfactory alternative: not necessarily the best institution, but the most feasible option that allows the education plan to come to fruition.

### *I. Possible derailing: The decision to stop the plan*

It is worth noting that the plan does not always successfully reach the admission stage. At the stage of university application, families can decide to cancel or postpone the plan due to a number of reasons caused by possible constraints. For example, the plan to study abroad may not proceed if the plan was originally generated by the parents during junior high school, and they have made several attempts to persuade the student to go, but the student has decided that they do not want to go abroad straight after high school, and instead would like to complete undergraduate study domestically first. In a different scenario, parents and students may decide to stop the plan due to unresolved conflicts over university preferences. Not only that, the overseas education plan of a family may have to stop if the student fails to get a scholarship with his or her university applications and this is a critical requirement set out at the beginning. When such situations arise, usually there will be a backup plan, that is, students will enrol in either a domestic university or a Vietnamese campus of an international university and complete their undergraduate education in Vietnam.

*“There has been changed in the plan. My daughter said that she does not want to go abroad after high school. Instead, she wants to complete undergraduate in Vietnam, and perhaps pursue postgraduate in Australia later on. She was the one who decided to change the plan. We parents provide everything we can for her, but it all comes down to her choice, and we respect her decision, partly because she is our little daughter. She told me her decision around July or August, right after she sat the domestic university entrance examination. I agree to let her stay, but also suggested her to enroll in international education, like RMIT Vietnam, because it will make her future international transfer a lot easier. At the moment, she already started her studying at RMIT Vietnam.” – Father of HCM 06*

### *J. Final stage of the decision process*

The final stage in the process is to apply for a visa. At this point, students will have to prepare all academic documents, such as high school transcripts and an English language certificate, while parents, and occasionally siblings or overseas relatives, are responsible for providing financial documents for sponsorship. Many families tend to get professional help from educational agencies, and this is also a common information source at this stage. During this period, besides the visa application, parents and students are often concerned about students' adaptability to new environments and future independent living, as well as arranging accommodation prior to departure. The

time required to prepare the visa application, submit and wait for results varies from country to country and from case to case, but normally it takes from two to four months. Once the visa has been issued, families will then complete the rest of the preparation, including buying air tickets, and waiting for the departure day.

*“After choosing BSU for enrolment, I continued my study at school and completed my high school at the end of May. In early June, I submitted my visa application, and received the result about a week after I had the interview. The visa application process was not difficult, in the interview, they only asked me 3 or 4 questions. We started preparing the documents in early May, and I got my visa in June. In this stage, my mother helped me preparing tuition fee payment and financial statements. We prepared everything ourselves, without the need of any education agent. After receiving the visa, I packed my luggage and then waited for the departure on August 13.” – Student of HN 04*

Finally, it is still possible at this last stage for constraints to adversely impact the outcome. If a student fails to get a student visa to go to the USA for instance, then despite having an admission offer from an American university, he or she will not be able to enrol at this institution. In such a situation, the student needs to either redo the visa application or enrol in a different university somewhere else if time allows, or the worst case scenario is that he or she has to wait for at least half a year until the next admission round.

## **CHAPTER 6    DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS**

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. It starts with a reflection upon the three theoretical foundations, namely the ecological systems theory, the consumer decision-making process, and the facilitators and constraints framework. Next, the chapter discusses key contributions of the research to the international education decision-making and the family decision-making literature. Chapter Six also details managerial implications that this study has for practitioners in the international education industry. Finally, the chapter provides methodological implications for other qualitative studies that may take the same approach.



## **6.1 Implications for theory**

We can start this chapter by considering the implications of the study findings for theory. Chapter Two introduced a number of theoretical and empirical foundations that potentially provided insights into the international educational decision-making of Vietnamese families. This section briefly discusses the application of the three theoretical foundations to the research, followed by implications of this study's findings for the empirical bodies of literature, in particular, international education decision-making and family decision-making. Table 5 presents the key premises of each theoretical and empirical foundation, and the implications of each framework for the study findings.

Table 5: Summary of reflections on theoretical and empirical foundations

<b>Theoretical and empirical foundations</b>	<b>Key premises</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Ecological systems theory	The surrounding context of an individual influences the development of that person.	The planning and decision-making process of Vietnamese families occur within an ecological system comprised of multiple layers of external influence.
Consumer buying decision-making	The decision-making process of consumers is based on a bounded rationality and problem-solving perspective. The process consists of five key steps.	The PIUE model adopts the stage-based structure of the standard consumer decision-making process but is enhanced with new concepts, long-term goals and resource accumulation.
Facilitators and constraints framework	The decision to participate in an activity can be facilitated by a number of facilitating factors (facilitators) and constrained by a number of constraining factors (constraints).	Application of a facilitators and constraints framework help to better explain the dynamic nature of the PIUE model.
<i>Factors influencing choice of university by domestic and international students</i>	The choice of university by international students is determined by a range of internal and external factors. These factors can be categorised into two groups: push factors – factors of the home country that push students away; and pull factors – factors of host countries that attract students toward them.	The PIUE model adopts a push-pull model of factors influencing each component decision.
<i>Decision-making processes for choice of university by domestic and international students</i>	The decision-making process for choice of university by international students adopts the three-phase domestic college choice process and the push-pull model of influencing factors.	The PIUE model adopts a planning approach to the decision-making process. As a result, structural changes are made to existing models.
<i>Family decision-making</i>	Highly important decisions within the household are usually made by family members collectively. Family members take different roles with different influence during the decision process. Family members use a wide range of strategies to resolve conflicts taking place while making decisions.	The involvement and influence of family members are dynamic throughout the decision process. Adolescents can have equally strong influence as their parents in the decision process. Family with adolescents tend to resort to cognitive strategies for resolving conflicts.

### 6.1.1 Reflections upon the three theoretical foundations

Chapter Two introduced the three theoretical foundations for this research, the ecological systems theory, the consumer decision-making process, and the facilitators and constraints framework. I reflect now on the contribution of these three foundations to the development of the PIUE model.

The ecological systems theory helped explain the influence of multiple social forces on all decision components of the PIUE model. The family and high school, which belong to the *microsystem* of the ecological system, are two critical environments for the development of an aspiration for international education in students. Furthermore, elements of the outer layers of the ecosystem also affect the decision to study abroad. For instance, social norms, which belong to the *macrosystem*, can influence how Vietnamese people perceive the benefits of overseas education, as one of the reasons for parents to invest in international education is the increased level of employability for international graduates. In later stages of the decision process, it is the interaction between family members and their social surroundings, such as relatives, friends and acquaintances that inform and shape their preferences for country, major and university.

The standard five-step process of consumer decision-making provided the researcher with a stage-based platform upon which the PIUE model was built. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the generic consumer decision-making model in explaining the international education decision-making by Vietnamese families. Firstly, the standard consumer decision-making model views the process from a problem-solving perspective, while the international education decision-making phenomenon is essentially a planning and implementation activity. Secondly, the standard model describes the information search to be a distinct stage of the process, whereas the planning perspective of the phenomenon requires an ongoing information search that runs across all stages of the process. Finally, the standard model does not include in its process the possibility of having more than one possible outcome of the decision-making, which is evident in the case of choosing an international university for education.

The facilitators and constraints framework added a useful dimension to existing models of international education decision-making. Facilitating factors, such as having relatives living overseas, are shown to put the family unit on a fast-track through the task of choosing country and quickly move on to the next task, whereas constraining factors, such as unresolvable conflicts between family members regarding the choice of

university, can derail the decision-making route leading to postponement or cancellation of the international education plan. This dynamic nature of the phenomenon had not been captured in previous models of international education decision-making.

### **6.1.2 Implications for the international education decision-making literature**

The results of this study have a number of implications for the international education decision-making literature.

#### *The familial decision-making unit*

Firstly, the results challenge the common notion found in the literature that the student is the individual responsible for making decisions (Baharun, Awang, & Padlee, 2011; L.-H. Chen, 2007; Cubillo et al., 2006; Foster, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2012; Mpinganjira, 2011; Zwart, 2012). The present study argues that the choice of international undergraduate education of people in Confucian and collective countries may be a familial matter that involves active participation of both parents and students (M.-K. Lee, 2013). Parents are not merely external influencers to students as the pivotal decision-maker, instead parents and students work closely as a collective decision-making unit throughout every stage of the decision-making process and parents share the same degree of responsibilities as students in ensuring the best outcome is reached. Research on international student mobility, especially with students from Confucian and collective cultures, should focus on the family, rather than the students only, when they investigate important aspects of international education decision-making, such as motivations for the aspiration to study abroad, the choices of country, major and university, as well as the interaction between family members when making decisions.

#### *A different approach to studying international education decision-making*

Secondly, the present study calls into question the representativeness of existing decision-making process models in describing the purchase of international education of people from different home countries. Prior to this research, decision-making has been depicted as a problem-solving activity, and existing models are fundamentally built upon the standard five-step consumer decision-making process (Bohman, 2014; Branco Oliveira & Soares, 2016; L.-H. Chen, 2007). In these models, students first recognise a need to study abroad, which leads them to conduct a search for possible country and university alternatives. Once students have got a list of viable options, they then submit their applications, and the final outcome arrives when students enrol in one university

that accepts them. While this approach may be applicable to certain countries and regions, the present study argues that it fails to represent all possible choice-making behaviours in every country that have people pursuing international education. The research, therefore, proposes another approach to this phenomenon, a planning perspective. The planning approach suggests that researchers should view the purchase of international education as an ongoing and social process, rather than an isolated individual event, in response to an identified 'problem' (Holmegaard et al., 2014). The decision to study abroad, and the subsequent choice of university are not decisions that students make spontaneously, instead they are the results of an elaborate planning and implementation process taking place over a considerable period of time. The planning is about preparing all necessary antecedents for the decision to study abroad to happen, while the implementation is essentially the decision-making task, in which students decide on practical aspects of their overseas education pursuit, such as what country, what major and what university to choose. The planning perspective introduces three new concepts to the international education decision-making literature: long-term goals, resource accumulation, and time allocation for each stage of the process.

Long-term goals of students are a vital element of the planning process because they drive all behaviours of students by determining relevant goal-serving actions to be taken, as well as motivating the execution of those actions (Locke & Latham, 2002). In order to develop appropriate and realistic plans, students need to accumulate all necessary resources, as well as having enough time allocated to accumulate these resources (Sniehotta, Schwarzer, Scholz, & Schuz, 2005). Typical resources that international students, especially those from developing countries, must acquire are saving money to fund the study, learning a foreign language, and maintaining good academic performance at school to meet the entry requirements. The specification of time required for each stage of the planning and decision-making process, which has been overlooked in previous models, is useful in demonstrating the long-lasting nature of the resource accumulation task, as well as other decisions taking place in each stage.

#### *A call for changes in the structure of current decision-making models*

The introduction of the planning perspective may prompt major changes to the structure of existing decision-making process models. The present study suggests that stage one of the decision-making process should also include detail of the time prior to the decision to study abroad being made, because this is usually the period in which an aspiration for study abroad emerges and evolves into an actual plan. This period is,

therefore, crucial to the decision to study abroad, since it is when all the psychological and physical prerequisites are gathered. During high school, students can acquire the aspiration from classmates and friends or through their personal experience with domestic education, which then encourages them to improve their language skill and academic performance. In the meantime, their parents may be positively influenced by friends whose children also study abroad, which leads them to a save up for their children's future education abroad. For some families, this period can last for years, with a lot of interactions taking place, and thus an in-depth examination of the reasons for parents and students to pursue overseas education, the conversations between them, the use of various information sources, and their accumulation of resources will significantly improve the understanding of how the whole activity proceeds.

The second structural change is in the information search stage. According to the standard problem-solving decision-making process, after recognising a 'problem', consumers conduct a search to gather information about available alternatives that can satisfy their unmet needs (Hawkins et al., 1998). This search ends at stage three where consumers are confident that they have had enough information to identify the most appropriate option out of the alternative pool (Kancheva, 2017; Rojas-de-Gracia et al., 2018; Srnec et al., 2016). Existing decision process models in the tertiary education decision-making literature clearly reflect this view of a short-term information search, and often they do not detail what actually happens in the information search, or in some cases it was even ignored altogether (Bohman, 2014; Branco Oliveira & Soares, 2016; L.-H. Chen, 2007; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). By contrast, the present study treats families' purchases of international education as a planning and implementation activity, the information search is therefore an ongoing task that runs across the entire process, instead of being limited to just one stage. At any stage, families need information input in order to improve the quality of decision of that stage, as well as the overall outcome of the process. The close-knit environment of people surrounding families, such as relatives, friends, classmates and teachers, is a valuable reference source, for both students and parents in obtaining information, advice and encouragement about overseas study (Alexander & Campbell, 1964; Bradshaw et al., 2001; Ceja, 2006; D. W. Chapman, 1981; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna et al., 2008). Parents and students may have one or more trusted information sources and/or external influences that they regularly make contact with. The role of these information sources and external influences becomes much more significant under the new perspective, and thus a detailed description of their role in the process is necessary.

### *Factors influencing the planning and decision-making process*

One of the key research areas in the international education decision-making literature is examining the factors that influence the students' choices. The present study reinforces results from previous work in stating that students take into account a wide range of internal and external factors when making the decision to study abroad and the subsequent choice of international education. Regarding the decision to study abroad, the socioeconomic status of students, their academic abilities and personal characteristics, social conditions of students' home countries and positive values of international education all play a positive part in leading the family towards the aspiration of studying abroad (Boyle, 1966; Brown et al., 1999; Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; D. W. Chapman, 1981; Doyle et al., 2010; Hearn, 1984; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Maringe & Carter, 2007; McMahon, 1992; Sewell & Shah, 1967; Z. Wang, 2007; Wu, 2014). On the other hand, students are mainly influenced by various pull factors of different country, major and university options when they make these component choices in the later stages of the process (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; DalGLISH & Chan, 2005; Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2012; Mpinganjira, 2009; Yao & Garcia, 2018). However, since the present study proposes families as the decision-making unit, it also investigated factors that matter to parents and presented these factors alongside those of students as equally important factors to the planning and decision-making. A side by side presentation of influencing factors of parents and students on the PIUE model allows the researcher to explore any similarities and differences between parents' and students' thinking, which can be a potential source of conflict within the family unit during the process.

Furthermore, as opposed to previous studies labelling all internal and external factors involved in the decision-making process as 'influencing factors', the present study puts forward a different way of classifying these factors because it argues that they have different roles in the process. In the PIUE model, information sources and external influences are intentionally separated from the remaining factors, because they are now defined as individuals or organisations that provide the decision-making unit with valuable information or advice for their decision-making, in other words, they are indeed 'influencing factors'. However, when families carry out all component decisions in Stages 2 and 3, they are not passively pushed and pulled by the numerous attributes of different country and university options until an alternative that best fits the set of influencing factors emerges, as portrayed in previous studies. Instead, parents and

students have a list of criteria for each component decision, against which they will compare the appropriateness of each alternative. The classification of pull factors of country and university options as ‘choice criteria’ implies a more active stance of the decision-making unit in their deliberation to determine which element is important for the consideration of alternatives.

#### *A dynamic process in action*

The present study echoes L.-H. Chen’s (2007) findings in saying that the order of three component decisions in Stage 2, namely the choice of country, major and university, is dynamic in nature and does not follow any fixed sequence. Each family can have a different starting point for their Stage 2 with one of these three decisions, depending on which decision is prioritized. Occasionally, some families may make two out of three decisions simultaneously, or even skip one decision completely. However, the present study also highlights that the dynamic nature of the decision-making process is not limited to just Stage 2, the overall outcome of decision-making can be dynamic as well. It means that there is more than one possible outcome of the decision-making process: a successful enrolment in an international university or a postponement, or even a cancellation of a plan. This point has not been explored in previous work, including L.-H. Chen’s (2007) model, all of which suggest that the decision-making process always leads to the successful route. The present study offers an explanation for the dynamic structure of the process by exploring the influence of situational facilitators and constraints in the decision-making process. As the name implies, when facilitators are in action, they facilitate decision-making by clearing way for a quicker path through the stage. Constraints, on the other hand, have an opposite effect by hindering the possible choice options to be considered or, more seriously, alter the overall outcome of the process.

#### *The generalizability of the PIUE model to other countries*

The present study develops the PIUE model to describe the planning and decision-making process of Vietnamese families regarding the choice of international undergraduate education. While the context of this research is specific to Vietnam, the generalizability of the PIUE model is not limited to just one country. The PIUE model takes into account a key cultural value of Vietnam, Confucianism, when trying to explain the international education decision process, and thus its applicability is likely to be high in any country that shares this same cultural foundation as Vietnam. The Confucianism ideology has expanded in many countries and territories in the East Asian



region, including Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao (Y. K. Wang, 2013; Yum, 1988). The researcher expects the behaviour of people in these countries to be similar to that of Vietnamese people in some key attributes. Firstly, the decision-making of people in these East Asian countries is likely to involve both the parents and students as a collective decision-making unit. Secondly, if the overseas study is self-funded, it is more likely to be a planning and decision-making process, which means that there should be a period of planning and accumulating resources in the early stage of the process, much like that shown in Stage 1 of the PIUE model. However, the length of time required for accumulating finance to support the plan in Stage 1 of people in other East Asian countries may not be as long as that of Vietnamese people, given their higher GDP per capita (The World Bank, 2017). Thirdly, East Asian people may have a somewhat similar set of choice criteria used in selecting country and university options, with a priority being placed on the academic quality and learning experience of the destination. Lastly, parents and students are expected to contact a wide range of sources for information and advice regarding whether it is worth to pursue international education, and what will be the most appropriate institution to choose.

### **6.1.3 Implications for the family decision-making literature**

The current study not only presents notable implications for the international education decision-making literature, but also for the literature on family decision-making. Research in this area has focused on studying two core aspects of group decision-making, examining the roles of each family member in making decisions and how families resolve conflicts taking place during the decision process. Following these two main streams, the present study explored the involvement of family members in a family decision-making context, their influences to the decisions made at each stage, and the conflict resolution strategies employed by families in handling disagreements between members. Firstly, data supports the observation found past literature that the purchases of significant items are more likely to involve more than one member of the family in one or more decision stage, and this involvement is dynamic and flexible (Davis, 1976). When families consider a purchase situation to be a familial issue, each of the family member is aware of their responsibilities in contributing to the planning and decision-making. However, depending on the individual's personal resources, such as time available and knowledge of the matter at hand, as well as the importance of each decision, family members determine the appropriate amount of involvement that each of them should have (M. A. Belch & Willis, 2002). For example, in the context of this

study, both parents may cooperate with the student to work on critical tasks such as resource accumulation and the decision to study abroad, yet in other decisions (e.g. choice of country, major and university), one parent can leave the active role and let the other parent work with the student. By doing this families can optimise their use of resources while assuring that parents still remain actively involved in the process.

