

# **A re-evaluation of the relevance of Key Account Management to the UK higher education sector**

**Volume I**

**Gary Richard Harden**

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Administration*

**Nottingham Business School  
Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

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## Abstract

This research set out to explore the nature of business-to-business (B2B) relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector. More specifically, it sought to address the strategic issue of how relationships between a UK business school (in this case, Nottingham Business School) and its corporate clients could be organised and managed effectively over the longer-term in order to provide, maintain or, where appropriate, enhance the mutual satisfaction of all parties concerned. It is argued that such research is relevant and timely given that revenue generated from commercial activity (*third stream* income) is considered increasingly vital to UK business schools as they attempt to remain financially solvent in a toughening market that is faced with the additional threat of longer-term reductions in Higher Education Funding Council grants (Watling *et al.*, 2003; Prince, 2004; Prince, 2007).

It is not only commercial activity that would appear to be a relatively under-developed activity in most new universities (Prince, 2004). B2B literature shows little or no research into business relationships within the UK corporate education sector (Murray and Underhill, 2002). Additionally, Ellis and Mayer (2001) and Wright (2004) are typical of those calling for more research across different B2B sectors.

Having scoped the research problem (Document 1) and undertaken a critical review of the B2B relationship marketing literature (Document 2), exploratory qualitative research in Document 3 focused on NBS lecturers with responsibility for managing both open and client-specific postgraduate programmes. Whilst previous commercial experience and academic expertise were thought to lend weight and respectability to the client manager's position, social and inter-personal aspects were felt to exert a greater influence on the relationship. However, a number of barriers are likely to hinder the successful development of commercial relationships. Some of these are external (e.g. sudden and unexpected adverse trading conditions or a more general economic downturn), others are more or less self-inflicted (e.g. lack of senior management support or a tendency to overload the client manager job role). Client managers were also more likely to adopt a positive attitude to business development if they were rewarded appropriately.

Document 4 enabled some of these issues to be explored further through quantitative survey-based research that benefited from the inclusion of a number of corporate clients as well as client managers from other higher education institutions. An initial review of the B2B relationship marketing literature had identified a number of dimensions that were thought vital to relationship formation and development: attraction, atmosphere, social bonds, trust and commitment. Of these, social bonds were thought to have the greatest impact. However, the research suggested that it was actually the attraction dimension that figured most prominently, with all parties appearing to value intuition (or 'gut feel'), personal chemistry, a sense of humour and a charismatic personality as core ingredients in relationship formation. Interestingly, closer economic ties were considered more relevant than social bonds. The research also tackled a number of issues ranging from the strategic development of the relationship portfolio through to operational matters such as whether appropriate incentives (financial or otherwise) should be offered to client managers. Whilst it was reassuring to note that half of the respondents believed senior managers provided

reasonable support and investment for commercial relationships, this support did not necessarily extend to financial and other incentives for client managers themselves.

From the outset, this study was designed to conclude with an exploration and reappraisal of the strategic relevance to a UK business school of the Key Account Management concept. Thus, Document 5 focused on the relevance of the concept for Nottingham Business School, as seen through the eyes of the academics adjudged to be occupying key account management roles. On the face of it, many of the elements of KAM appear to have the potential to be adapted to fit a business school environment. Nevertheless, this study suggests that the KAM journey is likely to be a long, arduous and challenging one. Indeed, KAM represents a bold strategic move for an organisation like Nottingham Business School and would require significant investment in both people and support systems in order to flourish. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee of a short-term return on that investment. Equally, when the potential barriers to KAM implementation are considered - particularly the longer-term problem of encouraging commercial flair and developing business acumen in an entrenched academic culture - the task confronting senior managers would appear to be a challenging one. Consequently, it would be no surprise to see a KAM strategy overlooked in favour of a simpler, more cost-effective alternative.

## **Key words**

Business-to-business  
B2B  
B2B relationship marketing  
Key account management  
KAM  
Corporate client manager  
Programme manager  
UK higher education sector  
Nottingham Business School

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**Document 1: Definition and mapping of  
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***‘So, You Think You’ve Got  
a Relationship?’***

**A Reappraisal of the Nature and  
Intensity of Relationships between UK  
Business Schools and their External  
Corporate Clients**

*by*

**Gary Richard Harden**

*In part-fulfilment of the  
Doctorate in Business Administration  
(2002/2005 cohort)*

**Nottingham Business School  
The Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

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## **Doctorate in Business Administration**

### **Document 1: Definition and mapping of research questions**

*‘So, You Think You’ve Got a Relationship?’*

*A Reappraisal of the Nature and Intensity of Relationships between UK Business Schools and their External Corporate Clients.*

#### **Problem description/organisational context**

The aim of this research is to explore the nature of business-to-business (B2B) relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector. More specifically, it will seek to address the strategic issue of how relationships between a UK business school and its corporate clients can be organised and managed effectively over the longer-term in order to provide, maintain or, where appropriate, enhance the mutual satisfaction of all parties concerned.

The research will comprise an extended and systematic exploration of the expectations and experiences of those individuals within business schools tasked with managing external corporate client relationships (in broad terms, the ‘key account managers’) and the corporate clients themselves who sponsor selected employees to attend postgraduate programmes of study. It is envisaged that the research will also surface comments and suggestions about how such B2B relationships can best be organised and managed in the future. This will, in turn, facilitate a reappraisal of the strategic relevance of the Key Account Manager concept within an academic environment.

#### **Rationale**

The exploration of B2B relationships within the UK higher education postgraduate sector substantially meets the criteria laid down by Fisher (2000) for testing the suitability of a chosen research topic. For example, in terms of *interest and relevance*, the case is argued below from both a personal and organisational perspective. Equally, as will be touched on in the overview of the relationship marketing (RM) literature,

and more fully addressed in Document 2, the concept of RM is a topical one that has generated substantial debate from both academics and marketers about its conceptual underpinning and practical application. In crude terms, RM could be regarded as a 'hot' topic.

As far as *durability* is concerned, it is felt that the research topic will retain its currency in the longer-term by virtue of the fact that an organisation such as Nottingham Business School is, in effect, forced to engage in some form of on-going dialogue, however minimal, with its corporate clients. Such dialogue would be expected to continue irrespective of any major changes in the strategic direction or policy of the Business School. It could also be argued that, regardless of such developments, the data generated in this largely exploratory study are likely to be of equal value whatever the initial objectives of the research. This approach accords with the notion of the *symmetry of potential outcomes* as outlined by Gill and Johnson (1997).

In terms of the remaining criteria, the wide-ranging scope of B2B relationships and the extensive nature of the B2B literature (*resources*) both offer the potential for an appropriate *breadth of research questions* to be developed within the topic area, as will be discussed in more detail later. Equally, it is felt that the topic is sufficiently broad and rigorous to accommodate both the criterion of *topic adequacy* and the degree of methodological pluralism demanded by the DBA programme.

It is acknowledged that adequate *access* can often be problematic for the academic researcher. However, the fact that the author is both a full-time employee of Nottingham Business School and a Course Leader in the postgraduate area should guarantee reasonable access to appropriate respondents in the Business School and its major corporate clients. Furthermore, should the study adopt a comparative approach, the issue of gaining access to another academic institution would, again, not be considered unduly problematic given the fact that the study does not intend to report any financial data or, for that matter, disclose any other data that might be considered commercially sensitive or likely to compromise any competitive integrity of that institution.



Nevertheless, despite the relatively unproblematic nature of access anticipated in this study, it is expected that issues relating to the *micro-politics* of organisations may still be encountered. According to Fisher (2000), in researching any business issue the researcher runs the potential risk of becoming caught up in the management debates and politics that surround it. Although attempts can be made to avoid these pitfalls there is no absolute guarantee that the researcher will not fall foul of them. However, far from being a disadvantage, this may provide the research with a degree of unpredictability and, hence, excitement that accords with Fisher's call for a balance to be struck between *risk and safety*.

## **Outcomes**

### ***Organisational***

In terms of justifying the research from an organisational perspective, evidence would suggest that competition within the corporate education sector is intensifying and that business schools need increasingly to focus on ways of developing long-term relationships with key organisations that more specifically meet the needs of the business world (Murray and Underhill, 2002: 4). Failure either to identify business needs correctly or to understand how B2B relationships should be organised and managed is likely to impact significantly on both the long-term reputation and commercial viability of UK business schools. Arguably, all business schools should be looking to increase the amount of commercial business done with external corporate clients, particularly in view of the continuing uncertainty surrounding the long-term funding of undergraduate programmes. Nottingham Business School, for example, is targeting a revenue increase of 14% in its corporate business in 2002/3. In the light of such developments, it is felt that this research will contribute to providing a richer and more meaningful insight into the factors and issues that dictate whether business school-corporate client relationships will flourish or decay and what can be done to get the best out of them for all concerned.

More specifically, this research will provide the Business School with an insight into the nature of business school-corporate client relationships in 'open' programmes - in other words, those programmes that accept students from any organisation or background as long as the minimum entry requirements are met. Whilst, at the present

time, a form of Key Account Management does exist for most company-specific (or 'closed') programmes, no such formal system exists for 'open' programmes. Hence, it is considered both commercially significant and timely to understand the particular circumstances under which such relationships flourish despite the significant potential for mismanagement and miscommunication to occur on many levels.

### ***Personal***

On a more personal level, research into aspects of B2B relationship marketing will complement work done previously by the author at Masters level, where the main focus was on exploring business-to-consumer (B2C) relationships. The current study therefore brings with it the opportunity for the author to develop a more holistic view of the strategic relevance of relationship marketing to commercial organisations. The following is a brief summary of the additional personal benefits thought likely to accrue from engaging in research connected with the DBA:-

- It will actively engage the author in 'cutting edge' marketing thinking
- The DBA has a strong marketing practitioner 'edge' that accords with the author's own view of the practical nature and relevance of marketing
- The nature and staged structure of the DBA programme will offer the best opportunity and incentive for the author to deliver publishable material in the short to medium-term, in much the same way as was experienced during the MSc Marketing Management
- The fact that the DBA can be completed within a three-year period provides clear targets and a definite completion date. This will act as a strong motivator.

### ***Contribution to academic debate***

As far as contributing to the broader academic debate concerning B2B relationships, both conceptually and operationally, this study is likely to provide welcome and timely data relating to an area of marketing that remains largely under-researched. Indeed, there is a growing call for researchers to understand in greater depth the different B2B contexts in which relationship marketing and Key Account Management approaches appear to flourish or flounder and for a wider application of empirical research across different B2B sectors (Ellis and Mayer, 2001: 217/218).

## Overview of the relationship marketing literature

Relationship marketing (RM) involves a significant shift away from the traditional marketing preoccupation with single transactions towards a focus on developing and maintaining long-term relationships with customers. Arguably, it represents a marked change from what has traditionally been characterised in the marketing literature as confrontational and adversarial customer-supplier encounters to a more interactive and cooperative approach (Buttle, 1996: 12; Gruen, 1997). Defining RM, however, has proved to be somewhat difficult despite the attention the topic has received for more than two decades. Indeed, Buttle (1996: 13) summarises the situation perfectly:-

*“RM is a term which has yet to acquire uncontested status and meaning.”*

Although a universally accepted definition of RM may not exist, it is still possible to identify broad conceptual categories that recur in the literature. This has been done in a simple yet effective way by Harker (1999) who, based on an analysis of some 29 definitions of RM, suggests that the following conceptual categories might provide the primary constructs of any future definition:-

- Creation
  - *an attempt is made to attract customers and establish a relationship*
- Development
  - *once established, relationships are enhanced and strengthened*
- Maintenance
  - *an effort is made to sustain stable and lasting relationships*
- Interactive
  - *relationships thrive on mutual exchange and co-operation*
- Long-term
  - *companies look to retaining customers on a permanent basis*

- Emotional content
  - *relationships rely on trust, commitment and fulfilment of promises*
- Output
  - *relationships should lead to rewarding and profitable outcomes*

The topicality of the RM debate might lead one to assume that the concept was breaking new ground. However, relational exchange as an integral part of commercial life is not new - indeed its history can be traced back thousands of years. RM may be a new term but 'an old phenomenon' (Gummesson, 1997; Gummesson, 1999). In a seminal paper assessing the changing role of marketing in the organisation, Webster (1992) suggests that even before the marketing mix (or 4Ps) took hold in the early 1960s marketing was seen more as a set of social and economic processes. Indeed, it has been argued that marketing has always been regarded as a very human activity (Petrof, 1997).

The number and nature of the relationships that organisations experience are many and varied: first, there are external relationships with consumers - otherwise known as business-to-consumer or B2C relationships. Second, there will almost inevitably be external relationships with other organisations such as suppliers and clients - otherwise known as business-to-business or B2B relationships. From the outset, it has been clear in the relationship marketing literature that 'firms are linked together in a dense network of co-operation and affiliation' (Richardson, 1972, cited in Blois, 1998: 267). Finally, internal relationships with staff should not be overlooked since everybody in the organisation has the potential to impact in some way on the company-customer relationship - in other words, every member of staff is a *part-time marketer* (Webster, 1992; Gummesson, 1994). Given the multiplicity of relationships, a comprehensive understanding of relationship characteristics is arguably crucial. As Buttle (1996: 7) observes:-

*"It is evident that customers generally seek quality, value and convenience in their transactions with suppliers. What is not clear is what else customers would expect if they were to enter into a long-term relationship."*

### *An overview of the nature and characteristics of B2B relationships*

Much B2B research has attempted to examine the precise nature of organisational relationships. Haskell and Pole (2002: 3) is a useful starting point for identifying suitable sources in the literature, although they quite rightly observe that much of this work tends to focus on technical industrial markets.

Broadly speaking, a consistent theme emerging from the literature is that B2B relationships are complex and multi-faceted. The conceptualisation of relationship complexity owes much to the work of academics such as Morgan and Hunt (1994) who are primarily concerned with identifying the determinants of trust and commitment in buyer-seller exchanges. Equally, the pioneering research of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group has helped immeasurably in underlining the importance of networks and interaction in the industrial sector. A key assumption implicit in Morgan and Hunt (1994) is that any of the relationships has the potential to impact on long-term commercial success or failure. Additionally, each relationship is the result of a specific set of circumstances that will require handling in a unique manner. In the specific case of a business school and its corporate clients, the number and complexity of the relationships can be seen in Appendix 2a. It is interesting to note for the purposes of this study, however, that business schools have, to date, appeared to concern themselves purely with a satisfactory relationship outcome between the immediate service provider (i.e. the lecturing staff) and the student - in other words a B2C relationship. This is evidenced by the increasing use of module and programme evaluation sheets (or 'happy' sheets as they are sometimes irreverently termed). This somewhat narrow focus on relationships can be seen in Appendix 2b. There is obviously much to be done in terms of understanding some of the other relationships that exist.

Again, underlining the complexity of B2B relationships, Bonoma and Johnston (cited in Brennan and Turnbull, 1999: 11) talk of the importance of buying 'episodes' in the development of buyer-seller relationships:-

- many organisational buying episodes take place in the context of longer-term buyer-seller relationships

- individual buying episodes will be influenced by the history of the relationship, and will in turn influence the development of the relationships
- in many cases it is the buyer who initiates the transaction, and the seller who responds
- in general, buyers and sellers in industrial markets interact with each other in a complex fashion

Whilst not sector-specific, the above overview could, again, be easily applied to the example of business school-corporate client relationships.

One further approach to conceptualising the nature of B2B relationships that is arguably worth considering at this point is that of Hakansson and Snehota (1995). They propose four main structural characteristics of relationships:-

- *continuity* (i.e. stability and length)
- *complexity* (i.e. number of people involved in the process)
- *symmetry* (i.e. balanced resources, power and skills)
- *informality* (i.e. reliance on informal bonds between actors)

Whilst the composition and structure of the collective decision making unit (*complexity*) and issues relating to the balance of power in relationships (*symmetry*) have received much coverage in the literature, the determinants of the informal bonds between actors that lead ultimately to the formation of the commitment necessary to maintaining the relationship (*informality*) have been largely under-researched.

There would seem to be some overlap here between the concept of informality and *atmosphere* - a concept referred to often in IMP-inspired literature. Roper *et al.* (2002: 9) offer the following comprehensive definition:-

*“Atmosphere concerns the feelings that one party has towards the other. It evolves from an accumulation of every interaction or communication that party has with, or receives about, the other. It defines the tone in which transactions are conducted. It reflects the view one party holds of another, thus conditioning the way one party enters into subsequent transactions.”*

Appendix 3 provides an initial attempt to conceptualise the likely factors impacting on relationship *atmosphere*. The concept will be explored in more detail in Document 2. However, it is accepted that B2B relationships are far more complex than a consideration of atmosphere alone. Zineldin (cited in Roper *et al.*, 2002: 4) suggests that ‘quality of atmosphere’ is one of five dimensions of relationship quality in business markets: the other dimensions being quality of object, process, infrastructure and interaction. These are all issues that are worthy of further investigation in Document 2.

Whilst exploring the nature and quality of B2B relationships, it is also difficult to ignore the issue of *adaptation*. According to Brennan and Turnbull (1999: 13) adaptation is ‘the degree to which the firm should adapt its standard methods of doing business for any individual customer’. Arguably, it is inconceivable for any business school not to be involved in some form of adaptation of its product/service offering. Adaptation, in this sense, may refer to more than simply changes to the content and delivery of the requisite training programmes. It is just as much a matter of how the physical relationship between the parties is managed and enhanced. Again, these themes will be explored in more detail in Document 2.

### **Research questions**

The specific research questions for each of the major research-based Documents are listed in turn below. Each section will be accompanied by a brief explanation of how the research questions from the one Document are expected to feed into subsequent Documents. See Appendix 1 for an initial attempt at mapping the research questions.

### ***Document 3***

This Document calls for the researcher to adopt either an interpretative or action based methodological approach. In its capacity as the first of the major research-based Documents, it allows the surfacing of issues likely to be pertinent to both the design of the subsequent stages of the research and to the development of a richer and more detailed picture of the way in which B2B relationships in the UK postgraduate sector are currently managed and how they might be further developed. At this stage, the research questions are as follows:-

- What are the qualities and characteristics that make an effective B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?
- In what ways are these qualities/characteristics similar or different for all parties concerned?
- How can relationships be improved to the mutual satisfaction of all parties?

#### ***Document 4***

This Document calls for the researcher to adopt a positivistic or ‘scientific’ methodological approach. Following on from the findings of the interpretative study in Document 3, it will allow the researcher to determine more precisely any trends emerging in the way in which B2B relationships within the UK higher education postgraduate sector are currently managed and to identify any significant correlation between particular variables. At this stage, the research questions are as follows:-

- How far does the relationship meet/exceed the expectations of all parties concerned?
- Which particular aspects of the relationship do the respective parties consider more important?
- Which particular aspects of the relationship are likely to lead to the long-term success of a B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?

#### ***Document 5***

This Document calls for the researcher to explore and report on a separate but major aspect of the overall research topic. It is normally expected that work done in the previous two Documents will be built on, but no particular methodological approach is prescribed. At this stage, it is expected that the requirements of this Document will best be addressed through the adoption of an interpretative approach, since it is the researcher’s intention to explore and reappraise the strategic relevance to UK business schools of the concept of Key Account Management (KAM) based largely on the issues and themes that will have emerged from the research conducted during the preceding Documents. Equally, it is felt that both the scope of the KAM concept and the fact that it represents a new area of interest to the researcher make it unlikely that anything other than an exploration of the key themes and issues of KAM within the



sector can be achieved, given the time scale and limited resources available to the researcher. At this stage, the research questions are as follows:-

- How appropriate is the concept of Key Account Management (KAM) to the organisation and management of business school-corporate client relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?
- What are the characteristics of successful KAM within the sector?
- How is the concept of KAM likely to develop into the future within the sector?

### **Research methodology**

#### ***Considering methodological approach***

Two broad methodological approaches dominate the research literature: positivism and interpretivism or phenomenology. Although both philosophies are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Saunders *et al*, 2000: 85), they nevertheless have a significant impact on the way the researcher approaches a project. Easterby-Smith *et al*. (1991: 21) give three reasons why an understanding of research methodological issues is useful:-

- Choice of research philosophy will help clarify the research design or provide the overall configuration of the research - in other words, it will assist in determining what kind of evidence is gathered from where and how it is interpreted
- Knowledge of philosophy can also help the researcher to recognise which research design(s) will work and which will not
- The researcher can also identify research designs that may be outside of his/her experience. These can then be adapted to the constraints of the particular issue being investigated.

#### ***The adoption of a positivistic approach***

As stated above, Document 4 requires the researcher to adopt a positivistic or 'scientific' approach. In positivistic research, the researcher tends to adopt the philosophical stance of the natural scientist who believes that the social world exists externally and that its properties should be measured through objective methods rather

than being inferred subjectively through sensation, reflection or intuition (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991: 22). Consequently, data should be collected and analysed in a detached, objective and value-free manner, with the researcher neither affecting nor being affected by the subject of the research (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998: 33). In addition, a highly structured approach is considered important in order not just to respect the best traditions of scientific investigation but also to facilitate replication of the research by others (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 85). Central to this structured approach to the choice of research method is the formulation of a hypothesis that is subjected to rigorous testing. Through a process of *deduction* a judgement can then be made as to whether the hypothesis is proven, disproved or needs to be modified.

Although, at this time, no specific hypothesis has yet been formulated for Document 4, it is expected that the outcomes from the research conducted in Document 3 will help point to a clearer understanding of the relative impact of, and possible interaction between, the different relationship variables that business school staff and their external corporate clients view as important. At the very least, the research objectives stated above will enable the researcher to determine whether the relationship meets/exceeds the expectations of all parties concerned, which particular aspects of the relationship the respective parties consider more important and which are likely to lead to the long-term success of a B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector.

### ***The adoption of an interpretative or phenomenological approach***

Documents 3 and 5 will be adopting an interpretative or phenomenological approach. The development of phenomenology stems from the view that the world and 'reality' are not objective and exterior rather they are socially constructed and given meaning by people (Husserl cited in Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991: 24). The social scientist is concerned with attempting to understand the constructions and meanings people put on their experiences. Phenomenology appeals to those who feel that the 'social' context of business research is too complex to lend itself to theorising in the same way as the physical sciences. Indeed, most business contexts are not just complex they are unique because the subjects under investigation are essentially situation- or company-specific. They are the function of a particular set of circumstances and individuals. Rich insights into these situations may be lost if the research is reduced

entirely to a series of 'law-like' generalisations (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 86). Equally, it could be argued that the phenomenological researcher is more interested in discovering the details of a situation in order 'to understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind them' (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998: 35).

Broadly speaking, a phenomenological or interpretative stance assumes that the researcher will adopt an *inductive* approach to the analysis and interpretation of the data generated: in other words, theory *building* as opposed to theory *testing* (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 87/88). The key characteristics of adopting an *inductive* approach can best be summarised as follows:-

- The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the nature of a particular problem by exploring the richness of the qualitative data gathered
- The researcher is particularly concerned with the context in which the events being researched are taking place
- The researcher attempts to make sense of the data in order to formulate theory
- A small sample is felt appropriate since conclusions generated are deemed to be situation-specific. The researcher is less concerned with the need to generalise
- Induction allows greater flexibility in terms of its choice of research methods. This, in turn, may enable a number of alternative theories to be examined during the course of a project.

The appropriateness of an interpretative and inductive approach can be clearly illustrated by considering the specific research objectives for Document 3 (stated above) where the intention is to *explore* and *better understand* the qualities and characteristics that make an effective B2B relationship, whether these qualities/characteristics are similar or different for all parties concerned and to identify ways in which B2B relationships might be improved to the mutual satisfaction of both parties. Far from theory testing, the intention is to help build a better theoretical and conceptual *understanding* of the nature and scope of B2B relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector.

### *A case for methodological pluralism?*

The choice of which research philosophy to adopt is not so much a case of which one is 'better', rather which is more appropriate for both the research topic in question and the beliefs of the researcher. The practical reality is that research rarely falls neatly into either the positivist or phenomenological camps. Business research may often be a mixture of the two depending on the scope and breadth of the research topic. Indeed, Remenyi *et al.* (1998: 37) suggest that the two research approaches should be viewed as being in a 'dialectical relationship' that will provide a set of tools or directions which the researcher may draw on as and when appropriate. It is encouraging to see that further support for this position is to be found within the marketing literature. Marsden and Littler (1996) propose that the prudent marketer should be actively encouraged to derive insights and knowledge from different perspectives and methodological approaches

### **Research strategy**

Research strategy involves thinking not just about the most suitable method(s) for answering the given research objectives but also an opportunity to consider the source(s) most likely to produce the best data. In effect, choice of research strategy is concerned more with the effectiveness rather than the efficiency of individual data collection methods (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 92) and is influenced significantly by the overarching methodological approach. However, whilst it is acknowledged that research methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive to either methodological stance, experiment and survey are essentially tools of the positivist researcher. Here, the emphasis is very much on hypothesis testing through the collection and analysis of quantitative data. On the other hand, case study, grounded theory, ethnography and action research are arguably the preserve of the interpretative researcher where the aim is to gather data in a more direct and personal manner before attempting to generate theory.

*Case study* has been chosen as the most appropriate research strategy for this particular project for a number of reasons that will be discussed shortly. Robson (1993: 5) defines case study as:-

“...a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.”

Although, as a research tool, case study is arguably of relevance to both positivist and interpretative researchers, it is thought particularly appropriate for this project given its capacity to provide rich data about an individual, company or event. It should be stressed, however, that the use of case study might not appeal to some on account of its perceived lack of ‘scientific’ foundations. However, case study is more than a mere description of a business context, it can also represent a worthwhile way of exploring existing theory. Indeed, a well-constructed case study can enable a researcher to challenge existing theory and may even provide a source of new hypotheses (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 94).

Specifically with Robson’s definition of *case study* in mind, the overriding aim of this project is to gather data (i.e. *empirical investigation*) about the nature and current state of B2B relationships (i.e. *a particular contemporary phenomenon*) in one or more UK business schools (i.e. *real life context*) through a logical and systematic programme of research that will include surveys and interviews with key personnel from one or more business schools and selected external corporate clients (i.e. *multiple sources of evidence*). Perry (1998: 786) offers further support for the use of case study particularly in postgraduate research.

Another issue to consider is whether the research is exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. An *exploratory* study is useful for helping to clarify or understand a research problem. According to Robson (1993: 42), exploratory studies are a valuable means of finding out “*what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light.*” A *descriptive* study aims to portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations (Robson, 1993: 4) and is often seen as an extension of, or possibly forerunner to, exploratory research (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 97). An *explanatory* study, on the other hand, attempts to establish and explain causal links between variables (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 98). It is interesting to note that the scope of this particular DBA project is such that it permits the use of all of these approaches, albeit at different times.

In Document 3, for example, the intention is to conduct a largely *exploratory* study in order to understand better the nature and characteristics of B2B relationships within the UK higher education postgraduate sector. It is anticipated that, for Document 4, this will lead to the development of a conceptual framework that will begin to describe how the various B2B relationship components might combine to determine the success or otherwise of relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector. In other words, this will provide the context within which *explanatory* research can take place in order to test for significant correlation and/or causal links between variables. Document 5 is expected, at this stage, to be largely *exploratory* although perhaps veering towards the *descriptive* depending on the richness of the data generated. The intention is, by the end of Document 5, to be able to provide a detailed picture of how the Key Account Manager (KAM) concept is currently being used within the UK higher education postgraduate sector and to establish what future form effective KAM might adopt.

### **Research methods**

The task of choosing appropriate data collection methods represents the *tactical* level of the research planning process (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 92). Choice of appropriate methods depends largely on the methodological stance and research strategy adopted from the outset. Whilst acknowledging that data collection methods do not necessarily fit conveniently into neatly labelled boxes, a positivistic approach generally favours the use of both *structured* questionnaires and interviews because of their capacity to generate large amounts of quantitative data in a relatively standardised format. This facilitates both statistical interpretation and replication of the research by others at a later date. On the other hand, an interpretative stance tends to favour the use of participant observation, *semi-structured* and *unstructured* interviews because of their flexibility and capacity to generate rich data that enhances understanding of a particular event or situation.

#### ***Specific research methods for Documents 3 and 5***

In both Documents 3 and 5, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews are likely to be adopted. Whilst the researcher will develop a list of themes and questions that need to be covered in each interview (in other words, an *interview agenda*) it is acknowledged

that the questions and issues raised may vary from interview to interview, depending on the particular nature of the organisation being investigated and the role/job title each informant holds. It is likely that certain questions will be omitted in some interviews and others introduced as necessary in order to explore or probe relevant issues as they arise. This is arguably part and parcel of the evolutionary nature of research. Equally, from a personal perspective, such flexibility is part of the appeal of adopting the interview method.

However, the use of interviews is not straightforward. Although interviewing is often claimed to be the 'best' method of gathering information, its complexity can sometimes be underestimated (Jones, 1985; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). This complexity is due partly to the fact that an interview is a social interaction with all the inherent problems of meaning and significance that individuals attach to their words and actions (Jones, 1985). Another problem is that - no matter how thorough and professional - an interviewer will bring preconceived ideas and frameworks to the discussion that, in turn, could bias the outcome of the research. As Jones (1985: 47) comments:-

*"... there is no such thing as presuppositionless research."*

A more detailed justification of the use of semi-structured interviews will be presented at a later date.

#### ***Specific research methods for Document 4***

Document 4 will necessitate the use of data collection methods more suited to the positivistic or 'scientific' nature of the task. As suggested above, experiment or survey research using questionnaires are the usual methods of gathering quantitative data. In business research, however, the scope for using experiment may be somewhat limited, being confined to such things as test marketing and the trialing of advertising and packaging concepts in a focus group setting. Survey research through the use of questionnaires is much more prevalent in business research. The term *questionnaire* is generally understood to include all techniques of data collection in which each person is asked to respond to the same set of questions in a predetermined order (deVaus cited in Saunders *et al*, 2000: 278). This definition indicates a degree of flexibility in

the way in which respondents can be interviewed in the sense that the questionnaires can be either self-administered or interviewer-administered and conducted either in person or impersonally by post, e-mail or telephone.

At this stage, the specific survey design for Document 4 has not been decided. However, the notion of self-administered questionnaires via post and/or e-mail is worthy of further investigation in terms of the size of sample that can be accessed and the relative ease, speed and convenience with which data can be obtained. Equally, Dillman (cited in Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 285/6) talks of grouping the data that can be collected through questionnaires into four distinct types:

- attitude (how respondents *feel* about something)
- belief (what they think or *believe* is right or wrong)
- behaviour (what people *did* in the past, *do* now or *will do* in the future)
- attribute (what qualities or characteristics respondents bring to a situation).

As already outlined above, the research objectives for Document 4 seek to determine whether the relationship meets/exceeds the expectations of all parties concerned, which particular aspects of the relationship the respective parties consider more important and which are likely to lead to the long-term success of a B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector. Given this framework, it would appear that the most fruitful line of questioning might be to elicit responses from all parties relating primarily to *attitude* and *behaviour* with the possibility of including some questions that would elicit responses relating to both *belief* and *attribute*.

Specific details of the survey design will follow at a later date.

### **Research time scale**

The research related to this study is expected to take at least two years. However, the structure of the DBA programme means that the research can be carried out in a staged manner. The anticipated staggering of the Documents can be seen in the Gantt charts provided in Appendices 4a, 4b and 4c.



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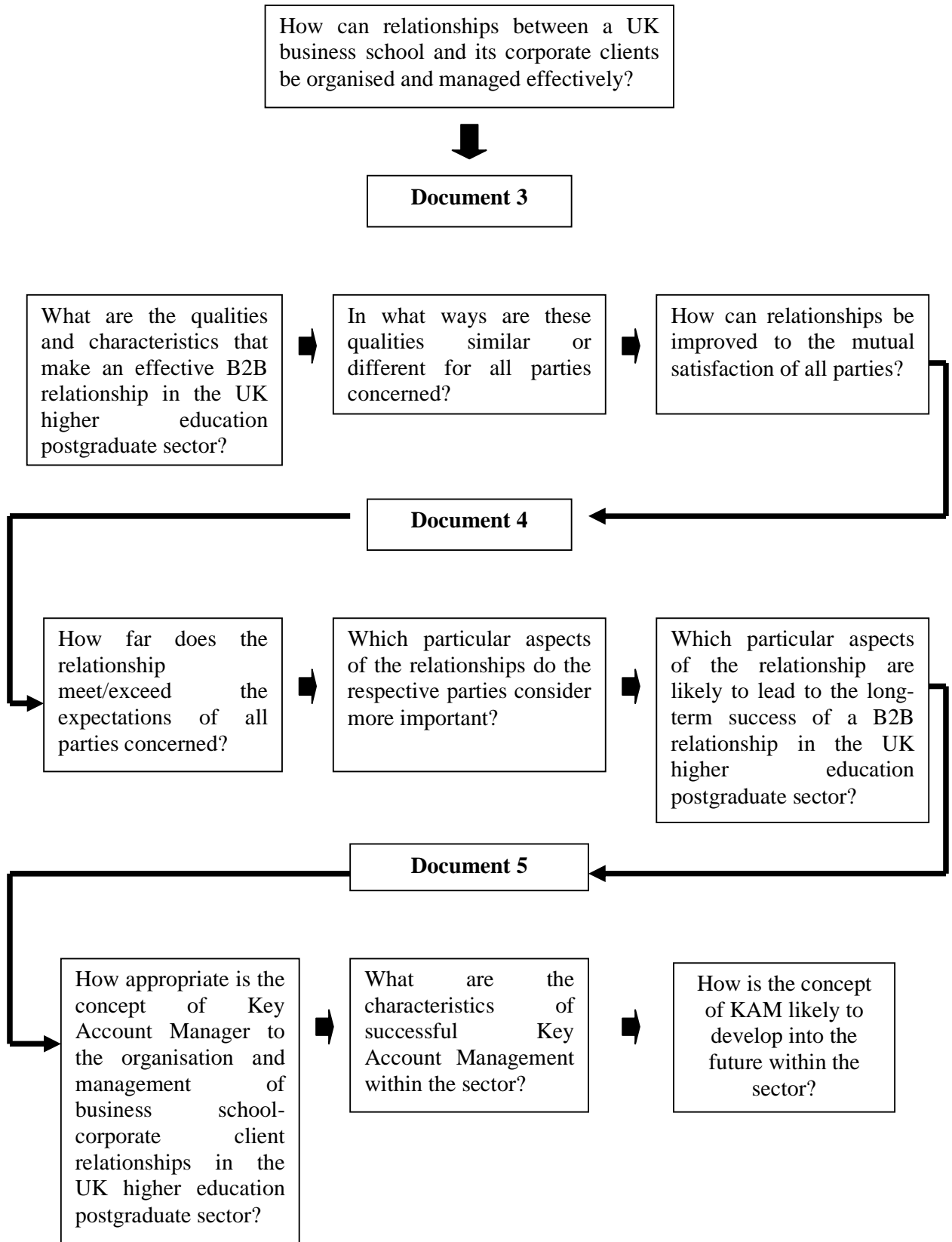
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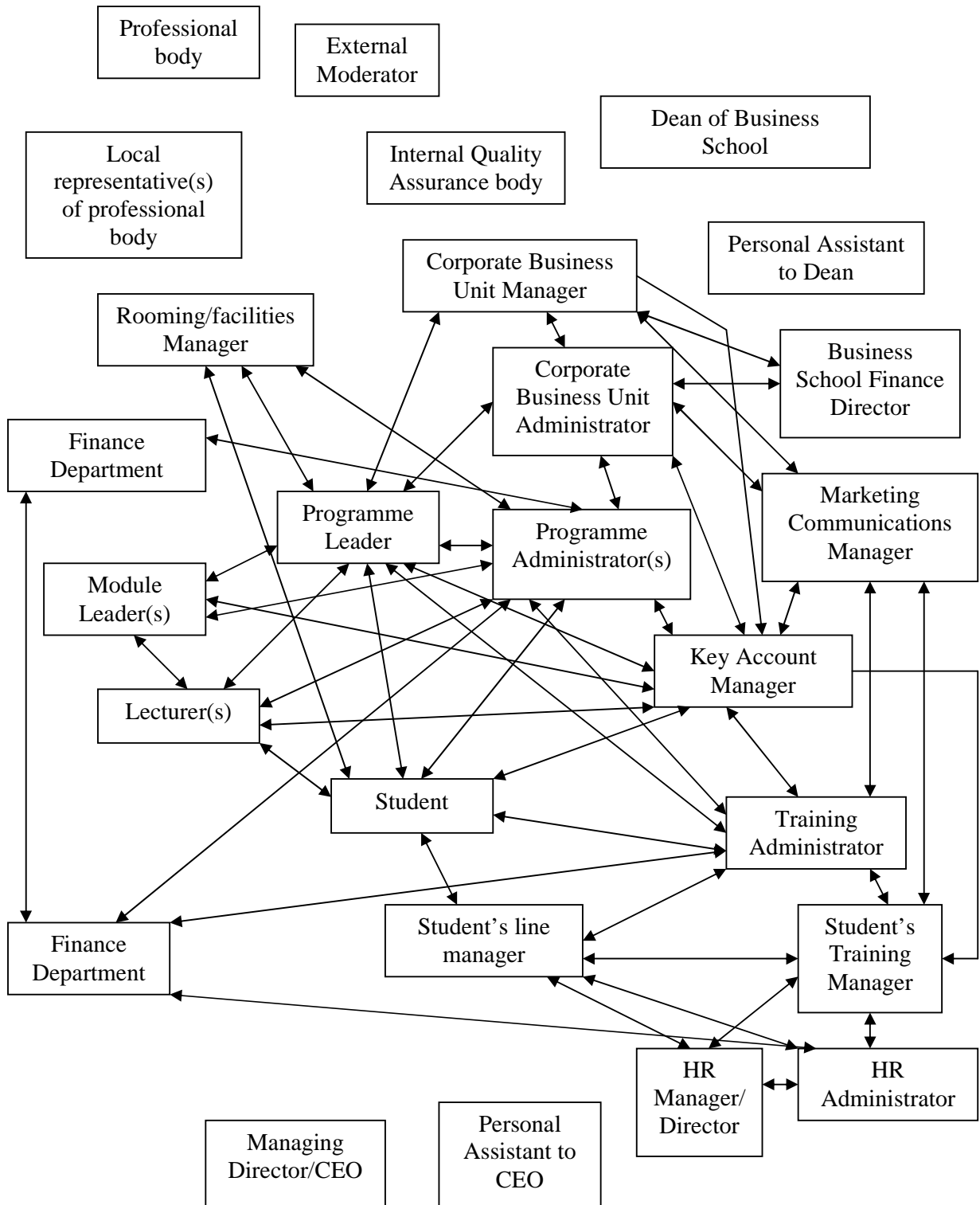
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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Mapping the research questions

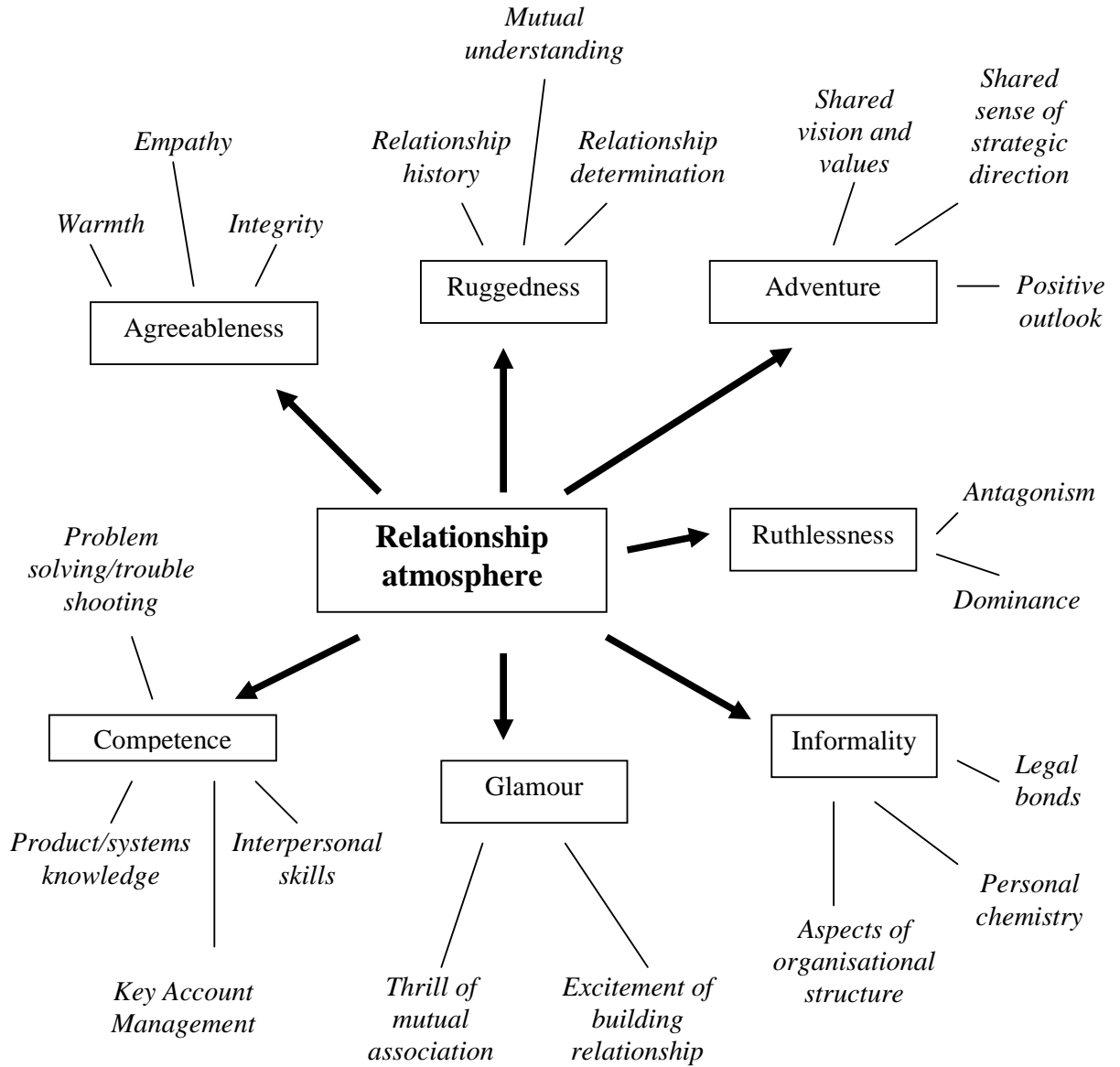


**Appendix 2a: Mapping the complexity of business school-corporate client relationships**





### Appendix 3: Potential factors impacting relationship atmosphere



(Adapted from Roper et al., 2002)

**Appendix 4a: Overview of research activities in 2003**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
<b>Document 1</b>												
<i>Reading/ making notes</i>	→											
<i>Writing up Document</i>		→										
<b>Document 2</b>												
<i>Reading/ making notes</i>				→								
<i>Writing up Document</i>							→					
<b>Document 3</b>												
<i>Reading/making notes</i>									→			
<i>Research design</i>									→			
<i>Initial interviews</i>											→	



**Appendix 4b: Overview of research activities in 2004**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
<b>Document 3</b>												
<i>Reading/ making notes</i>	→											
<i>Conducting further interviews</i>	→											
<i>Writing up Document</i>	→											
<b>Document 4</b>												
<i>Reading/ making notes</i>			→									
<i>Research design</i>			→									
<i>Pilot testing questionnaire</i>					→							
<i>Conducting further interviews</i>						→						
<i>Analysing/interpreting data</i>							→					
<i>Writing up Document</i>							→					
<b>Document 5</b>												
<i>Reading/ making notes</i>									→			

**Appendix 4c: Overview of research activities in 2005**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
<b>Document 5</b>												
<i>Reading/ making notes</i>	→											
<i>Research design</i>	→											
<i>Conducting interviews</i>		→										
<i>Analysing/interpreting data</i>			→									
<i>Writing up Document</i>		→	→	→	→	→	→					
<b>Document 6</b>												
<i>Reading/ making notes</i>				→								
<i>Writing up Document</i>					→	→	→	→				

**Document 2: Critical literature review  
and initial conceptual framework**

***‘Business relationships  
under the microscope?’***

**A critical review of the nature and  
relevance of business-to-business  
relationship marketing in the UK higher  
education postgraduate sector**

*by*

**Gary Richard Harden**

*In part-fulfilment of the  
Doctorate in Business Administration  
(2002/2005 cohort)*

**Nottingham Business School  
The Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

**October 2003**

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## **Doctorate in Business Administration**

### **Document 2: Critical literature review and initial conceptual framework**

# *‘Business relationships under the microscope?’*

A critical review of the nature and relevance of business-to-business relationship marketing in the UK higher education postgraduate sector

## **Introduction**

The overarching aim of this critical literature review is to examine the nature and role of business-to-business (B2B) relationships and the relevance of B2B marketing theory and concepts in the context of the UK higher education postgraduate sector. However, in order to do this, it will first be necessary to revisit the broader topic of relationship marketing (RM) in order to evaluate the current state of academic debate and conceptualisation. Specifically, this review will seek to:-

- determine the precise nature of RM (i.e. to address the ‘*What is it?*’ question)
- explore the fascination of organisations for RM and its strategic relevance (i.e. to answer the question of ‘*Why RM?*’)
- understand the specific business contexts in which RM is considered an appropriate strategic option (i.e. the ‘*Where?*’ and ‘*When?*’ dimensions)
- consider some of the key issues relating to the implementation of RM (i.e. the practicalities of ‘*How?*’)
- evaluate where current conceptualisation leaves an organisation such as a business school and its dealings with commercial clients (i.e. the ‘*So, what?*’)

Having reviewed the topic of RM in this way it will be possible to draw together the main threads of the debate into a broad conceptual framework that will both supplement the original research direction outlined in Document 1 and act as a guide to future research activity that will be undertaken in each of Documents 3, 4 and 5. However, it should be noted that neither research objectives nor their implications will be addressed specifically in Document 2. Rather, a comprehensive explanation and rationale for each subsequent stage of the research will be provided in the appropriate Document. However, in summary, it is reasonable to identify that, at this stage, the research will be seeking to gauge the expectations and experiences of those individuals within business schools tasked with managing external corporate client relationships (in broad terms, the 'key account managers') and the corporate clients themselves who sponsor selected employees to attend postgraduate programmes of study. It is envisaged that the research will also surface comments and suggestions about how such B2B relationships can best be organised and managed in the future. This will, in turn, facilitate a formal appraisal of the strategic relevance of the Key Account Manager concept within an academic environment.

The choice of the UK higher education postgraduate sector as the research context for this study is largely justified on the basis that it is acknowledged to be an under-researched area of marketing. Indeed, it will go some way to meeting a growing call for researchers to understand in greater depth the different B2B contexts in which relationship marketing and Key Account Management approaches appear to flourish (or flounder) and for a wider application of empirical research across different B2B sectors (Ellis and Mayer, 2001).

This critical review of RM literature will attempt to steer a course through what is readily acknowledged as an extremely large and diffuse body of work. It would perhaps be unreasonable, within a single review of such limited length, to expect a comprehensive and faithful coverage of every single issue raised in debate in multiple business contexts over a period of some 30 years. In this respect, the review of any one school of thought or body of work cannot be expected to provide the final word on the matter. Rather, the reader is asked to indulge what might, at times, appear to be the somewhat naïve - but well-intentioned - musings of a fledging researcher

embarked on a voyage of academic (self-) discovery and enlightenment. Equally, one's commercial and/or academic background may inevitably mean that certain perspectives on the nature and dynamics of relationships are considered more readily accessible than others and, consequently, more directly relevant. Thus, a degree of judgement has to be exercised when selecting those bodies of literature on which to focus the discussion. This study could conceivably have encompassed a review of such broadly relevant areas as Actor-Network Theory, social psychology, supply chain management, selling and sales management, database marketing, competitive strategy and micro-economic theory. However, for the purposes of this review, discussion will concentrate on the following:-

- RM conceptualisation
- 'Classic' organisational buying behaviour (OBB)
- services marketing (interactive marketing)
- buyer-seller relationships (classic 'dyadic' relationships)
- networks as markets (NW approach)
- Industrial Marketing and Purchasing group (IMP)
- Key Account Management (KAM)

This review will conclude with an attempt to determine the extent to which B2B theory and concepts are applicable to the development and management of commercial relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector. However, it is first necessary to build a clear picture of the precise nature of RM.

### **What is RM?**

The concept of RM is unmistakably a topical one that appears to have generated substantial debate in both academic and marketing practitioner circles, not least concerning the precise status of its conceptual underpinning and the implications of its practical application. The volume of books, academic journal articles, conference papers - and even conferences - devoted to RM all testify to the strength of interest in

the area. In crude terms, RM could be regarded as a 'hot topic' (Brennan, 1997: 774) or to have entered the 'rhetoric of management' (Blois, 1998: 256). Gummesson (1999: 245) provides further support for the idea that RM is a fertile marketing 'growth area':-

*"...there is a rich literature searching for an RM identity. The growth rate is currently exponential."*

Blois (1998) claims that the principal reason for this emerging interest in RM - as with interest in other ostensibly simple marketing management tools such as the product life cycle concept - lies principally in its intuitive feel. Certainly, on a personal level, we are all familiar with 'relationships' in our everyday lives and, so, it is perhaps not unreasonable to expect the relationship metaphor to graduate to the commercial lexicon. However, as will become clear later in this critical literature review, the use of such a deceptively straightforward notion as 'relationships' in a commercial context may well mask significant practical problems for organisations when they attempt to implement RM.

In challenging the validity of RM, Blois (1998) queries whether the deceptively simple appeal of the many benefits that can accrue to an organisation entering into long-term relationships with customers might be merely assertions propounded by academics rather than borne out in reality. By the same token, whilst it may be generally accepted that relationships should be long-term in their nature, the economic argument to justify pursuing such a strategy is 'thin' (or circular?) in the sense that long-term benefits can only accrue if substantial investment is made in the relationship in the first place (Blois, 1996a). Further support for this position is provided by Cann (1998) and Rao and Perry (2002), who claim that, whilst the benefits of long-term relationships are generally well recognised, theory is not always put into practice.

Now, at first sight, the topicality of the RM debate might lead one to assume that the concept was perhaps breaking new ground. However, the notion of relational exchange as an integral part of commercial life is not a new one - indeed its history



can be traced back thousands of years. RM may be a new term but an old phenomenon (Gummesson, 1997; Gummesson, 1999). Equally, in his seminal paper assessing the changing role of marketing in the organisation, Webster (1992) suggests that even before the marketing mix (or 4Ps) took hold as the predominant mode of marketing thought in the early 1960s marketing was viewed largely as a set of social and economic processes and - hence, by implication - built up on the notion of relational exchange. Indeed, it is argued by some that marketing has always been regarded as a very human activity (Petrof, 1997).

At this point, it is also worth noting that the emerging focus on 'relationships' has not necessarily been unique to marketing. There is evidence to suggest that marketing's flirtation with the notion of relationships is concurrent with a growing interest in the issue of co-operation between economic actors in economics, sociology and organisation theory (Mattsson, 1997: 447). Nonetheless, despite sustained academic debate around its conceptualisation and commercial applicability, the matter of actually defining RM has proved, surprisingly, to be somewhat more complicated (Mattsson, 1997; Blois, 1998; Gronhaug *et al.*, 1999; Rao and Perry, 2002). To some, RM is an 'ambiguous' term (Gronhaug *et al.*, 1999; Lindgreen and Crawford, 1999) because it means different things to different people in different contexts. Equally, the concept of relationships could be 'misleading' and inappropriate to the kind of situations that marketers normally address because, under certain circumstances, business transactions may not necessarily require close contact between buyer and seller in order to succeed (Rosenfield, 1999). RM might be a useful label in terms of consumer marketing but is an inappropriate description of what happens in, for example, business markets because of the active participation of customers in the process (Ford, 1997: xv).

Indeed, Buttle (1996: 13) encapsulates perfectly the problems surrounding the definition of RM:-

*"RM is a term which has yet to acquire uncontested status and meaning. For some, RM is simply transactional marketing dressed up in new clothes; for others, it represents a significant change in the practice of marketing."*

However, for the purposes of attempting to define RM, the following (or more recent variations on a theme) is normally adopted as the ‘standard’ definition by leading RM authors:-

*“Marketing is to establish, maintain and enhance relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises. Such relationships are usually but not necessarily always long term.”* (Gronroos, 1994a: 9)

It is worth pointing out, however, that this definition has been modified more recently with the insertion, into the first line, of the words “...and, where necessary, terminate...”. This, in turn, has been attributed to Gronroos - although, strangely, it would appear that all references to this modified definition do not in fact lead the reader to discover a definition that actually contains the additional words! Be that as it may, the amended version has presumably become fashionable in order to accommodate the fact that not all relationships are necessarily considered profitable or need be long-term in nature. Indeed, arguably, companies should not hesitate to terminate unprofitable relationships where necessary.

Another way of approaching the problem of defining RM has been to suggest that, rather than attempting to be too prescriptive and narrow in focus, there is possibly a case to be had for a more open-ended definition that incorporates *any* activity directed towards establishing and maintaining successful relational exchanges. This would, thus, make RM applicable to most marketing contexts:-

*“Conspicuously missing from all extant definitions of RM is the specific recognition that many instances of RM do not have a “customer” as one of the exchange participants.”* (Morgan and Hunt, 1994: 22)

Although a universally accepted definition of RM may not exist, it is nonetheless possible to identify broad conceptual categories that recur in the literature. Typical of this approach to ‘deconstructing’ RM is the framework of core features proposed by Holmlund and Tornroos (1997: 305/6). In short, they claim that relationships are

highly *context dependent* and are governed by *mutuality* and *interaction* over the *long-term*. However, a more comprehensive - yet elegantly simple - approach to deconstructing RM is offered by Harker (1999) who, based on an analysis of some 29 definitions of RM, suggests that the following conceptual categories might well provide the primary constructs of any future definition:-

- Creation
  - *an attempt is made to attract customers and establish a relationship*
- Development
  - *once established, relationships are enhanced and strengthened*
- Maintenance
  - *an effort is made to sustain stable and lasting relationships*
- Interactive
  - *relationships thrive on mutual exchange and co-operation*
- Long-term
  - *companies look to retaining customers on a permanent basis*
- Emotional content
  - *relationships rely on trust, commitment and fulfilment of promises*
- Output
  - *relationships should lead to rewarding and profitable outcomes*

Despite what, on the face of it, might appear to be somewhat academic - and possibly sterile and counter-productive - arguments over defining RM, marketing practitioners and academics alike have nevertheless been lured by its many charms. At this stage, therefore, it is considered appropriate to examine the reasons why some organisations have opted for pursuing RM as a strategy.

### **Why the fascination for RM?**

The very essence of the competitive commercial environment dictates that organisations will inevitably be affected in some way by the complex interaction of

environmental pressures in their broadest sense (the so-called *macro-environmental* factors), other organisations and groups (in other words, the competitors and customers that operate in the *micro-environment*) and people themselves (working in, or on behalf of, the respective organisations). Arguably, it is largely as a result of the rational approach to strategy formulation and implementation that has dominated management thought and action over the past three decades that organisations have attempted to predict the precise nature and likely impact of this complex interaction of forces on commercial performance - not least, from the perspective of understanding how people and organisations interact. This is no straightforward issue, especially if it is accepted that it is not the organisations themselves that make commercial decisions and build relationships it is the people (i.e. the staff) who actually do this in the course of their dealings with customers (Blois, 1997, 1998). Consequently, if it accepted that the fate of the majority of commercial relationships is likely to rest largely in the hands of ordinary employees this, in turn, will encourage organisations to scrutinise peoples' behaviour more closely and to understand the impact that the combination of behaviour and peoples' interpretation of events and decisions can have on relationship development (Blois, 1998).

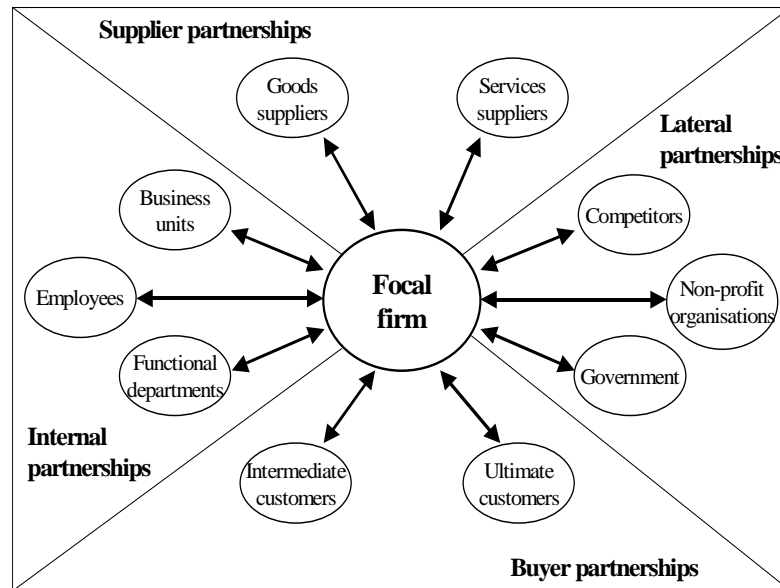
From the earliest academic writing on business relationships, it has been clear that 'firms are linked together in a dense network of co-operation and affiliation' (Richardson, 1972 cited in Blois, 1998: 267). In broad terms, for example, there are *external* relationships with consumers - otherwise known as business-to-consumer (or B2C) relationships. Second, there will almost inevitably be *external* relationships with other organisations such as suppliers - otherwise known as business-to-business (or B2B) relationships. Then, finally, there are *internal* relationships with staff, which have become an increasingly important strategic concern for organisations as they slowly begin to embrace the concept of internal marketing. In short, the main thrust of internal marketing is that the same effort should be expended on marketing to the *internal* customer (i.e. the staff) as is expended on the *external* customer, since everybody in the organisation has the potential to impact in some way on the development and maintenance of the company-customer relationship. The main implication is obviously that every member of staff - in whatever capacity - who comes into contact with the customer could conceivably be regarded as a *part-time*

*marketer* (Webster, 1992; Gummesson, 1994) with a responsibility for contributing to the company's overall customer-orientation. In light of this, it may be valid to consider that the job of marketing should not be viewed exclusively as the preserve of full-time, professional marketers working in the marketing department. This has obvious ramifications for marketing practitioners.

The identification of the range of potential relationships that organisations experience owes much to the influential work of American academics Morgan and Hunt (1994). Figure 1 illustrates these relationships clearly and succinctly. *Supplier partnerships* occur with companies providing goods and components or those providing services e.g. advertising and specialist promotional agencies. In addition, organisations have numerous *lateral partnerships* with competitors, government (both local and national) and non-profit making organisations such as trade unions and charities. The existence of *buyer partnerships* suggests that organisations need also to think in broader terms about the buyers of its products. These buyers may not always be the individual or company that makes the initial purchase. The real end-user may be some distance removed. Finally, there are the various *internal partnerships* either with individual employees, departments or business units.

As for applying this approach to the UK higher education postgraduate sector, a detailed description of the complexity of relationships between a business school and its corporate clients was given in Document 1. Here, the complexity was largely accounted for by the fact that transactions may occur between many different parties - not just between the student and the lecturer. For the purposes of comparison, a diagram of the many potential relationships can be found in Appendix 1.

**Figure 1: The relational exchanges in Relationship Marketing**



Source: Morgan and Hunt (1994)

Given the multiplicity of relationships that an organisation has to contend with in the course of its commercial activities, a comprehensive understanding of relationship characteristics arguably becomes crucial. This is especially true if it is accepted that relationships are intrinsically dynamic and will change over time (as they do in our own personal lives). In this respect, therefore, organisations have been largely forced into attempting to understand more about relationships. In other words, it is a *coerced* fascination.

Equally, organisations have possibly become more interested in issues such as RM because of its perceived usefulness in terms of building and protecting company reputation and creating sustainable competitive advantage in a competitive environment where technological and product-related advantages are becoming shorter-lived. Thus, RM finds itself catapulted to the level of strategic importance. However, at this point, it is worth exploring in more detail the specific characteristics of RM that have motivated organisations to consider it as an appropriate strategic option because, although an organisation may be convinced that it has satisfied the

customer in the short-term, it may be an altogether harder task maintaining and developing the relationship in the longer-term and is something that has to be worked at. As Buttle (1996: 7) observes:-

*“It is evident that customers generally seek quality, value and convenience in their transactions with suppliers. What is not clear is what else customers would expect if they were to enter into a long-term relationship.”*

Arguably, the single most radical feature of RM - at least from a marketing perspective - is that it involves a dramatic change of emphasis from the single transaction to a continuing relationship with the customer. Concern over the potentially exploitative nature of traditional marketing - with its emphasis on the single customer transaction - has been much in evidence in the RM literature (Levitt, 1983; Webster, 1992; Gronroos, 1990; Gronroos, 1994a). By the same token, it represents a significant change from what has traditionally been characterised in the marketing literature as confrontational and adversarial customer-supplier encounters to a more interactive and cooperative approach (Buttle, 1996; Gruen, 1997). As a result, RM is likely to have significant strategic implications for companies, not least in organisational terms. Gronroos' (1996) view, for example, is that the relational approach is essentially a resource-based one in which far greater emphasis is placed on *managing* the relationship with the customer (see Appendix 2). Hence, a more intimate level of service is likely to accrue than in a product-oriented company. In this respect, some would claim that RM offers companies a unique opportunity to get to know their customers better (Stacey, 1993). The key differences in approach resulting from this shift of emphasis are summarised in Table 1 (see below).

Equally, it is now commonly accepted that customers are becoming increasingly sophisticated not just in terms of their tastes but also in terms of their expectations. Consequently, RM has emerged partly because product quality itself is no longer considered sufficient to enable a company to satisfy its customers. Indeed, product quality is possibly something that is readily imitated by competitors and offers little guarantee of creating sustainable competitive advantage (Palmer, 1996; Buttle, 1996). Companies are therefore increasingly looking to other aspects of the product offering -

notably the service dimension - to create a competitive edge (Gronroos, 1996; Rosen and Surprenant, 1998).

Table 1: Comparison of transactional and relationship focus

Transactional focus	Relationship focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation to single sales</li> <li>• Discontinuous customer contact</li> <li>• Focus on product features</li> <li>• Short time scale</li> <li>• Little emphasis on customer service</li> <li>• Limited commitment to meeting customer expectations</li> <li>• Quality is production's concern</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation to customer retention</li> <li>• Continuous customer contact</li> <li>• Focus on customer value</li> <li>• Long time scale</li> <li>• High customer service emphasis</li> <li>• High commitment to meeting customer expectations</li> <li>• Quality is the concern of all</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Payne *et al.* (1995)

However, we should not be fooled into thinking that the fascination with relationships is motivated purely out of concern for the customer. Organisations are obviously increasingly aware of the financial significance of entering into long-term relationships and improving customer retention. Much of the initial impetus for focusing on, what Gronroos (1994a) calls, *customer relationship economics* has been provided by classic research conducted by American consultants Bain & Co. into the impact of reductions in customer defections on long-term corporate profitability. Reichheld and Sasser (1990) reported that, on average, a 5% reduction in customer defections can boost corporate profits over a five-year period by 25%-85% across a range of business sectors. Their research accepts that whilst not all customer business is necessarily profitable in the early stages of the relationship attention should be focused on the value to the company of the customer's business over the customer's lifetime - hence the notions of *customer lifetime value* and *customer relationship life cycle* (Gronroos, 1994a). It is arguably the financial imperative that seals RM's fate as a strategically important concept



However, in order to appreciate more fully the strategic implications of pursuing RM, it is considered useful to evaluate how RM has emerged in different business contexts and how it has been applied.

### **The contexts in which RM is applicable**

Whilst RM may well be a 'hot topic' that has encouraged wide-ranging academic debate, it can be argued that both the conceptualisation and development of RM have been hindered rather than helped by the emergence of divergent schools of thought (Gronroos, 1994a; Buttle, 1996; Coviello *et al.*, 1997). The following 'schools' can be detected in the literature:-

- the Nordic school - which has tended to focus predominantly on the strategic issues surrounding service quality and service provision
- the North American school - which has largely tended to explore the fundamental determinants of the classic dyadic relationship between buyer and seller. Typical of research from this 'school' is the attempt to model the role of trust and commitment in relationships
- the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group - who since the 1960s have concentrated largely on interaction and networks in industrial contexts
- a loose affiliation of European and Australasian academics - who have focussed on matters relating largely to the conceptualisation of RM theory.

The following section aims to outline the contribution of these 'schools' and identify the circumstances in which RM has emerged as a relevant business approach. To help in this task, a framework first proposed by Coviello *et al.* (cited in Brodie *et al.*, 1997) has been useful in lending structure to the debate. According to Brodie *et al.*, this typology represents an interesting attempt to understand developments in RM (i.e. the strands of research) and the use of terminology (i.e. confusion over terms and activities encompassed by RM). In short, four types of marketing are identified:-

- Transactional Marketing
  - Transaction marketing

- Relational marketing
  - Database marketing
  - Interaction marketing
  - Network marketing

In essence, the typology depicts the full range of relationship proximity that is possible between organisation and customer ranging from the impersonal, single transaction (i.e. traditional transaction marketing) through to situations where organisations enjoy a high degree of closeness and mutual trust and transact with each other on an on-going basis in what amounts to an affiliation or network of companies (i.e. network marketing). Now, before going further, it is worth clarifying that, in this study, the typology is being used purely as a means of providing a structure for discussion. It should not be assumed that the different types of marketing are being claimed as mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, in using the typology for their own research, the two main issues for Brodie *et al.* (1997) were to establish whether:-

- different types of marketing are practised in different business sectors

“...are service firms necessarily dominated by the practice of Relational marketing activities?” (Brodie *et al.*, 1997: 386)

- *whether there has been a paradigm shift (or whether, in fact, all four types of marketing could be practised simultaneously)*

“...might it not be argued that Transactional and Relational marketing are not mutually exclusive, but are part of the same paradigm; a paradigm which allows for both perspectives to coexist?” (Brodie *et al.*, 1997: 389)

Transactional marketing has already been addressed in this study in the course of setting the context for the emergence of RM, and so will not figure in the following discussion. Equally, whilst it is acknowledged that database marketing is - in the right

hands - an effective marketing tool in helping to manage and exploit an organisation's customer base, it could be argued that exponents of database marketing - as indeed may be the case with all impersonal forms of marketing communication - are only giving the impression that the organisation is entering into a more personal and meaningful relationship with the customer. In reality, such dealings may amount to little more than an illusion being performed on the customer (Harden, 2002). Consequently, the topic of database marketing will not figure in the following critical review of the relevance of RM in different business contexts. The review will proceed initially with an examination of research in the field of services marketing.

### **Services marketing (interaction marketing)**

From the perspective of the Nordic school, the main motivation for much of their research has derived from an interest in the whole episode that is the company-customer service encounter. In particular, they have attempted to focus on the issue of service quality. Now, by its very nature, the concept of the service encounter implies that an organisation will almost inevitably become involved in some kind of interaction with the customer. This interaction may or may not continue into the longer-term based on the outcomes of each interaction. During a company-customer encounter both the seller and the buyer participate in a complex sequence of interaction, during which the seller attempts to determine exactly what will satisfy the buyer. This is made more complicated by the intangible nature of services and the fact that the service the customer wants is normally an intensely personal one that is subject - at least in terms of personal taste and preference - to a good deal of unpredictability and change. Equally, services deliver a bundle of consumer benefits through the experience that is created by the service provider at the point of transaction. In reality, the different parts of the bundle come from a variety of sources at once (Bateson and Hoffman, 1999).

The classic way of representing this is the model of *servuction* developed by Lorange and Eiglier (see Appendix 3). The consumer can be influenced by both visible and invisible parts of the organisation and, indeed, by other customers. Equally, the *servuction* system model not only shows the different elements of the service experience, but also shows how the experience is created. In a university business

school, for example, the invisible part of the organisation will be everything that takes place away from the actual physical learning environment e.g. the technical and administrative support behind-the-scenes that facilitates a particular programme of study. Without the appropriate staff and organised systems the front of house service - in other words, the delivery of the programme - could not be sustained. In this model, it is also suggested that other customers may also exert an influence on the service being provided. This has obvious implications for a service provider such as a business school insofar as one customer may seek to influence the views of another based on the quality of the service they have received. In short, underpinning the *servuction* system model is the notion of the 'critical incident'.

These critical incidents are specific interactions between customers and service firm staff that are either especially satisfying or especially dissatisfying (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990). Incidents occur each time service providers and customers encounter each other. However, whilst most of these incidents might be fairly inconsequential and have little, if any, effect on the customer, others might grow important enough to become critical to the success of the encounter (Palmer, 1998). In reality, at each critical incident, the customer has an opportunity to evaluate the service provider and form an opinion of the service quality being offered (Palmer, 1998). This process of evaluation must inevitably play a role in determining the long-term development of a commercial relationship.

The nature of these company-customer exchanges gives rise in the services marketing literature to the notion of the *interactive marketing function*, which is explained as:-

*"...the marketing impact on the customer during the consumption process, where the consumer of a service typically interacts with systems, physical resources and employees of the service provider."* (Gronroos, 1994b: 353)

Whilst, at first sight, this concept sounds a compelling one - and is broadly in keeping with the move towards greater customer orientation identified earlier in this review - it poses the immediate organisational problem of which department should be tasked with operating this integrative function. Marketers would understandably claim that this falls within their traditional domain. However, Gronroos (1994b) goes on to

mount a stinging attack on the typical marketing department as being increasingly isolated and out of touch. As such, he believes that it would find it impossible to accommodate such an integrative approach.

The interactive nature of the company-customer relationship, as viewed by the services marketers, is not dissimilar to the approach adopted by the North American 'school' with its focus on the buyer-seller (or dyadic) relationship. However, whilst the main vehicle for research has obviously been the interaction between the two parties, the underlying motivation has been somewhat different.

### **Dyadic buyer-seller relationships**

The North American 'school' has tended to focus on the particular dynamics of the buyer-seller relationship in a bid to identify the precise factors that lead to the development and maintenance of successful long-term relationships. Although many contextual factors undoubtedly contribute to the overall success or failure of marketing relationships, two factors in particular have provoked substantial academic debate: commitment and trust:-

*"In short, commitment and trust lead directly to cooperative behaviors that are conducive to RM success."* (Morgan and Hunt, 1994: 22)

Morgan and Hunt (1994) provide a wide-ranging and authoritative review of the key literature from the fields of social exchange and organisational and buyer behaviour in order to better understand the role and nature of commitment and trust in RM. They contend that commitment results from an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum effort at maintaining the relationship. By the same token, trust is said to exist when one party has confidence in the other's reliability and integrity. Commitment and trust are considered important because they encourage marketers to work at preserving relationships with customers and look to the longer-term benefits of staying with customers, whilst discouraging exchange partners from acting opportunistically (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Indeed, Morgan and Hunt go on to regard them as key mediating variables (or K MVs) because they are believed to be influenced by a

number of antecedents whilst influencing, in turn, a number of potential outcomes. Appendix 4 illustrates the relationships between these variables.

Superficially, Morgan and Hunt's KMV model appears to provide an attractively simple and intuitively logical vision of how marketing relationships develop. Indeed, Morgan and Hunt's subsequent work offers broad support for the model. However, their research should be viewed in the context of being purely exploratory and conducted within the somewhat 'narrow' field of US car tyre dealers, which obviously raises concerns over the generalisability of the data and the conclusions.

Equally, the KMV model could be regarded as an oversimplification of what is generally considered to be a complex psychological process, much of which is obviously subjective and unique to each individual. Indeed, the building and maintenance of lasting customer ties is generally acknowledged in RM literature as a difficult marketing challenge, even in situations where a relationship is considered 'feasible' (Jackson, 1985). There is also a danger in thinking that relationships only revolve around trust and commitment. Although trust and commitment are held by many RM authors to be essential ingredients in a relationship (see, for example, Doney and Cannon, 1997), the irony is that they may well end up having a destabilising effect:-

*"...perversely, commitment and trust also bring uncertainty."* (Blois, 1996b: 186)

By the same token, it is suggested that such a narrow view might actually lead one to "ignore the rich diversity of relationships which not only exist but are appropriate in different contexts" (Blois, 1998: 268). So, rather than restrict our field of vision, we should in fact remain open to the full range of potential influencing variables whilst, at the same time, also taking into consideration the particular contextual dynamics of the business environment. This is important because commercial relationships do not occur in isolation but are necessarily affected by the *environment* in which the transacting organisations operate (Anderson *et al.*, 1994). Indeed, the issue is not so much whether a relationship *per se* exists rather to understand the *nature* of the relationship. Equally, inter-organisational relationships are complex and multi-faceted because they are not just important in themselves but are also predictors of likely

future transaction behaviour (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996). Given this complexity, it could be argued that there is a pressing need to look beyond the obvious and avoid slipping into what has been referred to as ‘dyadic atomisation’ - a type of reductionism (Anderson *et al.*, 1994: 13) where an unnecessarily simplistic view is taken of an inherently complex and abstract concept.

Another way of looking at this issue is to draw a distinction between the so-called *primary* and *secondary* functions of a relationship. The former relate to things that take place within the relationship, the latter relate to factors that occur outside the focal relationship (and will be explored further in the section on ‘networks’):-

*“Relationships are dyads, but the existence of the secondary functions means that they are also parts of networks.”* (Anderson *et al.*, 1994: 3)

It is also relevant to note that the traditional focus in organisational buying behaviour (OBB) literature has tended to be on studying discrete buying and purchasing decisions (Campbell, 1996). According to Ford (1997), the ‘classic’ approach to business marketing is flawed for a number of reasons. First, it is guilty of perpetuating the separate analysis of the marketing and purchasing process. Second, it has concentrated on the single purchase as its unit of analysis. Finally - and perhaps more tellingly - it has carried over the view from consumer marketing literature that buyers were individually insignificant, passive and part of a relatively homogeneous market. Interestingly, Sheth - one of the foremost academics in the field of OBB research - has himself recently begun to question the relevance of classic OBB theory:-

*“We need to learn new concepts, methods and theories appropriate for the new world of OBB.”* (Sheth, 1996: 12)

For a more detailed guide to the main themes and issues emerging from ‘classic’ OBB literature, the reader is referred to the Appendix to Sheth’s challenging and thought-provoking paper, which contains a comprehensive and authoritative overview of the key OBB literature covering a period of 25 years.

The move towards a more holistic approach to considering commercial interaction inevitably brings the discussion round to a consideration of the work of the 'interaction as networks' researchers: in other words, a consideration of the relevance of network marketing theory and constructs.

### **The 'networks as markets' approach**

In strategic planning literature, the classic view of the environment has tended to be that, although there is inevitably a significant impact on the organisation from environmental pressures, there is nevertheless a distinct demarcation between it and the firm (in other words between the *macro* and *micro* environments). Whilst this perspective may well be suited to a rational planning model, it is problematic from a general RM perspective, not least by virtue of the fact that an organisation's environment is normally considered to be socially constructed, being shaped over time by a continuous cycle of interaction between people representing their respective organisations. In this respect, the socially constructed nature of the business environment makes it easier to understand the interest in dyadic relationships of researchers such as Morgan and Hunt and Doney and Cannon. However, whilst there is undoubtedly a degree of overlap with research done on 'pure' dyadic relationships, the focus of network marketing is not on these relationships in isolation rather on their role within the broader network of interacting businesses:-

*"Emerging practice strongly suggests that to understand these business relationships, greater attention must be directed to the business network context within which dyadic relationships take place."* (Anderson *et al.*, 1994: 13)

Equally, it is the complex nature of the interaction between people in organisations that sometimes obscures the precise dividing line between an organisation and its environment. The 'networks as markets' literature is quite clear on this point:-

*"...a network perspective better captures the notion that the boundary between the firm and its environment is much more diffuse."* (Anderson *et al.*, 1994: 4)



On this particular point, it is appropriate to note that the diffuse nature of this boundary seems to pose few problems for the network (NW) researcher because the focus of research is ultimately the network and not the organisation or the individual relationship (Easton, 1992). However, the fact that NW marketing intrinsically involves many and varied relationships between organisations in the network is potentially problematic for business managers:-

*“The inherently ambiguous, complex, and fluid nature of business networks place unfamiliar and often perplexing demands on managers.” (Anderson et al., 1994: 12)*

Now, before discussing NW marketing further, it is perhaps useful to attempt to define the concept of a ‘network’ because there has been criticism in the NW literature that “neither RM nor NW definitions are internally homogeneous and consistent” (Mattsson, 1997: 448). A business network can be defined as:-

*“...a set of two or more connected business relationships, in which each exchange relation is between business firms that are conceptualised as collective actors... Moreover, two connected relationships of interest themselves can be both directly and indirectly connected with other relationships that have some bearing on them, as part of a larger business network.” (Anderson et al., 1994: 2)*

In terms of the differences between the RM and NW approaches, Mattsson (1997) - in providing a comparison of RM and NW definitions - draws the conclusion that RM definitions are largely *management-oriented*. In other words, definitions frequently mention RM as either a management process or as a set of management actions that are implemented in the course of developing and maintaining long-term relationships. On the other hand, NW definitions tend to *describe* market processes as interactions within relationships and market structures as network structures (Hakansson, 1982; Mattsson, 1997). In short, Mattsson claims that RM definitions are *prescriptive* and NW definitions *descriptive*:-

*“The focus is more on relationships as they are than as they should be.” (Mattsson, 1997: 449)*

Another way of looking at this would be to suggest that RM perhaps has a ‘normative objective’ whereas in NW the existence of relationships has been ‘inductively’ derived (Mattsson, 1997: 450). It is fair to add, however, that this does not mean that NW is without any kind of normative implications, simply that they derive *as a result of the approach* rather than drive it (Easton, 1992). In this respect, the NW approach has much in common with the original Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group research, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. However, suffice it to say at this stage that the IMP has been heavily criticised in some parts for describing too much and prescribing too little (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002).

