

# **Student Perceptions of the European Capital of Culture:**

University Choice and Liverpool 08

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Report by

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## Executive Summary

Like the cities/regions in which they are located, universities face an ever more competitive environment, where attracting suitably qualified students is a critical task. To this end, universities engage in marketing initiatives/activities to develop messages seeking to maximize the attributes of the university/locale.

This research is part of a wider study into the effectiveness of pre-determined university marketing messages, but its specific focus is on an emergent theme - the role of mega-events such as European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Specifically, this paper considers the influence of Liverpool08 on student choice, through 35 focus groups of first year undergraduates across all faculties of the University of Liverpool.

Results indicated that students were aware of, and influenced by, the forthcoming ECoC designation, that they wished to be part of the action and even went as far as to suggest that the institution use this designation more forcefully within its marketing campaigns.

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## 1. Introduction

Those institutions comprising the Higher Education (HE) marketplace currently face various threats. The ever increasing supply of universities and research institutes has prompted fierce competition for student and faculty talent (Florida 2002, 2005), a factor only destined to intensify in the UK if plans to add 20 new universities by 2013 (DIUS, 2008) come to fruition. Moreover, apprenticeships, full-time employment, the armed forces and student debt (Callender & Jackson, 2008) all threaten to restrict the pool of available student talent. To lure potential applicants, institutions have responded in a variety of ways, utilising traditional marketing techniques such as prospectuses and open days, incentivising their offering using laptops and free travel passes, or even embracing 'new' technologies such as YouTube or social networking sites. Yet, despite the growing body of literature investigating which factors influence student choice (e.g. Ali-Choudhury et al., 2008; Briggs, 2006; Price et al., 2003), there remains no definitive understanding as to why students select one institution over another.

The study at the heart of this paper sets out to add to this body of knowledge, but in quite a specific way. Rather than investigating broad factors influencing student choice, it set out to specifically question the role pre-determined university marketing messages play in the decision-making process. Based upon a case study location, the University of Liverpool, UK, qualitative data was collected from 35 focus groups drawn from first-year students across all faculties of the University during the 2008/9 academic session. For the case study location this period was one of particular significance. It was the lead up to the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2008 celebrations, a designation which was to play an unexpected influential role in the decision-making process. Rather than reflecting upon the whole study findings here, this paper will focus specifically upon the findings linked to the ECoC designation and in doing so will attempt to comment upon a hitherto under-researched area, the role mega-events can play within the student choice process.

To present the argument, initially the literatures linked to place marketing, cultural strategies and mega events, the ECoC designation, universities, economic development, place marketing and student choice will be examined to provide a contextual backdrop to the study. Having outlined the research process, the paper will move into a discussion of the findings relating to the influence of the city's ECoC status on potential student perceptions, as follows: the influence of the ECoC designation; the wider contribution of the ECoC status; the development of future key messages; marketing opportunities. Whilst the work focuses upon one case study location, it is arguable that the findings and implications may extend beyond this context and be transferable to both similarly constituted regional geographies and also areas hosting similarly significant mega-events.

### 1.1. Context: Place Marketing, Cultural Strategies and Mega-Events

Over the last thirty years, as competition between places - particularly at the urban scale - has become more intense (Jensen-Butler, 1997; Ward & Gold, 1994), the practice of place marketing has become increasingly common (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Kotler et al., 1993, 1999; Ward, 1998) and more professionalised (Griffiths, 1998; Ward, 1998; Wilkinson, 1992), although still with much scope for further improvement (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008). A major factor providing an impetus to this activity has been the need of former industrial cities to find a new role in the contemporary global economy (Hubbard & Hall, 1998). In doing this, such places have often had

to address negative preconceptions among target audiences and contradictory information in various media (Fitzsimons, 1995), a task they have attempted to achieve through the process of 're-imagining', whereby place marketing activities try to 'reinvent the city, weaving 'place myths' which are designed to make the city attractive as a site for external investment' (Hubbard, 1996; p. 28). This process has taken various forms - Short & Kim (1999) identify four broad 'campaign regimes' relating to how urban places portray themselves in marketing activities, relating to: (1) those cities who portray themselves as world cities (and those who aspire to that status); (2) old industrial cities seeking to refashion themselves as postmodern, post-industrial metropolises; (3) those cities attempting to lure business investment; and (4) those cities intent on 'capitalizing culture' as a means of competitive differentiation.