Secondly, the present research challenges findings of previous studies regarding the inferior role of offspring, with respect to those of parents, in a family decision-making context. As opposed to the common notion of children having relatively weak influencing power compared to their parents in decision-making processes of various product categories (G. E. Belch et al., 1985; Nørgaard & Brunsø, 2011; Soni & Singh, 2003), data from this study demonstrates offspring's influence to be just as strong throughout the process, and there are even stages in which youngsters exert stronger influence than those of their parents. The influencing power of children is not limited to just the purchases of inexpensive items, as suggested in the literature (Beatty & Talpade, 1994; Foxman et al., 1989; Shoham & Dalakas, 2005). Instead, parents can allow their children to have a more controlling voice in major financial investment situations of the families if these purchases are for children's direct use and/or have a significant meaning to the child's life. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the age of the child is an important factor for parents to determine how much influence they are allowed to have in a major purchase situation. As children get older, their parents have more confidence in believing that children have enough knowledge and experience to decide for themselves (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Dauphin et al., 2011; Flurry, 2007; Palan & Wilkes, 1997), hence adolescents may be given more deciding power in familial purchases.

The third implication of the present study to the family decision-making literature is in the examination of potential conflicts that may occur among family members during the decision process and how these conflicts are resolved. According to the literature, conflicts among members when making family purchases are inevitable, especially with expensive and highly involved items (M. A. Belch et al., 1980; Hamilton & Catterall, 2007), and to cope with conflicting opinions arising in the decision process, family members can resort to a wide range of available resolution strategies (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Cowan et al., 1984; Davis, 1976; Kirchler, 1993; Palan & Wilkes, 1997; Williams & Burns, 2000). Data from the present study supports this view, but it also takes one step further in suggesting that the choice of appropriate conflict resolution strategies may depend on family composition and product category. A family consisting

of parents and an adolescent, when facing a major purchase of a highly involving item, tends to prefer cognitive strategies to resolve conflicts between members over other types of strategies. This group of strategies comprises different techniques, such as problem-solving, reasoning, calling for a third person's opinion, direct asking and expression of preference (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2012; Cowan et al., 1984; Davis, 1976; Holdert & Antonides, 1997; Kirchler, 1993; Palan & Wilkes, 1997; Williams & Burns, 2000), all of which basically involve members expressing their opinions and managing their differences in a logical and straightforward manner to try to achieve a win-win outcome without appealing to emotion or using suppression. This behaviour can be explained by the fact that adolescents may be too old for begging, whining and other appeal to emotion techniques to be effective; and at the same time parents see their teenage children as almost adults, who they can reason with them confidently.

The last implication for the family decision-making literature is about the process through which families make decisions, an aspect that has traditionally not received much attention from consumer behaviour researchers (M. A. Belch et al., 1980; Davis, 1974, 1976; Su, Fern, & Ye, 2003). These scholars argue that in order to have a comprehensive understanding of family decision-making behaviours, it is of equal importance to explain accurately the process by which families reach a particular decision (M. A. Belch et al., 1980). The present study contributes to this third stream of research by providing a process-based model that describes a family decision-making scenario with four fundamental advances: a planning perspective to family decision-making, the concept of long-term goals as driver of the decision-making, the concept of resources accumulation as necessary antecedents to decision-making, and ongoing information search. Detail of the advances has been discussed in section 6.1.1 since the purchase of international education belongs to the family decision-making category, so they will not be reiterated here. In general, the new approach proposed in the present study provides another valid foundation to future studies on the decision-making of families.

## **6.2 Implications for practice**

This section discusses a number of practical implications that have been drawn from the PIUE model that are particularly relevant to educational providers. These implications include: a recognition of the actual decision-making unit for choice of international undergraduate education of Vietnamese people, the education plan is goal-driven and constraint-bound, the importance of cost to Vietnamese families, the difference in choice criteria between parents and students in the decision-making unit, the role of

high school environment in encouraging the education plan, and the importance of different types of information sources. The following discussion shows how practitioners may apply these factors to improve their international education marketing and recruitment activities, especially in the Vietnamese market.

### **6.2.1 Who makes the decisions?**

The current study has presented compelling evidence to assert that, for the choice of international undergraduate education, Vietnamese families are the collective decision-making unit who carry out the planning and decision-making process from start to finish. University marketing and student recruitment activities for the Vietnamese market, therefore, should recognize families as the target for their communication efforts. Firstly, marketing practitioners need to gain insights into what values are highly regarded by Vietnamese families when they are planning for their children's international education. Based on such an understanding, marketing messages delivered to Vietnamese families should not only focus on attributes that are appealing to students, but equally, or even more importantly, highlight values that are perceived by Vietnamese parents as critical to their children's studying and living experience abroad. For instance, if a student mostly cares about having the best quality education, while his or her parents demand a safe and supportive living environment, the preferred universities are those that can strike a good balance between learning experience and personal safety in their communication efforts with this family.

Secondly, communication channels need to be established with parents and students, so that marketing messages can reach them both. Practitioners have to take into consideration which channel is appropriate for communicating with Vietnamese parents or students because this will determine the effectiveness of their marketing and recruitment efforts. Vietnam has one of the fastest rates of growth in Internet use in Asia, with the number of internet users expected to rise steadily from 54.7 millions in 2018 to an estimation of 75.7 millions by 2023 (Statista, 2019). Among these users, nearly 62% of them are within the age range of 15 to 54 years old, who are said to be the prime target audience of digital marketing (Ecomobi, 2016). This age range matches with the ages of high school students and their parents, which means that practitioners must incorporate online marketing into the overall marketing strategy as one essential channel to reach and interact with both students and parents. For instance, with around 46 millions monthly active users on popular social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Zalo, they are great platforms for marketers to increase their engagement

with prospective students and their parents through interactive advertising campaigns (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2017).

### **6.2.2 The education plan is goal-driven and constraint-bound**

Long-term goals and situational constraints shape the international education plan of Vietnamese families and influence their decision-making. From the service provider perspective, having insights into the long-term goals and constraints facing Vietnamese families benefits international universities' marketing and student recruitment activities in a number of ways. Firstly, it helps institutions to better identify the most appropriate segment(s) of Vietnamese families to target. When shopping for international education, each family is likely to have a specific set of goals and constraints, and thus, they are more likely to be drawn to universities that can best satisfy their expectations and compensate for their resource constraints. For instance, universities from Australia and New Zealand should avoid targeting high ability students with low to medium socioeconomic status, since they are not able to afford paying the full tuition fee, hence these students are likely to prioritize countries that offer scholarships, such as the USA and Singapore. Instead, the target market for Australian and New Zealand institutions should be middle- to high-class families who are looking for good quality of education in civilized and peaceful societies with less concern over cost.

Secondly, the goals and constraints of families give universities useful clues in developing effective marketing messages for their recruitment activities. For any particular segment that an international university plans to approach, its marketing material needs to highlight how: 1) the common long-term goals of Vietnamese families in this segment can best be satisfied by the distinctive positive attributes of the university and its respective host country, and 2) this university is the ideal option that can mitigate all constraints typically experienced by this segment, thereby making the international education plan most feasible. For instance, if the goal of a family for their student is permanent migration overseas, New Zealand and Canadian universities can win this family over more academically reputable universities from the USA or Britain, by emphasising their facilitating post-study policies for international students. On the other hand, if cost is the most critical constraint for a family, Finnish or German universities can enhance their attractiveness by highlighting their countries' free tuition fee policy, which immediately eases the financial burden of the family. In the race with thousands of international universities from various host countries, which all target the same market, the winner is the one that can prove their best fit to the needs and wants of customers.

### **6.2.3 The differences in choice criteria between parents and students**

*At the choices of country and university to apply to in Stage 2 and the choice of university to enrol in in Stage 3 of the PIUE model, there are noticeable similarities and differences between the lists of choice criteria used by parents and students to evaluate options. Both parents and students consider academic and institutional attributes of country and university options as important criteria for their choices. However, it is in the social aspect that parents and students begin to differ in their views. Apart from employability during or after graduation and a high likelihood of permanent migration, which are two important social criteria shared by the family collectively, parents view social criteria mostly from a personal safety standpoint, while students care more about their experience living abroad (Bodycott, 2009). These differences in choice criteria for choices of country and university between parents and students can hinder the effectiveness of the marketing activities of international universities if the interests of either side are ignored.*

Since parents play an equal role as students in most component decisions during the process, marketing messages from overseas universities need to be equally convincing to them, as they are to students. In addition to highlighting positive academic attributes, advertising content needs to show Vietnamese families that their campuses and host cities can provide an active, connected, culturally diverse and, more importantly, safe environment for students. This is one of the key challenges for international marketing activities of universities since the vast majority of Vietnamese families do not have the opportunity to visit overseas campuses and cities themselves prior to application and enrolment due to geographic distance. Unlike local students in host countries, who can attend open-day tours to experience campuses and host cities, overseas prospective students can only rely on print and electronic content, photos and videos provided by universities to view and evaluate country and university options from a distance. To improve the convincing power of their marketing messages, universities have used written or video testimonials of alumni and current students as evidence for the quality of their education. However, in this day and age, such traditional communications may not be enough to win customers' pick. One possible solution to improve the interaction between prospective students and institutions is utilising modern technology to deliver a more immersive marketing experience. To counter the obstacle of geographic distance, marketers can develop virtual open-day tours of classroom, campus and host city using already available virtual reality technology. Such content could then be shown to parents and students during education expos in Vietnam, thereby permitting prospective

students to more fully experience the destination without requiring them to physically be there.

#### **6.2.4 The importance of the cost factor**

Cost is by far the most common constraint that influences Vietnamese families' choice of international education. Since 90% of outbound international education from Vietnam is self-funded (ICEF Monitor, 2013), and given the financial significance of this investment, families consider cost to be a critical criterion when they evaluate country and university options. When families are under cost pressures, the pool of possible alternatives for selection can be drastically reduced. Related to cost is the availability of scholarships/financial aid in determining the budget that families need to prepare for their children's overseas education. Vietnamese families pay close attention to destinations that are known for providing a high number of scholarships at the undergraduate level to international students, especially countries that have long-term educational support policies with Vietnam. These insights are of great importance to international universities in developing their value propositions for the Vietnamese market.

Within this market, the USA has stood out as one of the most preferred educational destinations for a number of years, due in part to its world-class academic and technological advancements, but also due to the number of scholarships offered to undergraduate international students by American universities. However, since these scholarship offerings are often coupled with very strict entry requirements, funded study in the USA is more often sought by the top academic students from Vietnam. For the rest of the students, who acknowledge their relatively weak competitiveness for scholarships, they deliberately avoid applying to universities in the USA and other scholarship-offering countries. Instead, these students either aim at extremely affordable country options, such as Germany and Finland with the free tuition fee policy, or slightly more expensive destinations, such as China, Singapore, and Japan. The UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, while consistently being in the top destinations for education for Vietnamese students (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2014; Education Counts, 2014; ICEF Monitor, 2013), are also seen as less preferable due to high costs and the lack of scholarships available, especially at the undergraduate level.

From the service provider perspective, universities in the USA should continue highlighting the ample scholarships available to international students as an effective

“pull” factor to attract Vietnamese students whose families are concerned about cost. For highly ranked universities, the availability of scholarships also allows them to attract high ability students from Vietnam since they consider getting a scholarship to not only help their families ease the financial burden, but it is also deserving proof of their academic excellence. However, other countries that have a cost disadvantage against countries such as the USA, due to the lack of international undergraduate scholarships available, should try to minimise the negative effect of this weakness by emphasising other positive attributes of their universities that are considered equally valuable by the Vietnamese. For instance, a good living environment with high levels of personal security is a serious concern nowadays, especially for parents, which has turned many Vietnamese families away from the USA for safer country options. Furthermore, part-time employability during study is an effective attribute to counteract the lack of scholarships available, while post-study work visas and the opportunity for permanent migration are two popular long-term goals for many Vietnamese families.

#### **6.2.5 The role of the senior high school environment**

The senior high school environment in Vietnam appears to have a significant influence on students in the planning and decision-making process. Many students are motivated by their friends and teachers at school to pursue international tertiary education during this period. For those who have already established their educational aspirations prior to senior high school, Year 10 to 12 is the time in which their aspiration is strengthened through conversations with high school friends, teachers and counsellors. In their daily conversations at school, students exchange information about the positive and negative attributes of different countries, majors and universities under consideration, which helps shape students’ preferences. The high school environment, therefore, can be an impactful channel for communication if marketing practitioners utilize it appropriately.

In the past 10 to 15 years, top-ranked universities from the USA or the UK have targeted Vietnamese high schools for the gifted by providing printed media as well as holding regular educational seminars, in order to attract top-performing graduates. In more recent years, international universities have started to approach privately-owned domestic high schools or Vietnamese campuses of international high schools more actively, because they are aware that graduates from these high schools are most likely to study abroad due to the aforementioned incompatibility with the domestic university system. The ongoing feed of information from universities of a particular country to Vietnamese students over their three years of senior high school can significantly



influence students' perception about the education system of that country, thereby making any destination with strong exposure a preferable option for selection.

There are a number of actions that international universities can consider to make better use of the domestic high school environment. Firstly, universities need to establish a constant presence at selective senior high schools in Vietnam that have a high potential of graduates pursuing international tertiary education by: 1) working with counselling offices at these high schools to provide university brochures and other print material to students, 2) holding regular educational conferences at those schools, in which the latest academic, scholarship and living information is provided to the students, and, if possible, 3) setting up a direct line of contact with university representatives through high school counselling offices. Once students are well informed, the next step is to try to become part of the topic of students' daily conversations about international education. Since cost and scholarship availability are two important choice criteria of Vietnamese families, having dedicated scholarships available to graduates of those targeted high schools can generate significant interest. Moreover, to attract high ability students, international universities can work with high schools in Vietnam to offer summer trips to host countries as rewards for top-performing students as well as a chance for these students to experience the destination country and university campus.

#### **6.2.6 The importance of different types of information sources**

At every step of the planning and decision-making process, Vietnamese families approach a wide range of sources for information. In general, these sources can be categorised into two types: formal/commercialised sources (e.g. university website, educational agency or educational expos) and informal/non-commercialised sources (e.g. a friend of the student who studies abroad or online reviews of universities from alumni). While formal/commercialised sources still serve as useful information channels for many Vietnamese families in the sample, for such things as specific questions about the tuition fees or the admission process, this research acknowledges the significant contribution of informal/non-commercialised sources. Indeed, some families even claim they place higher trust on informal/non-commercialised information sources when choosing universities to apply to (Branco Oliveira & Soares, 2016).

The increasing importance of informal/non-commercialised information sources can firstly be explained by the global expansion of Internet connectivity, including in Vietnam, during the last decade. Twenty years ago, educational agencies and educational expos were the main, if not the only, sources for information about

international education for Vietnamese families, whereas people in Vietnam today have much greater access to information via the Internet (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2017). In addition to agencies and expos, parents and students can now instantly get updated information from ranking websites, online reviews from current students and alumni, as well as friends and relatives living abroad. Family members go out of their ways to gather information, instead of relying heavily on educational agencies or university representatives at expos. As Vietnamese families gain confidence in their information search, they have started to question the authenticity of information provided by commercial sources, especially agencies or university representatives. This growing trend of Vietnamese families distrusting traditional sources calls for a strategic change in how international universities design their marketing plans for the Vietnamese market.

The present study offers practitioners a few recommendations on how to better select and design channels of communication with the Vietnamese people. In the foreseeable future, parents and students still appreciate educational agencies and expos, along with university websites, as useful sources for information. However, international universities can no longer rely solely on these formal channels for communicating with their prospective customers, instead they must focus on creating informal or non-commercialised sources and incorporating them equally in their overall marketing strategies. Among different types of informal sources, alumni are an extremely valuable channel of information to be utilised. International universities need to maintain and strengthen the relationships they have with alumni, especially with those who have returned to Vietnam, because they can act as the best offshore representative for universities. In a globalised world where people are presented with thousands of options for their educational needs, Vietnamese parents and students appreciate information coming from people who have real experience of overseas education. Annual alumni meetings held by universities in Vietnam, therefore, should not only be for reunion and networking purposes between alumni, but more importantly, they need to connect prospective students with alumni communities for information exchange. International universities can benefit from this establishment of relationships because this creates a unique positive image of the Vietnamese student associations of these universities, which are highly valued by prospective students.

Secondly, since parents and students look for online reviews of universities by alumni or current students as a credible way to verify gathered information, universities should be proactive on this front and facilitate a social platform for students and alumni to

write reviews and feedback about their universities. This provides prospective students with a genuine student perspective of the studying and living life on campus and in the host city. In addition to physical meetings between alumni and prospective students in Vietnam, international universities can also utilise the tremendous reach of social media platforms, such as Facebook, to create an interactive communication channel between themselves and prospective students, as well as between prospective students and alumni or current students for questions and answers. Practitioners can adopt the model of VietAbroad, a well-established forum of students and alumni studying in the USA, in which prospective students and their parents can get help on any issue relating to studying and living in the USA. There are even online groups of Vietnamese parents whose students are studying overseas, who not only provide “new” parents with useful information, but these “more experienced” parents also offer a sense of support and empathy to those who are concerned about their children living independently abroad.

### **6.3 Implications for methodology**

The present study provides two key methodological implications for research into international education decision-making in particular, and any research on extended-cycle consumer decision-making behaviours in general. The first contribution is the selection of appropriate research method. In the international education decision-making literature, the most commonly used method for collecting data is one-off quantitative survey or focus group, and the data collection is usually carried out after the subject had made their choice of university. This choice of research method bears two critical weaknesses. Firstly, one-off survey or focus group are not able of capturing the entire scope of the activity, which can take years to complete. Secondly, these research methods are prone to the problem of information inadequacy and/or inaccuracy because they require respondents to recall memories from events taking place months or even years in the past (Baharun et al., 2011; L.-H. Chen, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Pimpa, 2005). By contrast, the method selected in the present study is longitudinal semi-structured in-depth interviews, of which there were two rounds of interviews conducted with the same participants over a period of 10 months while they were actually undergoing the planning processes and had not yet made their final choices. This research method addressed the two aforementioned weaknesses by permitting the researcher to examine every aspect of the activity in great detail while allowing for a capture of the real progress families made through the planning and decision-making process. The longitudinal semi-structured in-depth interview method, therefore, proved to be more fitted with the enduring nature of the decision process.

In addition, the application of two different methods of analysis on the same dataset enhances the reliability of findings. On one hand, the individual analysis applied to each family unit provides a deep understanding of their planning and decision-making processes, with a strong focus on unique characteristics of each family's story. On the other hand, thematic analysis identifies key similarities running across the dataset that can be generalized for all 24 families. As a result, the PIUE model has superior explanatory power than any results that were produced by each method of analysis alone.