According to Easton (1992), the NW approach comprises a number of elements. First, as was seen above, networks can be viewed as a web of *relationships* and, second, as a dynamic *process*. However, networks are also about *structure* and the relative *position* of organisations within that structure. Indeed, there is much debate in NW literature concerning the structural dimensions of networks.

Whilst there are numerous interpretations of these structural dimensions, a network is typically reckoned to comprise three fundamental layers that operate at, what could be called, the strategic level. Within each of these strategic layers there may be different activities and processes in operation at any one time - in other words, operating at the tactical level. The three strategic layers are respectively a *production network* layer, a *resource network* layer and a *social network* layer. In other words, for a network to function, it is assumed that there must be an initial base level of resource allocation underpinning the existence of an organisation in the network. This, in turn, is necessary to provide a framework for, and to facilitate the process of, production. Furthermore, there must be an object or outlet to which this initial resource allocation can be applied and a social infrastructure within which both it and the process of production can be given meaning (Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997).

If we accept that “relationships constitute the core aspect which connects actors, resources and activities in a business network” (Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997: 304) then another way of looking at the structural dimensions of a business network might be to summarise the three layers as:-

- Structural
  - Links
  - Ties
  - Connections
  - Institutional bonds
- Economic
  - Investments
  - Economic bonds
- Social
  - Commitment
  - Trust
  - Atmosphere
  - Attraction
  - Social bonds

(Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997)

These elements will be explored more fully towards the end of this review when the outline conceptual framework that will guide subsequent DBA research activity is presented and defended.

In terms of the practical implications of business networks, within each of the three strategic layers there are reckoned to be three types of actor operating: firm actors, resource actors and human actors (Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997). In other words, for any given commercial transaction, certain companies will interact, specific resources will be allocated to the task in hand and specific individuals will be called upon to participate in servicing the relationship with the interacting organisation. Whilst there may be a temptation to trivialise such matters because they are operating purely at the operational level, these actors are nonetheless important for a number of reasons, not least of which because they perform and control the day-to-day activities in the network and develop relationships through exchange activity. They also possess differential knowledge about these activities, the resources used in carrying out exchange activities and experience of the other actors in the network (Hakansson and Johanson, 1992). This experience and knowledge is a resource that can only be built up over a period of time.

At first sight, whilst it might be thought that the inherent complexity of business networks might prove to be their undoing they can, and do, manage to function

effectively over the longer-term. Hakansson and Johanson summarise the fundamental forces that contribute to their continued existence as follows:-

- Functional interdependence
- Power structure
- Knowledge structure
- Intertemporal dependence (i.e. a product of 'history')

These factors (as will become evident in the next section of this literature review) broadly overlap with the main thrust of research from the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group. This provides a convenient link into a critical evaluation of some of the key IMP findings.

### **The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing group**

It is perhaps fair to say that the IMP group has achieved some prominence in academic and management circles over the past three decades, largely by virtue of its research into the less glamorous area of industrial marketing - much of which obviously takes place well away from public scrutiny - and its attempt to build on some of the classic organisational buying behaviour (OBB) theory and models. The significance of the IMP contribution should be seen in the context of the growing theoretical and empirical research base in B2B generally (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996: 44). A number of useful synopses of the way in which IMP research has developed can be found in the literature (for example, Easton, 1992; Brennan and Turnbull, 1999). However, the IMP group has sought essentially to challenge the notion that selling and purchasing should be studied separately (as in classic OBB research), arguing that these activities actually take place simultaneously during the process of interaction. Equally, the findings from early IMP research have confounded the notion that commercial exchange between two organisations is conducted largely on a transactional basis, showing instead that many of these transactions are indeed conducted in the context of enduring business relationships within which mutual trust and adaptation are commonplace (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002).

It is the very combination of such variables as the long-term nature of the majority of industrial relationships - and the level of mutual trust and adaptation involved in the many buying episodes that occur - that has contributed to the overall fascination of the IMP group with the issue of relationship complexity. Indeed, this complexity has been evident in B2B conceptualisation for a long time. For example, in the 1970s, Bonoma and Johnston (cited in Brennan and Turnbull, 1999: 11) were outlining the complex nature of buying episodes in the following terms:-

- many organisational buying episodes take place in the context of longer-term buyer-seller relationships
- individual buying episodes will be influenced by the history of the relationship, and will in turn influence the development of the relationships
- in many cases it is the buyer who initiates the transaction, and the seller who responds
- in general, buyers and sellers in industrial markets interact with each other in a complex fashion

In reality, it could be argued that both the interaction and IMP approaches have emerged very much as a reaction to previous research traditions, in the sense that they have both chosen to take the *relationship* itself as the unit of analysis rather than the individual transaction - as in traditional OBB research (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996). Equally, the emergence of the IMP group has perhaps as much to do with general dissatisfaction over the limitations of the traditional marketing mix management approach and its inappropriateness for certain marketing contexts:-

“ *...the marketing function must be at least as concerned with inter-firm relationship development and management as with conventional marketing mix management.*” (Brennan, 1997: 760).

Concern over the shortcomings of the marketing mix management approach was also instrumental in much of the Nordic school's early research output, with criticism of the somewhat limited empirical grounding of marketing mix theory (with its roots in microeconomic theory), the 'list-like' nature of the 4Ps (with the obvious problems inherent in any attempt to provide a definitive and practical taxonomy) and the almost

mechanistic 'toolbox' approach of 4Ps application by marketers (Gronroos, 1994b). It is not difficult to find similar sentiments expressed elsewhere in RM literature. However, perhaps one of the most graphic expressions of this collective marketing *angst* is provided by Wilkinson and Young (1994) in their support of the adoption by marketers of a more integrated relational approach as a means of moving away from traditional marketing mix management thinking:-

*"This integrated relationship orientation is not encompassed by some extension of the marketing mix paradigm, such as adding another P for people or politics, or by a more sensitive application of the existing elements of the mix. It calls for us to stop 'P-ing' on the customer and to focus instead on interacting and cooperating with them."* (Wilkinson and Young, 1994 cited in Ford, 1997: 94)

The other obvious parallel between the IMP work and the approach of the Nordic school lies in the focus on the interactive nature of the exchange process between two parties:-

*"...the process is not one of action and reaction; it is one of interaction."* (Ford, 1997: xi)

More specifically, it is suggested that there are a number of common threads between the two approaches: first, both parties are concerned with the development of relationships over time. Second, these relationships involve a chain of interactions. Lastly, these interactions comprise a sequence of acts and counteracts (Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997). Gronroos (1994b) goes so far as to suggest that the interaction and network approach of industrial marketing and service marketing involve an interactive process in a social context where not just relationship building is a vital cornerstone but also the 'management' of those relationships. However, it is worth identifying that, on this particular point, Mattsson (1997) argues that the network (NW) approach has little or nothing to do with the process of 'management' at all, rather the process of describing what is happening.

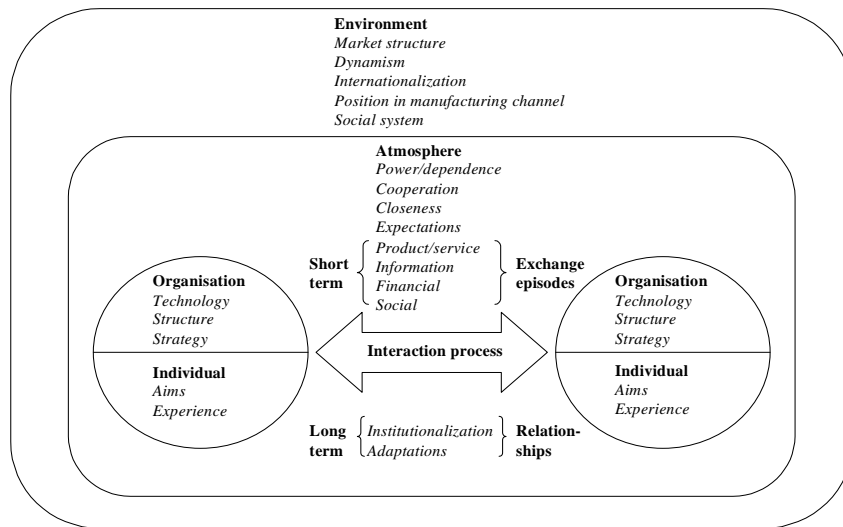
Equally, there are those who would argue that the complexity of the interaction and network approach that is generated by the sheer number and nature of the relationships goes beyond that experienced in services marketing:-

“The network approach... deals primarily with very complex/multifunctional relationships that furthermore are considered to be embedded in a web of interconnected relationships in a network.” (Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997: 304)

Such a sentiment finds a good deal of support in some influential academic circles (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996; Ford, 1997). However, in terms of appreciating the broad scope of IMP research, it might be helpful to refer to Hakansson’s original conceptualisation of the complexity of relationships in an industrial context. Figure 2 encapsulates concisely the interplay between the relationship variables.

**Figure 2:**

**The ‘classic’ IMP interaction model**



Adapted from Hakansson, 1982

An explanation of these variables inevitably leads to a consideration of the practicalities of introducing RM into a B2B context. Since its inception in 1976, the IMP group has largely been concerned with attempting to clarify the precise nature and characteristics of industrial relationships with a view to the findings being disseminated among business managers. In other words, the purpose of the IMP group has been:-

*“...to try to understand the patterns of meanings and the beliefs which guide managers in their interactions with others.” (Turnbull et al., 1996: 59)*

Whilst in some academic quarters (notably Turnbull) there may still be qualified optimism about the work that the IMP group has still to do, others are not so positive. This is largely in view of the limited amount of IMP work that has had any overt practical application. Gemunden (1997) offers some telling insights into the output of the IMP group in reporting that nearly half of the IMP conference papers between 1984 and 1996 do not contain any meaningful data analysis that could have a useful managerial application (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). Brennan and Turnbull go on to mount a scathing attack on IMP researchers suggesting that they are not in touch with business realities and that they have failed to keep pace with the rapidly changing business environment. Consequently, their models no longer make sense. Equally, the work of the IMP group is challenged as mere sophistry, in the sense that it may have missed out on the opportunity to ‘sell’ its ideas to managers because of the pursuit of some kind of unattainable management ‘truth’. Or, perversely, it may well be because the IMP group has not been sufficiently sophistic and needs to sell its ideas in a more convincing manner (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002).

In a similar vein, Brennan and Turnbull (2002) offer an interesting hypothesis that may to a large extent account for why the IMP group has so far failed to get its message across. In short, it is arguably down to a matter of poor ‘technology transfer’ - in other words, an inability among academics to present a convincing business case in terms that practitioners can relate to and have confidence in implementing. Brennan and Turnbull support their argument by offering the example of a single university and the many barriers - both cultural and personal - that may prevent technology transfer between it and a commercial organisation. If these problems are magnified to take account of the many researchers - and their disparate backgrounds - that make up the IMP group then it is not surprising that ideas and recommendations are not successfully transferred. However, in fairness to the IMP group, Brennan and Turnbull question whether this failing is perhaps more symptomatic of a wider academic malaise:-



“...the managerial irrelevance of IMP is but a microcosm of the greater managerial irrelevance of scholarly research in marketing.” (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002: 600)

Nevertheless, to provide some sense of balance, such criticism needs to be seen in the context of the IMP group’s stated remit to *describe* and not to prescribe. The IMP group has never overtly claimed any normative ‘high ground’ in its research. In this respect, people are perhaps judging its contribution unfairly. The following section seeks to assess the implications of pursuing a relational strategy in a B2B context.

### **An appreciation of the key themes emerging from IMP research**

Although there are many comprehensive and authoritative reviews of the key components of IMP research available in the literature, the following framework is considered useful for discussing the practical issues of RM implementation, each of which will be explored in turn:-

- *Pattern of dependencies*
- *Evolution over time*
- *Adaptations*
- *Inter-organisational person contact*

(Turnbull *et al.*, 1996: 45).

#### **Pattern of dependencies**

In terms of patterns of dependency, Campbell (1996) suggests that there are three broad types of relationship: *independent*, *dependent* and *interdependent*. These are influenced to a large extent by the nature of the business environment in which transacting organisations find themselves. For example, in a competitive marketplace, they will naturally tend to veer towards mutual independence. On the other hand, however, organisations will often be forced into a co-operative arrangement if they become dependent on each other for survival:-

*“The basic assumption is that organisations use... relationships in order to gain access to the resources which are vital to their continuing existence.”* (Easton, 1992 cited in Ford, 1997: 103)

The topic of co-operative business relationships is reputed in some academic quarters to have been one of ‘most pervasive topics’ (the ‘Holy Grail’?) of marketing discussion during the 1990s. Indeed, some would go so far as to say that co-operation is an important antecedent of commercial success (Palmer, 2001). However, it is important to understand exactly what is meant by a complex phenomenon such as co-operation. On the one hand, Palmer provides a fairly straightforward working definition:-

*“A co-operative marketing relationship is defined... as a mode of exchange between organisations which has the intention of moving the basis of the parties’ dealings with each other from transactionary to relational.”* (Palmer, 2001: 762)

However, such a definition could easily be challenged on the basis that it remains to be seen whether the intention of building the relationship is altruistic or not - and whether it is aimed at producing “superior mutual outcomes with expected reciprocity over time” (Anderson *et al.*, 1994: 10). It may well be the case that there exists a degree of conspiracy or collusion on the part of the economic actors to create and maintain a protected market with a degree of monopoly power (Palmer, 2001). Equally, there is always the possibility of one or other parties acting ultimately in an opportunistic fashion even though the original impression may have been given of establishing a close and ‘cosy’ relationship. Blois (1998) makes the pertinent observation that it is virtually impossible to judge the quality of a relationship without knowing more background information about things such as the contractual terms that apply in any given situation. Although, at first sight, it might appear that the two parties are engaged in a mutually beneficial arrangement, the reality may be that one of the parties is essentially ‘locked in’ to the relationship by means of a legally binding contract.

It is perhaps also appropriate to question the way in which academics have traditionally conceptualised business relationships as either competitive or co-

operative. For example, a more extreme viewpoint that has been expressed in recent relationship marketing literature is that co-operation and competition should not necessarily be regarded as opposites. Rather they should be viewed as separate dimensions of business relations (Wilkinson and Young, 1994). To illustrate this point, Wilkinson and Young propose a matrix that uses co-operation and competition to derive a better understanding of relationship types. The matrix comprises four types of inter-firm relationship:-

- Low co-operation/low competition  
- *little interdependence*
- Low co-operation/high competition  
- *both parties self-interested/relationship will ultimately end*
- High co-operation/high competition  
- *moderately high levels of conflict/some opportunistic behaviour*
- High co-operation/low competition  
- *stable relationship/ long life expectancy*

The culmination of Wilkinson and Young's paper is the contention that traditional approaches and terminology used in describing business relationships - that are, for example, borrowed from the fields of competitive strategy and economics - could be replaced by something that better represents their dynamic and complex nature. They propose instead the adoption of the metaphor of dance. Their choice is partly justified on the basis that dancing captures the central notion of co-operation and is very much a processual way of looking at things as opposed to the more traditional structural way of defining relationships. Equally, there are an infinite number of types of dance and these different dance types reflect the variety of co-ordination and co-operative tasks required in industry.

In connection with the issue of co-operation it is also important to consider the notion of power balance or the relative size of organisations. This is considered by many academics to be a big issue (Brennan, 1997). Obviously, the greater the difference in size between organisations the greater the propensity for one of the parties to engage in opportunistic behaviour. This type of behaviour smacks of the traditional

adversarial approach to doing business in B2B markets. In one sense, a lack of opportunistic behaviour is to be welcomed since it encourages the development of long-term partnerships. However, where one organisation wields monopolistic power over the marketplace there is a greater tendency for engaging in actions that may be harmful to the long-term development of mutually beneficial relationships. For example, in terms of relationships between a business school and its corporate clients, the issue of power balance may manifest itself in the simple fact that the business school is the sole or major provider of particular training programmes in the local region. Thus, the relationship may be forged out of necessity rather than design.

### **Evolution over time**

The time dimension of relationships also raises a number of practical issues. On the one hand, Turnbull *et al.* (1996) point out that organisations obviously need to focus on the short-term management of relationships (i.e. the operational). Failure to do so will undoubtedly impact on short-term commercial performance. On the other hand, however, there is possibly a more pressing need to consider the long-term (i.e. the strategic) development of the entire portfolio of relationships (Blois, 1996a; Turnbull *et al.*, 1996; Ford, 1997). In this respect, decisions will need to be taken concerning the nature, number, strategic ‘fit’ and commercial viability of all relationships and to determine the best approach to each relationship in the portfolio (Brodie *et al.*, 1997). This underlines the complexity of relationship strategy with its dual focus on the management of individual relationships and the interrelated portfolio (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996). Not surprisingly, such a focus on the strategic management of the range of relationships has given rise to the concept of *relationship portfolio analysis* (McDonald, 2000) as managers face the task of needing to maintain a balanced approach to the portfolio of relationships (Wilkinson and Young, 1994).

However, although, at first sight, the notion of analysing the relationship portfolio would appear to make good sense from both a rational and strategic perspective, it unfortunately raises problems of how exactly to measure the performance of each relationship. One approach might be to look at relationship *strength*. According to Donaldson and O’Toole (2000) relationship theories tend to focus on economic or behavioural explanations: the economic perspective being concerned with agency

theory and transaction cost economics (*i.e. price, power, risk avoidance and opportunism*) and the behavioural perspective being concerned with history, social structure and interdependence (*i.e. trust, commitment, co-operation, mutuality, equity*). They label the former approach the *content* perspective and the latter the social *process* perspective. Given this, Donaldson and O'Toole argue that the two perspectives could be combined to provide a useful measure of relationship strength:-

*“By combining belief and actions components of a relationship, a construct labelled ‘relationship strength’ is developed to discriminate between relationships on the basis of the variable set that dominates the content-process of the exchange.”* (Donaldson and O'Toole, 2000: 493)

The paper culminates in Donaldson and O'Toole proposing a simple matrix to assist managers in the task of relationship analysis:-

*“The relationship matrix provides managers with a tool for analysing relationship strategy, not dissimilar to the Boston Box matrix. Each relationship type may require a different management approach.”* (Donaldson and O'Toole, 2000: 501)

Whilst this matrix undoubtedly represents an interesting and welcome development, it arguably suffers from many of the problems attributed to the Boston Matrix. In short, it suffers from a lack of precision in terms of plotting the exact position of a relationship in any of the quadrants because the task of interpreting the parameters will inevitably call upon the manager to exercise much subjective judgement. Evaluating the performance of relationships is thus fraught with problems:-

*“Performance evaluation in a relationship is also relative rather than absolute. It depends on the expectations and comparisons available to those involved and these are provided by history and the environment.”* (Wilkinson and Young, 1994 cited in Ford, 1997: 95)

Equally, not all relationships are necessarily headed in the same direction or start at the same time - so again, there is possibly no best way of managing relationships (Wilkinson and Young, 1994). This raises obvious concerns for an organisation such as a business school that invariably finds itself with an inherently large and piecemeal

portfolio of corporate clients, each of differing importance to its long-term commercial success. In other words, which relationships are strategically important for the business school? Which relationships need managing to get the best from them? How best to manage these special relationships? It is issues such as these - and many more besides - that will provide the basis for the research that will follow in Documents 3, 4 and 5.

Another criticism is the fact that relationship analysis (as part of portfolio management) may or may not happen for two reasons; first, managers may be reluctant to categorise relationship types and, second, portfolio management involves choice (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996). Although both of these fears may be largely irrational they nevertheless represent genuine human weaknesses at the basic interpersonal level. Equally, these shortcomings may more normally manifest themselves in two common self-delusions: first, the belief that a relationship is actually closer than it is in reality and, second, that relationship management is simply being nice (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996: 53).

### **Adaptations**

There are frequent references in IMP literature to the need for organisations to adapt the way in which they respond to customers in the process of building and maintaining a relationship. Adaptation is generally considered a necessary management tool given the dynamic nature of both the macro and micro business environments (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999; Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). In short, adaptation can be defined as:-

*“...the degree to which the firm should adapt its standard methods of doing business for any individual customer.”* (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999: 13)

Adaptation could occur, for example, in a number of key areas within the business. From the first stage of IMP research, Hakansson (1982) suggested that adaptation can be found in areas such as product specification, product design, manufacturing processes, planning, delivery procedures, stockholding and administrative procedures and financial procedures. On this point, however, it is possible to criticise the early IMP research as being too focussed on manufacturing industry. Certainly, the

framework of adaptation categories proposed by Hakansson (1982) may be somewhat restrictive because it fails to take account of factors such as service design and service delivery (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999). In other words, the framework fails to take account adequately of the growth in importance of the service sector over the past two decades.

Further support for the notion of adaptation is provided by the fact that each dyadic relationship is embedded in a wider organisational network. At the very least, this will have a strategic impact on organisations in the sense that they will need to review each customer's specific needs and interests, assess issues such as their managerial orientation towards partnerships and whether this orientation has been realised throughout the company. Equally, it is important to review how this fits with organisational requirements (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999). The issue of exactly how far an organisation will need to adapt its approach to a given relationship will provide ample opportunity for research in Documents 3, 4 and 5 as the focus of investigation turns specifically to UK business schools and their management of corporate client relationships. Equally, it will be relevant to investigate the degree to which corporate clients themselves feel that their relationship with a business school might have been adapted to suit their particular needs and how much further the relationship is capable of being adapted in the future.

### **Inter-organisational person contact**

For effective analysis of inter-organisational relationships, it is necessary to identify their precise nature. On the one hand, if we are to accept that marketing is a *social* process (Webster, 1992; Gronroos, 1994b) then we have also to accept that it is not organisations themselves that have relationships rather the people in them i.e. the employees. Blois (1997) is typical of academics who support this notion by suggesting that trust - as a fundamental building block of relationships - is a construct important to individuals and operates on an interpersonal level. Consequently, if trust does develop between individuals then, ultimately, their respective organisations may well enjoy the benefits of satisfying and long-lasting commercial exchange. However, the onus for developing the relationship and the relationship outcomes derive primarily from the individuals themselves. Equally, for relationships to be *active*, transactions

and/or the exchange of information need to take place. In this respect, the social aspects (e.g. trust, commitment and reciprocity) are considered important:-

*“The relational exchange partners must both (all) do something for each other. If not, the relationship will sooner or later terminate.”* (Gronhaug *et al.*, 1999: 177)

On the other hand, there is an argument to suggest that it is the organisations that provide the context and the opportunity within which a mutual understanding can be reached between people. In this sense, the relationship could be said to exist only by virtue of the effort that individual employees expend in the pursuit of their work-related tasks (Gronhaug *et al.*, 1999).

However, neither of these positions is necessarily mutually exclusive because they both rely on the existence of certain links or *bonds* between the organisations and people involved. These links can be referred to as either structural or social bonds. A comprehensive discussion of the nature of both bonds can be found in Perry *et al.* (2002). In fact, definitions of these two types of bond are not difficult to find in B2B literature, but the following is considered an especially concise working definition of *structural bonds*:-

*“...structural bonds are forged when two organizations adapt to each other in some economic or technical way such as product or process adjustments...”* (Rao and Perry, 2002: 600)

Rao and Perry (2002) go on to suggest that there are three broad categories of structural bond: adaptations of product and/or processes, financial exchanges and information exchanges. In other words, these are the very factors that contribute to the basic infrastructure that underpins the more personal and social side of the relationship. However, it is also worth considering that these structural bonds may not necessarily represent a management panacea because both parties may have vastly differing ideas about what they want from the relationship (Blois, 1998). Equally, in the longer-term, a structural bond may well serve to tie an organisation into a relationship that becomes stale and counter-productive. Equally, a structural bond such as investment in information technology may actually only serve to weaken the social bonds that participants enjoy (Perry *et al.*, 2002). In this respect, Gronhaug *et*



*al.* (1999) may be quite right in their observation that structural binds are possibly a two-edged sword.

In contrast, however, *social bonds* could be defined as:-

*“...investments of time and energy that produce positive interpersonal relationships between the partners, although these can range from formal organizational contacts through to informal, personal ones.”* (Rao and Perry, 2002: 600)

Rao and Perry (2002) identify three types of social bond: trust, commitment and interdependence, each of which will be discussed in more detail. However, before doing so, it is also worth pointing out that Rao and Perry provide an excellent review of papers in which social bonds are either mentioned briefly or discussed more fully.

In a sense, social bonds are important because they are about achieving a comfortable match between both parties' expectations at a personal level. The better the personal 'fit', the stronger the social bonds become (Cann, 1998). Equally, the greater the customer's satisfaction from each transaction outcome, the greater the potential for strong social bonds to emerge (Turnbull *et al.*, 1996). However, the importance of social bonds arguably varies depending on the size and culture of the organisation. For example, in smaller organisations, norms/procedures that govern relational exchanges may be implicitly understood because employees have a greater propensity to become involved in the day to day running of the business (Gronhaug *et al.*, 1999). In larger, more impersonal companies, on the other hand, these norms/procedures may need to be overtly stated in the form of codes of conduct. If we accept that organisations and people are "embedded in a cultural context" then the characteristics of the particular cultural context "may significantly influence the expectations and behaviour of actors" (Gronhaug *et al.*, 1999: 179).

The nature of inter-organisational person contact conveniently brings the discussion round to a consideration of the role and usefulness of Key Account Management (KAM) in the broader context of managing relationships between an organisation such as a business school and its corporate clients. However, it should be borne in mind

that the purpose of this discussion is purely to identify the existence of a body of literature relating to KAM. A specific in-depth and critical review of the concept will follow in Document 5, where both its practical suitability and future relevance will be evaluated in a UK higher education context. In short, however, there is some evidence in recent RM literature to suggest a need for increased awareness and understanding of KAM and its practical application within the UK corporate education sector (Murray and Underhill, 2002). More specifically, they go on to suggest that:-

*“KAM is clearly under-researched and key account ‘attractiveness’ analysis under-used by companies.”* (Murray and Underhill, 2002: 6)

### **Key Account Management (KAM)**

The concept of KAM has partly emerged as a result of the fact that most organisations inevitably finish up with a large portfolio of corporate customers, not all of whom are necessarily vital to the long-term survival of the organisation. Consequently, what needs to be determined is arguably who the most important customers are in the longer-term - in other words, the *key accounts*. A simple way of looking at key accounts is perhaps to say that they are:-

*“...customers in a business-to-business market identified by selling companies as of strategic importance”* (McDonald, 2000: 18)

However, this instantly raises the problem of defining what is meant by the notion of ‘strategic importance’, because this can obviously mean different things to different organisations. For example, from the perspective of a UK business school, one organisation might measure ‘strategic importance’ in terms of impact on profitability, whilst another might consider it to revolve around corporate reputation and credibility in the local region.

Elsewhere, in the literature, there is evidence to suggest that the emergence of KAM may also be due in large part to issues such as market maturity - where organisations are understandably feeling the need to fight harder to keep their good customers - and increased customer sophistication and power - in other words, circumstances under

which customers may increasingly decide to 'vote with their feet' and take their business elsewhere if they perceive themselves to be in a strong bargaining position with suppliers. However, one should also not overlook the fact that the roots and cultural heritage of KAM lie very much in the more traditional area of selling and sales management (McDonald, 2002) where organisations have become used to selling to, and servicing, large customer accounts for many years. However, it is appropriate to point out that the traditional emphasis of sales managers has been predominantly on short-term outcomes - in other words, sales volume and margin increases from major customers who are likely to respond to price discounts and other short-term incentives. Now, whether those people tasked with servicing key accounts in organisations such as UK business schools actually do look beyond the short-term is a fascinating issue, details of which will become clearer during the course of future research.

In theory, the focus on an organisation's key accounts not surprisingly leads to the need for constructing some kind of framework or process within which these key accounts can be managed, hence the emergence of the concept of Key Account Management (KAM), which can be defined as:-

*"...the process of allocating and organising resources to achieve optimal business with a balanced portfolio of identified accounts whose business contributes or could contribute significantly or critically to the achievement of corporate objectives, present or future."*  
(Burnett, 1982 cited in McDonald, 2000: 19)

However, as has been previously mentioned, the matter of creating a balanced portfolio may be harder to achieve in reality on account of management unwillingness or inability to exercise choice in relationship matters. Equally, organisations may not have the systems in place to identify which customers to do business with (McDonald, 2002). Organisations may also tend to overestimate the degree of closeness experienced in a relationship. McDonald (2002) warns of the inherent danger in seeing sophistication and closeness in relationships as the only formula capable of guaranteeing KAM success. Successful exponents of KAM may well resort to a host of other measures by which to deliver good KAM practice. Indeed, as Blois (1997) suggests, relationship quality - although it should be pointed out that he offers no

specific explanation of what this term means - is often determined by the way in which matters outside of any contractual obligation are dealt with.

At this point, it is worth considering the contribution of the key account manager to the process of ensuring relationship quality. It is arguably this individual who is responsible for the ultimate success of the relationship between an organisation and its major customers. Blois (1997) offers some insight into the qualities and characteristics that make a good relationship manager, not least of which is reckoned to be a degree of entrepreneurial flair. In other words, the relationship manager is a proactive individual constantly attempting to deal with the operational challenges of maintaining relationships in a creative and dynamic way. However, despite what, on the face of it, appears to constitute a commonsense way of approaching the management of commercial relationships, Blois (1997) warns against over-reliance on any one individual:-

*“...unless steps are taken to create and constantly reinforce a strong culture appropriate for managing relationships then those relationships that do exist will be in danger of becoming ‘fief’ like”* (Blois, 1997: 380/1)

By the same token, there is increasing support in the RM literature for the view that the danger of relationships built on strong personal contacts is that they can eventually ‘fade’ away (Gronhaug *et al.*, 1999; Haskell and Pole, 2002).

However, it is not the scope of this particular review to explore the qualities of an ideal key account manager in detail. A broader picture of these characteristics will emerge during the course of Document 5. Equally, it is anticipated that further research will provide both timely and commercially relevant insights into the precise nature of the social bonds that are inherent in relationships between key account managers and their clients. Indeed, it is to the subject of the outline conceptual framework that underpins this further research that attention now turns in order to conclude this critical literature review.

## **Outline conceptual framework**

One thing that emerges strongly from a review of the B2B and IMP literature is the way in which researchers have attempted - and, indeed, are still attempting - to identify the key variables in relationship development and management such as trust, opportunism, co-operation and conflict (Brennan, 1997). Arguably, it is the complexity of the interplay between the many structural determinants of relationships that continues to fascinate and beguile researchers. For example, as early as 1982, at the conclusion of the initial stages of IMP research, Hakansson proposed the classic IMP 'interaction' model that was mentioned earlier in this review. Underpinning this model was a clear attempt to describe how the various environmental, organisational and inter-personal factors combine to determine relationship outcome.

By way of comparison, typical of more recent attempts to identify the relational dimensions underpinning business networks is the framework proposed by Holmlund and Tornroos (1997):-

- Structural
  - Links
  - Ties
  - Connections
  - Institutional bonds
- Economic
  - Investments
  - Economic bonds
- Social
  - Commitment
  - Trust
  - Atmosphere
  - Attraction
  - Social bonds

(Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997: 307)

Whilst most of the above dimensions have already been explored in some detail in this critical review, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the notion of *atmosphere* has not so far been addressed specifically. It is argued that atmosphere is a fundamental building block of successful relationships: for example, Zineldin (1998) proposes that 'quality of atmosphere' is one of five dimensions of relationship quality in business

markets - the other dimensions being quality of object, process, infrastructure and interaction, which coincide broadly with the *structural* and *economic* dimensions given above in the Holmlund and Tornroos framework.

However, before presenting the conceptual framework for this study, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the notion of *atmosphere*. The traditional IMP approach has been to define it in terms of the perceptions about the state of the relationship held by both parties:-

*“...the detailed interaction process is subject to the perceptions of both parties of the overall state of relations between them - power-dependence and conflict-cooperation.”* (Hakansson, 1982: 16)

However, this definition probably reflects Hakansson’s view of the economic origins of the construct, with its focus on the economic and control dimensions of power-dependence and conflict-cooperation. In summarising the key aspects of relationship atmosphere, however, McDonald (2000) goes beyond this focus on the economic and control dimensions alone to incorporate the additional elements of trust/opportunism and social distance. In other words, atmosphere is arguably also concerned with matters of a more personal and subjective nature, at least from the perspective of the participants in the exchange process. However, for the purposes of this study, it is felt that a more comprehensive and more appropriate definition is that provided by Roper *et al.* (2002: 9):-

*“Atmosphere concerns the feelings that one party has towards the other. It evolves from an accumulation of every interaction or communication that party has with, or receives about, the other. It defines the tone in which transactions are conducted. It reflects the view one party holds of another, thus conditioning the way one party enters into subsequent transactions.”*

Underpinning this definition is the notion that atmosphere is perhaps more concerned with the *intangible* or ‘softer’ aspects of the relationship - in other words, the perceptions, thoughts, attitudes, opinions and emotions of the participants themselves - rather than the more tangible or ‘harder’ aspects such as financial investment,

organisational infrastructure and the formal rules, conventions and etiquette that may govern the physical process of interaction. In this respect, we are dealing with issues that are largely personal and subjective and, thus, harder to access and interpret:-

*“...what has been written on the subject of Atmosphere is largely descriptive, lacking in clarity and contains a focus on the objective aspects of a business-to-business relationship (reflecting the economic origins of the construct) rather than on the more emotional dimensions that the term implies.” (Roper et al., 2002: 7)*

It is arguably the intangible nature of relationship atmosphere that has posed difficulties for researchers in terms of conceptualising the interrelationship between the key emotional constructs and the measurement of their relative importance (Sutton-Brady, 2001 cited in Roper et al., 2002). In turn, this may have prevented researchers from going beyond the provision of anything more than the most basic of taxonomies.

Another possible difficulty associated with the intangibility of relationships is that a degree of relationship instability might arise largely as a consequence of the uncertainty generated by the unpredictable nature of much inter-personal exchange (Blois, 1997). It is, thus, increasingly important to identify those aspects within the interaction process that might contribute to this relationship instability. Consequently, this study represents a welcome opportunity to undertake a more in-depth analysis of the emotional or ‘softer’ side of B2B relationships. Arguably, this is inevitable if the element of personal interaction is considered fundamental to the whole process of relationship development:-

*“A relationship must ultimately depend on the interaction of the individuals who participate.” (Campbell, 1996: 54)*

Further support for such an approach can easily be found. For example, it is considered difficult to judge the quality of a relationship without knowing more background information about specific factors such as participant explanations. In other words, it is difficult to prejudge the likely response in any interaction because both parties have *expectations* of the criteria that would determine what constitutes an

appropriate or suitable exchange. In this respect, issues such as trust and 'goal interdependence' become crucial (Blois. 1997; 1998).

Furthermore, if we are to accept that organisations are becoming increasingly serious about RM, then it would suggest that they should be equally keen to evaluate carefully all investments made into relationship development. Whilst it is acknowledged that the financial costs that are incurred when building and maintaining relationships can be more easily identified and evaluated, it should not be forgotten that there are many 'social' costs that also need to be considered. Indeed, these 'social' costs may well outweigh the financial ones (Blois, 1998). For the purposes of this study, it is speculated that the intangible aspects of a relationship may, on balance, be more important in terms of contributing to the successful development of relationships than the tangible aspects. As Cann (1998: 394) suggests:-

*“When selling a tangible product in the business-to-business arena, the vendor often finds that the services provide in conjunction with the product are considered more important by the customer than the product itself.”*

In talking about the services provided around the tangible product, it is difficult to ignore the thought that she is perhaps referring equally to the intangible aspects of the relationship as much as anything else. By the same token, relationship atmosphere may also play a key role in the process of adding value for the customer (Cann, 1998). However, there is ample warning in the RM literature that, in order to get closer to the customer and nurture genuine co-operative relationships, relationship managers may expect to have to work hard at keeping the customer happy:-

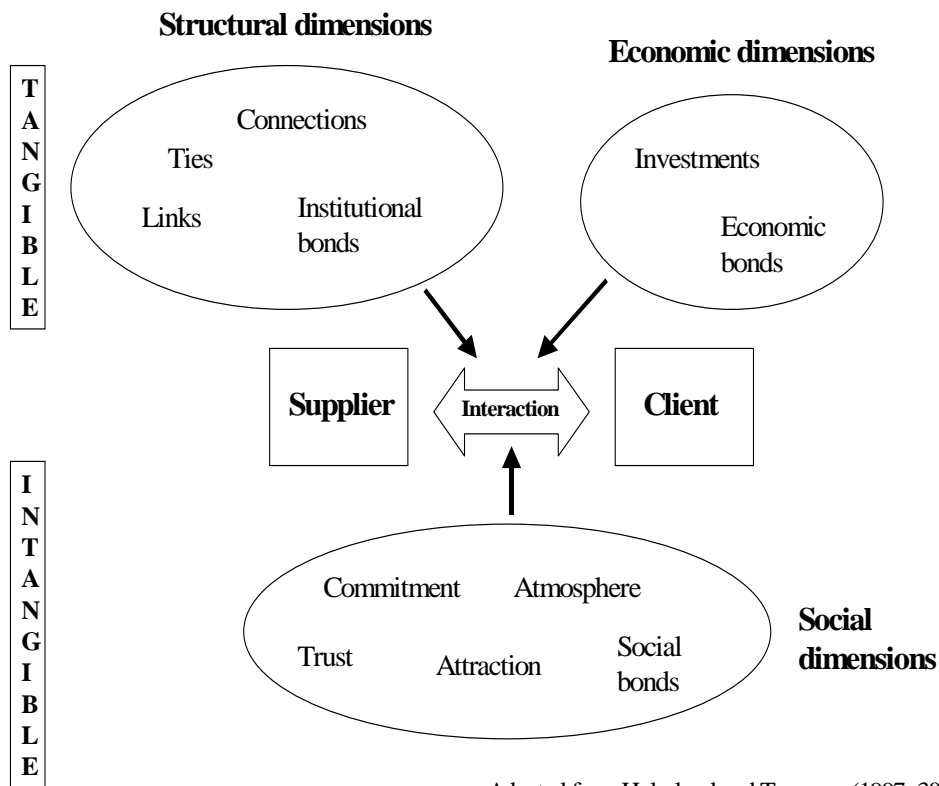
*“Cooperative customers require a lot of attention. They need reassurance that their decision to concentrate their purchases and put their faith in one or two suppliers is correct.”*  
(Campbell, 1996: 57)

Now, important though the intangible aspects of business relationships are, it should be noted that the tangible aspects will not be ignored in this study. Rather the research will attempt to explore the nature of the role played by all of the dimensions listed by Holmlund and Tornroos (1997). It is also entirely possible that other dimensions may



emerge during the research process. The initial conceptual framework provided below encapsulates succinctly the main focal areas for future research in this study. In short, the main thrust of the investigation - at least in the initial stages - will be targeted at the lower part of the framework, in other words the social dimensions of commitment, trust, attraction, social bonds and atmosphere.

**Figure 3: Initial conceptual framework**



Adapted from Holmlund and Tomroos (1997: 307)

An overview of precisely what each stage of the research is expected to achieve is given below.

**Document 3**

The adoption of an interpretive approach in the initial stages of the research will allow the surfacing of issues likely to be pertinent to both the design of the subsequent stages of the research and to the development of a richer and more detailed picture of

the way in which B2B relationships in the UK postgraduate sector are currently managed and how they might be further developed. As stated in Document 1, the research questions are as follows:-

- What are the qualities and characteristics that make an effective B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?
- In what ways are these qualities/characteristics similar or different for all parties concerned?
- How can relationships be improved to the mutual satisfaction of all parties?

The intangible issues listed in the above conceptual framework will obviously provide the initial framework for an interview agenda.

#### ***Document 4***

The positivistic nature of this stage of the study will allow the researcher to take the themes identified in Document 3 and to test the extent to which the views, opinions and feelings expressed are shared by respondents from a large sample of corporate clients who currently enjoy a relationship with a UK business school. This will enable the researcher to identify any trends emerging in the way in which B2B relationships within the UK higher education postgraduate sector are currently managed and to identify any significant correlation between particular variables. As outlined in Document 1, the specific research questions will include the following:-

- How far does the relationship meet/exceed the expectations of all parties concerned?
- Which particular aspects of the relationship do the respective parties consider more important?
- Which particular aspects of the relationship are likely to lead to the long-term success of a B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?

#### ***Document 5***

This Document will allow the researcher to explore and reappraise the strategic relevance to UK business schools of the concept of Key Account Management (KAM)

based largely on the issues and themes that will have emerged both from the research conducted in the preceding Documents and the initial overview of KAM literature provided earlier in this critical literature review. As outlined in Document 1, the research questions are likely to be as follows:-

- How appropriate is the concept of Key Account Management (KAM) to the organisation and management of business school-corporate client relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?
- What are the characteristics of successful KAM within the sector?
- How is the concept of KAM likely to develop into the future within the sector?

Whilst the concept of KAM has received obvious attention in relation to the areas of sales management and supply chain management there is still a need to understand more about its potential applicability in other business contexts. Indeed, broad support for such a notion is proffered by McDonald (2000: 31) in viewing KAM as a:-

*“... still nascent domain will develop even sounder conceptual underpinning.”*

## **Conclusion**

As was identified in the introduction, the overarching aim of this critical literature review was to examine the nature and role of business-to-business (B2B) relationships and the relevance of B2B marketing theory and concepts in the context of the UK higher education postgraduate sector.

Although the review has covered much ground and has, consequently, had to exercise a degree of selectivity about the concepts and issues discussed, some tentative conclusions can nevertheless be drawn. First, the issue is not *whether* an organisation has a relationship rather what *type* of relationship is appropriate (Ford, 1997; Blois, 1998). Second, if we accept that business relationships have the potential to be multi-faceted and complex (Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997), the interplay between the many factors that determine the precise nature of a given relationship provide a significant challenge for the researcher. Third, this challenge is made all the more demanding by virtue of the fact that business relationships are inevitably the by-product of a unique

set of contextual dynamics and, as such, constitute a diverse range from those where customers are not conscious that a relationship exists to those where a relationship is recognised by both buyer and seller (Blois, 1998).

Where does this leave organisations such as UK business schools and their relationships with corporate clients? In short, if the long-term future of RM is to be secured, the challenge for organisations such as UK business schools may well be to become convinced of the commercial wisdom and relevance of a detailed understanding of the nature of business relationships. However, in order to do this, it is necessary to gauge the perceptions, attitudes, opinions and feelings of those parties directly involved in the exchange:-

*“The appropriateness of relationship marketing can only be discussed by understanding the customer’s viewpoint.”* (Blois, 1996a: 162)

The following Documents will pick up this challenge and take the debate forward.

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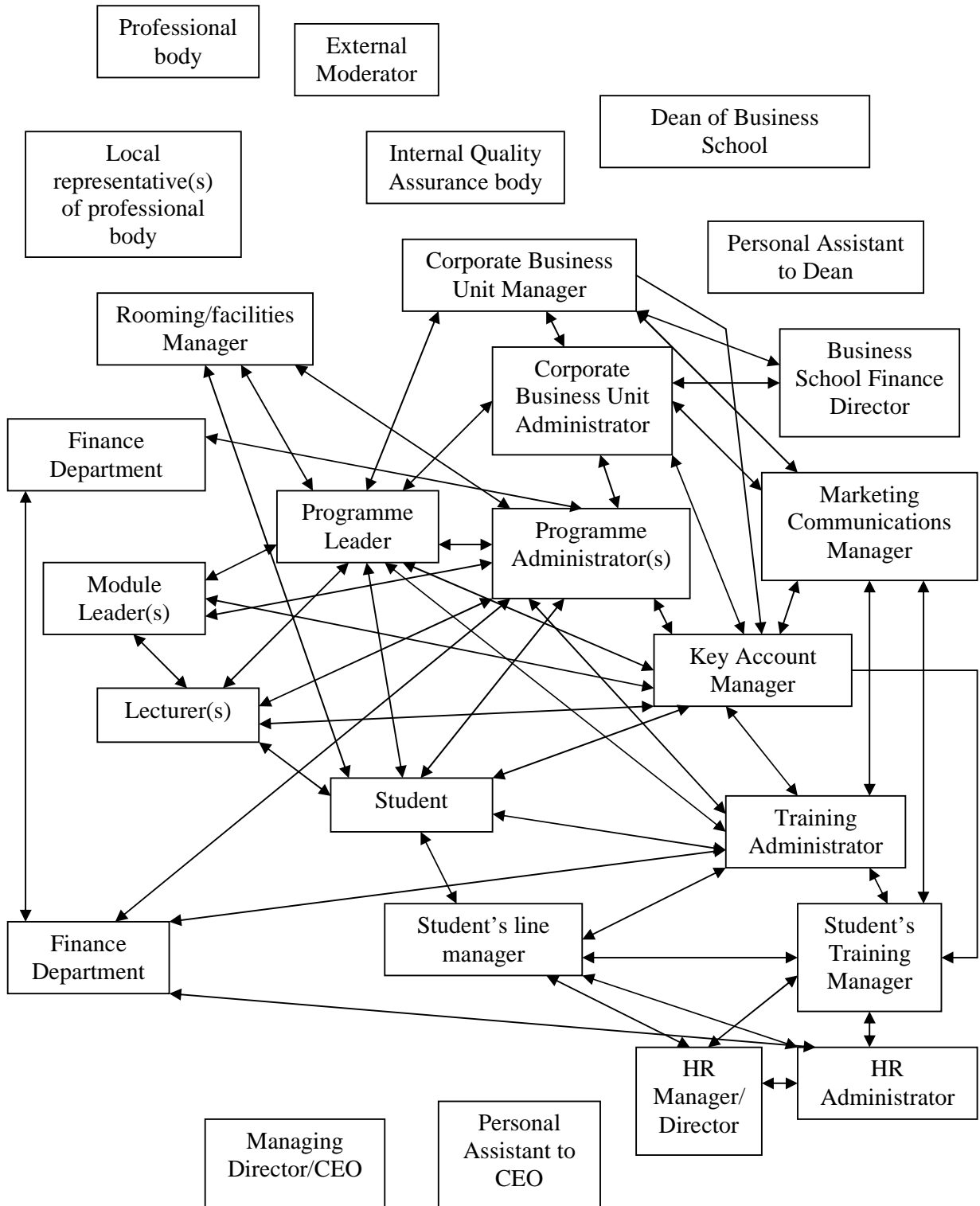
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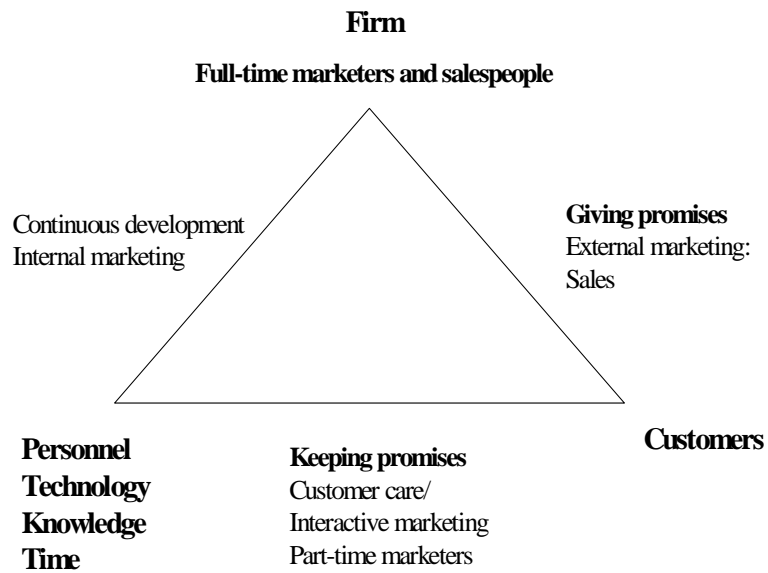
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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Mapping the complexity of business school-corporate client relationships

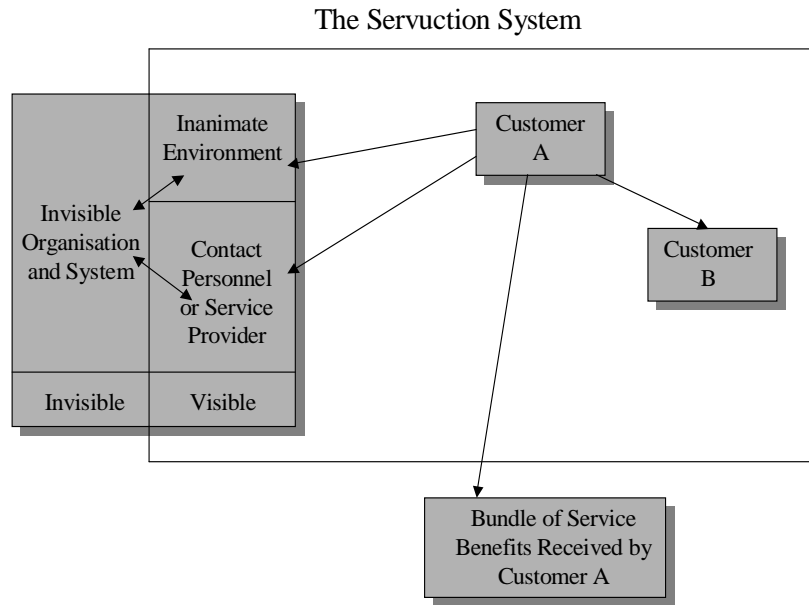


## Appendix 2: Resource-oriented marketing perspective: a relationship marketing approach



Source: Gronroos (1996)

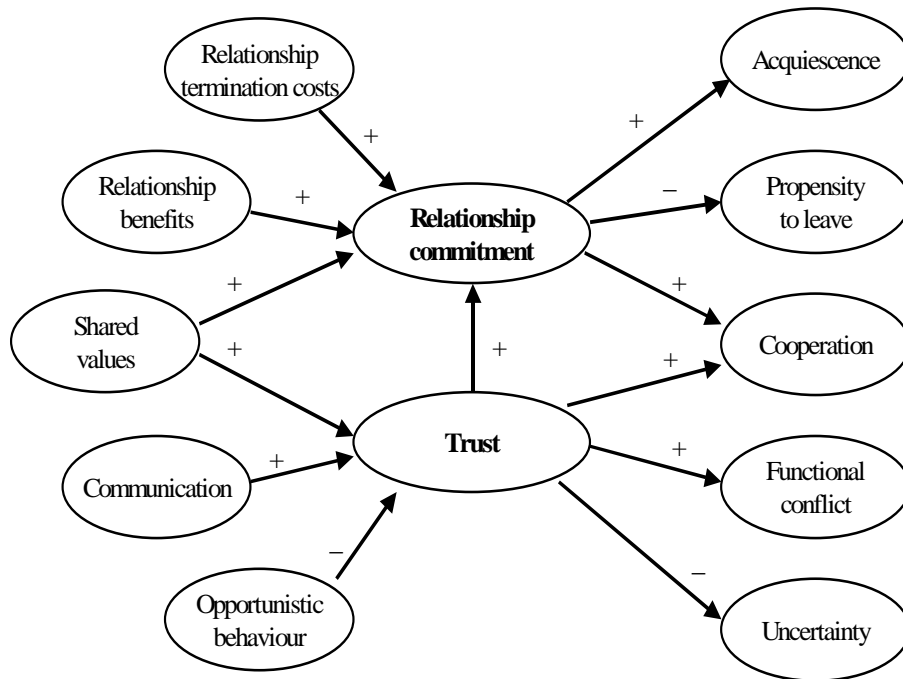
### Appendix 3: The servuction service model



Source: Langeard and Eiglier (cited in Bateson and Hoffman, 1999)

## Appendix 4: The KMV model of Relationship Marketing

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Source: Morgan and Hunt (1994)

**Document 3: An interpretative report of  
a piece of case-based research**

***‘Key account managers  
under the microscope: the  
business school  
perspective’***

**An exploratory study of the dynamics of  
client management in the UK higher  
education postgraduate sector**

*by*

**Gary Richard Harden**

*In part-fulfilment of the  
Doctorate in Business Administration  
(2002/2005 cohort)*

**Nottingham Business School  
The Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

**May 2004**

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**Document 3: An interpretative report of a piece of case-based research**

*‘Key account managers under the microscope: the business school perspective’*

An exploratory study of the dynamics of client management in the UK higher education postgraduate sector

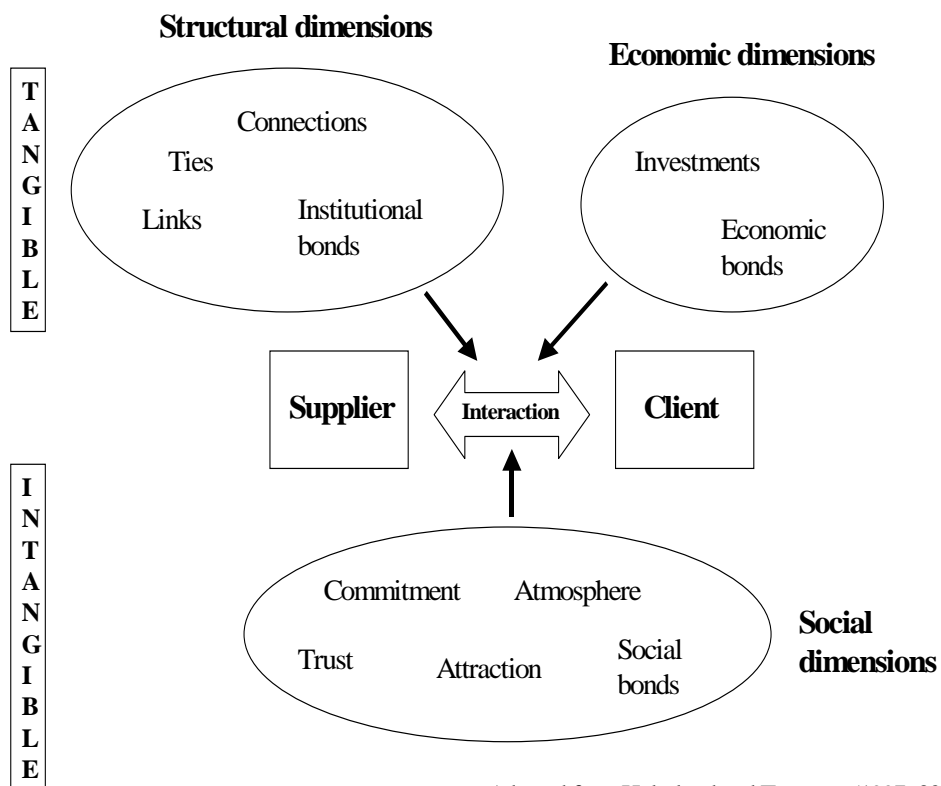
**Introduction: revisiting the initial conceptual framework**

As identified in the review of business-to-business (B2B) and Industrial Marketing and Purchasing group (IMP) literature in Document 2, researchers are still attempting to understand the key variables (or structural determinants) that impact on relationship development and management such as trust, opportunism, co-operation and conflict (Brennan, 1997). It is the complexity of the interplay between the many structural determinants of relationships that continues to fascinate and beguile researchers. This complexity is illustrated in the initial conceptual framework that was presented at the end of Document 2 (see Figure 1 overleaf).

The fundamental assumption underpinning the conceptual framework is the notion that business relationships are as much to do with the *intangible* social dimensions or ‘softer’ aspects of the relationship - in other words, the perceptions, thoughts, attitudes, opinions and emotions of the participants themselves - as with the *tangible* or ‘harder’ aspects such as financial investment, organisational infrastructure and the formal rules, conventions and etiquette that govern the physical process of interaction. Consequently, we are dealing with issues that are highly personal and subjective and, thus, harder to access and interpret. It is arguably the intangible nature of relationships

that poses the greatest difficulties for researchers in terms of conceptualising the interrelationship between the key emotional constructs and the measurement of their relative importance (Sutton-Brady, 2001 cited in Roper *et al.*, 2002). In turn, this may have prevented researchers from going beyond the provision of anything more than the most basic of taxonomies.

**Figure 1: Initial conceptual framework**



Adapted from Holmlund and Tornroos (1997: 307)

Another problem associated with relationship intangibility is the potential instability caused by the unpredictable nature of inter-personal exchange (Blois, 1997). It is, thus, important to identify those aspects within the interaction process that contribute to this instability. Consequently, this study represents a welcome opportunity to undertake a more in-depth analysis of the subjective or ‘softer’ side of B2B relationships. This is considered inevitable if the element of personal interaction is viewed as fundamental to the whole process of relationship development:-

*“A relationship must ultimately depend on the interaction of the individuals who participate.”*  
(Campbell, 1996: 54)

Furthermore, if we accept that organisations are becoming increasingly serious about RM, then it would suggest that they should be equally keen to evaluate all investments made into relationship development. These investments include the many ‘social’ costs incurred in building and maintaining commercial relationships. Indeed, these ‘social’ costs may well outweigh the financial ones (Blois, 1998).

This Document calls for the researcher to adopt an interpretative methodological approach. As the first of the major research-based Documents, it allows the surfacing of issues likely to be pertinent to both the design of the subsequent stages of the DBA research and to the development of a richer and more detailed picture of the way in which B2B relationships in the UK postgraduate sector are currently managed and how they might be further developed.

### **Revisiting the research questions for Document 3**

The research questions originally envisaged for Document 3, at the outset of the DBA, have subsequently undergone a slight revision. This is partly a reflection of the evolutionary nature of the research process itself and the growing confidence of the researcher in the overall direction of his DBA research. It is also partly in order to establish a clearer distinction between the aims of Documents 3 and 4. Whereas Document 3 was originally intended as an opportunity to compare and contrast the views of people on both sides of the relationship between a business school and its corporate clients, it will now focus solely on the experiences and opinions of business school ‘key account managers’. The issues and themes that are surfaced in this study will, thus, provide the framework to be rolled out over Documents 4 and 5 that, in turn, will enable a systematic and comprehensive evaluation of the process of relationship management from the perspective of both business school client managers and their corporate client contacts. Given the change of emphasis in Document 3, the specific research questions are now as follows:-

- What are the qualities and characteristics that make an effective B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?
- What are the barriers likely to hinder the successful development and management of B2B relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?
- How can the process of developing and managing B2B relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector be improved?

The following section comprises a detailed explanation and justification of the methodological approach thought most likely to generate the best insights into the issues raised by the above questions.

### **Methodological choice and its implications**

Methodological choice is likely to have a significant impact on the way the researcher approaches a project. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997: 21) give three reasons why an understanding of research methodological issues is useful:-

- Choice of research philosophy will help clarify the research design or provide the overall configuration of the research - in other words, it will assist in determining what kind of evidence is gathered from where and how it is interpreted
- Knowledge of philosophy can also help the researcher to recognise which research design(s) will work and which will not
- The researcher can also identify research designs that may be outside of his/her experience. These can then be adapted to the constraints of the particular issue being investigated.

According to Goulding (1999), choosing a methodology is a time-consuming, personal and reflective process, requiring an evaluation of one's self in terms of convictions, beliefs and interests. It also requires an honesty about those beliefs and about what we know, what we think can be known and how we know. In short, the key methodological issues are about what *reality* is and how we *know* reality. To couch this in philosophical terms, there are fundamental ontological and epistemological matters to be resolved.

According to Bryman (2001: 16), ontology is concerned with the question of “...whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors.”

This gives rise to two broad ontological positions: *objectivism* and *constructionism* (Bryman, 2001). Put simply, *objectivism* is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena are external facts beyond our reach and influence. For example, although the notion of corporate culture could be regarded as being determined by a set of shared values and customs that are socially generated by managers and employees, the entity nevertheless may still appear to individuals as a tangible ‘thing’ and having a life of its own. *Constructionism*, however, is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings come about as a result of the interaction and intervention of the social actors themselves. The implication here is that social phenomena and the categories that people employ to help them understand the natural and social world are not only the products of social interaction but that they are in a constant state of flux and revision (Bryman, 2001). Indeed, the nature of reality is further complicated by the fact that individuals may experience multiple realities and multiple selves (Goulding, 1999; du Toit, 2003), and these multiple ‘representations’ of reality will undoubtedly impact on the way in which people interact and construct the world around them. Furthermore, language adds to this complexity, because there is no one word or string of words that is likely to be able to capture and portray reality in a unique and satisfactory way. What we have to accept is that there are many interpretations as to what constitutes reality (du Toit, 2003).

Bryman (2001: 11) suggests that epistemology concerns the question of “...what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline. A particularly central issue... is the question of whether the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences.”

This gives rise to two broad positions: *positivism* and *interpretivism* (Bryman, 2001). Put simply, *positivism* is an epistemological position that calls for the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality. According to Milliken (2001), historically, there has been great emphasis placed on quantification

in the sciences such as mathematics, physics and chemistry - in other words, the 'hard' sciences. In these physical sciences, there are strictly formalised procedures for establishing and testing hypotheses. The scientific rigour of such an approach tends to be judged by the degree of replication and generalisability of the findings (Goulding, 1999). A more in-depth treatment of this position will be provided in Document 4.

*Interpretivism*, on the other hand, stems from the view that the world and 'reality' are not objective and exterior rather they are socially constructed and given meaning by people (Husserl cited in Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1997: 24; Goulding, 1999; Milliken, 2001). The social scientist is concerned with attempting to understand the constructions and meanings people put on their experiences. However, an unfortunate ramification of this is that the social sciences are often regarded - somewhat pejoratively - as 'soft', as a means of indicating their imprecision and lack of dependability (Milliken, 2001). Nevertheless, interpretivism appeals to those who feel that the 'social' context of business research is too complex to lend itself to theorising in the same way as the physical sciences. Indeed, most business contexts are not just complex they are unique, because the subjects under investigation are essentially situation- or company-specific. They are the function of a particular set of circumstances and individuals. Rich insights into these situations may be lost if the research is reduced entirely to a series of 'law-like' generalisations (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 86). It could be argued that the interpretative researcher is more interested in discovering the details of a situation in order "to understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind them" (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998: 35). As such, Goulding (1999) suggests that perhaps the first requirement of social science is fidelity to the phenomena under study rather than to any set of methodological principles, regardless of how strongly supported by philosophical argument.

Applying an interpretivist epistemology to the world of business, there is much evidence to suggest that qualitative research techniques are becoming increasingly useful, particularly in marketing. According to Burns *et al.*, (2000), qualitative methods provide marketing researchers with insight into phenomena at a depth that cannot be achieved with quantitative data. They further suggest that such methods are also indispensable whenever a marketing researcher investigates an unknown domain

or one that has received relatively little attention. Hackley (1998: 126) is typical of those extolling the many virtues of an interpretative approach:-

*“The value of this approach for qualitative marketing researchers lies in the emphasis it places on the developing interpretative skills and sensitivity of the researcher, the preservation of the integrity of what is meant by the research subject, and the richness of interpretation it can bring to the research task of making sense of qualitative social data.”*

By way of example, Gilmore and Carson (1996) suggest that such techniques are ideally suited to the services sector, given the dynamic nature of the service delivery and that services are delivered mostly through human interaction.

However, the choice of a constructionist ontological and an interpretivist epistemological position is not without its problems. This is largely due to the fact that there are different ‘schools’ of thought that can be identified under the ‘constructionist’ banner such as *symbolic interactionism* (with its focus on the ways in which people develop their concept of self through the processes of communication. Symbols such as words, gestures and dress allow people to interpret and understand the expectations of others) and *critical realism* (with its focus on attempting to identify the underlying social mechanisms or structures that govern and influence the way in which people interrelate and make sense of their social milieu).

Whilst there may indeed be a number of recognised interpretative approaches, each with its own philosophical assumptions and research strategies, a degree of overlap nevertheless exists. This overlap is provided by the very material generated during the process of communication itself - i.e. the words of the informants gathered in the course of interviews or observation (Goulding, 1999). It is not the specific task of this Document to provide an in-depth critique of each constructionist variant. However, it is nevertheless important to identify the particular epistemological position that resonates most closely with the intended nature of this study. In short, this study is influenced substantially by the epistemological arguments advanced by researchers and academics writing under the banner of ‘social constructionism’, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

### ***Characteristics of social constructionism***

As was discovered in Document 2, when critically reviewing marketing literature, the business of defining RM is fraught with problems, largely because academics have chosen to interpret the concept in different ways. In many respects, the same is true of *social constructionism* where no single ‘catch-all’ definition is readily discernable in the literature. Despite the one label that appears in the literature, social constructionism is not ‘one thing’ (Hosking and Bass, 2001). Hackley (1998) suggests that it constitutes a broad church in social research. Indeed, the term embraces many different philosophical traditions and is constantly evolving (Hosking and Bass, 2001). However, as with RM, it is nonetheless possible to identify a number of broad assumptions about social constructionism that provide a useful way forward in terms of determining the appropriateness of the concept for the researcher. According to Burr (1995), there are four key assumptions that appear to underpin the approach adopted by those academics and researchers who can be loosely grouped under the ‘social constructionist’ banner:-

#### **1. A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge**

Burr (1995) suggests that researchers should be critical of the idea that our observations of the world around us are able to reveal its nature to us in an unproblematic or ‘scientific’ way. A *realist* perspective represents a striving for unity and solidarity, where what is known derives from experimenting with external phenomena (du Toit, 2003). A *social constructionist*, on the other hand, would deny that our knowledge is a direct perception of reality. In other words, the notion of ‘truth’ is rendered problematic because there can be no such thing as an objective fact. The social constructionist, thus, could be said to thrive on a state of ambiguity and creativity (du Toit, 2003). In addition to being *anti-realist*, a social constructionist stance is *anti-essentialist* to the extent that, if it is accepted that the social world is the product of social processes, it follows that there cannot be any given, determined nature to the world or people:-

“There are no ‘essences’ inside things or people that make them what they are.” (Burr, 1995: 5)



In brief, then, the researcher should challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world:-

*“...social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be.”* (Burr, 1995: 3)

## **2. Historical and cultural specificity**

The very ways in which we interpret and make sense of the world around us are historically and culturally relative. In a sense, they are not only specific to particular cultures and periods of history, but are products of that culture and history, and are dependent on the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time:-

*“...we should not assume that our ways of understanding are necessarily any better... than other ways.”* (Burr, 1995: 4)

The way in which we attempt to understand the world comes not from objective reality but from other people, both past and present. Indeed, we are born into a world where the conceptual frameworks and categories used already exist (Burr, 1995), and it is language above all else that helps to frame our respective cultures. Arguably, a person comes to know him or herself through the language of their culture (du Toit, 2003). Language is both the cornerstone of the socialisation process and the very medium through which people attempt to make sense of the world around them. This process of sense-making and, indeed, knowledge creation is transmitted through the use and application of language (du Toit, 2003). Given this, it could be argued that language is therefore a necessary pre-condition for thought as we know it - and, thus, takes a diametrically opposed view to Piaget (see Burr, 1995).

## **3. Knowledge is sustained by social processes**

A social constructionist stance accepts that our knowledge of the world around us is shaped by our daily interactions with others:-

*“...our current accepted ways of understanding the world is a product not of objective observation of the world but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other.” (Burr, 1995: 4)*

Whilst, traditionally, psychology and sociology have put forward explanations of social phenomena in terms of static entities such as personality traits, economic structures, models of memory and so on, the explanation offered by social constructionists is more often in terms of the dynamic nature of the process of social interaction. In other words, the emphasis is more on *processes* than structures (Burr, 1995). Devins and Gold (2002) suggest that the social interaction - or relationship - between people is the vehicle through which values come alive. Indeed, in the normal day-to-day relational process, meaning becomes embedded in ongoing ways of talking, which in turn may become accepted versions of reality in a particular context. In the business world, for example, this could refer to the development of a set of shared corporate values and, even, a corporate language (or ‘corporate speak’). In effect, this becomes the lingua franca that binds the company employees together both socially and formally. The important point here is that, without the existence of two or more people who are mutually aware and have a mutual common interest, social constructionism can have no meaning. What we would be left with would be a situation that is constructed in a purely private cognitive way (Hackley, 1998) and, thus, not accord with a social constructionist epistemological position.

#### **4. Knowledge and social action go together**

If it is accepted that the knowledge we have of the world around us is ‘socially constructed’ then we have to accept, in turn, the existence of an infinite number of possible ‘social constructions’ of the world and the realisation that people will respond very differently to different situations and to the actions of others:-

*“...each different construction also brings with it, or invites, a different kind of action from human beings... descriptions or constructions of the world... sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others.” (Burr, 1995: 5)*

Each time people interact in this way, they construct between themselves a view of the world that results in a unique response or action. And, as our perspectives of the world around us change, so do our corresponding actions (du Toit, 2003). As Hackley (1998: 125) observes:-

*“The social constructionist approach takes subjective reports of events, emotions and cognitions to be multifaceted constructions which can be interpreted on many levels.”*

It is the challenge of making sense of this dynamism and unpredictability that characterises the social constructionist stance. However, whilst the entire process of social interaction and social change is no doubt of great interest to some social constructionist researchers, there is an overwhelming tendency to focus on language. The ‘performative’ role of language is of particular interest because of the power that it has to influence how we perceive the world and how we attempt to behave and influence those around us. In this respect, language could be regarded as a form of social action. In other words, when people talk to each other, the world is ‘constructed’ (Burr, 1995). In a business context, for example, Devins and Gold (2002) recognise the importance of talk, dialogue and interpersonal communication in the development of tacit knowledge in managers and their engagement in the process of personal and professional development. Thus, a social constructionist perspective would imply that people like management consultants should review their use of language and revise their role to become a ‘helper’ or co-producer rather than adopt the traditional role of ‘expert’ (Devins and Gold, 2002).

One final consequence of adopting an interpretivist epistemology is that the researcher will generally approach the analysis and interpretation of material generated by the chosen research method(s) inductively: in other words, favouring theory *building* over theory *testing* (Saunders *et al.*, 2000: 87/88). The key characteristics of adopting an *inductive* approach can best be summarised as follows:-

- The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the nature of a particular problem by exploring the richness of the qualitative data gathered
- The researcher is particularly concerned with the context in which the events being researched are taking place

- The researcher attempts to make sense of the data in order to formulate theory
- A small sample is felt appropriate since conclusions generated are deemed to be situation-specific. The researcher is less concerned with the need to generalise
- Induction allows greater flexibility in terms of its choice of research methods. This, in turn, may enable a number of alternative theories to be examined during the course of a project.

These characteristics are entirely consistent with the research focus of Document 3, where the intention is purely to *explore* and gain a *better understanding* of the nature and qualities of effective B2B relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector and the barriers that potentially hinder the successful development and management of such relationships. Far from theory testing, the intention is to help build a better theoretical and conceptual *understanding* of the way in which B2B relationships operate.

Having spent some time addressing the aims and objectives (i.e. the '*what*') of this study, attention must now turn to aspects of research strategy (i.e. the '*how*').

### **Research strategy**

Research strategy involves thinking not just about the most suitable method(s) for answering the given research questions but also an opportunity to consider the source(s) most likely to produce the best data. In effect, choice of research strategy is concerned more with the effectiveness rather than the efficiency of individual data collection methods (Saunders *et al.*, 2000) and is influenced significantly by the overarching methodological approach. However, whilst it is acknowledged that research methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive to either methodological stance, experiment and survey are generally regarded as tools of the positivist researcher, the emphasis being on hypothesis testing through the collection and analysis of quantitative data. On the other hand, case study, grounded theory, ethnography and action research are generally regarded as the preserve of the interpretative researcher, where the aim is to gather data in a more direct and personal manner in a bid to generate theory inductively from the data.

Robson (1993: 5) defines case study as:-

*“...a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.”*

Although, as a research tool, case study is arguably of relevance to both positivist and interpretative researchers, it is thought particularly appropriate for Document 3 given its capacity to provide rich data about an individual, company or event. Besides, Perry (1998) offers strong support for the use of case study in postgraduate research. It should be stressed, however, that the use of case study might not appeal to some researchers on account of its perceived lack of ‘scientific’ foundations. Nevertheless, case study is more than a mere description of a business context, it can also represent a worthwhile way of exploring existing theory. Indeed, a well-constructed case study can enable a researcher to challenge existing theory and may even provide a source of new hypotheses (Saunders *et al.*, 2000).

Specifically with Robson’s definition of case study in mind, the overriding aim of this Document is to gather data (i.e. *empirical investigation*) about the nature and current state of B2B relationships (i.e. *a particular contemporary phenomenon*) within a major UK business school (i.e. *real life context*) through a systematic programme of research that will involve depth interviews with key personnel from the business school (i.e. *multiple sources of evidence*).

Another research strategy issue to consider is whether the research is to be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. An *exploratory* study is useful for helping to clarify or understand a research problem. According to Robson (1993: 42), exploratory studies are a valuable means of finding out “what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light.” A *descriptive* study aims to portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations (Robson, 1993) and can either be seen as a natural extension of, or even precursor to, exploratory research (Saunders *et al.*, 2000). An *explanatory* study, on the other hand, attempts to establish and explain causal links between variables (Saunders *et al.*, 2000).

Document 3 is essentially an *exploratory* study, because the aim is to begin the process of understanding better the nature and characteristics of B2B relationships within a UK higher education postgraduate context.

### **Research methods**

The task of choosing appropriate data collection methods represents the *tactical* level of the research planning process (Saunders *et al.*, 2000). Choice of appropriate methods depends largely on the methodological stance and research strategy adopted from the outset. Whilst acknowledging that data collection methods do not necessarily fit conveniently into neatly labelled boxes, the positivist researcher would normally favour the use of either *structured* questionnaires or *structured* interviews because of their capacity to generate large amounts of quantitative data in a relatively standardised format within a relatively short space of time. This facilitates both statistical interpretation and replication of the research by others at a later date. On the other hand, the interpretivist researcher tends to favour the use of tools such as participant observation, *semi-structured* interviews and *unstructured* interviews because of their flexibility and capacity to generate rich data that enhances understanding of a particular event or situation. As such, the interview fits comfortably within a social constructionist epistemology. By way of example, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) see the basic process of interviewing as one of prospecting for information. It is essentially a quest for the ‘true’ facts and feelings lying within - in other words, a kind of search and discovery mission:-

*“...all interviews are interactional events. Their narratives... are constructed in situ, a product of the talk between interview participants.”* (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 2)

The appropriateness of interviews as a reliable and effective data collection method has received much coverage in the social sciences research methodology literature. Indeed, it is suggested that interviewing is very much the universal mode of systematic enquiry. In short, we live in the ‘interview society’ (Silverman, 1993). According to Briggs (cited in Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) some 90% of all social science investigations exploit interview data.

### ***Research method chosen for Document 3***

In Document 3, the chosen method of data collection is the semi-structured face-to-face interview. In practical terms, the research design comprises four depth interviews each lasting up to 45 minutes with a business school employee recognised as having some kind of key account management responsibility. Although any of the business school key account managers potentially had the opportunity to take part in this stage of the research, it was felt - at least initially - that, given the slightly sensitive nature of the issues under investigation, some colleagues might not necessarily be willing to take part. Equally, the process of accessing willing individuals and setting up the actual interviews, even within one's own organisation, is often a very frustrating and time-consuming process. As a result, approaches were made initially through a 'friendly' intermediary, who then used his/her influence to secure the appropriate interviews. Consequently, this helped to speed up this part of the research process.

On account of the interpretative nature of Document 3, and the fact that this is an exploratory study only, it was not thought necessary to secure a large sample of respondents. Rather, the main concern of this study was to begin the process of surfacing themes and issues that can be followed up and built on in later stages of the DBA. With this kind of research, what matters more is the richness and sufficiency of the material generated by respondents. Given this, however, and in view of the small number of people taking part in this stage of the research, each interview was recorded (with the consent of the respondent) in order to allow for subsequent transcription. An example of the transcripts can be found in Appendix 3.