With reference to this culturally-oriented portrayal of place, Fitzsimons (1995) identifies three broad approaches to re-imagining - cultural strategies, flagships, and festivals. Cultural strategies, defined by Short (1999; p. 51) as, 'attempts to identify, mobilize, market, and commodify a city's cultural assets' are now, 'a major element in urban regeneration and the stimulation of a city's economy'. While urban places have always been centres of culture and the arts, this explicit link between cultural strategies and urban regeneration is a relatively new phenomenon, and is particularly evident with flagship projects, defined by Bianchini et al., (1992; p. 245) as, 'significant, high-profile and prestigious land and property developments which play an influential and catalytic role in urban regeneration'. In image terms they are important in providing an icon for the urban place (Holcomb, 1999) and in contributing to the broader marketing of the city (Smythe, 1994), as well as performing an urban regeneration role (see Bianchini et al., 1992; Hall, 1998; Hannigan, 1995; Knox, 1991; Noon et al., 2000; Smythe, 1994). Major festivals and events, particularly at the national or international level, can also play an important part in re-imagining. Being the host city of major events can have significant benefits, not only in terms of visitor spending, but also because of 'the hype given to the winning city by the international media' (Fitzsimons, 1995; p. 28). Indeed, even competing for events such as the Olympic Games, the Tall Ships Race, or ECoC designation can send signals as to the aspirations of the urban place and indeed, much positive publicity can be generated from merely being in the competition (Ward, 1998). Of course, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and are often combined with, for example, success in the competition to host a major international event providing the catalyst for various flagship property developments and/or cultural initiatives.

In his discussion of the evolution of cultural policy, Bianchini (1999) highlights the recent convergence of the cultural with the more overtly economic, which he argues has been accentuated by the increasing use of marketing (and latterly branding) strategies. García (2004a; p. 316) suggests that one implication is that 'new approaches to cultural policy assume that business aspirations must supersede leisure and community demands'. Such issues have provided a key theme in the place marketing literature, with particular reference to 'prestige projects' (Loftman & Nevin, 1996) 'hallmark events' (Boyle, 1997), such as the Olympic (and other) games and ECoC designation etc. The focus of research in this specific area relates to issues such as the role of such events in urban regeneration (e.g. García 2004a, 2004b; Phythian-Adams et al., 2008), their legacy (e.g. Garcia, 2005; Phythian-Adams et al., 2008) and impact on the city image via marketing activities (e.g. Richards & Wilson, 2004; Shukla et al., 2005; Sjøholt, 1999; Waitt, 1999; Ward, 1998), the local political response (e.g. Boyle, 1997; Boyle & Hughes, 1995) and implications for governance (e.g. Loftman & Nevin, 1996).

## 1.2. The European Capital of Culture Designation

The prime focus of this paper is the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) designation, with particular reference to its award to the city of Liverpool for 2008. This designation was conceived in 1983, with the aim of helping to 'bring the peoples of the member states [of the European Union] closer together' through the 'expression of a culture which, in its historical emergence and contemporary development, is characterized by having both common elements and a richness born of diversity' (European Commission, 1985). The first ECoC, in 1985, was Athens, followed by Florence, Amsterdam, West Berlin and Paris, all of which were established cultural centres and, according to García (2004a; p. 318-9), 'all celebrated the year as a marker of their already-apparent cultural importance'.

In 1990 the selection of Glasgow marked 'a radical change in orientation' (García, 2004a; p. 319), which constituted a turning point for the ECoC designation (Richards & Wilson, 2004), in that it was used as a catalyst to accelerate urban regeneration, and the nomination of the city was based on this fact, and also on promised commercial sponsorship (Richards & Wilson, 2004). In his characterisation of common elements in the approaches used by ECoC host cities, Sjøholt (1999) termed this approach the 'infrastructural implementation' prototype. This approach has been used subsequently by other cities – García (2004a; p. 320) states that since 1990, 'nominated cities have been more ambitious with their proposals, most of which have shifted towards urban regeneration agendas'. Indeed, the ECoC designation has arguably become a 'brand' in its own right which has been used to change image perceptions of those cities thus designated (Richards & Wilson, 2004), and moreover, although 'many cities have claimed that cultural motives remain at the fore of the event, success is often measured in terms of the visitors it attracts' (Richards & Wilson, 2004; p. 1937). In addition, Sjøholt (1999; p. 343) argues that many cities hoped the ECoC designation would act as 'a seedbed for multiplier effects within cultural industries'. Thus, Richards & Wilson (2004) summarise the attractiveness of the ECoC designation not only as a means of developing the cultural infrastructure of the city, but as an economic development tool and as a means of enhancing the city's image.