There is no one approach to data collection and analysis suited to all qualitative research. For each research project, these things evolve as the researcher finds the best way to address the research question. In this research, the researcher has adopted two complimentary approaches to data analysis. 24 decision maps and summaries for the 24 family units were valuable for understanding each case in great depth. Thematic analysis was valuable for identifying cross-case patterns in the study's findings. These two methods of analysis provided insights for the construction of the PIUE model. While each qualitative study is unique, other qualitative researchers may learn from the approach to data analysis employed in this study.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

Chapter Seven concludes this thesis by reinforcing the main theoretical and managerial contributions of the research. The chapter also considers limitations of the study, from which suggestions are drawn for future research on the topic of the planning and decision-making process for international undergraduate education.

### 7.1 Theoretical and managerial contributions

This research has effectively explored the research question “*How does the Vietnamese family unit make the decision regarding choice of international undergraduate education?*” by constructing the PIUE model, a model which describes in detail the entire planning and decision-making activities of Vietnamese families with respect to international undergraduate education. The model highlights the role of the Vietnamese family as the decision-making unit for all key component decisions. The study thus acknowledges the highly influential role of parents in the choice of international undergraduate education for their children in a Confucian society. This finding may indeed generalize to other collectivist societies where parents are considered to have a life-long responsibility in their offspring’s lives.

First from a theoretical perspective, the research suggests a different approach to the study of international education decision-making. This phenomenon may best be viewed as a planning and implementation activity, rather than merely a decision-making activity, with the family’s long-term goals acting as the overarching driver of the whole process. The decision to study abroad, therefore, is not a simple decision, instead it is the result of years of planning and preparation efforts by the family.

In addition, further contributing to the family decision-making literature, this research suggests an equally strong influence of children and their parents in deciding in this major familial buying situation. Parents may allow their children to have more involvement in big-ticket purchases that have a significant meaning to their lives. Furthermore, the age of the children helps determine the degree of influence their parents are willing to permit children to have in the purchase decision. Lastly, families with adolescents tend to resort to cognitive strategies to resolve any conflict occurring during the decision-making process.

Finally, the findings emphasize the dynamics of the process, in that the order of key component decisions do not follow a fixed sequence. In addition, the research reinforces

there is more one than just one possible outcome – choice of university – of this process, depending on the presence of facilitating and constraining factors in the process.

From a managerial perspective, this research suggests that marketing practitioners in the international education industry need to tailor their communication toward Vietnamese families, instead of just Vietnamese students. Marketing material designed for the Vietnamese market needs to be in line with families' long-term goals for their children because these goals drive their education decision-making. Marketing practitioners also need to take into account the choice criteria of both parents and students, since each party may have different priorities when considering education options. For the Vietnamese market, the total cost of study continues to be one of the most critical factors for many families. Finally, for marketers of international education the three years of senior high school in Vietnam is an essential period in which to create presence and persuade prospective students.

## **7.2 Limitations**

This study has presented several worthwhile theoretical contributions to the literature on international education decision-making, as well as practical implications for the marketing and recruitment activities of international universities targeting Vietnam, one of the main markets in the Southeast Asian region. However, the research is not without limitations. The challenge to capture the entire planning and decision-making process within only research study, and the inability to have all interviews conducted with the participation of both parents and students, while not believed to critically affect the results, should be acknowledged as areas for improvement.

According to *The Story* in Chapter Five, the international education planning and decision-making process can take up to 10 years to complete, which poses a substantial challenge for data collection within a single research project. The 10-month period of field work of this research enabled the researcher to collect real-time data and observe any changes in preferences and selections during the decision stages observed; yet for most family units, parents and students relied on memory recall to some extent, especially recall of Stage 1 *Predisposition*, since many families reported having started their plans long before the first interview. The time constraint of this study made it virtually impossible for the researcher to recruit a family that was about to commence their planning process and follow that through to its conclusion. To assuage this potential issue, the participation of parents and students in interviews helped the cross-

checking of any vital information reported by one party, yet the threat of information loss or incorrect information being given can not be completely eliminated.

One important contribution that this research aimed to achieve is to confirm whether the Vietnamese family is the collective unit responsible for all major decisions in the process. Ideally, all members of the 24 families recruited should have been in attendance at both interviews, in order for the data to be completely representative of the familial perspective. However, despite the efforts made to invite parents, students and even grandparents (of extended families), not all parties were able to participate in both interviews, and there were cases in which the interviews were conducted with either the parents or the student. This is due to the fact that some families could not arrange a date and time that was convenient for all members to participate. Also, Vietnamese people in general are not used to taking part in academic research, especially those that require more involvement than a typical survey questionnaire, which might explain some families' hesitation to participate. Given this reality, to the best extent possible the researcher attempted to acquire information, regarding absent respondents by asking additional questions of those who attended the interviews.

### **7.3 Future research**

This study has constructed the first complete model that describes the undergraduate international education planning and decision-making process of Vietnamese families. This is an important stepping stone in the pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of such complex activity, not just for Vietnam, but for other national markets as well. Further research can build on this study's model in the following areas:

- Confirm the role of family as the decision maker for the choice of international undergraduate education in Vietnam. Confirm the applicability of the criteria established in Stage 2 and Stage 3 for choices of country, major and university to apply to/enrol in. The qualitative PIUE model is relevant to the Vietnamese people, but its generalisability to other national markets needs to be verified quantitatively. For instance, quantitative research using a survey technique can be conducted on Vietnamese families who are in the final stage of the decision process to confirm the applicability of the PIUE model to the Vietnamese population.
- Measure the importance weighting of the criteria utilised in the choices of country, major and university to apply to/enrol in (Bodycott, 2009; L.-H. Chen,

2007). A comparison between the choice criteria of families with different goals is beneficial to international universities and even ministries of education of host countries to better identify and target the appropriate market segments for promotion and recruitment.

- Compare the planning and decision-making process of families who critically require the availability of scholarships or financial aid with those who completely self-fund their students' education. From a service provider perspective, international universities that can or cannot offer scholarships to students need to understand the differences in choice behaviour between these two types of families, so that they can identify the correct customer segment for recruitment.
- Compare the expectations of Vietnamese families for the international education plan with the actual experience of students at their final destination. The long-term goals of families lead to a set of expectation that families have for their students' overseas education. Whether the destinations they select actually fulfil these expectations is a valuable topic for further research.
- From a methodological perspective, future studies on the topic of planning and decision-making processes for international education can extend the data collection period to cover junior and senior high school's years. Such coverage will ensure more complete data, as it will allow researchers to engage with the early planning and preparation stages as they take place. If time does not allow for capturing the entire process, it is recommended research should focus on the final three years of high school (Year 10 to 12) because most key decisions are made within this period.

## **7.4 Thesis conclusion**

The thesis has made significant theoretical contributions to the literature on international education decision-making, as well as insightful managerial implications to the international education marketing industry. The PIUE model provides both a valid foundation for future studies in the area of decision-making for international education, and a tool for marketing practitioners to understand and approach prospective students in Vietnam as well as other countries in the East Asian region.



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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A Ethics Approval Letter



### AUTEC Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, WU406 Level 4 WU Building City Campus  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

26 November 2015

Ken Hyde  
Faculty of Business and Law

Dear Ken

**Ethics Application:** 15/398 Decision-making processes for international undergraduate education: A study of Vietnamese students.

Thank you for submitting your application for ethical review. I am pleased to advise that the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) approved your ethics application at their meeting on 23 November 2015, subject to the following conditions:

1. Provision of further detail about recruitment protocols outside of personal networks, noting that no agency should provide contact details for potential participants. The agency may send out an invitation on the researcher's behalf, and interested participants encouraged to make contact with the researcher.

AUTEC notes that the safety protocol should include provision for the researcher checking in with his contacts at the conclusion of each interview.

Please provide me with a response to the points raised in these conditions, indicating either how you have satisfied these points or proposing an alternative approach. AUTEC also requires copies of any altered documents, such as Information Sheets, surveys etc. You are not required to resubmit the application form again. Any changes to responses in the form required by the committee in their conditions may be included in a supporting memorandum.

Please note that the Committee is always willing to discuss with applicants the points that have been made. There may be information that has not been made available to the Committee, or aspects of the research may not have been fully understood.

Once your response is received and confirmed as satisfying the Committee's points, you will be notified of the full approval of your ethics application. Full approval is not effective until all the conditions have been met. Data collection may not commence until full approval has been confirmed. If these conditions are not met within six months, your application may be closed and a new application will be required if you wish to continue with this research.

To enable us to provide you with efficient service, we ask that you use the application number and study title in all correspondence with us. If you have any enquiries about this application, or anything else, please do contact us at [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz).

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K O'Connor', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Kate O'Connor  
Executive Secretary  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: Minh Le Pham [mpham@aut.ac.nz](mailto:mpham@aut.ac.nz), Andrew Parsons

## Appendix B Consent Form

AUT

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

### Consent Form

Project title: *Decision-making Processes for International Undergraduate Education:  
A Study of Vietnamese Students*

Project Supervisor: *Associate Professor Kenneth Hyde*

Researcher: *Minh Le Pham*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 12 October 2015.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

## Parent/Guardian Consent Form

*Project title:*                      *Decision-making Processes for International Undergraduate Education:  
A Study of Vietnamese Students*

*Project Supervisor:*        *Associate Professor Kenneth Hyde*

*Researcher:*                      *Minh Le Pham*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 12 October 2015.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that I may withdraw my child/children and/or myself or any information that we have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ If my child/children and/or I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- ☐ I agree to my child/children taking part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Child/children's name/s : .....

.....

Parent/Guardian's signature: .....

Parent/Guardian's name: .....

Parent/Guardian's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date:

# Appendix C Information Sheet

AUT

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

## Participant Information Sheet

### Date Information Sheet Produced:

12 October 2015

### Project Title

Decision-making Processes for International Undergraduate Education: *A Study of Vietnamese Students*

### An Invitation

My name is Minh Le Pham and I am a Ph.D Student in the Department of Marketing, Advertising, Retailing and Sales at AUT University, New Zealand. I am conducting research on the decision-making process of Vietnamese students for international undergraduate education. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. All information collected will be kept confidential. You may withdraw your participation any time before the completion of the research project without any effect on your rights.

### What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this study is to understand how the choices of international education for Vietnamese students are made. I am conducting this research for my doctoral study at AUT university.

### How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You were initially identified through the recommendation of a mutual friend/acquaintance or an educational agent or because you attended an education fair, which shows your serious interest in overseas tertiary education. Through the brief discussion with you, I learnt that you are in the process of choose the destination for your international study. You are, thus, qualified as a participant to provide valuable information for this research. You have the rights to decide whether you want to participate, and in case you need more time to decide, I would like to obtain your contact details, with your permission, so that I can follow up and confirm your participation later. After your confirmation of participation, I will propose dates and times for the interview, and you can select the timeslot that is most convenient for you.

### What will happen in this research?

This research will involve three interviews that will collect information for the purpose of understanding the decision-making process of Vietnamese regarding international undergraduate education. The reason for having three interview is to capture the whole process, starting from when you first think of the idea of going overseas for study, to finalising the actual institution you are going to enrol in. These three interviews will take place from March to October, 2016.

The first interview will be carried out in March, when you are in the stage of active information search. The purpose of this interview is to gather information regarding the initiation of the overseas study idea, and how this idea evolves in your family. There will be questions that help you recall the discussions and activities that you and other members of the family have done to facilitate the thought of going abroad for study. This interview will take place at your house, with your permission, and it is a face to face interview with the researcher.

The second interview will be conducted in August. At this time, you are supposed to have applied to one or a few potential international institutions. Therefore, this interview will try to obtain information regarding your process of finalising the university list. Again, it will be a face to face interview with the researcher at your house.

The last interview will take place in October. By this time, you may have received the results of your applications, and you may be making your final choice of university. This interview attempts to see how the final stage in the process happens, and whether there is any unexpected factor that influences your final enrolment decision. The last interview will be conducted online, via Skype.

### What are the discomforts and risks?

There will be very limited level of risks.

Regarding discomfort, it is believed to be very minor, and may occur when you answer interview questions. To minimise this, I assure you questions are non-invasive, and explain clearly to you in advance that the interviews will be purely for collecting the data for the stated purpose of understanding the research subject. Data collected will be labelled with pseudo-names, so that the analysis and reporting will not reveal any personal or identifiable information about you.

**What are the benefits?**

This study will provide both academics and practitioners with valuable information regarding understanding the decision-making process for international undergraduate education of the Vietnamese. I will be the primary beneficiary as this research will allow me to fulfil the requirements for the award of doctoral degree from the Auckland University of Technology.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Your identity will remain confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone except the primary researcher. To ensure that privacy and confidentiality are respected, you and your information will be labelled with a pseudo name for the purpose of data analysis and reporting. All data will be stored on a password protected memory stick and consent forms will be stored in a password protected cabinet of the supervisors after the project is completed.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

There are no costs to you other than your time to participate in the study.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You can take your time to decide if you wish to participate in the study. If you cannot make the decision on the spot, I will ask for your contact details so that I can follow up with you later. You have the choice of selecting the most appropriate timeslot for you from the proposed schedule.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

Your formal agreement to participate in this research will be made when you sign the Consent Form given to you at the beginning of the first interview.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

A summary of the results will be available and emailed to you upon request once the study is complete.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Associate Professor Kenneth Hyde at [ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz) or 09-921-9999 ext 5605.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz) or 09-921-9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?*****Researcher Contact Details:***

Minh Le Pham, [mpham@aut.ac.nz](mailto:mpham@aut.ac.nz) or 09-921-9999 ext 7891

***Project Supervisor Contact Details:***

Associate Professor Kenneth Hyde, [ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz) or 09-921-9999 ext 5605.

## Appendix D Case Summaries

### HCM – 01

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student and her father. She is studying at a domestic senior high school for gifted students in Ho Chi Minh City. The student had been learning about overseas education since junior high school through the Internet, by her good friend's going overseas during Year 7, and later through English teaching centres, which came to her school to advertise English tests for winning scholarships. Her parents also encouraged her from an early age to study hard to aim for overseas scholarships. The student thinks overseas education will give her more knowledge, and give her a better chance to practise English, which is highly desirable in the Vietnamese job market. The father thinks overseas education is better than the Vietnamese one.

The idea for her to go is shared by both parents and student yet, when asked, the father said it has to come from the student, and has to be her aspiration. The student thinks about major, country and university. Student discusses the major, country and university with her parents. According to parents, the student will study overseas only if she gets a scholarship - it's the critical factor for making the plan happen.

Regarding major, the student is aiming for majors within the natural sciences area.

Regarding country, the student is looking at the US because of the American lifestyle, and the fact that there is more information about the US available to the student. According to the father, flying from HCMC to the US, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore is more convenient than to Europe. The student prefers Western countries, compared to Asian countries, because she wants to experience totally new things. Important information: traditions and customs, culture, lifestyle, social conditions, cost and scholarship availability.

Information sources included the Internet, university website, English education centre, student's friend, and parents' friends.

*Update from the second interview:* after the student completed high school, she tried to get a scholarship but failed, and thus has to stay in Vietnam. She has enrolled in University of Medicine and Pharmacy at Ho Chi Minh City.

The interview was conducted with a Year 11 student and her parents. She is studying at an international high school in Ho Chi Minh City that follows the American style. Her parents sent her to international school since junior high school, and also they've guided her from the early age about studying overseas. The idea was initiated by the parents, due to their recognition of the weaknesses of domestic education, and now has become the student's aspiration due to her familiarity with an international studying environment.

The decision to go was made by the family, yet the parents let the student choose her major and university. She is active throughout the process, and they respect her choices. The family decides major, country and then university.

Regarding major, the student likes business, despite her mom's advice to study medicine for a higher chance of getting employment after graduation. She is aiming for finance, but that may change once the student actually enrolls in the program.

Regarding country, the US is the no.1 option: top-ranked education, non-discriminative society, more opportunities for employment, appropriate undergraduate syllabus, the family has friends, business and house in the US, the student has been exposed to the US environment and education since high school. Her father suggested Japan but the student doesn't like this option due to the language barrier.

Regarding institution, the student originally aimed at NYU, because it's located in New York, an economic centre that, according to her, offers a lot of opportunities for internships and employment in the business discipline. Also, she prefers the metropolitan society in New York and, furthermore, NYU is one of the top 10 business universities in the US. However, due to the high tuition fees, her parents advised her to choose universities with more reasonable fees. Furthermore, her parents preferred her to study in California or Texas, because they have a house and relatives in California, and they have planned to settle down there in the future.

Information sources included student's friends, ranking websites, university websites, alumni feedback/reviews, education fairs.

*Update from the second interview:* The student finalised her university list with eight institutions, based on the following criteria: top educational quality, good with business majors, campus located in metropolitan cities, reasonable entry requirements,



reasonable tuition fees, cultural diversity at the hosted city, and support services available for finding internships. She discussed with her parents about the university list and got their approval.

The interview was conducted with a Year 10 student and his mother. He is studying at a senior high school for gifted students in Ho Chi Minh City, which has a good reputation for graduates going overseas for tertiary education. The idea was initiated by his mom about 10 years ago when she learned about the plan to study overseas of a colleague of hers. His mother has guided him since then, to make sure he, himself, and the family are ready when the time come for his studying. The decision to go was made by the family, based on the student's aspiration, rather than the parents forcing the idea onto him. They select major, country and then university.

Regarding country, the mother originally aimed for France due to the economical aspect, even though France is not as famous as the US for teaching certain majors. She then guided her son into studying French and preparing everything necessary for the plan to happen. The student, after spending two weeks in France on an exchange programme, realised the advanced level of French education, and thus really wanted to go to France. The plan changed to the US after student and mother realised his English language skill, and also after the student talked with his cousin who's studying in the US. The US is the most well-known country to teach his preferred major, has many universities offering this major, and has the best market for working with this major. Also, France recently has had the issue of terrorism, which concerned the family. Regarding state/city, there is only Washington State in the US that allows students below 18 years old to enrol to college, which suits the family's aspiration, as they want to send him overseas at the age of 17.

Regarding university, there are two colleges in consideration: Highline College suggested by the student's cousin, and Edmond College suggested by the student's uncle. Criteria: cost, good with preferred major, climate, good living environment, and safety. The family is currently aiming at Highline College, which is the cousin's former college, and is more famous in teaching the preferred major.

Information sources included relatives, university representatives, education fair, mother's friends whose students study overseas.

*Update from the second interview:* the mother said their plan is still the same, they will apply to Highline Colledge and Edmond College, with a preference for the former institution.