However, in reaching this choice of data collection method two key assumptions have been made. First, both parties in the interview process are necessarily and unavoidably *active*. For example, each is actively involved in the process of 'meaning-making'. Here, it is understood that meaning is not merely elicited by asking the right questions nor necessarily explicit in the replies of the respondent, rather both parties are actively engaged in the process of interpreting and assigning meaning during the course of the interview encounter itself:-

*“Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge - treasuries of information awaiting excavation - as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers.”*  
(Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 4)

Further support for the notion of the active interview comes from Shotter (2001: 334). He suggests that rather than seeking value-neutral, theoretical knowledge of the structure of a shared situation (e.g. an interview) as a passive object of thought whose meaning and practical implications we attempt to interpret in a disengaged and detached way, the very nature of the shared situation (its ‘being’) as an active object of thought should enable us to “hear the voice” and “see the face” of social situations. In other words, what is involved is arriving at a truly shared meaning of a truly shared situation or circumstance. As such, this represents a much more responsive - or, according to Shotter, relational - approach to the interview situation that should enable the researcher to see better the “connections”.

Second, much is made in the social sciences research methodology literature of the fact that the information held by the respondent is ‘uncontaminated’ and that the chief responsibility of the researcher is to exercise care in the type of questions asked in order not to bias or contaminate the information. Indeed, the trick is supposedly to formulate questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication between the interviewer and the respondent. However, in choosing the interview as a data collection method, the social constructionist viewpoint is that contamination results as a necessary by-product of the interview setting, its participants and their interaction:-

*“Construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience, but in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from and transforms the facts and detail... interviews are conversations where meanings are not only conveyed but cooperatively built up, received, interpreted, and recorded by the interviewer.”* (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 8-11)

The social constructionist revels in the diversity and unpredictability of the active interview. In a sense, the interview and its participants are constantly developing, akin to an interpersonal drama with a developing plot (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).



However, whilst acknowledging this diversity and unpredictability, Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997: 75) nevertheless warn against “the danger of assuming that a ‘non-directive’ interview, where the interviewee talks freely without interruption or intervention, is the way to achieve a clear picture of the interviewee’s perspective”. All that is likely to happen is that the interviewee remains unclear about the issues that the interviewer is interested in and the corresponding data will be difficult to interpret. Thus, the interview needs some kind of structure in order to derive the maximum benefit. Structure is provided by means of an interview guide or agenda.

The interview guide typically comprises a list of themes and questions to be covered in the interviews and can easily be generated (see Appendix 1). For this study, the list of themes is based partly on the research questions themselves and on some of the themes that emerged from the literature review in Document 2. However, despite the pivotal role of the interview guide, it is nevertheless acknowledged that the questions and issues raised may still vary from interview to interview, depending on the particular nature of the organisation being investigated and the role/job title each respondent holds. Certain questions may be omitted in some interviews and others introduced, as necessary, in order to explore or probe relevant issues as they arise:-

*“The use of the interview guide may vary from one interview to the next, becoming the crux of the interview conversation on some occasions and virtually abandoned on others as the respondent (with the interviewer) stakes out and develops narrative territory.”* (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 77)

This is part and parcel of the evolutionary nature of research and, from a personal perspective, such flexibility adds to the appeal of adopting the semi-structured interview method in this Document.

An additional device used to enhance the structure of the interviews in this study is the notion of the ‘critical incident’. Critical incident technique (CIT) is an approach to data collection that has received much interest since its introduction in the 1950s. According to Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (1997), CIT is a method that is particularly useful for teasing out information that might not be expressed easily or readily by respondents in the normal course of conversation. CIT can be used as a form of

content analysis to classify critical incidents or narratives for the purpose of uncovering emergent themes (Wong and Sohal, 2003). However, CIT should not be regarded as a rigid set of rules, rather a line of questioning that aims to elicit narratives from respondents about a particular activity together with details of critical aspects such as motivations to action, specific activities and the outcomes (Stokes, 2000).

Although the method was introduced by Flanagan in the 1950s, from an 'objectivist' standpoint, as a means of bridging the gap between the observation, recording and interpreting of the reasons behind actions, the technique has subsequently been used successfully by qualitative researchers, particularly in personal interviews, where the intention has been to determine more clearly the reasons behind significant actions or events that have occurred in the workplace. In this context, CIT has the added benefit of allowing the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up and probing questions in order to arrive at a better understanding of the events and actions being investigated (Wong and Sohal, 2003). The popularity of CIT has largely derived from its flexibility, and the technique has been interpreted in many different ways over the past fifty years. Indeed, Edvardsson and Roos (2001) go on to offer a useful taxonomy that incorporates the many variants of CIT discernible in recent research in the social sciences. However, despite the number of variants, the common denominator is that they are all based on the respondent's ability to recall and make judgements based on remembered, perceived incidents (Edvardsson and Roos, 2001).

Not surprisingly, CIT is a method that is increasingly attractive to marketing researchers (Burns *et al.*, 2000). For example, the technique has been used extensively in the fields of service quality and service management, where critical incidents are defined as those events or occurrences that take place in the process of interaction between service provider and customer that the latter remembers or perceives as unusually positive or negative when asked about them (Lockshin and McDougall, 1998; Edvardsson and Roos, 2001; Wong and Sohal, 2003).

In terms of this study, CIT is acknowledged as a useful means of exploring the reaction of individuals to issues that affect either the successful development of the

relationship or its eventual termination (Edvardsson and Roos, 2001). It is also interesting to note that the technique appears to have been used very little in the study of B2B relationships. This may well be because such markets have traditionally been characterised more by output concerns (i.e. *what was provided*) rather than process or relational issues - in other words, *how it was provided* (Lockshin and McDougall, 1998). As has been previously discussed, the research in Document 3 focuses predominantly on process or relational issues. Thus, the adoption of CIT appears to be entirely appropriate. On a more practical level, however, CIT was considered a useful device for both capturing the initial interest of the target respondents in the bid to seek their agreement to be interviewed and also to provide them with an overview of the anticipated direction of the interview - at the very least, a matter of common courtesy (see Appendix 2). Furthermore, it was felt that this device would also encourage respondents to express interesting events and outcomes (i.e. 'to tell a story') in their own words:-

*"Introductions and requests to participate should strategically convey the topic areas to be explored and the positions from which the exploration might embark. The researcher's objective is to provide initial contexts for how the respondent might possibly engage the interviewer's enquiries."* (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 76)

Despite the many positive aspects of CIT, there are nevertheless pitfalls and problems that the researcher needs to be aware of. These will now be considered.

### **Issues of validity and interpretation**

The use of interviews is not straightforward. Although interviewing is often claimed to be the 'best' method of gathering information, its complexity can sometimes be underestimated (Jones, 1985a; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1997). Whilst most researchers recognise interviews as social interactions, the social sciences research methodology literature appears to be more concerned with maximising the flow of valid reliable information, while minimising distortions of what the respondent knows (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). In other words, researchers tend to become obsessed with the need to avoid bias creeping into interviews. This, in turn, raises the issue of research validity and reliability, something that is of particular concern to the positivist

researcher. The underlying view is that the interviewer has merely to ask the questions properly and the respondent will provide the required information (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

However, if it is accepted that each interview is unique - the product of an unrepeatable social interaction - then the relevance of the notion of reliability can be questioned. Interviews fundamentally shape the form and content of what is said (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). No matter how thorough and professional, an interviewer will bring preconceived ideas and frameworks to the discussion that, in turn, could bias the outcome of the research. As Jones (1985a: 47) comments:-

*"...there is no such thing as presuppositionless research."*

As far as the use of critical incident technique (CIT) is concerned, problems of bias are difficult to avoid. This is largely because CIT relies heavily on the memory of the respondent. It is argued that the characteristics of critical incidents will influence how they are stored in the respondent's memory and how they are remembered (Edvardsson and Roos, 2001). Respondents may choose to recall situations in a highly subjective and personal way. Equally, the memory of events will be affected by the passage of time, resulting in the story telling being embellished or certain details being overlooked or selectively edited. Burns *et al.* (2000) provide a useful summary of the problems relating to this very process, which they term *self-disclosure*. For them, self-disclosure is governed by a number of key characteristics relevant to the respondent: *informant factors* (e.g. gender differences), *target familiarity or similarity* (i.e. whether the respondent knows the interviewer personally and/or feels empathy towards him) and the *disclosure topic* (i.e. the sensitivity and the interest of the respondent to the interview topic itself). These are all factors that the responsible interviewer cannot afford to overlook or take lightly. In effect, the emerging lesson is that interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

In light of the above, one criticism of CIT is that it fails to capture the range and frequency of 'similar' incidents. But, as McNeil and Pedigo (2001: 46) observe:-

“...such criticism betrays the bias towards quantitative research in business studies and fails to appreciate the uniquely rich and complex information which CIT yields, the distinctly individual tone which it captures, and the emotional content which it reveals as each respondent tells that particular ‘story’ which looms largest in his/her psyche.”

In defence of CIT - and qualitative research techniques generally - McNeil and Pedigo (2001) claim that it is through the words of business managers themselves that we are able to develop a very real sense of what it is to be a manager operating in a dynamic commercial environment, struggling with challenging day-to-day issues. Stokes (2000) endorses this sentiment on the back of his own use of CIT in researching the marketing processes and techniques used by managers in entrepreneurial small to medium sized organisations. Equally, there is ample support for claiming that the richness and depth of the data - and the process descriptions - uncovered by CIT more than outweigh its weaknesses in terms of reliability and validity (Lockshin and McDougall, 1998; Wong and Sohal, 2003; Mallak *et al.*, 2003).

Another criticism is that the use of CIT alone is unlikely to provide a sufficiently thorough description of the underlying cultural aspects that govern any given incident or event (Mallak *et al.*, 2003). However, in Document 3, it is readily acknowledged that CIT is only one way in which recollections and perceptions about events can be gleaned. Once CIT has performed its useful ‘icebreaking’ role at the start of each interview, the discussion of relevant themes and issues will be developed by the use of the kind of probing questions more typical of normal interview protocol. CIT is also acknowledged as a foundation for subsequent quantitative research (Burns *et al.*, 2000). In this respect, some of the issues and themes that emerge from the use of CIT in Document 3 can be revisited in more detail and, more importantly, investigated from a quantitative perspective in Document 4.

However, perhaps the strongest defence that the interpretative researcher can mount to accusations of a lack of scientific rigour is to adopt an honest and open approach to the handling of both research methodological issues and the interpretation of data. This is conveniently summed up by the need for the researcher to embrace the notion of *reflexivity*. As Hackley (1998: 129) observes:-

*“The researcher’s task therefore is not to aspire to an idea of quasi scientific objectivity, but to attain an order of researcher reflexivity. Reflexivity is a necessary feature of qualitative research... The social constructionist researcher cannot justify airbrushing him or herself out of the picture but neither can they discard as neutral their own influence on the interview. Nevertheless, this reflexivity consists more in an acknowledgement of the researcher’s presence in the research process than in recurring declarations of prejudice.”*

Such honesty and openness about the limitations of both the chosen data collection method and the potential impact of the interviewer on each respondent discussion inevitably needs to be carried through to the next stage of the research process: the analysis of the material generated.

### **Approach to data analysis**

Qualitative material is acknowledged as providing a rich and full understanding of a particular context or situation (Saunders *et al.*, 2000). This results in a “thick” or “thorough” description of the situation (Dey, 1993; Robson, 1993). However, the use of qualitative data has implications for both its collection *and* analysis (Saunders *et al.*, 2000). Whilst analysis of quantitative research can generally be carried out in a standardised way, the same is not necessarily true of qualitative material. Qualitative data analysis is a more personal activity (Jones, 1985b) requiring the researcher to exercise a degree of judgement over how to extract the best from the data:-

*“The analysis of qualitative data is a process of making sense, of finding and making a structure in the data and giving this meaning and significance for ourselves, and for any relevant audience.”* (Jones, 1985b: 56)

A logical and systematic approach needs to be adopted if criticism of excessive subjectivity and methodological weakness is to be avoided. Failure to manage the data efficiently means “failure to analyse the data effectively” (Dey, 1993: 57). In quantitative research, much importance is attached to replication. In other words, if other researchers were to adopt the same methods and ask the same questions, similar results can be obtained. However, in qualitative research, there is no such certainty. Whilst replication is not considered such an important issue, given the volume and

complexity of the data and the fact that a high degree of subjective judgement needs to be exercised, the researcher nevertheless still has to show that the data analysis has been subjected to an appropriate level of rigour:-

*“The results of most qualitative analysis mostly have to be taken on trust... In place of ‘external’ replication by other research, then, the qualitative analyst must perforce rely on ‘internal’ replication of his or her own research.” (Dey, 1993: 221)*

In broad terms, there are two ways of approaching the analysis of qualitative data. *Quantifying methods* attempt to turn the qualitative data into numerical data through the use of tools such as content analysis or repertory grid technique. *Non-quantifying methods*, such as cognitive mapping and grounded theory, offer a number of essentially non-numerical ways of interpreting the data (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but it needs to be acknowledged that each is attempting to do something different with the data generated. This Document adopts a *non-quantifying* approach, because it is the issues that are raised and the underlying perceptions of the respondents that are considered more important and insightful than the frequency with which issues emerge or the degree of commonality between respondents. Support for this approach is offered by Miles and Huberman:-

*“We argue that although words may be more unwieldy than numbers, they render more meaning than numbers alone... Converting words into numbers and then tossing away the words gets a researcher into all kinds of mischief.” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 56)*

However, the selection of a non-quantifying approach means that the researcher will be called upon to impose some kind of systematic and logical framework to managing and making sense of the material generated. Fortunately, suitable approaches or frameworks are available in the social sciences research methodology literature, as will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Categorising the data***

The way in which the data are initially sorted or categorised provides a conceptual framework through which the action or events can be rendered intelligible:-

“Without classifying the data, we have no way of knowing what it is we are analysing. Nor can we make meaningful comparisons between different bits of data.” (Dey, 1993: 40)

However, categories need not be chosen before the analysis begins. It is equally possible for this to occur as the process of analysis itself is unfolding. But, it does raise the issue of how much the researcher should seek to impose his/her preconceived ideas and categories on the data analysis:-

“...though some categories may be established in advance, these may still need confirmation in the data, while other categories or subcategories may be derived from distinctions suggested in the data... Categories should not be imposed on the data arbitrarily; the categories adopted should reflect the data.” (Dey, 1993: 97/98)

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997) offer a ‘broad brush’ 7-stage approach to the analysis of qualitative data, which - although relying significantly on the researcher’s intuition - nevertheless goes some way to deflecting potential criticism of a lack of analytical rigour. Equally, the approach they offer is entirely consistent with the notion of researcher *reflexivity* discussed earlier in this study and which was felt to be an important tool in the interpretative researcher’s armoury. The starting point in the process is the *familiarisation* stage. Here, the researcher reads and re-reads the transcripts in order to allow some first thoughts on the issues to emerge. The second stage is one of *reflection*. This involves an initial assessment of how useful the data appear to be and how far they match original expectations. Indeed, it may emerge that some issues assume a greater importance, whereas others may be played down by respondents. Equally, completely new issues can emerge that the researcher may never have considered and, as such, might be worthy of further investigation. Once this period of reflection has been completed, the researcher can then move onto the stage of *conceptualisation*. Here, an initial list of themes or categories present in the transcripts can be drafted.

As far as this particular study is concerned, the adoption of this approach led to a list of some 70 themes or categories being identified initially (see Appendix 4). However, it is worth reflecting that a number of the categories were actually suggested by the literature review in Document 2. These themes were taken forward to Document 3



and provided the basic building blocks of the interview guide discussed earlier. However, the list of themes generated by the literature review was never considered exhaustive. It was always the intention that the researcher would be open and sensitive to any additional themes that might emerge during the interviews.

### *Assigning the data to categories*

Having decided on a suitable approach to categorisation, the next stage in the process is that of sifting through the data in order to attach relevant ‘bits’ or ‘units’ of data to the appropriate categories. A ‘unit’ of data can be any number of words: a sentence, a string of sentences, a complete paragraph or some other chunk of textual data that fits a category (Saunders *et al.*, 2000). Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997) refer to this stage of the analytical process as *cataloguing concepts*. Here, the researcher attempts to assign units of data to a particular category in what is tantamount to a process of labelling. However, it needs to be stressed that a downside of this labelling process is that, in assigning units to categories, the full richness of some data may be lost:-

*“Whenever we divide data into bits, meaning is lost because the data is abstracted from its context.”* (Dey, 1993: 117)

Traditionally, some researchers have opted to operate a card indexing system in order to facilitate cross-referencing of themes. The current fashion, however, is for some researchers to harness the power of computer database software packages such as NUD\*IST in order to make the task of processing the volume of qualitative data more manageable. As far as Document 3 is concerned, it was decided to complete this stage of the process on computer, but using the standard Microsoft Word word-processing package (see Appendix 3 for an example of an annotated transcript). This was done essentially in order to retain a degree of ‘closeness’ to the data that was not felt possible with other methods of qualitative data analysis. Equally, it seemed a suitable method given the exploratory nature of the research in Document 3. Nevertheless, it is felt that a software package such as NUD\*IST could come into its own in Document 5, where the volume of qualitative data is expected to be that much greater.

The fifth stage in the process outlined by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997) is that of *recoding*. Here, the researcher may feel that either too many codes have been produced, in the first instance, and that there is not really sufficient difference between some of them to warrant being treated separately or else the initial codes are too restrictive and do not allow sufficient insights into major themes. This process of refinement is also referred to as *laddering*, with codes being either enlarged or collapsed into more general ones. In this study, for example, the initial code of ‘customer-centric’ was enlarged by the addition of ‘listening’ as it became apparent that, although there were a number of ways in which key account managers could get closer to the customer, being customer-centric was largely underpinned by the act of actually listening to what the customer is saying.

Stage six is one of *linking*, where the researcher attempts to identify possible links between codes in order to make sense of the data and start to tease out a ‘story’. In this study, once the initial categories had been identified, there was an attempt to group categories under significant sub-headings such as ‘problems with running programmes’ and ‘social aspects’ (see Appendix 5).

Stage seven involves the researcher in the process of *re-evaluation*. Here, progress made to date with the data analysis can be compared, for example, with the original research questions and with what the researcher already knows about the issues under investigation. At this point, a degree of judgement invariably needs to be exercised over which elements of the data are to be taken forward into the writing up or ‘telling of the story’. This is partly due to the amount of data generated, but also partly because the researcher may find certain issues instinctively more interesting and relevant than others. For this particular study, it was felt helpful at this stage to transfer specific units of data to separate Microsoft Word documents in order to provide, in effect, a set of working notes to facilitate the process of writing up (see Appendix 6). An explanation of the choice of issues that will form the backbone of the writing up will be left to the next section.

The approach discussed above is very similar to the *general analytical procedure* outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). In this procedure, again, a structured and sequential approach is taken to data collection and coding. Through a process of

coding and re-coding, initial themes are identified, grouped according to their relationship and then reduced. In so doing, significant themes are allowed to emerge. However, despite the degree of structure outlined in the *general analytical procedure*, it is worth noting that Miles and Huberman (1994: 8) still see a role for a more intuitive approach to data analysis and “assume that through continued readings of the source material and through vigilance over one’s presuppositions, one can capture the essence of an account”. In combining the two approaches the researcher retains the ability to modify or add categories, as and when necessary, depending on the themes that emerge from the data. The option of being able to supplement the *general analytical procedure* with an intuitive element (Miles and Huberman, 1994) is felt to be beneficial to the outcomes of this particular Document.

Having explored aspects of the researcher’s approach to the problems of qualitative data analysis, the remainder of this paper will now be given over to considering the main themes that emerge from the four depth interviews.

### **Analysis of the material**

The flexible nature of the semi-structured interviews conducted in this study resulted in some seventy themes emerging from the initial analysis of the discussions with respondents. However, the sheer wealth of material generated is in many respects something of a two-edged sword in the sense that certain themes, whilst being intrinsically interesting, are nevertheless not directly relevant to the specific research questions guiding Document 3. Thus, a degree of selectivity has been adopted in determining which themes to focus on. Equally, the nature of qualitative material poses problems for the researcher in terms of whether to present the raw data first, followed by analysis and discussion - as is normally expected in a ‘scientific’ or positivist treatment - or whether to offer a combined presentation and analysis of data. A strong argument in favour of the combined approach is that it avoids the unnecessary duplication of material. It also enables the researcher to develop the discussion around each theme at the specific point that it emerges in the writing up.

For the sake of clarity and structure, the following broad headings will be used to discuss relevant themes:-

- the importance of client management
- problems with running programmes
- business relationship characteristics
- techniques for building effective business relationships
- the importance of the inter-personal aspects of business relationships

The following analysis and discussion of themes will also benefit from the structure offered by the initial conceptual framework stated at the outset of this Document. Broadly speaking, the discussion will move from a focus on some of the structural and economic dimensions, as laid out in the initial conceptual framework, through to an exploration of the inter-personal, social dimensions. However, it should be noted that it is often difficult to divorce consideration of some of the structural and economic dimensions from the inter-personal or social. This is largely because the inter-personal or social aspects would appear to play an important part in the effective operation of most relationships, at least as far as the respondents taking part in this study are concerned.

The discussion will conclude with an evaluation of the extent to which the original research questions have been answered, followed by some tentative initial conclusions being drawn and useful pointers given for the direction of further research in forthcoming DBA Documents.

### ***Client management***

Client management is very much regarded as an opportunity to build bridges with corporate clients. Whilst factors such as price and place are no doubt important to the decision by corporate clients as to which training provider to adopt, the manner in which the relationship is managed is potentially the deciding factor (Respondent A). On the face of it, there is evidence to support the claim that client management is seen as fundamental to the way in which relationships between a business school and its corporate clients are conducted:-

*“I think it’s a good use of time because that’s what the Corporate Business Unit is all about.”*  
(Respondent A)

Respondent D talks of a flashpoint that reared its head with one particular in-company programme where the client had become dissatisfied with the amount of time it was taking for the Business School to return marked student assignments. The company's experience on another programme was markedly different, which tended to accentuate the feeling of dissatisfaction. However, once the grievance had been aired, the matter was resolved speedily to the satisfaction of all parties:-

*"...but, if we didn't have that relationship... and, if we didn't have that client management... it probably could have been a different scenario."* (Respondent D)

The amount of time and effort invested by key account managers is justified largely on the basis of the potential future business that can be generated from strong relationships with the right corporate client. For example, Nottingham Business School is aware of the strategic importance of moving into the less well-developed parts of the burgeoning European Union that is expected to come as a result of its new-found relationship with a major Danish customer (Respondent B). This customer enjoys a rapidly developing international presence that could see the Business School ultimately entering lucrative Eastern European and Asian markets on the back of the strength of this relationship. Equally, closer to home, the consolidation of the current in-company management degree programme, that has been running for a number of years now, will also enable the Business School to look to develop the programme in different sectors, thereby expanding the total number of students taking the degree (Respondent C). Client management, if practised effectively, is key to this expansion:-

*"...getting interest in the programme... if you get that up-front and do it in a way where they understand exactly what they're buying into, the rest will fall into place."* (Respondent C)

However, there is some concern about what constitutes effective client management. Whereas some may consider it to be simply managing an effective relationship with an immediate contact in the client organisation, it may have wider ramifications:-

*"I think some [key account managers] are very... have got a long and successful relationship... and they do have a dialogue and they talk to the client etc. But, I'm not sure*

*they're actually client managing, because client management is all about getting to the top people not just your training manager.” (Respondent A)*

The amount of time spent on client management varies markedly. For example, when a programme is first validated, around 80% of the key account manager's time can be spent on devising the programme and looking at the operational aspects (Respondent B). Respondent A also claimed that some 30% of her time was taken up specifically by bridge building activities, over and above the normal client management tasks she would normally be expected to perform. However, the time devoted to client management may decline as a programme develops:-

*“I think, once the relationships are up and running, that particular component [client management] will take less time than at present.” (Respondent A)*

It would also appear that the amount of time spent on client management differs from organisation to organisation. Some clients demand a lot of time and attention whereas others may make relatively few demands on the client manager. Respondent D suggests that this may be due, in part, to the organisational culture of the respective clients and the kind of person they employ. She goes on to name a major financial services provider as an example of the former and a large regional water company as an example of the latter.

Given the large amount of time that normally appears to be devoted to managing large clients, each key account manager can realistically only operate with a small number of clients. For example, the two clients that Respondent B handles are “not bog standard programmes”. Thus, it would only be possible for Respondent B to consider taking on the management of a small, undemanding ‘open’ programme like the Certificate in Management in addition to her current responsibilities. Respondent D talks of being involved in programmes that account for some 400-500 students in total. This undoubtedly raises concerns over the workload of individual client managers and their ability to cope with the increasingly demanding burden - and resultant stress - placed on them by the Business School. In addition to workload issues, further stress is experienced by some key account managers (Respondents A and C) by the volatility of certain client relationships: it seems that some relationships

change on a regular basis and this forces key account managers to have to establish contacts with new people. Respondent C cites the high turnover of graduate recruitment managers as a particular problem. In one organisation there have been five different graduate recruitment contacts in the past five years... nearly one a year. The whole process of client management thus becomes much more demanding than it needs to be:-

*“...you get a new contact and start all over again. So, that is very draining.”* (Respondent C)

However, relationship volatility is only one of a number of frustrations attached to the job of client management, some wholly outside the control of the Business School and others entirely avoidable, if effective client management techniques are exercised.

### ***Problems with running programmes***

#### **External factors**

The external problems that occur, over which the Business School has little or no control, are things such as economic factors. The problems are exacerbated when dealing with corporate clients because training budgets are very much subject to cut back in adverse trading conditions. Respondent C, for example, talks of one major corporate client, who had originally promised 10 students for the in-company management degree programme, withdrawing all students at the last minute because of poor company sales figures. Equally, Respondent A cites the case of a new programme developed by the Business School which was expected to launch in January 2004 but had to be postponed due to poor numbers. It is hoped that this programme will go ahead in September, although there can be no absolute guarantee of this happening.

Received wisdom would suggest that an effective relationship with a major corporate client has the potential to satisfy both parties. On the one hand, it is expected to lead to repeat business with that client - and the distinct possibility of increased student numbers - whilst, on the other hand, it offers the corporate client the opportunity to enjoy a tailor-made in-company programme, subject obviously to sufficient numbers.

However, whilst this would undoubtedly be the preferred position from the Business School's perspective - providing clear lines of communication and straightforward organisational structure - the practical realities of business sometimes mean that the client manager is left with the unenviable task of shopping around at the last minute trying to persuade multiple clients to send small numbers of students on what effectively becomes an 'open' programme or finding alternative work placements for those students already recruited onto a programme such as the in-company management degree:-

*"So, we could end up in order to satisfy the need for the number of placements for the number of students that we have taken having to go back to a more complex structure."* (Respondent C)

Respondent B talks also of language and geographical differences as other major factors over which the Business School has little or no control. The increasing internationalisation of corporate education means that Business Schools must be seen to be operating on the international stage in order to both promote and protect their reputation. Dealing increasingly with international corporate clients, thus, calls upon client managers to develop a whole new skills set, not least of which is understanding the language and culture of the corporate client's home country. This can obviously add extra pressure to an otherwise demanding job. However, it is interesting to see how resourceful a Business School can be in addressing such a problem. Respondent B talks of dealings with a major client in Denmark having been facilitated initially by the welcome presence of a fluent Danish-speaking Englishman (with local East Midlands connections!) in the Danish target organisation. However, this individual is soon to join the Corporate Business Unit as a company-sponsored Lecturer. This is seen as a move that will further strengthen relations between the two organisations and overcome any potential communications problems.

A further complication for key account managers working in an educational environment is that they invariably have to contend with multiple relationships. Rather than dealing with a simple dyadic buyer-seller relationship, as discussed in Document 2, the key account manager often faces a complex and perplexing network of relationships. Indeed, this complexity was previously highlighted in the Appendix



to Document 1. Respondent B, for example, talks of one programme, for which she is responsible, where she is involved in discussions and dealings not just with her immediate contacts in the client organisation but with numerous people internally in the Business School (such as lecturers, subject verifiers and QA people) and also with other parties such as BPP and external examiners. The complexity of dealing with multiple relationships undoubtedly adds to the difficulty of communicating and effecting change and, surprisingly, may even lead to a certain unwillingness on the part of the key account manager to innovate beyond the minimum level necessary to sustain the relationship:-

*“...if you try to change something you’ve got a range of people to try and buy into.”*  
(Respondent C)

Finally, there is also the relationship with the student, which should not be overlooked. Many client managers will come into direct contact with the students that corporate clients send on programmes both in an administrative and mentoring capacity. However, Respondent D talks of the pleasure that can be derived from seeing students develop over a period of time and how this student contact can actually counter-balance the time otherwise spent on the more boring administrative aspects of managing the client relationship. It is perhaps worth reflecting that students can have both a positive and negative short-term effect on the relationship between a Business School and a corporate client based largely on the feedback given directly to line managers. Equally, there is always the possibility that, in the longer-term, a student might look favourably on enlisting the services of the Business School irrespective of whether he or she is still with their original employer or has moved on to another organisation:-

*“...but, also, making sure that the students have such a positive experience that they want to recommend it.”* (Respondent C)

### **Internal factors**

In terms of those factors over which the Business School has some control, the potential damage inflicted by certain individuals on a relationship are talked about by all respondents. Generally, such problems are caused by differences of opinion or

personality clashes which inevitably result in the client asking for somebody else to take the programme over (Respondent A). Respondent B talks of the evident dislike of the Danish client for one particular member of the Business School delegation present at early meetings. So, it became clear from the outset that this individual needed to be replaced as a matter of urgency. Client dislike of individuals would also appear to extend to the lecturing team employed on a programme (Respondent D), thus adding to the problems faced by the client manager:-

*“...a problem from time to time is that certain deliverers are not acceptable on certain programmes.”* (Respondent B)

Equally, there are times when it becomes clear to senior managers within the Corporate Business Unit that a particular individual is no longer managing a relationship effectively or developing the business satisfactorily. Thus, a change of client manager is inevitable (Respondent A). A typical example is the in-company management degree, where a valued and respected member of the Corporate Business School was brought in to transform the fortunes of the programme. She was able to sell it into a major financial services provider and give the programme a much-needed boost in fortunes. However, the task of stepping into any programme management role at a late stage is not straightforward and is likely to put the client manager in a difficult position:-

*“...the difficulty is, if you’re stepping in at a certain point, you don’t know what’s been said beforehand.”* (Respondent C)

The problem of stepping in at a late stage is further exacerbated by the fact that resourcing is generally an issue in the Business School. Complications such as the long-term sickness of a Business Development Manager since November 2003 (Respondent B) and maternity leave (Respondent C) were notable examples provided by respondents. Such eventualities have to be covered by existing personnel who appear to be already overstretched. An interesting issue emerging on the back of this is that it is felt that the Business School could do more to develop its client managers so that they can manage business relationships more effectively (Respondent B). Part

of the problem may reside in the fact that the client managers are academics and, consequently, lacking in business acumen:-

*“...the Corporate Business Unit has academics who are client managers, who are excellent in their areas of expertise but... really don't have a clue about the commercial world... or even don't know what the margins on some of their clients are.”* (Respondent A)

Respondent D broadly supports this point, but goes on to suggest that the problem is magnified by the fact that the university is trying to operate like a normal business, yet is struggling to cope with the bureaucratic structures and processes that typify an academic institution:-

*“We try to be a business, in a business world, but we're still conforming to public sector academic structures which just don't fit.”* (Respondent D)

For example, the standard academic calendar means that lecturers tend not to be around for much of the summer. Consequently, clients might not appreciate fully the difficulties experienced by the key account manager in getting academic colleagues to deliver programmes or mark student assignments quickly. The fact that clients often lose sight of the fact that programmes need to correspond with academic term times can cause friction. However, the Corporate Business Unit realises this and is operating increasingly across the calendar year, so much so that client managers are now hard pressed to identify the precise dates of academic term time (Respondent D).

Respondent A goes on to suggest that there is more to client management than simply having good relations with your immediate contact in the client organisation. It is important not just to make a good impression but also to deliver and to find out what's happening in the client's business. Warwick and Cranfield are cited as examples of Business Schools operating in such a holistic way. Doubt was expressed as to whether client managers in Nottingham Business School could emulate such an approach to the job.

Another aspect of the client manager role in an academic environment is that it makes multiple demands on people. Not only are they expected to perform all of the duties of

a client manager, but they are also expected to fulfil a range of academic obligations. In one sense, this can be viewed as a positive aspect of the job and can make for a good deal of motivation:-

*“...a very varied role, actually. It’s a real cross-section of things... a sort of anything.”*  
(Respondent A)

However, the sheer variety of tasks and roles can lead to frustration - and, even, resentment - particularly if the same individuals feel taken advantage of on account of their abilities and goodwill:-

*“So, you end up in a situation where the same people that are good at client relationships are put on... every time.”* (Respondent B)

At certain times, too, the workload appears to be highly administrative, whether this involves the validation of programmes (Respondent B), the redesigning of course content and course committee work (Respondent D), business development activities (Respondent B), the training of new people into their course leader role (Respondent C), the business of mentoring students and co-ordinating all of their activities (Respondent C) or the development and co-ordination of plans for the launch of new initiatives (Respondent A). Whilst it is acknowledged that all this has to be done, it nevertheless puts added pressure on the key account managers and may prevent them from spending as much time as they would like on their main task: managing client relationships. It is interesting to note that business development issues emerged at regular intervals in discussions. It would appear that all respondents are well aware of the need continually to develop business with corporate clients. However, it may well be that the drive for incremental business - and the enhanced reputation that can accrue from a healthy portfolio of products and clients - may well add extra pressure to an otherwise stressful job. By way of example, Respondent A talks of the imminent launch of a major new initiative as “...quite a new product for us, so we *need* to make it work” and “...we want to ferment and grow this relationship so that we get further business from this client.” She gave the impression that she felt it increasingly necessary to deliver results in terms of business development. Inevitably, however, this raises the issue of incentives (Respondents B and C). Indeed, Respondent C was

quite strong in her demand for some kind of recognition for the hard work that goes on:-

*“If you could argue that we should be involved more, then it needs to be acknowledged that that takes time and some time needs to be set aside out of your annual hours to say that’s what we would be doing... There is nothing in my rewards package to incentivise me to... get two or three cohorts of... students.”* (Respondent C)

However, Respondent C finishes by observing, somewhat wryly, that anybody who is good at selling programmes into businesses isn’t necessarily going to come and work for the levels of salary that are paid in academic institutions. This may well be a hitherto little recognised barrier to the Business School establishing an effective client management structure and is worthy of being followed up in future Documents.

### ***Business relationship characteristics***

The key characteristics underpinning business relationships have been researched comprehensively by the IMP group. These characteristics were summarised in Document 2 as *patterns of dependency, evolution over time, adaptations* and *inter-personal contact* and will be referred to in more detail in the remainder of this study, albeit within the framework outlined at the beginning of this analysis and discussion section.

In terms of patterns of dependency, it would appear from the discussions with respondents that the key to the successful development of the relationship may lie very much in the hands of the corporate client. In other words, the power balance is generally weighted in their favour:-

*“...at the end of the day, the reality is they have the power. They’ve got the money.”*  
(Respondent C)

However, the situation isn’t just one of simple economics, it is also about personalities, especially when client managers have to deal with forceful and assertive individuals in the different client organisations. For example, some individuals will

seek to exert power over the content and communication involved in a programme to the extent of wanting to approve almost every single detail before it goes ahead (Respondent A). Respondent A goes on to use the term 'control freak' to describe such an individual. Others might seek to impose their will on the choice of deliverer (Respondent D) or, even, Business School client manager, using the threat of the ultimate financial sanction as a weapon:-

*"The upshot was, if you don't get this person out we're pulling the business."* (Respondent C)

The behaviour of such individuals has nevertheless to be accommodated not simply because of their position in their respective organisations - very often these people will be Directors or senior managers with major influence over HR policy - but because they are the key decision maker in the process of deciding to use the Business School:-

*"...he is the major decision maker in terms of whether this programme goes ahead or not."* (Respondent A)

Equally, key account managers would appear to accept a certain amount of power play as part of the package, so to speak, in the sense that it is acknowledged that the organisations they deal with are "like any business, they're not into charity" (Respondent C). However, sometimes it is the prospect of the future benefits that could accrue if the relationship goes well that helps to soften the blow in the short-term. In other words, this "dynamic aggression" can be used to benefit the Business School (Respondent C). For example, although the chief representative of the large Danish organisation may have been demanding in the early stages of the relationship, he now appears to be convinced that the Business School is the right partner with which to be doing business over the longer-term (Respondent B).

A sense of powerlessness in the relationship may occur if, for example, the Business School has to go cap in hand to a corporate client in order either to fill empty spaces on programmes or to engineer work placements for students already enrolled on programmes:-

*“...we need them to take our students. So, we have to be seen to be accommodating as much as possible.” (Respondent C)*

Once an organisation comes to the Business School’s rescue in this way, it may result in added pressure being put on course fees and profits. Respondent C talks of a recent situation where, although both parties felt they had obtained a mutually beneficial outcome in terms of maintaining both the Business School’s in-company management degree and the financial service provider’s own graduate management recruitment scheme, it hasn’t prevented the client from taking advantage and demanding to negotiate on price on the strength of the student numbers being taken (Respondent C).

Respondent A echoes this concern by citing an example of a major corporate client that has recently come to Nottingham Business School after a negative experience at another educational establishment. Even so, it seems that the corporate client still feels it can dictate what happens in the Nottingham Business School programme because of its previous experience. Such developments could lead to a certain amount of frustration and, even, hostility towards the client, especially if it is felt that all of the concessions (or *adaptations*) are being made on the part of the Business School. Respondent A offers the example of a situation where a particular corporate client was traditionally in the habit of expecting the Business School to arrange things like hotel accommodation and transport for its delegates rather than going through its own administrative channels:-

*“We are giving more than we need to... I am aware that, from my experience of being on the other side as a purchaser, you don’t get these things.” (Respondent A)*

In some respects, this frustration is exacerbated by the fact that some organisations involved in complex multiple relationships seem not to share the same sense of importance or commitment towards certain aspects of relationship maintenance as other parties. The perception is that because these organisations regard themselves as “the client” they can do almost what they like (Respondent B):-

*“[Named organisation] don’t seem to have any respect for any of our systems or procedures full-stop.” (Respondent B)*

Fortunately, despite the somewhat negative issues raised above, the key account managers interviewed feel that another factor that drives most relationships with corporate clients is essentially the belief that the relationship is mutually beneficial and leads to a ‘win-win’ situation. As Respondent A observes:-

*“...you can’t just keep taking even in a business relationship... it’s going to be a two-way thing.”* (Respondent A)

By way of example, Respondents A and D talk about their relationship with their clients and the “supportive behaviour” that they have both experienced:-

*“...it worked because we were both in it to make a success of it.”* (Respondent A)

Both respondents explain how the relationship had developed rapidly because the parties involved seemed to ‘hit it off’ almost immediately. Respondent C adds weight to this by suggesting that the in-company degree programme represented an ideal solution for the financial services provider, because it would help to support its own graduate recruitment programme. Equally, from the Business School perspective, the deal would secure additional student numbers on the in-company degree together with offering the possibility of work placements for other students already on the programme. Respondent B talks in a similar way about her dealings with a major public sector organisation, where both parties tacitly acknowledge that they need each other, despite the occasional strains in the relationship.

A key indicator of the pivotal role of mutuality in business relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector is provided by the length of time over which some relationships have existed. Respondent D, for example, talks of how the relationship with a major financial services provider has lasted well over ten years. During this time, the relationship has evolved in a number of ways (*i.e. evolution over time*) as, on the one hand, the client has gradually become interested in different programmes offered by the Business School and, on the other hand, individuals have come and gone, resulting in a degree of relationship upheaval. However, without some recognition on either side that it is in the interests of both parties to maintain and develop the relationship, it would no doubt have ended long since. This example is



not unique. All respondents offered further examples of successful relationships lasting in excess of two years. However, Respondent C offered one example where the relationship with the client had only lasted for the duration of one programme. Although the main cause of termination was economic difficulties experienced by the client, there had quite clearly not been enough opportunity to build the solid foundations of a future relationship. Respondent B shows, on the other hand, how the effort expended on building up initial contacts with the major Danish client now look likely to pay handsome long-term dividends.

Given that the way in which a relationship evolves over time is partly due to the various *adaptations* that are made to it, it now makes sense to consider in more detail some of the techniques that can be used to develop relationships.

### ***Techniques for building effective business relationships***

Perhaps one of the most important ways of building the relationship is by being customer-centric or “client-centred” (Respondent A). This means not just recognising the importance of the customer, but actually knowing something about the client’s business (Respondent B) and listening to what it is that the client wants:-

*“By listening to the client you can pick up on so much.”* (Respondent C)

Respondent C goes on to suggest that a good relationship “will be 80% listening and 20% talking, to really get to grips with what they want and why they want it”. A good deal of the key account manager’s time may, thus, be spent on trying to identify what the customer’s needs are and putting together a package that meets those specific needs (Respondent B). This is worth doing, because it would appear that the best results come from those relationships where key account managers have successfully managed the client’s expectations (Respondent B) and not rushed them into a programme without them really understanding what they were buying into (Respondent C). Respondent B goes on to illustrate this situation by explaining how a recent addition to the Business School’s client portfolio had terminated its relationship with another educational establishment because it wasn’t perceived to be particularly corporate-oriented. The client was expected to buy a ready-made, off-the-

shelf package that ultimately did not meet its specific requirements. Added to this, the business school in question was adjudged to be either unwilling or unable to adapt its offering. Consequently, the client switched to Nottingham Business School where it perceived the approach to be entirely different. In a sense, what underpins this example is the notion of transparency. Whether it is regarded as a matter of simple common courtesy, or whether it is seen as part of the process of treating others as you would like to be treated yourself, the fact of the matter is that openness and honesty on either side makes for the emergence of trust in the relationship:-

*“...if you get that up-front and do it in a way where they understand exactly what they’re buying into, the rest will fall into place.” (Respondent C)*

To illustrate this notion of transparency, Respondent A mentions a problem with an executive development programme, where the deliverer on a particular module requested the purchase of a book for the students at short notice. Whereas other client managers might normally write off the cost of buying the book (and the Corporate Business Unit profit!) as an essential part of keeping the client happy, she was open and honest in her approach to the client and stated quite simply that the £500-£600 for the purchase of this book had not been factored into the course budget. The book would obviously be a useful addition to the module, but the decision was ultimately the client’s. If the client felt the purchase of the book were important then they would be expected to fund it themselves. Ultimately, the client decided to go ahead with the book purchase and Respondent A now feels that the relationship has benefited from this transparency.

Honesty and transparency are also something that key account managers would expect to find in their clients. Respondent D, for example, mentions by name the main contact in the financial services provider as someone whom she considers to be “very honest”. Respondent C shares the view that this individual’s approach to the relationship is refreshing, because “J calls a spade a spade” (Respondent C). Viewed in this way, client honesty is an appealing quality and something key account managers would respond to favourably.

The process of being customer-centric also seems to revolve partly around making the client feel special or important (Respondent D). Respondent B mentions the ‘special’ arrangements that are made to accommodate the major Danish client on his visits to the UK. Rather than be put up in a standard hotel, he stays in one of the more up-market establishments in the Lace Market area of Nottingham. In other words:-

*“...they are the client and they do want to be looked after... and they don’t want to be treated just like a normal student.”* (Respondent B)

Equally, it is about adopting a more proactive approach to relationships and accepting that they will not necessarily develop effectively on their own and that it’s more of “a proactive role in terms of developing positive relationships up-front” (Respondent C). A lot of effort is, therefore, channelled into identifying potential problems before they occur (Respondent B), whether this be the careful matching of lecturers to modules and programmes (Respondent D), bringing in subject specialists to influence the design of programmes (Respondent B) or the rapid switching of individuals that the client takes a disliking to (Respondent B).

This kind of proactive approach requires the client manager to be well prepared and appears to be particularly important in the early stages of relationship development. For example, some respondents talk of the need to know basic things about the client, such as which words or themes to use and which to avoid with the individual(s) that you will be meeting (Respondent A), the culture of the organisation (Respondent A) and “finding out where their business is going” (Respondent B). In effect, it is about:-

*“...knowing what pleases them and what doesn’t and what makes the relationship at the end of the day.”* (Respondent A)

It is interesting to note that, as part of the process of “finding out where their business is going”, Respondent B mentions that she has been invited across to Denmark in order to sample the company culture and to check out the facilities for the forthcoming modules that are going to be delivered in Denmark. This is regarded as an invaluable opportunity to get closer to the customer and cement the good work done in the meetings that have already taken place in the UK.

Before moving on to consider the more social or inter-personal aspects of the relationship, there are two further issues that key account managers consider important to the successful development of client relationships: flexibility and delivery. In reality, flexibility is part and parcel of being customer-centric, in the sense of making personal adaptations to the customer as and when necessary:-

*“...being flexible as an individual to adapt to different peoples’ styles that you come across.”*  
(Respondent C)

However, flexibility does not mean giving in to the client at all costs and at all opportunities. A reasonable balance must be maintained otherwise a ‘win-win’ situation cannot be achieved. For example, Respondent A talks of a situation where a previous programme leader had made too many concessions to the client over a period of time. Once this happens, it is very difficult to restore any kind of balance in the relationship and a ‘win-lose’ situation ensues. The example discussed earlier of the £500-£600 additional costs for a book that was not factored into the original course budget shows that the new client manager takes a more balanced view of things:-

*“I try to be assertive, but also extremely flexible.”* (Respondent A)

Finally, the notion of delivery is frequently mentioned by respondents. For them, delivery means quite simply doing what you promise to do, when you promise to do it: “it’s non-negotiable” (Respondent A). Again, this fits conveniently with the need to be customer-centric. In just the same way as you wouldn’t expect to leave a message for somebody and not have them come back to you, when the client says he wants something then he or she expects it to be delivered (Respondent C). This normally calls for a rapid response from the client manager and, by and large, this happens:-

*“...the response is always immediate and we get things done.”* (Respondent A)

Respondent B provides the example of feedback that was posted to the Danish client in order to arrive by the date promised. However, ironically, the feedback was handwritten and, thus, practically unintelligible to the Danish students. This could

have been a potentially damaging incident - especially in view of the fact that the relationship with the Danish client is very much in its infancy - but, the situation was rectified quickly. Notwithstanding the initial lack of clear feedback, the client was nonetheless happy that the marks for the student assignments had been received by the deadline promised. Things can obviously be much worse, as in the case when people promise too much and can't deliver. This is particularly true of the situation where a new client manager takes over and has to pick up the pieces from the previous incumbent. A good deal of frustration might be experienced as the individual tries to ease into the job and get up to speed:-

*"...and, then, of course, you're left with the bundle, to pick up and manage and overcome and manage expectations beyond it."* (Respondent C)

### ***The importance of the inter-personal aspects of business relationships***

Respondents generally paint a warm and glowing picture of most of the relationships that they are involved with. From the interviews, it seems clear that this is largely due to aspects of social or *inter-personal contact* with clients. For example, the key decision maker of the Danish client [referred to as A] opted for Nottingham Business School not simply because he was happy to buy into what it had to offer but because he liked the people he met (Respondent B). Respondent B suggests that the key to growing the business is actually through the relationship with A. Equally, as has been mentioned already, both Respondents C and D seemed quickly to strike the right chord in their relationship with J, the key contact from the major financial services provider:-

*"...it was literally outside over a cup of coffee and cigarette."* (Respondent C)

She goes on to suggest that "if she [J] didn't like you, she would not want to work with you" (Respondent C). In a similar vein, Respondent B, in talking about the major public sector organisation that she is involved with, claims that despite the occasional stresses and strains, she enjoys a very good relationship with her key contact: "We do have a laugh and a joke about it" (Respondent B).

In just the same way as in a personal relationship, it seems that, once the initial problem of establishing personal compatibility has been resolved, the relationship can then develop reasonably quickly. So, personal chemistry would appear to play a substantial part in this process. Personal chemistry, however, is a somewhat elusive concept and essentially comes down to a question of personal intuition. Commenting on recent developments with the Danish client, Respondent B suggests that something just felt right about the relationship from the start:-

*“...it was just the feeling that you got. “ (Respondent B)*

However, there is no right to expect to find that personal chemistry from the outset of every relationship: “Sometimes people just don’t hit it off” (Respondent A). For example, Respondent A talks at some length of one particular client contact that she is currently dealing with on one of her programmes. This programme sponsor would appear to be “quite a difficult person to deal with” (Respondent A). Respondent A finds him, by nature, a pessimistic individual and feels that she is going to have to work at the relationship with him over the longer-term:-

*“I think it’s going to take a lot of effort and I don’t think charisma or personality is going to be the answer.” (Respondent A)*

Respondent C argues that the key to successful relationships may be “working hard to establish rapport with people.” It is interesting to note that Respondent A has recently been invited to a dinner that the client organisation hosts for its delegates. Traditionally, this dinner has been ‘closed’ to representatives from the Business School, but Respondent A feels that it is not only an honour to be invited but also recognition that the relationship is starting to develop along the right lines.

It is worth reflecting, too, that this process of determining whether personal chemistry exists between the two parties is probably influenced substantially by the personalities and general approachability of the individuals themselves. Respondent B suggests that the Business School needs to make sure that the right people are put in front of the client. This presumably applies just as much to the client manager as to the lecturers who deliver the modules. Equally, Respondent A admits to being a “very optimistic”

individual, whilst Respondent D claims to enjoy dealing with the “client side” of things. Then, on the client’s side, if you come across people like J - with her positive, ‘can do’ personality, infectious appetite and thirst for action - and A from the Danish client, it is not too difficult to see that any relationship involving these particular individuals might be predisposed to developing more successfully than others.

Once the initial stages of a relationship have been negotiated, and the initial personal intuition and chemistry have done their job, the potential would then appear to exist for trust to be gradually established. It is encouraging to see that, from the small number of interviews conducted, the concept of trust is held to be an important interpersonal facet of relationship development:-

*“...we trust each other for the common positive outcome... trust also in terms of confidentiality, which is non-negotiable...But, I think you’ve got to demonstrate that...”*  
(Respondent A)

Respondent B is convinced that because A [Danish client] felt instinctively that the initial meetings with both her and her colleagues in the Corporate Business Unit had been so positive - and that the relationship he had already built up with Respondent B was strong - that he didn’t really want to see the management of the programme pass to anybody else. Equally, Respondent C talks glowingly of Respondent D and how she was able to turn the fortunes of the in-company management degree around because J [financial services provider] had great respect for Respondent D and was keen to look at ways in which both parties could benefit from the opportunities presented by the in-company degree. Trust may well develop naturally as a relationship builds, but it might also have something to do with the background and experience of the client manager themselves and how this is perceived by the client. Respondent D suggests that whilst corporate clients undoubtedly value the academic expertise of academics, they are keen to build a relationship with someone who can translate academic knowledge in a way that they can interpret and use. Support comes from Respondent C, in forecasting the future potential of the in-company degree:-

*“So, I think you need a... person, really, that has got a private sector mentality with an academic head on his shoulders.”* (Respondent C)

Respondent A attributes her limited success with her “pessimistic” client partly to her commercial background and the fact that she has made it clear in dealings with the client that, whilst she is flexible and sympathetic to the client’s needs, she too has business objectives to meet and has limits beyond which she is not prepared to go. In this way, both parties learn to trust and respect each other. And, as a result, the relationship may become much more satisfying and more intensely personal. For example, as both parties relax in each other’s company, there may eventually be a role for more personal touches such as humour:-

*“I think that comes with time. I don’t think you can really go into a meeting and have that as your criteria to start with... I think it’s something that builds up along the way. And, I think that’s important in terms of... the duration of the relationship.”* (Respondent A)

### **Conclusions and themes for further research**

Having completed the task of making sense of some of the key strategic and operational issues that academic client managers have to contend with in their jobs, it is time to draw some initial conclusions from the study and offer some suggestions as to how the remaining DBA Documents might develop from here. However, before going any further, it is important to declare that, due to both the exploratory nature of this study and the fact that it represents the views and opinions (albeit detailed) of just four key account managers, it is difficult to draw anything other than tentative conclusions at this stage. Equally, it is important to be aware that, in view of the limitations inherent in the study’s research design, as discussed earlier in the relevant sections covering research methodology and research methods, no claims can be made as to the generalisability of all or any of the findings and/or conclusions other than at the level of the Nottingham Business School. Consequently, there exists plenty of scope for replicating this research at other business schools in the UK, irrespective of size and status.

In order to provide both a suitable structure for concluding this paper and an opportunity for seeking closure it is felt appropriate to revisit the original research questions adopted for this study. Broad conclusions and suggestions for further research will be discussed under each original research question:-



- What are the qualities and characteristics that make an effective B2B relationship in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?

As previously discussed, a number of qualities and characteristics are thought likely to have an impact on the successful outcome, or otherwise, of a relationship between a corporate client and business school key account manager. Although previous commercial experience and academic expertise are thought to lend weight and respectability to the client manager's position, it is arguably the social and interpersonal aspects that exert the greater influence on the relationship. For example, the more successful relationships tend to derive from situations where client managers perceive there to be a strong sense of personal chemistry between both parties. Equally, where client managers show flexibility in terms of approach and attitude, a willingness to respond quickly to the client and to deliver on their promises, clients tend to react favourably in terms of letting the relationship develop to the next level.

However, it must be borne in mind that the views expressed in this study are solely those of the client managers. Documents 4 and 5 will need increasingly to canvass the opinions of some of the clients themselves.

- What are the barriers likely to hinder the successful development and management of B2B relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector?

It would appear from this study that there are potentially a great many barriers that could hinder the successful development of a relationship. As previously discussed, some of these barriers are external to a business school and include such things as sudden and unexpected adverse trading conditions experienced by the corporate client, or a more general economic downturn. However, other barriers are more or less self-inflicted. Such barriers might be organisational, in the sense that they might relate to a university attempting to operate like a proper business but still being restricted by traditional academic systems and mechanisms such as validation and assessment procedures and academic year calendars. Equally, however, some barriers derive from inter-personal issues such as allocating the wrong person to manage a particular client

or not identifying poor performing client managers sooner before irreparable damage is caused to a relationship.

However, once again, it must be borne in mind that the views expressed in this study are solely those of the client managers. Documents 4 and 5 will need increasingly to canvass the opinions of some of the clients themselves.

- How can the process of developing and managing B2B relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector be improved?

It is possible to identify a number of areas where improvements can be made by a business school to the way in which relationships are developed into the future. As previously discussed, these range from those that can be dealt with at an institutional level to those within the sole power of the individual. For example, in terms of institutional actions that can be taken, business schools might need to review the number of client managers recruited and/or limit the number of major clients that they have to deal with. In this way, more time can be spent developing the most profitable clients whilst reducing the current stresses and strains that result from a poorly balanced workload. Equally, client managers might adopt a more positive attitude to business development if they are rewarded appropriately. This may either come from enhanced salary levels or some kind of performance-related incentive scheme. Additionally, enhanced client manager motivation and personal effectiveness is likely to accrue from staff development activities that more accurately reflect the demands of the role of client manager. On a more personal level, client managers can seek to become more professional and business-like in their approach to the client and foster a greater honesty and openness in relationship transactions than might currently be the case. Equally, client managers are urged to adopt a more customer-centric approach to the client in order to be better able to respond to the needs of the client.

However, once again, it must be borne in mind that the views expressed in this study are solely those of the client managers. Documents 4 and 5 will need increasingly to canvass the opinions of some of the clients themselves.

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# Appendix

# **Appendix 1: Exploring business school-corporate client relationships: *interview agenda***

**Interviewer: Gary Harden (Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Business School)  
March 2004**

## **Part A**

### **1. Introduction ( or 'icebreaker')**

- Discussion of interviewee's job title
- Role in the organisation
- Typical daily tasks
- Personal input into the relationship between NBS and the corporate client

### **2. Positive 'critical incident'**

- Pick up on issues raised by the positive 'critical incident' feedback supplied in advance by interviewee
- How has the situation progressed since the 'critical incident' identified?
- What specific actions have been taken to build the relationship?

### **3. Negative 'critical incident'**

- Pick up on issues raised by the negative 'critical incident' feedback supplied in advance by interviewee
- How has the situation progressed since the 'critical incident' identified?
- What specific actions have been taken to mend the relationship?

### **4. Critical success factors for a good B2B relationship**

- What factors are considered crucial for building and maintaining an effective B2B relationship?

### **5. Barriers to effective B2B relationships**

- What problems get in the way of effective relationships being developed?

## Part B

### 6. Patterns of dependency

- Is the relationship *independent, co-operative* or *inter-dependent*?
- What about the nature of the power balance in the relationship?
- Do both organisations see the relationship as being strategically important?
- How does the organisation choose which organisations to have a relationship with?

### 7. Evolution over time

- How long has the relationship existed?
- How much time and effort has been expended in maintaining the relationship? (*NB May be impossible to obtain a monetary value!*)
- How is the relationship monitored?

### 8. Adaptation

- What changes (or concessions) have you had to make to the other party in order to keep the relationship alive?
- To what extent has adaptation occurred via *structural bonds* or *social bonds*?

### 9. Inter-personal contact

- Which particular inter-personal aspects of the relationship have been vital in keeping the relationship alive?

## Part C

### 10. Future trends in the relationship

- How will the relationship develop in the future?
- Why will this be the case?



## **Appendix 2: Exploring business school-corporate client relationships: *interview briefing document***

**Interviewer: Gary Harden (Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Business School)  
March 2004**

Thank you for agreeing to help me with my doctoral research.

In order to provide a focus for the forthcoming interview, I would appreciate it if you could spare a little time to complete the following two tasks in advance of our meeting. As you will notice, I am interested in developing the interview discussion around the notion of ‘critical incidents’ that can be remembered in relationships between Nottingham Business School and some of its corporate clients. Wong and Sohal (2003) define a critical incident as ‘*a service encounter between a customer and a contact employee resulting in distinct satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the encounter*’.

I would be grateful if you could e-mail your completed replies to me at [gary.harden@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:gary.harden@ntu.ac.uk) at some stage before we meet.

### **Task 1**

Think of a particular relationship between the Business School and one of its corporate clients for which you are/were responsible. Please describe, in your own words, one ‘critical incident’ (or event) where you felt particularly *satisfied* with the outcome. What was the ‘critical incident’? What was the outcome? What organisational factors (if any) contributed to this positive outcome? What personal or inter-personal factors (if any) contributed to this positive outcome?

*Please insert your comments in this space*

Please turn over...

## **Task 2**

Think of a particular relationship between the Business School and one of its corporate clients for which you are/were responsible. Please describe, in your own words, one 'critical incident' where you felt particularly *dissatisfied* with the outcome. What was the 'critical incident'? What was the outcome? What organisational factors (if any) contributed to this negative outcome? What personal factors (if any) contributed to this negative outcome?

*Please insert your comments in this space*

Thank you for your time.

Gary Harden  
March 2004

### Appendix 3: Interview BS1: 15<sup>th</sup> April 2004

**GH: The first thing I'd like to find out more about is your job, your job title and the kind of things you do on a day-to-day basis.**

BS1: My job title is [job title]. I work in the Corporate Business Unit... a very varied role, actually. It's a real cross-section of things... a sort of anything. (Multiple demands of job role) I do anything from lecturing on organisational change on the (...) module and I do some of the personnel, recruitment and selection, career management and succession planning workshops to client management. There are a couple of organisations: one is an executive programme, which I've taken over from a colleague, which is at the very early stages... although my colleague did a lot of the up-front work. But, because of the relationship - and I don't know whether this is historical or whatever or a clash of personalities - the client actually asked for somebody else to take the programme over (Problems with NBS KAM). I was asked to do that. It is an executive programme... some quite middle to senior managers and directors on that particular programme. It's a 12-15 month programme... and all the client management (Job descriptors). It's an interesting programme because we're trying to build bridges... (Aims of client management) and there are some new players. So, that's very, very interesting from my perspective (Multiple demands of job role). And, there's another programme with the public sector, which is not up and running yet (a ...). That was due to be launched in January, but because we didn't get the numbers (Problems with running programmes) that was postponed and, hopefully, that will go ahead in September. But, I've also been involved with the launch of the [named initiative] ever since I came here 18 months ago and that was everything from running focus groups to getting involved in the launch, which is one week away today, with two heavyweight speakers talking about leadership. We've got a great team (Team ethic), but I've been responsible for co-ordinating things and working with people... everything from flowers to corporate gifts to donations to the speakers' charities to securing the speakers. The brochure was a nightmare, working with various people... but, it has been very interesting. It all comes to fruition next week...

**GH: You mention client management. What percentage of your job is spent on client management?**

BS1: At the moment, I would say that the majority of my time... I would say certainly 40% odd has been spent on this launch and client management (Time spent on client management) - because of building bridges (Job descriptors) - is taking quite a lot of time and I would say that would take another 30% (Time spent on client management) and then the remainder for lecturing (Academic role).

**GH: How do you feel about the amount of time spent on client management? Do you think that 30% is a good use of your time? Or, do you feel you need to spend more time on client management?**

BS1: I think it's a good use of time because that's what the Corporate Business Unit is all about (Importance of client management). I only have that one major client at the moment, but it is a major player... and because it's about executive development and it's an area we're just moving into now. This is quite a new product for us (New developments for Business School), so we need to make it work (Work-related

pressures). It is a good investment in time (**Importance of client management**). I think, once the relationships are up and running, that particular component will take less time than at the moment (**Time spent on client management**).

**GH: You say ‘building bridges’, so it indicates that the client you are dealing with is not new to the Business School. How long has the relationship been there?**

BS1: As far as I know, at least a couple of years... maybe a bit longer. Certainly, I am aware that the client has been working with the Business School for the last couple of years (**Relationship length**).

**GH: Let’s move on to these critical incidents that I asked you to look at... and you’ve whetted my appetite. Can I focus on the positive one first? I was interested that one or two things came up here that I’d like to know a bit more about. You talk about there being ‘supportive behaviour’ between the programme co-ordinator and yourself. What’s this ‘supportive behaviour’? What aspects did you consider to be ‘supportive behaviour’?**

BS1: The fact that we both wanted the same outcome (**Mutuality**). It’s very difficult to be specific about what behaviour because it happens at the time (**Spontaneity of relationship behaviour**), but historically there was an issue with the programme co-ordinator on the client part... The HR Director is the sponsor of this corporate-wide programme, so, it’s very high profile... there were some issues between the programme sponsor and the co-ordinator... and that individual has now been side-lined and somebody else has come on board (**Internal conflict in client organisation**). On the part of the university... and I don’t know whether that is linked in with the programme co-ordinator on the client’s part... with the co-ordinator on our part also there were some differences of opinion or areas of dissatisfaction (**Problems with NBS KAM**)... it could have been interconnected. So, things have not gone particularly right (**Poor relationship history**). So, when I took over the programme, which was only in January, I was still working with the *then* co-ordinator from the client and I’m still working with my colleague in the Business School... and then there were some changes (**Relationship volatility - personnel turnover**) again and the co-ordinator on behalf of the client was changed, so I’m now having to build a new relationship with that individual (**Time spent on client management**). So, we’ve both come into the situation with baggage and aware that things have not been as the programme sponsor wanted them (**Organisational baggage**). The programme sponsor was not very impressed, I guess, with whatever... whether it was us or whether it was them, I’m not sure or combination of both. So, we had to get one another... we were very aware of this situation. Plus, this programme sponsor is quite a difficult person to deal with (**Personal characteristics of client**). And, every module on this programme has a module sponsor which is also a Board Director (**multiple relationships**), so we have to run everything past the programme sponsor and get that person’s approval (**Power balance**). We then have to meet with the module sponsor, who is also a Board Director, and get their input and their OK. So, it’s quite delicate and there’s a lot of dialogue that has to go on (**Multiple relationships - time spent on client management**). And, we want it to work (**Work-related pressure**). This new individual wants the programme to work because he’s new into the role (**Self-interest**). We want it to work, because we want to ferment and grow this relationship so that we get further business from this client (**Work-related pressures**).

So, going into the meeting with the module sponsor, my colleague on the client's part had not met this individual before. I had not met this individual before. They're obviously a senior person... they've got their own views... we went in there... and sometimes, the information we had not discussed beforehand but it was really responding to things on the hoof (**Lack of preparation - spontaneity**). And, sometimes, it did involve a little bit of bluffing on both parts, but it worked because we were both in it to make a success of it (**Mutuality**)... and that was the kind of supportive behaviour (**Positive relationship outcome**).

**GH: So, an almost unwritten understanding between you (**Mutuality**) that you both needed a good outcome? And you both helped each other?**

BS1: Yes, totally.

**GH: You then go on to say 'evidence of good teamwork'...**

BS1: Yes, that was good teamwork (**Team ethic**) and it wasn't something that we discussed beforehand. We knew what we wanted to achieve (**Mutuality - self-interest**). We did say that we both want a good outcome but we didn't specifically discuss that we would do a), b) or c) or take such a tactic, it was just on the spur of the moment (**Spontaneity**). It worked very, very well.

**GH: Was that different from normal? Would you normally expect to talk to somebody before going in and agree a game plan?**

BS1: I think, typically, you would ask the person about the manager, the Director you were going in to see... what were the characteristics, their foibles, what you should be aware of, what you should perhaps be avoiding, what you should be focussing on. So, yeah. The more you know, the better. And, sometimes, it's just as simple as certain themes, certain words that you need to avoid (**Need for preparation**)... or that you need to bring up in the conversation to establish that rapport (**Relationship building techniques**).

**GH: Is that very much a personal thing then that you would need to avoid odd personal foibles of the person you were talking to or would it be the culture of the organisation that you were dealing with, the company-speak as it were?**

BS1: The culture... and that comes from my corporate background and dealing with all levels... senior levels... and knowing what pleases them and what doesn't and what makes the relationship at the end of the day (**Need for preparation - relationship building techniques**).

**GH: You go on to say that it is about ensuring the successful outcome for both parties - so obviously that's your starting point in the sense that you recognise the views of both parties - do you really think that is an important part of the relationship, that there is a successful outcome for both parties?**

BS1: Certainly, if you want money at the end of the day and if you want to continue business (**Mutuality**).

**GH: What's the reality of the situation, though? Do you very often get this mutual outcome?**

BS1: I think you have to work at it, although with some individuals you're never going to crack it because... sometimes people just don't hit it off (**Mutuality - personal characteristics of client - lack of personal chemistry**). But, you make every effort by doing some background, doing some homework, doing some research about the culture of the organisation about the people that you're going to be dealing with so that you go in as prepared as possible (**Need for preparation**).

**GH: Now, this meeting took place fairly recently. How have things progressed since?**

BS1: We are due to run the workshop in a couple of week's time. This particular Director, who is the module sponsor, is coming along... it's a two day module... but they're coming along to the first morning to introduce the programme - which is excellent, because that's great for the organisation and the delegates and it shows that senior people are interested (**Senior management support**)... and the way that the programme is defined, the module sponsor hosts a dinner on the first evening. And, that's going ahead... and that's excellent. And we've agreed that I will provide feedback to... you have to do that as a matter of course anyway to the sponsor but, if necessary, I would phone them. And, also, I think a bit of a success because, whereas previously the dinner is purely for the delegates, I've actually been invited to that dinner by the client co-ordinator, which I think is a bit of a success... a bit of a result (**Sense of personal achievement**).

**GH: In a very short space of time it shows that it is definitely heading in a positive direction.**

BS1: I think, for me, it's very pleasing (**Sense of personal achievement**), because I think it suggests trust (**Trust**)... and because obviously it's confidential... it's the organisation even though it's going to be in a public restaurant, they're going to be talking about particular issues. I know we've signed a confidentiality agreement (**Legal bonds**) - that's part of the process - but, I think to be invited into such an intimate gathering (**Social aspects**), I think it's a good way forward at an early stage in the new regime.

**GH: Now, the negative incident you talk about... presumably that's what came before this positive incident, if I get the situation right? Perhaps you could just explain one or two more things about why the situation was bad... and I notice you using words like 'hidden agenda' and 'previous unsatisfactory history' and these kinds of things. Can you just explain a little bit more about this 'hidden agenda' thing... it's quite intriguing?**

BS1: Right, OK. This was a meeting with the programme sponsor, the HR Director. And this is on the back of, suddenly, in January, I was asked to take over this programme because of the historical factor... dissatisfaction (**Relationship history - problems with NBS KAM**). And, I guess this individual is quite powerful in terms of... well, I don't know whether he actually controls a budget because I think it is cross-charged to the different divisions, but he is the major decision maker in terms of

whether this programme goes ahead or not (**Personal characteristics of client - power balance**). And, ultimately, he's the major decision maker as to whether we get the repeat business... and that's what we want at the end of the day (**Work-related pressures**)... and he was not a happy person. He is, I think, by nature, a pessimistic individual (**Personal characteristics of client**)... and this is a personal view based on my, I suppose, limited exposure but consistent up until now. If the glass is, you know, half full or half empty, it's always going to be half empty. And, this was something actually quoted to me by the previous co-ordinator (**Organisational baggage – negative relationship behaviour**). So, there was a lot of information - actually, quite negative information - both from my colleague at the Business School, who hadn't met him before but who had heard about him (**Baggage - hearsay**), and also from the organisation's representative before we went to meet this individual. This individual was not happy with what had happened previously both within the company and within the Business School. So, my first meeting, was a kind of... right, I've been thrown into this, I've got to meet this individual, I haven't heard great things in terms of striking... you know, this person being an incredibly positive individual to get on with. And, then of course there was the insistence, the person insists always to meet the deliverer of each module (**Added frustrations in relationship - multiple relationships**). And, just to compound matters, the deliverer that day phoned to say that they were not well. So, I go to the meeting... my first meeting with this individual to say, by the way the person you wanted to meet... couldn't make it. So, as far as he was aware, the feedback they got afterwards was a bit of a waste of time because it was all very well, but he wants to meet the individual (**Personal characteristics of client - power balance**). So, we did the best we could to reassure and try and start the relationship off but it was tough going. I'm not sure that... it wasn't a disaster because I did go... because, again, this individual likes to have papers prepared... information... he likes that beforehand and I had responded to that (**Need for preparation**). So, I had done everything within my power, but I could not produce somebody who was ill and in another part of the country... though I failed in that respect. But, it was OK. But, I know from feedback, that he wasn't happy because he didn't get what he wanted out of that meeting (**Power balance**). The subsequent meeting went a lot better... and, this is not a person who says things just for the sake of it, but comments like: 'Nice to see you again' shocked me greatly (**Relationship building techniques - social aspects**). And, I'd like to think that he did really want to say that. And, as long as we keep... it's very, very evident that we have to keep this individual happy (**Personal characteristics of client**)... so, the fact is that that meeting didn't go swimmingly or as I would have liked it... but, subsequently, if I need to correspond with this individual I do so immediately (**Rapid response**). And, because they're not located too far away, I even sometimes go and hand deliver things at reception to make sure that they get there (**Relationship building techniques**). I am keen to build up this relationship because, politically, it's a very nice thing to do (**Work-related pressures**). It's early days...

**GH: That sounds interesting. I think there's a lot of frustration coming out in what you say about the previous client programme co-ordinator being unwilling to challenge or take any risks about comments made by the programme sponsor... why was that? Was it just the individual?**

BS1: I don't know... it could be baggage... it could be history, but it was very much trying to please this individual (**Need to please senior management**). I think this

individual has now been side-lined and, looking back now, I think they were in a situation where they were quite afraid, scared... maybe bullied, I don't know (**Internal conflict in client organisation**). Well, when people are in that situation they're not going to put their head above the parapet (**Self-interest**) because, dealing with this new co-ordinator, it was an entirely different thing (**Positive feelings**). They do challenge, but they do so in a positive... you can challenge in a positive way (**Personal characteristics of client - relationship building techniques**). And, I think that the programme sponsor does want to be challenged, but the other person was very much a 'Yes' person and anything to please. I think they were so afraid... obviously because of things that had happened in the past... and, I don't have all the information as to what happened there, but that had an incredible effect on my first meeting with him... it was an interesting time (**Personal challenge**).

**GH: It also sounds like it was difficult to set the meeting up anyway, with cancellations and changes? Is that a regular occurrence that you're up against? Is that just the practical realities of dealing with the business clients?**

BS1: It's always going to happen because that's life, that's business. But, with this individual, you're never sure whether something's going to go ahead (**Added frustrations**). And, again, we were trying to be flexible by saying: 'Look this deliverer is ill... they cannot travel... would you be prepared to have a telephone conversation?' And, on two occasions, this programme sponsor said: 'Yes' and on two occasions they cancelled at the last minute (**Personal characteristics of client**). And, finally, we did manage to get the two together... and, I was there as well. Yes, this was part of the frustration.

**GH: Why do you think there is the problem of cancellations and being messed around? Is it because business is like that or is it a power game, perhaps? Is there some kind of politicking going on with those cancellations?**

BS1: I couldn't say the latter for sure, but possibly, I don't know. But, in business, the reality is that things do crop up (**Practical realities of business**)... and the more senior the individual is the more their time is. It wasn't particularly helpful.

**GH: Do you think it's a kind of power balance thing... you know, where two organisations come together there may well be one organisation that holds the cards, if you like... that is the stronger partner?**

BS1: It can be, but I don't think I could comment at this particular stage on this particular point. But, in this situation, they hold the keys in many respects because the previous programme was run by another Business School (**Power balance**). For one reason or another they changed their programme to come to Nottingham Business School and we're very, very keen to develop that business (**Work-related pressure**) because of the product portfolio... and the client (**Prestige**). And, I think, my predecessor bent over backwards sometimes particularly in terms of budgets and did things that I've changed (**Flexibility**) because I am aware that, from my experience of being on the other side as a purchaser, you don't get these things (**Unfair demands by client**). And, really, we are giving more than we need to (**Win-lose?**). And, some examples of that were that the client... and again this is down to the co-ordinator, I think... would always get the Business School to arrange things like hotels... not just



to book the hotel and rooms, but rather than the delegates going through their business administration, they would be using us (**Unfair demands by client**). And, there wasn't a charge being made for this. If we're going to be truly commercial, when we do additional admin we charge for that (**Need for transparency**). And, one incident, again, recently with a module running in a couple of week's time, the deliverer wanted a book for the two days which wasn't mentioned in original conversations with my predecessor... and it would have meant an additional five to six hundred pounds. My predecessor, who I went back to, ummed and aahed and said: 'Well, we could pay for it.' (**Flexibility**) 'Yes, but it's not been factored in but our options are a) we say that yes you can have this book but you will have to pay extra and it's going to be £500-£600 or we pay for it.' And, I did go back and decided that: 'The ball is in your court. The deliverer is saying that the book would be useful but it's going to cost £500-£600 extra. This wasn't originally factored into the total. What would you like to do? It's going to cost you £500-£600.' (**Transparency - relationship building techniques**) And, they've actually come back and said: 'Yes, we'll pay for it.' This is perhaps because my background is a truly commercial background (**Personal characteristics of NBS KAM**)...

**GH: So you feel that the criticism of the previous incumbent in the job was perhaps that they didn't have the commercial background and perhaps giving away too many things?**

BS1: I wouldn't say a 'criticism', I think, because there was a real keenness to grow this business and to get this business... I think was too much flexibility (**Flexibility**)... and, I think almost once you start that it's very hard to then go back (**Flexibility**). If you get someone new coming in, I think it's a lot easier. I wouldn't criticise because they've done all the work.

**GH: But, you would feel that making concessions is a very important part of the relationship?**

BS1: What do you mean by that?

**GH: Offering extra things to another party.**

BS1: I'm not clear what you mean by that?

**GH: Well, you were talking about the book obviously for £500-£600... that's a very big concession to make towards keeping the relationship going, but obviously it seemed to me that you weren't against making concessions of one kind or another in order to keep the relationship going?**

BS1: Yes... I wouldn't be against it but there is a limit (**Flexibility**)... and, I think, for me, because they have not behaved perfectly (**Transparency**). I think there's a limit to what you go to. It's alright if... you can't just keep taking even in a business relationship... it's going to be a two-way thing (**Mutuality**). And, enough is enough... we've got to make profits at the end of the day (**Work-related pressures**).

**GH: Now, have you actually said that, in so many words, to them or just indicated by your approach that you're a fairly assertive individual?**

BS1: I try to be assertive, but also extremely flexible (**Personal characteristics of NBS KAM - flexibility**)... and very client-centred (**Relationship building techniques**), but the response is always immediate and we get things done (**Rapid response**). If you need to do something, you get it done... you respond quickly, so that way, hopefully, they come to trust (**Trust**) you etc... and they know that, if you're going to come back to them and say: 'Look. £500 or £600 extra'... it's because you know you have checked everything.