Indeed, a significant element of the existing research on the ECoC designation focuses on its subsequent impact on the host city (e.g. García, 2004b, 2005, 2006; Phythian-Adams et al., 2008; Richards & Wilson, 2004; Sjøholt, 1999). This paper falls within that tradition, but with some differences, in that its focus is narrower, concentrating on one particular audience - potential students choosing their undergraduate degree course in the year prior to the start of the ECoC event in a particular city. Thus, the research reported here considers the effect of the ECoC designation on the image of a place before rather than after the event among a particular target audience – namely, students - that are becoming increasingly important in place marketing terms for post-industrial cities, especially where the focus of such activities is more explicitly culturally oriented.

## 1.3. Universities, Economic Development and Place Marketing

Universities (and research institutes) are described by Ward (1998; p. 189) as 'invariably key ingredients in the post-industrial [urban] mix', and the presence of plentiful, appropriately qualified students can contribute significantly to a place, not only in economic terms, but also culturally and

socially. Florida (2005) describes universities – and in particular, major research universities (2002) - as talent magnets, fuelling local economies through the attraction and creation of both academic faculty and students. He goes on to argue that they constitute ‘a basic infrastructure component of the Creative Economy’ (2002; p. 291), and as such, by acting as ‘growth poles’ (2005; p. 151)/ ‘creative hubs’ (2002; p. 291), are ‘a huge potential source of competitive advantage’ for the places wherein they are located (2002; p. 292). García (2006) adds a further dimension to this significance demonstrating that, for Liverpool in particular, University life has long been a relevant area for national media narratives of the city, even at a time when the city was mostly referred to in the context of violence and crime related stories. Quoting the findings of a media content analysis, García (2006) suggests that stories about the city’s universities and academic life during the period 1996, 2003 and 2005 could be classed as over 40% positive and 40% neutral, University life a dominant theme in the city narrative, ‘the city is also frequently associated with debate on universities/research (...) positive associations – such as reference to universities – have grown in 2005...’.

Charles (2006; p. 117) states that universities are increasingly recognised as playing a key role in regional development, a role likely to increase given the development of a ‘knowledge intensive’ economy and society. Landry (2000; p. 133) argues that universities are key elements in the ‘creative milieu’, defined as ‘a place - either a cluster of buildings, a part of a city, a city as a whole or a region - that contains the necessary preconditions, in terms of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ infrastructure to generate a flow of ideas and inventions’. Florida (2002; p. 292) describes the role of the university as ‘multifaceted’, and identifies three interrelated roles that reflect ‘the 3T’s of creative places’: technology, talent and tolerance. Consequently, universities ‘help to establish the broader quality of place of the communities in which they are located’, analogous to Landry’s ‘soft’ infrastructure - defined as ‘the system of associative structures and social networks, connections and human interactions, that underpins and encourages the flow of ideas between individuals and institutions’ (2000; p.133). Indeed the emphasis on the human capital of a place is a long-standing element of place marketing activity (Ward, 1998), and this marketing of a place through the skills and virtues of the populace – what Kotler et al., (1999) term ‘people marketing’ – remains a potent and often used marketing message.

Charles (2003) argues that the specific role of universities in the process of the localisation of knowledge has altered in recent years. Traditionally universities have produced graduates for a national labour market dominated by large employers, but Charles argues this model has begun to break down because of increased decentralisation and a larger role for small and medium enterprises. In addition he states that regional agencies are increasingly promoting graduate retention initiatives as a way of upgrading the local stock of higher level skills. This regional contribution in itself is nothing new, for as the earlier work of McNicoll et al., (1997), Sargeant et al., (1998) and Kelly et al., (2002) illustrates, host communities have long benefited from the improved skill base, technological and knowledge transfer and stimulation of cultural industries educational institutions generate, although the true extent of this remains to be appreciated (Thanki, 1999; May, 2005). What is less appreciated in the extant research is the role place plays in the student institutional selection process, in both the short term (i.e. study period) and the longer term (i.e. employment post study). This is particularly important for locations given the earlier evidence base discussed which infers that the longer the student remains in the locality post study, the more the region will benefit from their talent.