The interview was conducted with the father of a Year 12 graduate. The idea was initiated by the parents, as the family has sent her older brother overseas, and now the plan for her comes naturally. The parents see the weaknesses of domestic education, and thus want her to have better education overseas. She originally didn't want to go, but through the discussion and encouragement of her parents over a couple of years, she gradually came to an agreement, and is studying English to be able to go.

The decision to go was made by the student. Her parents really want her to go, and have prepared all necessary conditions, yet they leave it for her to decide, and respect her choice if she eventually wants to stay at home. The family selects country, major and then university.

Regarding country and city, Australia and Perth are selected decisively, as the family has relatives living there. The father requires her to live with relatives. Relatives play a critical role in the choice of country, major and university.

Regarding university, there are two options that they are going to apply to: Curtin and UWA. UWA is ranked higher, yet its entry requirements are stricter, whereas Curtin is easier to get into, and a common option for international students. Criteria: located in Perth, entry requirements, good reputation, availability of preferred major and employment opportunity after graduation.

Information sources included relatives, university ranking, university websites.

*Update from the second interview:* after the 1st interview, the student later decided that she did not want to go abroad right after high school. Instead, she preferred staying in Vietnam to complete her undergraduate degree, and then she might pursue a postgraduate degree overseas. She shared this thought with her father, and he agreed with her. At the time of the second interview, the student has already enrolled in RMIT, an international university that has an off-shore campus in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

The interview was conducted with a university Year 3 student, aged 21. She is studying at a domestic university in Ho Chi Minh City. The idea first came to her at the beginning of her 2nd year at university, due to her boredom with her current enrolled major, to the point where she decided to stop her university studying. Secondly, her preferred major of nursing was much better taught overseas, compared to Vietnam. Also, she wants to experience a totally new environment to test her adaptability.

The decision to go was made by the student. She informed her family about her aspiration and received support from them, yet throughout the plan, she has been the only active person. She selects major, country and then university.

Regarding major, she selected a new major because it fits her personality and social aspiration. The major is the foundation of all other decisions.

Regarding country, she selected Finland because of its free tuition fee policy for international students, and it has her preferred major. The cost criterion is critical and made Finland the only country on the consideration table for the student. Since this is her own decision, she has to make sure she selects the most economical option.

Regarding university, the Finnish education system requires the student to sit an entrance exam, much like the Vietnamese one, so she selected four universities that have her preferred major to put on her application for the exam. These four universities have different exam score requirements for enrolment, and the student listed them on the application from top score to bottom score. She is going to take the test in April 2016.

Information sources included a friend who is studying the same major in Finland, which is the most important source. This friend provided information about the major, Finland, and applicable universities. Also, this friend influenced the student's aspiration of overseas studying. In addition, university websites and websites about overseas education and scholarships provides her with more relevant information.

*Update from the second interview:* She passed the exam and received offer of a place from one out of four universities. She then applied for a visa, which required her to ask for financial support evidence from her brother and sister. She is preparing to depart in September.

The interview was conducted with a Year 10 student, and her parents and brother. She is studying at a domestic senior high school in Ho Chi Minh City. The idea first came to with parents around 3 – 5 years ago. Parents want the student to have a better education and an ideal environment for improving her English. She originally liked the idea, yet did not really think much about it because she was still very young at that time. Around Year 10, her aspiration has grown stronger, and her parents also encourage her to study English as preparation for the plan. She likes the practicality of overseas education; also this is an opportunity for her to travel outside of Vietnam.

The decision to go was made by the family, yet the parents allow the student to lead the choices of major, country and university. The student wanted to go during Year 10, but her parents required her to complete at least Year 11 in Vietnam, to make sure she is grown up enough to live independently. Since it is still an early stage in the plan, the family hasn't made choices of major, country and university yet.

Regarding major, the student is aiming at business-related majors or interpreting.

Regarding country, the family is looking at the US, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. Among these countries, Australia and America were preferred because: for Australia, it has reasonable tuition fees and living costs, good education and living conditions, and the student has friends studying there; for America, the family has relatives living here, and thus the student can receive good support if she goes there.

Regarding university, the student will be looking institutions that have her preferred major, reasonable costs, appropriate teaching methods, and employment opportunities after graduation. For the parents, they agree with her, and also care about length of the course, social conditions, climate and safety.

The father was thinking about moving the student to another senior high school that has less academically rigid syllabus, so that the student would have more time studying English and preparing for her overseas education plan.

Information sources included education fairs, university representatives, overseas relatives, and parents' friends whose offspring are studying overseas.

## HCM – 09

The interview was conducted with a university Year 1 student. He has spent 12 years studying at an international high school in Vietnam and, since high school, his parents have been talking with him about studying overseas at the tertiary level. His older sister went to Switzerland for studying and later settling down, and she plays an important role in facilitating the whole plan for him. The idea is intriguing because overseas qualifications are better valued, domestic education has weaknesses, and the student wants to go out and experience new things.

The decision to go was made by the family all together, based on the foundation of support and encouragement of parents and siblings. Even though the student appears to be the leading decision maker, his parents' and sister's opinions are influential. The family decides major, country and then university.

Regarding major, the student originally liked hospitality, yet due to parents' opinions, he changed to international business.

Regarding country, Switzerland was considered due to the original preferred major, for which Switzerland is globally famous. When the student changed the major, he kept the country because he likes Europe, which allows him to visit surrounding countries, thereby experiencing and learning new cultures. He also like the quality of education of Switzerland.

Regarding university, his sister was in charge of searching for information and narrowing down university options, based on the following criteria: availability of preferred major, has English programs for international students, appropriate tuition fees, good studying environment, appropriate entry requirements, and close to sister's house. The student and his sister worked together to choose university. He had been accepted and the next step was applying for visa.

The visa application process took about 4 or 5 months to complete. His mother helped him prepare financial statements, while his sister overseas prepared guardianship documents, as required by the Swiss immigration office.

Information sources included sister living overseas, university website, feedback/review of lecturers/students over there.

*Update from the second interview:* There was a small delay in the visa application process, but the student has completed his visa application and is waiting for the result at the time of the second interview.

The interview was conducted with a Year 11 student and his father. The idea came from the father, who started planning for the student's overseas study from the beginning of senior high school. His father realises the weaknesses of domestic education, and sees that overseas studying allows his son to have better knowledge and experience better teaching methods, he will have better chances of getting good employment after graduation, and also a chance to teach himself necessary soft skills. The student also likes the idea because he wants to experience new cultures.

The decision to go is a consensus of the family, based on the lead of the father. They decide country, university and then major. Cost/scholarship is the overarching criterion influencing all decisions of country and university.

Regarding country, the family hasn't got a final choice, and currently they have Germany and Finland as the top two options. The father likes Europe, especially these two countries, because of: affordable cost, good living environment and education quality. The father wants his son to study engineering/technology, and Europe is good at teaching engineering/technology, especially Germany. The student also shares this preference, as he wants to experience a place with such a long-established culture, and also he likes European people. The family also eliminates certain options like Japan, Korea and Singapore due to the cultural similarity among these Asian countries.

At the moment, the student is studying for both Germany and Finland, with Germany as no.1 option due to its superior education quality, good living environment and more moderate climate. However, these are not fixed choices, and an eliminated option such as Japan could be selected if the student won a good scholarship from this country.

Information sources included Finnish and German centres, parents' friends, student's friends, websites about studying overseas, university alumni and education fair.

*Update from the second interview:* father and son have finalised their choice of country to be Finland, despite their original preference of Germany. The reasons were that Germany no longer has a free tuition fee policy for international students, and the student needs to have a German language certificate, which takes at least a year to prepare. Regarding major, the student has discussed with his father and finalised mechatronics to be the major. He got this idea of major after receiving advice from his father's friends. Regarding institution, the student has not selected any particular university but he is aiming at applied science universities.



## HCM – 12

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student. The idea first came from parents, who wanted the student to study abroad or at least enrol in an international university in Vietnam, instead of entering domestic universities due to the bad quality of Vietnamese education. They also encouraged the student to study business-related majors to fit their fields of work, and the student selected a major that is not taught in Vietnam, which led to the decision to go abroad.

The decision to go was made by the family: parents prefer international education and the student is keen to go. During the discussion, the student actually convinced her parents that overseas education is the best option for her. They select major, country, city and university.

Regarding major, the parents advised the student to change her original preference of major to fit the parents' fields of work. The choice of major was later made by the student.

Regarding country, the parents first preferred Canada due to having relatives living there, yet later this was changed to Australia by the student. The criteria for choosing Australia: good education, world-wide famous universities, reasonable tuition fees, support policies for international students, and many people graduating from Australia find good employment in Vietnam.

Regarding city, the student selected Melbourne because it's a large but peaceful city, and doesn't have a big Vietnamese community. Regarding university, there were three universities considered, and the final one was selected for application based on the following criteria: well-known, offering the preferred major, matching the student's ability, reasonable tuition fees and is located in Melbourne.

Information sources included mainly IDP, student's friend who studied in Australia, education fair, Internet and social media.

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student. He is studying at a domestic senior high school in Ho Chi Minh City. The idea first came about with his mother during Year 10, because she doesn't like the quality of the domestic education system and the difficulty of university graduates in finding employment, yet at that time he wasn't sure whether he wanted to go. His father also wants him to be independent, and the student himself wants to experience new things. Later on, his aspiration has grown stronger, and at the end of Year 11, after talking with his cousin who is studying hospitality in Switzerland, he decided to pursue overseas education after completing senior high school.

The decision to go was made by the student, based on the idea initiated by his mother. Parents and the student are directly involved member in this plan. The student selects major, country and university.

Regarding major, the student decided to study hospitality.

Regarding country, at first his mother preferred the US and Australia. His mother has a friend living in Australia so she wants to have somebody taking care of the student during his early time living overseas. However, hospitality is not really well taught in either America or Australia, so the student looked for other countries, and ended up with Switzerland, the most famous country in teaching this major. Despite its high cost, Switzerland is considered the first option because there are specialised institutions for teaching hospitality and these universities provide paid internships during studying. The student considered Switzerland to be the best place to study hospitality.

Regarding university, the student selected a hospitality-specialised institution based on the following criteria: tuition fee, appropriate teaching programme, quality of education, internship and employment opportunity, and campus facilities.

Information sources included the student's cousin who is studying hospitality in Switzerland (the main source of information), university websites, ranking websites, overseas education websites, alumni reviews, education fair and agency.

*Update from the second interview:* Regarding major, the student has changed his focus slightly, from hospitality operations to hospitality management, which led to a change of institution. However, since both the old and new universities belong to the same group of hospitality institutions, the change was easy. Regarding the visa application,

the student used services from an agency, and his mother helped him getting financial statements. It took him around four to five months to complete the whole visa application process.

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student and her father. She has just completed her high school in Singapore and is preparing to go abroad for university. The idea first emerged within the family since junior high school, after she got into a Vietnamese high school that has a very strong tradition of students going overseas. She then got a scholarship to study high school in Singapore, which made the idea even clearer.

The family decides countries, major and then institution.

Regarding country, the family has five criteria: major availability, suitable life and culture, employment and settling opportunities after graduation, reasonable tuition and living cost, and safety. They considered a number of countries, including Singapore, the US, Australia, Netherlands and Germany, then narrowed down to Canada because it best satisfies all five above criteria. Employment and settling opportunity, through the process of considering countries, became the most important criterion.

Regarding major, they have a list of majors to be considered, and they ended up applying to one university for each major.

The choice of university is tied very closely to the choice of city/region, because each accepted university is located in a different city. At this stage, the most important criteria are living costs, society, and employment and settling opportunities. The final university for enrolment was selected because it offers the preferred major, its host city is famous for cultural values and a multi-racial society, and it is easier to find job and settle down in Quebec, despite Quebec's climate being more harsh compared to other cities/regions in Canada. This choice was significantly influenced at the very end by parents' friend and university representative.

This family clearly show that they have two plans going at the same time: a studying plan and a settling plan, of which the latter seems to be even more important than the former. At the moment, the family is waiting to receive all necessary documents for visa application.

*Update from the second interview:* The visa application took about two months to complete. During this process, parents helped student in preparing financial statements as parts of the application documents.

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student and his mother. His parents used to study overseas, so the idea emerged a long time ago with them and became serious when he entered senior high school. The parents do not like Vietnamese education and prefer a more comprehensively developed studying environment. The student was originally unsure about the idea, but later through his own experience, realised the weaknesses of domestic study and came round to the idea. The decision to go was made by the student, based on the consensus between parents and student through discussion and encouragement.

The family chooses major, country and institution. The critical criterion is the availability of scholarship/financial aid. The family originally preferred the US because it's a common destination, and American education and qualifications are globally famous and recognised. Later on Canada became the no.1 option because it has good education, more appropriate tuition fees (compared to the US), easier entry requirements (compared to the US), good living environment, and is an English-speaking country.

Regarding major, there are two criteria: it must fit his abilities and make him able to find a job.

Regarding university, the criteria are: good with preferred major, good living environment, and appropriate tuition fees. The student was accepted by a Canadian university. The final university for enrolment was selected because it has the preferred qualification available, it's more famous in teaching the preferred major, the student likes the hosted city, and the family has friends living in the hosted city.

The family uses university websites and Facebook groups of parents of Vietnamese students studying overseas as main sources for information. The mother trusts people in those Facebook groups as she considers their sharing as genuine. The family does not really use an education fair or agency.

The student is waiting to have all required academic documents for applying for his visa.

*Update from the second interview:* The family proceeded to the visa application stage. During this stage, the mother helped getting financial statements, while the student prepared all academic documents. Also, the student did get some advice and instruction

from an online forum of people who study/migrate to Canada. The visa application process took about two months to complete.

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student and his mother. He is studying at a private senior high school that follows the American style because his parents did not want him to study in a Vietnamese high school. The mother used to study overseas and now works in higher education in Vietnam so she has a chance to see the weaknesses of domestic education, and at the same time experiences the better quality of overseas education. The student is also aware of the differences between the Vietnamese and overseas life.

Within the family, there are parents, older brother and the student who directly participate in the discussion. The final decision is said to be made by the student, based on the guidance, advice and encouragement of his parents and brother. The mother is the most active person throughout the process. The family decides the country, institution and then major, because the choice of major is considered to be difficult. The critical criterion is the availability of scholarship/financial aid.

Regarding the country, the family chose the US because they are most exposed to it, due to the material and connections available at the student's high school. Other countries were thought of at some point, but never really became serious options. Regarding the university, the student applied to three institutions and was accepted by all three.

- University 1: best ranked, better reputation, good Vietnamese community on campus, scholarship offered, slightly higher tuition fee
- University 2: good with teaching business, only a regional university, mother's former university, scholarship offered
- University 3: small, not really good with teaching business, scholarship offered

Regarding major, the student is leaning toward marketing, which was suggested by his mother and brother, so being good with teaching business is an important criterion. University 1 was preferred by the mother, yet the student finally chose university 2, because he believe it has the best society for him in which to live, study and progress. The mother is happy with his choice, because this is also her old university. The student was waiting for the result of his scholarship application from University 2.

Regarding major, the student realised that marketing might not be suitable for him, and thus it may not be the final choice, even though he did put marketing on his applications.

Next step was applying for visa, which took about two months to complete. During this stage, the mother helped out in preparing financial statements.

*Update from the second interview:* after the 1st interview, the student received the scholarship result from University 2. He then compared the three institution options, in terms of tuition fees after deducting scholarship, university and class sizes, support services, and friendliness of people in hosted city, to pick out University 2 for enrolment. University 1 is more academically famous, with higher ranking and educational quality, yet was eliminated because of high tuition fees and low level of friendliness of people at hosted city. Tuition fee is the main criterion affecting the student's final choice of university for enrolment.



The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student and her mother. She is studying at a private senior high school that follows the American style because her parents did not want her to study in a Vietnamese high school. The idea emerged in the student during Year 5, and was learned from her parents, who also want her to study overseas because they do not like the Vietnamese education. The student originally preferred the US, due to her exposure to American culture through movies and high school, despite her parents' preference toward Australia. The decision to go is a consensus within the family, based on the discussion between parents and student, as well as the encouragement received by the student from teachers and classmates at school.

The family chooses country, major and then institution. The family discussed the choice of country, and left the choice of major and university for the student. The critical criterion is the availability of scholarship/financial aid.

Despite the student's original preference toward the US, her mom talked her into adding Canada into the country list, because it would increase the chance of her going overseas. Canada has lower costs, and it's easier to find part-time jobs while studying, as well as full-time jobs for settling down after graduation in Canada.

Regarding major, she was influenced by her high school and high school teachers. Regarding university, her criteria are: fit her ability, entry requirements, tuition fees and scholarships, good with preferred major, the number of students, campus location and facilities, and employment opportunity after graduation. She applied to five or six universities, which belong to three types of university: dream university, potential university, and 100% sure university, as regards the chance of being accepted.

The final university for enrolment was selected mainly due to the cost factor, despite its being behind other options regarding other criteria. It best matches the budget set out by parents, even though it is not the student's no.1 choice. Besides, her mom was convinced by her friend who studied at this university that it is a good university, has a peaceful environment and low living costs.

*Update from the second interview:* the process went as planned, the student completed the enrolment, accepted her scholarship offer, and received a visa.

The interview was conducted with a Year 11 student and her mother. He is studying at a Vietnamese high school in Hanoi for gifted students that has a tradition of graduates going overseas for tertiary education. The idea first emerged in the student when he was a child, by watching movies and coming up with questions about overseas life, and it became his aspiration. The high school environment helps making the aspiration firmer, and now the student is determined to go after graduation. He recognises the weaknesses of domestic education, and the advancements of overseas education both for studying and for future employment.

The mother doesn't want him to go, since he's the only child, but supports his aspiration, and she also recognises issues with living and studying in Vietnam. The decision was made by the student, fully supported by the mother. They select country, major and (soon to be) university. The critical criterion is the availability of scholarships/aid.

Regarding country, the student prefers the US because: he is personally interested and curious about US life, it has the best education and provides many scholarships, and it is the most popular destination for education in Hanoi, which allows the student to easily get info from experienced people. Australia and Canada were also added into consideration by the mother, for the purpose of opportunity to settle down, yet eliminated, due to their not providing scholarships; also the student was already in the process of preparing to go to the US when he thought of Australia and Canada. The US has been finalised as the destination.

Regarding major, the student prefers business-related majors and law, yet the mother advised him to consider choosing majors that are advantageous for seeking employment and later settling down. The choice of major hasn't been finalised due to the conflict in the long-term goal of employment and settling.

Information sources included education fair, ranking websites, classmates, university websites, mother's friends whose students study overseas.