**GH: Now, these two critical incidents that you've talked about, how many people were present, just to clarify this? Was it just two people or...?**

BS1: Right. The positive one, there were three of us. The negative one, there were three of us initially, then four of us when we finally got the deliverer there.

**GH: Do you find bigger numbers of people get in the way of forging a good relationship with the person that you do most business with? Or, do you feel there is safety in numbers?**

BS1: I don't feel anything about... it just depends whether the right people are there. It doesn't matter if that's one person or several people (**Number of people present**). With the positive... with three of us, it was no problem at all because the right people were there... the module sponsor, the co-ordinator and myself. And, equally, I think, with the other meeting - although it didn't turn out as well - the right people were there (**Number of people present**). I've got no... as long as the right people are there, I don't think it's an issue in terms of numbers (**Number of people present**).

**GH: How do you keep the contact going? Is it mostly by phone or is it by e-mail? Or, do you get a chance to do person-to-person?**

BS1: Mostly, in between, we do meet regularly (**Relationship building techniques**) with the co-ordinator, but in between times it would either be phone or e-mail (**Frequency/method of contact**). So, I will speak to them... I'll be in contact with them every single week.

**GH: So, you feel that's an important part of establishing a relationship and maintaining it, just to keep the contact going?**

BS1: Yes.

**GH: Right. I think that's probably as far as the two critical incidents are concerned, so I'd like to move on and just broaden the discussion, if I may... keeping an eye on the time obviously. I think I've got a lot of good feelings here about what you think is important for building good relationships. I just wonder whether you could actually clarify a few issues that you think are important in building a relationship... well, critical success factors, almost, in a good relationship?**

BS1: Delivery... rapport... humour... and value-for-money, so that your client feels they are getting value-for-money... trust...

**GH: You say ‘humour’... I’m interested in moving into that for the moment and expanding on that one. I like humour... I think it’s great and works very well, but I’ve run up against one or two situations where it’s not gone down very well... it has a negative effect to the one I desired. What are your feelings on that?**

BS1: I think that comes with time. I don’t think you can really go into a meeting and have that as your criteria to start with... it’s going to be a humorous meeting because it won’t be... and, I think it’s something that builds up along the way (**Role of humour**). And, I think that’s important in terms of... the duration of the relationship (**Role of humour**)... if you could get that at some point, you know that it’s...

**GH: When you feel both parties know each other... properly?**

BS1: ...you do establish a common language (**Personal chemistry**), a common critical incident (**Mutuality**) that you’ve gone through yourselves...

**GH: So, there’s humour between you and the programme co-ordinator then?**

BS1: And, actually, the module sponsors...

**GH: ...the ‘half glass empty’?**

BS1: No, no. The programme sponsor, I’m not sure yet... it’s early days. There are hints but I would not care at this stage to know whether they are genuine or sarcastic.

**GH: You mention ‘delivery’ as well. What do you mean by ‘delivery’?**

BS1: If you say you’re going to do something, you do it. Absolutely crucial... it’s non-negotiable (**Keeping promises**).

**GH: That’s not just from your side presumably? You expect the other party to deliver as well?**

BS1: Very much so (**Mutuality - transparency**).

**GH: OK. You talk about ‘trust’ and ‘commitment’. What’s your interpretation of the word ‘trust’?**

BS1: Well, trust... I think I’ve demonstrated in the positive critical incident, we trust each other for the common positive outcome... trust also in terms of confidentiality (**Trust**), which is non-negotiable. That’s almost unsaid. But, I think you’ve got to demonstrate that (**Relationship building techniques - transparency**)... and, even if you think some of the practices are dreadful, you keep those to yourself... and you perhaps share them with a colleague here at the Business School? You DON’T! (**Discretion**) And, that’s the way that you establish - one of the aspects of establishing trust - that you almost have this... and, it may not be genuine... respect for the company, the organisation (**Discretion**)...

**GH: But, it’s seen to be, for the purposes of the relationship?**

BS1: And, that's almost kind of like not really 'trust' (**Trust**)... but it is trust as far as the relationship is concerned. They know that you're not going to rubbish their company... they will probably sue you anyway! (**Legal bonds**) Yeah... but, I think being invited to the dinner, for example, that for me demonstrates a great deal of trust (**Trust**)... trust in me in terms of delivering and what I mean to deliver, but trust in terms of perhaps some of the discussions that are going to occur (**Discretion**).

**GH: Well, all these things obviously are very important to a relationship, but there are times when the relationship doesn't work out. So, what are the barriers then that get in the way of these wonderful relationships developing? You say that 'trust' should be there, 'commitment' should be there, 'good delivery'... what practically does get in the way?**

BS1: Personal agendas... personal agendas (**Baggage**). If somebody wants something, it might not be the best thing for the organisation but, because they have got some kind of personal goal - the results of which will benefit them individually - they may not take risks or opt for the best thing that's going to develop the delegate, they will go maybe sometimes for the safest things because they're either afraid or (**Self-interest**)...

**GH: Personal agendas... it's obviously a very personal thing. Are there times when the organisation gets in the way and frustrates the development of a good relationship?**

BS1: I don't quite know what you mean by that?

**GH: Are there organisational barriers like... demands on the organisation in terms of extra money... you mentioned the £500-£600 pounds earlier on for the book... are there difficulties in communication between the two organisations... any sort of organisational barrier that gets in the way... anything that's not personal?**

BS1: Well, it is kind of linked to personal but again we have to get the content agreed by the programme sponsor... and one example was for one workshop we wanted to use a couple of case studies... and because the programme sponsor had been at a previous conference where there had been a speaker talking about [case study organisation] and it had not gone down well... and he said: 'No! I don't want anything to do with [named industry]'. So, that was a barrier (**Barriers - personal characteristics of client**) because it was actually probably a very good illustration... and very topical... but, no. Or, anything that's not seen as a success (**Barrier**)... that's the barrier.

**GH: I would have thought that in looking at negative things you can learn a lot more?**

BS1: Indeed.

**GH: But, again, you say this is quite closely linked to personal agendas?**

BS1: I can't think of... maybe it's too early in this particular relationship.

**GH: In terms of communication, is it easy to communicate with the people that you need to talk to or do you have to go through different people before you get access?**

BS1: The previous co-ordinator was a real control freak (**Personal characteristics of client**)... even so much as joining instructions had to be checked by this individual and commented on... and altered... the slightest little thing... talk about trust (**Trust**)! And, real control there... and that got in the way certainly (**Barriers**). That caused delays. And, getting in touch directly... sometimes I'm not aware... can I get in touch directly with this programme sponsor? Should I? Or do I need to check with you now? The new person is much more relaxed... you know, it's early days and we're still building that up... I wouldn't be afraid about if I wanted to send an e-mail directly, I think I would... whereas before I wouldn't because... and, there is an organisational barrier in terms of getting hold of the programme sponsor would be very difficult and it's probably done via the co-ordinator (**Barriers**)... I know my routine... I've always been told what my routine is... it is a fascinating organisation!

**GH: I'm getting the distinct feeling here that the inter-personal contact is a very big issue not just for you but obviously for the way this relationship is working? Is that fair to say of most relationships?**

BS1: Yes, totally. That's what makes or breaks relationships (**Social aspects**)... makes or breaks any good relationship... at the end of the day.

**GH: So, it wouldn't matter how strong the financial incentives on either side were, at the end of the day it comes down to personal contact?**

BS1: It might be an initial thing... that might be the criteria by which a decision is made (**Financial criteria**), but that won't necessarily make a good deal in its entirety, because the business that we're in, they buy a service... you can't just sign a... well they do sign a contract (**Legal bonds**), but you have to continuously work with these people to develop every single module over the 12-15 months (**Importance of client management**). So, I think it's... I think the stakes are raised because of that... and it makes the relationship actually more important. So, the deal might have been done because the place... and the price was right... and, I'm sure those were the factors, but in terms of continued business... I think the relationship is the deciding factor (**Importance of client management**).

**GH: At the end of the day, you say delivery is very important... and you won't get the delivery without the people showing the right kind of motivation and commitment?**

BS1: And, the dialogue and conversation that you have is important because that helps you to actually tweak things... and to make sure that what you're designing and delivering... and the liaison with the deliverers (**Multiple relationships**) is absolutely what is required...

**GH: Can I just go back a moment and think about how the Business School finished up doing business with this particular corporate client. Did it just**

**happen or was there some strategic decision taken that it would be good to do business with this particular company?**

BS1: I don't know that... it's before my time... I've only been here for eighteen months.

**GH: Could you answer anything about how the Business School goes about choosing its portfolio of clients? Does it have a strategy... does it have a definite strategy for choosing its corporate clients or does it just take business from where it can get it?**

BS1: It does have a strategy, but I'm not sure in business if you ever choose **Relationship strategy**). I think when you are exceeding targets and when you perhaps reach saturation point then maybe you choose. But, as long as the services that you are providing are part of your strategy and, unless a client is really bad news, I don't think choice comes into it (**Relationship strategy**).

**GH: I was just wondering because I've been reading a lot about portfolio management and the fact that you'll probably finish up with some clients that you don't want to do business with really, but because you've got no extra clients to work with you've got to keep going with those. I just wonder whether the Business School were in such a position that it had a large number of clients in the portfolio that it could pick and choose, and would seek actively to move away from some parties and encourage others, so there was an active portfolio management going on...?**

BS1: I think there is some portfolio management... I don't think at this stage... the Corporate Business Unit would turn anybody down (**Relationship strategy - portfolio management**)... so, again, the relationships are managed... every organisation has a dedicated client manager (**Relationship building techniques**)... and at this stage it wouldn't turn any business down, but it would be very clear about the products and services... there's a clear strategy about that, about what we offer, what we're good at, what we're not (**Relationship strategy**)...

**GH: So, would it be fair to say that it's revenue then that is motivating most of the relationships as opposed to any other kind of strategic consideration?**

BS1: That's a very interesting question because... and I don't know how to answer that because... the Corporate Business Unit has academics who are client managers, who are excellent in their areas of expertise but, from my observations, really don't have a clue about the commercial world... or even don't know what the margins on some of their clients are (**Problems with NBS KAM**)... so, I can't answer that question.

**GH: Well, maybe I'll come back to this in a year or so's time when I've done further work on this because my initial feeling is... it's similar to you that there are some people there who don't manage the portfolio in as business-like a way as they could do... this is what the literature is suggesting as well... it might be time to step back from this and look at different ways of managing the portfolio of clients?**

BS1: I think some are very... have got a long and successful relationship... and they do have dialogue and they talk to the client etc. but I'm not sure they're actually client managing, because client management is all about getting to the top people not just your training manager (**Problems of defining client management**), creating a good impression, delivering and also finding out what's happening with their business... and then trying to get further business as a result of that... and, I'm not convinced that happens (**Problems of NBS KAM**). And, I may be speaking out of turn, but I'm not... and, even questions that I've asked: 'Well, what's the margin on this programme?'... I've not been able to get that answer directly, whereas... and even so much as the book incident... and I got a response to that: 'Well, I've done some calculations and this is what I believe is our profit on it and we could actually afford to pay for that'. But, that's not business... it's not factored in. You wouldn't find Warwick doing that... and you certainly wouldn't find Cranfield... working this way (**Problems of NBS KAM**). And, I've been a purchaser... I know! I know they don't work that way (**Personal characteristics**).

**GH: Well, I must come back to this. It's a fascinating subject. In two Document's time I will, I think. I've started to become absorbed with this. And, like you, I've been in business as well... I can see both sides of the fence. OK. Let's just try and bring things to a close because time is almost up. This relationship that you're in then with your executive client... how do you see it developing into the future?**

BS1: I'm very optimistic (**Personal characteristics**) that I will build up a good relationship... certainly with the co-ordinator... it's going very positively. So far, I've worked with two of the module sponsors, which are Directors on the Board... that's been absolutely fine. I need to concentrate my efforts on the programme sponsor... and this individual is very hard to get... you know, I think it's going to take a lot of effort and I don't think charisma or personality is going to be the answer (**Personal characteristics of client**). I think delivery and satisfaction at the end of the day are what makes... is really what is going to 'satisfy' this individual. And, I don't think we're going to know that until really towards the end of the programme... and that's down to the feedback of the delegates (**Multiple relationships**), because it's what they say to their people which will then get perhaps talked about at the senior board level (**Senior management support**).

**GH: So, as you go up in the organisation, people become then more outcome-obsessed rather than the nice, personal... inter-personal communication?**

BS1: No. Not entirely. I think that's a large part... and that should be part of every business otherwise why are you spending x thousands of pounds on the programme (**Importance of outcomes**). You have to think about the outcomes. But, actually, I think it's linked into the individual... but, it's with most people... and my experience even of this organisation with the senior people (apart from the programme sponsor) has been that you can build your relationship (**Relationship building techniques**). This individual, for whatever reason, is a tougher nut to crack... maybe because they are the programme sponsor they need to have a success... and maybe they've got things going on as to why they won't take any risks... and maybe bless every single module...

**GH: We're back to personal agendas again, aren't we?**

BS1: You can't get away from it at that level.

**GH: Well, thanks very much for spending the time to talk to me. It's been a wonderful insight into what goes on. I think I know a bit more now about what's happening in this long relationship.**

BS1: Thank you.



## **Appendix 4: Initial themes emerging from transcripts**

Multiple demands of job role

Academic role

Job descriptors

Client management

Problems of defining client management

Aims of client management

Importance of client management

Time spent on client management

Need for preparation/lack of preparation

Work-related pressures (NBS demands)

Internal QA procedures (validation)

New developments for NBS

NBS relationship strategy

Portfolio management

Importance of outcomes

Financial criteria

Prestige (reputation)

Problems with running programmes/barriers

Problems with NBS KAM

Multiple relationships

Number of people present in meetings

Relationship volatility (personnel turnover)

Poor relationship history (baggage/hidden agendas/hearsay)

Internal conflict in client organisation

Legal bonds

Power balance

Unfair demands by client

Team ethic (both internal and external)

Added frustrations

Practical realities of business

Relationship length

Mutuality

Win-win (or win-lose?)

Positive relationship behaviour

Senior management support

Negative relationship behaviour

Relationship building techniques

Trust

Discretion

Frequency/method of contact

Need for transparency

Offering VFM

Social aspects

Personal chemistry

Rapport

Personal characteristics of client

Need to please senior managers

Self-interest

Personal characteristics of NBS KAM

Flexibility

Rapid response

Delivery (keeping promises)

Humour

Sense of personal achievement

Personal challenge

Resourcing issues

Incentives

Personal development issues

Language/cultural barriers

Factors relating to organisation size

Close bonds

Personal intuition

Spotting key decision makers

Personality

Experience

Being customer-centric

Understanding customer needs

Listening

Proactive

Organisational systems

## **Appendix 5: Grouping/recoding of initial themes**

### **Multiple demands of job role**

Academic role

Internal QA (validation)

Job descriptors

Client management

- Problems of defining client management
- Aims of client management
- Importance of client management
- Time spent on client management

Work-related pressures (NBS demands)

### **NBS strategic and operational issues**

New developments for NBS

NBS relationship strategy

Portfolio management

Prestige (reputation)

Importance of outcomes

Financial criteria

Resourcing

Incentives

Personal development issues

### **Problems with running programmes/barriers**

Problems with NBS KAM

Multiple relationships

Number of people present in meetings

Relationship volatility (personnel turnover)

Poor relationship history (baggage/hidden agendas/hearsay)

Internal conflict in client organisation

Organisational systems

Legal bonds

Added frustrations

Practical realities of business

- Language/cultural barriers

### **Relationship characteristics**

Relationship length

Mutuality

- Win-win (or win-lose?)
- Team ethic (internal and external)

Positive relationship behaviour

Negative relationship behaviour

Power balance

- Unfair demands by client
- Factors relating to organisation size

Senior management support

- Need to please senior managers
- Spotting key decision maker(s)

### **Relationship building techniques**

Trust

- Discretion

Frequency/method of contact

Need for preparation/lack of preparation

Need for transparency

Offering VFM

Social aspects

- Personal chemistry
- Personal intuition
- Rapport
- Close bonds
- Personal characteristics of client
- Self-interest
- Personal characteristics of NBS KAM
- Humour
- Personality
- Experience
- Sense of personal achievement
- Personal challenge

Flexibility

Rapid response

Delivery (keeping promises)

Being customer-centric

Understanding customer needs

Listening

Proactive

## Appendix 6: Example of notes for writing up

### Building techniques

#### *Need for preparation*

... and sometimes, the information we had not discussed beforehand but it was really responding to things on the hoof (BS1)

The more you know, the better. And, sometimes, it's just as simple as certain themes, certain words that you need to avoid (BS1)

knowing what pleases them and what doesn't and what makes the relationship at the end of the day (BS1)

But, you make every effort by doing some background, doing some homework, doing some research about the culture of the organisation about the people that you're going to be dealing with so that you go in as prepared as possible (BS1)

to come along and have a look at the [company name] premises and get a feel for what his organisation was all about (BS2)

and we do spend a lot of time and effort on finding out where their business is going (BS2)

#### *Transparency*

'The ball is in your court. The deliverer is saying that the book would be useful but it's going to cost £500-£600 extra. This wasn't originally factored into the total. What would you like to do? It's going to cost you £500-£600.' (BS1)

and getting the interest in the programme because, if you get that up-front and do it in a way where they understand exactly what they're buying into, the rest will fall into place (BS3)

it was when companies had been rushed into the programme without them really understanding what they were buying into (BS3)

because, at the end of the day, that's the complexity of it... you've got students that you've recruited into a programme and you make sure up-front that they know that there's no guarantee they'll ever be placed (BS3)

#### *Flexibility*

I think was too much flexibility (**Flexibility**)... and, I think almost once you start that it's very hard to then go back (BS1)

I think, for me, because they have not behaved perfectly (BS1)

and being flexible as an individual to be able to adapt to different peoples' styles that you come across (BS3)

I try to be assertive, but also extremely flexible (BS1)

### *Client-centric*

and very client-centred (BS1)

They do have a current relationship with [named university], who deliver an MBA for them, and part of the problem with that is the fact that they are not particularly corporate-orientated (BS2)

The social aspects and, I think, also the view that they are the client and they do want to be looked after... and they don't want to be treated just like a normal student (BS2)

because it is a very precise, specific type of qualification and is devised specifically to meet the [company name] requirements (BS2)

and the amount of time and effort we spent talking to... trying to identify what their needs were and putting that into a package that met their specific needs (BS2)

A is one of those who comes over to the UK and does expect to be treated properly (**Understanding customer needs**)... and, he wouldn't expect to be put in the Travel Inn, he'd expect to be put in Hart's (BS2)

and part of that client relationship is managing their expectations (BS2)

know something about that client's business (BS2)

doing a review of what they think is good and why and what they think can be improved... and why and how (BS3)

It's more of a proactive role in terms of developing positive relationships up-front (BS3)

it was when companies had been rushed into the programme without them really understanding what they were buying into (BS3)

I think it's definitely listening to the client (BS3)

I think a good relationship will be 80% listening and 20% talking, to really get to grips with what they want and why they want it... so that you can respond and not be a talker (BS3)

By listening to the client you can pick up on so much (BS3)



### ***Rapid response***

the response is always immediate and we get things done (BS1)

### ***Delivery***

If you say you're going to do something, you do it. Absolutely crucial... it's non-negotiable (BS1)

As promised, the feedback was posted through, all the assignments went back and they received them on Friday... fantastic, everything's on time (BS2)

and he was happy that he'd had marks in advance (BS2)

and making sure that you do deliver what you say you're going to deliver (BS2)

'At the end of the day, I'm a client... and, if I say I want something, I expect you to meet and deliver it (BS3)

and, I don't expect to leave a message and not have somebody come back to me,' (BS3)

because they are messing us about with their interview dates for this current year (BS3)

You do get people promising things that they don't realise sometimes what they're promising... and, then, of course, you're left with the bundle, to pick it up and manage and overcome and manage expectations beyond it (BS3)

### ***Trust***

we trust each other for the common positive outcome... trust also in terms of confidentiality (**Trust**), which is non-negotiable. That's almost unsaid. But, I think you've got to demonstrate that (**Relationship building techniques - transparency**)... and, even if you think some of the practices are dreadful, you keep those to yourself... and you perhaps share them with a colleague here at the Business School? You DON'T! (**Discretion**) (BS1)

but trust in terms of perhaps some of the discussions that are going to occur (**Discretion**). (BS1)

but, from A's point of view, he didn't want it to pass on to anybody else because of the relationship that has already been built up (BS2)

It would be very difficult to go out there and just recruit a sales person... yes, they could go and make contact with organisations but they would only be able to go so far because of the nature of management development. It needs a lot more in-depth conversation... and, I think, that doesn't... that grows, builds as a result of the

relationships that you've managed... out of the experience of dealing with certain clients (BS2)

J had respect for R (BS3)

### ***Organisational structure***

the relationships are managed... every organisation has a dedicated client manager (BS1)

### ***Proactive***

the relationship had worked particularly well to identify what the potential problems might be (BS2)

from a Corporate Business Unit perspective... that was a critical moment when C realised that this person wasn't going to be involved in this particular programme, because if he was... he was going to jeopardise it. So, that situation had to be dealt with (**Proactive - rapid response**)... and, that was dealt with after the meeting... no, they wouldn't be going to Denmark... (BS2)

we're doing a review of the whole programme... every stakeholder that's involved in the programme (BS3)

But, the longer-term issue is that you've still got to focus on those students having a positive experience (BS3)

your subject specialist could be brought in as well to influence the design and the outcome of the programme (BS3)

it's almost like brushed under the carpet and forgotten (BS3)

### ***Incentives***

and maybe there needs to be more incentivisation in terms of growing the business (BS2)

If you could argue that we should be involved more, then it needs to be acknowledged that that takes time and some time needs to be set aside out of your annual hours to say that's what we would be doing (BS3)

there is nothing in my rewards package to incentivise me to - as C wants me to - to get two or three cohorts of [named degree] students (BS3)

anybody who is a good seller is not going to come and work for the levels of salary we offer (BS3)

**Document 4: Structured and survey-based research**

***‘Business relationships under the microscope: the investigation continues...’***

**Further exploration of the dynamics of business relationship management in the UK higher education postgraduate sector**

*by*

**Gary Richard Harden**

*In part-fulfilment of the  
Doctorate in Business Administration  
(2002/2005 cohort)*

**Nottingham Business School  
The Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

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## Document 4: Structured and survey-based research

# *‘Business relationships under the microscope: the investigation continues...’*

Further exploration of the dynamics of business relationship management in the UK higher education postgraduate sector

### **Introduction**

Document 3 was essentially concerned with *beginning* the task of making sense of some of the key strategic and operational issues with which academic client managers (the ‘key account managers’) have to contend as part of their working day. Although the outcomes of the initial exploratory study were necessarily tentative and in no way generalisable - representing the views and opinions of just four key account managers from a single higher education provider - they have nevertheless proven extremely useful in generating ideas as to how the research in the current study (Document 4) can be developed.

The conclusions from Document 3 broadly suggested that a number of qualities and characteristics were thought likely to have a significant impact on the successful outcome, or otherwise, of a relationship between a corporate client and a business school key account manager. For example, previous commercial experience and academic expertise were thought to lend significant weight and respectability to the key account manager’s position. However, respondents were also keen to stress the importance of the social and inter-personal aspects of the relationship. For example, the more successful relationships tended to derive from situations where client managers perceived there to be a strong sense of personal chemistry between themselves and the client contact. Equally, where key account managers perceived



themselves to be operating flexibly, adopting a positive attitude towards the relationship, a willingness to respond quickly to the client and to deliver on their promises, clients tended to react favourably and exhibited a greater level of commitment to the relationship.

Nevertheless, despite the many instances of personal commitment to the relationship on a social level, key account managers identified a number of potential barriers that could hinder the successful development of a relationship. In brief, many of these barriers are *external* to a business school and include such things as sudden and unexpected adverse trading conditions experienced by the corporate client or a more general economic downturn. However, other barriers are more or less self-inflicted. For example, although a university might consider itself to be operating just like any normal commercial entity, it is nevertheless constrained by traditional academic systems and procedures (such as validation and assessment policies) and the length and nature of both the academic working day and academic year. In such circumstances, there is more than likely to be a mismatch between the time the client ideally wishes to begin a programme of study and when the business school is able either to provide sufficient staff cover or to have concluded the necessary internal and external validation procedures. Other problems derive from, for example, allocating the wrong person to manage a particular client or even not identifying poor performing key account managers sooner before irreparable damage is done to the relationship.

In terms of casting an eye to the future, it is possible to identify a number of key areas where improvements can be made by a business school to the way in which it maintains and builds its relationships with corporate clients. These range from changes that can be made at an institutional level to those that are solely in the power of the individual key account manager. For example, in terms of institutional actions, business schools could look to review the number of client managers recruited and/or limit the number of major clients that each one has to deal with. In this way, more time can be spent developing the more profitable clients whilst reducing the current stresses and strains that result from an unevenly balanced workload. Equally, client managers might be more willing to adopt a positive attitude to developing business relationships if they were rewarded appropriately. This may come from either

enhanced salary levels or some kind of performance-related incentive scheme. Greater key account manager motivation and personal effectiveness may also accrue from staff development activities that are more closely targeted at enabling individuals to manage their business relationships more effectively.

Finally, on a more personal level, the research in Document 3 suggested that key account managers needed to become more professional and business-like in their approach to the client and foster a greater honesty and openness in relationship transactions than might currently be the case. Instrumental in this process is the need to adopt a more customer-centric approach to corporate clients in order to be better able to respond to the needs of individual customers.

The above tentative conclusions from Document 3 have helped to shape the research questions for this particular study. These will now be considered in more detail.

### **Research questions for the current study**

In the light of the above discussion, the research questions for Document 4 have been modified as follows:-

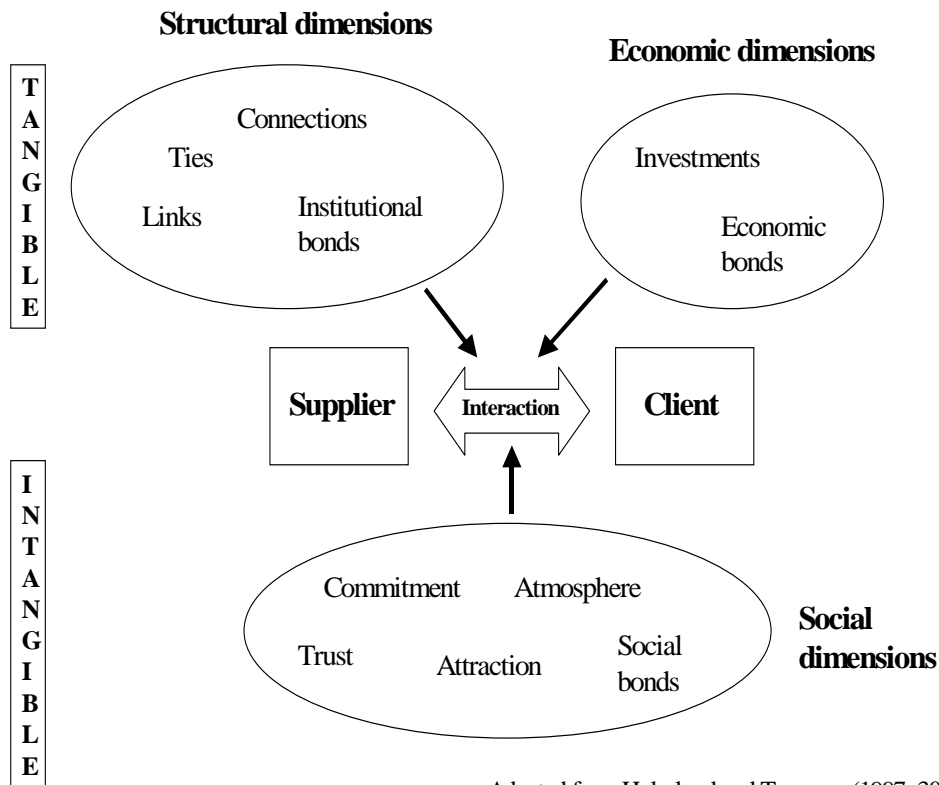
- Which particular aspects of the relationship do UK business school 'key account managers' and their corporate clients consider important?
- How far do current relationships meet/exceed the expectations of both parties?
- How can future relationships in a UK higher education context best be managed?

It will be noted that the above research questions are not significantly different from those in Document 3. The main reason for this is that the research in Document 4 is not necessarily intended to break new ground. Rather, as part of an evolving programme, it represents an opportunity to roll out the investigation to other business schools in order to determine the extent to which the views and opinions expressed by

the individuals interviewed in Document 3 are replicated by other key account managers. Equally, the intention is to canvass the views and opinions of some of the corporate clients themselves - something that failed to materialise in Document 3.

Finally, given the evolutionary nature of the research across the entire DBA process, it is also felt appropriate to revisit the conceptual framework originally outlined in Document 2. This will serve to reinforce the intended focus in Document 4 on the social dimensions of business relationships in the higher education postgraduate sector. The conceptual framework can be seen in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Initial conceptual framework**



Adapted from Holmlund and Tornroos (1997: 307)

As previously discussed, the overarching approach being taken by the researcher represents a welcome opportunity to undertake a much-needed analysis of the subjective or ‘softer’ side of business-to-business (B2B) relationships. This is

considered inevitable if the element of personal interaction is viewed, as it is in the marketing literature, as fundamental to the whole process of relationship development:-

*“A relationship must ultimately depend on the interaction of the individuals who participate.”* (Campbell, 1996: 54)

As can be seen from the conceptual framework, the issues under investigation are the ‘softer’ ones such as trust and commitment and the many factors that govern the general atmosphere of the relationship, not least of which are the degree of attractiveness felt by both parties and the social bonds themselves. As organisations become increasingly serious about relationship marketing (RM), this suggests that they should be prepared to evaluate *all* investments made into building successful relationships. Such investments include the many ‘social’ costs incurred. Indeed, these ‘social’ costs may well outweigh the financial ones (Blois, 1998).

The following section goes on to consider the methodological approach adopted for the research in Document 4 and the philosophical and practical implications generated by this choice.

### **Research methodology**

Two broad methodological approaches dominate the research literature: positivism and interpretivism (or phenomenology). Although both approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Saunders *et al*, 2000), they nevertheless have a significant impact on the way the researcher approaches a given project. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1991) suggest three reasons why an understanding of research methodology is useful: first, choice of research philosophy helps to determine the overall research design. For example, both the identification of the initial research problem and the wording of the subsequent research questions are noticeably different in nature and tone between the philosophical stances. Second, knowledge of research philosophy will also help the researcher recognise which research design will be likely to work and which will not. For example, a series of highly structured experiments will be more likely to reveal causal links between a set of variables than a small number of unstructured depth

interviews. Finally, the researcher can identify research designs that may be outside of his/her experience. These can then be adapted to the constraints of the particular issue being investigated. For example, the use of a highly structured questionnaire may, by its very nature, be alien to the interpretivist researcher. However, the use of such a data collection method could provide easier and faster access to a broader spread of views and opinions than would otherwise be the case with conventional interpretivist data collection methods.

### ***Ontological position***

In order to appreciate more fully how choice of approach can affect research design it is necessary to consider in more detail the issues of ontology and epistemology. According to Bryman (2001: 16), ontology is concerned with the question of “...*whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors.*”

Two broad ontological positions are identified in the literature: *objectivism* and *constructionism* (Bryman, 2001). In short, objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena exist beyond the reach and influence of individuals. For example, although the notion of corporate culture is largely determined by a set of shared values and customs that are socially generated by company management and employees, individuals nevertheless still perceive it as a tangible ‘thing’ that has a life of its own. On the other hand, constructionism is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings come about as a result of the interaction and intervention of individuals. The implication here is that social phenomena and the categories that people employ to help them understand the natural and social world are not only the products of social interaction but that they are in a constant state of flux and revision (Bryman, 2001).

### ***Epistemological position***

As for epistemology, Bryman (2001: 11) suggests that it concerns the question of “...*what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline. A particularly central issue... is the question of whether the social world can and should*

*be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences.”*

This gives rise to two broad positions: *positivism* and *interpretivism* (Bryman, 2001) In research of a positivist nature, the researcher tends to adopt the philosophical stance of the natural scientist who believes that the social world exists externally and that its properties should be measured through objective methods rather than being inferred subjectively through sensation, reflection or intuition (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). Data should be collected and analysed in a detached, objective and value-free manner, with the researcher neither affecting nor being affected by the subject of the research (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998). In reality, positivism is an epistemological position that calls for the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality. According to Milliken (2001) there has traditionally been a great emphasis placed on quantification in the sciences such as mathematics, physics and chemistry - the so-called ‘hard’ sciences.

Central to this structured approach is the formulation of a research hypothesis that is subjected to rigorous testing. Through a process of experimentation and *deduction* a judgement can be made as to whether the hypothesis is proven or needs further modification. A strictly formalised set of rules and procedures exists for establishing and testing such hypotheses. Scientific rigour is judged, in part, by the extent to which the research process conforms to these established rules and procedures. Another way of looking at this issue would be to suggest that scientific rigour is judged by the degree of replication and generalisability of the research findings (Goulding, 1999). In simple terms, scientific rigour may simply boil down to whether a researcher can convince others of his research methods and findings:-

*“Will the research stand up to outside scrutiny and will anyone believe what I am saying about it?”* (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991: 40)

This, however, gives rise to a degree of criticism levelled at those adopting a positivist stance in that the over-reliance on ‘scientific’ instruments and procedures may only serve to mask any connection between the research and everyday life - in other words, ignoring the fact that people cannot help but interpret and influence the world around

them (Bryman, 2001). Equally, the analysis of relationships between variables creates a limited and abstract view of social life because the process is conducted in isolation of the way people actually live their lives (Bryman, 2001).

It is also worth noting that, whilst the testing of one or more hypotheses may be central to the hypothetico-deductive (or explanatory approach) the role of *descriptive* research should not be underestimated:-

*“Descriptive research deals with questions of what things are like not necessarily why they are that way.”* (de Vaus, 2002: 18)

Good description is important and can often provide the basis for sound theory generation. If we fail to describe situations or issues accurately or thoroughly then subsequent attempts to explain them might be misplaced (de Vaus, 2002).

By the same token, it is possible to justify that quantitative research does not necessarily need the formation of a specific hypothesis for subsequent testing in order to yield insight into a research context. As Bryman (2001) suggests, the sum total of the researcher’s understanding of a particular issue may only amount to a loose set of concerns in relation to which the researcher collects data. This is indeed the case in this particular research study. Although the findings from Document 3 have identified some interesting issues, from a small number of respondents, it is now necessary to widen the sample of people taking part in this research to determine whether all or any of the issues raised are relevant to other respondents occupying a similar role in their respective organisations. However, despite broadening the number of people participating in this research, it still needs to be acknowledged that the findings generated will not necessarily be any more generalisable than those in Document 3. The precise reasons for this will be explored more fully later.

One final caveat is that Document 4 calls on the researcher to engage in what could be termed an ‘apprentice’ piece. As such, it is not necessarily expected that a hypothesis be subjected to rigorous testing. Rather, the researcher needs to be seen to be engaging in a developmental process, but one that nevertheless attempts to adhere to the best traditions of positivism. In reality, then, the developmental aspect of this

Document means that the quantitative results generated by the questionnaire do not need to be free-standing or culminate in the development of a specific theory. The research can simply be designed as the descriptive stage of a longer-term research project. In this instance, the questionnaire is designed to provide an indication as to whether those issues raised by the initial qualitative interviews in Document 3 do in fact resonate with other key account managers in different academic institutions.

The way is now clear to consider the specific data collection issues relating to Document 4.

### **Data collection methods**

Broadly speaking, there are four types of quantitative data collection method: interviews, questionnaires, tests/experiments and observation (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). The fact that most of these methods are applicable to both quantitative and qualitative research possibly only serves to blur the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). However, in quantitative projects, the researcher is more likely to use highly structured interviews in order to engage in a degree of statistical interpretation of the phenomena under investigation. Likewise, observations of events can be recorded for later statistical analysis. Experiments, for example, would include things such as psychometric testing and other procedures for assessing personality traits. In business research, however, the scope for using experiment may be somewhat limited, being confined to such things as test marketing and the trialing of advertising and packaging concepts. A more detailed discussion of questionnaires will be provided later in view of the fact that a questionnaire was chosen as the preferred data collection method for this particular research study.

However, despite the variety of data collection methods open to the positivist researcher, the common denominator is that all of the methods set out to *measure* the phenomena under investigation. Bryman (2001) suggests that there are three main reasons why people are pre-occupied with the issue of measurement in quantitative research. First, measurement allows the possibility of defining fine differences between people in terms of how they feel or react to the particular characteristic under



investigation. Second, a device for measurement also provides a consistent instrument for gauging these differences. Finally, measurement provides the basis for a more precise estimation of the degree of relationship between variables or concepts. In reality, the notion of measurement is fundamental to the process of supporting a claim for scientific rigour. Looked at in this way, measurement becomes a kind of ‘comfort blanket’ for the positivist researcher. However, this reliance on measurement is not without its problems. Critics of quantitative research would go so far as to suggest that the measurement process itself may, in fact, only promote an artificial and spurious sense of precision and accuracy Bryman (2001). As has been previously discussed, measurement may only serve to divorce the phenomena under investigation from their social reality. Equally, a strict ‘scientific’ approach may ultimately have a constraining effect on any research study:-

*“Quantitative survey research is sometimes portrayed as being sterile and unimaginative but well suited to providing certain types of factual information - the hard evidence.” (de Vaus, 2002: 5)*

### ***Questionnaire design***

Survey research using questionnaires is perhaps the most common method of gathering quantitative data. For example, the use of questionnaires is prevalent in business research where customer views and opinions are sought on matters such as satisfaction ratings and brand loyalty. The term *questionnaire* is generally understood to include all techniques of data collection in which each person is asked to respond to the same set of questions in a predetermined order (de Vaus, 2002). However, there is a degree of flexibility in the way in which respondents can be interviewed in the sense that the questionnaires can be either self-administered or interviewer-administered or conducted either face-to-face (or by telephone) or remotely by post or e-mail. The size of sample that can be accessed and the relative ease, speed and convenience with which data can be obtained make a self-administered questionnaire an attractive proposition. The biggest downside of this approach, however, is that self-administered questionnaires are notoriously difficult to manage by virtue of the fact that the researcher may be operating at some distance from the intended participant. This tends to result in lower response rates than in research using interviewer-administered questionnaires.

This flexibility also extends to the type of question that can be incorporated in the questionnaire. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1991) distinguish between two broad types of question: those intended to establish *factual* answers and those that are designed to identify *opinion*. Factual questions would be designed to establish things such as age, gender and occupation. However, the biggest problem with factual data is that it possibly only provides a superficial picture of the situation under investigation. On the other hand, opinion questions would be more concerned with what respondents actually think about a particular issue. Another distinction that could be made is to talk in terms of ‘closed’ and ‘open’ questions. The former would be designed to elicit a simple answer that could subsequently form part of detailed statistical analysis. The latter would comprise questions requiring more than a simple monosyllabic response. The downside here is obviously that data generated by ‘open’ questions does not lend itself so readily to statistical interpretation. However, it should be noted that these two types of question are not mutually exclusive. In reality, the vast majority of questionnaires comprise a mixture of the two.

A further refinement of the closed question approach, that ultimately provides a greater discrimination than is otherwise possible in straightforward ‘Yes/No’ responses, is the use of scales. These scales offer the interviewee a choice of options for response. The most common type of scale used by researchers is the Likert scale. This normally boasts a range of options from ‘Strongly Agree’ to ‘Strongly Disagree’. The respondent simply has to circle or tick the option that best matches how he/she feels towards a particular statement or issue. As a result, the researcher can identify the depth of feeling from respondents. Incidentally, this technique is widely used in higher education for obtaining student feedback at both modular and programme level. Equally, the technique is much used in marketing research where it can provide useful insights into, for example, the degree of loyalty felt by customers towards a company’s brands or how satisfied they are with products or services that have been consumed. Whilst it is not the only scaling method, the researcher’s familiarity with the technique made it a natural choice of data collection method for this study, especially given a general unfamiliarity with undertaking positivist research.

The self-administered questionnaire in this study comprises a set of attitudinal scales. It is designed such that it can be answered in either paper-based form or in an

electronic version that can be e-mailed back for speedier response. However, a web-based version was not considered largely due to time pressures and the limited technological abilities of the researcher. However, on reflection, a custom-designed questionnaire, courtesy of a software package such as Microsoft SNAP for Windows, is possibly far more customer-friendly, easier to complete and - more to the point - easier to return. This last point should not be overlooked, particularly in view of the fact that the typical key account manager targeted by this research is known to be over-worked and time-impooverished and will tend to leave to one side the completion of any task that, at first sight, might appear to look too difficult and time-consuming.

Originally (see Document 1), it was anticipated that Document 4 would approach the business of data collection by looking specifically at:-

- attitude (i.e. how respondents *feel* about something)
- belief (i.e. what they think or *believe* is right or wrong)
- behaviour (i.e. what people *did* in the past, *do* now or *will do* in the future)
- attribute (i.e. what qualities or characteristics respondents bring to a situation).

Although it was felt that the easiest and most fruitful line of questioning might be to elicit responses relating primarily to *attitude* and *behaviour* it would still be possible to include some questions that would elicit responses relating to both *belief* and *attribute*. However, as with all research conducted over a period of time, a degree of evolutionary change has been inevitable. In short, based largely on the findings from Document 3, the questionnaire has evolved to explore the following issues:-

- the emotional side of forming relationships (i.e. **affective** aspects) that governs the way an individual feels about a business partner
- issues likely to impact the duration of the relationship (i.e. **temporal** aspects)
- the practical implementation of relationship marketing (i.e. **instrumental** aspects)

Equally, the researcher is not only interested in the personal aspects of business relationships (i.e. the perspective of the key account manager or key client contact) but also how individuals view the approach of their respective organisations to managing relationships (i.e. the organisational perspective). On this point, however, it

should be noted that, in attempting to investigate the organisational ‘perspective’, there is no intention to impute to the organisation any sense of ‘personal’ feeling or emotion (in other words, the organisation is not considered to have undergone a process of anthropomorphosis) nor is it the intention to claim that there is necessarily any such thing as a consistent and rational organisational view. However, it is nevertheless perfectly possible for employees, over a period of time, to experience the shared values of an organisation and to determine from discussions with senior managers what the typical ‘organisational’ response is likely to be to a given aspect of relationship formation and relationship building. In so doing, the similarities and differences between the two perspectives can be surfaced.

One further caveat that needs to be stressed is that, because the focus of this study is on the views of key account managers and their immediate client contacts, it consequently fails to take account of the views and opinions of senior managers. Thus, the research is limited to what ‘frontline’ staff think about themselves - and the way in which they construct their own reality - and what they perceive to be the behavioural response to relationships typically exhibited by their respective organisations.

The process of moving from abstract concepts to the point where a questionnaire can be developed can be referred to as ‘*descending the ladder of abstraction*’ (de Vaus, 2002: 48). It involves moving from the broad to the specific - in other words, arriving at a set of specific measures or indicators that will enable a concept to be investigated thoroughly. Now, if a measure is a means of enabling the collection of data in a *quantifiable* format, an indicator could be interpreted as something that already exists (or can be devised) “*and is employed as though it were a measure of the abstract concept under investigation*” (Bryman 2001: 67). In marketing terms, one such example of a set of measures that has acquired a degree of common currency would be the SERVQUAL model, which sets out to measure the depth of feeling that respondents have to various aspects of service quality. Indeed, the SERVQUAL framework has arguably been much used and abused. For example, it is all too common for undergraduate students to latch onto the model and proceed to construct their dissertations around it without due regard to its underpinning conceptualisation or without sufficient critical evaluation of its usefulness.

On the one hand, the use of an existing set of measures is widely recommended in the social sciences research literature:-

*“Where possible it is best to use well-established indicators. Rather than ‘reinventing the wheel’ why not take advantage of the expert work of other researchers?”* (de Vaus, 2002: 50)

On the other hand, however, it is equally possible to use alternative methods: for example, talking to ‘informants’ from the group to be researched (de Vaus, 2002). This was indeed the approach adopted in the current research project. The easier option might well have been to adopt an existing set of measures or indicators. However, this was decided against for a number of reasons: first, the focus of the research is considered unique and deserves to be investigated in an appropriate manner. Second, it may be harder to adapt existing sets of measures to the research in question because the original measures and indicators were no doubt developed for quite specific reasons and in quite specific business contexts. Third, the natural evolution of the research across the entire DBA project makes it more natural to build on the ideas generated from previous stages of the research. Finally, it could be argued that the current study is not ‘reinventing the wheel’ since the issues are those raised by key account managers. It is the key account managers themselves who could be construed as ‘experts’ in the field. The issues that they feel are important in their jobs are arguably the best indicator of the how they perceive their role. Such an approach thus contributes significantly to the process of assuring the *face validity* of the resultant questionnaire - in other words, confirming whether the instrument or its items are plausible (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991).

However, irrespective of the source of indicators or measures, it could be argued that the more important issue is that of the *number* of indicators or measures to be used in the questionnaire. In short, there is no simple answer to the question of how many indicators to use. Indeed, they may range from a small self-contained set that are ideal for measuring simple concepts to multiple measures where the issue or issues under investigation are more complex and need teasing out. An example of this complexity is provided by attitudes and opinions. It is felt that these are often best measured by adopting a number of questions that attempt to capture the scope of the concept being

investigated (de Vaus, 2002), or, as de Vaus goes on to say: “*it helps to get at the complexity of the concept*” (de Vaus, 2002: 180). Certainly, in situations where there is no agreed way of measuring a concept it might be helpful to develop a range of indicators to assess the depth of feeling. In addition, de Vaus suggests that the use of multiple indicators can also help to minimise the kind of distortion or misclassification that can result from the analysis of single item measures and increase the reliability of the research. This point is supported elsewhere in the literature (see Bryman, 2001).

Once a set of potential measures or indicators has been identified, the first draft of the questionnaire can then be constructed. It is normally accepted protocol to subject the resultant questionnaire to testing in order to select the most suitable items for inclusion in the final version. This testing can be done in a number of ways. The easiest way is arguably the ‘test-retest’ routine whereby the original respondents are retested to determine whether there is any substantial difference in the way in which questions have been answered. However, from a practical perspective, this is seldom possible and is a reasonably arduous and time-consuming process. What is more likely is that the scale is subjected to statistical testing via a software programme such as SPSS. A typical approach would be to compute *Cronbach’s alpha coefficient*. This looks at the consistency of a person’s response on an item compared to each other scale item (de Vaus, 2002). If results of more than 0.7 are obtained the scale is generally considered to be reliable. However, as with all statistical tests, a degree of circumspection needs to be exercised because there may be other qualitative factors influencing the respondents’ answers that need to be factored into the evaluation of the questionnaire’s reliability. For example, the number of items to be tested is further affected by practical considerations such as the overall length of the questionnaire and the method of administration (de Vaus, 2002). Equally, where research in a particular context consistently shows *Cronbach’s alpha* less than 0.7 then that lower figure may be deemed acceptable. However, it is interesting to note that, when subjected to statistical analysis, the scales used in this particular study achieved a *Cronbach’s alpha* score of 0.831, suggesting that the instrument was reliable. A summary of the reliability computations can be seen in Appendix 5.

In order to subject a research instrument to further face validity testing, *piloting* is an acknowledged way of helping to eliminate unnecessary questions (de Vaus, 2002) and identify potential problems or inconsistencies with either the instrument or its administration. In this particular study, the first draft of the questionnaire was circulated to colleagues in the Marketing and Retail team at Nottingham Business School, with the request not just to complete the questionnaire but to provide comments on both the content and style adopted. The questionnaire was also circulated to both of the researcher's DBA supervisors for their scrutiny. Overall, the process was extremely helpful for shaping the final version of the questionnaire in terms of identifying specific issues such as an occasional lack of clarity with instructions, ambiguous wording in some statements and other items that could be deleted in order to make the finished version of the questionnaire more compact and more user-friendly. However, the process did take a lot longer than originally envisaged, due in large part to the various professional demands of the people involved and the fact that the pilot testing took place at a busy time of the academic year (in the run-up to Christmas) when assistance in this kind of activity may be low on colleagues' priority lists.

The final research instrument developed for this study consisted of seventy three statements (or items) that were originally derived from the comments of respondents taking part in the research for Document 3. A summary of the themes that emerged can be found in Appendix 1. These comments were subsequently moulded into three broad areas, which - as previously identified - are the *affective*, *temporal* and *instrumental relational* attributes. Further details can be found in Appendix 2. It is interesting to note, however, that these three groups of relational attribute have been further sub-divided into personal and organisational in order to reflect the previously stated aim of this research of attempting to gauge both the personal perceptions of key account managers and the way in which they believe their respective organisations respond on relationship matters.

Additionally, it should be noted that the above somewhat simplistic grouping of relational attributes should in no way be regarded as trivialising the construction of the questionnaire nor should it be regarded as masking the range and complexity of the issues under investigation. In fact, further exploration of the themes raised in

Document 3 have suggested that there are a dozen different concepts that underpin the development of the items in this questionnaire. These concepts are as follows but are not necessarily in any priority order:-

- intuition (i.e. personal instinct or ‘gut feel’)
- social aspects (i.e. the informal contacts in the relationship)
- trust and commitment (i.e. how respect for each party develops)
- personality traits (i.e. the personal characteristics that help create the right atmosphere for the relationship)
- response approach (i.e. the ways in which the individual responds to the customer’s needs)
- corporate traits (i.e. the particular ‘personal’ characteristics of organisations that can be discerned through experience)
- relationship outcomes (i.e. the mutually beneficial outcomes that both parties are seeking)
- relationship behaviour (i.e. instances of either positive or negative behaviour in a partner that have the potential to impact the relationship)
- preferred contact methods (i.e. the methods that individuals and organisations favour in the process of building relationships)
- staffing issues (i.e. problems of balancing workload and the different demands of the key account manager role)
- strategic approach (i.e. whether the organisation is perceived to be taking a co-ordinated approach to the management of it relationships)
- organisational support (i.e. key account management structures, personal rewards and personal development opportunities).

Each of these concepts will be discussed in more detail in the section on data analysis.

The resulting list of items was built into a five-point bi-polar Likert scale with response options ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Although it is acknowledged that the adoption of a seven-point bi-polar scale might offer a greater degree of precision for responses, it is nevertheless a concern that respondents may find it difficult to differentiate sufficiently between degrees of response if there



are too many options. Consequently, a five-point scale is considered sufficient in this instance, particularly given the exploratory nature of the research. As de Vaus (2002) suggests, a five-point Likert scale is flexible enough that it can be collapsed down at a later stage to two or three categories if necessary (see Appendix 3).

Approaching the design of the questions requires a good deal of thought for many reasons. Not least among these is the need for the questions to be *exhaustive* (or inclusive) in the sense that the range of items comprises issues on which all respondents will feel able to express an opinion. In addition, the questionnaire needs to be *exclusive* in the sense that each respondent can provide only one answer to each question. A useful checklist is provided by de Vaus (2002: 97). However, it is only when the questionnaire is piloted that the researcher can be certain whether it meets both of these tests. One further requirement suggested by de Vaus (2002) is the need to balance the categories. In other words, the questionnaire needs to be designed so that respondents have an equal choice of options to choose either side of the neutral category (in this case 'Neither Agree nor Disagree'). In self-administered questionnaires, de Vaus (2002) suggests that it is desirable to offer the middle position in order to avoid forcing people to express a level of commitment to an item that they may not have.

Due consideration was also given to the phrasing of the items used in the questionnaire. A potential problem with Likert scales is that if all items are phrased in the same way respondents might, for example, be tempted to tick the 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' boxes on every occasion without really considering their answers. In this instance, the respondent's inertia may significantly bias the outcome of the research. Equally, there could be a danger of taking too positive a stance to the research by phrasing items in such a way that the only possible answer is 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree'. Thus, in order to counteract these problems, the phrasing of the items needs to be varied throughout. A simple way of doing this is to introduce occasional items that the respondent will need to disagree with rather than express constant agreement. Thus, some of the items used in this research study incorporate negative statements. The intention was deliberately to cause the respondent to stop and think carefully before answering. Now, to a large extent, the use of the word 'not' is frowned upon in the social sciences research literature because it may only serve to confuse

respondents. However, as Bryman (2001) suggests the use of negatives in Likert scales is sometimes difficult to avoid because the researcher is likely to want to reverse the direction of the questions in order to identify respondents who exhibit certain response sets.

A copy of the final version of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 3.

### **Additional problems with data collection**

De Vaus (2002) summarises the problems that the researcher is likely to face as follows:-

- technical
- practical
- ethical

A good many technical problems have already been discussed as they relate quite specifically to the design of the questionnaire. However, an additional technical issue that needs to be considered is that of sampling. The sample in this particular study was originally envisaged as ideally comprising some 20 respondents (both 'key account managers' and corporate client contacts) from each of four or five UK business schools. In short, it was hoped that around 80-100 people would take part in the research. However, one of the particular problems with cross-sectional research is arguably accessing an adequate sample within a given period of time. Thus, the task of the researcher becomes one of attempting to find *willing* UK business schools and persuading *compliant* key account managers and their corporate clients to participate. This process inevitably results in the use of a non-random, convenience sampling approach.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the use of a non-random convenience sample will, to some extent, affect the degree of *generalisability* of the research findings, it is nevertheless still regarded as a useful method of obtaining data speedily and cost-effectively. Equally, in the early stages of exploratory research, such as testing questionnaires, non-random samples are considered satisfactory (de Vaus, 2002). Furthermore, Remenyi *et al.* (1998) suggest that such samples are extensively used in

universities or business school research, where full advantage can be taken of business executives attending courses at the time of the research being conducted.

In terms of this particular research study, a personal contact in each of the selected UK business schools was approached to act as a research 'facilitator'. This contact was asked to invite others to participate in the research in a form of *snowballing*. It was hoped that this process would further help to ensure a speedy response from participants. Remenyi *et al.* (1998) support the view that often this form of research is the only way in which a researcher can gain access to appropriate respondents: in the case of this study, the researcher is obviously acting remotely from the chosen business schools and is therefore totally reliant on the goodwill and willingness of the personal contact to involve colleagues in the research. Equally, the researcher will be heavily reliant on the goodwill and willingness of key account managers to provide access to the corporate client contacts that they deal with on a regular basis.

However, de Vaus (2002) goes on to suggest that some research is not all that interested in identifying what proportion of the population responds in a particular way. Rather, it is more a matter of obtaining an idea of the range of responses or ideas that respondents have. In this particular research study, the issue of sampling assumes less importance since the main focus is on eliciting the views and opinions of key account managers rather than achieving some kind of 'critical mass'. Further support is available to suggest that sample size is not necessarily considered crucial for quantitative research (Meier cited in Broderick *et al.*, 2004). Equally, there is evidence in the literature to support the view that small scale surveys in social research frequently involve between 30 and 250 cases (Denscombe cited in Broderick *et al.*, 2004).

In terms of more practical issues, there is also the problem of the potential imbalance between the volume of data generated by key account managers and by corporate clients. It is anticipated that key account managers may be more willing to complete the questionnaire than they are to involve their corporate client contacts. The reasons for this may be many and varied but could include, for example, personal inertia, a fear of 'burdening' their client contacts or, possibly, even an unwillingness to invite feedback for fear of it being negative. However, it is not within the scope of this study

to elicit any information concerning the motives of respondents for either participating or not in this study.

Other practical issues stem largely from the choice of using e-mail for distributing the questionnaire. Whilst it is accepted that there a number of sophisticated questionnaire design programmes available to the researcher (for example, SNAP for Windows), technical advice sought early on from both university technicians and colleagues who had used such packages suggested very strongly that, given the limited amount of time for conducting this research and the limited technical questionnaire design expertise of the researcher, a simpler approach should be adopted: namely, developing a Word-based questionnaire that could be distributed via e-mail. By doing this, it was felt that a suitable covering letter could be sent at the same time in order to clarify the research purpose and provide a more personal touch in the recruitment of potential respondents. An example of the covering letter that was sent can be found in Appendix 4. However, such an approach is not without its problems, not least because the questionnaire needs to be designed in such a way that it can, first of all, be accessed by the recipient and then that it allows them to complete the questions as intended. Given the range of computers available - each with their own uniquely configured operating system - and given the varying degree of computer literacy to be expected in respondents (even among professional people such as university lecturers) the questionnaire design needs to be sufficiently robust whilst still retaining an overall simplicity and elegance. In this respect, it is also important to take great care with the explanatory text provided. For example, instructions need to be completely clear and unambiguous. It was brought to the researcher's attention almost immediately after the first batch of questionnaires had gone out that there was still a problem with interpreting the instructions for returning completed questionnaires. Fortunately, since this problem occurred at a very early stage of the data collection process, suitable changes could be made to the instructions.

In terms of ethical matters, de Vaus (2002: 59) suggests a useful guide for how to proceed. In brief, it is suggested that all research needs to consider the following:-

- voluntary participation

- informed consent
- no harm
- confidentiality
- privacy

The above issues are conveniently underpinned by the notion of research etiquette. For example, when using a contact at another university, it is both a matter of courtesy and etiquette to seek permission for the research to go ahead. This may either require approval from a departmental head or even someone more senior in the organisation. The time lag between initiating the response for participation in the research and actually obtaining permission to proceed may be frustratingly slow. This problem is magnified by the fact that the research is being conducted remotely via a number of intermediaries, as has been previously discussed. This will inevitably result in increased difficulty in obtaining timely responses. Equally, canvassing the views of the corporate clients themselves is not expected to be an easy task because the researcher is not just reliant on the initial intermediary but subsequently on the good offices and goodwill of the respondent themselves in deciding when, or even if, the questionnaire should be completed. This adds to the frustration and uncertainty over obtaining adequate response rates.

An additional issue worth considering is that, although anonymity can be promised to respondents, the very fact that the questionnaires will be returned by e-mail means that their provenance can easily be identified. Equally, the only form of inducement that can be offered to potential respondents is that they can be shown a summary of the eventual findings of the study. This means that a record needs to be retained of who has requested such information.

Finally, in addition to all of the problems discussed so far, the researcher's limited experience of quantitative data analysis needs to be taken into account. However, the specific issues surrounding the approach taken to data analysis in this particular study are discussed in more detail in the next section of this Document.

## Approach to data analysis

The analysis of quantitative data poses a number of challenges from the outset. As Diamantopoulos (2000: 77) suggests, somewhat tongue-in-cheek:-

*“Your data are now sitting restlessly in the depths of your computer’s memory, eagerly awaiting your instructions to reveal their secrets. Your problem at this stage is to decide exactly what instructions to give, in other words, what analysis to undertake.”*

In short, the researcher needs to consider the following issues:-

- the number of variables to be examined
- the level of measurement of the variables
- whether the data are to be used for descriptive or inferential purposes
- ethical responsibilities

(de Vaus, 2002: 203)

### ***Number of variables***

In terms of the number of variables to be examined, the researcher has a choice: for example, the most straightforward option would be to conduct *univariate* analysis, where each variable is tackled individually and attempts made to clarify the reasons for the results obtained. *Bivariate* analysis is concerned with the analysis of two variables at a time in order to uncover whether the variables are related (Bryman, 2001). The researcher’s task is therefore to search for evidence that the variation in one variable coincides with the variation in another. It should be noted, however, that any resultant relationships should not necessarily be interpreted as suggesting a *causal* link. Further exploration would need to be carried out to determine whether any causality exists. *Multivariate* analysis, on the other hand, involves the investigation of three or more variables at any one time, again, in order to identify where relationships may appear to occur.

This particular study opts predominantly for univariate analysis followed by some tentative steps towards bivariate analysis. The reason for remaining largely at the univariate level is that there are no specific hypotheses to be tested (as discussed

previously). Rather, the research is more interested in establishing the extent to which the ideas expressed in Document 3 are endorsed by larger numbers of key account managers.

### ***Level of measurement***

In addition to concerns over the number of variables to be investigated, the researcher also needs to take into account the level of measurement. Distinct differences in the level of measurement depend very much on the original decisions taken at the stage of designing the data collection method(s). In broad terms, these range from the use of nominal data (lowest level) through ordinal (or ranking data) through to interval or ratio data (the highest level) (Diamantopoulos, 2000; de Vaus, 2002: 204). However, there are other issues that have a part to play in deciding on the level of measurement: namely, the more powerful and sophisticated analytical techniques are only appropriate for interval level data. Equally, higher levels of measurement provide more information. However, de Vaus (2002) questions whether this amount of information is always necessary. Equally, respondents may not be able to provide accurate information either because they don't have it or because they may not want to divulge personally sensitive data.

In this particular study, since the data obtained has come from the use of Likert scales, this means that the analysis needs to adopt analytical methods that are generally considered suitable for ordinal (or ranking) data. However, much of the research methods literature suggests that the statistical techniques most frequently employed are those based on random sampling using *parametric* methods (Diamantopoulos, 2000). Such methods are based largely on computations involving the statistical *mean*. With ordinal data, however, the mean is not a particularly relevant measure because the response options relate to discrete categories. A respondent either agrees or strongly agrees with a statement. It is impossible to determine the exact extent to which he or she agrees. As a result, other methods need to be employed that take account of statistical measures such as the *median* and *mode*. In other words, ordinal data require the application of *non-parametric* methods of analysis (Diamantopoulos, 2000). It is interesting to note, however, that there is increasing support in the research methods literature for the use of parametric methods of analysis on ordinal data, particularly in marketing:-

*“Rating scales are strictly speaking ordinal. However, in practice, especially in the marketing area, these are treated as being measured at the interval level” (Reminiyi et al., 1998: 153).*

Despite this - and particularly in view of the small sample size in this study - it has been decided to adopt a non-parametric approach to data analysis.

### ***Descriptive and inferential statistics***

Broadly speaking, *descriptive statistics* are those that attempt to summarise patterns in the responses from the sample cases surveyed. At a basic level, they provide simple information about the frequency of occurrences and enable averages to be calculated. Furthermore, these descriptive statistics can be reported in table or graph form. The chief advantage of descriptive statistics reported in this way is that a large amount of data can be dealt with and reported quickly and conveniently. Indeed, it is sometimes easier to visualise a situation at a glance from a table or graph rather than read through large amounts of explanatory text in order to glean the relevant facts.

*Inferential statistics*, on the other hand, attempt to go beyond the mere description of attitudes and characteristics and allow the researcher to generalise the results from the sample to a wider population. The aim is to provide an idea about whether the patterns described in the sample are likely to apply to the population from which the sample is drawn. Consequently, a large part of adopting an inferential approach to data analysis is concerned with tests for statistical significance, which Bryman (2001: 233) defines as follows:-

*“A test of statistical significance allows the analyst to estimate how confident he or she can be that the results deriving from a study based on a randomly selected sample are generalisable to the population from which the sample was drawn... it also tells us about the risk of concluding that there is in fact a relationship in the population when there is no such relationship in the population... statistical significance is solely concerned with the confidence that researchers have in their findings.”*

Although most of the analysis conducted in this study will be at the descriptive, univariate level, for reasons previously discussed, a degree of bivariate analysis will



be carried out in order to move towards a situation where inferences might be drawn. However, where bivariate analysis has been attempted, care has been taken to ensure that the correlation coefficients used are considered suitable for situations where both variables are ordinal (e.g. as is the case with data produced by Likert scales). For example, reference will be made to Spearman's *rho* (Bryman, 2001) and gamma and Kendall's *tau<sub>c</sub>* (de Vaus, 2002). Nevertheless, it should be added that these tests only measure *linear* associations. It may be possible to run tests to establish the degree of non-linear relationship present. However, time does not allow for this exercise to be undertaken in this particular piece of work.

In situations where relationships are being examined between variables with mixed levels of measurement (e.g. nominal and ordinal) de Vaus (2002) suggests that the researcher will have to make do with statistics designed for two nominal or two interval variables. In this study, therefore, chi-square testing would be an appropriate technique to employ.

### ***Ethical responsibilities***

Finally, data analysis is not just concerned with technical statistical matters. The researcher also has a responsibility to analyse the data professionally and report it fairly and accurately. All necessary steps need to be taken to avoid misrepresentation of the findings. This could easily occur by simply reporting the positive or convenient results only: in other words, adopting the kind of sensationalist approach often to be found in the press. Equally, the misuse and abuse of statistical tools and summary statistics should be discouraged in a bid to offer results that are, to the best of the abilities of the researcher, a true and fair reflection of the situation under investigation. In order to overcome these potential problems, it is normally expected that the researcher makes all data sets and statistical summaries available for inspection. This is part and parcel of the need for positivist research to generate results that can be replicated as a safeguard against falsification (de Vaus, 2002).

One further issue is that the researcher should respect the individuals who have taken part in the research and do nothing that would expose them to subsequent embarrassment or misrepresentation. Consequently, the researcher should be mindful of the need to treat material with sensitivity and the requisite degree of anonymity.

## **Analysis of the data**

For the sake of ease and convenience, the following data analysis will use as its framework the twelve themes that were identified earlier in the discussion on data collection methods. Although the intention is to deal initially with the data in a descriptive manner, the opportunity will nevertheless be taken to provide a degree of manual cross-tabulation, where relevant, in order to highlight the similarities and interesting differences of opinion between the 'personal' and the 'organisational' perspectives on certain issues and to consider any contrasts between the university key account manager view and that of the corporate clients. It is felt that a manual approach to this task is both appropriate and sufficient given the relatively small sample of people who took part in this study. However, in addition to manual cross-tabulation, statistical tests will be undertaken from time to time in order to determine whether any relationships might exist between certain variables.

With reference to the sample, a total of 25 questionnaires were returned before the data analysis commenced. 20 of these were from staff working in a key account manager capacity within a number of higher education establishments. 5 were from corporate client contacts. Two additional questionnaires from corporate clients were returned shortly after the process of data analysis had begun and were thus too late to be included. The response rate is difficult to ascertain in view of the fact that the questionnaire went out to a number of institutions via personal contacts of the researcher. The remote nature of the research (as previously discussed) makes it difficult to be certain of the exact numbers of people to whom the questionnaire was circulated. However, by way of illustration, the questionnaire was distributed among members of the Centre for Management Development (CMD) at Nottingham Trent University. Out of a possible 20 people identified as being eligible to take part, seven people returned completed questionnaires (i.e. a response rate of 35%). The Centre for Automotive Industries Management (CAIM) at Nottingham Trent University identified three people as potential respondents. Here, two completed questionnaires were returned (i.e. a response rate of 66%). However, it should be noted that the issue of generalisability has already been discussed in this study. Since the findings are intended to enable the researcher to build on the themes identified in Document 3, the

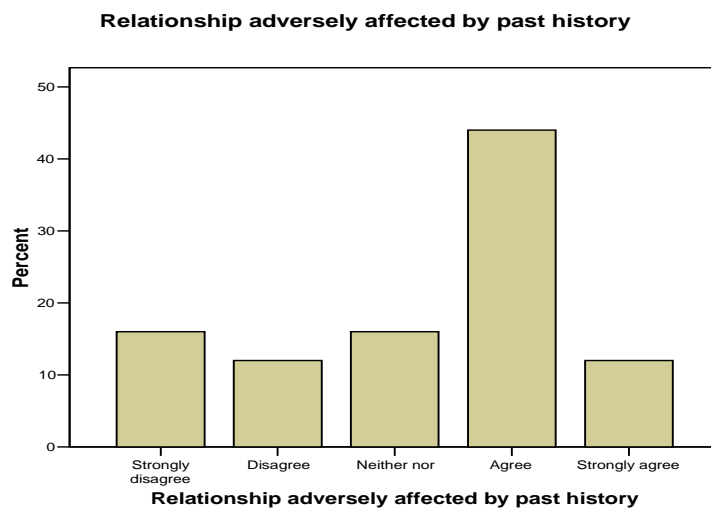
actual composition of the sample becomes less relevant. Rather, it is the issues themselves that are more important.

Out of interest, the other academic institutions taking part in the research were Strathclyde University, Middlesex Business School, the Southampton Institute and the London College of Communications.

### ***Intuition***

A number of lines of enquiry were grouped under this particular heading, but all of them were trying, in some way, to gauge factors thought relevant to understanding a respondent's personal drive and motivation towards forming business relationships. For example, past experience (Item 1a) might be instrumental in shaping the individual's attitude to the formation of new relationships. On this particular point, it is interesting to observe that over half of respondents think that relationship history has an effect on future relationships (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Bar chart showing the effect of past history on a relationship**



When compared with the 'organisational' response (Item 3a), some two thirds of respondents thought their respective organisations were influenced by past experience. This may indicate that the issue is possibly more keenly felt by

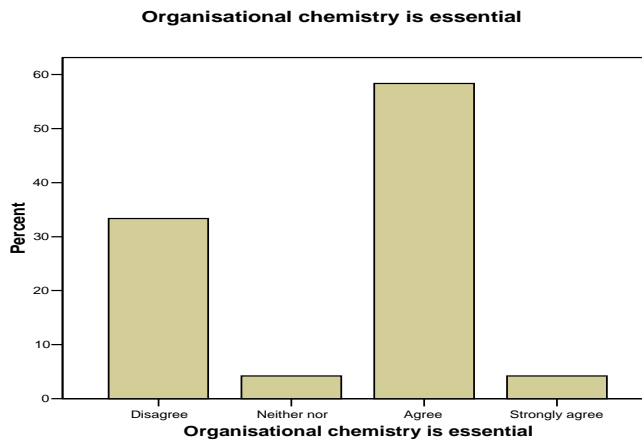
organisations rather than individuals. The corporate client view was broadly similar, with the one exception that responses avoided the extremes of *strongly* agree or *strongly* disagree. However, one thing that is fascinating (and would be worthy of further investigation) is that a quarter of respondents actually felt that past experience has no effect whatsoever on future relationship development.

The items concerning the important role played in relationship formation by ‘gut feel’ (Items 1b and 3b) revealed that the issue was possibly considered *more* important on a personal level than for organisations. Some 80% agreed that it was personally important to them whilst 60% echoed this viewpoint for their respective organisations. All of the corporate clients answered positively for Item 1b, confirming their personal belief in its importance.

The responses to Item 1c, concerning the impact on relationship formation of personal likes and dislikes, provided an almost identical set of results. Again, however, around one sixth of respondents disagreed, claiming that personal likes and dislikes had no impact on how they formed relationships. This may indicate that they might possibly be the kind of people not to let their emotions rule their approach to relationships. It may well be that they consider the adoption of a professional and impersonal stance more appropriate, although this would be subject to further investigation.

The issue of personal chemistry between partners provoked a strong response from individuals with, again, four fifths of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was an essential ingredient in a relationship. The corporate clients echoed this feeling in their responses. However, it is interesting to observe that there was less agreement in terms of ‘organisational’ chemistry (Item 3d). Here, around one third of respondents disagreed (see Figure 3). Equally, one respondent was consistently out of step with the general mood of other key account managers throughout the opening stages of the questionnaire. This may indicate that the individual possibly has issues around relationship formation or may be relatively new to the position and has yet to appreciate the more ‘personal’ aspects associated with relationship formation.

**Figure 3: Bar chart showing the importance of organisational chemistry to relationship formation**



Finally, the subject of self-interest was raised (Item 1e). This was an attempt to identify whether individuals approached a relationship for purely personal reasons or whether they took a more holistic approach that encompassed the needs and concerns of their business partners. Whilst it was arguably gratifying to see that some 60% of respondents disagreed, claiming that self-interest was not an issue, there were still around a third of individuals who neither agreed nor disagreed. It may well be that they either did not wish to voice an opinion on the subject or, possibly, that they had never really thought of relationship formation as a means of advancing their own cause. Worryingly, however, there was a single case from the corporate clients who strongly agreed that self-interest *was* a powerful motivator.

### ***Personality traits***

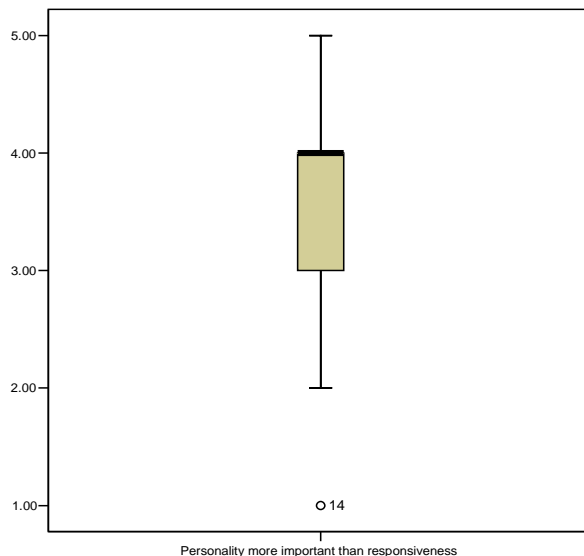
Following on from the issue of personal chemistry, the questionnaire also attempted to develop a better notion of the kind of traits that key account managers might be looking for in their potential partners, in much the same way as an individual approaches a potential long-term relationship such as marriage. Certainly, charisma and a good sense of humour were themes generated in the exploratory research in Document 3. Looking, firstly, at charisma (Item 2a), it is perhaps not surprising to observe that around four fifths of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that a charismatic personality in a partner is beneficial to the way in which a relationship becomes established. A particularly interesting angle on this

issue is that some 70% agreed that personality was actually more important than being responsive to a partner's needs (Item 2d). The fact that all corporate clients either agreed or strongly agreed would suggest that some key account managers still feel that it is more important to be responsive, possibly suggesting that they consider their role to be one of pleasing the client rather than being pleasant - although this would obviously need to be investigated further (see Figure 4). A broadly similar outcome was detected in Item 4e where, if it is assumed that organisational goodwill is similar in nature to personality, then there are still roughly 25% of respondents opting for responsiveness over goodwill. With only 45% of respondents agreeing outright with the statement, this means that around 30% of people were still undecided on the issue.

**Figure 4: Stem-and-leaf box plot showing how respondents view responsiveness**

Frequency	Stem & Leaf
1.00	Extremes (= <1.0)
5.00	2.0
1.00	3.0
15.00	4.0
3.00	5.0

Stem width: 1.00  
Each leaf: 1 case(s)



Equally, a good sense of humour is important, but possibly less so than charisma and personality. Just over half of respondents suggested that a good sense of humour was essential to relationship formation. However, it is interesting to note that just under

30% of people felt it unimportant. It may well be that the business of forging commercial relationships is regarded as a professional and impersonal matter (as was suggested earlier).

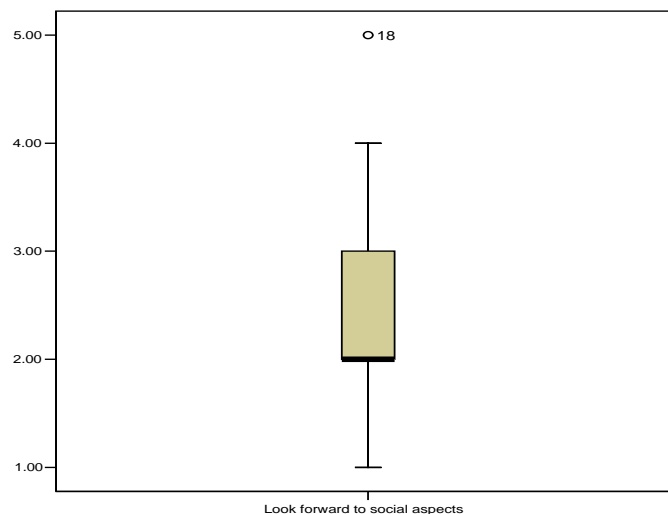
***Social aspects***

The next section of the questionnaire attempted to move beyond the personal, intuitive aspects and explore the social side of relationship formation. For example, respondents were asked whether they were motivated by the prospect of becoming involved in new relationships (Item 1f). In this particular instance, 70% of respondents were motivated by the prospect with 30% expressing neither agreement nor disagreement. Nobody disagreed with the statement.

**Figure 5: Stem-and-leaf box plot showing how respondents view the social aspects of a relationship**

Frequency	Stem & Leaf
1.00	1.0
13.00	2.0
6.00	3.0
4.00	4.0
1.00	Extremes (>=5.0)

Stem width: 1.00  
 Each leaf: 1 case(s)



However, when asked whether it was the social aspects of the relationship that appealed (Item 1i) it was somewhat surprising to discover - given that the theme

figured prominently in the literature review developed in Document 2 - that only one fifth of people positively looked forward to the social aspects. Over half of respondents were not looking forward (see Figure 5). Equally, none of the corporate clients was looking forward to this aspect of the relationship!