#### 1.4. The Higher Education Marketplace and Student Choice

The HE marketplace is experiencing a period of change. Examining what he argues to be the 'commodification and commercialization of HE', Kezar (2008; p. 473) comments upon the American experiences as represented by Bok (2003), Slaughter & Rhoades (2004) and Zemsky et al., (2005) claiming that whereas 'in previous decades, [college/university] presidents reached out to communities and were critical commentators; student affairs administrators focused on student development. In more recent years, student affairs administrators wrestle with demands to become more market smart and to create revenues (...)'.

Similarly, in the UK, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 significantly altered institutional supply, granting former polytechnics university status with their own degree awarding powers whilst the 2004 Higher Education Act altered the structure of HE funding, introducing fees, grants and bursaries (Callender & Jackson, 2008), the theory at least in part being to widen participation so as to meet the government target of 'moving towards 50% of 18-30 year olds experiencing higher education by 2010' (Hatt et al., 2005; p. 374).

The changing nature of the HE marketplace has led many educational administrators to seek a more thorough understanding of the student market. Just as the banking sector before, some HE institutions have attempted to incentivise their offering linking a study place to laptops, travel passes, bicycle vouchers, text books etc., and have advertised through the traditional marketing mediums: university prospectus, university open days, university web sites, friends, students in the university, lectures on campus, teachers, parents and other family members, university league tables, news, career advisors and university school visits. Communication techniques continue to evolve though and there is increasing evidence of institutions introducing marketing strategies which make much greater use of an ever growing range of technological options - click internet advertising, social networking sites and texting, for instance: 'A text message sent by Bradford University to students waiting for A-Level results reading "Hoping 4 gr8 results Thursday ☺ from bfd uni" is one of the latest moves in the scramble by universities to fill their places' (MacLeod, 2003). Such activities are not confined to the UK, as a feature in *Converge Magazine* (2008) highlights 'Old Dominion University (ODU) in Virginia is going beyond a traditional web page to attract students. The university is the first college or university in the state to introduce its own channel in the video sharing site YouTube (...)' "The primary benefit is that this is where the young people are" said Nancy Cooley, vice provost for distance learning for ODU. "They are looking at YouTube every day. As they're exploring YouTube, we want them to find ODU'.

Not surprisingly, one area of student choice frequently investigated is linked to understanding why students select one institution over another - in effect, determining the brand salient attributes. Exploring the issue of a university brand, Ali-Choudhury et al., (2008) questioned directors and managers at 25 university locations in England to determine which components of a university brand were perceived to be significant to student recruitment. An institution's educational identity, location, employability record, visual imagery, ambience, reputation, sports and social facilities, learning environment, courses offered and community linked activities were all identified as factors influencing student choice. Considering the impact of facilities upon student choice, Price et al., (2003) reflects upon the notion of a 'student-institution fit' explained by Banning & Banning (1986; p. 1) as 'the degree of congruency, or fit, between student characteristics and the ability of the institution to respond to those characteristics'. Within this context, they observed selection to be dependent upon course/subject, reputation of course/department, school, university, league tables, convenience/proximity to home, location and facilities/resources, findings not dissimilar to Briggs

(2006) whose study of student choice at six contrasting Scottish universities identified academic reputation, distance from home and location to be the top three factors influencing the decision-making process. Whilst common features of research are apparent, it is noticeable that no one definitive understanding of student choice exists. Furthermore, whilst much of the existing work notes the influence of location upon the choice process, it goes no further than to identify this as one contributory factor in the broader debate.

## 2. Research Process

The empirical work this study introduces did not set out to specifically add further to the wealth of data on student choice, but rather it sought to explore the role that pre-determined university key marketing messages play in the selection process. But in the process of this, some interesting issues emerged relating to the role of place, and it is these issues that are discussed in the remainder of this paper.