*Update from the second interview:* After discussing with his mother, the student has narrowed his choice of major down to two main majors: computer science and business administration, plus Chinese to be studied as a minor. Of these two main majors, he is more into computer science and, in case no good computer science university accepts him, he will choose a university with business administration. He abandoned law, even

though it was his original preference of major, due to a lower chance of getting employment in the future. Regarding institution, the student has narrowed his choice to about 17 universities to apply to, based on the following criteria: social conditions on campus and in hosted city, class size, type of university, tuition fees and financial aid, entry requirements, and preferred major availability.

The interview was conducted with a Year 11 student and her parents. She is studying at a Vietnamese high school for gifted students in Hanoi that has a tradition of graduates going overseas for tertiary education. The idea first emerged in the student when she was in primary school, and became serious around the beginning of senior high school. She doesn't like the domestic education and also her preferred major is not available in Vietnam.

Parents don't want to send the student abroad, but they support her aspiration. The decision to go was made by the student, based on discussion and the agreement of her parents. They select major, country and university. The critical criterion is cost/scholarship availability.

Regarding country, the student is open, and accepts any country that is the most economical option with good education. She personally like Britain, and Europe, but that was dropped due to high cost. Her current criteria are cost effectiveness, has the preferred major, has English-speaking programs, close to Vietnam and not the US. She thinks she doesn't fit with the society and lifestyle in the US, even though her parents prefer the US for the best education, having most chances to get scholarships, as well as an active society there. Taiwan were considered but dropped due to not having English-speaking programs. The current most satisfying option is Japan.

Regarding major, the student prefers psychology, although her parents worry whether she is mentally and physically strong enough to study and work well in this area.

Regarding university, the student has the following criteria: good quality, strong with preferred major, has English-speaking programs. For parents, they care about campus location, climate, student population and racial profile of host city, and safety.

Information sources included classmates' parents, parents' friends, education agency websites, education fair, student's classmates.

The interview was conducted with a Year 11 student and her parents. She is studying at a Vietnamese high school for gifted students in Hanoi that has a tradition of graduates going overseas for tertiary education. The idea was initiated by the parents when she was young, based on their understanding of the weaknesses of domestic education, and their aspiration for their daughter to have a comprehensive environment for development. The student adopted the idea, and it became her aspiration very early on, and the idea became even clearer when she got into the gifted senior high school.

The discussion happens within the family very naturally during dinners. The decision to go is by consensus within the family, with a contribution from parents, financially, and the student, in terms of having all the necessary preparation for the plan. The family selects major, country and then university.

Regarding country, cost is an important factor, and the criteria are: appropriate tuition fee, scholarship availability, good with the preferred major, has good universities, an English-speaking country, has the social characteristics that fit the student's preferences, and with a moderate climate. At the moment, the US is no.1 option, then the Netherlands, China and studying at an international university in Vietnam.

Regarding university, the criteria are: good with preferred major, good climate of hosting city/region, scholarship/financial aid availability, university ranking, campus facility, student profile, and social environment.

Information sources included parents' friends whose students study overseas, Facebook groups of parents of student studying overseas, feedback/review of current students/alumni of overseas universities, and education fair (not important).

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student and her mother. She is studying at a private senior high school that follows the American style, which has a positive impact on her educational aspiration. The idea emerged in the parents a long time ago, because they used to study overseas and thus recognised the weaknesses of Vietnamese education. The student is also aware of the issue of studying in Vietnam; hence her aspiration for overseas study has grown since senior high school. By the beginning of senior high school, she shared with her mom her aspiration and where she wants to go.

The decision to go was made by the student, based on the support and encouragement of her parents and old brother, who is studying overseas as well. The discussion happens within the family very naturally during dinners and other recreational occasions. The student selects major, country and then university.

Regarding country, the student first preferred the US, yet through her time at senior high school, she realised she does not fit with the American style of studying and living, and thus changed her aim to Europe. Her no.1 choice is the Netherlands, because it's in Europe, she likes the culture there, appropriate tuition fees, and the Netherlands uses English.

Regarding university, her criteria are: good with preferred major, type of university (research vs. applied), good ranking, located in a modern but peaceful city, good campus facilities, good student support services, appropriate tuition fees and scholarship. She was aiming for Erasmus, a university in Rotterdam city.

Information sources included educational consulting office at school, university representatives, classmates, overseas Vietnamese alumni, university websites, and ranking websites.

*Update from the second interview:* The student keeps the Netherlands as her choice of country, yet has had further consideration on institutions for application. She has finalised three universities for application, one of which is best preferred by the student due to the following criteria: good global reputation, high entry requirements, peaceful city, reasonable and living cost, despite her having a lower chance of getting scholarship. During the application process, she got help from her teachers and classmates at school in terms of reviewing her motivational letter and writing recommendation letters. At this stage, the family starts using services from an educational agency.

The interview was conducted with a Year 12 student and her father. She is studying at a Vietnamese high school for gifted students in Hanoi that has a tradition of graduates going overseas for tertiary education. The idea came from the student, as she does not want to study in Vietnam. According to her, the teaching style in Vietnam is too theoretical and does not suit her. She prefers a better education overseas, and also an international qualification is better for her finding job overseas or in Vietnam after graduation. Furthermore, the student wants to experience a new environment.

The decision to go was made by the family, as parents need to provide the necessary finance. Parents require the student to get a scholarship, otherwise she will have to study in Vietnam. The family decides country, university and major.

Regarding country, the student likes the US right from the beginning, because there are more scholarships available here, compared to other countries, and the US has many of the best universities in the world. The US is also a very popular destination for her classmates at school. The student has not considered any other country options.

Regarding university, the student was in charge of shortlisting universities for application. Institution criteria are: university ranking, campus location, campus studying environment, social safety of the hosting city, type of university, and ratio of international students within the campus. The student applied to 15 universities, of which six institutions accepted her. The student then discussed with her father to finalise the choice of university for enrolment. The father chooses Boise State University (BSU) straightaway, due to the higher chance of getting a scholarship, affordable tuition fees, acceptable quality, high number of Vietnamese students, and a good relationship he has with one faculty at BSU. According to the father, BSU is the most feasible option for his daughter. On the other hand, the student prefers another university, which: is a liberal arts instead of national university, has slightly higher ranking, is smaller in size with reasonable number of Vietnamese students, and higher tuition fees. Father and daughter are still discussing the choice of university for enrolment.

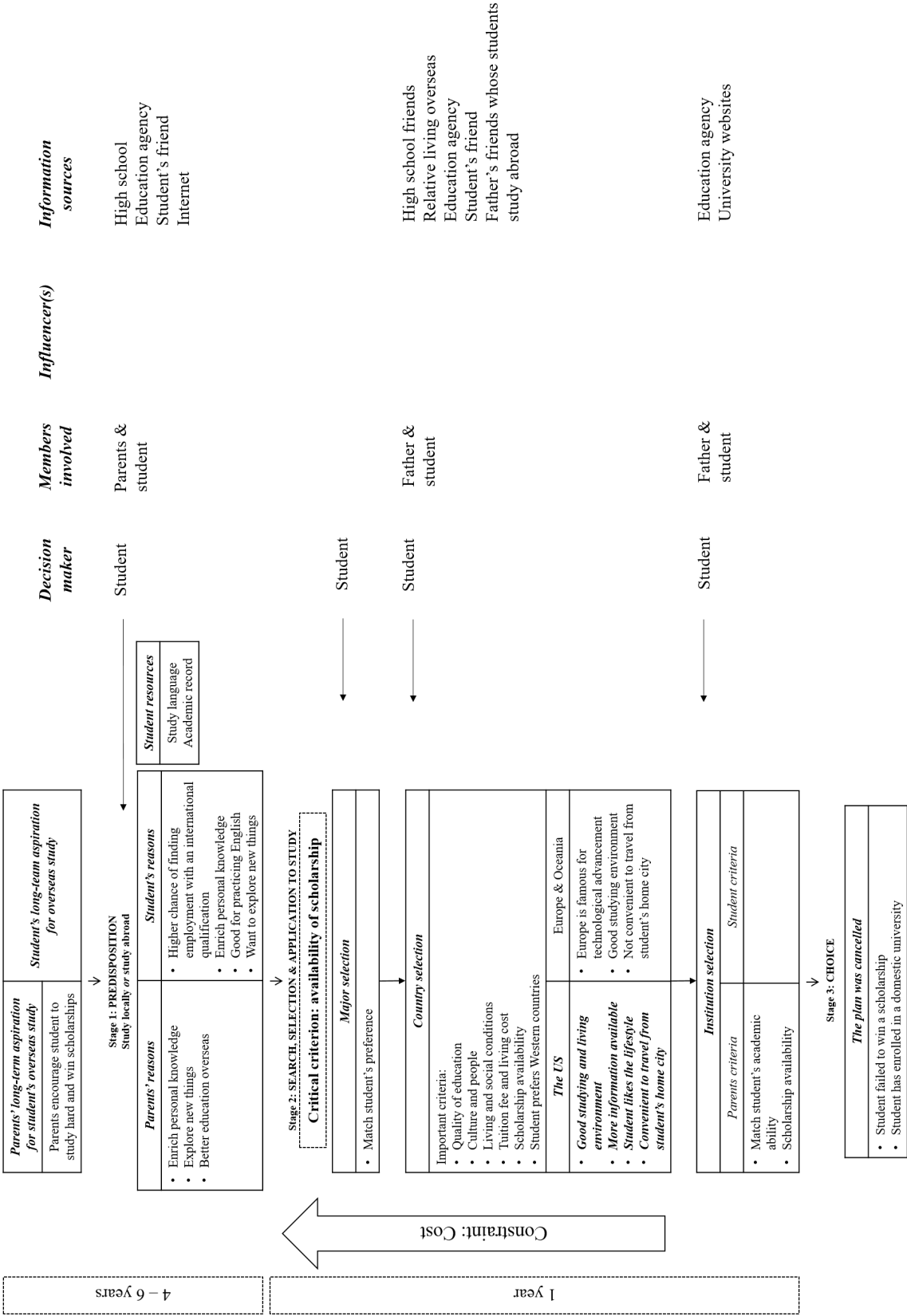
Information sources included father's colleagues, university ranking website, university website, student's friends, and university review websites. The student does not trust education agencies and fairs.

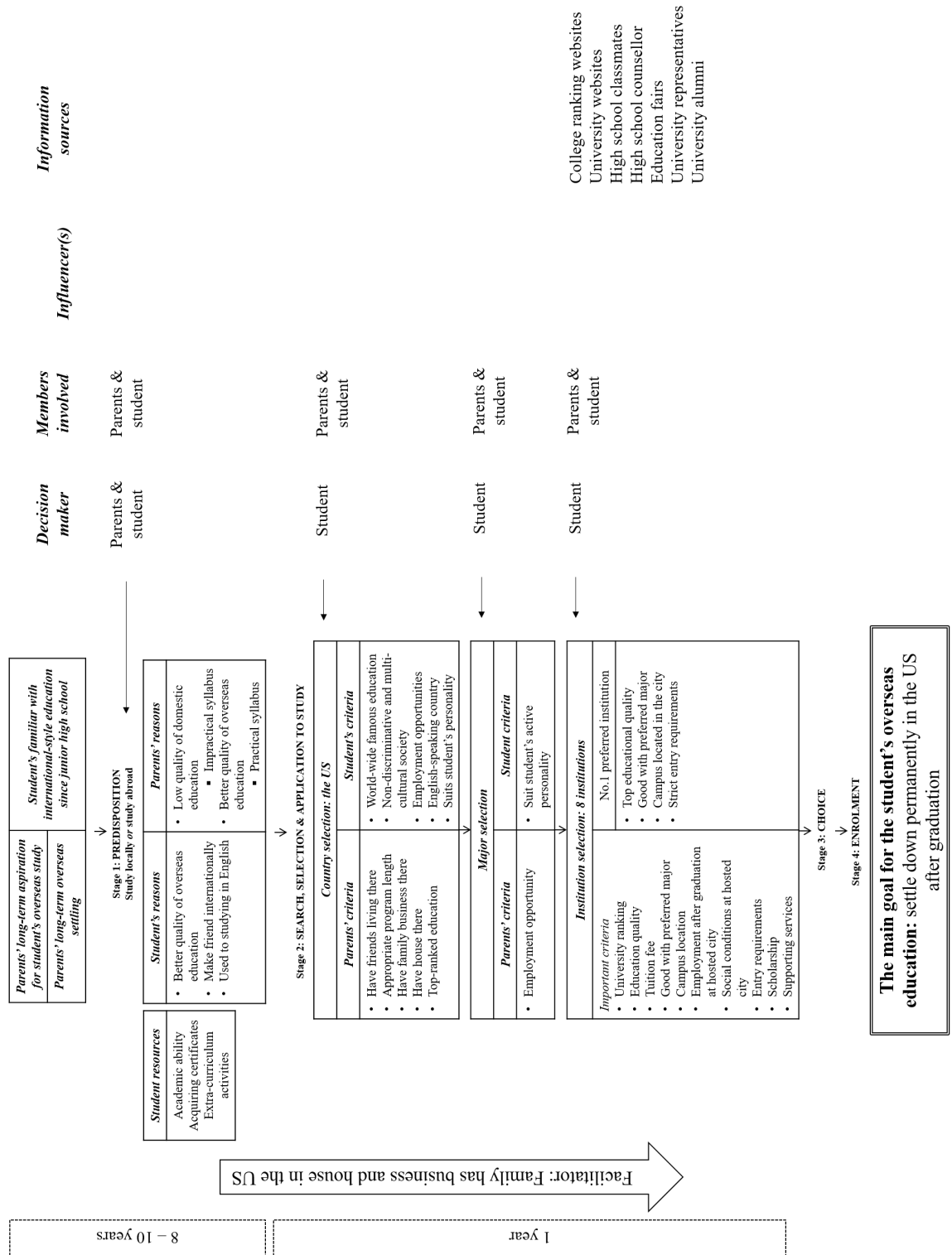
*Update from the second interview:* Father and daughter failed to settle conflicting preferences of university for enrolment. When the deadline was near, the father let student decide, and she proceeded to select her preferred university. She has put much effort into her application and, thus, she wants to choose an option that is worth such effort, compared to an easy option like BSU. Next step was applying for visa, and parents helped the student in preparing financial statements and making payment.