Further evidence for the lack of interest in the social aspects of the relationship is provided by the statistical tests carried out on the variables of *socasps* ('looking forward to the social aspects') and *jobrole* ('work in higher education'). With a Kendall's  $Tau_c$  of -0.045 and Spearman's  $\rho$  of -0.053, these would suggest that no relationship appears to exist (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Testing for a relationship between the variables of job role and looking forward to the social aspects**

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.856 <sup>a</sup>	4	.043
Likelihood Ratio	9.651	4	.047
Linear-by-Linear Association	.397	1	.529
N of Valid Cases	25		

a. 9 cells (90.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .20.

**Symmetric Measures**

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Kendall's tau-b	-.049	.196	-.249	.803
	Kendall's tau-c	-.045	.180	-.249	.803
	Gamma	-.089	.354	-.249	.803
	Spearman Correlation	-.053	.211	-.254	.802 <sup>c</sup>
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	-.129	.168	-.622	.540 <sup>c</sup>
N of Valid Cases		25			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

c. Based on normal approximation.



### ***Trust and commitment***

If the social aspects of relationship formation failed to motivate respondents, a very different picture was presented in relation to matters of trust and commitment. For example, there was almost unanimous agreement about the fact that respect for a business partner helps to speed up the formation of relationships. Indeed, this was the case for both the ‘personal’ and ‘organisational’ perspectives (Items 1g and 3e). (Interestingly, however, there were two non-responses to this item from university key account managers). By a similar token, over three quarters of respondents claimed that the credibility of a potential corporate business partner helped to facilitate the development of the relationship once it had been established (Item 4a).

Taking this issue a stage further, however, there was a marked falling-off of the positive response to the issue of whether individuals and organisations preferred to do business only with partners they felt they could trust (Items 1h and 3f). Here, although 50% of respondents strongly agreed and some 20% agreed (Item 1h), it was nevertheless interesting to observe that around one fifth of individuals thought the issue unimportant either ‘personally’ or ‘organisationally’. Manual inspection of the completed questionnaires would suggest that at least two of these ‘negative’ respondents have already been alluded to in connection with views that seem to stand consistently apart from the ‘norm’. Furthermore, two of these respondents represent the total sample from one particular institution!

It was also felt appropriate to establish whether trust was considered to be a natural by-product of a long-term relationship or whether it was something which had to be worked at (Items 5a and 6a). Whilst it is interesting to note that around 60% of respondents agreed with the idea that trust occurred naturally in a successful relationship, Table 2 nevertheless suggests that over a quarter of respondents actually disagreed with this notion.

Trust in a business partner could be considered to be partly influenced by a partner’s honesty. Certainly, taking Item 2f, a significant majority of respondents would consider honesty to be more important than sharing mutual goals. This is an interesting finding in view of how strongly the relationship marketing literature has

stressed the fundamental supremacy of mutuality. Important though this may be, it may certainly not be the only relevant issue.

**Table 2: Frequency table showing views on whether trust is a by-product of a successful relationship**

**Trust is relationship by-product**

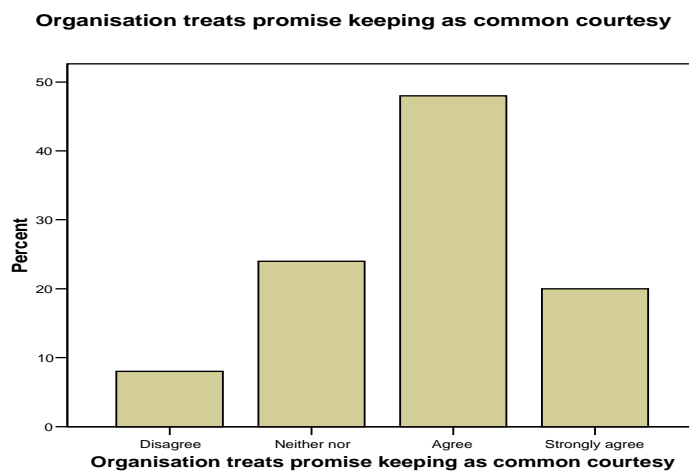
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1	4.0	4.0	4.0
	Disagree	6	24.0	24.0	28.0
	Neither nor	3	12.0	12.0	40.0
	Agree	11	44.0	44.0	84.0
	Strongly agree	4	16.0	16.0	100.0
	Total	25	100.0	100.0	

Trust may also accrue from activities such as keeping promises and treating partners with sensitivity. This was a particularly strong issue that emerged from the exploratory research conducted in Document 3. However, in this particular study, Items 7c and 8b dealt with the issue of sensitivity. Whilst it was clear that, from a personal standpoint, respondents felt that they treated their partners with sensitivity (around 90% agreement registered in Item 7c), the same was not true of the way in which individuals perceived their organisations to respond. Indeed, only 60% of respondents were able to agree, with about one fifth of respondents disagreeing with the statement that their organisation treats its business partners with sensitivity. This obviously suggests an area for further investigation, but this is regrettably beyond the scope of the current study. On the subject of keeping promises (Items 7d and 8c), a similar breakdown in the figures can be observed. However, instead of 20% of respondents being unconvinced about the way in which their respective organisations treat their partners, some 20% have yet to make their mind up about whether their organisations think that keeping promises is a matter of business courtesy (Figure 6).

In terms of the role that commitment plays in the continuation of a long-term relationship, there appears to be broad agreement on the part of respondents. Without adequate commitment from both parties, a relationship may find it very hard to flourish. Indeed, some 60% of individuals agree that it is important both from a

personal and organisational perspective. However, in comparison to the statement about keeping promises (discussed above) only half as many respondents opted for the *strongly* agree option when speaking personally (Item 5b) and only a third as many opted for the *strongly* agree option when speaking on behalf of their respective organisations (Item 6b). So, this may indicate that respondents are generally less certain of the role played by commitment than with other factors.

**Figure 6: Bar chart showing how organisations regard the business of keeping promises**



### ***Relationship behaviour***

Trust and commitment is likely to be further influenced by whether business partners exhibit behaviour that is construed as being either positive (for example being friendly and helpful) or negative (in other words, being obstructive and unhelpful). The results suggest that there is widespread agreement in the belief that positive behaviour does impact on the likely length of the relationship (Item 5c). This position is echoed in the statement that addresses the issue from a corporate perspective (Item 6e). There was unanimous agreement on the part of the corporate clients themselves.

A control statement (Item 5l) was built into the questionnaire in order to provide another opportunity to test reaction to the issue of behaviour in a business partner. This was phrased in such a way as to reflect the inverse view: in other words, that negative relationship behaviour will adversely affect the length of a relationship.

Some 80% of respondents agreed with the statement. All of the corporate clients were in agreement.

It is also worth considering, at this point, that personality clashes might equally have a part to play in influencing either the formation of a relationship or its successful development over time. Table 3 suggests that although two thirds of respondents agreed that personality clashes are potentially damaging to a relationship, there are still 20% who disagreed. It would be interesting to know more about how they manage their particular relationships. It may well be the case that these relationships simply involve strong personalities who respect each other's positions sufficiently to be able to move on after any disagreement.

**Table 3: Frequency table showing whether respondents view personality clashes as harmful to the relationship**

**Personality clashes are harmful**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	8.0	8.0	8.0
	Disagree	3	12.0	12.0	20.0
	Neither nor	3	12.0	12.0	32.0
	Agree	16	64.0	64.0	96.0
	Strongly agree	1	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	25	100.0	100.0	

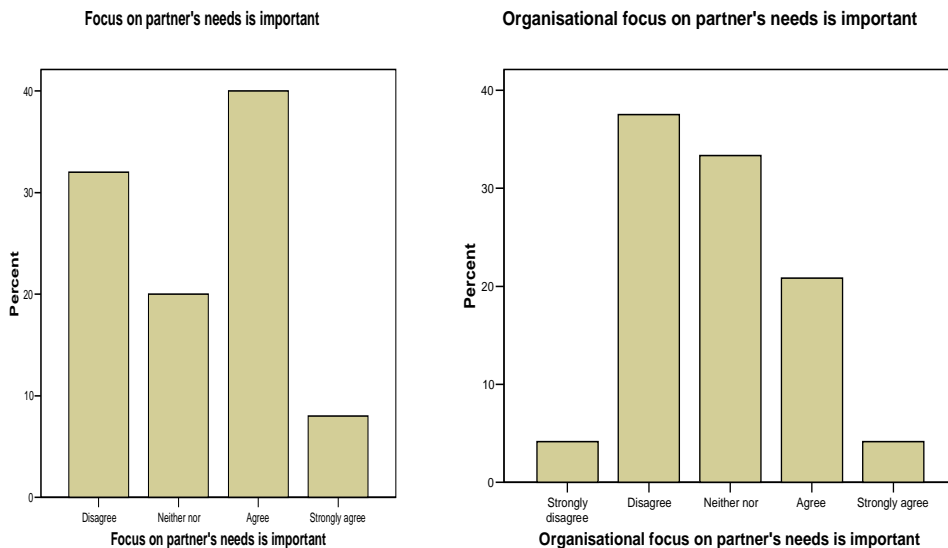
***Response approach***

This section deals broadly with the likely approach that respondents believe is a necessary part of establishing and maintaining long-term relationships. For example, the benefits of adopting a proactive stance towards a partner are considered (Items 2e and 4f). Around 90% of respondents felt that being proactive would pay dividends. This position was supported unanimously by the corporate clients. Organisations, likewise, can reap the benefits of adopting a proactive stance. Although slightly down on the figure quoted above, it is still the case that four fifths of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their respective organisations would acknowledge that they can reap commercial rewards by adopting a suitably proactive stance to their corporate partners.

Taking this issue a stage further, the questionnaire was designed to determine the extent to which respondents thought a partner valued a positive approach (Item 7a). Over three quarters of individuals believed that their partner valued a positive attitude. The corporate clients were unanimous in their support on this point. Equally, there was no disagreement whatsoever in response to Item 7b, which tried to establish whether respondents thought that their partners were actually concerned about the issue of responsiveness.

In terms of focussing on a partner’s needs, there is some disparity between how individuals view the situation and how they perceive that their organisations behave. Items 2g and 4g look at this particular aspect of response approach (see Figure 7). It is interesting to observe that just under half of respondents agreed that it was important to focus on a partner’s needs. However, almost a third of individuals disagreed. Equally, when it comes to the organisational perspective (Item 4g), only a quarter of respondents agreed about the importance of focussing on a partner’s needs. Over 40% of respondents actually disagreed with the statement.

**Figure 7: Bar charts showing the views of individuals and organisations on the importance of a customer focus**



Obviously, without further investigation it would be difficult to ascertain the precise reasons for such a large percentage of disagreement. However, one possible interpretation could well be that such an outcome is a reflection back to the 'old' B2B culture where there was little understanding of the needs of the customer. Rather, the prevailing mindset was one of 'win-lose'.

Whether organisations actually deliver what they promise was investigated in Item 8a. Here, the intention was to establish whether respondents thought their respective organisations prided themselves on delivering on their promises. Although there was widespread agreement, around one sixth of individuals nevertheless claimed the contrary. What is interesting to note here is that the same two 'negative' respondents identified earlier were again among those disagreeing with this statement. As previously proposed, this could possibly indicate a very different organisational culture to the other institutions taking part in this research study.

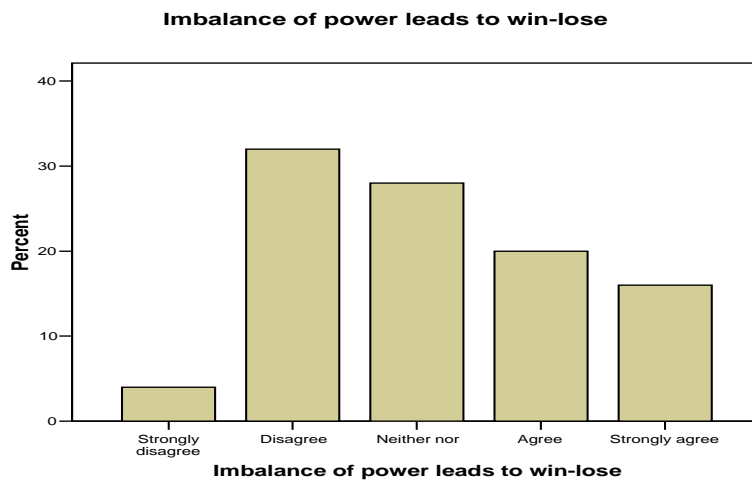
### ***Relationship outcomes***

In terms of what is expected from any long-term relationship, much mention is made in the RM literature of the need for both parties to feel that they have achieved something positive from the relationship. In other words, the notion of 'win-win' is considered a desirable outcome. In this particular study, the issue was addressed through Items 5c and 6c. From an individual perspective, there was overwhelming support for the notion that 'win-win' is the ultimate goal, with some 85% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing. From an organisational standpoint, however, the results were not quite so clear cut: around 2/3 of respondents agreed. This left around a quarter expressing neither agreement nor disagreement with the statement. Rather than this indicating that respondents had no view on the matter, it may simply have been that they found it difficult to interpret how their respective organisations would react. It is interesting to note that all of the corporate clients answered positively to both items, suggesting that they fully appreciate the importance of achieving a 'win-win' situation in their commercial relationships.

Probing this issue further, Item 5n invited respondents to comment on whether they felt that a 'win-win' situation was ultimately achievable. Here, some 70% of people thought that it was achievable. However, one thing which might hinder relationships

being good for both parties is possibly the problem of power imbalance. If one party is considered to be the dominant force in the relationship this may only serve to generate a 'win-lose' outcome. The results to Item 6d were quite interesting because they provided a mixed response to the issue (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Bar chart showing whether organisations believe an imbalance of power leads to a win-lose situation**



Agreement was only noted in just over one third of respondents. A little over 40% either disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that although one organisation in a relationship may still be the dominant force it did not necessarily mean that the relationship would not be in the best interests of either party. The corporate clients all presumably subscribe to this view because none of them agreed with the statement. A similar set of figures was produced in response to Item 5f, which looked at the same issue but from a personal standpoint.

A similar mixed response was evident in Item 6n, which attempted to establish whether respondents felt that their respective organisations were aware of the potential costs of long-term relationship failure. 40% of respondents agreed with the statement. However, an equal percentage felt their respective organisations were not aware of the potential costs of relationship failure. Whilst this could be interpreted as a worrying sign that some organisations might not look at their commercial relationships in a strategic manner, it may simply be that the respondents failed to

interpret the question accurately. One criticism of the pilot questionnaire was that some of the terminology used might not always be immediately obvious to those without an in-depth knowledge of RM concepts and theory. However, one thing which might suggest that the statement was interpreted correctly is that all of the corporate clients either agreed or strongly agreed. These are likely to be people who take a keen interest in all matters that could affect future profitability.

One final aspect of relationship outcomes that was tested was whether respondents felt that the actual length of a relationship was a good indicator of a successful relationship (Items 5g and 6f). Again, the results proved to be very much a mixed bag, with no clear view expressed one way or the other. The mix of opinions was echoed in the results from the corporate clients themselves. However, although the fact that length might not necessarily be the best indicator of a successful relationship, it is beyond the scope of this particular study to identify alternative measures that might be more suitable. However, this study did seek to probe the issue of the manner and frequency of contact between partners and whether this was likely to have any bearing on the longevity of the relationship.

### *Contact*

On the question of frequency of contact (Items 5h and 6g) around two thirds of respondents agreed both individually and on behalf of their respective organisations that it was likely to have an impact on relationship length. The assumption made here is that the more regular the contact established between parties the greater the likelihood of that relationship flourishing. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that around one sixth of respondents still disagreed with the statement, identifying once again that there might be other factors more relevant to the success of relationship development and maintenance over the longer-term. This group of respondents did not, however, include any of the corporate clients. So, these other factors may be of specific relevance only to those working within higher education establishments. However, focussing specifically on those working in higher education, statistical tests were carried out on the variables of *contact* ('frequency of contact is important to long-term success') and *jobrole* ('work in higher education'). With a Kendall's  $Tau_c$  of 0.320 and Spearman's  $\rho$  of 0.396, it is possible to detect a modest linear relationship between the variables (see Table 4).



**Table 4: Testing for a relationship between the variable of job role and frequency of contact**

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.167 <sup>a</sup>	2	.125
Likelihood Ratio	5.925	2	.052
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.322	1	.068
N of Valid Cases	25		

a. 5 cells (83.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .80.

**Symmetric Measures**

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Kendall's tau-b	.379	.091	2.673	.008
	Kendall's tau-c	.320	.120	2.673	.008
	Gamma	1.000	.000	2.673	.008
	Spearman Correlation	.396	.096	2.067	.050 <sup>c</sup>
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.372	.091	1.922	.067 <sup>c</sup>
N of Valid Cases		25			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

c. Based on normal approximation.

In relation to the matter of how this contact should best be conducted, Items 5i and 6h sought to determine whether formal contact was the preferred approach. Two thirds of respondents would appear to disagree with this notion when speaking from a personal standpoint.

**Table 5: Frequency table showing views on whether informal; contact works best**

**Informal contact works best**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	7	28.0	28.0	28.0
	Neither nor	9	36.0	36.0	64.0
	Agree	8	32.0	32.0	96.0
	Strongly agree	1	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total		25	100.0	100.0	

One would expect therefore that the inverse would apply and that these respondents would prefer more informal methods of contact. However, the control statement (Item 5m) would suggest that only around one third of people appear to positively agree that informal contact works best (see Table 5). This sends a very mixed message about the preferred nature of contact between parties.

Further evidence for the lack of interest in the informality of the relationship is provided by the statistical tests carried out on the variables of *infcont* ('informal contact works best') and *jobrole* ('work in higher education'). With a Kendall's  $Tau_c$  of -0.262 and Spearman's  $rho$  of -0.300, this would suggest that a modest negative relationship appears to exist (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Testing for a relationship between the variables of job role and informal contact**

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.261 <sup>a</sup>	3	.353
Likelihood Ratio	3.152	3	.369
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.176	1	.140
N of Valid Cases	25		

a. 5 cells (62.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .20.

**Symmetric Measures**

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Kendall's tau-b	-.280	.181	-1.431	.152
	Kendall's tau-c	-.262	.183	-1.431	.152
	Gamma	-.562	.323	-1.431	.152
	Spearman Correlation	-.300	.194	-1.506	.146 <sup>c</sup>
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	-.301	.185	-1.514	.144 <sup>c</sup>
N of Valid Cases		25			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

c. Based on normal approximation.

Moving on, one sixth of individuals actually agreed that formal contact was best (Item 5i). This possibly suggests that the more informal, social aspects of the relationship may not be to everybody's taste, despite the implications from the literature review in Document 2 that a normal relationship might be expected to comprise a degree of intimacy and informality. This is all the more interesting when the fact is taken into account that the corporate client view is skewed in favour of formality of contact (Item 5i). However, it should be borne in mind that the corporate client views originate from a very small sample and may not be fully representative of the general corporate client attitude towards the issue.

Further evidence for support for the formality of contact in a relationship is provided by the statistical tests carried out on the variables of *formcont* ('regular contact is best conducted formally') and *jobrole* ('work in higher education'). With a Kendall's  $Tau_c$  of 0.371 and Spearman's  $\rho$  of 0.457, this would suggest that a reasonably strong relationship appears to exist (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Testing for a relationship between the variables of job role and regular formal contact**

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.417 <sup>a</sup>	3	.144
Likelihood Ratio	5.397	3	.145
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.788	1	.029
N of Valid Cases	25		

a. 7 cells (87.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .20.

**Symmetric Measures**

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Kendall's tau-b	.434	.166	2.141	.032
	Kendall's tau-c	.371	.173	2.141	.032
	Gamma	.763	.179	2.141	.032
	Spearman Correlation	.457	.175	2.467	.022 <sup>c</sup>
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.447	.183	2.394	.025 <sup>c</sup>
N of Valid Cases		25			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

c. Based on normal approximation.

In terms of the organisational stance on formality of contact (Item 6h), about half of respondents believed their organisations preferred formal contact. A sizeable 25% disagreed. As above, a control statement was inserted into the questionnaire that attempted to determine whether organisations might actually discourage informal contact between parties. About 60% of respondents disagreed. However, it is disconcerting to observe that over a quarter of respondents claim that their respective organisations might still actively discourage this type of contact (see Table 8).

**Table 8: Frequency table showing views on whether organisations discourage informal contact**

**Organisation discourages informal contact**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	8.0	8.0	8.0
	Disagree	12	48.0	48.0	56.0
	Neither nor	4	16.0	16.0	72.0
	Agree	6	24.0	24.0	96.0
	Strongly agree	1	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total		25	100.0	100.0	

In a similar vein, Item 6l raised the issue of whether the organisation might regard the economic ties resulting from a relationship as more important than the social ties. It is interesting to note that some 60% of respondents agreed. Indeed, only 5% actually thought that the social ties were more important. This would quite clearly suggest that the profit motive behind the development of a relationship is of paramount importance to most organisations - so much so, that the social aspects may be regarded as

possibly little more than a by-product of the relationship or as simply one element among the many elements that go towards maintaining it over the longer-term.

The remainder of this data analysis section will now switch focus away from the purely personal perspective on relationships to consider a number of other issues thought appropriate to gaining a better insight into way in which organisations are perceived to approach commercial relationships.

### *Corporate traits*

The term ‘corporate traits’ has been used to summarise a group of factors such as corporate goodwill, corporate attitude towards shared strategic vision and concern over corporate image that, in a sense, could be said to contribute to the public face of an organisation. In other words, the sum total of the impact of these factors contributes to the development of a kind of corporate ‘personality’. In the same way that personality in individuals was deemed to be influential in speeding up the establishment and development of relationships, these corporate traits may also be expected to have some impact on how well organisations work together.

In this particular study, a shared strategic vision is assumed to be broadly similar in nature to the sharing of personal likes or tastes. If two organisations share a strategic vision then it implies that they should normally be expected to work well together. However, judging from the results to Item 3c, only half of respondents agreed that such a shared vision was important. It is interesting to observe that a quarter of respondents thought the matter would not get in the way of the relationship developing. However, it is appropriate to point out that none of the corporate clients disagreed with the statement. Again, this may indicate a heightened understanding of what is important for a commercial organisation to prosper.

By the same token, organisational ‘dislikes’ may also figure prominently, to the extent that a conflict of strategic interests may be considered detrimental to the development of a relationship (Item 4a). Indeed, some 70% of respondents appeared to support this notion (compared with two thirds of individuals who agreed in Item 2c in relation to the potential harm that personality clashes could inflict on a relationship). A control

statement (Item 6i) produced a similar set of results. However, again, approximately a quarter of respondents disagreed. It would be interesting to probe further in order to establish the precise reasons why these individuals feel that a conflict of strategic interests is unimportant in reality. Possibly, these relationships are so well-founded on a personal and social level that any corporate disagreements can be overcome speedily and effectively by the people most directly involved in the relationship.

In terms of whether this shared strategic vision could be developed further, 60% of respondents thought that organisations would consider the prospect of establishing a strategic alliance important (Item 3g). Although a quarter of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, a little fewer than 20% disagreed, suggesting that relationships might not necessarily need to lead to a strategic alliance in order to thrive. Again, none of the corporate clients figured among those disagreeing, suggesting that, for them, the issue of strategic alliances is possibly a major attraction of forging closer links between organisations.

Finally, in terms of the impact of relationships on corporate image (Item 4b) and the importance of organisational goodwill on building the relationship (Item 4c), the responses were overwhelmingly positive, with over 80% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Corporate clients showed a similar spread of results.

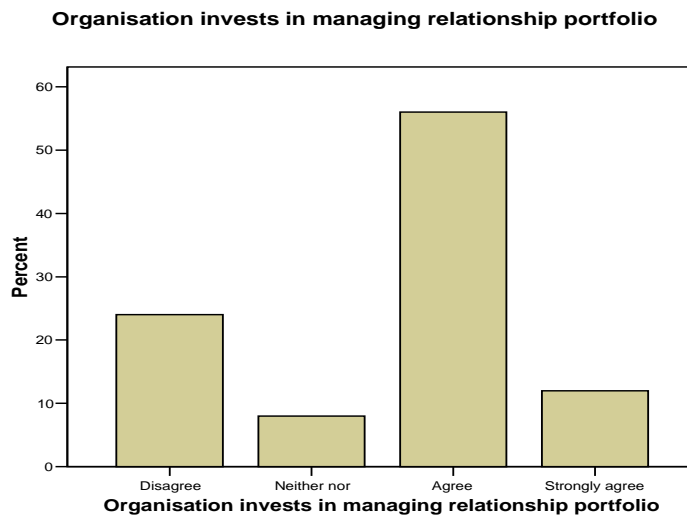
The remaining statements on the questionnaire were intended to provide an insight into how organisations facilitate the development and management of long-term relationships. For example, it is interesting to establish whether organisations are perceived to be providing adequate financial or personal support to key account managers. Equally, organisations may be perceived as not taking a strategic approach to managing their portfolios of relationships.

On the matter of adopting a strategic approach to relationships, the picture was somewhat confusing. Item 6j, for instance, suggested that approximately half of respondents thought their respective organisations did actually adopt a strategic approach. However, the control statement (Item 8k) saw this figure decrease to around one third. As a consequence, those disagreeing in Item 8k (45%) increased from around 30% (Item 6j). For the corporate clients, four fifths were convinced that their

organisations were being strategic. Despite this discrepancy, it is reasonable to suggest that, on balance, some organisations would appear not to be coping successfully with the strategic management of relationships.

This lack of strategic focus may extend to inadequate investment in managing relationship development. According to the results from Item 8d, it would appear that whilst two thirds agreed that their own organisations do invest, around a quarter of respondents still believed that their institutions do not. What is interesting about these results is that, once again, the two individuals from the one institution who have been singled out previously for being out of step with the general mood of respondents were present again among those who disagreed. This may suggest that they are less than satisfied with their own organisation's performance in supporting relationship activity (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Bar chart showing whether organisations invest in managing their relationship portfolios**



### *Staff issues*

In terms of workloads for key account managers, the results were inconclusive insofar as the potential impact on relationship management is concerned. Opinions were divided almost equally. It may be that some key account managers speak from experience when answering that they believe workloads to hamper good relationship

management. This was, after all, a theme that emerged in the qualitative interviews in Document 3. However, there are others who may not suffer from the same problem and thus find it difficult to visualise a situation where they would feel hampered by excessive workloads.

Turning to the issue of whether organisations have specific key account management (KAM) structures in place, once again, the picture was not particularly clear. With around 45% of respondents expressing agreement with the statement and 40% disagreeing, this may suggest that organisations perhaps have some way to go in developing appropriate structures to manage relationships effectively. This is also echoed in the responses to Item 8f concerning how proactive organisations are perceived to be in assigning people to KAM roles. These were also inconclusive. However, this issue would obviously need to be the subject of further investigation, possibly in Document 5.

### ***Organisational support***

The mixed and confusing picture continued into Item 8h, which attempted to establish whether key account managers thought that their organisations would make the necessary organisational changes to support them in their roles. However, the situation was more positive on the subject of whether organisations actually provide support for key account managers (Item 8g). Although it was impossible to specify the exact nature of this support in the statement, the intention was simply to gauge whether KAMs felt supported in general terms by their respective organisations. Approximately 50% of respondents agreed, with one third disagreeing. None of the corporate clients disagreed.

Further evidence for suggesting that organisations provide adequate support for KAMs is provided by the statistical tests carried out on the variables of *mansupp* ('organisation provides support for KAMs') and *jobrole* ('work in higher education'). With a Kendall's  $Tau_c$  of 0.399 and Spearman's  $\rho$  of 0.384, this would suggest that a reasonably strong relationship appears to exist and that KAMs do feel well supported by senior managers (see Table 9).



**Table 9: Testing for a relationship between the variables of job role and organisational support for KAMs**

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.062 <sup>a</sup>	4	.398
Likelihood Ratio	5.532	4	.237
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.542	1	.060
N of Valid Cases	25		

a. 9 cells (90.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .40.

**Symmetric Measures**

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Kendall's tau-b	.349	.125	2.231	.026
	Kendall's tau-c	.339	.152	2.231	.026
	Gamma	.707	.209	2.231	.026
	Spearman Correlation	.384	.138	1.993	.058 <sup>c</sup>
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.384	.128	1.996	.058 <sup>c</sup>
N of Valid Cases		25			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

c. Based on normal approximation.

Finally, focussing in on two particular aspects of support that were raised initially in the qualitative interviews in Document 3, Items 8i and 8j were designed to establish insights into whether key account managers felt supported either financially by their organisations or through personal development activities designed to enable them to perform their KAM role more effectively. The reaction to both statements was extremely revealing. For example, two thirds of respondents claimed that they were given no financial incentives to do a good job (Item 8i). Only one sixth of respondents agreed with the statement - two of whom were corporate clients (see Table 10). This might indicate that higher education establishments are not as advanced as their corporate clients in introducing adequate financial rewards for people in key account management positions.

**Table 10: Frequency table showing views on whether organisations provide financial incentives for KAMs**

**Organisation provides financial incentives**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	8	32.0	32.0	32.0
Disagree	7	28.0	28.0	60.0
Neither nor	6	24.0	24.0	84.0
Agree	3	12.0	12.0	96.0
Strongly agree	1	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total	25	100.0	100.0	

Again, in response to Item 8j, approximately 60% of people claimed that their organisations offered insufficient incentives other than financial ones - most corporate clients disagreed. Just 20% of the sample thought that there were suitable incentives offered (see Table 11). As above, it would appear that a large number of higher education establishments have some way to go in convincing members of staff that there are personal development opportunities available.

**Table 11: Frequency table showing views on whether organisations offer incentives other than financial for KAMs**

**Organisation offers other incentives**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	5	20.0	20.0	20.0
Disagree	9	36.0	36.0	56.0
Neither nor	6	24.0	24.0	80.0
Agree	4	16.0	16.0	96.0
Strongly agree	1	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total	25	100.0	100.0	

With the process of data analysis now completed, attention will turn to drawing a number of tentative conclusions from this particular quantitative study. These will be outlined in the following section of this Document.

## **Conclusions and themes for further research**

In order to provide a suitable structure for this section, it was thought appropriate to use the research questions set out at the beginning of this study. These questions were as follows:-

- Which particular aspects of the relationship do UK business school 'key account managers' and their corporate clients consider important?
- How far do current relationships meet/exceed the expectations of both parties?
- How can future relationships in a UK higher education context best be managed?

Once again, it should be borne in mind that these conclusions can only be tentative in view of the small sample taking part in this study. Nevertheless, the conclusions do occasionally reveal fascinating insights into issues that warrant further investigation. These issues have therefore been identified as appropriate.

### ***Which particular aspects of the relationship do UK business school 'key account managers' and their corporate clients consider important?***

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) identified the *social* dimensions of the relationship as the predominant focus of this study. As previously discussed, these social dimensions are concerned with issues such as attraction, atmosphere, social bonds, trust and commitment.

First, in terms of *attraction*, key account managers would appear to be highly motivated by factors such as intuition (or 'gut feel') when it comes to forming relationships. An intuitively felt personal chemistry between parties appears to be considered an important ingredient. Equally, a good sense of humour and a charismatic personality all help in the process of cementing the relationship. However, what is interesting to note is that there may be a tendency for respondents to rate these factors more highly on a personal level than for their respective

organisations. This is obviously not to say that the matter is unimportant for their organisations, rather it is something that is much more personally felt. The precise reasons for this difference are perhaps worthy of further exploration.

The *atmosphere* of a relationship can be coloured significantly by the personal likes and dislikes of the parties involved. This may be further influenced by the existence of strong personalities, leading to occasional personality clashes. However, as has been previously discussed, some respondents are happy to work through such personality clashes, presumably accepting them as part of the 'rough and tumble' of a commercial relationship. By the same token, a large proportion of respondents feel that past experience can also play a part in colouring the atmosphere of a relationship. However, the issue was thought perhaps to be more important for organisations than individuals.

On the subject of *social bonds*, it was somewhat revealing to discover that a relatively small proportion of respondents (one sixth) actually felt that the social aspects of the relationship were important. Furthermore, a majority suggested that economic ties were perhaps more important than social ties. This indicates that the harsh reality of operating in a competitive commercial environment may mean that the thoughts of individuals and organisations alike are focussed more on the generation of profit as the key driver of the relationship. By a similar token, it was surprising to identify that there wasn't particularly strong support for informal contact between parties. It was expected that the more informal and personal approach to establishing and managing a relationship might actually be considered more stimulating and more welcome than the formal aspects. However, early findings would indicate that more respondents actually prefer regular formal contact. So, it is difficult to say which type of contact is likely to work best from the limited findings in this particular study. This issue would also warrant further investigation in order to better understand the apparent paradox between individuals appreciating, on the one hand, all of the personal, more 'informal' elements of attraction yet, on the other hand, wanting to remain within a more formal sphere of operation.

In terms of *trust*, which is clearly a significant issue in much of the RM literature, it is therefore not surprising to see substantial agreement for the important role played in

relationship formation and relationship development by factors such as mutual respect and credibility. For most respondents, trust would appear to be both a necessary prerequisite to forming the relationship and a welcome and expected by-product of the process. Equally, as expected, the majority of respondents felt that *commitment* was something which had to be worked at over the course of a relationship. Without showing sufficient and sustained commitment on both sides, the relationship will inevitably struggle.

***How far do current relationships meet/exceed the expectations of both parties?***

Although the questionnaire in this study was not, strictly speaking, used to measure satisfaction *per se*, it nevertheless provides some interesting insights into situations where respondents believe that either they themselves or their respective organisations are providing a service that their partner would appreciate (in other words, situations where they feel they are ‘delivering’). For example, there is overwhelming support for the notion that respondents accept the need to be proactive in meeting their partner’s needs and that such a positive response is generally welcomed by partners. Equally, the majority of respondents believe that they and their respective organisations treat partners with sensitivity.

However, one area where there may still be room for improvement is in the matter of keeping promises. Although individuals were happy to claim that they recognised the importance of keeping promises, responses from the organisational perspective were less convincing. Clearly, it would be interesting to investigate further the reasons why key account managers feel that their respective organisations don’t always keep their promises. This would establish whether the reasons are due, for example, to poor communication, inappropriate key account management structures, poor senior management support or excessive workloads.

Another fascinating insight is provided by the finding that, although some respondents are aware of occasional personality clashes and imbalances of power between organisations, there is still sufficient interest for both parties to remain in the relationship. In other words, both parties accept that their mutual needs and goals are important and that a ‘win-win’ outcome is achievable. Without a ‘win-win’ outcome,

it is difficult to see how any disadvantaged party can elect to continue in a relationship. So, by implication, the relationship must be exceeding the expectations of all parties.

***How can future relationships in a UK higher education context best be managed?***

In addition to considering whether to focus more on the formal or informal aspects of the relationship (as previously discussed) and the frequency of contact between individuals, some thought needs to be given to the broader issue of how best to provide appropriate key account management support in a higher education context. This support might range from the organisation taking a more strategic approach to the management of its relationship portfolio to the provision of adequate incentives (financial or otherwise) to key account managers themselves. It is felt that this area is worthy of a good deal of further research. In fact, the whole area of key account management and appropriate KAM structures is expected to provide the main focus for research in Document 5. The intention is to identify precise structures and approaches that organisations could and should adopt in order to manage B2B relationships more effectively in the future.

At this stage, some tantalising insights have been provided by the research in Document 4. Whilst it is no doubt gratifying for organisations to see that approximately half of respondents believe that senior managers do provide adequate support for them and adequate investment in the relationship, this support does not extend to the provision of suitable financial and other incentives for key account managers. In fact, around two thirds of respondents claimed that they were not adequately compensated. This raises the question of what their respective motivation levels might be if their efforts were appropriately rewarded. However, precisely what will motivate key account managers is not possible to determine from this particular study.

Likewise, this research did not attempt to identify which particular types of KAM structure were thought to be effective. Neither was it able to gauge whether the relative seniority and rank of partners - or turnover of key contact staff - had an effect

on the long-term development of the relationship. These are issues that will be more fully investigated in Document 5.

Equally, the research conducted so far paints a confusing picture as to whether organisations do actually adopt a strategic approach to managing relationship portfolios, with only half of respondents suggesting that their respective organisations did. However, another issue that is impossible to investigate in this study is what organisations actually mean by a 'strategic' approach. The reality may well be that approaches are unique to each organisation, with some taking a longer-term view than others and some effecting more major structural changes than others. Nevertheless, it would be relevant to determine any common factors in the respective approaches to relationship portfolio management.

In conclusion, although the research in Document 4 has provided a welcome broadening of investigative scope in terms of taking the opportunity to roll out the questionnaire to key account managers in other higher education institutions (and to some of their corporate client contacts), so much remains to be uncovered about the complex world of B2B relationships in an academic environment. Thus, in Document 5, the investigation will continue...

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# Appendix

# Appendix 1

## **Initial themes emerging from Document 3**

Multiple demands of job role

Academic role

Job descriptors

Client management

Problems of defining client management

Aims of client management

Importance of client management

Time spent on client management

Need for preparation/lack of preparation

Work-related pressures (NBS demands)

Internal QA procedures (validation)

New developments for NBS

NBS relationship strategy

Portfolio management

Importance of outcomes

Financial criteria

Prestige (reputation)

Problems with running programmes/barriers

Problems with NBS KAM

Multiple relationships

Number of people present in meetings

Relationship volatility (personnel turnover)

Poor relationship history (baggage/hidden agendas/hearsay)

Internal conflict in client organisation

Legal bonds

Power balance

Unfair demands by client

Team ethic (both internal and external)

Added frustrations

Practical realities of business

Relationship length

Mutuality

Win-win (or win-lose?)

Positive relationship behaviour

Senior management support

Negative relationship behaviour

Relationship building techniques

Trust

Discretion

Frequency/method of contact

Need for transparency

Offering VFM

Social aspects

Personal chemistry

Rapport

Personal characteristics of client

Need to please senior managers

Self-interest

Personal characteristics of NBS KAM

Flexibility

Rapid response

Delivery (keeping promises)

Humour

Sense of personal achievement

Personal challenge

Resourcing issues

Incentives

Personal development issues

Language/cultural barriers

Factors relating to organisation size

Close bonds

Personal intuition

Spotting key decision makers

Personality

Experience

Being customer-centric

Understanding customer needs

Listening

Proactive

Organisational systems

# Appendix 2

## Affective relational attributes

Relational attributes	Personal	Organisational
<i>Psychological aspects</i>		
History (or personal 'baggage')	✓	✓
Intuition (or 'gut feel')	✓	✓
Personal likes/dislikes	✓	
Strategic preference		✓
Chemistry/shared values	✓	✓
Respect for other party	✓	✓
Likelihood of forming close social bonds	✓	
Likelihood of forming strategic alliance		✓
Self-interest	✓	✓
Sense of challenge	✓	✓
<i>Physical aspects</i>		
Experience/credibility	✓	✓
Reputation/corporate image		✓
Engaging personality/charisma	✓	
Potential for personality clashes	✓	
Potential for conflict of strategic intent		✓
Sense of humour	✓	
Flexibility	✓	✓
Responsiveness	✓	✓
Being proactive	✓	✓
Transparency	✓	✓
Being a good listener	✓	
Adopting a customer-centric approach	✓	✓

## Temporal relational attributes

Relational attributes	Personal	Organisational
<i>Psychological aspects</i>		
Trust	✓	✓
Commitment	✓	✓
Mutuality	✓	✓
Attitude to positive relationship behaviour	✓	✓
Attitude to negative relationship behaviour	✓	✓
Power balance	✓	✓
Sense of personal development in role	✓	
Demands on time/multiple roles	✓	
<i>Physical aspects</i>		
Stage in relationship life cycle	✓	✓
Length of relationship	✓	✓
Relationship history	✓	✓
Frequency of contact	✓	✓
Method of contact (personal or impersonal)	✓	✓
Number of people present in meetings	✓	✓
Role and status of those present	✓	✓
Turnover of staff	✓	✓
Demands on time/multiple roles	✓	✓
Potential for personality clashes	✓	
Potential for clash of strategic intent		✓
Co-ordinated relationship strategy		✓
Economic bonds		✓
Legal bonds		✓



## Instrumental relational attributes

Relational attributes	Personal	Organisational
<i>Psychological aspects</i>		
Positive attitude to being customer-centric	✓	✓
Positive attitude to providing VFM	✓	✓
Relationship awareness	✓	✓
Flexibility	✓	✓
Responsiveness	✓	✓
Willingness to keep promises	✓	✓
Having respect for others	✓	✓
Sensitivity to language/cultural issues	✓	✓
Awareness of relationship exit costs	✓	✓
<i>Physical aspects</i>		
Developing relationship strategy		✓
Adopting portfolio management approach		✓
Resourcing/financial issues		✓
Setting up KAM structure		✓
Assigning people to KAM role		✓
Personal development opportunities		✓
Other related organisational systems		✓
Senior management support		✓
Incentives		✓
Economic bonds		✓
Legal bonds		✓
Personal presentation	✓	✓
Being customer-centric	✓	✓
Providing VFM	✓	✓
Managing relationship flexibly	✓	✓
Managing relationship responsively	✓	✓
Practising good customer care	✓	✓

# Appendix 3

## “Exploring business school-corporate client relationships”

**Researcher:** Gary Harden (*Senior Lecturer in Marketing*)

**Contact details:** Gary Harden, Nottingham Business School,  
Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham NG1 4BU.  
Tel. (0115) 848 2444 E-mail: gary.harden@ntu.ac.uk

### How to complete this questionnaire

Thank you for your help in completing the following questionnaire. It should take **no longer than 15 minutes**. The questionnaire comprises a collection of statements (or items) each with a series of five answer options ranging from **strongly disagree** to **strongly agree**.

The questionnaire has been designed specifically for completion **via** computer in order to speed up the returns process. For each statement, all you have to do is left click with your mouse inside the box underneath the answer option that you feel is most appropriate and then enter an **X** from your computer keyboard. **Please note: you need to save the completed questionnaire and send it back to me as an attachment in your e-mail reply.**

*Please rest assured that anonymity will be respected throughout this exercise. However, for the purposes of analysis, it would help to have the following background information:-*

1.	Do you work in higher education?	Yes	No

2. If the answer is ‘No’ please describe the nature of your employer’s business:-

3.	What is your gender?	Male	Female

4. Please list your job title:-

5.	How long have you been in your current job?	Less than 1 year	1 -2 years	2 - 3 years	More than 3 years

Thank you.

## Section A: Affective relationship attributes

Please answer the following from a **personal** perspective. If, at first glance, any statement appears not to be directly relevant to you, please try to imagine a situation where the issue addressed in the statement could be relevant, and answer according to your personal beliefs and feelings.

1.	In the <u>early stages</u> of forming a new business relationship, your experience of previous relationships tells you that:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
a)	the new relationship will not be adversely affected by what has happened in the past					
b)	'gut feel' is important in deciding whether a successful relationship will develop					
c)	personal likes/dislikes play little or no part in forming a relationship					
d)	personal 'chemistry' between both parties is essential to forming a relationship					
e)	you will be seeking to put your own self-interest above that of your business partner					
f)	you find the prospect of forming a new relationship a strong personal motivator					
g)	the respect you have for a business partner influences how quickly a relationship forms					
h)	you would only consider dealing with a business partner that you felt you could trust					
i)	you look forward to the social aspects of the relationship rather than the formal aspects					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**

2.	In the <u>early stages</u> of forming a new business relationship, your experience of previous relationships tells you that:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
a)	you tend to respond more positively if your partner has a charismatic personality					
b)	a good sense of humour on both sides is not essential to cementing a relationship					
c)	you find personality clashes harmful to the formation of the relationship					
d)	being responsive to your business partner's needs is less important than personality					

e)	you appreciate that adopting a proactive approach to your partner will pay dividends					
f)	working towards mutual goals is more important than being honest with a partner					
g)	you don't feel it important to focus on your partner's needs all of the time					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**

Please answer the following from your **organisation's** perspective. If, at first glance, any statement appears not to be directly relevant to your organisation (based on your knowledge and experience), please try to imagine a situation where the issue addressed in the statement could be relevant, and answer according to your knowledge of the way your organisation would normally act in such a situation.

3.	<b>In the early stages of forming a new business relationship, the stated views or observed behaviour of senior managers leads you to believe that:</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
a)	past experience has no bearing on how the organisation forms the new relationship					
b)	'gut feel' is important in deciding whether a successful relationship is likely to develop					
c)	a shared strategic vision is not necessarily relevant to forming the relationship					
d)	a certain 'chemistry' between both parties is essential to establishing the relationship					
e)	respect for the other organisation influences how quickly the relationship forms					
f)	your organisation would only consider dealing with a partner it felt it could trust					
g)	the potential to form a strategic alliance with the other organisation is not important					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**

4.	In the <u>early stages</u> of forming a new business relationship, the stated views or observed behaviour of senior managers leads you to believe that:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
a)	the credibility of both parties determines how quickly the relationship forms					
b)	the potential impact of the relationship on corporate image is an important issue					
c)	goodwill on both sides is not essential to forming a solid relationship					
d)	a conflict of strategic interests is viewed as potentially detrimental to the relationship					
e)	being responsive to the other party's needs is less important than goodwill					
f)	the organisation appreciates that adopting a proactive approach will pay dividends					
g)	the organisation doesn't feel it important to focus on its partner's needs all of the time					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**

## Section B: Temporal relationship attributes

Please answer the following from a **personal** perspective. If, at first glance, any statement appears not to be directly relevant to you, please try to imagine a situation where the issue addressed in the statement could be relevant, and answer according to your personal beliefs and feelings.

5.	In the process of <u>managing</u> a long-term relationship with a business partner, you feel generally that:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
a)	mutual trust is a natural by-product of a lengthy relationship					
b)	without commitment to the relationship on both sides it will struggle					
c)	the desire to achieve a 'win-win' situation is the ultimate goal					
d)	personality clashes do not make for a long-lasting relationship					
e)	positive behaviour from your partner will tend to increase relationship length					
f)	an imbalance of power between the two parties will lead to a 'win-lose' situation					
g)	length of relationship is a reliable indicator of how successful a relationship is					
h)	frequency of contact with your partner has no bearing on relationship length					
i)	regular contact is best conducted in a formal manner					
j)	turnover of key staff doesn't have a negative effect on how long a relationship lasts					
k)	a heavy workload means that you can't develop any single relationship properly					
l)	negative behaviour from your partner is detrimental to the length of the relationship					
m)	contact with your partner works best if conducted informally					
n)	the practical reality is that a 'win-win' situation is seldom achievable					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**

Please answer the following from your **organisation's** perspective. If, at first glance, any statement appears not to be directly relevant to your organisation (based on your knowledge and experience), please try to imagine a situation where the issue addressed in the statement could be relevant, and answer according to your knowledge of the way your organisation would normally act in such a situation.

6.	<b>In the process of <u>managing</u> a long-term business relationship, the stated views or observed behaviour of senior managers leads you to believe that:</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
a)	mutual trust between organisations is an expected outcome of a lengthy relationship					
b)	It is accepted that without mutual commitment the relationship will struggle					
c)	the desire to achieve a 'win-win' situation is considered the ultimate goal					
d)	an imbalance of power between the parties is expected to lead to a 'win-lose' situation					
e)	positive behaviour from its partners will tend to increase relationship length					
f)	length of relationship is not regarded as a reliable indicator of relationship success					
g)	frequency of contact with a partner is not considered important to long-term success					
h)	the organisation feels that regular contact should be conducted in a formal manner					
i)	It considers that a clash of strategic interests does not make for a long-lasting relationship					
j)	the organisation adopts a strategic approach to managing its relationships					
k)	the organisation tends to discourage regular informal contact with partners					
l)	close economic ties in the long-term are considered more important than social ties					
m)	the use of a legally binding contract is viewed as the mainstay of a relationship					
n)	the organisation is unaware of the potential long-term cost of relationship failure					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**



### Section C: Instrumental relationship attributes

Please answer the following from a **personal** perspective. If, at first glance, any statement appears not to be directly relevant to you, please try to imagine a situation where the issue addressed in the statement could be relevant, and answer according to your personal beliefs and feelings.

7.	In the process of <b>managing</b> a long-term relationship with a business partner, you feel generally that:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
a)	your positive attitude to the relationship is the one thing that your partner values most					
b)	your partner is not really concerned with how responsive you are to his/her needs					
c)	you are able to demonstrate that you treat your business partner with sensitivity					
d)	failure to keep promises will not be tolerated by your partner in the longer-term					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**

Please answer the following from your **organisation's** perspective. If, at first glance, any statement appears not to be directly relevant to your organisation (based on your knowledge and experience), please try to imagine a situation where the issue addressed in the statement could be relevant, and answer according to your knowledge of the way your organisation would normally act in such a situation.

8.	In the process of <b>managing</b> a long-term business relationship, the stated views or observed behaviour of senior managers leads you to believe that:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
a)	the organisation prides itself on being able to deliver what its partners want					
b)	It is able to demonstrate that it treats its business partners with sensitivity					
c)	the organisation regards the keeping of promises as a matter of common courtesy					
d)	It is prepared to invest in managing its portfolio of business relationships					
e)	the organisation has a 'key account management' structure in place					
f)	It takes a proactive approach to assigning staff to key account management roles					

g)	It provides senior management support for its key account managers					
h)	the organisation makes organisational changes to support its key account managers					
i)	the organisation offers key account managers appropriate financial incentives					
j)	It offers key account managers appropriate incentives ( <b>other than financial</b> )					
k)	It is unable to demonstrate a strategic approach to managing its relationships					

**Additional comments (if necessary):**

**Thank you for taking part in this research.**

**Please save the above data as ‘Completed questionnaire’ - or something similar - and return it as an attachment in your e-mail reply to**

**gary.harden@ntu.ac.uk**

*If you would like to see the results of this study, I would be only too happy to send you a copy once all of the data has been analysed and written up. Simply indicate in your e-mail reply whether you would like me to send you the details.*

Gary Harden  
 Nottingham Business School  
 February 2005

# Appendix 4

## “Exploring business school-corporate client relationships”

### *How you can help me in my research...*

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for taking the time to read this. My name is **Gary Harden** and I am currently a Senior Lecturer at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University. A couple of years ago, I decided to begin studying for a Doctorate in Business Administration as part of a programme of continuing personal and professional development. I am now just over halfway through a research programme which has set out to explore how relationships between a Business School and its corporate clients are formed and managed. The research is intended to be informative for both Business School employees (the ‘key account managers’) tasked with managing relationships with corporate clients and the client company contacts themselves. It is hoped that both parties can learn more about what makes business relationships ‘tick’ so that they can be managed more effectively.

As you will see from the accompanying questionnaire, at this stage in my research I will be exploring three particular aspects of these relationships:-

- the emotional side of forming relationships that governs the way we feel about a business partner (i.e. the **affective** attributes)
- the issues likely to affect the duration of the relationship (i.e. the **temporal** attributes)
- the tools and techniques that can be used in the task of maintaining relationships (i.e. the **instrumental** attributes)

You will also notice that I am not only interested in the personal aspects of business relationships (i.e. the perspective of the key account manager or key client contact) but also how individuals view the approach of their respective organisations to managing relationships (i.e. the organisational perspective). In so doing, the similarities and differences between the two perspectives can be explored.

#### **Task**

The questionnaire should take **no longer than 15 minutes** to complete. Further explanation of how to proceed can be found on the first page of the questionnaire that you have been sent by e-mail.

Thank you for your help.

Gary Harden  
*Nottingham Business School*  
*February 2005*

# Appendix 5

## Scale reliability statistics

### Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.831	73

### Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Relationship adversely affected by past history	245.7500	329.145	.480	.823
Importance of gut feeling for relationship success	245.1500	341.187	.317	.828
Personal likes and dislikes impact on relationship	245.1000	350.937	.020	.833
Personal chemistry essential to relationship formation	245.1000	332.516	.560	.823
Motivated by self-interest	246.6500	344.661	.299	.829
Motivated by prospect of new relationship	245.0500	347.629	.167	.830
Respect for partner speeds up relationship development	244.9000	332.411	.611	.823
Only deal with trusted partner	245.0000	331.579	.454	.824
Look forward to social aspects	246.5500	347.103	.159	.830
Charismatic personality in partner helps	245.2500	348.724	.105	.831
Good sense of humour is essential	245.6000	332.884	.549	.823
Personality clashes are harmful	245.5500	352.366	-.018	.834
Personality more important than responsiveness	245.3500	351.397	.009	.834
Proactive approach will pay dividends	244.9500	340.576	.362	.827
Mutual goals more important than honesty	246.6500	368.871	-.473	.842
Focus on partner's needs is important	245.7500	343.039	.225	.829
Organisational past experience impacts the relationship	245.3000	347.168	.138	.831

Organisational gut feeling is important	245.4000	349.937	.079	.832
Shared strategic vision is important	245.6500	337.924	.467	.825
Organisational chemistry is essential	245.5500	334.787	.491	.824
Organisational respect speeds up relationship	245.1000	344.305	.428	.828
Organisational trust in partner is essential	245.5500	336.787	.406	.826
Potential for strategic alliance is important	245.5000	339.632	.309	.828
Organisational credibility impacts relationship speed	245.1000	344.726	.262	.829
Impact on corporate image is important	245.0000	337.789	.468	.825
Organisational goodwill essential to forming relationship	245.1500	334.976	.592	.824
Conflict of strategic interests is detrimental	245.6000	335.095	.371	.826
Organisational responsiveness is more important than goodwill	245.7000	358.011	-.184	.836
Organisational proactiveness pays dividends	245.2000	344.695	.269	.829
Organisational focus on partner's needs is important	246.2500	345.250	.172	.830
Trust is relationship by-product	245.5500	356.050	-.113	.836
Commitment to relationship necessary to avoid struggle	244.7000	352.853	-.022	.832
Win-win is ultimate goal	244.7500	343.882	.400	.828
Personality clashes affect relationship length	246.9000	361.568	-.275	.838
Positive behaviour increases relationship length	244.8000	344.695	.376	.828
Imbalance of power leads to win-lose	246.0000	339.368	.271	.828
Relationship length is reliable indicator of success	245.9500	341.524	.268	.829
Contact frequency impacts relationship length	245.3000	353.905	-.061	.834
Regular contact best conducted formally	246.4500	351.839	.002	.833
Staff turnover has negative impact on relationship length	244.9500	344.997	.306	.829

Heavy workload harms relationship development	246.0000	353.579	-.053	.837
Negative behaviour harms relationship length	245.1000	342.411	.386	.827
Informal contact works best	246.1000	341.779	.308	.828
Achievement of win-win seldom possible	246.8000	354.274	-.078	.834
Organisational trust expected in long relationship	245.1500	346.450	.214	.830
Mutual commitment necessary to build relationship	245.0500	350.682	.080	.831
Organisational win-win is ultimate goal	245.0000	336.526	.472	.825
Power imbalance leads to win-lose	246.1500	335.713	.366	.826
Positive organisational behaviour encourages long relationship	244.9500	340.366	.589	.826
Length of relationship is reliable organisational indicator of success	245.9500	352.892	-.034	.835
Frequency of contact important to long-term success	245.5500	341.418	.380	.827
Regular formal contact is best	245.8500	346.766	.168	.830
Clash of strategic interests makes for long-term relationship	246.6000	386.568	-.812	.851
Organisation adopts strategic approach to relationships	245.9000	328.621	.579	.822
Organisation discourages informal contact	246.4000	362.568	-.303	.839
Economic ties more important than social ties	245.3500	341.713	.385	.827
Legally binding contracts as mainstay	246.2000	351.853	-.015	.835
Organisation aware of long-term relationship costs	245.8000	342.905	.206	.830
Partner values positive attitude	245.2500	347.776	.113	.831
Partner is concerned about responsiveness	244.8000	359.747	-.353	.836
Treat partner with sensitivity	245.1000	346.726	.248	.829
Broken promises will have affect in longer-term	247.4500	354.892	-.093	.834
Organisation prides itself on delivering	245.3000	331.379	.579	.823



Organisation treats partners with sensitivity	245.5500	337.839	.466	.825
Organisation treats promise keeping as common courtesy	245.2000	338.274	.566	.825
Organisation invests in managing relationship portfolio	245.5500	329.313	.616	.822
KAM structure in place	245.9500	329.734	.489	.823
Organisation proactive in assigning KAMs	246.0000	322.105	.632	.819
Organisation provides support for KAMs	246.0500	329.103	.502	.823
Organisation makes changes to support KAMs	246.1500	337.082	.305	.828
Organisation provides financial incentives	246.7500	338.618	.293	.828
Organisation offers other incentives	246.6500	333.187	.457	.824
Organisation demonstrates strategic approach	246.2000	334.274	.412	.825

# Appendix 6

## Descriptive statistics: summary

### Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Relationship adversely affected by past history	20	1.00	5.00	3.1000	1.33377
Importance of gut feeling for relationship success	20	2.00	5.00	4.0000	.85840
Personal likes and dislikes impact on relationship	19	2.00	5.00	3.9474	.91127
Personal chemistry essential to relationship formation	20	2.00	5.00	3.8000	1.00525
Motivated by self-interest	20	1.00	3.00	2.3000	.57124
Motivated by prospect of new relationship	20	3.00	5.00	3.8000	.69585
Respect for partner speeds up relationship development	18	2.00	5.00	3.9444	.87260
Only deal with trusted partner	20	2.00	5.00	3.9000	1.29371
Look forward to social aspects	20	1.00	5.00	2.5500	.99868
Charismatic personality in partner helps	20	2.00	5.00	3.9000	.71818
Good sense of humour is essential	20	2.00	5.00	3.2500	1.01955
Personality clashes are harmful	20	1.00	4.00	3.4500	.99868
Personality more important than responsiveness	20	1.00	5.00	3.5000	1.19208
Proactive approach will pay dividends	20	1.00	5.00	4.1000	.91191
Mutual goals more important than honesty	20	1.00	4.00	2.3500	.87509
Focus on partner's needs is important	20	2.00	5.00	3.1000	1.07115
Organisational past experience impacts the relationship	19	2.00	5.00	3.5263	.96427
Organisational gut feeling is important	19	2.00	5.00	3.3158	.94591
Shared strategic vision is important	19	2.00	4.00	3.2105	.91766
Organisational chemistry is essential	19	2.00	5.00	3.1579	1.06787
Organisational respect speeds up relationship	19	2.00	5.00	4.0000	.66667
Organisational trust in partner is essential	19	2.00	5.00	3.6316	1.11607

Potential for strategic alliance is important	19	2.00	5.00	3.6316	.95513
Organisational credibility impacts relationship speed	19	2.00	5.00	3.8947	.73747
Impact on corporate image is important	19	2.00	5.00	3.8947	.80930
Organisational goodwill essential to forming relationship	19	1.00	5.00	3.5789	1.07061
Conflict of strategic interests is detrimental	19	1.00	5.00	3.4737	1.21876
Organisational responsiveness is more important than goodwill	19	2.00	5.00	3.1579	.95819
Organisational proactiveness pays dividends	19	2.00	5.00	3.7895	.78733
Organisational focus on partner's needs is important	19	1.00	5.00	2.6842	1.00292
Trust is relationship by-product	20	1.00	5.00	3.3000	1.26074
Commitment to relationship necessary to avoid struggle	20	2.00	5.00	4.2500	.71635
Win-win is ultimate goal	20	2.00	5.00	4.1000	.78807
Personality clashes affect relationship length	20	1.00	5.00	2.3000	1.03110
Positive behaviour increases relationship length	20	3.00	5.00	4.2500	.55012
Imbalance of power leads to win-lose	20	1.00	5.00	3.1500	1.18210
Relationship length is reliable indicator of success	20	2.00	5.00	3.2500	1.06992
Contact frequency impacts relationship length	20	2.00	5.00	3.7500	1.06992
Regular contact best conducted formally	20	1.00	4.00	2.4000	.82078
Staff turnover has negative impact on relationship length	20	2.00	5.00	4.0500	.82558
Heavy workload harms relationship development	20	1.00	5.00	3.1500	1.26803
Negative behaviour harms relationship length	20	2.00	5.00	3.9500	.75915
Informal contact works best	20	2.00	5.00	3.2000	.89443
Achievement of win-win seldom possible	20	1.00	4.00	2.2000	.76777
Organisational trust expected in long relationship	20	2.00	5.00	3.9000	.78807

Mutual commitment necessary to build relationship	20	2.00	5.00	4.1500	.67082
Organisational win-win is ultimate goal	20	2.00	5.00	3.9000	.91191
Power imbalance leads to win-lose	19	1.00	5.00	3.0000	1.15470
Positive organisational behaviour encourages long relationship	20	3.00	5.00	4.1000	.55251
Length of relationship is reliable organisational indicator of success	20	1.00	5.00	3.1500	1.03999
Frequency of contact important to long-term success	20	2.00	4.00	3.4000	.75394
Regular formal contact is best	20	2.00	4.00	3.2000	.83351
Clash of strategic interests makes for long-term relationship	20	1.00	4.00	2.5500	.99868
Organisation adopts strategic approach to relationships	20	1.00	5.00	3.1000	1.07115
Organisation discourages informal contact	20	1.00	5.00	2.8000	1.05631
Economic ties more important than social ties	20	2.00	5.00	3.6000	.75394
Legally binding contracts as mainstay	20	1.00	5.00	3.2000	1.28145
Organisation aware of long-term relationship costs	20	1.00	5.00	3.0000	1.21395
Partner values positive attitude	20	2.00	5.00	3.6500	.87509
Partner is concerned about responsiveness	20	4.00	5.00	4.3500	.48936
Treat partner with sensitivity	20	2.00	5.00	3.9500	.60481
Broken promises will have affect in longer-term	20	1.00	3.00	1.6000	.68056
Organisation prides itself on delivering	20	2.00	5.00	3.7000	1.12858
Organisation treats partners with sensitivity	20	2.00	5.00	3.3500	.98809
Organisation treats promise keeping as common courtesy	20	2.00	5.00	3.7500	.91047
Organisation invests in managing relationship portfolio	20	2.00	5.00	3.5000	1.10024
KAM structure in place	20	1.00	5.00	2.9500	1.27630
Organisation proactive in assigning KAMs	20	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.33377

Organisation provides support for KAMs	20	1.00	5.00	2.9500	1.23438
Organisation makes changes to support KAMs	20	1.00	5.00	2.9500	1.23438
Organisation provides financial incentives	20	1.00	4.00	2.1000	1.11921
Organisation offers other incentives	20	1.00	4.00	2.3500	1.08942
Organisation demonstrates strategic approach	20	1.00	5.00	2.7000	1.08094
Work in higher education	20	1.00	2.00	1.1000	.30779

# **A re-evaluation of the relevance of Key Account Management to the UK higher education sector**

**Volume II**

**Gary Richard Harden**

*In part-fulfilment of the requirements  
of the degree of Doctor of Business  
Administration*

**Nottingham Business School  
Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

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## Abstract

This research set out to explore the nature of business-to-business (B2B) relationships in the UK higher education postgraduate sector. More specifically, it sought to address the strategic issue of how relationships between a UK business school (in this case, Nottingham Business School) and its corporate clients could be organised and managed effectively over the longer-term in order to provide, maintain or, where appropriate, enhance the mutual satisfaction of all parties concerned. It is argued that such research is relevant and timely given that revenue generated from commercial activity (*third stream* income) is considered increasingly vital to UK business schools as they attempt to remain financially solvent in a toughening market that is faced with the additional threat of longer-term reductions in Higher Education Funding Council grants (Watling *et al.*, 2003; Prince, 2004; Prince, 2007).

It is not only commercial activity that would appear to be a relatively under-developed activity in most new universities (Prince, 2004). B2B literature shows little or no research into business relationships within the UK corporate education sector (Murray and Underhill, 2002). Additionally, Ellis and Mayer (2001) and Wright (2004) are typical of those calling for more research across different B2B sectors.

Having scoped the research problem (Document 1) and undertaken a critical review of the B2B relationship marketing literature (Document 2), exploratory qualitative research in Document 3 focused on NBS lecturers with responsibility for managing both open and client-specific postgraduate programmes. Whilst previous commercial experience and academic expertise were thought to lend weight and respectability to the client manager's position, social and inter-personal aspects were felt to exert a greater influence on the relationship. However, a number of barriers are likely to hinder the successful development of commercial relationships. Some of these are external (e.g. sudden and unexpected adverse trading conditions or a more general economic downturn), others are more or less self-inflicted (e.g. lack of senior management support or a tendency to overload the client manager job role). Client managers were also more likely to adopt a positive attitude to business development if they were rewarded appropriately.

Document 4 enabled some of these issues to be explored further through quantitative survey-based research that benefited from the inclusion of a number of corporate clients as well as client managers from other higher education institutions. An initial review of the B2B relationship marketing literature had identified a number of dimensions that were thought vital to relationship formation and development: attraction, atmosphere, social bonds, trust and commitment. Of these, social bonds were thought to have the greatest impact. However, the research suggested that it was actually the attraction dimension that figured most prominently, with all parties appearing to value intuition (or 'gut feel'), personal chemistry, a sense of humour and a charismatic personality as core ingredients in relationship formation. Interestingly, closer economic ties were considered more relevant than social bonds. The research also tackled a number of issues ranging from the strategic development of the relationship portfolio through to operational matters such as whether appropriate incentives (financial or otherwise) should be offered to client managers. Whilst it was reassuring to note that half of the respondents believed senior managers provided



reasonable support and investment for commercial relationships, this support did not necessarily extend to financial and other incentives for client managers themselves.

From the outset, this study was designed to conclude with an exploration and reappraisal of the strategic relevance to a UK business school of the Key Account Management concept. Thus, Document 5 focused on the relevance of the concept for Nottingham Business School, as seen through the eyes of the academics adjudged to be occupying key account management roles. On the face of it, many of the elements of KAM appear to have the potential to be adapted to fit a business school environment. Nevertheless, this study suggests that the KAM journey is likely to be a long, arduous and challenging one. Indeed, KAM represents a bold strategic move for an organisation like Nottingham Business School and would require significant investment in both people and support systems in order to flourish. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee of a short-term return on that investment. Equally, when the potential barriers to KAM implementation are considered - particularly the longer-term problem of encouraging commercial flair and developing business acumen in an entrenched academic culture - the task confronting senior managers would appear to be a challenging one. Consequently, it would be no surprise to see a KAM strategy overlooked in favour of a simpler, more cost-effective alternative.

## **Key words**

Business-to-business  
B2B  
B2B relationship marketing  
Key account management  
KAM  
Corporate client manager  
Programme manager  
UK higher education sector  
Nottingham Business School

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A re-evaluation of the relevance of Key Account Management to the UK higher education sector: a case study of Nottingham Business School

#### **Document 6 (Reflection)**

*'Surviving the doctoral journey'*

A personal perspective on the DBA research process

## **Document 5**

# ***A re-evaluation of the relevance of Key Account Management to the UK higher education sector: a case study of Nottingham Business School***

by

**Gary Richard Harden**

*In part-fulfilment of the  
Doctorate in Business Administration  
(2002/2005 cohort)*

**Nottingham Business School  
Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**



## **Introduction**

Documents 3 and 4 set out to identify what programme leaders (or ‘key account managers’) at Nottingham Business School (NBS) and their corporate clients look for in a successful and mutually beneficial business relationship. The intention was always to surface general themes rather than focus specifically on the concept of key account management (or KAM), which would become the research focus of Document 5.

In Document 3, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small number of lecturers who were responsible for the management of both open and client-specific postgraduate programmes within NBS. The views expressed about the nature of relationships with corporate clients, and how these could be developed, formed the basis for a larger quantitative study in Document 4 that sought to obtain views not only from other NBS staff with programme leadership responsibility but also from some of their corporate clients. Here, access to corporate clients was facilitated by the programme leaders and represented a form of snowball sampling. In addition, it was felt that feedback from both NBS senior managers and programme leaders at other UK higher education institutions would enhance the validity of the study. Indeed, respondents were recruited from five establishments using snowball sampling, with initial access facilitated by a personal contact.

The specific research questions that were addressed in Document 4 were as follows:-

- Which particular aspects of the relationship do UK business school ‘key account managers’ and their corporate clients consider important?
- How far do current relationships meet/exceed the expectations of both parties?
- How can future relationships in a UK higher education context best be managed?

The following tentative conclusions were drawn from the research, revealing insights into a number of areas thought worthy of further investigation:-

***Which particular aspects of the relationship do UK business school 'key account managers' and their corporate clients consider important?***

From an initial review of the B2B relationship marketing literature, a number of potential relationship aspects (or dimensions) had been identified: attraction, atmosphere, social bonds, trust and commitment. Of these, *social bonds* were thought to have the greatest impact on business relationships. However, it was actually the *attraction* dimension that figured most prominently in the data gathered, with both parties appearing to value intuition (or 'gut feel'), personal chemistry, a sense of humour and a charismatic personality as core ingredients in relationship formation. Indeed, respondents valued such factors more highly than they felt their respective organisations did. However, as for past relationship experience, respondents felt this was likely to be more of a concern at the organisational rather than personal level. They also felt that the *atmosphere* of a relationship could be coloured significantly by the personal likes and dislikes of the parties involved. For example, the existence of strong personalities might occasionally lead to personality clashes.

Given the prominence of the issue in the B2B relationship marketing literature, it was surprising to discover that few respondents felt the social aspects of the relationship to be important. Indeed, closer *economic* ties were considered far more relevant, presumably reflecting an acknowledgement that economic indicators such as profitability are the key drivers of commercial success. Furthermore, there appeared to be limited interest in establishing informal contact between parties. This was expected to be prized over the more formal demands of business relationship etiquette. However, findings indicated that respondents wished to restrict relationships to regular formal contact.

As far as *trust* was concerned, there was general recognition among respondents that mutual respect and credibility play vital roles in relationship formation and development. Equally, trust would appear to be both a prerequisite to forming the relationship and an expected by-product of the process. However, respondents felt that *commitment* had to be worked at over the course of a relationship. Without it, the relationship would struggle.

***How far do current relationships meet/exceed the expectations of both parties?***

Although Document 4 did not set out to measure satisfaction *per se*, it nevertheless provided insights into the kind of service respondents believed that they (or their respective organisations) were providing - and the level of service they felt that business partners would appreciate. Here, for example, most respondents thought that a partner would welcome their needs being met in a timely and proactive manner. The general consensus was that they were actually providing such a service already. Equally, both parties felt that they handled partners with sensitivity. However, there appears to be room for improvement, notably, in keeping promises. Whilst respondents claimed they personally recognised the importance of keeping promises, they were not sure whether they could say the same for their respective organisations. For example, poor communication, inappropriate key account management structures, limited senior management support and excessive personal workloads were typical of ways in which organisations failed to keep promises, often resulting in employee frustration and demotivation. Document 5 provides an excellent opportunity to explore some of these structural issues.

In general, both parties endorsed the concept of mutuality and felt they were actively working for a 'win-win' outcome. At no stage did respondents express significant dissatisfaction about the actions of a business partner. Thus, it would appear that the minimum expectations of both parties were being met.

***How can future relationships in a UK higher education context best be managed?***

In addition to focussing on the degree of relationship formality and the frequency of contact between individuals, thought was given to the matter of how to provide appropriate key account management support in a higher education context. For example, questions tackled a number of issues ranging from the strategic development of the relationship portfolio through to operational matters such as whether appropriate incentives (financial or otherwise) should be offered to key account managers. Whilst it was reassuring to note that half of the respondents believed senior managers currently provided reasonable support and investment for commercial relationships, this support did not necessarily extend to financial and other incentives

for key account managers themselves. In fact, around two thirds of respondents felt they were not receiving adequate compensation for their efforts. This, too, is likely to impact on key account manager motivation levels and, ultimately, job performance.

Thus, at this point, the aims and research questions for Document 5 can be clarified.

### **Research questions for Document 5**

The assessment criteria for Document 5 call for the researcher to explore and report on a separate - but major - aspect of the overall DBA research topic. It is normally expected that issues surfaced in the previous two Documents will be subjected to further scrutiny, but no particular methodological approach is prescribed. Whilst methodological issues will be discussed in more detail later, it is worth briefly clarifying the overall methodological direction adopted in this study in order to provide a context for the research questions.

This study adopted an interpretivist epistemological stance with the intention of gathering qualitative data from a series of semi-structured interviews. The interview participants comprised those individuals at Nottingham Business School (NBS) adjudged by both the researcher and an *ad hoc* panel of colleagues as operating in a 'key account manager' capacity. In other words, those who by virtue of their job titles or job roles were thought to have the most significant direct contact with current or potential corporate clients. Equally, NBS was selected as the case study organisation largely out of convenience rather than it necessarily being representative of UK business schools. Further background information about NBS may be found in Appendix 10. Whilst it is acknowledged that the conclusions from this study are not generalisable, it is nevertheless hoped that research of a similar nature can be conducted by others in different business schools in the immediate future.

The research questions addressed are as follows:-

- How appropriate is the concept of Key Account Management (KAM) to the organisation and management of current corporate client relationships at Nottingham Business School?

- What are the perceived characteristics of a successful key account manager according to Nottingham Business School corporate client managers?
- How could a KAM strategy be implemented at Nottingham Business School?

Throughout, the intention has been to explore and reappraise the strategic relevance to a UK business school of the Key Account Management concept, but through the eyes of key account managers themselves. In principle, a review of the concept is all the more relevant and timely given that revenue generated from commercial activity (*third stream* income) is considered increasingly vital to UK business schools as they attempt to remain financially solvent in a toughening market that is facing a further threat from longer-term reductions in Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) grants (Watling *et al.*, 2003; Prince, 2004; Prince, 2007). However, commercial activity would appear to be a relatively under-developed activity in most new universities (Prince, 2004). Equally, the effective management of third stream income may not simply be a question of dedicating staff to commercial activities but ensuring that they have the right skill set and customer orientation to do the job in the first place (Prince, 2007).

It is also suggested that the practice of key account planning has received little or no attention from academics (Ryals and Rogers, 2007). Equally, although many articles explore the conceptual differences between key account and normal buyer-seller relationships, there is little supporting empirical evidence offered (Ivens and Pardo, 2008). Indeed, the absence of broad-based empirical research is a recurring theme in the KAM literature. Much existing research is also criticised for being too descriptive (Millman and Wilson, 1996; Workman *et al.*, 2003). In reality, academic positions range from an insistence that little has changed in the past 20 years (Homburg *et al.*, 2002) to an acknowledgement that change is occurring, albeit slowly:-

*“We are still a long way from being able to say we know everything about key account management. However, we are much less ignorant than we were ten years ago.”* (Pardo, 1999:286)

KAM could be seen to be at a crucial stage in its development. According to the editorial comment in the special edition of the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* in 1997 - dedicated to reviewing KAM's progress - the hope was expressed that debate would mark "...a new interest and focus on the special opportunities and challenges in National or Key Account Management" (Krapfel and Sengupta, 1997).

The review of KAM literature that follows sets out to evaluate whether academics and practitioners have risen to these 'special opportunities' and 'challenges' in the intervening period. It also attempts to assess the transferability of KAM principles and techniques to the higher education sector, where explicit knowledge of the concept appears to be limited (Murray and Underhill, 2002). Indeed, KAM literature shows little or no research into business relationships within the UK corporate education sector (Murray and Underhill, 2002). Additionally, Ellis and Mayer (2001) and Wright (2004) are typical of those calling for more research across different B2B sectors, something which provides a partial justification for conducting this study. Equally, Sheth (1996) believes that much buying behaviour field research conducted in postgraduate courses of study still tends to revolve around end-users (or consumers) rather than organisational customers and advocates that more effort should be expended in research into B2B markets. Elsewhere, it is anticipated that, as part of an on-going process of responding to changing organisational customer needs, companies operating in different B2B sectors will come to see the value of KAM principles and techniques and that further research will stimulate debate and prevent the concept from diminishing in importance (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997).

An interesting parallel can be drawn between Cahill's reflection on the uncertainty facing the future of the *learning organisation* concept and whether KAM will achieve more widespread acceptance. In other words, "...it [*the learning organisation*] is timely, provocative and somewhat ambiguous...it holds great promise and seems to subsume other agendas... it is widely mentioned but unevenly understood...it burns brightly for a period of time, then gives way to the next exciting idea." (Cahill, 1998:209)

However, before reflecting on the future of KAM, it is important to explore the concept more fully in the following literature review.

# **Chapter 2**

## **Critical literature review**

## A critical review of the Key Account Management literature

### *Overview*

The concept of Key Account Management (KAM) straddles a number of bodies of literature, the most significant of which are sales management, relationship marketing and supply chain management (McDonald, 2000). For example, a trawl of the relevant relationship marketing (RM) literature suggests that supporters of KAM see it very much as belonging to the new 'relational' era in which organisations have begun to acknowledge the strategic and commercial wisdom of building long-term relationships with key customers. This strategic approach is characterised by a high degree of collaboration and commitment (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). However, it should be noted that elevating the concept to the strategic level is in marked contrast to the sales-based view of KAM as the implementation of purely short-term, operational activities aimed at managing the current customer base (Millman and Wilson, 1995; Lambe and Spekman, 1997). This is an issue that will be explored more fully later in this literature review. Nevertheless, suffice it to say that KAM tends to capture the prevailing mood of RM with its move away from what can be done *to* the customer towards what can be done *for* the customer (Grönroos, 1994a; 1994b). Thus, KAM represents, for some, an exciting opportunity to operationalise key aspects of RM theory.