### 2.1. The Case Study

The University of Liverpool (UoL), a UK institution which dates back to 1881, recognized as the original 'redbrick' university and a member of the UK research-led Russell Group of institutions, utilizes five key messages (see table I) to attract the undergraduate (home and international) student population - 13,598 in total as of January 2009 (University Corporate Communications, 2009). To question the effectiveness of these messages, data was collected through both desk research (home prospectus materials, home website, wider advertisements, general websites e.g. pages on Facebook and teamtalk, league tables, National Student Survey datasets (Richardson et al., 2007), competitor institution websites and other corporate communication materials) and qualitative research in the autumn of 2008. 35 focus groups, each with seven participants on average, were conducted with first year students drawn from all six faculties of the Institution: Science Faculty (n=6); Engineering Faculty (n=6); Faculty of Medicine (n=6); Faculty of Veterinary Science (n=6); Faculty of Arts (n=5); Faculty of Social and Environmental Studies (SES) (n=6). Discussions explored the university choice process, student engagement with marketing materials, effective ways for institutions to brand themselves, and highlighted a number of shortfalls in current practice.

Table 1: University of Liverpool (UoL) Pre-Determined Key Messages

UoL key message	Key findings
Excellent reputation home and overseas	Reputation and employability were identified as key factors in the selection process: <i>“students have to be proud to say that they go there [ie an institution]”</i> .
Academic excellence and widening participation pioneer	Students commonly associated with the notion of excellence. The concept of widening participation proved more perplexing: <i>“does this [ie widening participation] mean that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be favoured over students who marginally missed the admissions targets (...) doesn’t it kind of cheapen the image of the Uni[versity] and associate it with Universities of a lower ranking?”</i> .
Exceeding our students’ expectations	Expectations were associated with both academic and social attributes. This message was frequently criticised for setting the Institution up with an impossible task: <i>“exceeding’ suggests that they [ie the institution] are going to offer more than we expect (...) everyone’s expectation levels will differ (...) this is an impossible task to win in”</i> .
Excellent job opportunities	This was recognized as a pivotal factor in the selection process: <i>“competence once employed is an important expectation of the learning experience”</i> .
Liverpool’s low cost of living, high value student experience	This message was criticised for being under-stated. The cost of university education was considered both during the selection process, and again once studies had commenced: <i>“my friend is considering coming back to Liverpool to study because his university location is too expensive”</i> .

Source: Primary data

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Choice Influencers

Focus group discussions initially concentrated upon attempting to establish the level of awareness of the UoL key messages amongst respondents. Interestingly those able to confirm their awareness of the messages were in a minority. No-one could name all, and in fact most respondents failed to name any particular message, instead able to vaguely associate the Institution with key words, rather than statements. Table I provides a summary of the role each key message was found to play in the institution selection process. It is not the intention of this paper to discuss these general findings further here. Instead, this paper will focus upon one emergent part of the data from the focus groups, namely, the attraction of 'place' in the selection process. It became increasingly apparent from very early in the research process that Liverpool, the place, evoked affection in students. Even though students were only a matter of months into their HE experience, feelings of attachment and belonging were evident: 'We feel the amazing culture and history of Liverpool should come through in the key messages to set itself apart from its main competitors' (SES respondent); 'Liverpool's city scene could be elaborated upon (...). The fact that it is busy and exciting but not as anonymous as London and with a friendly atmosphere should be mentioned' (Faculty of Veterinary Science respondent); 'Excellent opportunities for work and play in a socially thriving city (...) great University, great city, a lot going on' (Faculty of Science respondent). The passion for the city even prompted criticisms from respondents that the messages did not go far enough in advertising the location: 'I think they [the Marketing team] should concentrate more about the city of Liverpool' (Faculty of Engineering respondent).

#### 3.2. Significance of the European Capital of Culture 2008 Status

One specific aspect which generated a considerable amount of unsolicited comment was linked to the designation of Liverpool as ECoC in 2008. This is particularly significant as, under the UK entry system administered by UCAS, the majority of respondents in this study would have made their institutional choices before the ECoC year began (the UCAS main deadline for September 2008 entry was December 2007). Respondents located in the Faculties of Arts, Engineering, Science and SES were particularly vocal about the significance they attached to the designation, which was mentioned in each of the focus groups. In contrast, only two focus groups of Medical students and two groups of Veterinary Science students made any reference to the subject. That said, collectively a number of interesting trends and commonalities emerged which can be broadly considered as follows: deciding factors in institutional choice; influence of the ECoC title; wider contribution of the ECoC status; development of key messages; and marketing opportunities.