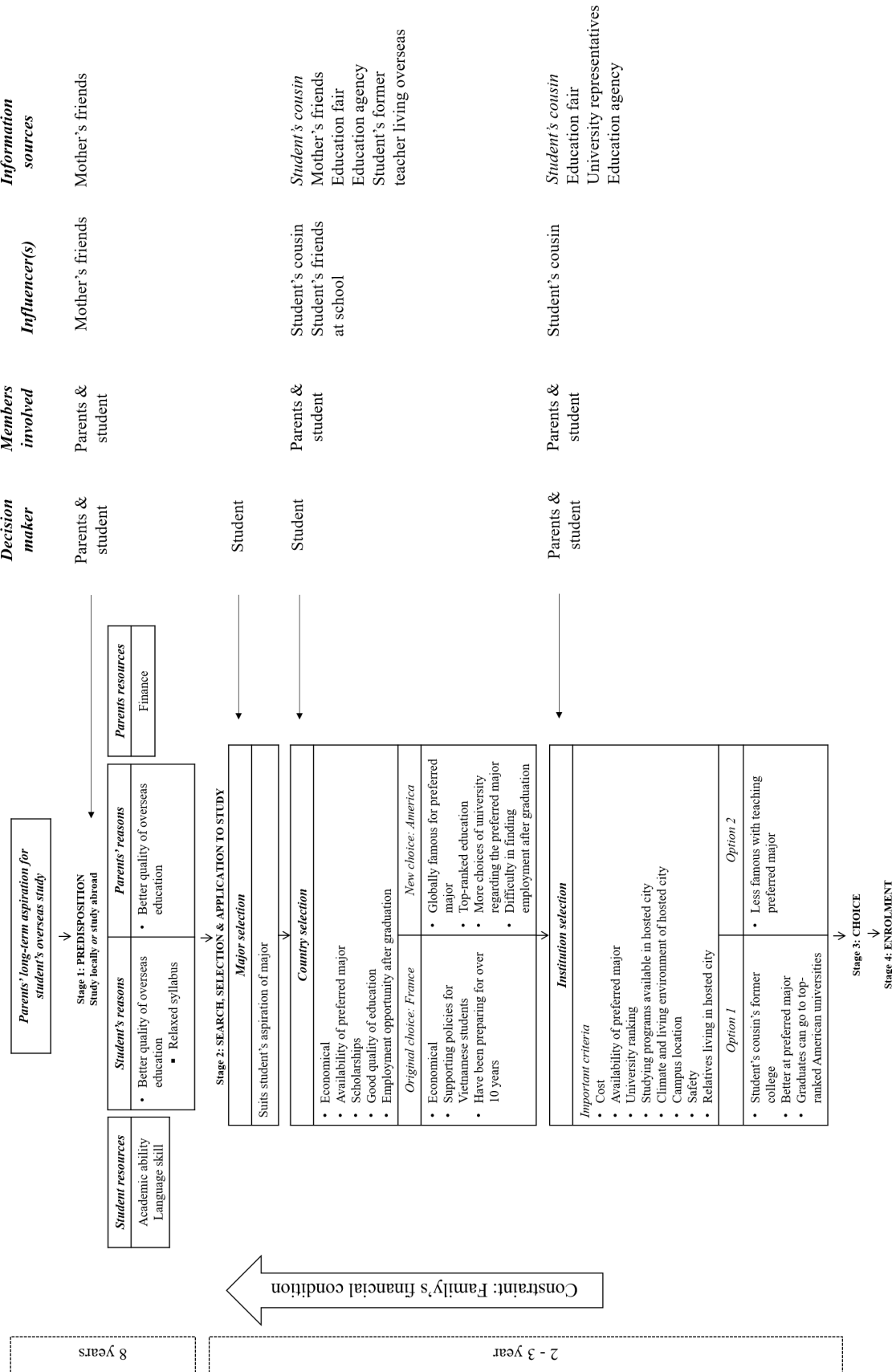


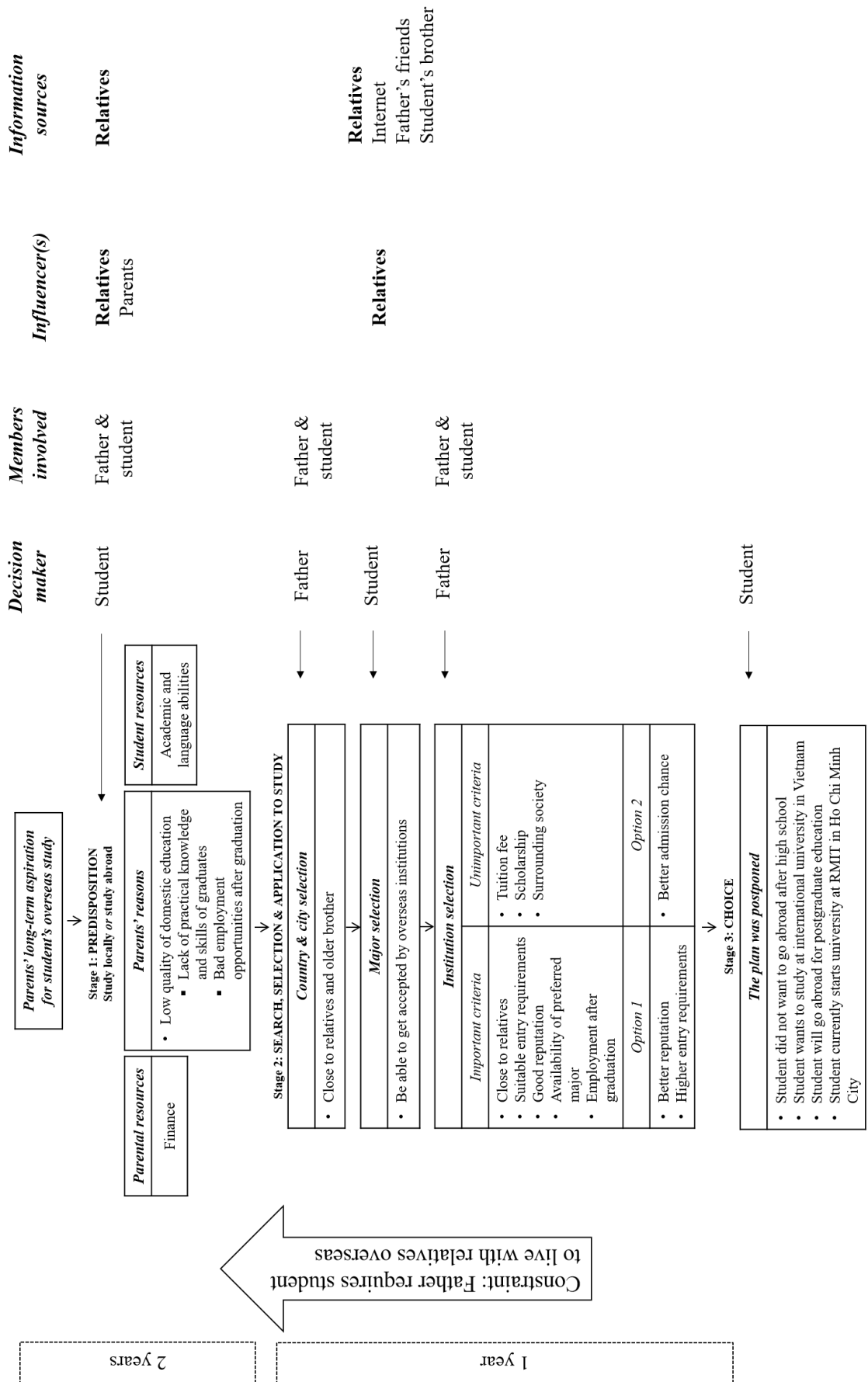
Appendix E Case Decision Maps

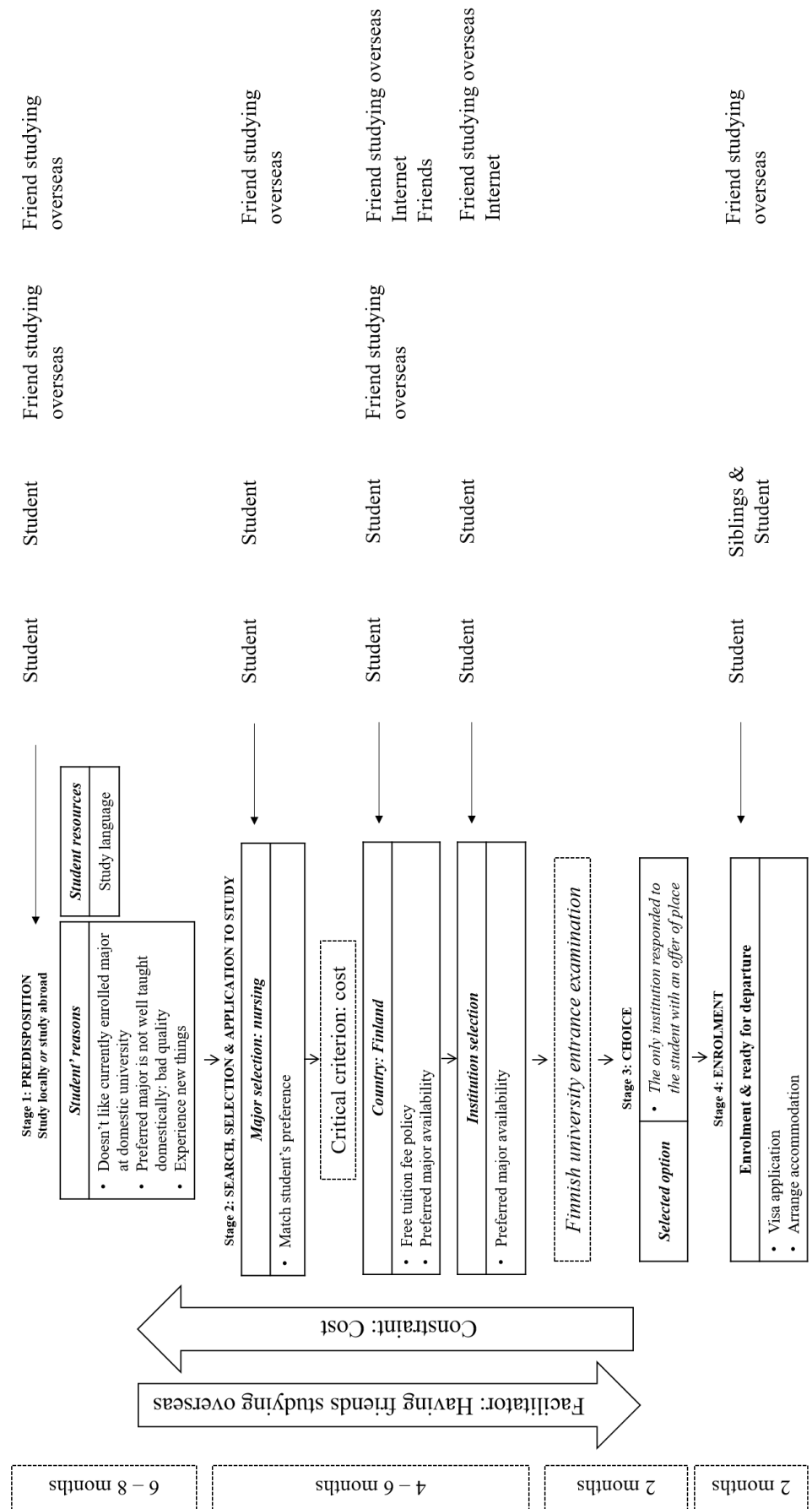
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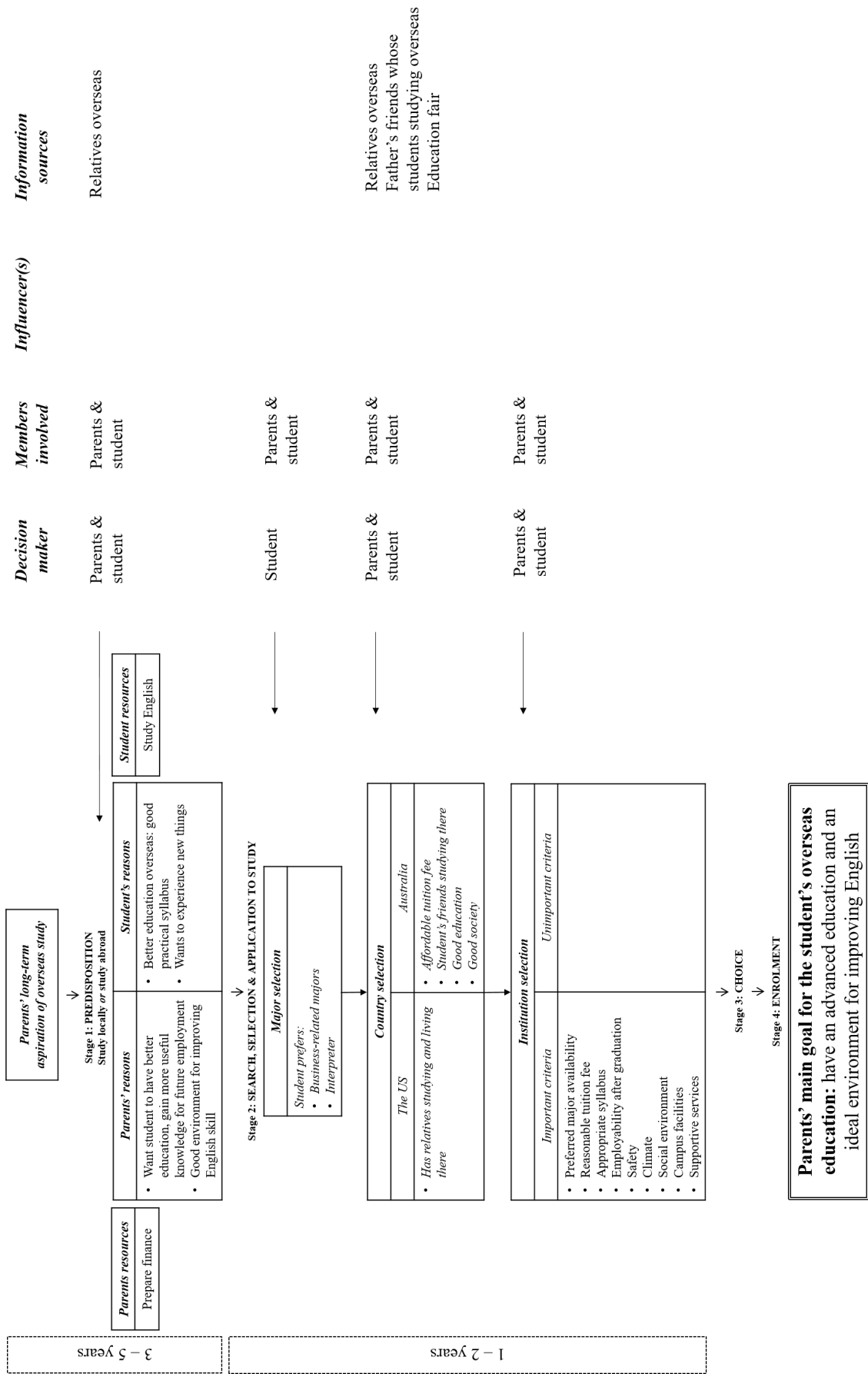