KAM enjoys equally widespread coverage in the sales management literature where, far from being a new concept, it is very much regarded as the natural evolution of the traditional salesperson's role. Although a variety of terms is used to refer to KAM - such as *Key Account Selling*, *National Account Management* and *Strategic Account Management* - it is generally held that the salesperson's principal task is to make large volume sales to a small number of commercially significant customers (Boles *et al.*, 1999; McDonald, 2000). In addition, KAM is regarded as an integral part of sales and sales management processes because its principles have arguably always underpinned commercial transactions (McDonald, 2000). On this basis, it may sometimes be difficult for organisations to distinguish KAM from the normal activities of the sales function (Jolson, 1997).



Any concerns that KAM might be suffering an identity crisis tend to be reinforced by the fact that a 'universal' definition appears not to exist. Whilst this is unlikely to stop organisations adopting KAM and implementing KAM techniques, consensus among marketing academics and practitioners would nevertheless provide an indication of the concept's general state of health. In reality, though, defining KAM has been fraught with difficulty because both conceptual debate and the consideration of KAM implementation have been largely shaped by diverse cultural traditions. For example, there is a difference between the 'harder' sales-driven approach evident in North American literature (*cf.* Tice, 1997) - where KAM is generally referred to as *Key Account Selling*, *National Account Selling* or *Strategic Account Selling* (Napolitano, 1997; Pardo, 1999; Ojasalo, 2001) - and the 'softer' processual stance favoured by European academics (*cf.* Millman and Wilson, 1995; 1996). However, the term 'Key Account Management' appears to be becoming the 'universal' descriptor - and is certainly the most widely used term in Europe (Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Ivens and Pardo, 2008).

Despite these divergent approaches, it is nevertheless possible to see common themes emerging in the literature. For example, organisations are keen to identify their *key customers* and focus on *satisfying their needs* in order to drive *long-term profitability* and *loyalty* (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999). Although a 'standard' definition may not exist, the following probably comes closest to capturing the essence of the concept. Here, KAM is viewed as:-

*"...an approach adopted by selling companies aimed at building a portfolio of loyal key accounts by offering them, on a continuing basis, a product/service package tailored to their individual needs."* (McDonald *et al.*, 1997:737)

Thus, KAM entails the allocation and organisation of resources to achieve optimal business with a balanced portfolio of accounts whose business contributes - or could contribute - significantly to the achievement of present or future corporate objectives (Burnett, 1992; Ivens and Pardo, 2008). This suggests that the focus of KAM should not necessarily be on those customers who are currently profitable - although revenue yield is a major concern for business managers - but on those who will be profitable in the long-term (Millman and Wilson, 1995; Wang and Bowie, 2009). In effect, KAM

becomes a process of customer management or customer prioritisation (Homburg *et al.*, 2008). On the one hand, this is no indiscriminate process; rather it focuses attention on the *few* not the *many* (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999). However, on the other hand, there is concern that the very process of prioritisation may inevitably lead to less valued customers becoming dissatisfied with suppliers (Homburg *et al.*, 2008).

The long-term nature of KAM is supported by studies from different countries. For example, Wong (1998) reports that 6.8% of respondents claimed that it took them more than five years to establish meaningful relationships with their Chinese partners. Elsewhere, European research suggests that respondents had been involved in commercial relationships lasting an average of just under seven years (Walter and Gemünden, 2000). Indeed, a ten year relationship life span should not be considered atypical (McDonald *et al.*, 1997).

Nevertheless, the identification of a portfolio of 'key account' relationships that can be developed over the longer-term raises a number of practical issues (Kempener and van der Hart, 1999). For example, an organisation would need some way of determining who these customers were. One view suggests that key accounts are "*customers in a business-to-business market identified by selling companies as of strategic importance*" (McDonald, 2000:18). However, this begs the question of what is meant by 'strategic importance'. Campbell and Cunningham (1983) offer a useful set of key indicators such as the relative proportion of the supplier's sales volume and profit that each customer represents. Indeed, Minett (2002:201) reports that Sandvik Steel simply looks for large volume of business and high profit potential. Other indicators that could be used are the extent of resources required to service a customer account or even the age of the relationship itself (Campbell and Cunningham, 1983). On the other hand, Krapfel *et al.* (1991) view criticality in terms of how reliant on the customer's business a supplier is likely to become.

Pardo (1997) distinguishes between *quantitative* and *qualitative* criteria in order to reflect the fact that some organisations may look for 'softer' relationship benefits rather than the 'harder' outcomes of sales and profit. Typical criteria might be the image value of being associated with a particular customer or access to new end-user

markets. Nevertheless, although such criteria represent a more pragmatic approach to assessing relationship benefits, it is difficult to gauge whether organisations currently have the systems in place to adopt a more holistic approach to developing a balanced portfolio of strategically important customers. Indeed, some would argue that the selection of key accounts is very much taken for granted (Pardo *et al.*, 1995; McDonald, 2000; Murray and Underhill, 2002).

One possible way of mitigating accusations of a *laissez-faire* approach to key accounts is to establish a system whereby individuals (or 'key account managers') are tasked with the strategic development of these relationships. This is also likely to result in more effective coordination of outputs across the supplier organisation and, even, geographical boundaries (Maister, 1999). Indeed, traditional definitions of the term 'key account manager' often overlook the extent of internal and external coordination that needs to occur in order for KAM to flourish (Brady, 2004). In reality, the responsibility for servicing these key accounts tends to fall on the experienced salespeople, who often end up servicing multiple accounts. However, in some quarters, it is felt that restricting the number of key accounts allocated to individuals would be more beneficial in terms of maintaining service quality and an appropriate professional focus (Abratt and Kelly, 2002).

Much attention is given in RM literature to the pivotal role of the intermediary in engineering an effective customer focus in the buyer-seller exchange and enhancing the relationship over time (Wong, 1998). Indeed, it is felt that this role contributes more directly than any other to the organisation's long-term commercial success (McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Arnett *et al.*, 2005). However, KAM is more than simply offering "*better relationship management*" (Spencer, 1999:291). Such intimate relationships are likely to expose an intermediary to a range of special issues (Ryals and Rogers, 2007). For example, where organisations choose to engage in *partnering*, 'old', adversarial supply chain practices are replaced by a 'new', co-operative culture (Brennan, 1997; McDonald, 2000; Egan, 2001). Such a cultural shift is likely to involve effective two-way communication, the sharing of information, the integration of information systems, the establishment of a co-ordinated approach to strategic planning and a significant change in the skill set of the intermediary. However, it is interesting to note that existing definitions of 'key account manager' often appear to

contain little more than a list of headline characteristics that the typical key account manager should possess (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). The skills and qualities of the key account manager will be addressed later in this review. However, attention should not be focused solely on defining the characteristics of the role and the skills of the role holder: a failure to appreciate fully the principles underpinning KAM may lead to the execution of KAM plans that are misguided and misaligned (Lambe and Spekman, 1997).

The supply-side focus on a portfolio of key customers is matched by significant demand-side developments. For example, some organisations such as UK supermarkets have experienced dramatic expansion in recent years courtesy of rapidly growing markets or mergers and acquisitions. In order to achieve the necessary economies of scale, many of these customers are looking to create longer-lasting partnerships with fewer suppliers (Homburg and Kuester, 2001; Piercy and Lane, 2006). However, such relationship rationalisation poses major challenges to suppliers. For example, the sheer size of certain key customers is likely to see the supplier's salesforce exposed to more centralised purchasing, the resulting complexity of buying processes and a growing requirement for customised services (Cespedes, 1993; Napolitano, 1997; Ghingold and Wilson, 1998; McGinnis and McCarty, 1998; Wright, 2004; Piercy and Lane, 2006; Brennan *et al.*, 2007). In short, the B2B sales environment has become increasingly complex (Boles *et al.*, 1999).

Whilst there is concern that KAM may lack adequate conceptualisation, as a “...*still nascent domain [it] will develop even sounder conceptual underpinning*” (McDonald, 2000:31). Indeed, the structural challenges, changing demand patterns, B2B complexity and the reasons underpinning the emergence of KAM as a strategic alternative to building longer-term commercial success will be explored more fully in the remainder of this literature review.

### **Reasons for the growing popularity of KAM**

Although the term ‘relationship marketing’ was first coined by Berry (1983), the conceptual foundations of a relational paradigm had already been laid by the Scandinavian services marketing school (*cf.* Grönroos and Gummesson). Ever since,

academic interest has tended to focus on the factors that influence the development of successful long-term relationships between suppliers and customers and the likely benefits that can accrue to organisations pursuing a relational strategy - the most important being the potential to achieve higher profits over the longer-term through customer retention. Early empirical evidence to support the profit impact of customer retention was provided from the States by Reichheld and Sasser (1990). However, it has been suggested subsequently that financial benefits may not automatically accrue without human intervention and active relationship management (Storbacka *et al.*, 1994; Ryals and Holt, 2007) and this provides partial justification for the continued interest in RM conceptualisation generally and KAM in particular.

Aside from profitability, there is much debate in RM literature about the way in which trust and commitment are likely to develop over the course of a relationship (Young and Wilkinson, 1989; Moorman *et al.*, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Lambe and Spekman, 1997; Hanmer-Lloyd and Canning, 2004; Ryals and Holt, 2007). Indeed, trust is considered by many as a fundamental cornerstone of relational cooperation and relationship quality (Abratt and Kelly, 2002; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Doney *et al.*, 2007; Ashnai *et al.*, 2009). On one level, trust is moulded by the relational behaviours adopted by the service provider and these behaviours need to be credible and benevolent if they are to achieve the desired outcome (Doney *et al.*, 2007). Equally, the personal baggage of the actors involved and their tendency to rely on critical events and experiences from the past (Brennan *et al.*, 2007) add to the complexity of relationship development and management. On this basis, conceptual RM debate looks set to continue as calls are still being made for further research into these 'softer' relational issues (Zupancic, 2008).

B2B marketers have particularly embraced relational issues because it is argued that business marketing is driven by relationships (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) and that relationship management constitutes the heart of business marketing (Hutt and Speh, 1998). Indeed, B2B debate has been heavily influenced by the research conducted over the past 35 years by the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group which has sought to explore the broader contextual factors encountered rather than focus on the simple dyadic buyer-seller relationship alone (Webster, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Blois, 1998).

Although there appears to be widespread interest in the concept of relational exchange and relationship outcomes, the focus of this study now turns specifically to the reasons underpinning the growth in popularity of KAM in particular and the benefits that both parties seek to derive from the establishment and effective management of a close working relationship. Somewhat fortuitously, Sengupta *et al.*, (1997) talk in terms of there being two dimensions of KAM: the *subjective* (i.e. what KAM does for the customer) and the *objective* (i.e. what KAM does for the seller) and this is considered a convenient framework for the following discussion.

### ***The potential benefits that suppliers derive from KAM***

There are a great many supply-side benefits identified in the KAM literature. A typical summary is provided by Arnett *et al.* (2005:27) who go on to suggest that the most important outcome of an effectively managed key account relationship is superior financial performance. Indeed, long-term profitability is cited so often in conceptual articles - stretching from Stevenson (1981) through to the present day (Ashnai *et al.*, 2009) - that it is akin to a mantra proclaimed by academics and practitioners alike. Whilst increased profits are usually expected to result from either incremental sales volume or from cost reduction opportunities over the course of the relationship life cycle (Napolitano, 1997; McDonald, 1997; McDonald, 2000), it should be noted that lavishing preferential treatment on a small number of customers may not bring the desired results. Indeed, in focussing narrowly on a limited number of key accounts, suppliers may actually miss out on scale economies or profit that could be generated from other parts of the customer portfolio (Piercy and Lane, 2006; Homburg *et al.*, 2008). Equally, empirical research has occasionally shown that relationship longevity does not necessarily guarantee profitability (Storbacka *et al.*, 1994; Wang and Bowie, 2009). Recent German research has also suggested that the concept of *customer lifetime value* appears to play little or no part in how suppliers determine which accounts to target with a KAM strategy (Wengler *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, 50% of the companies polled did appear to be applying KAM principles and a further 16% claimed that they were actively considering implementing KAM (Wengler *et al.*, 2006).

Profit and sales volume - or the 'narrow' economic viewpoint (Pardo, 1999) - are, however, not the sole motivation for suppliers considering implementing a KAM

strategy. Criteria such as image, market standing and technical knowledge (McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999) may be just as influential. Access to different end-user markets may also result from establishing relationships with certain new customers (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

KAM offers suppliers the chance to use their own resources more efficiently (Homburg *et al.*, 2008) and to achieve greater overall strategic effectiveness from forging closer links with key customers (Stevenson, 1981; Boles *et al.*, 1999; Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Ryals and Rogers, 2007). For example, suppliers should be looking to build a more detailed understanding of each key customer's business. This knowledge could be vital not just in pursuing corporate goals (Moon and Gupta, 1997) but also in engineering added value for both itself and its business partners (Napolitano, 1997). Equally, the adoption of KAM principles should encourage a more productive follow-up to sales and the general servicing of key accounts (Cann, 1998; Boles *et al.*, 1999) through improved internal and external communication (Boles *et al.*, 1999; Schultz and Evans, 2002). Indeed, KAM is normally characterised by an "*intensity of coordination*" (Wengler *et al.*, 2006:108), although recent research has started to question the assumption of a correlation between KAM implementation and improved internal processes (Ivens and Pardo, 2008). Nevertheless, the resulting superior responsiveness to customers (Moon and Gupta, 1997) and the new thinking that KAM inspires (Ryals and Rogers, 2007) are, at the very least, considered important in heading off potential conflict between partners. Viewed in this way, KAM represents a form of risk reduction strategy for suppliers (McDonald, 2000).

KAM should also lead to better business planning (Cespedes, 1993) although, whilst a buyer and seller may enjoy a close relationship, joint planning and collaboration may only occur at a tactical rather than a strategic level (Lambe and Spekman, 1997). Such an outcome would be disappointing, particularly since KAM is adjudged to represent a rare opportunity for suppliers to engineer a differential advantage in increasingly competitive markets (Wengler *et al.*, 2006; Ashnai *et al.*, 2009).

Suppliers may also turn to KAM in situations where they find themselves confronted by increasingly complex organisational and management challenges created in dealing with large and demanding customers (Walter and Gemünden, 2000; Ryals and

Rogers, 2007; Zupancic, 2008). For example, the supplier may be faced with a centralised and co-ordinated customer purchasing function, a complex buying process and decision making unit and large scale purchases that demand an increasingly specialist servicing (Cespedes, 1993; Napolitano, 1997; Cann, 1998; Ghingold and Wilson, 1998; Piercy and Lane, 2006). One way of responding to the uniqueness (or heterogeneity) of B2B customers would be to introduce a dedicated intermediary to facilitate the process of identifying and satisfying the needs of individual clients (Blois, 1996; Piercy and Lane, 2003; Ryals and Rogers, 2007). In effect, each relationship will be highly context-specific and a 'one size fits all' approach is unlikely to yield the best results. Indeed, KAM is arguably the kind of "*ill-structured problem*" where "*...there are several feasible solution paths and many possible solutions*" (Evans *et al.*, 2000:514).

KAM may ultimately take many forms, but Dubinsky *et al.* (2003) suggest that there should at least be room for more friendliness in high quality relationships. Indeed, a more flexible and personal approach to account management is likely to be preferable to a heavy-handed and bureaucratic system and should yield better long-term results. However, Turnbull *et al.* (1996) stress that there is more to managing B2B relationships than simply 'being nice'. Equally, customer heterogeneity should not automatically imply the need for formalised KAM structures. Paradoxically, these may only serve to hinder the provision of specialist treatment to certain customers (Workman *et al.*, 2003).

### ***The potential benefits that customers derive from KAM***

Of the many demand-side benefits likely to accrue from a supplier choosing to pursue a KAM strategy, the most important are reckoned to be continuity of supply, preferential after-sales service and trust (Millman and Wilson, 1995; McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Ryals and Holt, 2007). In other words, customers would also appear to see the risk reduction opportunities associated with KAM (Ivens and Pardo, 2008). However, risk reduction for some may simply result in a general reluctance to place large orders with a single supplier and an unwillingness to enter into a close, long-term relationship (Rao and Perry, 2002). Indeed, such customers may be suspicious of any attempt by suppliers to treat commercial exchanges as anything other than discrete, arms-length transactions (Blois, 1998). Equally, some customers may not feel bound



by any sense of obligation and could still resort to occasional opportunistic behaviour even though they appear on good terms with their suppliers. The occurrence of such behaviour is likely to increase dramatically when trading internationally because of the additional cultural factors encountered (Ashnai *et al.*, 2009).

Some customers might adopt a more cautious approach to relationships by engaging in a two-stage process that looks for short-term successes before deciding whether to invest in a closer relationship (Beverland, 2001). For example, they might choose to focus on short-term performance-based behaviours such as whether a supplier meets deadlines and keeps promises - the *tactical* aspects of the relationship. Then, when the customer is satisfied, relationship behaviours assume a greater importance - the *strategic* aspects (Beverland, 2001). Indeed, recent research suggests that such factors as high quality key account plans impress purchasing decision makers (Ryals and Rogers, 2007). Equally, customers tend to value supplier adaptation throughout the relationship life cycle rather than short-term incentives (Sengupta *et al.*, 1997). However, although KAM combines both strategic and operational level marketing management (Ojasalo, 2001), it could be a two-edged sword because “*with increased dependence also comes strategic vulnerability*” (Krapfel *et al.*, 1991:22). Thus, suppliers should gauge the degree of strategic importance that a customer attaches to the product offering and their degree of receptiveness to a partnership approach (Blois, 1996; McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Pardo, 1997; Beverland 2001). Here, Pardo (1997) offers a basic typology of customer attitudes to KAM (see Table 1):-

**Table 1: Typology of customer attitude to KAM**

<b>Attitude to KAM</b>	<b>Typical behaviour</b>
<b>Disenchanted</b>	<i>KAM is perceived as an unnecessary approach (or, worse still, KAM is not recognised at all!)</i>
<b>Interested</b>	<i>KAM is perceived as an effort from the supplier in improving the supplier/key account relationship, but may still not be regarded as sufficient in its own right</i>
<b>Enthusiast</b>	<i>KAM is perceived as a real and important bettering of the supplier/key account relationship</i>

**Source: Adapted from Pardo (1997:20)**

Although the above taxonomy is primarily intended to be applied to customers, it could also be used to categorise supplier attitudes to KAM. For example, in this

particular study, it might be appropriate to gauge the extent to which a university business school might be regarded as an *enthusiast* of KAM or whether it is merely *interested* and paying little more than lip service to the concept.

Comprehensive treatment of other demand-side relationship benefits is readily available in the KAM literature (*cf.* Maister, 1999) but among the factors cited most frequently are personal contact with key account managers, interpersonal communications channels, ease of contact and the availability of technical advice (Millman and Wilson, 1995; McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Ryals and Holt, 2007). However, although social and personal bonds appear to be important to key account success (Sharma, 2006), suppliers should still seek to maintain their technological superiority over rivals in order to justify the privileged status that customers accord them (Campbell, 1996). Equally, key accounts may simply require special attention and constant reassurance that their purchase decisions and their faith in a supplier are justified (Campbell, 1996; Golfetto and Gibbert, 2006). Suppliers could also make an effort to get to know the client's business and industry in detail (Maister, 1999). Interestingly, some two thirds of the information and knowledge gained about the customer derives from face-to-face contact (Harwood and Garry, 2006). In reality, the face-to-face component may be the glue that holds the relationship together because "*...good personal relations between the relationship promoters will contribute to higher stability of the supplier-customer relationship since they feel an obligation toward each other...*" (Walter and Gemünden, 2000:92).

The relative position occupied in the supplier's relationship portfolio could also affect the perceived benefits that a customer expects from KAM. Certainly, if a customer believes it is not considered a key account, it will possibly be unwilling to invest time and effort in a relationship that is not supported by adequate levels of supplier motivation and commitment (Pardo, 1997). Equally, the extent of the customer's knowledge of KAM may play some part in that the more a customer knows about KAM the more likely it is to expect benefits from a close relationship with a key account manager (Pardo, 1997). By the same token, the more a customer knows about KAM, the less likely it is to be impressed by opportunistic supplier behaviour such as the introduction of tougher revenue management policies (Wang and Bowie, 2009).

A number of additional factors might account for the rise in popularity of KAM amongst customers. For example, there has been a distinct trend for organisations in particular industry sectors, such as food retailing, to rationalise the supplier base and deal with a limited number of preferred suppliers (Sharma, 1997; Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006) which has resulted in a degree of supplier *shake-out*. Now, whilst this could simply be the result of such factors as market maturity or general macro-economic conditions, it is nevertheless interesting to note that Sharma (1997) reported a reduction in the number of suppliers of 27% - 90% among Fortune 500 companies. However, this is not necessarily a representative picture since it offers little insight into what might be happening in smaller organisations.

Larger customers have either sought better levels of service from suppliers - courtesy primarily of more effective communication (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; Schultz and Evans, 2002) - or they may have simply overstretched themselves financially and are looking to maximise value through cost savings (McGinnis and McCarty, 1998; Pardo, 1999). In short, the drive for added value appears to have led customers to become far more demanding, exerting greater power over suppliers than ever before (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; McGinnis and McCarty, 1998; Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Murray and Underhill, 2002; Arnett *et al.*, 2005; Golfetto and Gibbert, 2006). Thus, suppliers need to recognise that the creation of superior value for customers should be an integral part of their KAM strategy (Ryals and Holt, 2007; Ivens and Pardo, 2008). However, value creation is still regarded as a much under-researched issue (Pardo *et al.*, 2006; Henneberg *et al.*, 2007).

In light of such developments, it is perhaps not unreasonable to assume that the process of managing the complex interaction between supplier and customer will require a degree of professional intervention and a sustained, co-ordinated effort (Ryals and Rogers, 2007; Ryals and Holt, 2007). Indeed, it is suggest that a supplier's ability to deal with complexity is viewed positively by the customer (Ryals and Holt, 2007). Thus, the adoption of KAM by suppliers may be seen by customers as a pragmatic response to the structural and management challenges (Maister, 1999; Rao and Perry, 2002). However, it may simply be that the centralisation of procurement in customer organisations has given rise to the expectation of a similar structural response from the supplier (McGinnis and McCarty, 1998; Homburg *et al.*, 2002).

Whatever the reason, a study of *Fortune 1000* companies suggested that the number of national account programmes and national account managers had tripled over a five-year period. This trend was expected to continue (Napolitano, 1997). In a similar vein, a survey conducted by *Purchasing Magazine* suggested that 80% of procurement executives were already working with suppliers who had national account programmes (Napolitano, 1997). Additional statistics provided by Weilbaker and Weeks (1997) reported a rise in membership of the National Account Management Association (NAMA) in the States from 250 in the 1970s to 800 in 1997. However, once again, such findings should be treated with caution since they only represent organisations with large, formal KAM structures and whose managers belong to NAMA (Workman *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, a frustration of much B2B empirical research is its focus on large companies (Harwood and Garry, 2006). Such findings tell little or nothing about the state of KAM development in smaller organisation such as universities, where the somewhat sparse literature suggests that KAM may be adopted purely as a reactive, defensive measure. For example, increased competition in the corporate education market has forced some academic institutions to get closer to their customers in a bid to keep them (Murray and Underhill, 2002). Indeed, new university business schools generally could be criticised for tending to respond to requests from clients rather than proactively seeking out new business (Prince, 2007). Equally, as corporate clients become more demanding, UK business schools are tending to experience a culture shock which is further hampering a more considered and proactive response (Watling *et al.*, 2003).

The above discussion serves to underline the point that the inherent complexity of B2B relationships means that they are unlikely to flourish without being actively managed by a skilled and knowledgeable intermediary (Blois, 1996; Ryals and Holt, 2007) who possesses the ability to add value to a relationship (Golfetto and Gibbert, 2006): in other words, a key account manager. Indeed, the skills and qualities expected of an effective key account manager will be examined in more detail later in this review. However, beforehand, it is important to investigate the steps a supplier needs to take as part of a co-ordinated approach to the many organisational and structural challenges posed by KAM implementation. Without a systematic approach, KAM is likely to be a process of trial and error (Zupancic, 2008).

## **Organising for KAM**

Acceptance of the KAM concept inevitably requires organisations to make tough decisions about the most effective way to manage key customers - a message that is broadly supported by academics “*on both sides of the Atlantic*” (Pardo, 1999:286). Some would even go so far as to suggest that KAM represents one of the most fundamental changes in marketing organisation in recent times (Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Workman *et al.*, 2003) and much effort has been expended on discussing appropriate designs (Kempeners and van der Hart, 1999; Homburg *et al.*, 2002).

Adaptation is generally considered an important feature of B2B relationships (Brennan *et al.*, 2003). Thus, some degree of adaptation would be expected in order to arrive at an appropriate KAM system. At one end of the scale, organisational adjustment may be minimal, leading to little or no identifiable hierarchical structure (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). In such circumstances, KAM is normally accommodated within existing structural constraints. In KAM terms, this is referred to as *extension* (Millman and Wilson, 1996). At the other end of the scale, significant structural change and strategic investment would be evident (Beverland, 2001; Homburg *et al.*, 2008). Such KAM systems are *transformational* (Millman and Wilson, 1996). It is interesting to note that limited empirical research has so far been conducted into adaptation in B2B relationships (Schmidt *et al.*, 2007). Equally, those studies that have been carried out have focused on the *hard* elements such as physical changes to products and production processes rather than the *soft* human elements of relationship development (Schmidt *et al.*, 2007).

Nevertheless, there are a number of useful frameworks suggested in the KAM literature that help to summarise the type of approach that an organisation could adopt. For example, Kempeners and van der Hart (1999) offer perhaps the simplest typology (see Table 2). Homburg *et al.* (2002:51) propose a more sophisticated typology comprising eight categories ranging from *No KAM* through to *Top Management KAM*. However, despite the additional categories, managers may actually find it difficult to distinguish between some of the mid-range categories. Thus, the greater semantic differential provided by this typology may be more useful to academics than practitioners.

**Table 2: Typology of KAM structure**

<b>KAM system</b>	<b>System characteristics</b>
<b>No system at all</b>	<i>KAM is perceived as an unnecessary approach or is not recognised at all</i>
<b>Part-time programme</b>	<i>KAM tasks are performed by 'non-specialists' in addition to their normal work role</i>
<b>Full-time programme at operating unit level</b>	<i>KAM is a recognised function (and has clearly identified key account managers) but lacks representation and support at senior management level</i>
<b>Corporate-level programme</b>	<i>KAM is supported by senior managers and key account managers have a part to play in KAM decisions that impact the organisation's strategic development</i>
<b>National account division</b>	<i>KAM stands apart as a fully-fledged strategic business unit with its own management structure</i>

**Source: Adapted from Kempeners and van der Hart (1999:315)**

Whether an organisation opts for transformational adaptation or simple extension is likely to depend not only on resource issues but factors such as senior management commitment and the power balance between organisations. Equally, the unique KAM needs of the organisation should ideally dictate the choice of ultimate KAM structure rather than choice of structure govern the direction of KAM strategy (Pardo, 1999). However, the practical reality is that adaptation tends to be more of a reactive response rather than a deliberate feature of the relationship development process (Schmidt *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, striking a balance between major structural redesign and localised operational adaptation is fraught with difficulty. For example, some academics argue that too much time is spent on considering KAM structural issues at a strategic level rather than debating how organisations can actually do it (Toland, 2004). Equally, focussing on strategic issues alone may ultimately mask the full complexity of operationalising KAM because “...one must not forget that key account management generates in and of itself a rise in organizational complexity for the supplier” (Pardo, 1997:25).

Organisational complexity can be conveniently summarised in two ways: *involvement* and *extensivity* (Sharma, 1997). *Involvement* consists of vertical involvement (i.e. number of organisational levels), horizontal involvement (i.e. number of departments) and resource involvement (i.e. size of transaction with the customer). *Extensivity* concerns the total number of people involved, the time taken in decision-making and the formalisation of the exchange process (Sharma, 1997). In other words, KAM comprises a variety of co-related issues embedded within a broader range of

relationship management activities (Walter and Gemünden, 2000). For example, the task of key account management has traditionally fallen to the individual salesperson (McDonald, 2000). However, a better way of servicing a complex account might actually be through the establishment of a dedicated team. Indeed, Cespedes (1993) was one of the first to talk of a *liaison unit*. Academics have subsequently been warming to the notion of a selling *team* (Homburg *et al.*, 2002) or a customer-responsive *unit* (Homburg *et al.*, 2008). Likewise, practitioners such as Minett (2002) question whether a B2B relationship is best handled by one person or many. Indeed, a case could be made for a core selling team working behind the scenes whilst the key account manager acts as the front-line contact (Arnett *et al.*, 2005). However, there is little empirical evidence so far to support the case for team over individual or, indeed, for determining when teams would be more appropriate (Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

In reality, there also appears to be no *prima facie* evidence for why sales staff should be expected to take the lead in promoting KAM. Indeed, the task of managing key account activities is possibly too complex to be handled by the sales function alone and needs the active participation of other functions (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). The belief that “*everyone who participates in serving the client can, and does, affect the relationship*” (Maister, 1999:62) has obvious parallels with the concept of the *part-time marketer* (Gummesson, 1991). Equally, the encouragement of greater cross-company support for the effective servicing of key accounts is, in some ways, akin to the organisational transition from sales-orientation to market-orientation. A KAM strategy should encourage the effective integration of cross-functional units within the supplier organisation (Maister, 1999; Brady, 2004; Toland, 2004).

The choice of KAM design is also likely to be highly context-specific. As identified in Document 3, the informal, small-scale approach to KAM structure appears to be well suited to organisations such as business schools, where key account management duties are simply considered one of the tasks that need to be performed by an already overstretched staff. Equally, an informal KAM system tends to develop on a trial and error basis. Workman *et al.* (2003) cite the example of professional service firms who assign key account responsibility to senior managers, thus obviating the need for significant change to the overall organisational structure. Other small-scale changes may simply affect reward systems and the way in which salespeople are expected to

carry out their day-to-day duties (Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Evans *et al.*, 2000; Beverland, 2001). However, even though organisations may not possess formal KAM systems, they treat their most important customers differently (Wengler *et al.*, 2006; Zupancic, 2008). Indeed, Wengler *et al.* (2006) go on to suggest that more than 80% of companies researched treated their customers as key accounts even though they had no formal KAM structures.

On the other hand, major structural changes will most often be found in larger organisations, where key customers make significant demands on supplier resources. Indeed, such customers will expect a more highly structured and formal relationship with suppliers - a requirement driven largely by pure commercial considerations. These customers will look on a supplier more as a business partner than as a friend (Maister, 1999). However, suppliers should view this in a positive light because the active management of key accounts has been shown to yield significantly better results than the adoption of a *laissez-faire* approach to KAM design (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, major change is likely to pose significant challenges to an organisation and senior managers need to be very clear about the effort needed in adapting to a given B2B relationship (Brennan *et al.*, 2003). Perhaps organisations should be more discerning in their choice of relationship (McDonald, 2000). However, these issues are worthy of more detailed examination, beginning with ways in which the right KAM mindset can be inculcated.

### ***Creating the right environment for KAM***

Arguably, the impact of shifting from a transactional to a relational mindset is likely to be felt most keenly in the supplier's corporate culture. For example, the organisation will be expected to dispense with its traditional 'hunter-oriented' stance in favour of becoming more 'farmer-oriented' (Compton and Grigg, 2001). In other words, it will seek out relationships that it can actively manage and nurture in the longer-term. Dubinsky *et al.* (2003) go so far as to suggest that what is really needed is a 'sea change' in organisational attitude. However, this is likely to come at a price because KAM programmes are heavy on financial, temporal and human resources (Sharma, 2006). For example, *all* staff would be expected to put the customer first, not just those in customer-facing roles. Furthermore, such change can only result from a co-ordinated focus on three crucial elements: an organisation's culture, climate and



policies. Wilson (1995) is also keen to stress that operational aspects of the business, such as reward systems, would need to be modified in order to reinforce appropriate behaviours in those tasked with managing key accounts.

Brady (2004) suggests that the cultural barriers are both institutional and personal and are potentially made more challenging by the increasingly global nature of the markets in which suppliers operate. Toland (2004) offers a timely warning from the U.S. financial services sector where sales orientation is so ingrained that few organisations have succeeded in establishing an effective customer service mindset. Failure to do so is only likely to see customers continuing to be overlooked as corporate assets because customer relationships do not normally figure in a company's financial statements (Wang and Bowie, 2009). Equally, there is a danger that senior managers will persist in treating 'account managers' as ordinary sales people with sales targets to achieve and, thus, will remunerate them in the usual way (Toland, 2004). Indeed, it seems that many B2B organisations are slow to dispense with the 'hard sell' (Jolson, 1997). It is alarming to see that many of the stereotypical perceptions of salespeople still prevail. For example, in presenting the findings of the 1996 Butler report, Jolson characterises the typical salesperson as insincere, fast-talking, despicable, a greasy 'glad-hander' and more vilified than a member of any other professional group (Jolson, 1997).

There is increasing evidence in the KAM literature to suggest that senior management has a key role to play in fostering the right climate for KAM (Homburg *et al.*, 2008) and in engineering a relationship orientation that "*must pervade the mindset, values, and norms of the organization*" (Day, 2000:24). Indeed, they are ultimately responsible for encouraging the development of a collaborative culture that should lead to greater flexibility in the way the organisation deals with its business partners (McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999; Ojasalo, 2001; Toland, 2004; Brady, 2004). Further KAM should really be an organisational rather than an individual goal (Toland, 2004) and internal buy-in to the concept of key account planning is crucial (Ryals and Rogers, 2007). Workman *et al.* (2003) talk of senior managers needing to foster a KAM *esprit de corps*, which they define as the extent to which people involved in managing key accounts feel obligated to common goals and each other. For example, in the UK higher education sector, senior business school managers are tasked with

the job of supporting entrepreneurial and commercial behaviour and ensuring that all levels within the organisation are “*in supportive alignment*” (Prince, 2007:753). Indeed, the full enormity of this task should not be underestimated because “*the academic culture does not fit easily with the demands of corporate clients*” (Watling *et al.*, 2003:232).

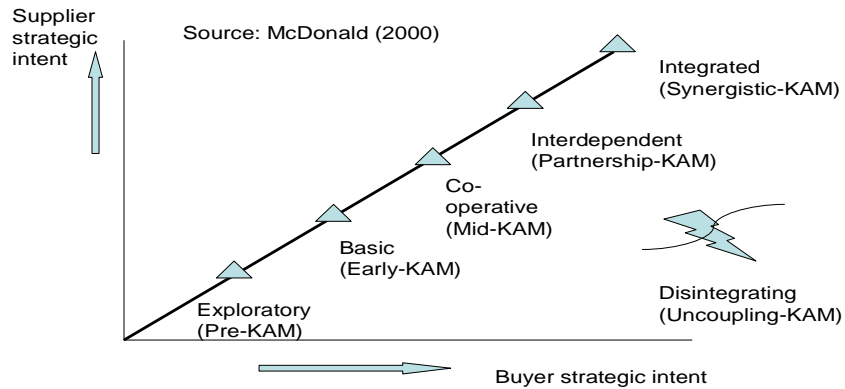
There needs to be genuine senior management commitment to KAM principles rather than token lip service (Napolitano, 1997; Pardo, 1999; Millman and Wilson, 1999; Brady, 2004; Toland, 2004) and this commitment may ultimately be articulated in the organisation’s mission statement (Napolitano, 1997). Equally, a KAM ‘champion’ is required from within senior management circles to promote the KAM cause because some directors may still need to be convinced of the strength of the business case supporting its adoption (Cahill, 1998). Here, the difficulty of costing relationship management activities may actually be hindering progress (Millman and Wilson, 1995). However, without a ‘champion’ encouraging staff to embrace new practices, the status quo is likely to prevail (Cahill, 1998).

Senior management involvement also brings with it a number of other benefits such as the likelihood of financial investment and the motivation of the supplier’s key account managers (Workman *et al.*, 2003). It also demonstrates commitment “*in the eyes of customers*” (Millman and Wilson, 1999:331) and signals that the supplier considers the customer important (Ivens and Pardo, 2008). This, in turn, may encourage greater involvement from the client’s directors and a deepening of the overall relationship (Workman *et al.*, 2003). However, if senior managers are to exert a significant influence over how relationships with key customers develop over time, an appreciation of the particular characteristics of each stage of the relationship life cycle would be useful in fostering a more proactive approach to KAM implementation.

### ***Stages in KAM relationship development***

A number of life cycle models can be found in the KAM literature that help to describe the different relationship development phases that organisations are likely to encounter. Typical of these is McDonald’s adaptation of the earlier work of Millman and Wilson (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Relationship stages**



At the *Exploratory* and *Basic* stages, organisations will normally take a transactional approach to doing business. Indeed, organisations may not want to go beyond these stages (Millman and Wilson, 1995; McDonald *et al.*, 1997). The typical behaviour exhibited by one or both parties is largely adversarial and exploitative (Harwood (2002). Even where organisations are amenable to forming closer ties, the outcome is likely to be governed by factors such as market considerations (i.e. price and product need) and other relational or processual issues (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

There is no guarantee that a relationship will develop by the *Basic* stage because buyers may still be market testing other suppliers (McDonald *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, it is only at the *Co-operative* stage that the supplier is likely to have established sufficient credibility with a customer that contact between organisations will have increased. In effect, the mood of both parties will have become more co-operative, and the designation 'preferred supplier' is often encountered in the purchasing policies of committed customers. The emphasis in the relationship is also likely to switch from product excellence to social integration (McDonald *et al.*, 1997).

Further into the relationship, organisations can become linked strategically. Indeed, at the *Interdependent* stage, suppliers are likely to be seen as a strategic resource and long-term, legally-binding partnership agreements may be entered into (McDonald *et al.*, 1997). By the *Integrated* stage, both supplier and customer may exhibit some of the hallmarks of a merged entity (McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Harwood, 2002). Indeed,

collaboration would be expected to be at its greatest with both parties enjoying a high level of relationship commitment and scale economies through shared resources (Arnett *et al.*, 2005). However, suppliers should not necessarily assume that such close co-ordination will continue. The very notion of a relationship life cycle suggests that long-term relationships may eventually run their natural course (Piercy and Lane, 2006). Indeed, *Disintegrating* recognises the fact that relationships are finite and that an organisation will sometimes choose to sever its ties and pursue other options (Millman and Wilson, 1995; Piercy and Lane, 2006), particularly if the current arrangement proves to be more costly than beneficial (Krapfel *et al.*, 1991; Piercy and Lane, 2006).

Equally, in spite of the intuitive appeal of life cycle models, relationships will not necessarily develop in a straightforward linear fashion (Jap, 2001). Indeed, disintegration is possible at any stage (McDonald *et al.*, 1997). Nevertheless, the benefit of considering relationship development in this way is that it should, at the very least, alert suppliers to the fact that they will need to modify their management approach to the customer as the relationship progresses. In other words, it should encourage a more proactive response. However, creating the right environment is only one element of KAM implementation. In terms of the day-to-day management of relationships, attention also needs to focus on the key account managers themselves: the job roles that they perform and the skills and qualities they need to possess. After all, the role that key account managers perform is regarded as an important one (Wang and Bowie, 2009).

### **The role of the key account manager**

Whilst Maister (1999) complains that the role may be a complex and ill-defined one, a recurring theme in the KAM literature suggests that the key account manager is very much the primary link between the supplier and customer and, as such, is likely to exert a considerable influence over the customer's perception of both the supplier's reliability and the value of the services being offered (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Surprisingly, however, little empirical research has been conducted to establish the precise nature of the key account manager's impact on customer-perceived value (Georges and Eggert, 2003). As primary link, the key account manager is typically

expected to assume responsibility for growing one or more key accounts consistent with the supplier's objectives, co-ordinating and tailoring the supplier's offering, facilitating multi-level, multi-functional exchange processes and promoting the KAM concept internally (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

The first two elements of the job role underline the fact that key account programmes comprise special activities not offered to ordinary customers, with the focus very much on building relationships with strategically important clients only (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). Here, the key account manager is expected to add value - or "*something more*" (Pardo, 1997:22) - to the business of both supplier and customer over the entire relationship life cycle. Indeed, recent research suggests that value is a necessary factor in stabilising commercial relationships over time (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). However, this process of adding value relies on more than simply increased profitability. For example, factors such as company image, geographic proximity and technological competencies all contribute to value delivery (Pardo *et al.*, 2006; Henneberg *et al.*, 2007). Thus, the process is very much one of shaping and advancing inter-organisational exchange processes (Walter and Gemünden, 2000) and "*...this value continues as the relationship matures*" (Jap, 2001:103). Indeed, as the supplier's business orientation evolves, the key account manager is likely to progress along the scale from being *provider* to *persuader* to *problem solver* to *value creator* (Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

Equally, in acting as an intermediary, the key account manager will be involved in both external and internal relationship marketing duties (Brady, 2004), being required to adopt an '*inside-out*' and an '*outside-in*' view (Toland, 2004). However, the need to achieve a balance is potentially fraught with difficulty since it is all too easy to waste time in fighting internal battles for systems, support and investment instead of building the external customer relationship (Toland, 2004). Key account managers themselves claim that they are often doing more selling internally than in front of the customer (Ryals and Rogers, 2007). However, intra-firm tension needs to be managed (Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Georges and Eggert, 2003). Potential role conflict may result in situations where key account managers are called upon to determine the extent to which they should act as the supplier's client-facing representative (or *luminary*) or the customer's representative (or *manager*) in its dealings with the

supplier (Maister, 1999). The key account manager will tend to be regarded by both organisations as a focal point - or the 'one voice' (Pardo, 1999). However, this could lead to the misconception that the key account manager is the only point of contact regardless of the problem (Pardo, 1999). This misconception threatens to undermine the process of facilitating multi-level and multi-functional exchange that KAM sets out to achieve (Napolitano, 1997). Additionally, Wong (1998) talks of the need to balance *outsider* and *insider* relationship demands insofar as key account managers will be forced to respond to pressures, people and events outside the scope of the normal day-to-day exchanges they enjoy with business contacts. However, conflict can give rise to positive benefits. For example, it is likely to stimulate interest in exploring new approaches to developing the relationship, motivate both parties to adapt and grow and encourage them to build commitment to each other (Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

The final two responsibilities on the Millman and Wilson list suggest that the key account manager's role should be viewed as a boundary-spanning one (Walter and Gemünden, 2000; Beverland, 2001) in the sense of requiring the key account manager to operate across different managerial and functional levels in both organisations and facilitate high level links (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). In other words, the key account manager is a kind of "*alliance manager*" (Lambe and Spekman, 1997:61). Indeed, whilst Homburg *et al.* (2002) talk in terms of KAM being performed by special actors, Pardo (1999:278) views the key account manager as an animator of internal networks, occupying the position of 'privileged informant' where "*...our manager thus becomes a specialist in the gathering, processing, enriching and the redistribution of information*". This process of information sharing is not necessarily limited to formal mechanisms. Much of the knowledge exchange in a KAM relationship actually occurs informally (Steward, 2008). As far as the UK higher education sector is concerned, the successful individual tasked with coordinating third stream revenue generation is likely to be charismatic and a "*magnet*" around which like-minded individuals and activity revolve (Prince, 2007:755).

In effect the key account manager's role is multi-faceted (Jolson, 1997), likely to be demanding and carries a high level of responsibility (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000). As such, it is either best suited to the most experienced sales professionals (Sengupta *et al.*,

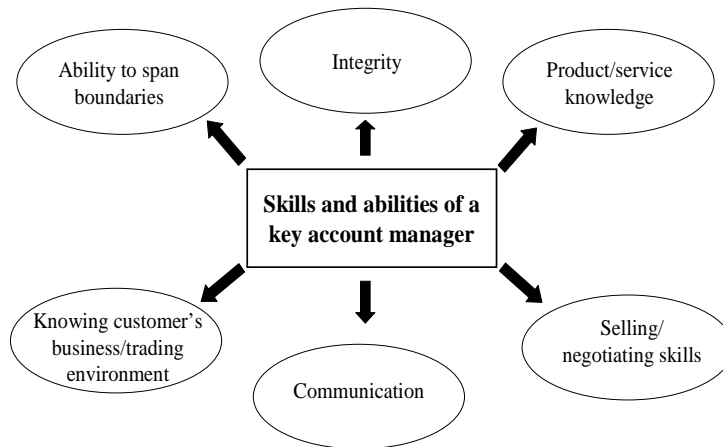
1997; Jolson, 1997) or perhaps a special *relationship promoter* (Walter and Gemünden, 2000). Such an individual is likely to be “...no administrator who dutifully fits into a standard job description ...this key person commits him- or herself fully to the relationship and network management task and fills specific action scopes autonomously” (Walter and Gemünden, 2000:98). However, in talking about the role, it is sometimes difficult to separate the number and nature of the tasks to be performed from the attributes and personal skills necessary. Thus, attention now turns to a more detailed treatment of the personnel specification accompanying the key account manager role.

### **The skills and qualities of a key account manager**

The earlier debate around the ‘ownership’ of the KAM concept is further exemplified by the suggestion that successful implementation of a relationship marketing strategy depends either on the way the salesforce behaves (Beverland, 2001) or on the competence of individual key account managers (Abratt and Kelly, 2002; Ryals and Rogers, 2007). However, irrespective of KAM’s provenance, success is thought most likely to ensue when key account managers engage in activities that go above and beyond what is regarded as the norm, such as making sacrifices or taking risks on behalf of the customer. In such cases, suppliers demonstrate clear commitment and the relationship is likely to become stronger as a result (Jap, 2001). Indeed, customers are notoriously good at knowing when they are low on the supplier’s priority list (Abratt and Kelly, 2002).

A trawl of the KAM literature would suggest that key account managers are typically expected to boast a minimum range of skills and qualities. These are summarised in Figure 2. At first glance, most of the skills listed look little different from those expected of a traditional salesperson. However, the boundary-spanning nature of the job and the facilitation of multi-level, multi-functional exchanges across organisations (Weitz and Bradford, 1999) means that the key account manager needs to be able to exercise considerable leadership skills. Indeed, there will be times when both parties will look to the key account manager for guidance and direction (McDonald *et al.*, 1997) in much the same way as an orchestra hangs on the beat of the conductor’s baton. Like a conductor, the key account manager will typically be expected to exhibit all the hallmarks of authority.

**Figure 2: Key account manager skills/abilities**  
Source: Adapted from McDonald *et al.* (1997:748/9)



Equally, this authority is not only also likely to accrue from the wealth of knowledge the key account manager possesses about the supplier's own products, services and processes but also from a detailed appreciation of the customer's own trading environment and unique commercial challenges (Abratt and Kelly, 2002). This is a further example of where the skills and qualities of the key account manager probably outstrip those required of the typical salesperson. Indeed, research suggests that knowledge and understanding of the customer's business is considered important by both parties (Abratt and Kelly, 2002). However, such knowledge is not necessarily innate and comes largely from 'on the job' experience rather than from any formal or informal training (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Key account managers should also possess both strategic and intrapreneurial ability. In other words, they should have the confidence to operate as a cognitive *thinker* as well as a *doer*. However, important as it is to strike a balance between the strategic and operational aspects of the role, a quicker return is normally perceived from being a *doer* than a *thinker* because the impact on the customer is more immediate (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000).

Communication and selling skills are also important. On the one hand, the concept of KAM may need to be promoted within the key account manager's own organisation



(Millman and Wilson, 1995). On the other hand, multi-level, multi-functional exchanges are unlikely to occur without recourse to first-rate communication and inter-personal skills, with persuasion arguably the most important of them all (Brady, 2004). Indeed, in order to facilitate and motivate, the key account manager may increasingly need to operate behind-the-scenes in a quiet and efficient manner, "...devoting significant time to being a terrific coach" (Maister, 1999:63). Equally, the key account manager will need to be resourceful, innovative and happy to work as part of a team (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). This is particularly interesting, given that such skills and abilities are markedly different from those associated with the traditional salesperson, who tends to be regarded very much as a "loner" (Weitz and Bradford, 1999:250).

Finally, an exploration of key account manager skills and qualities would be incomplete without a consideration of some of the pertinent demographic factors. For example, interesting data emerges from the KAM literature about the typical age and educational background of key account managers. According to research conducted by Sengupta *et al.* (2000), the median age of key account managers interviewed was 41. Additionally, they tended to be well-qualified (two thirds with degrees and one third with postgraduate qualifications) and had worked for their respective organisations for a median of 12 years (mostly in sales). Arnett *et al.* (2005), in investigating core selling teams, found that the average age was 39 and that individuals were being paid an average salary of \$84,000. However, whilst no direct comparison is possible with the UK higher education sector - and the figures quoted presumably relate to *Fortune 500* companies anyway - the research nevertheless suggests an underlying trend for key account managers to be mature, experienced, well-qualified and appropriately rewarded. This conveniently leads on to a more detailed examination of the way in which key account managers should be remunerated in order to motivate them to do a good job.

### **Key account manager reward structures**

Assuming that the effective key account manager is an experienced, mature and well-qualified individual - in other words, a 'super-KAM' (Walter and Gemünden, 2000) - it is perhaps not unreasonable to see average salaries in the region of \$84,000, as

identified above. Indeed, if key account managers are regarded as “*treasured resources*” (Napolitano, 1997:3) and are able to bring people together effectively, they should be paid accordingly. Equally, an organisation should be looking to enhance its wage structure in order to attract key account managers with the right skills and abilities (Tice, 1997) - an argument that is all the more compelling if the establishment of an effective KAM structure is accepted as a reliable means of reducing risk in corporate growth (Napolitano, 1997). In reality, the remuneration framework might actually become the “*litmus test*” that distinguishes true key account managers from sales people (McDonald, 2000:16). However, there are potential downsides. For example, salary differences between key account managers and the traditional salesforce are more than likely to provoke internal conflict and hamper the task of prising KAM from the stranglehold of its sales legacy (McDonald, 2000; Brady, 2004). Equally, organisations willing to pay higher salaries are likely to have higher expectations of key account manager performance (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000).

However, in deciding on an appropriate wage and bonus structure, organisations should perhaps heed the findings of research conducted into sales staff perceptions of their respective remuneration packages. Although not surprising, a major point of note is that sales people tend to dislike the idea of limits (or caps) being placed on their potential earnings. Indeed, caps might have a negative overall impact on morale because “*...instrumentality theory predicts that capping mechanisms do not motivate salespeople or sales teams*” (Tice, 1997:41). However, two reasons are generally cited as to why organisations might opt for caps in KAM remuneration: first, key account managers are often part of a team and, thus, it would be unfair to offer particular individuals unlimited earnings opportunities without it impacting on the stability and harmony of the team. Second, the resources expended in winning and maintaining relationships are potentially substantial. Thus, earnings opportunities need to be tightly controlled in order to assure optimum profitability from the account team (Tice, 1997). Interestingly, a survey of global and national account managers discovered that over 65% of respondents said their earnings were limited by company policy (Tice, 1997). However, despite the unpopularity of caps with selling teams and key account managers, if judiciously applied as part of a well-designed remuneration package, they do have a place “*...in the arsenal of management tools of the modern sales executive*” (Tice, 1997:47).

KAM literature suggests there are two broad approaches to rewarding key account managers: compensation and promotion (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Indeed, key account managers are likely to be motivated by immediate financial incentives such as salary increases, bonuses and profit share (Walter and Gemünden, 2000; Beverland, 2001). One bonus scheme that is particularly well-suited to KAM, and is enjoying increasing popularity, is based on customer satisfaction targets (Jap, 2001). However, such schemes may only address classic, short-term hygiene factors. Arguably, long-term motivation might only come from more far-reaching rewards such as promotion. Yet, promotion itself may be a two-edged sword because traditional salespeople appear not to do well when promoted to the role of key account manager. Equally, the promotion of established key account managers may also interfere with the continuity of existing relationships (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Regrettably, some senior managers underestimate the impact of changes in key account personnel on customer perceptions (Millman and Wilson, 1995). They may also fail to recognise that some customers will often exhibit greater loyalty to the key account managers themselves than to the supplier (Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Jap 2001).

Walter and Gemünden (2000) provide a useful checklist of elements to be incorporated in a holistic benefits package for key account managers (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Holistic approach to KAM remuneration**  
**Source: Adapted from Walter and Gemünden (2000:98)**

<b>Checklist of essential elements of a KAM remuneration package</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Increased budgets for gathering market information
<input type="checkbox"/> Released time from administrative tasks
<input type="checkbox"/> Increased travel privileges
<input type="checkbox"/> Formal recognition of the relationship promoter (key account manager) role
<input type="checkbox"/> Immediate incentives (bonus, profit share, salary increase)
<input type="checkbox"/> Training programmes
<input type="checkbox"/> Participation in business planning and development

Viewed in this way, the key account manager operates in a more strategic capacity, and can be released from routine administrative tasks. Equally, both the role and the individual would be accorded greater status within the organisation. This would

represent a welcome development since key account managers are all too often adjudged to have responsibility without the authority (Maister, 1999).

Training programmes, too, are vital in enabling key account managers to cope with increasingly dynamic supply chains (Millman and Wilson, 1995; Pardo, 1999) and the effective use of tools such as strategic planning, financial analysis, environmental scanning, research and information technology (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000). Such training could be important in ensuring that key account managers are aware of what is expected of them and how they can best contribute to the alignment of the organisation's goals, objectives and strategies (Abratt and Kelly, 2002). Equally, key account managers may need help in recognising the many intangible aspects of relationships that are essential in building trust over the longer-term (Doney *et al.*, 2007). At the very least, training is likely to boost key account manager confidence (Ryals and Rogers, 2007) and better customer retention levels should be expected as a result (Sharma, 2006). However, it is worrying to observe that, in a recent study, few of the key account managers in the case study organisation were actually trained in marketing. In fact, most were from a sales background. The remit of the marketers was confined solely to the creation of product literature (Brady, 2004).

Although training and motivational issues are considered increasingly important elements of the remuneration mix, systems that some organisations currently have in place may regrettably be insufficient for building effective customer relationships and could even be counter-productive (Evans *et al.*, 2000). For example, in the UK higher education sector, the nature of academic staff contracts makes it difficult to reward entrepreneurial behaviour appropriately (Watling *et al.*, 2003). Likewise, consideration needs to be given to the issue of whether or not to measure key account manager performance and how this might actually be done. Indeed, it is felt by some that the inclusion of a performance-related component in the remuneration package is likely to benefit KAM implementation in the longer-term (Homburg *et al.*, 2008).

The literature review can now be summarised in the form of a conceptual framework (see Figure 4) that will help shape the direction of the proposed research. However, it should be noted that this framework is, at best, a snapshot of a dynamic and constantly evolving situation and is, thus, subject to limitations.

# **Chapter 3**

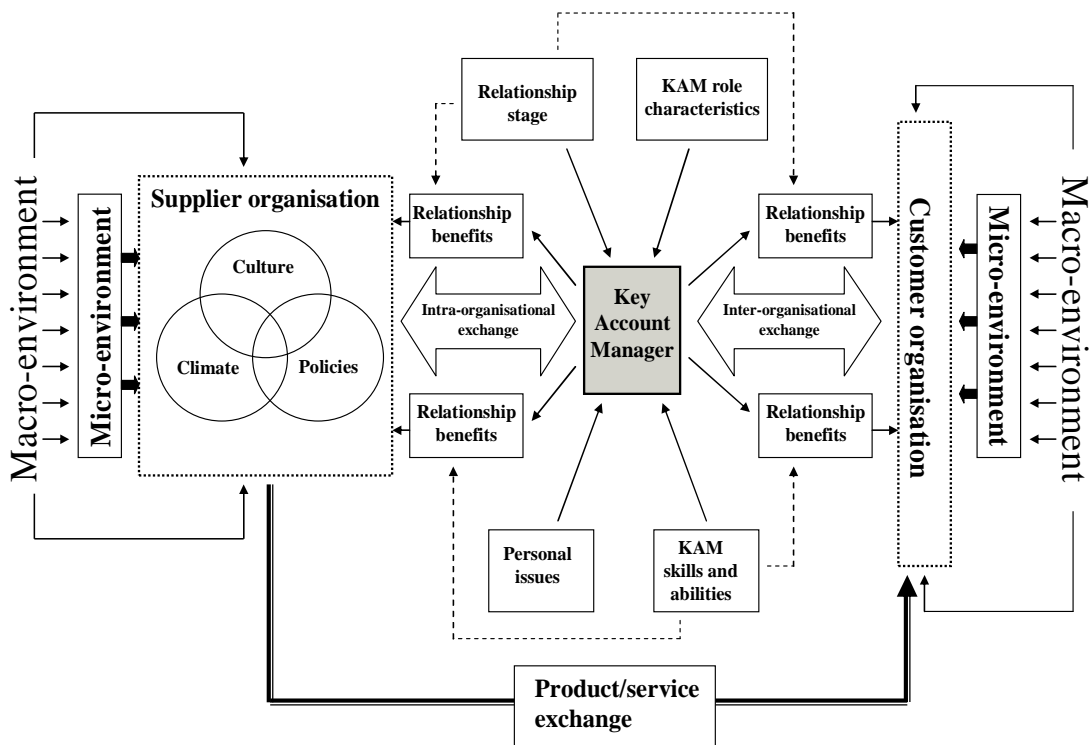
## **Conceptual framework**

## Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework below (Figure 4) offers an overview of the KAM process predominantly from a supplier perspective. The reason for such a focus is because the study seeks to re-evaluate the relevance of the concept to a UK business school - in this instance, Nottingham Business School. It is also acknowledged that little or no research has so far been conducted into commercial relationships within the UK corporate education sector (Murray and Underhill, 2002).

The literature review has focussed largely, but not exclusively, on the organisational implications for suppliers of adopting KAM and the role-related and personal factors that contribute to the making of an effective key account manager. This study examines these issues specifically in the context of a UK business school and its management of relationships with corporate clients.

**Figure 4: Conceptual framework for Document 5**



In terms of organisational implications, KAM requires suppliers to undergo a fundamental shift in business orientation. At the very least, this will necessitate changes to organisational culture, climate and policies (Dubinsky *et al.*, 2003) and these are likely to involve significant strategic investment (Beverland, 2001; Homburg *et al.*, 2008). For example, the mindset should become ‘farmer-oriented’ (Compton and Grigg, 2001). Here, senior management has a significant role to play in sponsoring and nurturing the right climate for KAM development (Homburg *et al.*, 2008). Equally, in terms of policies, suppliers need to identify which customers they believe are strategically important to the business - not only now but in the future (Burnett, 1992; Ivens and Pardo, 2008). This will entail some relationship portfolio analysis (Zolkiewski and Turnbull, 2002), followed by a decision on the most suitable KAM design for facilitating the selected accounts. In effect, this can range from no identifiable system through to a fully-fledged, stand-alone strategic business unit (Kempeners and van der Hart, 1999). However, the organisation will be forced to decide on the degree of adaptation necessary for establishing a suitable KAM structure - adaptation is a necessary condition of engaging in B2B relationships (Brennan *et al.*, 2003). Finally, senior managers should be looking to determine a robust and coherent wage structure that will help attract and retain key account managers with the right skills and abilities (Tice, 1997) and decide on a suitable approach for measuring both KAM implementation and key account manager performance (McDonald *et al.*, 1997).

Additionally, suppliers are able to derive a number of benefits from the effective management of key account relationships. For example, a long-term partnership is likely to lead to increased profitability (Ashnai *et al.*, 2009), reduced servicing costs over the relationship life cycle (Napolitano, 1997; McDonald, 1997; McDonald, 2000), market standing and technical knowledge (McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999) and access to new end-user markets (Millman and Wilson, 1995). Equally, suppliers are able to build a more detailed understanding of each key customer’s business and use this to create added value for both themselves and their partners (Napolitano, 1997) through activities such as better strategic planning (Cespedes, 1993). At the very least, the adoption of KAM should encourage a more responsive and productive after-sales follow-up (Cann, 1998; Boles *et al.*, 1999).

Such reported benefits are worthy of further investigation in this study in order to evaluate their transferability to a higher education context. The findings also partially answer the call from Ellis and Mayer (2001) and Wright (2004) for more research across different B2B sectors.

From a customer perspective, KAM is believed to deliver an equally impressive list of benefits. For example, longer-term relationships bring the prospect of continuity of supply, preferential after-sales service and trust (Millman and Wilson, 1995; McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Ryals and Holt, 2007). As such, KAM could be regarded as a risk reduction strategy (Ivens and Pardo, 2008). Customers also enjoy personal contact with key account managers, improved communication channels and the availability of technical advice (Millman and Wilson, 1995; McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Ryals and Holt, 2007) and enhanced levels of supplier service (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; Schultz and Evans, 2002). However, such issues are not subjected to closer scrutiny in this research since the overall focus is on the supplier perspective - in other words, Nottingham Business School.

In effect, the glue that holds the commercial relationship together (Walter and Gemünden, 2000) is very much the individual key account manager. For this reason, the central portion of the conceptual framework is dominated by both the role-related issues and the skills and personal qualities of the key account manager and, once again, it is important to evaluate these aspects from a higher education perspective. As far as the role is concerned, the principal tasks are growing one or more key accounts consistent with supplier objectives, co-ordinating and tailoring the supplier's product/service offering to each key account, facilitating multi-level, multi-functional exchange processes in a boundary-spanning capacity (Walter and Gemünden, 2000; Beverland, 2001) and promoting the KAM concept within the supplier organisation (Millman and Wilson, 1995). In the course of carrying out these duties, the key account manager is expected to assume the position of intermediary, responsible for both external and internal relationship marketing duties (Brady, 2004). In reality, the role of key account manager would appear to be a multi-faceted one (Jolson, 1997) and calls upon a particular kind of individual with the right blend of skills and personal qualities.



In terms of personnel specification, a key account manager should be confident when spanning organisational boundaries (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Such an individual is also expected to show leadership skills and integrity in the course of guiding the relationship (McDonald *et al.*, 1997) and a detailed knowledge of both the supplier's products, services and processes and the customer's trading environment (Abratt and Kelly, 2002). Key account managers should be comfortable in operating at both strategic and tactical levels (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000) and they will also need to be resourceful, innovative and happy to work as part of a team (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Communication, selling and negotiation skills are likely to be important in situations where key account managers find themselves dealing with complex problems that require a degree of persuasion and diplomacy in arriving at a satisfactory solution (Brady, 2004). In effect, customers have become more demanding and are exerting greater power over suppliers than ever before such that the many skills and qualities of an effective key account manager are rapidly becoming the standard entry level for the position (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; McGinnis and McCarty, 1998; Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Murray and Underhill, 2002; Arnett *et al.*, 2005; Golfetto and Gibbert, 2006).

The above personal skills and qualities are all considered worthy of further investigation in a higher education context. Thus, attention now turns to outlining and justifying the chosen research design guiding the data collection process in this study.

# **Chapter 4**

## **Research design**

## **Contextualising the research design for Document 5**

Whilst the research questions have already been presented - and supported by a comprehensive rationale - it is appropriate to reproduce them here as a backdrop for the discussion and evaluation of the research design issues that are inevitably raised in the early stages of the research process. The questions are as follows:-

- How appropriate is the concept of Key Account Management (KAM) to the organisation and management of current corporate client relationships at Nottingham Business School?
- What are the perceived characteristics of a successful key account manager according to Nottingham Business School corporate client managers?
- How could a KAM strategy be implemented at Nottingham Business School?

The ensuing discussion focuses in particular on the issues of research methodology, research strategy and data collection methods.

## **Chosen research methodology and rationale**

Methodological choice is an important aspect of the research process because it outlines the researcher's basic assumptions about how the world is viewed (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). In effect, it forces the researcher to consider what reality is and how we *know* reality (Fisher, 2007) and requires honesty about personal beliefs, about what we know and what we think can be known (Goulding, 1999). In other words, ontological and epistemological decisions need to be made (Bryman, 2001). On the one hand, Goulding (1999) argues that methodological choice is a time-consuming, personal and reflective process, and this process is made all the more challenging because of differing interpretations of what constitutes reality (du Toit, 2003). However, on the other hand, methodological choice provides a useful overarching framework that shapes and guides the research process and goes some way to prescribing the kind of evidence that will be gathered and how it will be interpreted (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1997).

A comprehensive evaluation of ontological and epistemological issues was provided in Document 3. Thus, it is not felt necessary to enter into a lengthy philosophical debate at this stage. However, suffice it to say that, for this particular study, a subjectivist (or, more specifically, a social constructionist) ontology is considered appropriate because the world and ‘reality’ are not necessarily objective and exterior but are socially constructed and given meaning by people (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1997; Goulding, 1999; Milliken, 2001; Fisher, 2007; Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, it is argued that the purpose of good constructionist research is to obtain a detailed understanding of individual viewpoints so that lessons may be learned (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). Further support for a social constructionist stance is provided by Devins and Gold (2002) who suggest that the social interaction between people is the vehicle through which their values come alive.

Whilst a ‘soft’ ontological stance could be criticised for imprecision and lack of dependability (Milliken, 2001), the ‘social’ context of business research is arguably too complex to lend itself to theorising in the same way as the physical sciences. For example, B2B marketing situations are particularly complex and require a depth of knowledge of what is going on both inside organisations and in the many relationships between them (Gummesson, 2003). Equally, most business contexts are unique because the issues under investigation are usually situation-specific or, at the very least, company-specific. Indeed, events or outcomes are the function of a particular set of circumstances and individuals. As such, rich insights into these situations may be lost if the research is reduced to a series of ‘law-like’ generalisations, as found in much positivist research (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, when exploring the details of a situation, it is important “*to understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind them*” (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002:35).

In terms of epistemological choices, this study favours an interpretivist approach, given that the data will be generated from qualitative data collection methods. Moreover, a qualitative research style that focuses on understanding and interpretation is normally - but not exclusively - considered the favoured approach of researchers adopting a constructionist ontological stance (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). Some would go so far as to claim that all research is actually interpretive to some extent (Gummesson, 2003). Furthermore, qualitative research techniques are becoming

increasingly useful in the business world, particularly in marketing (Burns *et al.*, 2000). For example, Gilmore and Carson (1996) suggest that such techniques are ideally suited to the services sector, given the dynamic nature of service delivery and the fact that services are delivered primarily through human interaction. It is also felt that qualitative techniques can provide marketing researchers with a depth of insight into phenomena that cannot necessarily be achieved through the statistical analysis of quantitative data (Burns *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, “*a social constructionist approach takes subjective reports of events, emotions and cognitions to be multifaceted constructions which can be interpreted on many levels*” (Hackley, 1998:125).

A further consequence of adopting an interpretivist epistemology is that the researcher approaches data analysis through a process of induction - in other words, favouring theory *building* over theory *testing* (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). This study does not set out to test any predetermined hypothesis; rather, a better understanding of the nature of KAM, in a higher education context, is expected to emerge from the data gathered during the research. In turn, this is likely to help either support existing views on KAM suitability or provide new insights. Equally, the interview agenda supporting the semi-structured interviews with ‘key account managers’ from Nottingham Business School has been devised such that respondents express their personal, freely-held views on KAM-related issues before specific concepts and frameworks from KAM literature are subjected to closer scrutiny.

### **Chosen research strategy and rationale**

Whereas ontological and epistemological choices provide an overarching framework for guiding the research process, research strategy is instrumental in determining the most effective source(s) of data. In reality, research strategy is concerned more with the effectiveness of the research design than the efficiency of individual data collection methods (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). A comprehensive evaluation of the most widely used research strategies was provided in Document 3. Of these, case study was felt to be a particularly flexible way of approaching exploratory research. Robson (2002:178) defines case study as “*...a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence*”. On this basis, case study is an appropriate research

strategy for Document 5 because the aim is to gather data about the progress of KAM (i.e. a particular contemporary phenomenon) within a major UK business school (i.e. real life context) through a systematic programme of research involving depth interviews with individuals from Nottingham Business School either acting in a key account manager capacity or having previous KAM experience (i.e. multiple sources of evidence). Additional justification for this strategy is provided by Perry (1998), who claims that case study tends to be a popular choice in postgraduate research.

In reality, whilst a given research strategy is not necessarily exclusive to any one methodological stance, case study is generally regarded as being more useful to the interpretivist researcher because it enables data to be gathered in a more direct and personal manner (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). However, case studies may not appeal to some on account of their perceived lack of ‘scientific’ foundations or “*representativeness*” (Fisher, 2007:60). Yet, they can provide an effective medium for exploring and challenging existing theory and may even lead to the formulation of new hypotheses (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, although the current study is exploratory, it nevertheless enables a more detailed picture to emerge of the relevance of KAM to Nottingham Business School. Equally, such exploratory studies are increasingly recognised as helping the researcher to get close to respondents, penetrate their realities and generate an understanding of the marketing practices and activities employed by social enterprises (Shaw, 2004). Robson (2002:59) concludes that exploratory studies are a valuable means of finding out “*what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light.*”

### **Chosen data collection method and rationale**

Approaches to data collection constitute the *tactical* level of the research process (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Again, choice of appropriate method(s) depends largely on the overall methodological stance adopted. For example, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) see the basic process of interviewing as one of prospecting for information - a quest for the ‘true’ facts and feelings lying within. Such a view fits comfortably with a social constructionist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. However, choice of data collection method(s) also owes much to the preferred research strategy.

Generally speaking, the interpretivist researcher wishing to probe a case study organisation will opt for *semi-structured* interviews because they are particularly suitable for exploratory studies (Ashill and Jobber, 2001). They offer the capacity to generate rich data and are flexible enough that the order of questions can be varied from session to session (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Equally, other unexpected and interesting issues can be explored as they emerge (Shaw, 2004).

For this particular research project, flexibility and richness of data were considered important in view of the fact that the number of individuals acting in a key account manager capacity within Nottingham Business School was limited. Indeed, at the time of designing the research, there were just six people adjudged to have the necessary close contact with strategically important corporate clients to single them out as potential 'key account managers'. The researcher was able to identify these individuals partly on the basis of some ten years of personal experience as an employee and programme leader at NBS and partly on the basis of informal *ad hoc* discussions with colleagues who, when asked, kindly offered advice and guidance on respondent choice and general approach to data collection. Of the six respondents identified, two had significant previous key account management experience in other organisations and had been recruited to NBS in order to increase third-stream revenue generation. The other respondents all assumed day-to-day responsibility for managing NBS programmes that had been tailored to the specific requirements of key corporate clients. Whilst these individuals may not have boasted the title of Key Account Manager, in their capacity as programme leaders, they nevertheless were expected to carry out tasks that would normally be associated with the role of key account manager. (A brief profile of these six individuals can be found in Appendix 3).

In effect, respondents constituted a purposive or "*purposeful*" sample (Fisher, 2007:168). Indeed, purposive sampling is regarded as a particularly useful approach for the interpretivist (Hill and Wright, 2006) and is entirely appropriate in situations where the aim is to broaden understanding of an under-researched topic rather than confirm or refute hypotheses (Shaw, 2004). The fact that the participants were known in advance conforms to the view that samples in qualitative research are usually prespecified but may still evolve once field work begins (Hill and Wright, 2006).

Whilst it is acknowledged that the sample selected in this study might give cause for concern, in some quarters, a number of positions can be taken on this issue. On the one hand, the fact that the six individuals chosen were adjudged, in reality, to be the only people likely to be able to comment meaningfully on the suitability of pursuing a KAM strategy within NBS, makes a compelling argument for claiming that this study was attempting to operate at the level of an entire research population or sampling frame (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002) - albeit a necessarily small one. On the other hand, however, strong arguments can be found for justifying the use of small samples in qualitative business research. For example, Rao and Perry (2003) suggest that, whereas some would claim the minimum viable sample size to be twelve, size should rather be determined by *stability* - the point where consistency or broad agreement is reached between respondents and differences in opinion can be explained. Indeed, Rao and Perry (2003) go on to provide examples of business research where respondent views have converged after only five or six interviews. Equally, other researchers using small samples have found that the depth of experience shared by key respondents is a more significant factor than sample size in surfacing important and relevant opinions (Simms and Rogers, 2006). Research using small samples boasts other benefits too. At the very least, it allows a more intensive type of investigation (DeNicola, 2002) where individual experiences can be probed and insight generated into the depth and complexity of the issues under investigation (Crowley-Henry and Weir, 2007). Indeed, such interviews “... *though fewer in number, foster the kind of open-ended, discursive interaction that is likely to uncover important findings and relationships*” (DeNicola, 2002:44). Equally, small samples are more manageable in terms of balancing financial outlay with the time involved in gathering and analysing data (Given, 2006).

The choice of semi-structured interviews in this particular study is typical of much research conducted at postgraduate level (Fisher, 2007). However, despite the widely-held perception that they are the quickest and easiest way of generating qualitative data, their complexity is often underestimated (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1997). Thus, it is important to acknowledge some of the potential problems that interviews generate.

First, it should be noted that both parties in an interview are unavoidably *active* and that each person is likely to be engaged in a process of interpreting and assigning



meaning throughout the conversation. Indeed, meaning is not something that can be elicited simply by asking the right questions nor is it necessarily explicit in the respondent's replies (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The shared experience of the interview as an active object of thought should enable the researcher to "*hear the voice*" and "*see the face*" of particular social situations (Shotter, 2001:334). However, this raises potential concerns about the impartiality of the interviewer and may add to accusations of a lack of scientific rigour (Hackley, 1998). To counter such claims, the interpretivist researcher needs to adopt an honest and open approach to handling both the interview and the data analysis. Here, the notion of *reflexivity* is important because "*... the social constructionist researcher cannot justify airbrushing him or herself out of the picture but neither can they discard as neutral their own influence on the interview... reflexivity consists more in an acknowledgement of the researcher's presence in the research process than in recurring declarations of prejudice*" Hackley (1998:129).

Second, there is an assumption that respondent information will not necessarily be elicited in a 'pure' form and may be contaminated by personal views and experiences. Indeed, in the process of responding, people constructively add to, take away from and transform facts and detail (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Equally, the researcher, too, may be guilty of doing much the same thing because "*... there is no such thing as presuppositionless research*" (Jones, 1985a:47). The degree of importance attached to particular issues and the order in which questions are asked are also likely to vary from interview to interview "*... as the respondent (with the interviewer) stakes out and develops narrative territory*" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995:77). Finally, the overall direction of an interview is also likely to depend to some extent on the role/job title of each respondent and their experience/knowledge of the subject matter under investigation. Fortunately, the social constructionist view is that contamination is an unavoidable by-product of the interview setting, the participants and their interaction. As such, the diversity and unpredictability of an active interview is to be welcomed (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

However, whilst acknowledging this diversity and unpredictability, Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997) warn that an interview may not produce meaningful results unless directed purposefully by the interviewer. To this end, structure can be provided by a pre-prepared agenda or interview guide (Shaw, 2004). This typically comprises a list of

themes and questions to be raised and can be generated reasonably easily (Fisher, 2007). For this study, the interview agenda was based partly on the research questions themselves and on key themes emerging from the literature review (see Appendix 1). Equally, a series of respondent cue cards (see Appendix 2) provided an additional means of structuring the conversation and stimulating replies, although it should be stressed that these cards were withheld from respondents until they had had an opportunity to express their initial views on the various KAM-related issues. This helps mitigate potential accusations of interviewer bias (Saunders *et al.*, 2007).

Third, the use of any data collection method raises issues relating to validity, reliability and generalisability (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1997; Remenyi *et al.*, 2002). *Validity* involves careful consideration of the extent to which a chosen data collection method actually captures what it sets out to capture. *Reliability* is concerned with whether a research instrument will yield the same results on different occasions. Finally, *generalisability* addresses the extent to which the research findings are representative of the wider population (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1997). However, whilst such terms are generally considered appropriate to positivist research, they are inappropriate for judging qualitative research, given that the intended goals are markedly different to those of quantitative studies (Given, 2006). Nevertheless, the values enshrined in them may still be important to the interpretivist researcher in providing a series of checks and balances to regulate the quality of the research output (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002).

From an interpretivist perspective, ‘validity’ can be demonstrated by ensuring that the researcher gains maximum exposure to the knowledge and meanings of respondents. Here, good quality access to the case study organisation and relevant employees is vital (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002). It is also about providing a detailed rationale of the chosen research design to enable others to judge its suitability to the given research context. In other words, ‘validity’ is about establishing *credibility* in the eyes of fellow researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1995). In this particular study, access to Nottingham Business School was guaranteed because it was the researcher’s place of work. Consequently, full access to those individuals identified as either acting in a key account manager capacity or having KAM experience was also possible, thus ensuring maximum exposure to the knowledge and meaning of appropriate

respondents. Equally, validity can be established by using multiple sources of evidence (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002), thereby providing triangulation. In this study, triangulation was attempted by virtue of the fact that participation was sought from those with either key account management experience or from academics carrying out many of the duties normally associated with key account management - but who might not necessarily perceive themselves as acting in a KAM role. Thus, evidence was gathered from two separate sources.