Questions linked to the deciding factors in institution selection prompted a range of similar responses across faculties: 'I knew Liverpool was going to be Capital of Culture and that was a major draw' (SES respondent), 'I chose it [Liverpool] because it was the Capital of Culture (...) the city would have lots of things going on, and hopefully, it would be a wicked place to live' (Faculty of Arts respondent); 'Great city (...) Well it's a large city, and the Capital of Culture is great you know' (Faculty of Engineering respondent); 'Capital of Culture and enrichment programmes were a major influence [in university selection]' (Faculty of Science respondent); 'vibrant city and Capital of Culture' (Faculty of Science respondent); 'It presented the opportunity for a unique experience'

(Faculty of Arts respondent); 'I knew that 2008 was Capital of Culture year so I wanted to be in Liverpool for that' (Faculty of Medicine respondent); 'Capital of Culture was a big deal in my choice' (Faculty of Medicine respondent); 'When choosing a university I knew that Liverpool was a red brick university and about to be the Capital of Culture year' (Faculty of Medicine respondent). The scope of this status extended beyond the domestic marketplace as the following quotes illustrate: 'I wanted to go to study in the UK and Liverpool's reputation for 'Capital of Culture' was most appealing to me' (Faculty of Arts international student); 'The fact that Liverpool is the Capital of Culture and is a historical place also helped me in making a decision to apply to the University of Liverpool' (Faculty of Arts international student).

However, differences of opinion existed in terms of the extent of the influence of ECoC over university choice. Whilst a number of students did identify the status as a primary factor in decision making, it was more common for respondents to note the secondary influence of the status: 'The Capital of Culture title meant that it would be an exciting time to be a part of the University of Liverpool however, it wasn't a deciding factor, more of an additional factor' (Faculty of Science respondent); 'I didn't apply specifically because of the Capital of Culture but I thought there would be more going on in the city because of it' (Faculty of Science respondent); 'It helped to make the choice of uni[versity] although it wasn't a deciding factor' (Faculty of Arts respondent); 'Europe's Capital of Culture (...) there has been quite a lot going on in Liverpool that is very unlikely to happen again anytime soon' (SES respondent). Two respondents, both in the Faculty of Veterinary Science also commented on the 'unique contribution' the ECoC status offered to the University choice process.

It wasn't just the ECoC title which respondents saw as attractive, but also the scope for favourable knock-on consequences which prompted comment: 'It [ECoC] didn't actually come into the decision making part of it [ie university selection] but it did make Liverpool more attractive and I have been quite a few times to Glasgow and witnessed their Capital of Culture and there you can see a turning point in the city and I thought if something similar could happen to Liverpool then it would be a good place to be and an exciting place to be' (Faculty of Science respondent); 'The Capital of Culture has helped a lot to improve the reputation of both the city and the University' (Faculty of Arts respondent), consequences which some students felt might ultimately be of benefit to themselves: 'Liverpool's (...) a thriving city and since it has been the European Capital of Culture a lot more businesses have moved into the city bringing more job opportunities' (Faculty of Arts respondent), with some respondents in a position to comment upon what they described as the Liverpool before and the Liverpool after: 'I had been in Liverpool two years ago and I think this year there is a huge difference between before and after, after it being the Capital of Culture. Definite progress has been made' (Faculty of Engineering respondent). Interestingly, students were also quick to attribute all progress (rightly or wrongly!) to the ECoC status with the following comment not unusual: 'the construction work taking place around [the university] campus could be down to the city holding the award' (SES respondent).