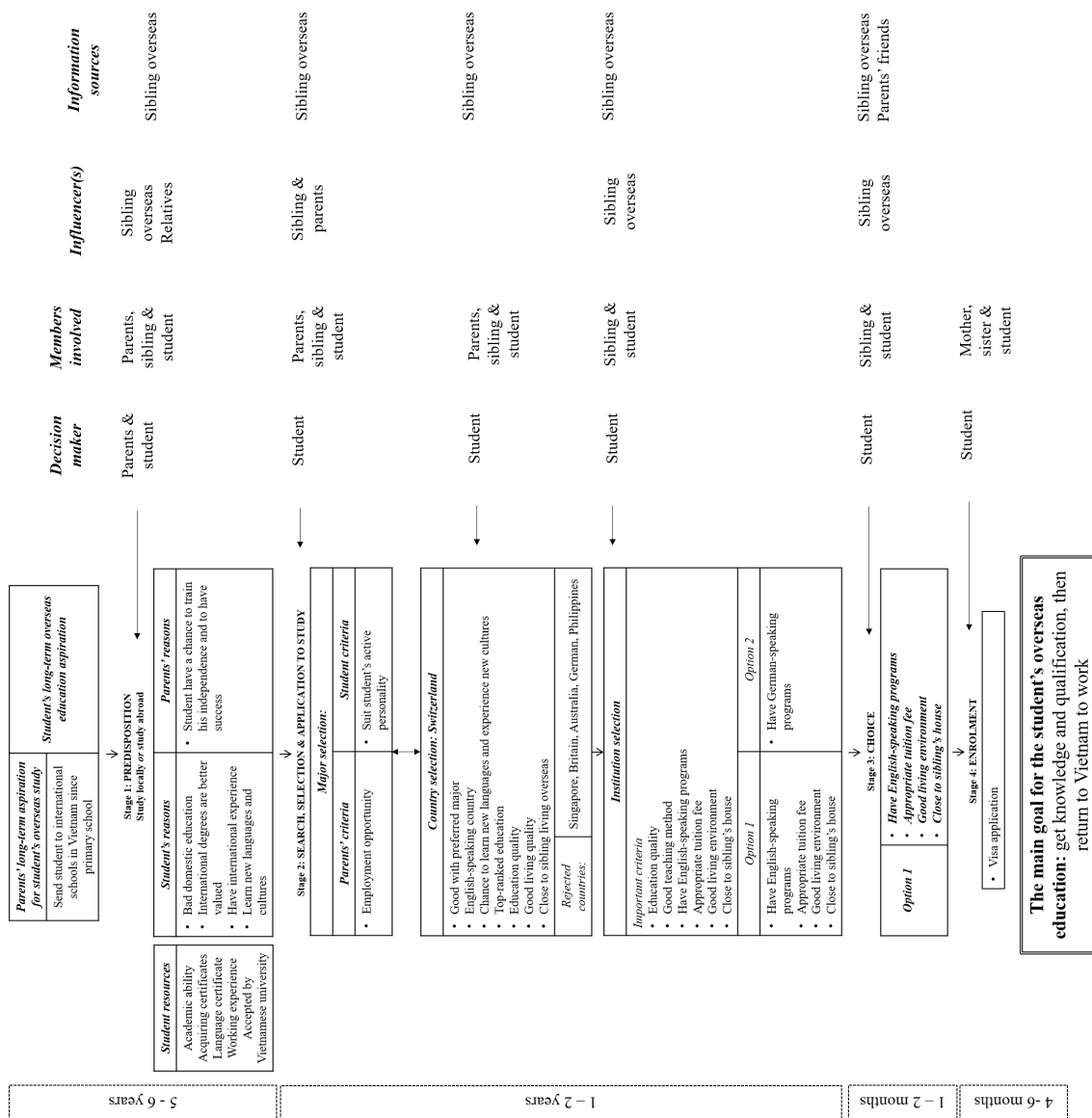


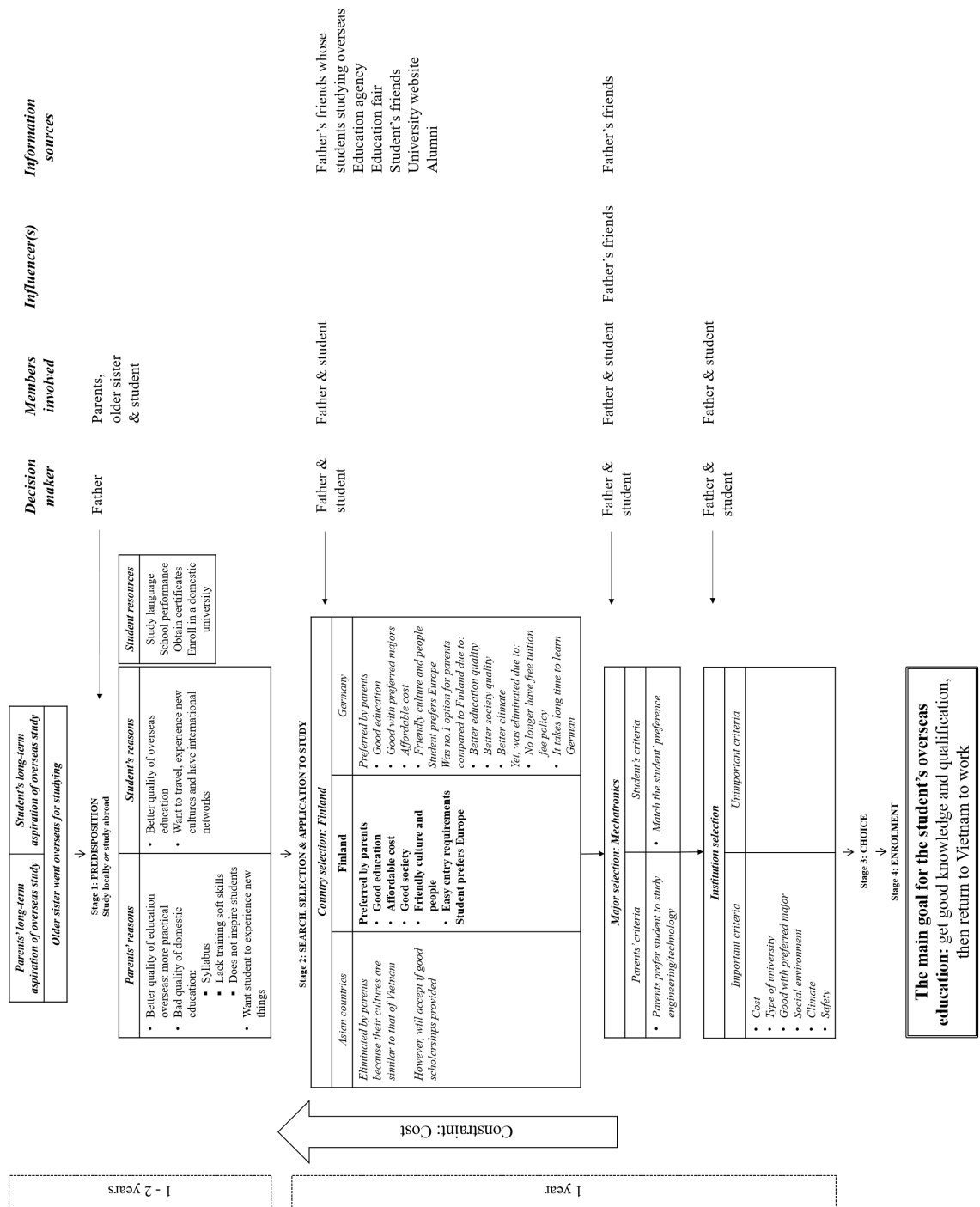




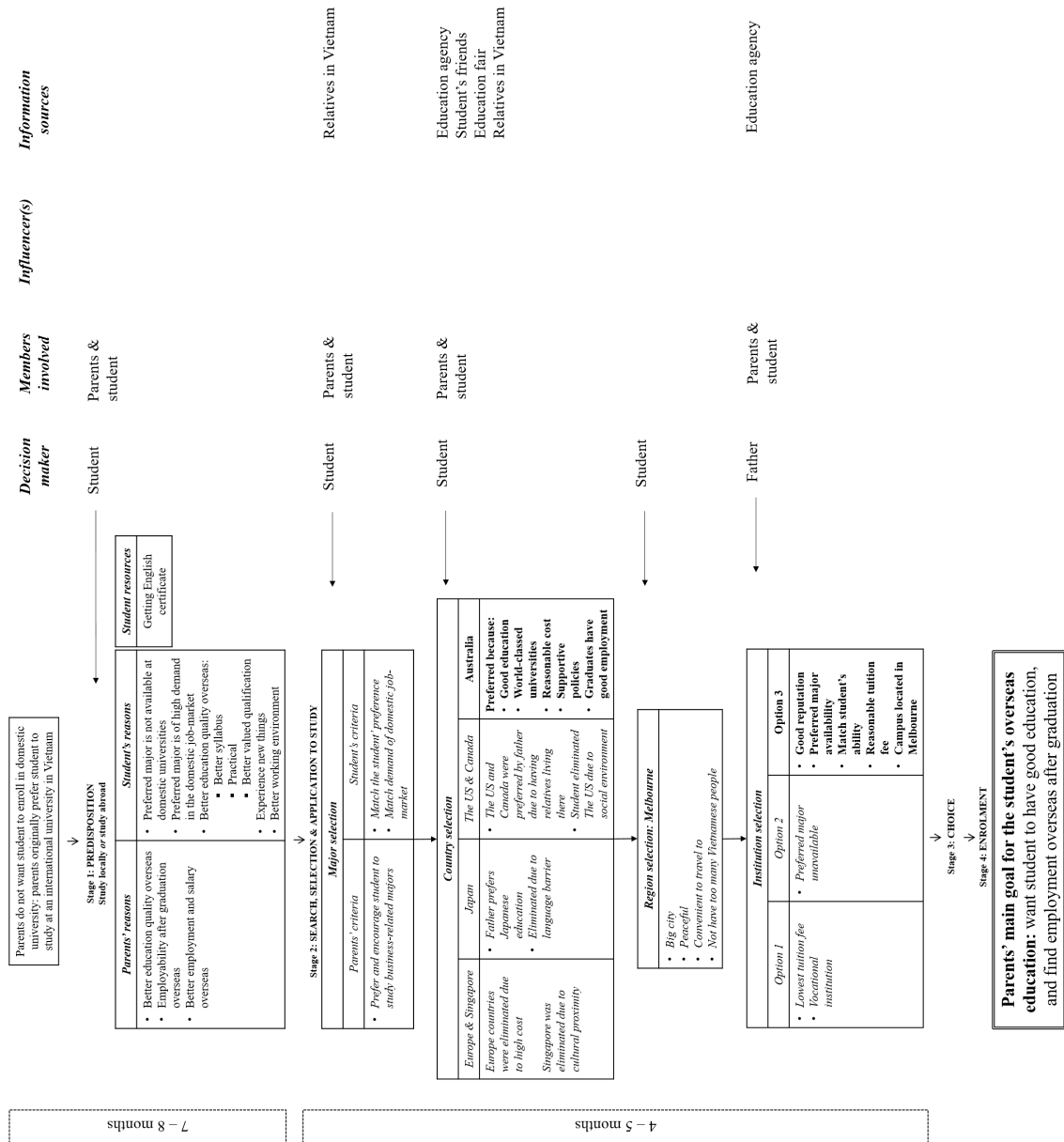


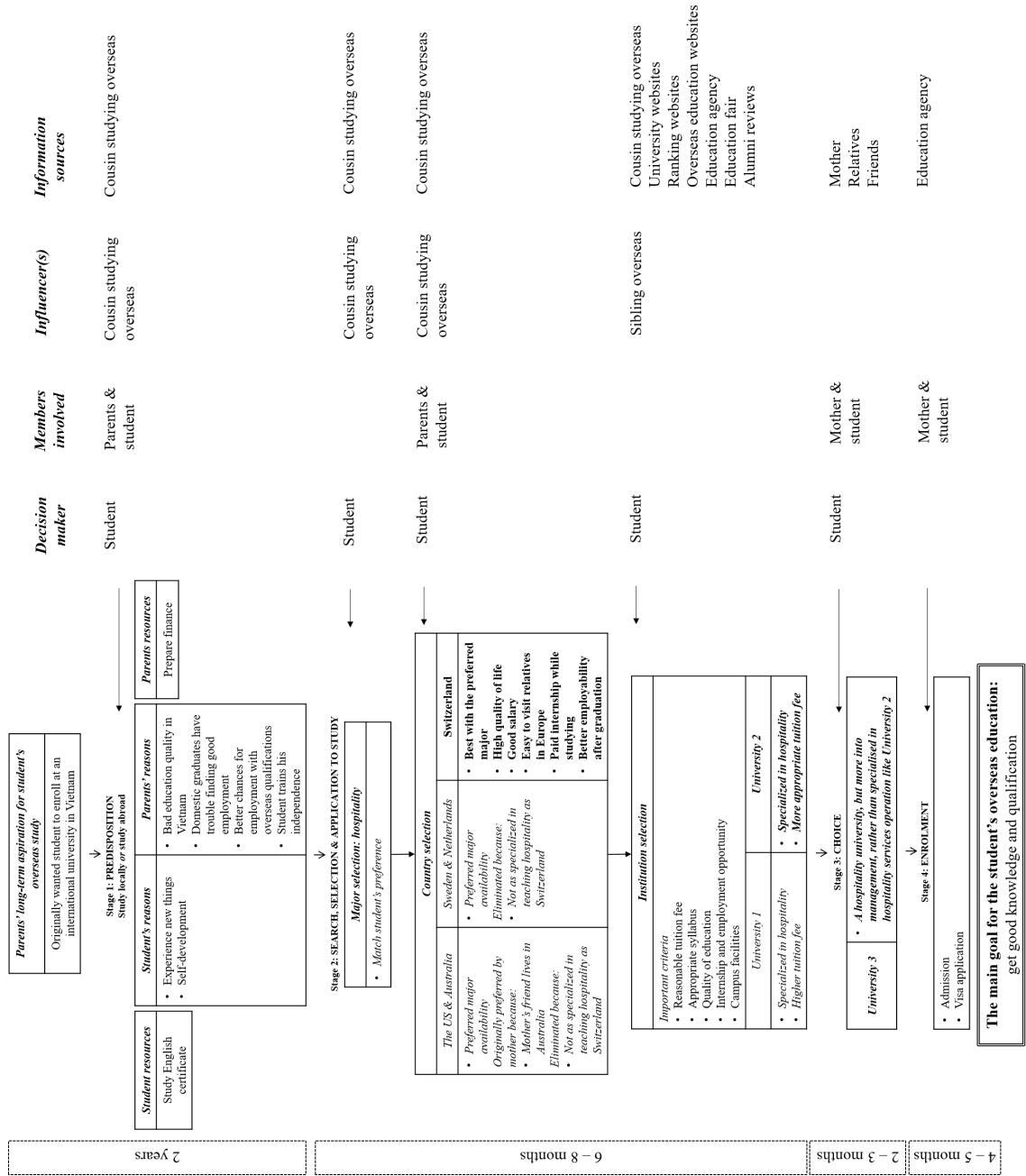


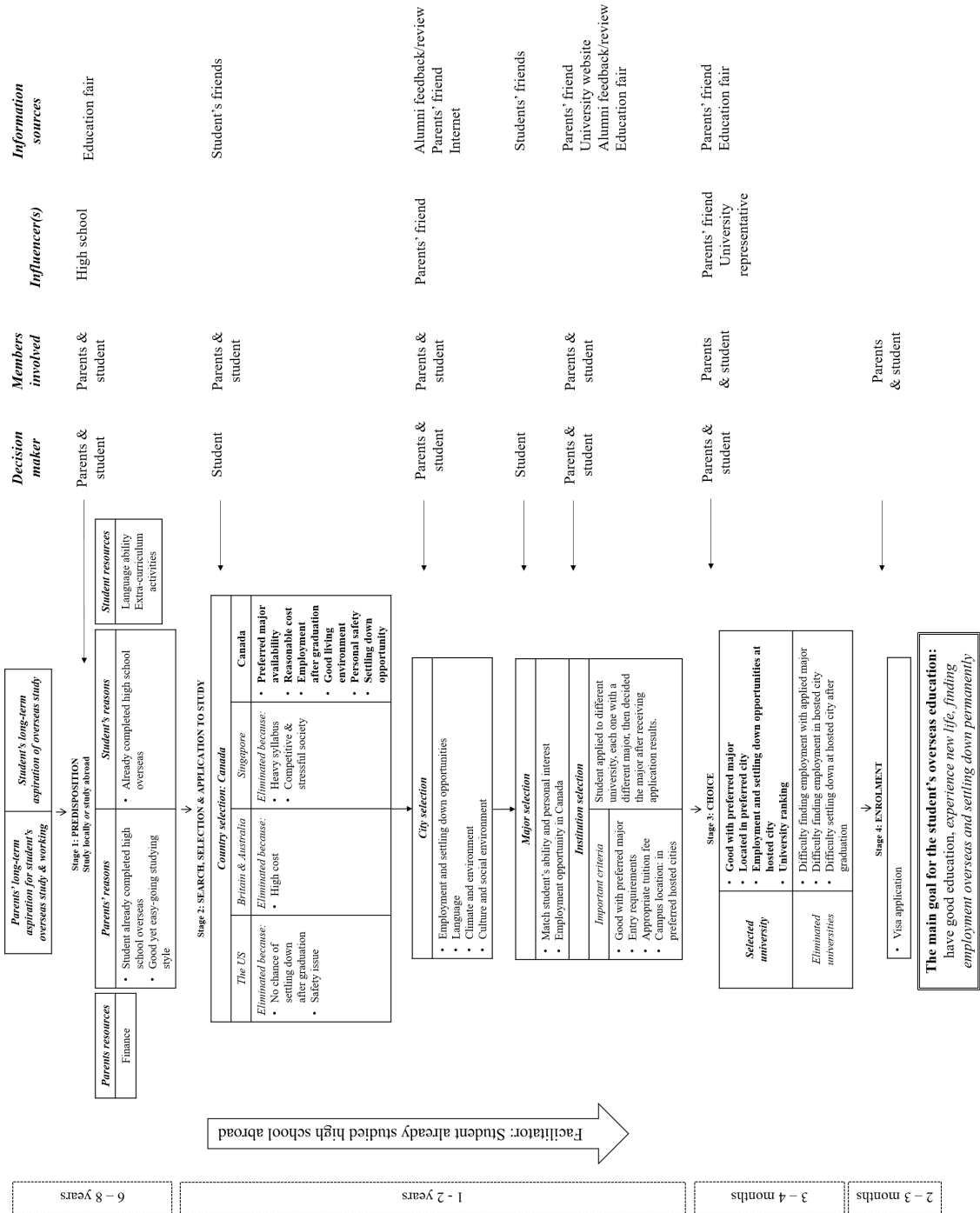


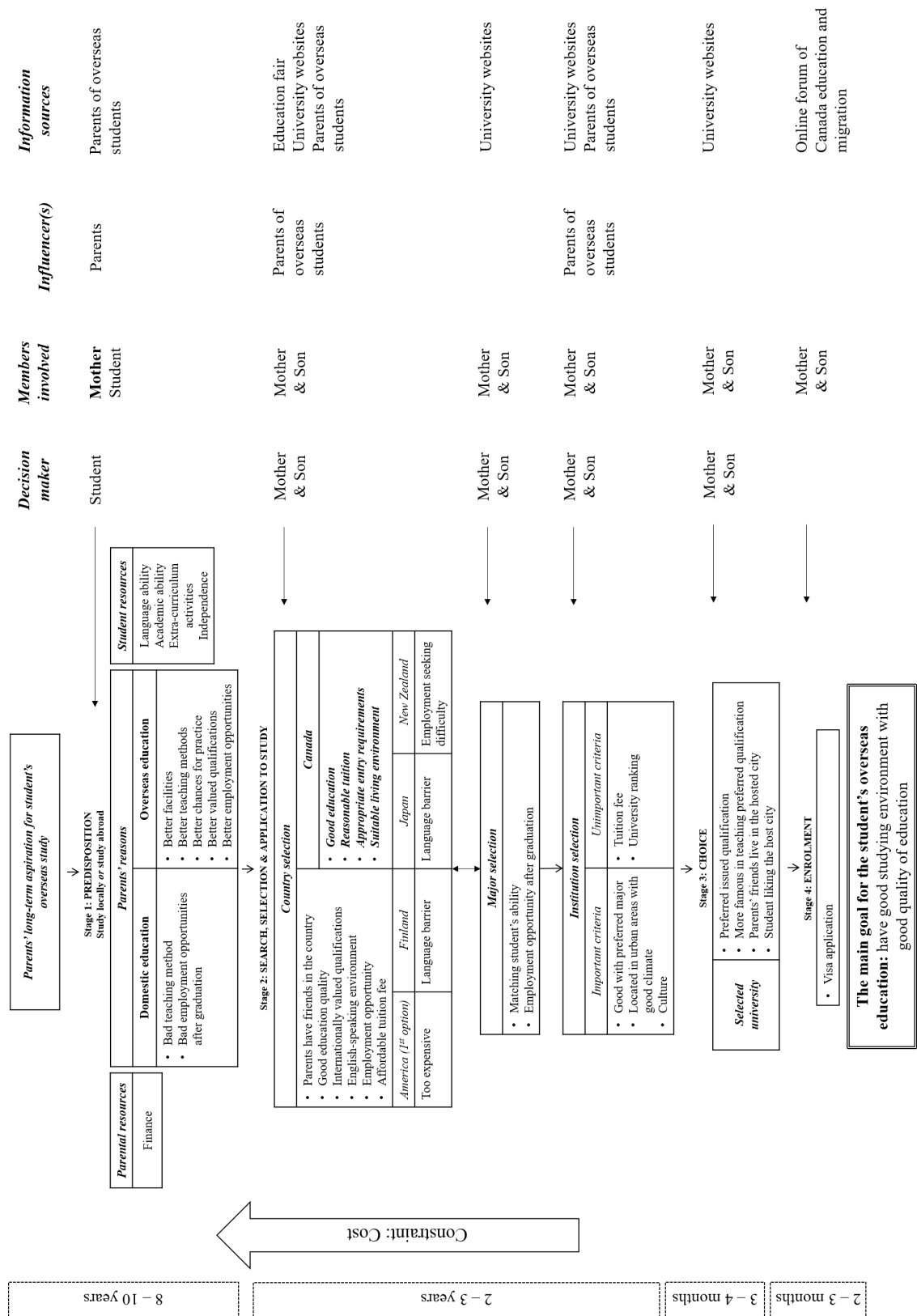


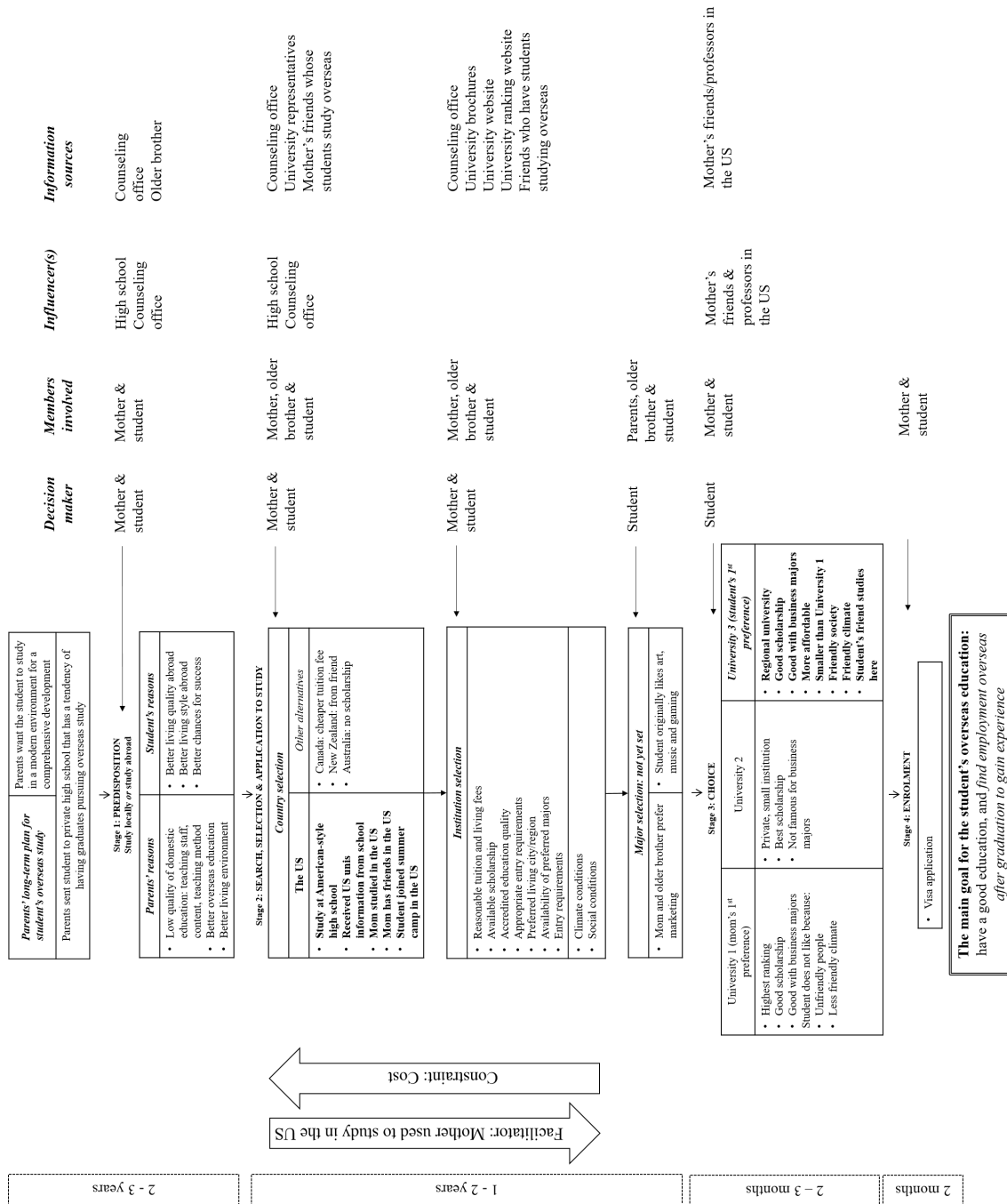


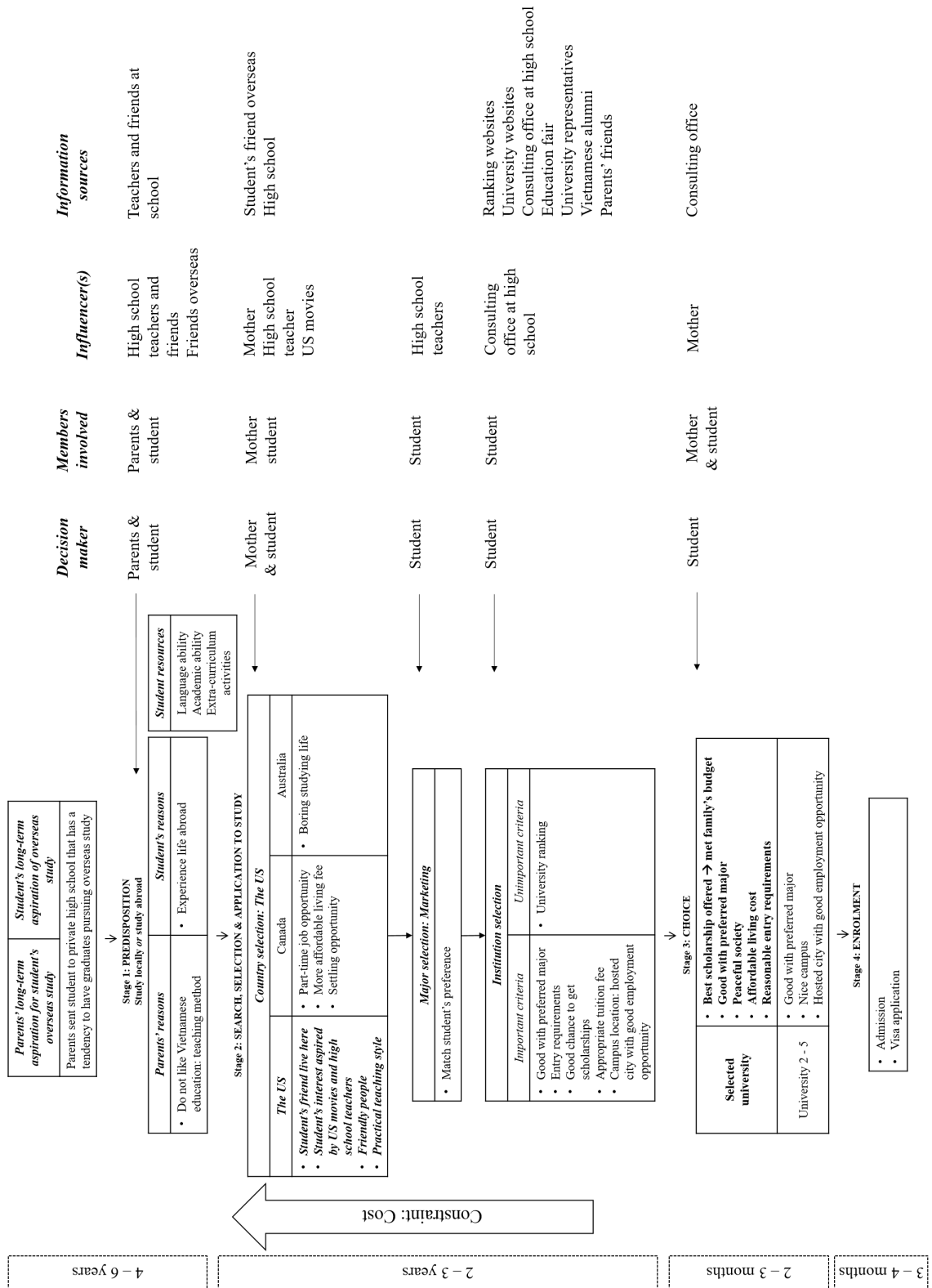