However, it is acknowledged that the chosen research design might raise questions as to why other sources of evidence from within Nottingham Trent University (e.g. Manager of Corporate Affairs or Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Business Development) and NBS (e.g. Dean of Business School) were excluded from the study. In mitigation, it should be noted that the research focus of this study is Nottingham Business School rather than Nottingham Trent University. Consequently, the views of those outside the School were considered irrelevant to the task in hand. As for the Dean of NBS, it was felt that his specific technical background and limited experience of postgraduate programme delivery were likely to restrict the potential usefulness of the data generated. Rather, the views and opinions of those most directly involved in the day-to-day process of dealing with corporate clients were considered pivotal to this study. A further criticism might be that this study missed an opportunity to investigate the progress of KAM implementation in other UK higher education providers. Whilst such research would have provided interesting - and perhaps revelatory - insights into KAM developments that could be useful in shaping NBS KAM strategy, it was felt that such a major undertaking would have been too resource-intensive for Document 5. Equally, it is worth returning to the observation that the purpose of the exploratory research in this study is to understand how KAM is viewed by customer-facing staff within NBS. As such, it should be considered the first stage in what could be a bigger and more wide-ranging investigation.

The issue of 'reliability' is not considered a major concern for the interpretivist researcher because interviews tend to be situation-specific and, therefore, do not lend themselves to replication in quite the same way as in positivist research (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002). However, the general reliability of small-scale qualitative research can be guaranteed if consistency is built into interviewing techniques and procedures (Martin

and Wright, 2005). For example, the current study benefited from the degree of rigour provided by the interview guide. Elsewhere, the interpretivist should also take steps to establish an appropriate audit trail, with all evidence kept in an easily retrievable format that allows others to view the data if required (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002). In this respect, the digital recording and storage of interviews is highly recommended and easy to do (Fisher, 2007). Such an approach was considered appropriate for this particular study. Indeed, full interview transcripts are presented in Appendices 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 and digital recordings of each interview are available on CD Rom or electronically on request. Finally, the interpretivist researcher needs to be open and honest about problems encountered and/or changes made to the design of subsequent interviews (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002). Such actions go some way towards supporting the desire for *dependability* and *transferability* in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1995). In this particular study, for example, the view was taken during the first interview that cue card 15 was largely irrelevant to an understanding of KAM concepts among respondents. Equally, it became clear that the interview was likely to exceed the scheduled hour unless corrective action was taken. Thus, cue card 15 was removed from the first and subsequent interviews. The KAM relationship life cycle stages shown on cue cards 6 - 10 also needed far more explanation than was expected. Subsequent explanations may have involved more direct researcher intervention than was ideally desirable, using up valuable time that would have been better employed probing respondents' own views and opinions about KAM and KAM concepts. Equally, it was not necessarily clear whether the explanations really helped to clarify matters for respondents or whether they may have biased respondent replies.

Finally, lack of 'generalisability' is another charge often levelled at interpretivist studies, since small samples tend to be used and the research is largely confined to a particular research setting (Fisher, 2007; Saunders *et al.*, 2007; Giroux, 2009). This is especially true of small business research, which some would argue is unfairly dismissed for generating superficial and anecdotal accounts rather than 'proper' research (Giroux, 2009). However, such a view is increasingly challenged, given that a focus on smaller samples can actually provide a greater understanding of how businesses operate than more traditional large-scale positivist surveys (Giroux, 2009). Indeed, the interpretivist researcher would suggest that the use of small samples can often surface the reality underpinning a case study context (Hurrell, 2005). Equally,

whilst positivist surveys invariably boast large sample sizes, and claim statistical significance, the samples themselves may actually be confined to a localised area, thereby undermining any claim to being representative of the wider population (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). For this particular study, no claims are made for ‘generalisability’ other than that the findings are relevant to KAM implementation at Nottingham Business School or, at the very least, a better understanding of the extent to which KAM concepts are being embraced. However, it is hoped that this study will inspire others to investigate KAM in their own institutions and compare and contrast findings. In this way, it satisfies the interpretivist desire for *confirmability* rather than ‘generalisability’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1995).

Having reviewed matters of research design and justified the choices made in this particular study, attention now turns to the analysis of the data generated.

# **Chapter 5**

## **Data analysis**

## Approach to data analysis

Qualitative data are acknowledged as being likely to provide a detailed (or ‘thick’) description of a research situation (Dey, 1993; Robson, 2002). However, the use of such data has implications for both its collection and analysis (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Whilst the analysis of quantitative data can be carried out in a largely standardised way - with the data being subjected to complex and robust statistical analysis - the same is not necessarily true of qualitative data. Indeed, the analysis of such data brings with it a different set of challenges and forces the researcher to make tough decisions about how best to proceed in order to preserve the integrity of the research. Indeed, failure to manage this process intelligently is likely to result in “*failure to analyse the data effectively*” (Dey, 1993:57).

Qualitative data analysis is viewed as much more of a personal activity (Jones, 1985b) and requires the researcher to exercise a degree of judgment over how to extract the best from the data. In reality, it is “*a process of making sense, of finding and making a structure in the data and giving this meaning and significance for ourselves, and for any relevant audience*” (Jones, 1985b:56). However, the fact that the interpretivist researcher is required to exercise a degree of judgment should not negate the need to adopt a systematic and rational approach to data analysis. At the very least, a system of ‘internal’ replication would help guard against accusations of subjectivity and methodological weakness, given that the results of much qualitative analysis “*mostly have to be taken on trust*” (Dey, 1993:221).

Broadly speaking, there are two ways of managing the analysis of qualitative data. *Quantifying methods* allow the researcher to interpret the data numerically through techniques such as content analysis. *Non-quantifying methods* adopt non-numerical techniques such as grounded theory and cognitive mapping (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Whilst not mutually exclusive, each approach sets out to achieve something different with the data. Thus, for this particular study, a *non-quantifying* approach was adopted because the issues raised and the underlying perceptions of the respondents were considered more important and insightful than the frequency with which they occurred. Equally, the notion of frequency is possibly less meaningful for research

based on small samples. Support for the use of non-quantifying methods is readily available in the qualitative research methodology literature:-

*“We argue that although words may be more unwieldy than numbers, they render more meaning than numbers alone... Converting words into numbers and then tossing away the words gets a researcher into all kinds of mischief.”* (Miles and Huberman, 1994:56)

The way in which initial sense is made of qualitative data is through a process of categorisation. Indeed, without some attempt to streamline the data it will be difficult to make meaningful comparisons between data chunks (Dey, 1993). Some categories may well be identified before the analysis begins and will tend to mirror themes that have surfaced in the literature review. However, it is equally possible for this to occur as the analysis unfolds, but the researcher needs to exercise caution and avoid imposing his/her preconceived ideas and categories on the process. Indeed, categories *“should not be imposed on the data arbitrarily; the categories adopted should reflect the data”* (Dey, 1993:97/98).

For this particular study, the 7-stage framework proposed by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997) offered a convenient and manageable structure for approaching data analysis. The starting point in the process is the *familiarisation* stage. Here, the researcher reads and re-reads the transcripts in order to form initial thoughts on the issues. The second stage is one of *reflection*, and involves a candid assessment of how useful the data appear and whether they match initial expectations. Indeed, issues that might have been considered important by the researcher may not be viewed in the same way by respondents. Equally, completely different issues can emerge. However, after this period of reflection, *conceptualisation* can begin. Here, the researcher drafts a list of prominent themes or categories that have emerged from the transcripts.

The next step is *cataloguing concepts*. In other words, an attempt is made to assign ‘units’ of data to the categories identified - a ‘unit’ of data being any number of words: a sentence, a string of sentences, a complete paragraph or some other chunk of textual data that ‘belongs to’ a category (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). In effect, this stage of the process is one of labelling. However, a potential concern is that the full richness and meaning of some data chunks may be lost once they are taken out of context



(Dey, 1993). Whilst traditional approaches to data categorisation have tended to make use of techniques such as card indexing systems for facilitating the cross-referencing of themes, advances in information technology have encouraged interpretivist researchers to opt for computer software packages such as NVIVO 7. These can make the task of analysing large volumes of qualitative data easier and faster. However, given the relatively small amount of data in this particular study, a more traditional approach to indexing was adopted using Microsoft Word. Data chunks were cut from the transcripts and pasted into appropriately labelled folders. Such an approach was also considered beneficial in helping the researcher to retain a degree of ‘closeness’ to the data that was not felt possible with a more sophisticated software-based solution.

The fifth stage in the Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1997) process is that of *recoding*. The researcher may be concerned that too many codes have been produced. Indeed, some may not be sufficiently different to warrant being treated separately. Equally, initial codes may perhaps have proved too restrictive in not allowing sufficiently rich insights into certain issues. Consequently, this process of refinement (or laddering) entails codes being enlarged or collapsed. Stage six is all about *linking*. In other words, links between codes are identified and an initial attempt is made to tease out the building blocks of a ‘story’ from the data. The final stage involves *re-evaluation*. Here, a degree of judgement needs to be exercised over which elements of the data will actively be pursued in the writing up of the ‘story’.

The above 7-stage framework is broadly similar to the *general analytical procedure* outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). However, Miles and Huberman (1994:8) still see a role for a more intuitive approach to data analysis and “*assume that through continued readings of the source material and through vigilance over one’s presuppositions, one can capture the essence of an account*”. Such advice has been useful in enabling a systematic, yet balanced, approach to data analysis in this particular research study.

Consideration will now be given to the main themes that emerged from the six interviews with ‘key account managers’ at NBS.

## Analysis and discussion of research findings

### *Understanding of the Key Account Management (KAM) concept*

Terms such as *key account management* and *key account manager* appear to have limited currency within Nottingham Business School (NBS). The following comment is typical of the feelings of more established academics with experience of delivering programmes to corporate clients:-

“... *we don't act as key account managers... we see ourselves as programme leaders.*”  
(Respondent C)

This is perhaps not altogether surprising, given that explicit knowledge of the KAM concept is believed to be limited in the corporate education sector (Murray and Underhill, 2002). Equally, part of the reason for the above view may be that KAM is more normally associated with sales and sales management (McDonald, 2000). Indeed, the three respondents with a sales background seemed comfortable with the concept. This, in turn, may say something about the potential transferability of KAM to a university environment. Additionally, the appointment of a Commercial Manager from outside higher education was regarded as a strong indicator of the imminent introduction of such terms into NBS and was a cause for concern for some (Respondents A and C). Building on her earlier dismissal of the concept, Respondent C claimed that KAM actually has no place in a university:-

“... *I don't, really, because I think the term sits within a sales mindset...*” (Respondent C)

Whilst some doubt would appear to be cast over the relevance of the term *key account* within the sector (Respondents A and D) - alternatives such as *corporate client* are more usual (Respondents C and F) - there is nevertheless a degree of commonality in the way in which major corporate clients are viewed (see Table 3). In effect, key accounts are customers who generate significant revenue not only in the short-term but also represent major future commercial opportunities (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999). However, it should be noted that Respondents C and D questioned the transferability of the concept to NBS on the basis of the relatively small size of the School and its business dealings with corporate clients.

**Table 3: Defining key accounts**

	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Respondent A</b>	<i>"It's managing the relationship with some of your key customers... who you are going to deliver more business to."</i>
<b>Respondent B</b>	<i>"... those accounts that were the most lucrative and that demanded extra-special levels of service..."</i>
<b>Respondent C</b>	<i>"[For larger companies]... a key account manager would look after major clients."</i>
<b>Respondent D</b>	<i>"... the idea of 'account manager' where somebody works for Northern Foods, and is the key account manager for Tesco, is a very nice idea. We haven't got the resources for that."</i>
<b>Respondent E</b>	<i>"... it's about knowing who is important in terms of your strategy and it's about developing an approach with those clients..."</i>
<b>Respondent F</b>	<i>"... we would have to say that the key accounts would be broken down very simply by what they've spent with us and how important, financially, those particular accounts are to us in terms of maintaining the same level of revenue moving forward."</i>

As for the process itself, experienced academics tended to prefer terms such as *client management* (Respondent B) and *corporate account management* (Respondent A). Indeed, the definition shown in the interviews (see cue card 1, Appendix 2) provoked much debate around two issues: first, the fact that KAM involves special treatment or prioritisation (Homburg *et al.*, 2008) and, second, that this should be targeted at the biggest and most important customers (Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999).

On the one hand, special treatment is not thought particularly relevant in view of the limited number of clients that NBS currently services (Respondent C). Consequently, programme leaders felt that all corporate clients should be considered key accounts and treated equally (Respondents A and C). This would go some way to avoiding the acknowledged drawback of prioritisation in that less valued customers may ultimately become dissatisfied with suppliers (Homburg *et al.*, 2008). By the same token, Respondent B suggested that individual clients do not need to be told they are special because *"... they know that they are a key account by the way that I deal with them... and the fact that they have my personal mobile"* (Respondent B). Equally, incoming calls from key accounts should not necessarily be routed through a special 'hot line' to be answered, for example, in three rings. Rather, KAM should mean that all calls are answered in three rings (Respondent E) and a positive virtue made out of adopting a customer-oriented approach:-

“... if you develop a core competence that involves the treatment of your key account... then what becomes special should be transmitted across all.” (Respondent F)

On the other hand, the KAM definition also suggests that this special treatment is targeted at the biggest and most important customers (Pardo, 1999). Indeed, two of the respondents with a sales background (Respondents E and F) tended to support such a view, with Respondent F actually referring to key accounts as the “*cash cows*” of the business. However, programme leaders would say that this is not the case in NBS (Respondent A). The main reason for this is that revenue from corporate clients is spread reasonably evenly across the portfolio (Respondent C). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that relationships with certain corporate clients could represent opportunities for future expansion (Respondent A) and that there is a range of clients that NBS would actively want to do business with (Respondent F). Such clients have a) been with NBS a long time b) do regular business with NBS and c) may be high profile organisations with whom NBS would be happy to publicise an association (Respondent B). The need to explore future potential is broadly supported by the findings of Ivens and Pardo (2008). Equally, commercial revenue generation tends to be an under-developed activity in most new universities (Prince, 2004).

It is also interesting to note that two of the respondents with a sales background - and who exhibited an enhanced awareness of KAM and KAM concepts (Respondents E and F) - offered additional insights into the introductory discussion. For example, the theme of *mutuality* surfaced, with Respondent E seeing KAM as a two-way process where each party recognises its importance to the other (Brennan, 1997; McDonald, 2000; Egan, 2001). Equally, Respondent F talked in terms of discovering things that you had not realised you had in common as a result of a close relationship. Both respondents also took a long-term, strategic view of the establishment of key account relationships, a position that finds much support in the KAM literature (Millman and Wilson, 1995; Weilbaker and Weeks, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999; Wang and Bowie, 2009). Indeed, it was suggested that one of the reasons why current programme leaders in NBS may not have a clear view of their key accounts - or how to manage them effectively - is because business has been developed over the years “... in an *ad hoc* way” (Respondent E).

However, the notion of special treatment for the biggest and most important customers (Pardo, 1999) is worthy of further investigation, particularly in light of the McDonald (2000) definition of a *key account* (see cue card 2, Appendix 2). The main problem with this definition is that it introduces the notion of determining key customers based on their strategic importance. However, this begs the question of how organisations interpret *strategic importance*.

### ***Determining strategic importance***

When initially challenged for their personal views of which factor(s) NBS adopts for determining the strategic importance of potential relationships, it was perhaps not surprising to see that most respondents shared the view proposed by Pardo (1999) that the ‘harder’ financial measures tend to be favoured. In particular, sales revenue and profit were mentioned most frequently. The following are typical comments:-

*“You know, sales volume is important. The level of profitability that we’re going to get from those future clients is important.”* (Respondent F)

*“... the bottom line [is]... a fundamental criterion.”* (Respondent D)

Nevertheless, the use of profitability as a criterion may be somewhat problematic for NBS. For example, Respondent A suggested that *“... we do have an idea about profitability but I think we look at... contribution.”* The concept of contribution is actually part of a long-standing NBS policy for determining the minimum level of contribution a programme (or key account) must make towards meeting both the fixed and variable costs incurred in delivery. The majority of experienced programme leaders interviewed (Respondents A, C and D) would appear to believe that this policy exerts a significant influence over the Business School approach to its key customers and may account for the fact that minimal effort tends to be expended on small companies that are unable to provide sufficient people to form a client-specific cohort:-

*“Yes, because we’ve got to get 50%... I mean, the argument is that with big clients they pay the bucks anyway.”* (Respondent C)

However, ‘softer’ criteria such as image and market standing may be just as important as the ‘harder’ financial indicators (McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Millman and Wilson, 1999). Respondent E has already suggested (see Table 3) that determining key accounts is about knowing which organisations are important to your strategy and which ones you want to be associated with. Indeed, the issues of brand association and branding were touched on by other respondents:-

*“I think there are two aspects: one is around supporting the type of business that we want to nurture and develop, and then there is this issue around brands, I suppose, and our reputation... and raising our stakes as a business school that provides education to big, blue chip companies...”* (Respondent B)

Whilst the focus on brand appears to be partly a matter of reputation (Respondent E), it also seems to be a Business School aspiration to become a provider of education to the kinds of organisation that would normally send their employees to Warwick, Cranfield and Ashridge (Respondent B). However, concern was expressed in some quarters that the requirement to achieve a 50% contribution may occasionally conflict with the desire to be seen to be doing business with certain high-profile companies. For example, Respondent D talked of the imminent collapse of a relationship with a well-known petro-chemical company and the potential damage that this could cause the Business School’s reputation:-

*“I do think it’s imperative that we maintain the image and identity of the Business School which, unfortunately, has been very, very significantly depleted over the last five years.”* (Respondent D)

The remainder of the discussion about *strategic importance* was structured around a set of key indicators proposed by Campbell and Cunningham (1983). A summarised version of these can be found on cue card 3 (see Appendix 2). Of the criteria listed, the two that attracted the most comment were *attractiveness of links with the customer* and *subjective judgment of the key account manager*. As for the former, Table 4 shows some typical examples of the views expressed. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Respondent C suspected that whilst senior managers might claim that the attractiveness of links is influential, the ultimate decision probably comes down to

profitability. A similar view was expressed in relation to *age of relationship*, with Respondent B wondering whether such considerations might, again, be overruled by the need to achieve sales volume and/or profitability. However, the concern here is that, by focussing on the kudos of a particular association, senior managers may be overlooking the more fundamental elements of KAM.

**Table 4: Attractiveness of links with the customer**

	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Respondent B</b>	<i>"The kudos of working with Barclays."</i>
<b>Respondent C</b>	<i>"The perception is that we're huge, big partners in Barclays..."</i>
<b>Respondent E</b>	<i>"... they could be important because they actually may not have a high value, in terms of monetary value, but they might have a high status."</i>
<b>Respondent F</b>	<i>"So, yes, there is a certain level of attractiveness of links with certain customers... it would be good for us... to have... the Bank of England, for example."</i>

The criterion of *subjective judgment of the key account manager* probably provoked discussion because respondents were initially unclear as to what exactly was meant by the expression. However, after a brief explanation of the Campbell and Cunningham (1983) suggestion that decisions about important relationships should ideally be left to the key account managers themselves, a range of views was expressed. For example, Respondent B felt that the influence of programme leaders had diminished noticeably. Indeed, the opportunity to exercise personal judgment had been much easier previously *"... where there was a lot more autonomy as far as the client managers were concerned."* However, the situation is now controlled much more centrally (Respondent B) and represents a potential cause of frustration. For example, Respondents A and C viewed recent developments as the inevitable result of new people being brought in from outside NBS with little understanding of academic life. Indeed, the fear is that new ways of doing things might impact adversely on existing commercial relationships. Conversely, the newcomers to NBS tended to think that exercising subjective judgment was likely to be challenging for existing programme leaders because they lack experience in dealing with established relationships in a proper commercial environment (Respondents E and F). This polarisation of views suggests that the question of how to develop effective relationships with corporate clients is a complex one and worthy of further investigation.

***Adopting a strategic approach to corporate clients***

The KAM literature suggests that suppliers seek to use their own resources more efficiently (Homburg *et al.*, 2008) and achieve greater overall strategic effectiveness from forging closer links with key customers (Stevenson, 1981; Boles *et al.*, 1999; Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Ryals and Rogers, 2007). The assumption is that suppliers adopt a strategic approach to KAM. However, in order to stimulate discussion on this issue, respondents were asked to rate NBS on a scale of 1 - 10 (where 1 represents no identifiable KAM strategy and 10 denotes the existence of a sophisticated and co-ordinated strategic approach to KAM).

**Figure 5: NBS KAM strategy rating scale**

Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Respondent	C				E, F D	B				→

A rating from Respondent A does not appear in Figure 5 because the scale was only introduced into subsequent interviews in order to help initiate conversation about strategic issues before cue card 4 (see Appendix 2) was shown. Respondent D also expressed concern that rating NBS in isolation was meaningless. Nevertheless, compared with other new universities, NBS would easily rank in the top half of the table (Respondent D). Equally, as relative newcomers to NBS, Respondents E and F were expected to offer more objective opinions. Indeed, whilst a rating of 5 suggests that the Business School has made significant progress over the previous 12 months “*we’re not where I’d like us to be*” (Respondent E). As for Respondent F, problems still needed to be overcome in certain areas:-

*“... we have got direction and we are trying to achieve those goals. I only say 5 and not 6 or 7 because how close we are to achieving those goals depends on so many other different things that perhaps haven’t been as well thought out as the strategy.”* (Respondent F)

Whilst, the rating from Respondent C appears somewhat low, the general sentiment expressed was supported by Respondent A, who believed that client management at NBS was, at times, more operational than strategic. However, Respondent C went on to defend her position:-



*“I’d go for 1 or below 1 actually... because it’s a scattergun approach. I actually don’t believe there is anything wrong with it but people think you should have a strategy, don’t they?” (Respondent C)*

This perception that NBS may be guilty of adopting an *ad hoc* approach to key accounts is not without grounding. According to KAM literature, the selection of key accounts can be very much taken for granted (Pardo *et al.*, 1995; McDonald, 2000; Murray and Underhill, 2002). Additional comments tend to suggest scepticism about the usefulness of approaching key accounts in a co-ordinated and strategic way. For example, Respondent C claimed that strategy is only useful because *“it makes people feel as if they’re in control”* (Respondent C). Equally, thinking strategically could be viewed as a luxury. However, there are times when *“you don’t have that luxury... sometimes you just need to survive”* (Respondent C). Equally, the existence of a strategic plan does not automatically guarantee results. For example, recent newcomers to NBS *“... have not brought in one single piece of new business... not one!”* (Respondent C).

**Table 5: Comments on KAM approach at NBS**

	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Respondent A</b>	<i>“... there’s no sort of formal strategy... there is definitely, you know, a sort of philosophy of looking after...”</i>
<b>Respondent B</b>	<i>“I don’t think there was any... particular strategic direction as far as corporate business was concerned in terms of defining which client we wanted to do business with. If anybody came along, then most of the time... we would try and develop that and the resulting business.”</i>
<b>Respondent C</b>	<i>“... it doesn’t work like that because people come to us through word-of-mouth... There isn’t a logic to how it works. There’s no point pretending there is a logic... there isn’t.”</i>
<b>Respondent D</b>	<i>“We don’t choose the customers. Crikey... we cradle them! And it’s just opportunities that we find...”</i>
<b>Respondent E</b>	<i>“We’ve developed business historically by being reactive and so, if you like, everybody’s a key account because they are a new business.”</i>

Respondent C’s view that NBS was not currently engaged in the strategic development of key account relationships is worthy of further examination because it is an issue that most respondents commented on. Table 5 provides a selection of their views. In reality, it would appear that client management policy has never been articulated formally and that, historically, relationships have been developed in the absence of an overall third stream or commercial strategy (Respondent E). As a result,

programme leaders have been forced to develop an understanding of what is required from experience (Respondent A). Such views tend to support the findings of Prince (2004) that commercial activities in new university business schools are under-developed. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the absence of a strategic plan may not, in itself, mean that an organisation is unable to benefit from a focussed, tactical approach to developing commercial relationships with key customers.

Despite the above reservations, a counter-theme that surfaced during the interviews was that strategic change was now more noticeable. For example, Respondent E suggested that NBS managers and programme leaders had recently embarked on a key account management “*journey*”. Furthermore, one of her roles was to develop commercial strategy in association with colleagues. This heralds a welcome switch from a reactive to a proactive business development model (Respondent E). Indeed, Respondent E was acknowledged as a change agent (Respondent F) at the same time as working on a planned and coordinated approach to building customer relationships (Respondent A). At the very least, this approach had resulted in an enhanced awareness of which particular clients are key accounts:-

*“And I would also say that we’re starting to be choosy about how we deal with enquiries.”*  
(Respondent E)

In terms of the determinants of a strategic KAM approach outlined on cue card 4 (see Appendix 2), certain issues seemed to capture the imagination of respondents more than others. For example, when asked whether *KAM activities are adequately resourced*, four respondents felt that NBS was currently under-resourced. The following is typical of the views expressed:-

*“I think that [resourcing] is obviously part of a strategic approach but... I’m not sure that we actually are adequately resourced.”* (Respondent A)

However, as with the adoption of a strategic approach, there are signs of improvement in the resourcing of commercial activities within NBS (Respondent D). For example, new people (i.e. Respondents E, F and the Dean of Business School) had recently been brought in, but NBS was still perceived to be under-resourced (Respondent D).

Perversely, however, the fact that NBS was adopting a more strategic approach to KAM may simply be due to human resource or financial pressures (Watling *et al.*, 2003; Prince, 2004; Prince, 2007). For example, given limited resources, it would appear to make sense to focus efforts on clearly defined targets (Respondent B). At the very least, the adoption of KAM should represent an ideal opportunity for organisations to make more efficient use of their resources (Homburg *et al.*, 2008).

Equally, it is unlikely that NBS could adopt a more strategic approach to key clients unless *KAM goals are aligned with corporate goals* and unless *KAM has senior management support* (see cue card 4, Appendix 2). According to the KAM literature, senior management are expected to play a crucial role in fostering the right climate for KAM (Homburg *et al.*, 2008) and ensuring that all levels within the organisation are “*in supportive alignment*” (Prince, 2007:753). Interestingly, Respondents A, C and D, who are all programme leaders with a substantial track record of operating within the corporate wing of NBS, were all fairly positive about NBS performance. The following is typical of the opinions expressed:-

*“I think we are actually aligned with corporate goals and hopefully leading some of the returns for corporate goals...”* (Respondent D)

Whilst the top four determinants on cue card 4 (see Appendix 2) generally seemed to provoke a positive response, the bottom four found participants less convinced. For example, whilst *customer portfolio analysis* appeared to be a concept that the majority of respondents understood, the general consensus was that it had only recently begun to happen at NBS:-

*“... I think we are on the lower end of the scale of this but we are actually on the scale and we do know what we are trying to do in terms of customer portfolio... and we are developing that area.”* (Respondent D)

Equally, as part of the move towards enhanced customer profitability analysis, service review meetings had now been incorporated into the regular planning process (Respondent E). These meetings were essentially intended to evaluate how key accounts have been operating and whether customers were happy (Respondent F).

However, regular joint planning meetings with customers are not yet a standard feature of life at NBS, with the exception of the traditional course committee meetings (Respondent C). Nevertheless, joint planning meetings are currently in the process of being formalised as part of a strategic approach to KAM (Respondent F). Indeed, such moves are regarded by KAM academics as vital to the effective servicing of key accounts (Cann, 1998; Boles *et al.*, 1999). At the very least, they can improve internal and external communication (Boles *et al.*, 1999; Schultz and Evans, 2002).

Finally, views were sought as to whether respondents considered key account manager status in the organisation an appropriate indicator of strategic intent. Indeed, the literature suggests that the key account manager role contributes more directly than any other to the organisation's long-term success in the generation of revenue from commercial activities (McDonald *et al.*, 1997; Arnett *et al.*, 2005). However, whilst respondents generally accepted the principle, the feeling was that this was not their experience at NBS. Equally, the KAM literature suggests that the position of key account manager carries a high level of responsibility (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000). However, whilst programme leaders felt that they did have a degree of responsibility, they did not necessarily have the authority to go with it (Respondent C). Indeed, Respondent F wondered whether this might actually be the result of academics failing to appreciate fully the true nature of their corporate role. An overview of respondent comments on their status within NBS is provided in Table 6.

**Table 6: Status of the key account manager position within NBS**

	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Respondent A</b>	<i>"I mean, the key account manager has been the course leader and the administrator doing that role, neither of whom have had any real status."</i>
<b>Respondent B</b>	<i>"... no, because I think there is a misunderstanding of what key account management is."</i>
<b>Respondent C</b>	<i>"The key account manager has status? Please... I'm an SL [Senior Lecturer]."</i>
<b>Respondent E</b>	<i>"I would say the key account manager hasn't got a status as a position... but, after saying that... we have got... 'third stream dominant' academics... they are key account managers in my head. And I also think some programme leaders are key account managers but they don't realise it."</i>
<b>Respondent F</b>	<i>"Actually, people don't realise... they are business developers; but they just don't see themselves as business developers."</i>

Attention now moves to considering which type of KAM system would be ideally suited to a higher education environment and a specific exploration of KAM system developments within NBS.

### ***Types of KAM system***

The KAM literature offers a range of frameworks that are useful for describing the types of restructuring that might be necessary in supplier organisations. On the one hand, adjustment could be minor, resulting in little or no identifiable change (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). Such an approach would be regarded as *KAM extension* (Millman and Wilson, 1996). On the other hand, KAM implementation may require significant organisational change and investment (Beverland, 2001; Homburg *et al.*, 2008). Such approaches would be regarded as *transformational* systems (Millman and Wilson, 1996). However, despite the choice available, the framework proposed by Kempeners and van der Hart (1999:315) was considered a useful point of departure in this study for determining the extent to which NBS has embraced KAM.

One thing that emerged from having shown cue card 5 (see Appendix 2) is that respondents believed NBS had some kind of KAM system, although it might not necessarily be identifiable to an outsider. The following are typical of the general comments expressed:-

*“... it can't be I... we do have an identifiable system.”* (Respondent F)

*“... somebody coming in might struggle to identify but it is... the system is that academic course leaders are key account managers.”* (Respondent A)

However, in terms of the specific options shown on cue card 5 (see Appendix 2), some respondents would suggest that NBS operated a *part-time system* by default because programme leaders tended to assume control of corporate client management alongside their other duties (Respondents A and B). This approach does not require structural change or financial investment on the part of the Business School. Nevertheless, both respondents felt that NBS was moving towards a *full-time system* with programme leaders being encouraged to spend more of their time developing business with key accounts. Indeed, whilst Respondent F went so far as to suggest

that, in light of his recent appointment, NBS was now operating at the *full-time system* level because his sole responsibility was business development, Respondent E felt that NBS already had experience of operating at this level:-

*“I would say that we actually had a full-time system at operating unit level when we had the Centre for Management Development as an independent unit, but it wasn’t sustainable.”*  
(Respondent E)

Nevertheless, the overall picture is somewhat unclear because some people believed that the system NBS adopted lay somewhere between the *part-time system* and the *corporate-level system* (Respondents C and D). Equally, this tended to depend on the clients involved and the stage that a particular relationship had reached. Thus, Respondent E thought there might be room for an additional descriptor - a *developing system* - that has elements of many of the stages identified in the Kempeners and van der Hart (1999) framework. However, the *corporate-level system* - where KAM is controlled by a centralised function - is perhaps considered inappropriate to a university, given the broad mix of academic, research and commercial activities:-

*“I don’t think that would ever happen... I think the whole university is geared up to undergraduate teaching and all of the systems are geared up to undergraduate... and very few Colleges, if any, have the amount of corporate work that we have.”* (Respondent A)

Moreover, if the university were to consider such a system, the view was expressed that it would more than likely be administered by NBS since that is where most corporate activities currently took place (Respondent A).

In addition to the Kempeners and van der Hart (1999:315) framework, it was also thought relevant to explore respondent views on the stages in the KAM relationship life cycle in order to understand how NBS manages the development of key accounts.

### ***Stages in the KAM relationship***

Cue cards 6 - 10 (see Appendix 2) figured prominently in this part of the interview and were based on McDonald’s (2000) adaptation of earlier work by Millman and Wilson (1995). According to respondents, key account relationships did show a

tendency to evolve over time. However, whilst it is difficult to measure the extent and speed of change, it is nevertheless interesting to gauge general respondent perceptions of the current stage of development of key relationships and contrast these with how respondents felt these relationships were likely to develop in the future (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Stages in the KAM relationship**

KAM stage	Exploratory	Basic	Co-operative	Interdependent	Integrated
<b>Historical views on life cycle stages</b>	A B, D	C, F			
<b>Current (and future) views on life cycle stages</b>			A, E B, D, F		

Historically, respondents felt that NBS programme leaders have tended to operate at the *exploratory* or *basic* levels because delegates attending programmes at NBS have been responsible for cascading relevant information and knowledge in their respective organisations rather than the programme leaders having to do it (Respondent C). Thus, there has been little need for programme leaders to move beyond this stage. Equally, where relationships have been forged, they have tended to be with Human Resources representatives in respective client organisations and it has been largely down to them to decide what information is passed on and who is chosen to attend courses. Thus, NBS has been acting merely as a provider of training services (Respondent C). Programme leaders may also have felt a greater sense of control when operating at this level and have, therefore, been unwilling to relinquish initial one-to-one relationships (Respondent F). Equally, KAM literature suggests that, at both *exploratory* and *basic* stages, organisations normally adopt a transactional approach to doing business and may not want to develop a more sophisticated relationship (Millman and Wilson, 1995; McDonald *et al.*, 1997).

In terms of future development, the mood of respondents was mixed. On the one hand, Respondents A and E both felt that NBS should realistically be aiming to work at the *co-operative* level. By this stage, sufficient credibility will have been built up

and contact between organisations will have increased such that a more co-operative atmosphere is expected to prevail. Indeed, KAM literature suggests that the emphasis in the relationship is also likely to switch from product excellence to social integration (McDonald *et al.*, 1997). Respondent F asserted that the *co-operative* level probably has the strongest intuitive appeal because it encourages people to come together from different parts of the university. This could be extremely useful to a client (Respondent F). However, in reality, there may be contextual limitations placed on the degree of intimacy that can be achieved and, therefore, the *co-operative* level may be the best possible outcome:-

*“Yes, I think so, because... I don’t think we can be in an integrated relationship. Instinctively, I don’t think that works because we’re not in a supply chain in the conventional way...”*  
(Respondent E)

Other respondents felt that NBS should be attempting to build relationships not just up to the *co-operative* level but possibly moving towards the *interdependent* (Respondents B and D). Here, KAM literature would suggest that suppliers and customers usually see each other as a strategic resource and enter into long-term, legally-binding partnership agreements (McDonald *et al.*, 1997). Nevertheless, such a move would be highly dependent on the client and the nature of the relationship forged but “... *for certain ones, at the moment, we are moving towards this [interdependent] model*” (Respondent B). The fear is that NBS might never be able to operate at this level (Respondent A) because an *interdependent* relationship suggests that both parties come to rely on each other and work together across multiple organisational and functional levels. For example, the process of mapping between organisations is likely to be problematic if both parties are unequally matched and operating in different business contexts. At NBS, “... *we don’t have the level of sophistication in operations management that a company like Rolls Royce might have*” (Respondent E).

In conclusion, whilst there appears to be a mood of cautious optimism among those involved in corporate client management within NBS, rather than representing a sea change in approach, the reality is probably somewhat more subtle:-



*“I don’t think it’s a move from a more basic relationship. I think it’s always been there. I think the issue’s about... recognising that as a key account management relationship rather than a relationship between academics and particular individuals in organisations.”*  
(Respondent E)

Having spent time focusing on the strategic aspects of KAM implementation, it is now appropriate to focus more specifically on the individuals involved. In other words, attention turns to the role, skills and qualities of a key account manager.

***Role of the key account manager***

KAM literature suggests that the key account manager is the primary link between the supplier and customer and can exert a considerable influence over the customer’s perception of both the supplier’s reliability and the value of the services being offered (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Indeed, the key account manager is expected to add value or “*something more*” (Pardo, 1997:22) to both the client and supplier businesses. However, an interesting split emerged between the experienced NBS programme leaders and recent newcomers to NBS when challenged about the typical role(s) of the key account manager. In essence, the former appeared to justify their role more through the customer’s eyes, whilst the latter focused on the identification of business opportunities and increases in commercial activities (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Differing views on the role of the key account manager**

<b>Programme leader perspective</b>	<b>Business development perspective</b>
<i>“... you respond to the client’s needs really... even if it’s not something you can actually deliver yourself and... you try to support the client.” (A)</i>	<i>“... aligning growth to business objectives is a key role.” (E)</i>
<i>“I suppose the other thing should be that there is a proactiveness there as well... but perhaps, you know, go out there and give the client something they didn’t know that they want.” (A)</i>	<i>“... it’s back to emerging opportunity... matching capability.” (E)</i>
<i>“I mean, I think the argument would be that we should grow the accounts. Our argument is we weren’t employed to grow accounts, thank you very much... we’re employed to run programmes.” (C)</i>	<i>“... whether there are any other opportunities that will be in the forefront.” (F)</i>
<i>“It’s periodically communicating... periodically visiting the client. It’s hosting the client if they’re coming up to visit. It’s inviting the client to come to course meetings...” (D)</i>	<i>“... but I think that as well as relationship building, as well as networking which are key areas or elements of the role one has to also think about the business of reporting and being able to quantify that, being able to demonstrate results.” (F)</i>

Part of the reason for this difference in focus may simply be due to the fact that programme leaders are likely to grow closer to their corporate clients in the process of day-to-day programme management. However, Maister (1999) warns that role conflict can develop when key account managers question the extent to which they should act as the supplier's client-facing representative (*luminary*) or the customer's representative (*manager*). The evidence in this study suggests that programme leaders tend towards the latter. However, it should be noted that the two respondents with business development responsibilities were not motivated solely by the need to grow commercial opportunities. For example, Respondent E accepted the importance of adopting a customer-focused approach:-

*"I think successful marketers... I didn't call them key account managers... but that's what I meant... are client-focused, have the right knowledge, understand the client problem and the client... follow through and go above and beyond."* (Respondent E)

Cue card 11 (see Appendix 2) represented an overview of the roles identified for a key account manager from the KAM literature and was based largely on Millman and Wilson (1995). The additional elements of *alliance manager* (Lambe and Spekman, 1997) and *knowledge manager* (Pardo 1999; Steward, 2008) were considered worthy of further exploration given the privileged position of the key account manager as the intermediary between supplier and customer and the subsequent boundary-spanning role performed (Walter and Gemünden, 2000; Beverland, 2001). Interestingly, Respondents B, D and F endorsed all of the points shown on cue card 11 but offered little further elaboration. Equally, the concepts of *alliance manager* and *knowledge manager* seemed to provoke little comment. Consequently, the opportunity was lost to explore some of these more unusual claims concerning the nature of the key account manager role. This was particularly disappointing given that the role is reckoned to be an ill-defined and complex one (Maister, 1999). However, it may simply be that higher-level concepts such as *alliance manager* and *knowledge manager* were not sufficiently well understood by respondents to enable them to engage in meaningful discussion. Fortunately, the remaining elements on cue card 11 (see Appendix 2) did stimulate a useful exchange of views.

In terms of *co-ordination and tailoring of the offering*, opinions were divided. On the one hand, it may not be necessary in situations where “... *clients only want one or two things at a time*” (Respondent C). Thus, a more transactional and standardised approach would seem appropriate. On the other hand, Respondent A suggested that it was necessary most of the time because clients want something unique from the programmes that the Business School offers. Moreover, coordination and tailoring of the offering represents a natural extension of the process of identifying emerging opportunities and matching capability (Respondent E). Equally, KAM literature suggests that this process is one of intensively shaping and advancing inter-organisational exchange processes (Walter and Gemünden, 2000). However, on a more practical day-to-day level, programme leaders are often involved in a great deal of work behind-the-scenes in order to ensure that their courses run smoothly:-

“... *the key account manager is doing the work here, arranging for people to be in the class at the right time, finding the classrooms, which is a whole network of people behind them.*” (Respondent D)

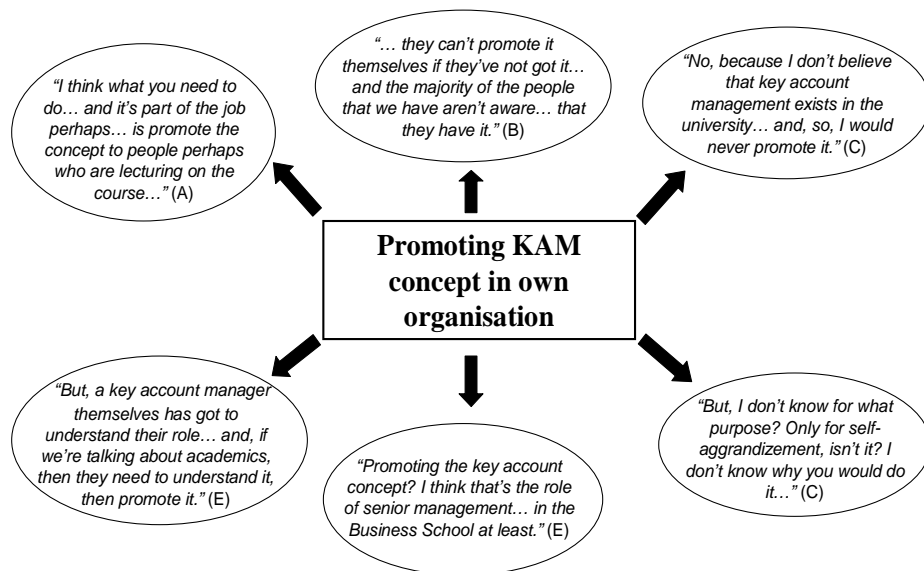
The notion of *facilitating multi-level, multi-functional exchange* was summarised succinctly by Respondent E: “*I think the key account manager is the grease in the wheel.*” Equally, the fact that programme leaders worked in a university environment can mean that “... *the client very often thinks you’ll know everybody*” (Respondent A). Indeed, KAM literature recommends that key account managers should be prepared to operate across different managerial and functional levels in both organisations and facilitate high level links between relevant parties (Homburg *et al.*, 2002). However, this may not be the case for more straightforward transactional situations where ‘facilitating’ is possibly too strong a term (Respondent E). Another potential downside of operating a KAM system across different functional levels is that people may assume that key account managers are the only people capable of doing the job (Respondent E). The use of an intermediary might also only serve to restrict longer-term business opportunities (Respondent E).

The issue of *promoting the KAM concept in your own organisation* generated a range of conflicting views (see Figure 7). For example, Respondent A felt that, although programme leaders had a strong sense of what is involved in managing corporate

clients, the lecturers on the courses regrettably did not. Respondent B believed that programme leaders were at fault here for not possessing the necessary key account management skills or the wit to realise what is needed. Further support for this position was provided by Respondent E who, whilst reluctant to criticise colleagues, nevertheless felt they did not always help themselves in front of clients:-

*“I think the other aspect of it is - and this is going to sound a little bit unkind - it’s to offer a professional approach.” (Respondent E)*

**Figure 7: Promoting KAM concept in the organisation**



Elsewhere, Respondent C was unconvinced of the need to promote the concept anyway, given her view that it was not essential to the successful day-to-day running of courses. Finally, Respondent E thought the task of promoting KAM should actually fall to senior managers so that they would be able to provide the necessary gravitas.

Overall, it would appear that respondents accept that the role of key account manager is multi-faceted (Respondent D) - a point made by Jolson (1997). Indeed, elements of this are evident in the following definition of a typical NBS client manager:-

*“I think it depends on the client... the existing model, the role of that person is to a) be the programme leader... deal with all the routine stuff around programme management, programme leadership... b) is to be the key point of contact for the client, given any issues, problems, questions... and, thirdly, is to be a business development point.”* (Respondent B)

Whilst the job of key account manager may not necessarily fit into a standard job description (Walter and Gemünden, 2000), the variety of tasks involved is most noticeable. Indeed, Respondent D concluded his observations of the points listed on cue card 11 by joking that he now had ample evidence to justify his own position within NBS:-

*“I’ve no problems... I can see that. I think I’m a key account manager.”* (Respondent D)

#### ***Key account manager skills and qualities***

Before presenting cue card 12 (see Appendix 2), respondents were asked to identify the skills and qualities that they thought essential in a key account manager. Given that the job involves the facilitation of relationships between people across different organisational levels (Homburg *et al.*, 2002), *communication skills* were expected to feature in discussions. Moreover, KAM literature proposes that communication is vital for promoting the KAM concept within the key account manager’s own organisation (Millman and Wilson, 1995). Equally, if a key account manager is expected to work as part of a team (Weitz and Bradford, 1999), the interpersonal skills required are likely to be markedly different from those associated with the traditional independent salesperson (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Indeed, there is ample evidence in the data to suggest that respondents viewed communication as an important building block in the key account manager’s personal make-up. For example, Respondent D regarded the way in which the key account manager communicated as *“imperative”*. Respondent A believed it was *“absolutely key”*. Equally, Respondent F asserted that communication skills were *“essential”* to building up good relationships with customers:-

*“I think you need to have rapport building skills. You need to be able to talk and communicate with people fairly easily.”* (Respondent F)

Communication was seen as an integral part of boosting self-confidence, developing persuasive charm and learning how to negotiate (Respondent A). Indeed, good communication skills were likely to encourage adaptability and flexibility - qualities that can enhance the key account manager's ability to cope with change (Respondent A). However, communication was also about *listening* to clients and being able to offer them suitable solutions (Respondent B):-

*"... we listen to what the clients want and then we design and deliver programmes around what they want."* (Respondent C)

Respondents surfaced additional themes such as *professionalism* which, broadly speaking, is the appropriate business-like manner with which a key account manager deals with customers (Respondent A). Indeed, respondents felt that they were being increasingly expected to adopt a more professional approach these days (Respondent E), to be responsive to clients and *"... be at that client's beck and call, to a certain extent..."* (Respondent B). Respondent E provided a constructive list of factors that she felt would make a key account manager more professional: they should be motivated by achievement and recognition, show an interest in, and flair for, solving customer problems, possess the requisite communication and organisational skills, act with integrity and empathy and show a desire to be autonomous and a self-starter. Finally, they should be corporate players (Respondent E) - in other words, they should be happy and comfortable representing NBS in its dealings with corporate clients. However, professionalism probably boils down to one simple thing:-

*"... at the end of the day, the client needs to like you and [you need to do] whatever it takes for them to like you..."* (Respondent A)

In response to cue card 12 (see Appendix 2) many of the respondents chose not to dwell on the issues, simply agreeing that the skills and qualities listed were important (Respondents C and E). The main reason for this was possibly because respondents felt the issues had been exhausted in the 'open' discussion. Consequently, this did not make for the most interesting exchange of ideas. However, the elements on cue card 12 did stimulate discussion in four main areas: organisational skills, higher level management skills/integrity, confidence and selling skills. These are looked at in turn.

Two of the experienced programme leaders (Respondents A and C) endorsed the fact that those dealing with corporate clients need good organisational skills, particularly in view of the unpredictability likely to be encountered during a relationship:-

*“... you have to be a good organiser and you have to be able to deal with uncertainty and you have to try not to flap and panic too much.”* (Respondent C)

Indeed, KAM literature acknowledges the fact that the quality of a supplier’s strategy often owes a lot to the competence of individual key account managers (Abratt and Kelly, 2002; Ryals and Rogers, 2007), and the customer and supplier will both tend to look to key account managers for guidance and direction (McDonald *et al.*, 1997). Consequently, key account managers will need to manage expectations and ensure that their respective courses run smoothly (Respondent C) and that they have the client management skills to go with it (Respondent B). At the very least, personal reputation and pride may be at stake:-

*“... the skill is in manipulating people for your own ends so that your damn courses run and you’ve got people standing in front of them.”* (Respondent C)

Whilst good organisational skills are likely to enhance the personal reputation of the key account manager, management experience also seems to play a part in building credibility in the eyes of corporate clients (see Table 8). However, KAM literature suggests that credibility and management ability are not necessarily innate qualities but come from ‘on-the-job’ experience (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Indeed, this may offer some insight into why the role of key account manager is often thought better suited to experienced sales professionals (Sengupta *et al.*, 1997). However, Respondent E believed that academics had an edge over ordinary sales people. They were regarded by corporate clients as having expertise and credibility by virtue of the fact that they worked in a university environment. Elsewhere, opinions about higher level management skills and experience were somewhat mixed, with some believing that these were not relevant to higher education (Respondent A), whilst a senior management track record might have an impact on certain high profile customers only (Respondent B).

**Table 8: Management experience and credibility of the key account manager**

	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Respondent A</b>	<i>"... the status might impact on it, that if they're dealing with somebody that hasn't got the status, then I think the client may feel... I'm dealing with an also-ran here."</i>
<b>Respondent A</b>	<i>"High level management skills? Not so... I don't think are quite so important in our context."</i>
<b>Respondent B</b>	<i>"...it conveys some sort of commitment in terms of the size of Barclays... I wouldn't say it's essential, no..."</i>
<b>Respondent E</b>	<i>"... academics make excellent salespeople because they have one thing that the double glazing salesman doesn't have: and they have credibility."</i>
<b>Respondent E</b>	<i>"I probably mean credibility and the ability to work across all levels."</i>
<b>Respondent F</b>	<i>"... if you can't demonstrate integrity with the smallest of things then you fail... in every way, both internally and externally."</i>

Respondent F's comment about failure to demonstrate integrity is an interesting one because it reflects back on the key account manager's levels of confidence and self-belief. Indeed, the issue of confidence provoked a strong reaction from respondents, particularly from some of the experienced programme leaders (Respondents A, B and C). However, whilst Respondent F also accepted that confidence was important, he believed that key account managers needed to go beyond this and show *"tenaciousness [sic], courage..."* (Respondent F). This extra dimension is what respondents referred to as *drive* and *enthusiasm*. The following are typical of the views expressed:-

*"Most of them [academics] probably have the skills and qualities, it's the desire, enthusiasm and motivation to be involved in corporate work... and that is the... the key driver..."* (Respondent B)

*"I guess there should really be an innate desire to win as well."* (Respondent F)

The drive and determination that individuals ideally need to show calls to mind the traditional qualities of the salesperson (Jolson, 1997; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Indeed, this issue was discussed with respondents. However, the overriding mood appeared to be that few respondents believed selling skills to be vital to the key account manager's performance in the job, particularly in an academic environment. Table 9 provides a selection of comments expressed. Additionally, Respondent C commented that, whilst she accepted NBS senior managers might feel it important for



key account managers to go out and sell, existing academics had little or no interest in selling anything: “... *we didn’t self-select to sell*” (Respondent C).

**Table 9: The need for selling skills?**

	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Respondent A</b>	“ <i>Selling skills? I’m not sure because... selling skills are probably a combination of all of those anyway...</i> ”
<b>Respondent B</b>	“ <i>Selling skills is a difficult one... I think one of the tricky things about education is, is that it is difficult to sell. It’s not like buying tins of beans. It’s a very intangible, very difficult thing to define.</i> ”
<b>Respondent B</b>	“ <i>Not for key account management.</i> ”
<b>Respondent D</b>	“ <i>I’m not a very good salesman. I can’t sell like Brian could sell. I can’t finish something like Brian could finish it.</i> ”
<b>Respondent F</b>	“ <i>... if by when we say ‘selling skills’ we mean ‘negotiation skills’ and we mean ‘integrity’ and we mean ‘confidence’... because actually they’re all a part of that selling skill to me...</i> ”

Whilst the qualities and skills that have been discussed could perhaps be regarded as conventional and routine, there are a number of additional attributes that might be expected in a balanced and well-rounded key account manager. Such attributes formed the basis of cue card 14 (see Appendix 2). For example, in KAM literature, age is claimed as an important factor in the key account manager’s personal make-up, with the median age of those interviewed being 41 (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000). Similarly, Arnett *et al.* (2005) found that the average age of key account managers was 39. Additionally, they tended to be well-qualified: two thirds possessed degrees and one third had postgraduate qualifications (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000). The opportunity was also taken, in the interviews, to ascertain whether factors such as *general management* and *previous key account management experience* were considered relevant to key account manager success. Similarly, respondents were challenged as to whether they felt they needed to be *fully-trained marketers* in order to deal effectively with customers. Table 10 contains an overview of the opinions expressed.

In terms of *general management experience*, respondents largely agreed that it does help the key account manager (Respondents A, B and C). At the very least, previous programme management experience was considered vital for running successful courses (Respondent B). However, the same could not be said of *previous key account*

management experience. Respondents felt this was not a prerequisite for dealing with corporate clients (Respondents A, B and C).

**Table 10: Additional key account manager attributes**

<b>General management experience</b>	<b>KAM experience</b>
<i>"I think, you know, sometimes broad experience does help. General management experience? I haven't got that." (A)</i>	<i>"Previous key account management experience, I don't think is essential." (A)</i>
<i>"General management experience? Maybe... I think programme management experience is probably critical because again I would not expect somebody to manage a corporate programme who doesn't know the academic system and who doesn't know everything that needs to be in place to run an academic programme." (B)</i>	<i>"Previous key account management experience? Possibly... it would depend on the client again, I think." (B)</i>
<i>"... you have to have experience." (C)</i>	<i>"I think anybody who can run courses could do what we do in the CMD. I mean, to be frank, we just run courses for corporate clients. We don't do anything different to anybody else..." (C)</i>
<b>Senior management experience</b>	<b>Fully-trained marketer</b>
<i>"And then, experience of moving in senior management circles? Not necessarily the case." (A)</i>	<i>"I don't think you need to be a fully trained marketer because I'm not." (A)</i>
<i>"Again, I think it depends on which relationship you're looking at..." (B)</i>	<i>"Fully trained marketer? No." (B)</i>
<i>"So, it's more the ability to be able to bring in senior management, I suppose..." (B)</i>	<i>"You don't need to be a fully trained marketer. You actually don't need general management experience." (C)</i>
<i>"I don't know about the experience of moving in senior management circles. I think the main thing is not to be intimidated by them." (C)</i>	<i>"Fully trained marketer? No. No. I don't think it's important." (D)</i>
	<i>"I do challenge that. Marketer? Can be a hindrance actually... I am one but again, in my experience, if you've worked at the wrong end of the mix it can actually be a hindrance." (E)</i>
<b>Educated to degree level</b>	<b>Age</b>
<i>"I don't think that is essential... I suppose educated to graduate level does mean that you have a certain intelligence." (A)</i>	<i>"In terms of age... yes, I think age helps because of status." (A)</i>
<i>"Educated to graduate level? Yes, definitely." (B)</i>	<i>"Not through my experience. I think it's more to do with being confident and being able to speak knowledgeably... and confidently about what we do." (B)</i>
<i>"You do need to have an academic qualification." (C)</i>	<i>"Age isn't... you don't need to be of an age." (C)</i>
<i>"... educated and knowledgeable? Absolutely." (D)</i>	<i>"Well, I'm that aged person... (laughter)... I've some experience, yes." (D)</i>
<i>"And some of the characteristics that enable them to be successful are their above-average intelligence." (E)</i>	<i>"I've had some very young key account managers who had that in spades and they weren't that old. They just had that as part of their skill set." (E)</i>
<i>"I'd love a postgraduate qualification. I think that helps just to put you on, not a level playing field, but allow you to continue with your confidence in any field you like... sit at any table." (F)</i>	<i>"I think that sometimes age can be a factor where... clearly it's not always the case. And I think that knowledge that one has of a business can demonstrate that equally well." (F)</i>

Equally, most respondents asserted that key account managers did not need to be fully-trained marketers in order to deal effectively with customers. Indeed, marketing experience might actually prove a hindrance to getting things done, especially if that experience has been gained in the 'wrong' marketing field (Respondent E). The fact that key account managers appear not to need KAM experience or marketing knowledge is particularly interesting because it calls to mind recent KAM research that suggests that, even though organisations may not possess formal KAM systems, they still treat key customers differently (Wengler *et al.*, 2006; Zupancic, 2008). Indeed, Wengler *et al.* (2006) claim that more than 80% of companies researched treated their customers as key accounts in spite of having no formal KAM structures.

In terms of qualifications and age, respondents tended to suggest that some level of academic achievement was obligatory. Whilst this might not necessarily be a first degree, such awards are nevertheless interpreted by clients as a general indicator of academic ability and intelligence (Respondents A and E). Incidentally, Respondent F felt that he might actually benefit from a postgraduate qualification because this would at least put him on a level playing field with NBS academics and boost his confidence and self-esteem. Overall, however, it could be argued that corporate clients dealing with a university would expect academics to be highly qualified and, possibly, even experts in their respective fields of research.

As for age, respondent views were more mixed. On the one hand, Respondents B, C, D and E took the view that age is largely unimportant and that, in principle, anybody can perform in a key account manager capacity. On the other hand, age may confer status and gravitas to the individual (Respondents A and F) and this is something that certain clients might value. Indeed, if a key account manager is to aspire to be an 'animator of internal networks' and occupy the position of 'privileged informant' (Pardo, 1999), commercial experience is likely to be an advantage. Equally, as for a university, the individual involved in coordinating third stream revenue generation is likely to be charismatic and a "magnet" around which like-minded individuals and activity revolve (Prince, 2007:755). Again, this suggests somebody with experience and status - which are both likely to have been acquired over time.

In conclusion, a small number of additional comments were made that might be worthy of further reflection by key account managers and senior managers alike. For example, the issue of dress code was raised. In particular, it was felt that key account managers - and, indeed, lecturers - should know how to present themselves in front of corporate clients (Respondent B). Although specific individuals were not named, concern was expressed that standards of dress may sometimes let NBS down:-

*“You know, there are some academics that again you would not put in front of a corporate client... because they’re not presentable enough.”* (Respondent B)

Similarly, certain individuals seem able to exude a general aura of excellence. This is considered particularly advantageous in a university context where a client might need convincing of the wisdom of placing their faith in an academic institution. Indeed, there appears to be only one way of describing this attribute:-

*“I’m going to use a very old-fashioned word and it’s not... it’s not meant to have a value attached to it... the thing about a key account manager in our sector in terms of - as I keep going on about this high credence service - is they’ve got to have class.”* (Respondent E)

### ***Key account manager payment and reward systems***

The key account manager possessing ‘class’ is essentially the experienced, mature and well-qualified individual that Walter and Gemünden (2000) refer to as a ‘super-KAM’. Indeed, according to KAM literature, good key account managers should be regarded as “*treasured resources*” (Napolitano, 1997:3). Consequently, an organisation should be looking to enhance its wage structure in order to attract key account managers with the right skills and abilities (Tice, 1997) and, indeed, keep them. It is therefore timely to consider respondent views on remuneration within NBS.

A particular theme that emerged was that most of the experienced programme leaders regarded remuneration as a contentious issue (Respondents A, B and C). The initial problem was caused by the fact that, as an academic institution, NBS had only two pay scales: academic and non-academic (Respondent A). The academic contract was considered inflexible because it failed to provide a way of accommodating bonuses or additional payment for business development activities undertaken (Respondent B).

Consequently, there was little incentive for staff to develop particular accounts or to engage in activities that go beyond the normal programme leader's remit. Indeed, *"...we are paid in the same ways as to programme lead [sic] any other academic programme"* (Respondent B). Nevertheless, the contract does reward programme leaders with a time allowance that is subtracted from the total number of hours that individuals are required to work during the year (Respondent A). In the case of NBS, the annual contract is based on each full-time member of staff working a notional 1575 hours. However, corporate-facing staff felt they were being treated unfairly partly as a result of the way in which individual roles and workloads had evolved:-

*"What I'm also disappointed with is that there are different treatments of different people in the same situation... some people getting substantially greater amounts of money because it's something they've negotiated with ATLS [Academic Team Leaders] against something that's not been negotiated with ATLS."* (Respondent D)

This problem was intensified by the knowledge that programme leaders were often on different pay scales and had unequal numbers of courses and students to manage:-

*"I'm an SL [Senior Lecturer]. I manage five or six postgraduate courses. There's about... a hundred people on my course... And other people are running one postgraduate programme with eighteen people on it and they're PLs [Principal Lecturers]. This is a great source of contention."* (Respondent C)

Under certain circumstances, staff are able to benefit from the payment of an additional responsibility allowance. For example, although Respondent A was currently on the SL [Senior Lecturer] pay scale, she was awarded an additional responsibility allowance for managing her programme. However, Respondent B reported that, whilst she received a normal academic salary and operated as key account manager for a number of programmes, *"... I don't get any responsibility allowances or anything like that. That is just as it is"* (Respondent B). Thus, it appears that the current payment and reward scheme at NBS contains significant anomalies. However, programme leaders face a paradox: whilst they would welcome a fairer system of pay, *"... we all want to protect our academic contracts"* (Respondent A).

When asked whether they were happy in their current jobs, most respondents suggested they were. However, it is interesting to see how some people derive pleasure from their work. For example, satisfaction does not necessarily always result from a good salary. Table 11 provides an overview of opinions expressed.

**Table 11: Contributory factors to job satisfaction at NBS**

	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Respondent B</b>	<p><i>"... personally, I am... but mine is perhaps a slightly different case in terms of additional responsibilities that I have taken on since people have left..."</i></p> <p><i>"... there is still no bonuses and there is still no additional related financial incentives, so they're just lucky that I'm happy with what I've got."</i></p>
<b>Respondent D</b>	<p><i>"I think it's also the rewards that we get from working with high profile clients as well."</i></p> <p><i>"I love the job I do. I think it's great. And I'm doing multiple things... I'm not well paid... I'm not fantastically paid, but I enjoy what I'm doing..."</i></p>
<b>Respondent F</b>	<p><i>"... it has a lot to do with, you know, the people you work with and the management team and so on... and whether they make you feel happy and comfortable within the role."</i></p> <p><i>"So, am I paid well to do that? Yes, OK... for now."</i></p>

A sense of contributing to the wider corporate good appeared to be a motivator for some. For example, one respondent would like to be part of a successful Centre for Management Development and *"... a valued member of it"* (Respondent D). Elsewhere, satisfaction can be derived simply from helping organisations to flourish:-

*"... it's much more aligned to taking us as a Business School to a different place in society and being able to help specific organisations."* (Respondent F)

Cue card 16 (see Appendix 2) comprised a number of payment-related issues derived from the KAM literature. However, whilst respondents provided useful insights into most of the elements, the first two items on the list provoked the most debate. Consequently, Table 12 provides a selection of relevant comments. Once again, there appeared to be a difference between experienced programme leaders and more recent business development newcomers to NBS. For example, Respondents E and F regarded *enhanced basic salary* as entirely appropriate and felt it would lead to greater transparency (Respondent E). However, *enhanced basic salary* was not

favoured by programme leaders because it was seen as contrived (Respondent A). In essence, this would only perpetuate the current system of perceived unfairness where salary packages were adjudged to lack transparency. Equally, changes to basic pay would be fraught with problems because of the difficulty of equating programmes and key account manager responsibilities (Respondent C). Indeed, KAM literature suggests that reward structures that provoke internal conflict are likely to have a detrimental effect on collaboration between employees and the sharing of information and knowledge (Steward, 2008). Additionally, there was a fear that increased pay could lead to a change of roles and increased workloads (Respondent B). Certainly, organisations willing to pay higher salaries are likely to have higher expectations of key account managers and their performance (Sengupta *et al.*, 2000).

**Table 12: Key account manager payment and reward structures**

Enhanced basic salary	Bonuses/financial incentives
<i>"I'm not keen on somebody just enhancing a basic salary, because I think it becomes contrived... I think it needs to be open and honest, but... I don't like any behind-the-scenes manipulation." (A)</i>	<i>"Additional performance-related financial incentives?... that's a possibility that would... possibly work, but then... it's always going to be subjective, isn't it?" (A)</i>
<i>"... it's a difficult one... because, by doing that, you're changing the roles." (B)</i>	<i>"... we can perhaps think about maybe adding in some bonuses. And therein lies the difficulty in that people inherently do not want to give up their academic contract." (B)</i>
<i>"... you can't start tagging it to any sort of income... and related to income... because it is luck of the draw." (C)</i>	<i>"I definitely wouldn't go down the financial incentives because it's just fraught." (C)</i>
<i>"I see salary as a hygiene factor. I think it's one of those things... it's not the deal breaker..." (E)</i>	<i>"... there is a proposal at SMT [School Management Team] here, at the university level, on incentivisation for academics and I think that's long overdue." (E)</i>
<i>"So, in other words, in terms of payment and reward structure, what you want is a clear, transparent grade. So, if you're a key account manager, then you're on X grade." (E)</i>	<i>"I think what we need is a bonus structure within the Business School full stop. I don't think it should just be for key account managers because I don't think they're the only contributors..." (E)</i>
<i>"Enhanced basic? Yes... appropriate." (F)</i>	<i>"Additional performance-related financial incentives? Absolutely appropriate. It doesn't exist at the moment." (F)</i>

As for *additional performance-related financial incentives*, KAM literature indicates that bonuses and profit share arrangements should be of particular interest to key account managers (Walter and Gemünden, 2000; Beverland, 2001). However, in this study, a similar picture emerged to that concerning *enhanced basic salary*. For example, Respondent B suggested that the academic contract was a stumbling block to the introduction of a bonus scheme. Equally, Respondents A and C viewed the issue as problematic because performance-related pay was a subjective matter for

most people (Respondent A). In any case, the way that academics ended up managing particular programmes was entirely down to chance (Respondent C). Certainly, Respondent D would be wary of performance-related pay:-

*“I’m never certain I’m going to bring anything in. So, that’s why I’m very appreciative of the salary I’m getting and for what I’m doing.”* (Respondent D)

Respondents E and F, however, adopted a more positive approach to bonus payments. For example, Respondent F would welcome the introduction of performance-related pay, although he acknowledged that it might be difficult for programme leaders because they were not used to that kind of scheme (Respondent F). Respondent E even felt that a bonus scheme should not be exclusive to key account managers. Indeed, other people in the Business School can make a significant contribution to servicing key accounts.

A further bonus-related issue was raised by Respondent B: car parking. Apparently, the limited availability of university car parking spaces had become particularly problematic. Consequently, people driving into NBS were normally only guaranteed to find a parking space very early in the morning. If a client-related journey was necessary later in the day, it was unlikely that a parking space would be available when the key account manager returned. This caused a good deal of frustration:-

*“... but I think the key one that you’re missing, as far as NBS is concerned, is car parking... because we don’t get company cars. So... that is a key issue... but, it is those hygiene factors possibly that might make a bigger difference...”* (Respondent B)

In conclusion, having explored a number of themes relating to KAM, generally, and key account managers, specifically, it is felt that sufficient ground has been covered to be able to reflect back on the original research questions that were set for this study and draw some tentative conclusions about the feasibility of implementing a KAM strategy at Nottingham Business School. In turn, a number of implications will be identified. These will need to be addressed if NBS is to develop a more effective approach to managing key corporate client relationships in the longer-term.



# **Chapter 6**

## **Conclusions**

## Conclusions

The original research questions provide a useful structure for this section of the document. This will enable a focus and sense of perspective to be maintained throughout the process of drawing conclusions. Equally, such an approach helps to provide continuity with earlier sections of the document. Thus, each research question is reviewed in turn and conclusions drawn:-

- How appropriate is the concept of Key Account Management (KAM) to the organisation and management of current corporate client relationships at Nottingham Business School?
- What are the perceived characteristics of a successful key account manager according to Nottingham Business School corporate client managers?
- How could a KAM strategy be implemented at Nottingham Business School?

It should be noted that this research project has focussed exclusively on KAM implementation within Nottingham Business School. As such, the conclusions drawn will not necessarily be generalisable to the UK higher education sector. However, the conclusions may be of use to others wishing to repeat this research in different institutions. Equally, given that this study was cross-sectional, the data gathered may not necessarily capture the most recent changes in Nottingham Business School or Nottingham Trent University policy relating to corporate or third stream income. Thus, the conclusions drawn will, at best, be tentative. Nevertheless, they will be both timely and useful to the Business School in its future strategic development.

***How appropriate is the concept of Key Account Management (KAM) to the organisation and management of current corporate client relationships at Nottingham Business School?***

As previously discussed, concern was expressed - at least amongst experienced programme leaders - about the suitability of KAM for an academic institution such as Nottingham Business School:-

*“... the whole thing about having a key account manager is something that people are trying to bring in from industry which does not resonate here, because it ain't how it works basically.”* (Respondent C)

Such comments tend to highlight a significant difference of opinion between academics and recent newcomers with previous KAM experience. For example, the latter felt that the current approach taken by NBS to corporate clients was “*ad hoc*” (Respondent E). However, programme leaders generally defended a “*scattergun approach*”, claiming that it appeared to be working because clients were satisfied with the service they received (Respondent C). Equally, Respondent E believed there was a genuine commitment within NBS to pursuing a KAM strategy, although the ideal KAM structure had yet to be determined. Programme leaders, however, were unconvinced because they did not actually see themselves acting as key account managers (Respondent C). Nevertheless, Respondent E remained undaunted in the face of a less than enthusiastic response to KAM:-

*“... my premise was that it's quite straightforward to introduce key account management within a business school if your academics are involved in business development because the culture and the skills and attributes of a key account manager and an academic - if you map them against each other - there's actually quite a lot of similarity.”* (Respondent E)

Coincidentally, Respondent E had recently attended a conference for business development managers at the Association of Business Schools and had presented a paper outlining a set of proposals for introducing KAM into a business school environment. Regrettably, she felt that her ideas were given a lukewarm reception but *“... it hasn't actually deterred me”* (Respondent E). Whilst it would be clearly impossible to generalise from such a report, it nevertheless provides useful additional insight into the general suitability of KAM for the UK higher education sector.

Another factor that hints at the possible unsuitability of a KAM strategy for NBS is that current clients are not considered large enough to warrant the kind of special treatment that key account managers would normally be expected to provide. Indeed, respondents found it hard to identify any existing Business School client that would fall into the category of *key account* in its accepted sense because corporate business

was spread reasonably evenly across the NBS portfolio (Respondent C). Equally, the current portfolio was not considered an extensive one (Respondent A) and it was unclear as to whether any one client could produce the level of financial return to justify such a fundamental shift in NBS strategy. This would also be unlikely to happen given that Prince (2004) suggests that commercial revenue generation is regarded as an under-developed activity in most new universities.

An additional problem that could possibly hinder plans for introducing KAM into NBS is the academic contract (Respondent E). On the one hand, the contract could be considered outdated because “... *it uses up academics’ time on a metric that, in some respects, isn’t very fair*” (Respondent E). On the other hand, the general mood of academic programme leaders was that it did not fit comfortably with the way in which corporate programmes needed to be managed (Respondent B). Two main reasons were offered to account for this. First, the current academic contract had no business development component built into it (Respondent E) and it was therefore difficult to reward staff properly for effort expended on developing commercial activities. Second, the contract was considered inflexible because the allocation of hourly-based allowances for programme and module leadership often failed to reflect the time spent with clients outside of normal academic duties (Respondent D). Paradoxically, academics would appear to welcome a fairer system of remuneration but “... *we all want to protect our academic contracts*” (Respondent A).

Respondents felt that one way of remunerating staff for this extra work was through over-contract payment. However, this was considered potentially divisive because some programme leaders benefited through no other reason than they happened to be good at negotiating hours with their Academic Team Leader. As such, it could be regarded as payment by stealth (Respondent E). Interestingly, the fact that programme leaders reported to different Academic Team Leaders suggests that NBS might not have the right organisational structure in place to facilitate effective KAM implementation.

Whilst the above comments indicate that NBS might struggle to introduce a KAM strategy, positive developments can nevertheless be detected: namely, respondents felt that some kind of system already existed within NBS. After all, corporate client

relationships were being managed successfully by current programme leaders (Respondent A). Thus, a *part-time system* existed almost by default. However, this tended to rely too heavily on operating at the *exploratory* and *basic KAM* levels. Respondents believed that change was occurring and that conditions within NBS were beginning to favour the adoption of a *full-time system* operating at the *co-operative KAM* level. Development beyond this point, however, might be a step too far. Respondents felt that a *corporate-level system* operating at the *interdependent KAM* level would be inappropriate given that the Business School's organisational structure was very different from that of a normal commercial enterprise.

***What are the perceived characteristics of a successful key account manager according to Nottingham Business School corporate client managers?***

As far as the people element of KAM is concerned, a clearer picture has begun to emerge from this research. Essentially, respondents believed that NBS was under-resourced in the corporate area. Indeed, the problem had not been helped by significant recent staff turnover (Respondents A and D):-

*"... our department used to be fourteen people, it's four now!... the four that are left just get more and more and more."* (Respondent C)

However, whilst it was acknowledged that additional staff were needed, *"... we need the right people"* (Respondent B). Indeed, existing programme leaders regarded it as fortuitous that NBS currently possessed a group of people who recognised the need for a separate skill set and were happy to be involved in corporate activities (Respondent B). Yet, regrettably, there were few people with the requisite client management skills (Respondent B). Consequently, those working in the corporate area faced a number of challenges. First, given that NBS was not always able to recruit externally (for valid economic reasons), the pool from which corporate account managers were recruited was essentially an academic one - and academics tended to want an academic role only (Respondent B). Second, non-academics did not necessarily represent the best choice for corporate programme leadership because academic credibility, subject knowledge and class management skills were also needed. Indeed, it was suggested that student feedback was invariably poor when

people without these attributes were used to lecture on corporate programmes (Respondent B).

The research in this study has also been able to offer some useful insights into the ideal role(s) that key account managers are expected to perform and the skills and qualities they should possess. Thus, at the very least, appropriate job and personnel specifications could be drawn up that would, in turn, help to make the search for suitable client account managers more fruitful.

In terms of role(s), this study offers further evidence of a difference of perspective between programme leaders and business development staff. On the one hand, programme leaders believed that the main part of their role was to meet the needs of their corporate clients (Respondents A, C and D). On the other hand, Respondent E saw the role of key account manager as generating more revenue from key accounts, which would involve a degree of selling. However, concern was expressed at the mention of a potential sales role because those wishing to pursue an academic career “... *self-select for not having selling skills*” and were not necessarily keen to become involved in selling (Respondent C). Equally, some programme leaders had witnessed business development managers trying to “... *push things down the client’s throat*” (Respondent C). This had not helped them change their views on selling.

In reality, those currently managing corporate programmes tended to run them as programme leaders and not as client managers or key account managers (Respondent B). Academics might actually possess account management skills but simply chose not to use them because they saw their principal role as being an academic one rather than key account management or business development (Respondent B). Whilst the two positions are not mutually exclusive, both roles should be promoted strongly in future recruitment. Certainly, a clearer distinction between programme management and client management duties would be helpful (Respondent B). Ultimately, “... *the job description has to change so that we are employing people with business development and relationship development as part of their contract.*” (Respondent B)

In terms of skills and qualities, this research suggests that good communication and inter-personal skills are paramount (Respondents A, D and F). Indeed, such skills are

likely to boost key account manager confidence and are vital to mastering the art of persuasion and negotiation (Respondent A):-

*“I think you need to have rapport building skills. You need to be able to talk and communicate with people fairly easily.”* (Respondent F)

Equally, those dealing with corporate clients should possess good organisational skills on both a personal and professional level. Indeed, the combination of first-class communication and organisational skills is likely to deliver the kind of key account manager that corporate clients regard as professional, dynamic and credible. Credibility appears to be particularly important for a high credence service provider like NBS (Respondent E).

In conclusion, some additional issues were surfaced in this study, each of which could be directly relevant to the recruitment of future corporate client managers in NBS. For example, respondents felt that key account managers did not need to possess key account management experience, selling skills or come from a marketing background. Whilst, at first sight, such revelations appear surprising, they possibly hint at an axiomatic truth that ‘key account managers are made, not born’.

### ***How could a KAM strategy be implemented at Nottingham Business School?***

In keeping with the introduction of any major strategic initiative into an organisation, KAM implementation needs to be considered with care because it entails a number of far-reaching strategic implications (Blois, 1998). For example, it is likely to require significant investment in terms of both financial and human resources. Equally, it may result in major structural and cultural change. This study attempted to explore a number of these issues and respondent views fell largely into four areas: *culture, strategy, people* and *systems*.