The title also added an attractive feature to the location in general: 'The city being the Capital of Culture is also a reason to come to the University' (Faculty of Engineering respondent), prompting a number of focus groups, across faculties, to suggest a new key message around the status: 'If I could create a key message for the University to attract new students I think mine would be about how much City of Culture 2008 has affected it. There are loads of opportunities to get involved' (Faculty of Engineering respondent); 'It is recommended that a culture related key message should

be added, considering Liverpool is the European Capital of Culture 2008 (...) attract students (...) enrich their university experience (...) being European Capital of Culture this year boosted the city's popularity and encouraged improvements in the city and increased the facilities offered (...) it can attract students and bring the student experience to a higher value' (SES respondent). Certainly, according to unconfirmed recruitment statistics for the period reported by Sharpe (2008), the city saw a 10% increase in new full-time undergraduates at Liverpool John Moores University, a bumper year for postgraduate applications at Liverpool Hope University, a rise in applications at the University of Liverpool and an increased number of transfer applications for students wishing to complete their studies in Liverpool.

Interestingly, respondents were critical of, what they perceived to be, a missed marketing opportunity for the University: 'I think they [University] should put more emphasis on the Capital of Culture. I don't think it was used enough when I was applying because it is a big deal' (Faculty of Engineering respondent); 'This factor wasn't highlighted enough in the University's marketing materials, and perhaps with more inclusion, the Capital of Culture as an attraction could have been more successful in helping students choose the University' (Faculty of Engineering respondent); 'The University needs to elaborate on the impact of European Capital of Culture (...) it needs to highlight the impact that the ECoC will continue to make on the city in the future' (Faculty of Engineering respondent); 'The University should remain proactive about the city of Liverpool and should continually assess qualities the city possess regarding the aftermath of the Capital of Culture 2008' (Faculty of Science respondent); 'Liverpool being the European Capital of Culture for 2008 was a great award and something that should be used by the University to show the city of Liverpool is held in such high esteem' (Faculty of Science respondent), comments endorsed by Liz Williams, deputy president of Liverpool Guild of Students: 'A lot of my friends chose the city because of cheaper rents but I know the Capital of Culture has changed the old perception of the city and really put it on the map. It now has a hip, lively reputation and students are welcomed into the city. When you combine this with the good reputation of the Universities, it is an appealing place to study' (Sharpe, 2008). As well as helping to confirm the perceived significance of mega-events by the student population, these comments also help us to query how closely potential students study HE marketing literatures during the application process, as, contrary to student feedback, the ECoC status did indeed feature in marketing publications during the period in question!

## 4. Conclusions

While nested in the wider literature on the factors influencing student choice of HE institution, this paper has more specifically explored the role that pre-determined key marketing messages play in the decision-making process. Through this lens, the role of place emerged as a significant consideration, heightened in the case study location by the 2008 ECoC designation. Whilst no claims are made that the ECoC was the major factor in student choice of institution, or even geographical location, what the empirical research does show is that place did play a contributory role in the decision-making process, in that students were aware of, and influenced by, the forthcoming ECoC title attached to Liverpool, that they wished to be part of the action and that they even went as far as to suggest that the institution should have used this designation more forcefully within their marketing campaigns.

Arguably, there is a need to explore the student attachment to place more thoroughly, both during the choice selection process, but also the extent to which this attachment remains post study. Given the evidence presented that local communities may benefit economically from this pool of talent remaining in the region post-graduation, and the consequent implications for place marketing activities, it is incumbent upon academic institutions and agencies linked to local and regional development to work together to ascertain more robustly which factors promote an emotional attachment to an area, and whether indeed these can be harnessed to the advantage of all concerned. The research methodology employed in this study also presents opportunities for future research. The data was collected during the early stages of study for the respondents involved. Whether their place attachment would have continued into their subsequent years of study could not be determined. A follow-up investigation of a similar or even quantitative nature would be useful to map out attachments over time.

The work was also based upon one case study location and requires testing within a wider geographical context. Equally it focused specifically upon one form of mega-event, the ECoC, which in effect represents a year long series of mini events (e.g. pop concerts, maritime events, sporting events, art exhibitions etc.), the diverse nature of which is likely to be attractive to a wider populace. Whether the same interest in place would emerge from a locality staging a Football World Cup event for instance, or even an Olympic Games, where the focus is principally upon sport and only for a limited time period, remains to be determined. Further investigations into these areas could help to identify new directions for place marketing research whilst also adding to our understanding of the ubiquitous question surrounding student choice. As comments made by the student population highlighted, the University and the locality are not separate entities. They are one community, the success of each likely inter-woven with one another. As one moves forward, the other can progress too. The need and value of academic institutions developing strategic alliances with city institutions could conceivably be an area for future research priority.

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