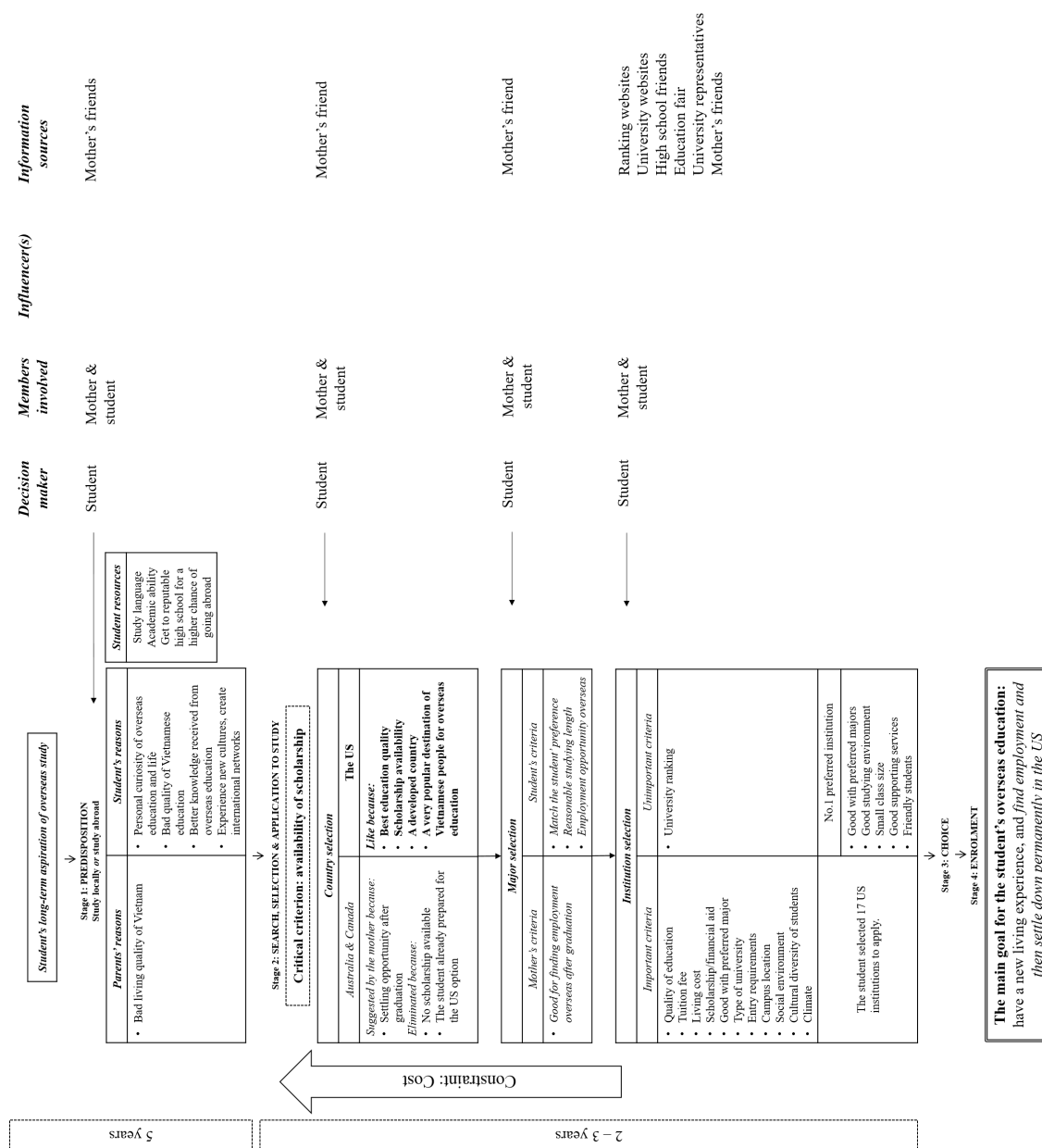


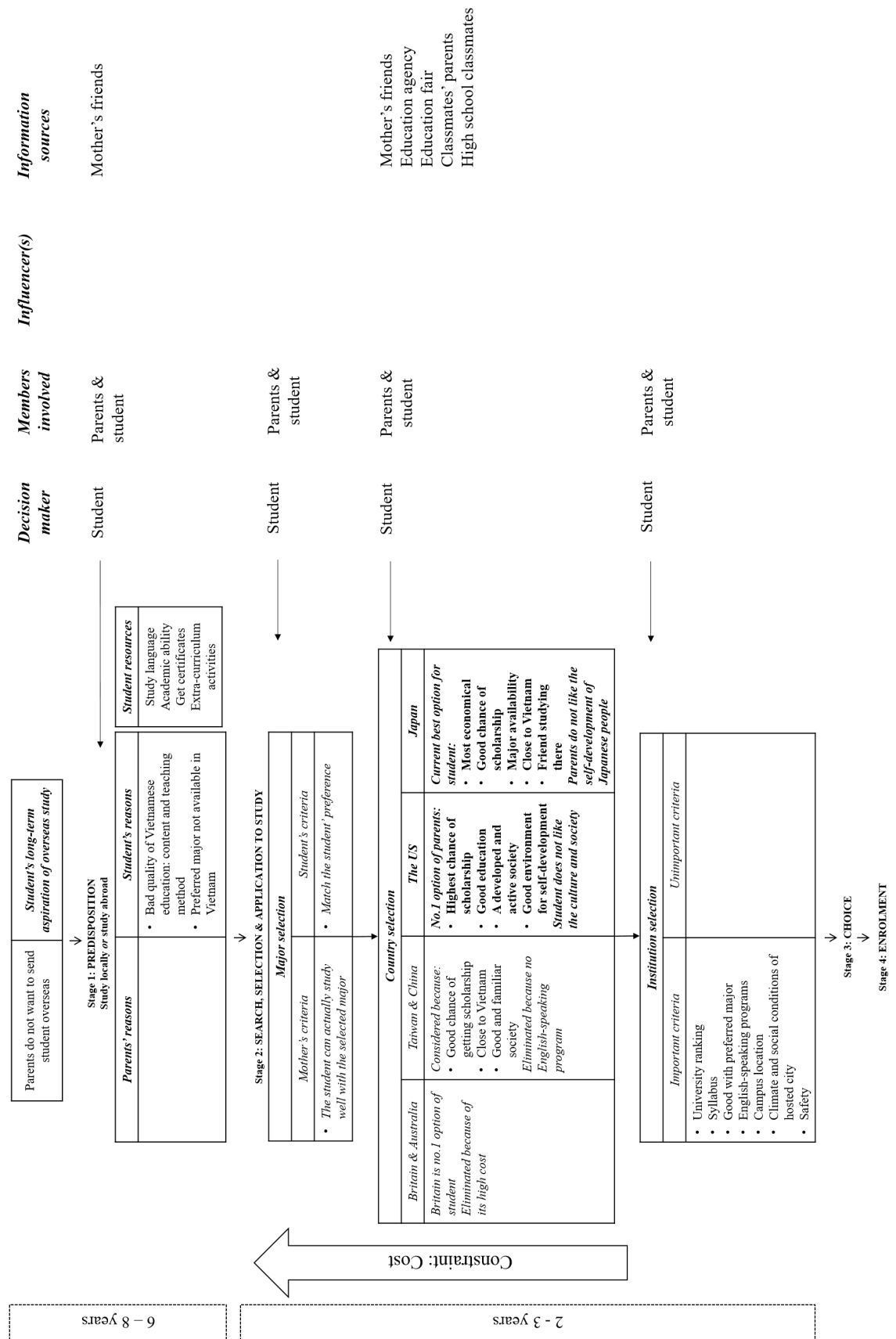




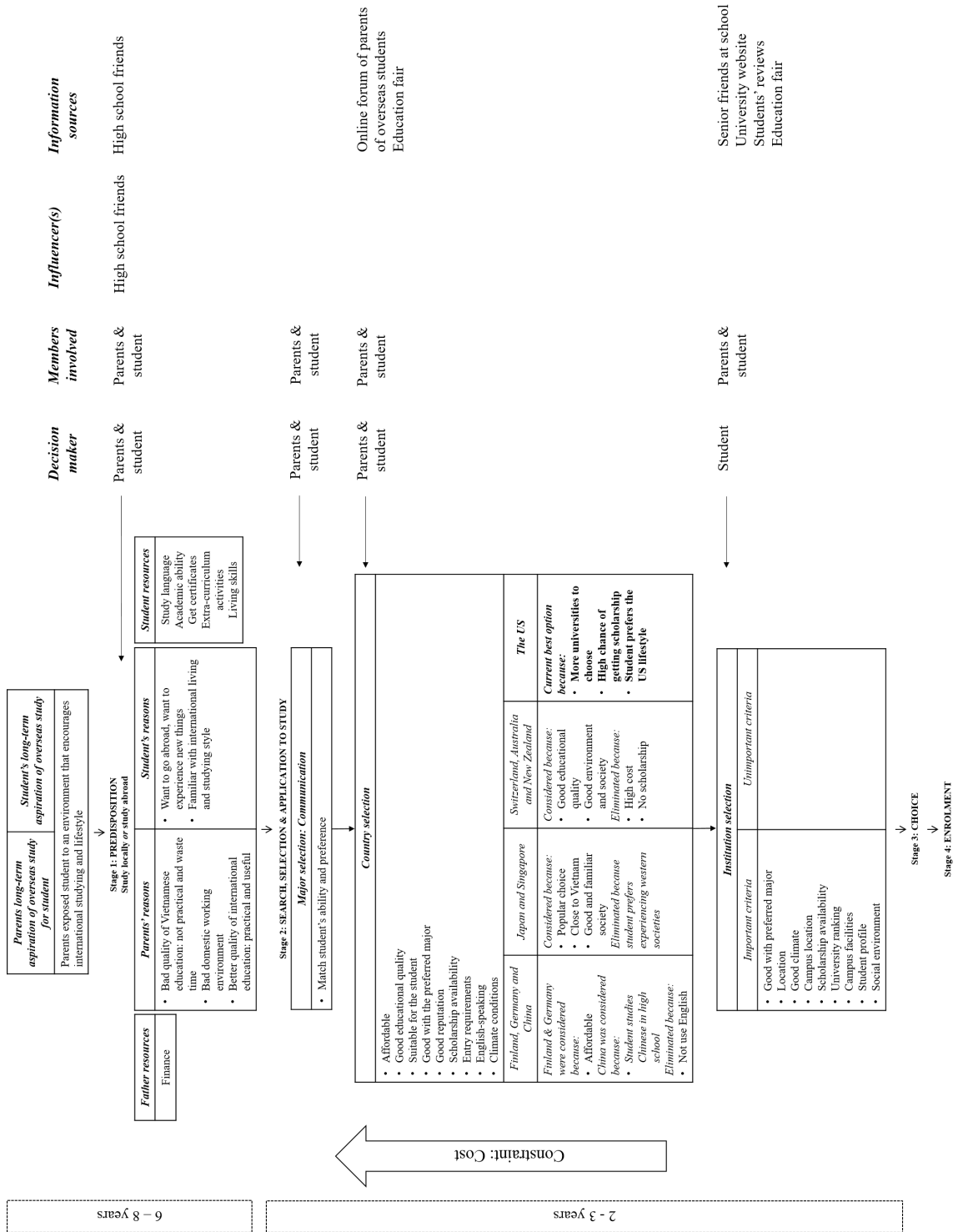


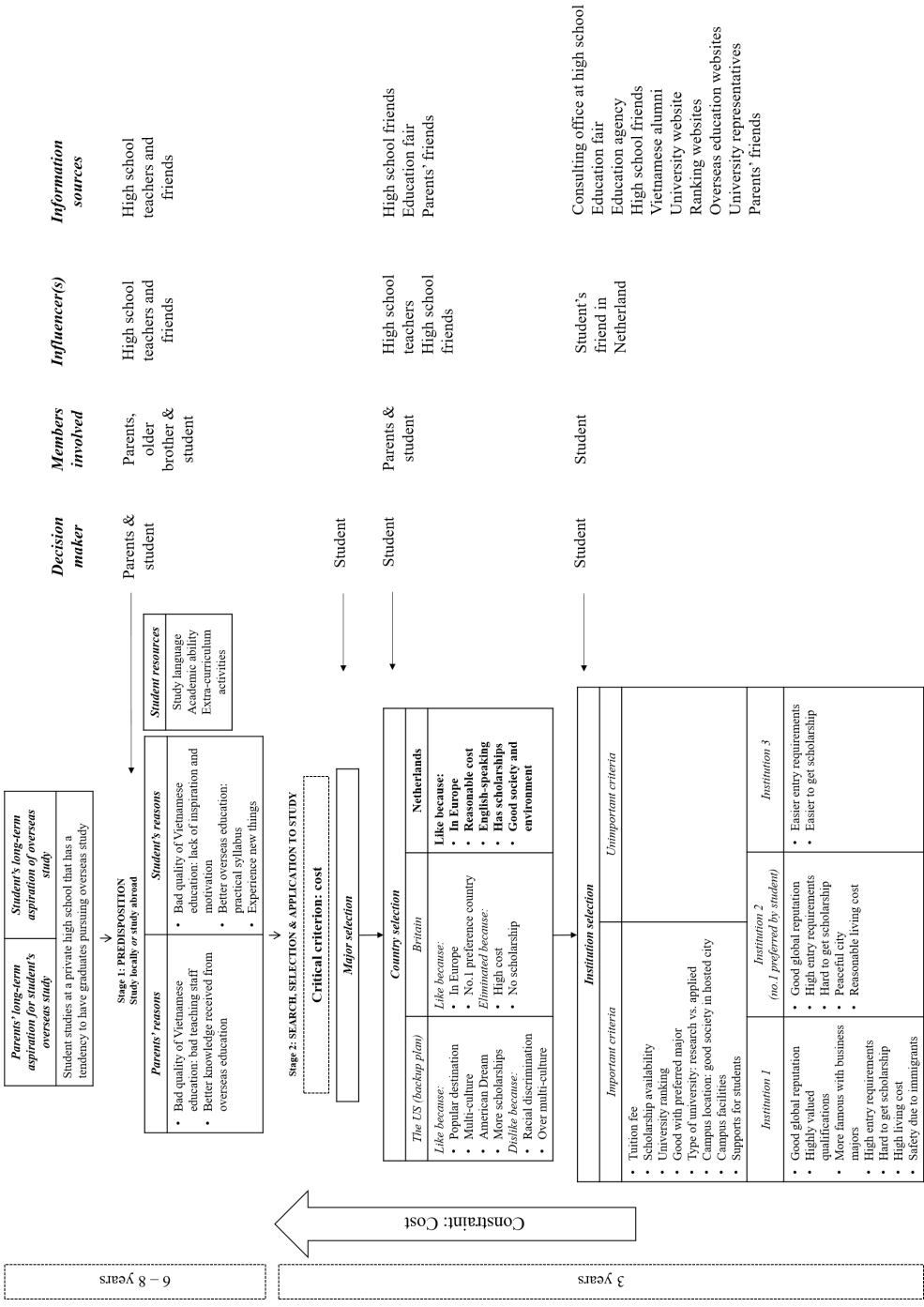












**The main goal for the student's overseas education:**  
get a good education, have a new cultural and social experience, then work for NGO companies overseas