As for *culture*, the findings tended to suggest that the situation at NBS was far from ideal because “... *there is an ‘old school’ vibe that is wafting around the place generally, where it’s difficult to... sometimes it just feels too difficult to do simple things...*” (Respondent F). Indeed, KAM is unlikely to gain more widespread acceptance

without the creation of the right co-operative atmosphere. This would be a pity because staff would miss out on the potential benefits associated with KAM:-

*“I think one of the things that would... improve our take-up of key account management would be if academics could really see that it would help them develop their careers and that it would have an equal status to perhaps research or publications. And I think that needs to be recognised at university level. I don't think the Business School can change the culture.”*

(Respondent E)

Respondent E also felt that the word ‘commercial’ was regarded with suspicion by most NBS staff, who appeared either unwilling or unable to value what they did in financial and economic terms. Regrettably, “... *everything has to be valued in higher level [academic and pedagogic] terms*” (Respondent E). Indeed, selling, negotiation and business development were alien concepts to academic staff “... *it's almost as if they attack academic integrity.*” (Respondent E). Equally, the traditional public service, institutional values associated with a university might also be partly to blame for preventing academic staff from acting as key account managers in the way that clients might expect of, say, their computer suppliers (Respondent B). In reality, it was felt that NBS staff were unlikely to adopt a more positive attitude to either KAM or selling unless an individual emerged with the vision, charismatic personality and the stamina to promote the benefits of the concept within the organisation and galvanise staff into considering alternative ways of managing corporate clients - in other words, a KAM ‘champion’.

In terms of *strategy*, KAM implementation needs to be well planned and co-ordinated. For example, senior managers should ensure that KAM goals are fully aligned with corporate goals and that all levels of the organisation are “*in supportive alignment*” (Prince, 2007:753). However, respondent views were mixed on these issues. Although, historically, NBS appeared to have lacked a co-ordinated and planned approach to generating third stream income (Respondents A, B, C and F), some felt that change was occurring - albeit slowly (Respondents D and E). A reason for this slow transition might simply be that senior managers were struggling to determine whether KAM represented a viable strategic option. However, they were still



expected to show decisive leadership: “... *the biggest challenge is that they’ve [NBS senior managers] either got to go one way or the other*” (Respondent B).

Some respondents acknowledged that there would inevitably be a degree of uncertainty over how KAM should be implemented, particularly where resources were concerned (Respondent B), and a number of issues relating to *people* emerged. For example, Respondent E asserted that “... *my mantra is that resource has to follow strategy... we’re in a limited resource.*” Indeed, as has already been discussed, NBS was under-resourced at the time the research was conducted and staff were experiencing significant workload pressures. In particular, respondents claimed that it was difficult to get academic staff to participate in corporate work because lecturers found themselves too heavily committed to teaching elsewhere in the Business School. Indeed, lecturers often felt that they barely had time to resource their own modules and programmes, let alone contribute to corporate activities (Respondent B). Respondent C summed it up succinctly: “... *we’re just too busy.*” Equally, those in the corporate area claimed that they were managing too many client accounts (Respondents A, B and C), which runs counter to one of the KAM principles that key account managers should be responsible for a limited number of accounts and given sufficient time to build effective relationships.

Finally, organisations attempting to implement KAM can be badly let down by inadequate *systems*. Whilst such operational details might be considered to have little or no part to play in a study that sets out to consider the wider strategic implications of pursuing a KAM strategy, it is nevertheless important to understand some of the smaller issues that contribute to staff perceptions of a working environment that is fit for purpose. Indeed, the findings of this research suggested that systems can be an issue for staff at both macro and micro levels. For example, at the macro (or organisation-wide) level, respondents felt that the systems currently in place were ill-equipped for the kind of work undertaken in the corporate area:-

“... *we’ve had undergraduate-related practices and techniques that people think will just naturally extend into the postgraduate and the corporate side.*” (Respondent D)

Concerns were also expressed about the structure of the academic terms, timetabling, room allocation and information systems (Respondents C and D). All of these were perceived to be configured specifically for undergraduate requirements and, therefore, unsuitable for corporate programmes. Equally, at the micro (or individual) level, respondents again felt poorly supported by the Business School:-

*“... you need the tools and kit to do a key account manager’s job. So, it’s things like having a laptop computer and a mobile phone and things like that.”* (Respondent E)

Moreover, whilst the university had a policy on claiming mileage allowance for the use of private cars, it had no policy on company cars *per se*. Car parking was also a source of frustration for staff working on corporate business, as has been previously discussed. In effect, key account managers were being asked to adopt a professional, dynamic and proactive approach to corporate clients with what was perceived to be minimal support. However, although such a situation might be sustainable in the short-term - largely through the resourcefulness, determination and goodwill of programme leaders - there could be no guarantee that NBS would enjoy longer-term growth in third stream revenue without further change.

Thus, it is appropriate for NBS senior management to consider a number of implications that arise from this study.

# **Chapter 7**

## **Managerial implications**

## **Implications arising from the research**

Whilst it is not within the scope of this particular DBA Document to offer NBS senior managers a detailed KAM implementation action plan, it is nevertheless considered appropriate to summarise the tentative conclusions drawn from the research findings and present a series of strategic implications that will ultimately need further and more comprehensive evaluation, should a KAM strategy be deemed important to the longer-term development of the Business School.

### ***Creation of a corporate culture to support commercial activities***

The current culture does not necessarily suit commercial activities because academics see their principal role as teaching students and conducting academic research rather than as client-facing business development managers. Indeed, corporate work tends to be treated with suspicion because academics are unable to identify any higher level academic value in such activities. However, harnessing academic research output to the development of selected commercial projects might be a fruitful avenue to explore. By the same token, particular clients might actually represent interesting case study-based research opportunities that could ultimately be converted into material for academic publication. This would go some way towards making corporate work more attractive to academics.

Senior managers also need to ensure that the commercial activities of the Business School are given greater prominence alongside academic achievements in staff briefings and NBS-wide communications. Equally, the wider benefits to NBS of engaging in commercial activities (such as revenue generation and enhanced corporate reputation) should be promoted. In this way, a more positive impression of commercial activities can be created and regular reinforcement of this message may help in facilitating a change in corporate culture over time.

### ***Encouragement of a positive staff attitude to KAM and selling***

Closely allied to this is the need to foster a more positive attitude towards both selling and KAM. In general, the majority of academics would probably not consider themselves to be salespeople and have specifically chosen a career in higher education on the basis that it reflects more closely their personalities and backgrounds. Indeed,

such academics will have self-selected not to sell. Thus, at the very least, a clearer distinction needs to be made between roles that are purely academic and those that are likely to involve a sales element. Equally, individuals should not necessarily be forced into a career path that they consider inappropriate. However, those who do wish to become more involved in selling should be given adequate training and support to develop in such a role.

An additional means of fostering the right attitude to both KAM and selling could be through the identification of a KAM ‘champion’. Such a figurehead could be useful in spearheading both the internal promotion of the KAM concept and ensuring that a KAM strategy is integrated into the wider Business School policy framework.

#### ***Development of a strategic KAM plan***

Historically, NBS has tended to adopt an *ad hoc* approach to developing third stream income. The same appears to be true of KAM implementation. It should be stressed, however, that KAM is not simply about treating customers differently. Rather, it involves a set of conscious strategic choices and deliberate strategic actions. The first step, therefore, is to identify what kind of KAM system (as per the Kempeners and van der Hart framework) would be appropriate for the corporate activities undertaken by NBS and how far it wishes to develop its relationships (as per the McDonald relationship development model). The second step is to conduct a review of the current resource base. This would allow senior managers to determine whether sufficient resources could be allocated to delivering the desired KAM system. Further investment may be necessary or else resources may need to be redeployed within the Business School. Finally, senior managers should set specific KAM objectives, but ensuring these are fully aligned with NBS corporate goals.

The above recommendations require considerable commitment from NBS senior managers. As with any significant change of strategic direction, there can be no guarantee of short-term returns. Indeed, an indication of the effectiveness of a KAM strategy may only become clear in the longer-term because of the time it is likely to take to build strong corporate relationships and change NBS corporate culture. Equally, the Business School will need to respond to macro-environmental factors

such as changes in legislation and economic conditions, any of which is likely to hamper progress towards KAM implementation.

### ***Targeting of strategic key accounts***

Not all customers will want a close relationship and may prefer to conduct business on a purely transactional basis (Blois, 1998). Consequently, it would appear to make sense to identify those customers who would welcome a more intimate approach. However, such clients need to be chosen with due care and attention because they may not necessarily represent the best financial return on investment in specialist KAM treatment. Thus, in order to provide suitable guidance to NBS senior managers and key account managers alike, it is felt that a formal system of customer portfolio analysis (CPA) should be introduced. Combined with a regular series of customer review meetings, this should enable key account managers to adopt a more targeted approach to commercial customers. Equally, the targeting of key account manager time and effort would be entirely appropriate should NBS continue to experience financial pressures and under-resourcing into the foreseeable future. Indeed, financial pressures may actually force NBS to establish a system of customer portfolio analysis and a deliberate key account selection policy by default.

### ***Recruitment of the right KAM staff***

As has already been identified, NBS would appear to be particularly under-resourced in the corporate area. Indeed, existing client-facing staff claimed to be experiencing the twin pressures of excessive workloads and the management of numerous accounts. Given the nature of the current operating conditions within NBS, it is unlikely that programme leaders will have sufficient time and energy to devote to the effective development of any one account. Thus, additional staff would be necessary should NBS consider adopting a fully-fledged KAM strategy in the longer-term. However, if this were the case, it would be imperative to recruit the right staff or, possibly, to redeploy and retrain existing staff.

On the one hand, potential key account managers should possess not only an appreciation of, and commitment to, KAM principles, but also have good client management skills. The latter would include communication and inter-personal skills, personal and professional organisational skills and the kind of personality and

charisma that is likely to inspire confidence in corporate clients. On the other hand, this study also suggests that potential key account managers in a business school need to be established academics with experience of programme management and an ability to perform within the particular operational constraints that university policies and procedures are likely to impose. However, NBS senior managers should be aware that individuals who satisfy both corporate and academic requirements of the role are likely to be few and far between. Consequently, it may be necessary to consider exceptional remuneration packages in order to attract and retain the right people.

*Identification of relevant changes to NBS and university support systems*

This study has also raised concerns that university systems may not be configured in the best way to support corporate activities. For example, the three-term academic year is based on a standard undergraduate model. In particular, the summer vacation represents a significant period of downtime for teaching activities as staff tend to take the bulk of their annual leave. Whilst it is technically possible to take leave at other times during the academic year, this is likely to cause practical problems for individuals who find themselves committed to year-long undergraduate modules. Clearly, one solution would be to encourage staff to decide on whether they wish to specialise in undergraduate, postgraduate or commercial programmes. However, the reality is that particular staff skills and expertise are often needed across all three levels and that individuals do not, therefore, have the luxury of specialising.

The centralised university function responsible for timetabling and room booking causes additional problems. Respondents raised concerns that it was largely configured for undergraduate programmes and that postgraduate and commercial programmes were not necessarily given priority when rooms were allocated. For example, respondents claimed it was often difficult to secure teaching rooms of a sufficiently high standard for fee-paying corporate clients. Equally, consistency and continuity of room allocations could not be guaranteed for any courses that were scheduled to run for more than a day. Overall, this did not help to project the most professional image of the Business School to fee-paying clients. Thus, in the first instance, it would appear to be important to identify teaching rooms that could be dedicated exclusively to corporate programmes. However, if this were not possible,

corporate programmes should, at the very least, be given priority during the timetabling process.

### ***Reformulation of the academic contract***

Another aspect of the university's support systems that was perceived to be acting against the best interests of those working in the corporate area was the academic contract. As has already been discussed, neither the current contract nor the payment mechanism was thought flexible enough to accommodate the time and effort that key account managers spent on commercial client-related duties. Whilst it would be technically possible to place new staff, and transfer existing staff, onto the managerial pay spine - which would obviate the need to be involved in direct teaching and teaching-related duties - this would conflict with the earlier contention that the ideal key account manager in a business school should be an academic as well as having relevant commercial skills. Thus, it is likely that key account managers would continue to be remunerated through an academic contract for the foreseeable future.

Complete renegotiation of the academic contract would appear to offer the only sensible longer-term solution. However, the university's hands are tied by the fact that the contract is part of a nationally agreed framework that applies to all new universities. Failing this, a simpler solution might be to build into the current contract a sizeable allowance of hours dedicated to commercial activities. This would offset the amount of teaching that academics would need to deliver, thereby alleviating some of the time and workload pressures that have been surfaced in this study. Equally, it might be possible to set aside an extended period of time each year so that key account managers could be released from normal academic duties. For example, this could be for a period of three months and would allow individuals to devote their energies to working on key account development. In effect, this would be similar to the research sabbatical. However, as with sabbaticals, the outputs of these commercial 'time outs' would need to be evaluated against predetermined targets.

It is also recommended that NBS senior managers explore alternative forms of remuneration such as bonuses, profit share and performance-related pay. However, it should be stressed that such alternatives would need to be discussed openly with key account managers rather than a solution being imposed. Equally, senior managers



would need to be aware of the wider implications for general staff relations within NBS of offering alternative forms of payment exclusively to key account managers.

**Parting words: the future of KAM?**

On the face of it, many of the elements of KAM appear to have the potential to be adapted to fit a business school environment. Nevertheless, this study suggests that the KAM journey is likely to be a long, arduous and challenging one. Indeed, KAM represents a bold strategic move for an organisation like Nottingham Business School and would require significant investment in both people and support systems in order to flourish. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee of a short-term return on that investment. Equally, when the potential barriers to KAM implementation are considered - particularly the longer-term problem of encouraging commercial flair and developing business acumen in an entrenched academic culture - the task confronting senior managers would appear to be a challenging one. Consequently, it would be no surprise to see a KAM strategy overlooked in favour of a simpler, cost-effective alternative. However, the concluding remarks from two of the respondents offer a tantalising glimpse of what the future might hold in store for KAM at Nottingham Business School:-

*“There’s nothing I’ve seen here that suggests that a key account management approach will not work. My fear is that we won’t get the recognition that it’s important.”* (Respondent E)

*“I would see this organisation suffer without it. And I’ve seen how it has suffered without it...”* (Respondent F)

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## **Document 5**

***A re-evaluation of the  
relevance of Key Account  
Management to the UK  
higher education sector:  
a case study of  
Nottingham Business  
School***

*by*

**Gary Richard Harden**

# **Appendices**

*In part-fulfilment of the  
Doctorate in Business Administration  
(2002/2005 cohort)*

**Nottingham Business School  
Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

**April 2010**

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# **Appendix 1**

## **Interview agenda**

# Exploring approaches to Key Account Management: *interview agenda*

**Interviewer: Gary Harden**  
**(Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Business School)**

## **Part A**

### **1. Introduction ( or 'icebreaker')**

- Discussion of interviewee's job role
- Typical daily tasks
- Personal involvement in dealing with corporate clients

### **2. General understanding of 'Key Account Management' concept**

- How does your organisation deal with its biggest corporate clients?
- Does it have a particular structure in place (or particular people assigned) to deal with these clients?
- How does your organisation usually describe this structure?
- How does your organisation usually describe these people?
- Are you familiar with the term 'Key Account Management'?
- How would you define the process of 'Key Account Management'?

#### ***Show card 1***

- Comments on the KAM definition shown (card 1)?
- Would the KAM definition shown (card 1) adequately describe the way in which your organisation operates?

### **3. How 'key accounts' are determined**

- What term(s) does your organisation use to describe its most important corporate clients?
- Are you familiar with the term 'key account'?
- How would you define a 'key account'?

#### ***Show card 2***

- Comments on the 'key account' definition shown (card 2)?
- Would the 'key account' definition shown (card 2) adequately describe the way in which your organisation refers to its biggest clients?
- How does your organisation normally decide which clients are of 'strategic importance'?

#### ***Show card 3***

- Comments on the criteria shown (card 3)?
- Which of the criteria shown (card 3) does your organisation mostly use to determine its 'key accounts'?



- Are there any criteria listed (card 3) that your organisation doesn't currently use to determine its 'key accounts'?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Are there any other criteria not mentioned that might be relevant to your organisation? If so, what are they?

#### **4. Strategic or ad hoc approach to KAM?**

- How would you best describe the approach that your organisation currently takes to KAM?
- On a scale of 1-10 (where 1 = disorganised/ad hoc and 10= carefully planned/managed), how would you rate your organisation's approach to KAM?
- Are you satisfied with the approach that your organisation currently takes to KAM?
- What factors would convince you that your organisation was adopting a strategic approach to KAM?

##### ***Show card 4***

- Comments on the factors shown (card 4)?
- Which of the factors shown (card 4) can be witnessed in your organisation's current approach to KAM?
- Are there any factors listed (card 4) that cannot be witnessed in your organisation's current approach to KAM?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Are there any other factors not mentioned that might be relevant to your organisation? If so, what are they?

#### **5. Type of KAM structure/relationship in place**

##### ***Show card 5***

- Comments on the broad types of KAM approach shown (card 5)?
- Which of the broad KAM types shown (card 5) best describes the approach that your organisation currently adopts?
- Would any of the other KAM types shown (card 5) be more suitable for your organisation to adopt?
- What are your particular reasons for believing this to be the case?

##### ***Show cards 6-10 (with suitable explanation)***

- Comments on the types of KAM relationship shown (cards 6-10)?
- Which of the KAM relationships shown (cards 6-10) best matches the type of relationship that your organisation currently has with its biggest corporate clients?
- Would any of the other KAM relationships shown (cards 6-10) be more suitable for your organisation to adopt?
- What are your particular reasons for believing this to be the case?
- Does your organisation have different types of relationship with different corporate clients?
- What reasons might account for this?
- Is this part of a co-ordinated KAM policy on the part of your organisation?

## **Part B**

### **6. Role of the Key Account Manager**

- Are you familiar with the term 'Key Account Manager'?
- What would you say are the typical role(s) that a 'Key Account Manager' is expected to perform?

#### ***Show card 11***

- Comments on the 'Key Account Manager' roles shown (card 11)?
- Which of the 'Key Account Manager' roles shown (card 11) would you most closely associate with your current job?
- Are there any 'Key Account Manager' roles listed (card 11) that you do not personally associate with your current job?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Are there any other roles not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what are they?

### **7. Skills/qualities of the Key Account Manager**

- What would you say are the typical skills/qualities that a 'Key Account Manager' is expected to possess?

#### ***Show card 12***

- Comments on the 'Key Account Manager' skills/qualities shown (card 12)?
- Which of the 'Key Account Manager' skills/qualities shown (card 12) would you most closely associate with your current job?
- Are there any 'Key Account Manager' skills/qualities listed (card 12) that you do not personally associate with your current job?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Are there any other skills/qualities not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what are they?

### **8. Knowledge that the Key Account Manager needs to possess**

- What knowledge do you think an experienced 'Key Account Manager' should possess?

#### ***Show card 13***

- Comments on the 'Key Account Manager' knowledge shown (card 13)?
- Which aspects of 'Key Account Manager' knowledge shown (card 13) would you most closely associate with your current job?
- Which aspects of 'Key Account Manager' knowledge listed (card 13) would you not personally associate with your current job?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Is there any other knowledge not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what is it?

## **9. Other requirements for a Key Account Manager position**

- What other personal/academic requirements do you think are important in the recruitment of a 'Key Account Manager'?

### ***Show card 14***

- Comments on the additional requirements shown (card 14)?
- Which additional requirements shown (card 14) would you most closely associate with your current job?
- Which additional requirements listed (card 14) would you not personally associate with your current job?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Is there any other personal/academic requirement not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what is it?

## **10. What customers value most in a Key Account Manager**

- What do you think corporate clients value most in dealing with a 'Key Account Manager'?

### ***Show card 15***

- Comments on the most valued KAM aspects shown (card 15)?
- Which of the most valued KAM aspects shown (card 15) strike you as surprising? Why?
- Which of the most valued KAM aspects (card 15) do not strike you as surprising? Why?
- Is there anything missing from the list that might be relevant to consider? If so, what is it?

## **Part C**

## **11. Rewarding/remunerating the Key Account Manager**

- How are you currently rewarded for performing your 'Key Account Manager' duties?
- Does your remuneration package consist purely of salary or does your organisation take a more creative approach to paying you?
- How satisfied are you with your current remuneration package?
- Do you think your remuneration package adequately reflects the effort that you put into your 'Key Account Manager' tasks?
- In what ways could an organisation reward its 'Key Account Managers'?

### ***Show card 16***

- Comments on the payment/reward structures shown (card 16)?
- Which of the payment/reward structures shown (card 16) would you most closely associate with your current job?
- Is there any payment/reward structure listed (card 16) that you do not personally associate with your current job?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Is there any other payment/reward structure not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what is it?

## **12. Measuring Key Account Manager performance**

- How does your organisation measure your performance as a 'Key Account Manager'?
- Does your organisation use a single performance measure or multiple performance measures?
- How satisfied are you with the way in which your performance is measured?
- Do you think the way in which your performance is measured adequately reflects the effort that you put into your 'Key Account Manager' tasks?
- In what ways could an organisation measure the performance of its 'Key Account Managers'?

### ***Show card 17***

- Comments on the performance measures shown (card 17)?
- Which of the performance measures shown (card 17) would you most closely associate with your current job?
- Is there any performance measure listed (card 17) that you do not personally associate with your current job?
- Are there any particular reasons that might account for this?
- Is there any other performance measure not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what is it?

## **13. Barriers to the development of KAM in your organisation**

- What factors would you say are likely to hinder the development of 'Key Account Management' in your organisation?
- Why do you see these factors being problematic?
- What solutions can you offer to help overcome these barriers to KAM development in your organisation?

### ***Show card 18***

- Comments on the barriers to KAM shown (card 18)?
- Which of the barriers to KAM shown (card 18) do you think are most relevant to your organisation?
- Are there any barriers to KAM listed (card 18) that you do not think are relevant to your organisation?
- Are there any particular reasons why you feel this way?
- Are there any other barriers to KAM not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what are they?

## **14. Personal concerns about KAM development in your organisation**

- On a personal level, what concerns/fears do you have that are likely to impact on your ability to perform effectively as a 'Key Account Manager'?
- Why do you see these personal concerns/fears being problematic?
- What solutions can the organisation offer to help overcome some of these personal fears/concerns?

### ***Show card 19***

- Comments on the personal concerns/fears shown (card 19)?

- Which of the personal concerns/fears shown (card 19) do you think are the most relevant for your organisation to address?
- Are there any personal concerns/fears listed (card 19) that you do not think relevant?
- Are there any particular reasons why you feel this way?
- Are there any other personal concerns/fears not mentioned that might be relevant to consider? If so, what are they?

Gary Harden

# **Appendix 2**

## **Interview cue cards**

## What is Key Account Management?

*“Key account management is aimed at the biggest and most important of one’s customers and offers special treatment in the fields of marketing, sales and services administration.”*  
(Barnett, 1986 cited in Pardo, 1999: 276)

1

## What is a ‘key account’?

*“... customers in a business-to-business market identified by selling companies as of strategic importance”*  
(McDonald, 2000: 18)

However, this begs the question of how to determine strategic importance?

2

## Determining strategic importance

- Sales volume
- Profitability
- Resources required to service account
- Age of relationship
- Supplier's share of customer's purchases  
(Campbell and Cunningham, 1983)
  
- Attractiveness of links with customer
- Access to new market(s)
- Subjective judgement of Key Account Manager

3

## Strategic approach to KAM

- KAM activities are planned and proactive
- KAM activities are adequately resourced
- KAM goals are aligned with corporate goals
- KAM has senior management support
- Customer portfolio analysis is undertaken
- Regular planning meetings held with customers
- Key Account Manager position has status
- Position confers responsibility and authority

4



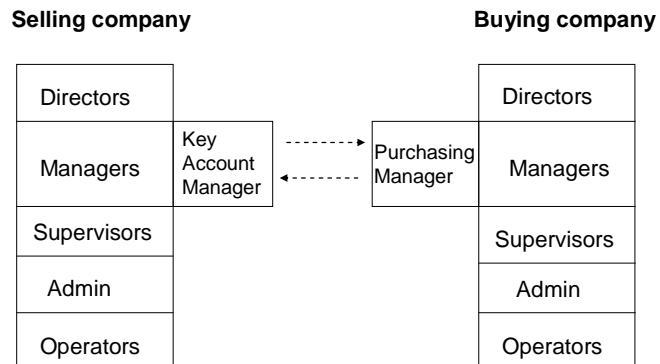
## Types of KAM system

- ❑ No identifiable system
- ❑ Part-time system (*KAMs have other job roles*)
- ❑ Full-time system at operating unit level
- ❑ Corporate-level system (*centralised function*)
- ❑ National account division (*a separate and fully integrated unit*)

Source: Kempeners and van der Hart (1999)

5

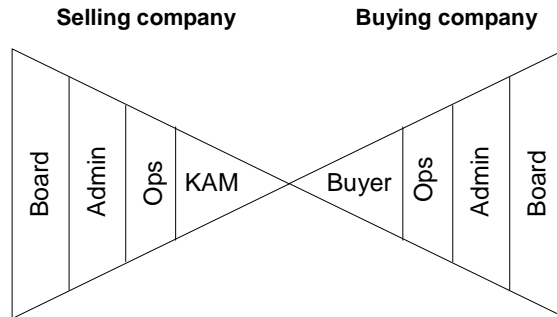
## Exploratory KAM relationship



Source: McDonald (2000)

6

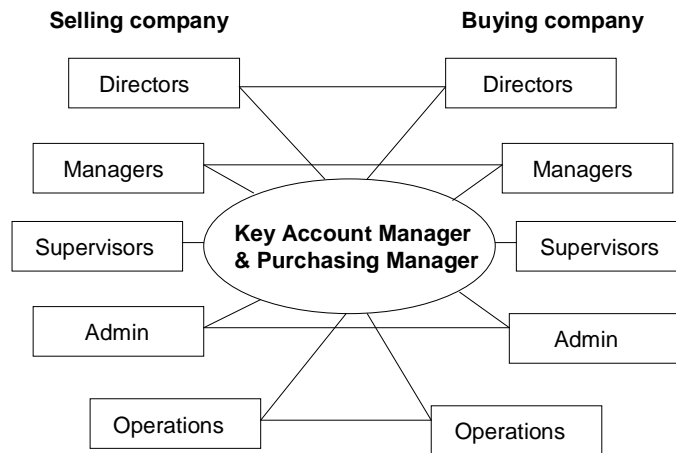
## Basic KAM relationship



Source: McDonald (2000)

7

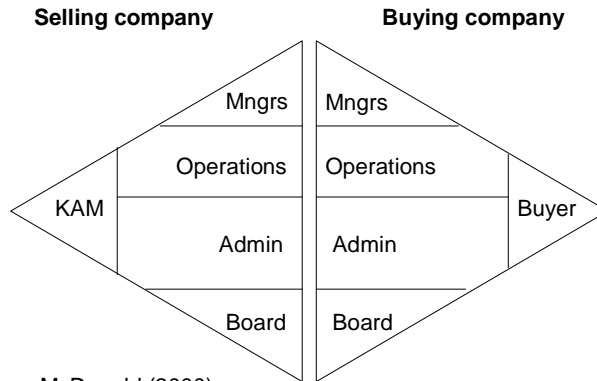
## Co-operative KAM relationship



Source: McDonald (2000)

8

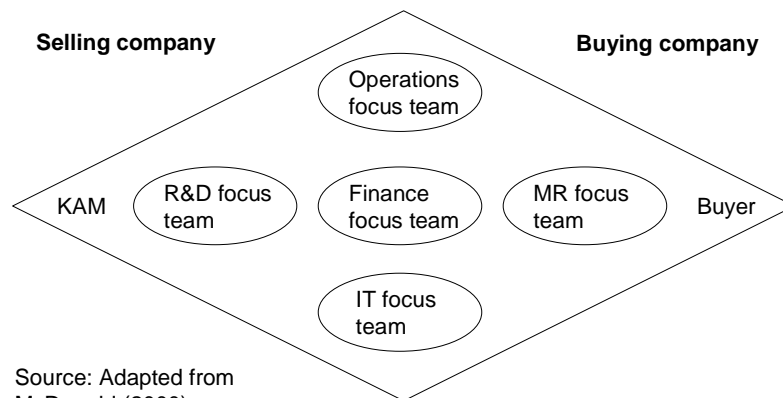
## Interdependent KAM relationship



Source: McDonald (2000)

9

## Integrated KAM relationship



Source: Adapted from McDonald (2000)

10

## Role of the Key Account Manager

- Growth of one or more key accounts consistent with business objectives
- Co-ordination and tailoring of offering to key accounts
- Facilitating multi-level, multi-functional exchange processes
- Alliance manager (or intermediary)
- Knowledge manager
- Promoting KAM concept in own organisation

11

## Key Account Manager skills/qualities

- Good co-ordination/facilitation skills
- High level management skills
- Ability to work on own initiative
- Integrity
- Confidence
- Effective communication/dissemination of information
- Selling skills
- Negotiation skills
- Persuasion
- Commitment to relationship

12

## Key Account Manager knowledge

### *Knowledge of own company's...*

- Products/services
- Business philosophy/mission
- Processes/systems
- Senior managers

### *Knowledge of customer's...*

- Business environment/market
- Products/services
- Business philosophy/mission
- Processes/systems
- Senior managers
- Needs/resource requirements

13

## Other Key Account Manager requirements

- Educated to graduate level (or beyond)
- Fully-trained marketer
- General management experience
- Broad experience of other business areas (e.g. sales/HR)
- Age
- Previous Key Account Management experience
- Length of time in previous Key Account Manager roles
- Experience of moving in senior management circles

14

## What customers value in KAM

- Quality products
- Quality service
- Quality people
- Good communication channels
- Dealing with experienced Key Account Managers
- Long tenure in post
- Commitment from Key Account Managers
- Keeping promises
- Availability of advice
- Senior management involvement

15

## KAM payment/reward structures

- Enhanced basic salary
- Additional performance-related financial incentives
- Training/personal development
- Responsibility with authority
- Promotion
- Status/recognition within the organisation
- Involvement in strategic planning process
- Full access to senior managers
- Profit share
- Bonus payment related to reduction in KAM costs

16

## KAM performance measures

- Profit targets (impact on 'bottom line')
- Performance against budgeted costs
- Performance against job specification
- Annual appraisal/supervision by senior managers
- Client satisfaction survey/informal feedback
- Annual client audit
- Number of new key accounts set up
- Number/strategic importance of key accounts managed
- Relationship length
- Added value created for client
- Intimacy of relationship
- Single performance measure or multiple measures?

17

## Barriers to KAM in your organisation

- Lack of appropriate corporate culture
- Lack of senior management commitment to KAM
- Lack of co-ordinated/planned approach to KAM
- Lack of proactive approach to KAM
- Lack of a KAM 'champion' to improve profile of KAM
- Confusing the appointment of Key Account Managers with doing 'strategic' KAM
- Inadequate financial rewards
- Staff turnover
- Bureaucracy

18

## Key Account Manager fears/concerns

- Lack of trust in senior managers
- Lack of trust in client contacts
- Not being given enough time to build relationships
- Having to manage too many accounts
- Lack of status within company
- Poorly defined job specification
- Relationship with customer becoming closer and stronger than internal loyalties
- Telling clients they are 'key accounts'

19



# **Appendix 3**

## **Respondent profiles**

## Respondent profiles

Respondent	Gender	Age	Position at NBS	Time at NBS	Programme leadership experience	Previous KAM experience
A	Female	50+	Senior Lecturer	10+ yrs	Yes - extensive	No
B	Female	30-39	Principal Lecturer	10+ yrs	Yes - extensive	No
C	Female	50+	Senior Lecturer	10+ yrs	Yes - extensive	No
D	Male	50+	Principal Lecturer	10+ yrs	Yes - extensive	No
E	Female	30-39	Manager of Commercial Activities	2 yrs	No	Yes
F	Male	20-29	Business Development Manager	6 months	No	Yes

# **Appendix 4**

## **Interview 1 transcript**

## **DBA Interview 1**

**GH: Right... thanks very much for coming to the interview today. Perhaps a good place to start would be to get you talk a bit about your job and the kind of corporate clients you become involved in.**

A: Yes, well... I think my job's changing a little bit in that my original job is the course leadership, as you probably know, of the [XXXX]... and that's got a lot of corporate clients in. But, this academic year, I'm more seconded to them, but I think that [XXXX] wants me probably to develop more of a relationship in terms of business opportunities to promote the Corporate Management Department. So, but I can only talk about, obviously, what I've done in the past and dealing with a consortium of companies who sponsor the [XXXX] programme.

**GH: What sort of companies are we talking about?**

A: Well, the current sponsors are... let me go through them... we've got two banks, we've got [XXXX] and [XXXX]. Then, we've got [XXXX] (which isn't really [XXXX] anymore, is it)... [XXXX] and [XXXX]. Then we've got [XXXX]. And then we had three new companies last year... we had [XXXX], who do the [XXXX] sponsorship... they do the landscaping, all the slabs. We had a company called [XXXX], who make glass and sandpaper and everything. So, they're big, they're a PLC. We had [XXXX] as well, so that's sort of eight companies that we're dealing with in one go. We may get [XXXX] on board this year and we may get [XXXX]. So, you know, we've got a range of them really.

**GH: OK. So, a very varied job then, by the sounds of it?**

A: Well, it is, yes... yes, it is. I mean, you know what a typical academic's job is, but I don't really class mine as being like that. It's sort of... it's such an adaptable job so, obviously, that's why I like it, because you're sort of dealing with the students, dealing with the companies, teaching when you've got time. Other clients I deal with, when I teach in-company, which I do quite a lot of... and people like [XXXX]... what was the last one I just did? [XXXX]. So, if we ever get a consortium [XXXX], then I deliver the finance on that as well. So, I have that sort of role... which is like, you know, a module leader's role, but going into the company as well as sort of managing the relationship. So, I suppose when I do the in-company teaching, the only bit of the relationship I manage is the relationship between me and who I'm delivering to or, you know, the person perhaps in the company who's overseeing it, but I don't really manage the whole relationship. That's done by the course leader. Then, of course, with [XXXX] then I'm managing operationally the actual relationship with the client.

**GH: Interesting. Well, thanks for that. Let's build on that then and talk about the way that you feel the University or the Business School looks at its important business clients. Does it take a structured view to the way in which it deals with those corporate clients? Does it look at them in a co-ordinated way?**

A: It's difficult to say really. Operationally, then, I think there is a sort of co-ordinated way that we deal with all corporate clients, and I think it's much more of an operational thing than a strategic thing because, you know, if you've got a client then

they are always looked after, phone calls are always returned, they have a dedicated administrator, they know who they can contact. And, so, the actual administrator becomes much more of a relationship as well. You know, so you've got another party... I mean, the administrator obviously has a relationship with the students. But, I think it's just as... more important possibly... equally important that they have this relationship with your client because, very often, they're the first port of call. And, so, you know, although there's no sort of formal strategy, you do get, if you go and work in the Corporate Management Department, there is definitely, you know, a sort of philosophy of looking after...

**GH: A structured approach to the way in which you deal with those corporate clients?**

A: Yes... I mean you don't keep them waiting if they want something. You jump to it, that sort of thing. It's not actually set down... it's never laid down: 'This is what you will do'. Maybe it should be, but there's a sort of... you know... just through experience there's a sort of routine.

**GH: Is the term 'key account management' something that's used in normal parlance in the Business School or in your circles?**

A: I've heard [XXXX] use it. [XXXX]'s come in from outside and I think she tends to use, like... yes... 'key customers'. I wouldn't say it's used a lot... I have heard it. So, if we have a corporate client, you know, who gives us a lot of work... a few years ago, you would have said [XXXX] was, you know, one of our key accounts because they had done [XXXX] over and over again. So, you know, it's a word I've heard but I don't know that it's actually used as a sort of... regularly, you know.

**GH: So, if you were to define 'key account management' as a process, what would your personal attempt be to define it?**

A: Well. I suppose... what it means to me actually is looking after all corporate clients. In other words, I wouldn't see 'key' as being the word. I would say 'corporate account management' because I don't think we have any corporate clients that are not key. You know, I think they're all treated equally... maybe a little bit they're not... I mean all the ones I have are generally treated equally... except, if a [XXXX] student finds their own placement, then you've got a relationship with the company because the student is there but they're not someone who's going to take on another student... and it's only there, very often, because they are doing a favour to the students. So, they're not one of our real consortium members. So, you tend not to, sort of, give them... You sort of think... oh, well... they're not going to give us any other business... But, to go back to your question... I mean 'key account'... What is 'key account management'? It's managing the relationship with some of your key customers, who you assume are going to deliver... who you are going to deliver more business to. So the key ones will be those that are on-going and those that are going to perhaps expand the relationship, whereas the non-key ones would be the one-offs.

**GH: That's interesting. The reason I ask it is because if I refer you to card number 1 here, this is a fairly standard definition that I've come across, referring to 'key account management', so I just wondered what you thought**

**about that... whether that seemed to chime with the kind of job that you're doing, or that you see your colleagues as doing?**

A: Yes... I mean, it's aimed at the biggest and most important of one's customers, so... I don't know that we do have any... you know, this definition sounds like you've got one biggest and most important, whereas I don't think that that's the case... me personally... you know, if I look at [XXXX], it's a consortium and who is my biggest and most important, I don't have one. So, you know, if you think of me looking after possibly ten corporate clients, I probably have some not quite so important but I probably have about eight who are all equally important. So, I mean... you know... maybe in a different type of business, but my personal view is that there isn't a biggest and most important...

**GH: Building on that, again... we're talking about these corporate clients as being important... I'm trying to think about the notion of a 'key account' now because we're identifying the fact that these clients are important, so they become 'key accounts'. So, what would you reckon a 'key account' would be, in your opinion? Who would be a 'key account'?**

A: Do you mean in terms of a name or generally?

**GH: Generally... what would the criteria be for a 'key account'?**

A: Well... I think it would be somebody who delivers a fair proportion of business to the corporate department with opportunities for expanding an on-going business. So, that's what I say...

**GH: Now, if I show you card 2, this is a standard definition that you can come across for a 'key account'... it's not particularly revealing but I think the interesting thing is it begs the question of what is strategic importance. So, I'd like to hear from you really... how would you regard corporate clients as strategic... what criteria would... what would be 'strategic importance' to you?**

A: Strategic importance is on-going business... and continued commitment. And strategic importance is, as well, the opportunity to develop further business with them. So, I think it's two things... it's maintaining the on-going business... and the opportunity to develop more business.

**GH: Ah, ha. That's fair enough. I'm going to show card number 3 to you here, because it's a selection of criteria that crop up in the literature when the subject of 'strategic importance' is mentioned. I just wonder if you'd cast your eye down that list and see whether some of those, again, you could equate with Nottingham Business School and things going on or whether you think perhaps some of those things on that list are not happening?**

A: Sales volume is, yes. Profitability is a bit questionable in that we're not altogether, at the moment, clear as to... we do have an idea about profitability but I think we look at. in the Corporate Management Department... contribution, I suppose, is better than profitability.

**GH: And contribution is probably the thing that we all use, isn't it? Yes, ah, ah.**

A: Resources required? Not something that we think about a lot, although, you know, it is there... at the back of your mind. I mean, [XXXX] is particularly demanding... and so you do tend to think, is it worth it? Age of the relationship? Probably... Supplier share of customer's purchases? Oh, yeah... in terms of maybe sole supplier... that sort of thing, yeah? Attractiveness of links? Yes...

**GH: You're talking about [XXXX], aren't you? And, I suppose that's a good example of one where it is perceived as being a very prestigious client to be doing business with?**

A: Access to new markets? Yes... And subjective judgement is very vague anyway, but, yeah, I mean there is a lot of...

**GH: Is it down to that key account manager's discretion at the end of the day or gut feeling about what the strategic importance of an account is, yeah?**

A: Yes, I think so... I think [XXXX] has her own ideas as to what is strategically important... I think... possibly a little bit different to what we have from having dealt with some of these people for a long time. You know, then it suddenly becomes clear that they aren't contributing. I think contribution is quite key... and if they're not contributing, even though we think it might be... there are other reasons to have a strategic important client, then I think...

**GH: So, profitability shouldn't really be the sole criterion then for judging the importance of a relationship? There are other, perhaps qualitative factors, that might be equally interesting?**

A: Yes... and I think it depends on the person as well, doesn't it? [XXXX]'s got to deliver contribution, so she might see it in those terms, whereas someone who's been dealing with the client from a historical point of view, from years, might think of them as strategic important because we've always dealt with them. But, [XXXX] may come in and say, well, you know, they're not contributing anything so get rid of them.

**GH: That's a concern, obviously. Thinking about the approach that the Business School takes then to these major clients, would you think it's a strategic approach? Does the Business School actually adopt a strategic approach to building relationships with these clients? In your opinion?**

A: In my opinion, historically, definitely no. It's been a very hit and miss and... it's been, oh, I think, you know, someone's come along, so I think we should do business with them and yes, we have... but, I do think there is a definite move from [XXXX] now to develop a strategy to build on strengths we've got, not just to take business for the sake of it... and to concentrate where we've got strengths. So, she's working on much more of a strategic approach... but, historically, no. Without a doubt, it's been a fragmented approach.

**GH: If I can show you card 4 then because, again, there are a number of issues that are being raised as indicators of a strategic approach being taken, so I just**

**wonder if you'd cast your eye down that list whether there are perhaps indications of some of those things happening in Nottingham Business School or likely to be happening over the not-too-distant future?**

A: Key account management goals are aligned with corporate goals? I mean... the only thing I would question, I mean, is whether when you're talking about key account management... I suppose that's your business... it's what you actually include in it... because I would read here that corporate... that CMD goals are aligned with corporate goals...and CMD goals are that, I think, everybody should... every company should be a key account, if you see what I mean? We don't have accounts that aren't key accounts because we're not in that... we're not big enough.

**GH: But those CMD goals, as far as you're concerned, are aligned to corporate goals?**

A: Are starting now to be aligned now to corporate goals... and all of these now, you know, are being looked at, in terms of the activities are being much better planned. I'm not sure about adequately resourced? I think that is obviously part of a strategic approach but, within the CMD, although that is an issue, I'm not sure that we actually are adequately resourced.

**GH: So, do you feel a bit stretched then?**

A: Yes. Yes. I think it definitely has senior management support. There is definitely some portfolio analysis. Regular meetings is definite. And, I think there's starting to be seen to be a status in, you know, looking after clients. I mean, I think it's the title you use is Client Support... and Client Manager... and Client Development.

**GH: Are those terms that [XXXX]'s developing now?**

A: Yes. We're using client rather than that, but... I think that those are starting to be seen to be introduced... I'm not saying they all happen at the moment and I don't think, in the past, they've been very much at the forefront, as I say... I think the majority is very much hit and miss. I mean, underneath [XXXX]'s umbrella, now, you've got some of the overseas stuff... and, you know, just as an example of the [XXXX] fiasco, that we signed a contract with [XXXX] because someone thought it was a good idea and I think we're losing money hand over fist. So, that was very much the sort of approach that was used in the past.

**GH: OK. You talk about the reputation and status of the client manager, or the key account manager. Is that something that wasn't there before and is gradually changing? Do you feel that individual has a bit more space within the Business School?**

A: Yes, I think it is gradually changing. I think it's moving away more from an academic role to a sort of combined role that, you know, in the past, again, it's been a course leader role that the client... the key... I mean, the key account manager has been the course leader and the administrator doing that role, neither of whom have had any real status. But, I think that soon, in the not-too-distant future that... the title



will be changed. I think anonymously, between you and me, I think [XXXX] would like her business liaison client-facing managers not to be academics.

**GH: Right. That's interesting.**

A: But, I think that would... not... that won't happen.

**GH: Yes, it's not for the short-term?**

A: No, that won't happen... and it might be more longer-term, but it won't happen because I think she sees the contract as being restrictive. But, I mean, for a business school, it's a very difficult... you know, it's a difficult area, isn't it, because... you know... you've got the business side of it, but you have got the academic side as well.

**GH: And sometimes they don't gel together.**

A: And they don't. We've seen [XXXX] coming in as a [XXXX] with no academic knowledge whatsoever... and struggling to come to terms with the product that we can actually deliver. And then you've got an academic who knows what product she can deliver but not necessarily can sell them and develop them. So, there is that bit of conflict there.

**GH: But, certainly, it sounds like things are moving... they're changing... they're developing? Which is interesting because, if I can just quickly show you card number 5 here... this indicates that there's a kind of continuum in key account management systems, where it goes from no identifiable system right through to the other side of the continuum, where there's almost like a self-standing, national division dedicated to key account management (or client management). So, I just wonder whether you can spot Nottingham Business School on that scale - perhaps traditionally - or, maybe, where you think it's going in the future?**

A: Yes... it would be interesting to compare what I say to what other people... because I've not been involved as long. I mean, when you speak to [XXXX], she's been in there a lot longer... and I would guess that anybody who's been in there would say... well, you know, we had a bit of a part-time system to start off with - where they had other job roles - and, I suppose... I don't think we would move to a centralized... it depends what you mean by centralized function? I mean, if you meant going over to Newton, then no. If you meant going to the College as centralised, then I don't think that would happen.

**GH: I think centralized function, in this respect, would be that, centrally in the University, there is a key account management department, if you like.**

A: I don't think that would ever happen... because, in the University... I think the whole university is geared up to undergraduate teaching and all of the systems are geared up to undergraduate... and very few Colleges, if any, have the amount of corporate work that we have. I know they don't, but I think it is really, really different in significance. I think ours is... I don't know, ten times more than the next or something like that. So, you know... I think, in a way, if there were a centralised

system, it would come to the Business School because that's where most of it is anyway.

**GH: So, at the moment then, it seems that there's a move from part-time system perhaps to more of a full-time system operating at the operating unit level?**

A: Yes.

**GH: So, moving in the right direction, I suppose we could argue?**

A: Yes.

**GH: OK. But, definitely, there is a system there somewhere? It's not a question of no identifiable system?**

A: Of managing key accounts? No, I think you'd have to say there is some system because, you know, I suppose somebody coming in might struggle to identify but it is... the system is that academic course leaders are key account managers. So, I think most people know that... So, yes, there must be a system that's identifiable.

**GH: Well... building on that, I want to show you a few more cards in one go, because there are different sort of types of key account management structure evident in organisations... (There follows an explanation of cards 6-10)... So, there's a kind of scale building up on that basis. So, I just wonder how that fits in with Nottingham Business School? Whether you've got this exploratory relationship? Whether it's a basic key account management relationship? Whether it's actually starting to facilitate these relationships between different people in the two organisations? Or, how do you think it's going?**

A: I think... I don't think it's going to get anywhere near as sophisticated as your 9 and 10... when you've got a relationship with [XXXX], the question is: are we developing other relationships within [XXXX]? And so, as a result of my relationship with [XXXX], does that mean then that [XXXX]'s got a relationship with someone else at [XXXX]? Is that what you mean?

**GH: Yes, I think that's really what it is... it's actually from the single relationship that's developed between the key account manager (or the client manager), you actually finish up facilitating a number of different relationships between different people in those organisations.**

A: I think that would be a wish... that because I know somebody in [XXXX] and then, you know, you can use that like a... as a lever, but it doesn't... I don't think it happens.

**GH: So, you feel this is aspirational then, the situation on slide 8?**

A: Yes, I think it is. I think it's something that... because you know somebody, I think it's almost expected... or so and so will know someone else and so on... but, I think it is aspirational.

**GH: So, the reality perhaps is that we're somewhere on... sort of... 6 and 7?**

A: Yes, I think so.

**GH: OK, That's interesting to pick up on that one. Sorry to spring that on you. OK. That's about the structural side of relationships. I want to move on to consider the more personal aspects of the client manager (or the key account manager) role. I suppose, first of all, would actually be to... just try to get from you some idea of what you think the role or the roles of this client manager (or key account manager) are, or perhaps should be. What role or roles do they... exist to perform?**

A: Um... what do we do? Well... the only... it's really difficult to explain... I mean, what role?... I mean you... you respond to the client's needs really... the sort of... whatever... and that's overall. So, if they've got a problem with a student who is one of our products, I assume, you know, you respond to that. You try and supply more students if they need more students. You might supply another programme if you had a more developed client relationship. You know... from the [XXXX] course, they might want an internal I.T. programme or something like that, so you are responding to that. So, I don't really... I mean, you're probably going to show me a slide where you break it down, but... overall... the job is to just respond to the client's needs, even... I think, even if it's not something you can actually deliver yourself and, you know, you try to support the client and.... facilitate...

**GH: You try to find a solution somewhere?**

A: Yes... and if you can't, then you just have to say... well, sorry... we can't.

**GH: You make it sound like a problem solver?**

A: Yes...

**GH: Yes, you're right. I'm going to show you a card because there are some ideal accounts, if you like, of what the key account manager should be trying to do. So, I just wondered whether this fits in with your view currently of a client manager (or key account manager)? Whether you can see these sorts of things as being part of the job?**

A: Yes, I suppose the difference is... I always talk about responding to the client's needs... and I suppose the other thing should be that there is a proactiveness there as well... that maybe you try and not actually... you know... deliver what the client wants, but perhaps, you know, go out there and give the client something they didn't know that they want. There is a little bit of that goes on... you know, in that if we have a new product... I mean, I think, if you speak to [XXXX], he'll say that definitely does go on. So, for example, [XXXX] have got a [XXXX] with us... maybe it's a [XXXX] as well... a [XXXX] or a [XXXX]... and also we've told them about [XXXX]. So, you know, [XXXX]'s role is very... I think [XXXX] would see his role perhaps much more like that. I don't think I get the opportunity, in my role, to be as proactive because, you know... well a) I haven't got time but b) we've never really gone down that route with my clients at all, on the basis that they are in it for

[XXXX]. We've never actually explored other options, whereas it tends to work the other way round. So, if you've got a big client that you're delivering a [XXXX] for, then... you know... [XXXX] would then perhaps try to sell something else. But, there is an interrelationship, without doubt, that we do try to do that. And, there is some proactiveness going on. Co-ordination and tailoring of offering? What do you think that means for key accounts?

**GH: Well, it means providing for each client the specific package that they're requesting rather than giving them a kind of off-the-shelf solution. Everything is tailor-made.**

A: Ah, right. Well, again, talking to me, probably at this point, isn't the right person... but, again, if you speak to one of the others, they will say that there is some tailoring... towards individuals... because they all have slightly different needs with regards to the [XXXX] that we offer. Facilitating multi-level, multi-functional exchange processes?

**GH: It's that business of trying to engineer multiple relationships between organisations as opposed to just a single relationship.**

A: They do a bit of that... but not much. Knowledge manager... in terms of trying to find out what they all know... there is a bit of that as well.

**GH: Sometimes, expected to be the fount of all knowledge?**

A: Yes... there is a bit of that. I think that often happens actually.

**GH: That problem solver you were talking about earlier on.**

A: Yes... you know... because you're at university, the client very often thinks you'll know everybody... An alliance manager? Yes, that happens in that... you know, particularly with students... an alliance, I assume means, you know, the client and me, in this case, would join an alliance to deal with a difficult student... that would work together... that definitely happens. And, then, promoting the key account management concept? I don't know whether we would promote it... I think there is a little bit of that, isn't there?

**GH: Do you think it should be promoted more strongly in the organisation, so that the organisation perhaps understands more about the concept?**

A: I think the organisation within, certainly the area I work (CMD) does understand the concept, therefore there is no need to promote it. I think what you need to do... and it's part of the job perhaps... is promote the concept to people perhaps who are lecturing on the course... that, you know, that really are lecturing on a corporate course who have different expectations... and I think definitely that we do that. Yes, without doubt.

**GH: So, that's the role of the key account manager. Let's focus on the skills or the qualities that you think these individuals should have. So, in your experience,**

**what qualities and skills do you think a good client manager (or key account manager) should have?**

A: Um... professionalism... whatever that means, you know? It's quite funny actually... at the end of the day, the client needs to like you and whatever it takes for them to like you... because if we are Cranfield or Ashridge or Henley, and we were to want to get a client... in a way, it wouldn't matter whether they liked us because of the reputation. So, they would just go... and even if they didn't like you they would probably still go to Cranfield... you know, because they know that they'll deliver... The most important thing, I think, is that they actually like the person that they're dealing with almost... there's something about that person that makes them want to come back...

**GH: A very personal kind of relationship?**

A: Yes... that makes them want to come back. You know... I mean, if we do bid for business and if, you know, you've got Cranfield there and you've got us... you know... so why are they going to come to us? I mean, there's obviously got to be a bit of persuasiveness and selling but... you know... they've got to like you. And so, whatever it is that makes... I think the professionalism is all about communication and... how you adapt to their requirements, how you deal with them. Communication is probably absolutely key... a bit of adaptability and flexibility so that you can change what you're doing.

**GH: If I can show you card 12 then, there are some thoughts from academic sources as to the kind of skills and qualities that the key account manager should possess.**

A: Good co-ordination/facilitation skills? Yes. High level management skills? Not so... I don't think are quite so important in our context. Ability to work on own initiative? Yes. Integrity, confidence? Yes... yes. Selling skills? I'm not sure because, I mean... I don't actually know what selling skills are, I mean... selling skills are probably a combination of all of those anyway...

**GH: It's the ability to actually go out and sell new things to clients or sell to new clients.**

A: Yes, but I mean that's part of being confident and persuasive, isn't it... and negotiation? So, you know... actually, it's covered by a lot of the other things. I think... you know... if you said, well, how do you make a sale... you've got to be confident, you've got to be able to communicate, you've got to be persuasive and you've got to be able to negotiate... So, yes... although, in my role, I tend only to have a limited opportunity to sell, but I do do selling... and I'm selling [XXXX] students to companies, but because we have enough companies, we don't actually, at the moment, do it that often... but we do do it. Negotiation? Yes... yes... all of that really, except possibly not the high level management skills... because I don't really know what that means anyway.

**GH: It just means that perhaps you come from senior management levels in the company... in the organisation.**

A: I think... I think that... I think probably the reason they're saying that... I wouldn't say that's a skill or quality of somebody... it's obviously a position... and it might impact...

**GH: You've got experience... or you've got reputation and status...?**

A: Yes, that's right... the status might impact on it, that if they're dealing with somebody that hasn't got the status, then I think the client may feel... well, you know... I'm dealing with an also-ran here, you know. So...

**GH: That could be an issue with some organisations?**

A: It could be an issue to some organisations, I think... I don't think it is, but... if you give me an example... maybe with [XXXX], they like to think they are dealing with the top people... when we first got the business, I mean, [XXXX] used to go out a lot with them... and they like to feel that they, you know, have got the top man. But then, you know... after that, I think... once you've got the business, maybe... I dunno... we've still got [XXXX]...

**GH: So, there are just certain clients who might consider that issue to be important?**

A: Yes... I'm not sure it's a skill thing. It's more from a client perspective of actually dealing with somebody who...

**GH: That's fair comment. I think... following on from that... I mean we've talked about qualities and characteristics... are there still additional things that key account managers should have? Do you still expect them to be that plus more besides?**

A: Well, I mean... one of the things, I mean, in our context there that you haven't actually got on there, I don't think, is knowledgeable... you know... that you've got to have a good working knowledge of the products. I mean, not just of your own products, but also of a wider range of products. So, you know, if someone does say: well, OK, we've been involved with [XXXX] but now we'd like to develop something else... then you can actually offer some help at the time... and then, point them in the right direction. So, yes... there is knowledge that... for our products is academic knowledge.

**GH: Interesting... you're getting into the spirit of this. You're right... knowledge, yes. Knowledge about a number of issues perhaps... and this is a suggestion from, you know, the literature I've read. Do you think these are the right kind of areas where we should be showing knowledge?**

A: Knowledge of our own company's products and services? Yes. Processes, systems, senior managers? I'm not so sure senior managers... I mean, I think key is products and services... processes... how things are done...

**GH: It's because you're representing those products, I suppose, most directly that the client...**

A: Yes... and, if necessary, knowledge of senior management might help... and then, of the customers, what they need... again, I don't know about senior managers... yes, but I think most of those... not all of them are applicable to us.

**GH: So, you feel that, as a client manager, as a key account manager, you know quite a bit about the client's business as well... the business environment they're operating in?**

A: Yes, definitely... I mean, I wouldn't say that you know that straight away but you get to know it and, therefore, I mean... I suppose, if you were looking to, you know, do other business... you know, you would be the first person because, other than the client themselves, you would actually know how they operate. I mean, you know... I can look at [XXXX] and see it operates very differently to [XXXX]. You know... I wouldn't say I have vast working knowledge, but I do have some knowledge about how the companies work... and it must be an advantage if they want something else. So, it's not essential... it's just an advantage to have.

**GH: I'm glad you mentioned the business about knowledge but there are still other things perhaps that we could expect of a key account manager or a client manager. I just wonder whether there's still something we haven't discussed that we could add into...?**

A: Still qualities? Knowledge... what else is there?

**GH: Does anything strike you obviously or not? Because sometimes we think these key account managers...**

A: Do you think we might need to be good looking and... sort of young and slim... young, slim, good looking...?

**GH: I'm just interested to hear what you think these additional qualities or attributes are.**

A: I mean, I would put that into professionalism... you know... would ugly, fat people just be as successful? I don't know... I mean, you have to ask the clients that, don't you?

**GH: Interesting aspect of it. If I just show you this slide very quickly, slide number 14...**

A: Oh, I see... education, yes.

**GH: There are some additional things that you can pick up that these key account managers should have. So, I just don't know wonder whether you think they should have these things?**

A: Educated to graduate level? I don't think that is essential. I mean, it depends if we're talking about our business or generally. I mean... what is expected of our business is obviously that you are educated to graduate level because then you've got an insight into the products you're selling. And, I think it's hard to gain that if you've

not worked in education. So, it depends... I suppose educated to graduate level does mean that you have a certain intelligence. I don't think you need to be a fully trained marketer because I'm not. General management experience? I haven't got that. Broad experience? I think, you know, sometimes broad experience does help. Age? In terms of age... yes, I think age helps because of status. So... you know...

**GH: So, if you've got a longer track record then that goes with that... that prestige?**

A: Yes. Then I think it might go against you when you get to other end... you know, old fuddy duddy... you know, that sort of thing. You have to be a bit careful on that one. Previous key account management experience, I don't think is essential. Length of time? No, I don't think that's a... And then, experience of moving in senior management circles? Not necessarily the case. So, I think... you know... there are some there that are attributes that might make you better, but not definitely. I think quite a lot of it depends on the individual.

**GH: Interesting. Right... moving into the last part of the interview now, I want to move onto possibly something slightly more contentious and to think about reward structures, payment structures, remuneration... for these positions. So, without giving me any, sort of, specific information about what you're paid, just in terms of general issues... how are you currently rewarded for operating in this client manager role?**

A: Not at all. Basically, that bit is a bit contentious... and I think it's a bit contentious again because, in an academic institution, you actually have two scales: you have academic scales and non-academic scales... and, so... as an academic, as you know, everybody's paid the same... so, what reward you get, you get so many hours for looking after the course, which involves dealing with the students and dealing with the clients. So, I get probably one of the highest allowances, or comparable allowance of a much larger course because you're dealing with the client as well and... you know, there's quite a lot of demand from that. So, with the hours, you do get a responsibility allowance but, you know, it's exactly the same as whatever people get as a responsibility allowance. So, you know, I'm paid on the SL scale and, then, with a responsibility allowance for looking after the programme.

**GH: Have you got any ideas about how you'd like to see that change? Have you got any suggestions about how the reward structure could be improved?**

A: Um... well, I don't know... it's very difficult, because we all want to protect our academic contracts. I mean... I think you're talking to the wrong person here in a way because I... if you talk to [XXXX] and me, we're both of us SLs... and if you talk to [XXXX] and [XXXX], they're PLs. Now, I said I wasn't going to run [XXXX] unless I got a PL but, because of the new framework, they said: well... you know... wait till the new framework, because the new framework is going to reward, you know, as I believe, client... anybody promoting strategy and things like that will automatically get a bit of recognition. So, I think the grading of the job I'm doing will actually be a grade higher, I think, from what I've been told, which will... you know, what they're really saying to me is: it's a PL job, you've got your responsibility allowance... so, effectively, you're being paid virtually what a PL is anyway... and, as soon as the



new framework comes in, then we should, all four of us, we should all be on an equal footing. And so... you know... as I say, it's a bit contentious.

**GH: Right. So, you're going to wait and see what happens... basically?**

A: Wait and see what happens.

**GH: Well... if I could just show you slide 16, there are some suggestions for key account management payment or reward structures. I just wonder whether any of those might look appealing and whether you can see those working perhaps in a business school environment?**

A: Um... enhanced basic salary? I think there is a need... and, I wouldn't say it was an enhanced basic salary but, within an academic environment, I think there is a need for recognition... of the corporate role. And, how that is done is quite difficult, but... you know... as we have got a grading scheme then, I mean... you know... enhanced basic salary is saying: well, OK, everybody else is an SL but you'll get more... whereas the way to do it is to say: well... you know... you're a higher grade. I'm not... I'm not keen on somebody just enhancing a basic salary, because I think it becomes contrived. So... you know... I think it needs to be open and honest, but... if, you're in a client-facing role, then it is a whatever... scale 5... and if you're not, then it's a... you know, you're still an academic but you get a higher grade than you do otherwise... I don't like any behind-the-scenes manipulation. Additional performance-related financial incentives? Um... that's a possibility that would... possibly work, but then... you know, it's always going to be subjective, isn't it? Training and personal development? Um... responsibility with authority/promotion? I think everybody would like to see promotion prospects... and status and recognition within the organisation. I think everybody would like to see that. I think we tend to be involved in the strategic planning process anyway within the CMD. Not worried about full access to senior managers. We don't... we couldn't operate a profit share. And, bonus payment... I wouldn't want to go down the last route in relation to reduction because, I think, you start...

**GH: So, you're looking more then at the promotion prospects and the responsibility and the status...?**

A: And the status... the recognition, generally... yes... without being contrived. I think it would... you know... have to be open to everybody and, so... well, you know... this type of job does involve something a little bit different. I mean, I think that's because I come from an academic... and I think other academics would agree. However... if you do talk to [XXXX], she'll have very different views because, I think, what she would like to see is almost a different scale... you know... that is a client/key account manager type of scale. So, are you going to talk to her?

**GH: I hope I do, yes. Um... talking about reward structures and payment, I suppose you can never escape from thinking about performance measures and... sort of... to see whether you're doing a good job or not. So, do you feel you are being currently measured on your performance as a client manager? And, if so, in what way...?**

A: I wouldn't say, as a client manager, I'm being measured on performance. I'm being measured on performance full stop... and, part of my job role... being an academic, as you know, it's not just that one role. So, when you have your personal development appraisal, then of course the client-facing role will come up as being... you know... how you do it and how you don't. So, I will be appraised on it without doubt. Yes...

**GH: So, are you being appraised according to quantitative measures perhaps or is it more the qualitative aspects of the...?**

A: Qualitative... qualitative. I mean, I don't think we use quantitative here, do we? I mean, we use quantitative methods for... well, I say quantitative... it depends what you mean. We get feedback, don't we, from courses that they scale you 1-5 and... you know... that's open for everybody. How you... how you deliver a course is ranked on the basis of 1-5 and that's open for anybody within the corporate people to see. So, you know... and, I suppose that's part of your general role. Um... so if I don't do a good job in [XXXX], then... you know... they would probably take me off the course anyway, but everybody would see that... not everybody... but [XXXX] would see the feedback and want to know why.

**GH: OK. If you look at card 17 there, I've got some suggestions as to how key account manager performance could be measured. I just wonder whether any of those you would feel particularly relevant to the business school environment?**

A: Gosh... (long period of reflection of points on the card)... So, you would be measured on what... the contribution that you bring in?

**GH: I think it's contribution... for a business school. And, if you're producing a strong contribution, then I suppose you could suggest that you're doing your job very well?**

A; Yes, OK... well... could work, not sure... Performance against budgeted costs? Well... pathetic at budgeting here but, yes, we ought to look at that anyway, in terms of... you know... for a programme... you have a budgeted programme... and nobody bothers. So, we ought to have that. Performance against job spec? Yes. Annual appraisal/supervisions? Yes, that goes on anyway. Client satisfaction/survey/formal feedback? So, yes... whether the client's satisfied? We use that a bit.

**GH: Yes. So, if [XXXX] don't want you, they'll tell you?**

A: And also... you know... if we had somebody managing a course that the client would let us know that they didn't think... you know, they wanted a different manager and so on. So, yes...

**GH: Is there such a thing as an annual client audit? Do you sit down and discuss the... performance of a relationship with a particular client every year?**

A: No. Not that I know of.

**GH: Would that be a useful way forward?**

A: Um... I don't know. I don't know whether I'd like that... personally. I think generally there are opportunities for clients to let us know what their feelings are. And, so, I'm not very keen on that personally. Number of new key accounts set up? Um... I don't think that's relevant, because I don't think you will have set many up in a year. I think... you know... I mean, what's not on here is it could be measured... I suppose, not set up but leads and stuff like that.

**GH: Leads generated?**

A: Yes. Like [XXXX], with his [XXXX]... he could generate three or four leads that, ultimately, could end up as business. And, of course, you know... that's one of the things that, I'm sure, he would informally be measured on.

**GH: Very interesting.**

A: So... and strategic importance certainly... of the accounts you look after. Relationship length? Quite important... um, I wouldn't think it was a measure, though, in terms of being paid on that because... you know... it just might be that... you know... you just carry on doing it because you want to do it and...

**GH: So, when the relationship is just so strong, you don't see why you should get paid or measured on the basis of that relationship?**

A; Well, I mean, you might be paid on other things like... you know... the contribution rather than the fact that... you know... you've run a programme. You know, I don't think that that's a... I mean, I've run [XXXX] in the past... the first time round... I ran it for five years and I don't think I should have got paid on that basis but... you know, what perhaps I ought to have got paid on, or could have done, would be more that I've contributed X amount to the... you know, to the Corporate Business Unit... (long pause)... added value created for the client? That's quite interesting... I mean that's all part of it as well... it's all part of your status... and it's all part of your own job satisfaction. Intimacy of the relationship? No... I don't think... I think multiple measures are obviously better than a single measure. You know... so it's all about... you know... contribution, client feedback... you know... on there as well, I mean... I suppose that's all about your own appraisal but... you know... the independence with which you do it... you know... because some people might manage a client relationship and need a lot of help... somebody new, but... you know... the proactiveness within which you do it. You know, if [XXXX] says to me... you know, I don't go to [XXXX] with problems... just resolve them. And so, I only, sort of, ever go to her once a month if that... you know? She knows then that she'll have to answer my e-mail but... it's your... the way that you do it... totally independently... is important and I think... you know... that's... I wouldn't say I should be paid on that but that's part of my appraisal is to...

**GH: You'd expect it would be one of those criteria used to measure your performance?**

A: How much trouble do I cause [XXXX]?

**GH: OK. Just to round things off then, we're looking at all the positive things that could happen in these relationships but you run up against barriers... you know, things that will stop these things happening. So, I just wondered whether you've got any concerns at the moment... any ideas of barriers within the Business School that are stopping client relationships being developed more effectively... or this key account management more effectively?**

A: Yes. There's one word beginning with 'r'... resources. That stops it developing... you know... in terms of... you just don't have enough... I mean, if I wanted to develop more, I don't have enough hours in the day. So, that's a time resource... and, if you wanted to look at other things, you might not have the admin resource to do it and so on... I mean, just as a simple thing, if we wanted to expand [XXXX]... I mean, assuming we had students... we'd have to go out and find the companies. I, personally, don't have time to go out and find the companies because of what I'm running at the moment. And, I mean... I'm sure there's a lot more we could do with our existing clients... you know... but... you know... we don't have the time to do it because... you know... we are quite thin on the ground.

**GH: OK. If I can just show you card 18 then... here are a few barriers that are suggested to get in the way of key account management being developed effectively. I just wonder whether some of these are relevant to...?**

A: Appropriate?

**GH: Mmm.**

A: Lack of appropriate corporate culture? In the past, that could have been a barrier... I think that's been a barrier... I mean, the reputation of the CMD department was always a very much them and us but... unless you fit into the corporate culture then... you know... you didn't get a look-in. I think it was there... I think a barrier was they didn't recognise that a lot of people within the Business School could actually fit into it. So, they were creating their own barrier that actually wasn't there. You know... they were saying... well, you know... we're here and we're the corporate lot and nobody else can do it. But, I do think that, within the Business School, there is a bit of a barrier anyway... and that is the recognition that corporate clients need a slightly different service... and people that are used to dealing with undergraduates won't necessarily be... I won't say able... but, they're not going to be the best people, sometimes, to deliver to the corporate. So, there is a bit of a barrier about the corporate culture. And, in the past, there's been a lack of a co-ordinated or planned approach. I don't think there's been a lack of senior management commitment. That's always been there. I think we have actually been reactive and not proactive. I think we've not actually gone out and looked for business... it seemed to come to us. Possibly a lack of a 'champion' to improve the profile... and, sort of, what is the key account manager role? Inadequate financial rewards? Staff turnover and bureaucracy? So, yes... I think staff turnover has been an issue in the past year, hasn't it? Bureaucracy? To a certain extent... but, you can't do sometimes what the client wants. I think [XXXX] will be able to give you examples of that where... you know... the client wants you to deliver something but... you know... you can't do it. But, I don't think it's a major issue. So, yes, I think... you know... that there are quite a few barriers there... and I don't think the senior management one is a barrier. I

don't think the lack of a 'champion' is a significant barrier... and I don't think confusing the appointment with doing it is a significant barrier. Bureaucracy has been a bit... I think the others ones have all... have all been barriers.

**GH: It sounds as if you have a 'champion' already in [XXXX]... a key account manager/management 'champion' by the sounds of it?**

A: Yes, I think we have. Mmm.

**GH: OK. I was interested to see... or hear you talk about 'no time'. Just, finally, on card 19, that's one of the issues that crops up there... the fact that you haven't got enough time to build relationships... and, these are just additional fears or concerns expressed by some key account managers. So, I just wonder how closely you would associate with some of these thoughts?**

A: Lack of trust in senior managers? Definitely not being given enough time... balancing managing accounts with other responsibilities in terms of, as I say, your academic responsibilities. I don't think the relationship with customers becoming closer and stronger than internal ones is a problem. Telling clients they are key accounts? I don't think that's a problem.

**GH: Do you not think that if you give them this view that they're important, they might... might cause problems to you ultimately?**

A: A bit of blackmail?

**GH: Yes, possibly.**

A: Yes. I don't know, really. I don't think they would ever think of that...

**GH: No experience of that situation in the Business School?**

A: No. [XXXX] are important to us, and if they were to turn round and not support [XXXX], we'd be left in a terrible mess... and, I'm not sure, I mean, whether they actually recognise that or not. I think they probably do recognise that but also... you know... we are also very important to them. I mean, we are now supplying them with their main talent stream, so they don't have graduate programmes. So... you know... if we didn't deliver the students. So, it's an interesting... So, I don't think that would... lack of status within this company... presumably within the Business School? A little bit of a concern, I think... and, so, yes... there's quite few on there. I don't think lack of trust in senior managers is a problem. And, I don't think lack of trust in client contacts is a problem. Occasionally... I think one of the problems that's not on here that we have is... I mean, it's speed...

**GH: Right. Speed of response?**

A: Well, on both sides actually... you know... the fact is... you know... that things take so long in companies. I mean, the thing that takes a long time in a company is the decision as to whether or not to go with a course or not. But, then when they do, everything has to be done really quickly by us. So... you know... the speed. So, a

concern would be, if you're relying on a company... a new client, for example, to come up with business this year... that they just take so long to decide. So... you know... I mean... it's... it's not enough time to... it's not the one about time to build relationships, it's decision making time that takes a long time. And, I think in our... I think from our side as well, sometimes, it takes too long. So, yes... I think both sides suffer from that.

**GH: Well, in terms of speed, I think it's about time now to draw the conversation to a close. Thank you very much for all your input.**

A: Was that alright?

**GH: Yes. Thank you.**

# **Appendix 5**

## **Interview 2 transcript**

## DBA Interview 2

**GH: Right. Thanks for coming to talk to me today about key account management... and we'll explore various aspects of your role as we go through the interview. Well, I suppose a good place to start would be just to get from you some sense of the corporate clients that you actually deal with at the moment and the kind of involvement that is?**

B: I'm Programme Leader for the [XXXX] suite of programmes and I am Programme Leader for [XXXX]. Saying that, though, I have a much wider business development, client management, quality and product management role... not only for corporate business but increasingly across the School. So, I tend to get involved in most of our clients... and, certainly, with any new clients that come on board... I don't know... what else do you want me to say?

**GH: No. That's fine to start with. It just gives me a lead in, if you like, and gives me some idea about the kind of clients you deal with. I hear you use the term 'client management'... is that a Business School term or your term for referring to business or corporate clients?**

B: I think, as far as corporate work is concerned, there has to be a clear definition between programme management and client management. Clearly, there is the aspect around the normal day-to-day programme management that you would expect for any programme... in terms of course report, module leaders' reports, teaching, assessments and all the normal routine stuff that any other programme manager would do in the Business School. In addition to that, you also have the client relationship... you have a relationship with the students that have their own perception that they are not, I suppose, routine NTU students. So, as a result of that, they expect a higher level of service... and then, of course, there is the client that is paying their bill and providing us with the business. And, so again, that has to be managed in a different way as well. And, they don't want to know about problems with individual assessments and stuff like that.

**GH: Sure. Just this concept of 'client management'... because the term that I come across normally is 'key account management'... and I appreciate that's just one way of referring to this process. Have you come across this term 'key account management'?**

B: I have, yes.

**GH: What do you understand by that term... 'key account management'?**

B: It's probably because I'm from a sales background before I came to the university... my background was sales... and key account management was dealing with those accounts that were the most lucrative and that demanded extra-special levels of service, I suppose. I suppose... thinking about the term in the context of our business... this same definition would apply. You know, they are...

**GH: Is it a term that's used in the Business School or not? So, it's 'client management' which is...?**



B: And that is only used by us in corporate business, I think. And, I think, when we are looking to appoint programme leaders for corporate programmes... you know, that is one of the key requirements. If I'm looking to pass on a programme to somebody else in the Business School, that is one of the key requirements, is that they need the client management skills that go with it.

**GH: OK. So, I've got a definition here to show you... this is on card number 1... a standard definition of key account management. If you can just have a quick look at that and see whether that fits in with the kind of job that you're doing... your colleagues are doing here in the Business School?**

B: Yes, I would say it does. Yes.

**GH: So, that would tend to summarise, really, what you're doing?**

B: I don't think it summarises the entirety of the job. It summarises and provides the additional aspect of managing a customer who buys educational services. That's the difference. I think there is a difference here in probably... the customer's expectations in that a) they like to be treated as a client but, at the same time, they still recognise that we are a university... we are a public service... and that, to maybe just some extent, we still have those public service institutional values that perhaps prevent us from acting as key account managers, as they might expect from their computer suppliers or... or whatever. So, I think it does... it does encapsulate it a little bit, but... but, there is a bit missing in terms of the fact that it's educational services... and part of that is managing educational services.

**GH: Thanks for that. We're talking about corporate clients... we're talking about client accounts or even key accounts... what would you say this term or this concept 'key account' means? Who is or what is a 'key account'?**

B: Who? I think, as far as our current clients are concerned, they are those clients that are... a) have been with us a long time and b) do regular business with us and c) maybe high profile clients that we would wish to publicise the fact that we deal with i.e. [XXXX]. And... you know... there are a lot of clients out there that may well do... provide more income to the School than [XXXX], but... I suppose from the reputation point of view and from selling... on-going selling of corporate education, the School - and the university, I think, as far as [XXXX] is concerned - likes to be affiliated with a company like that.

**GH: That leads in quite nicely to card number 2... because, if I show you a fairly typical definition of a 'key account'... it's not without its problems because it's looking at this business of strategic importance... so it begs the question: what is strategic importance? So, it's whether you do reflect on that from a Business School perspective... you mentioned one or two things already... but, how would you regard strategic importance in a key account or key client?**

B: Yes, well, again... just to emphasise that point with [XXXX], I think... I think there are two aspects: one is around supporting the type of business that we want to nurture and develop, and then there is this issue around brands, I suppose, and our reputation... and raising our stakes as a business school that provides education to

big, blue chip companies... and, I suppose that is why [XXXX], I suppose, is of strategic importance because of the types of companies that actually buy into that programme.

**GH: So, it's not just a quantitative thing... there are qualitative factors there that are taken into account?**

B: No. No... No. I think it's a reputation thing. I think it's... I think it's an aspiration of the Business School, I suppose, to be a provider of education to these sorts of companies that may, normally, I suppose... send their business to Warwicks, Cranfield and Ashridge and those sorts of places. So, I think... you know... there are certain names... I can only think of [XXXX]... as I say, you know, the amount of time and effort that went into that client and now they're probably not particularly lucrative, but we're still keen to keep that relationship alive...

**GH: It's having that name attached to the Business School?**

B: The kudos of working with [XXXX], yes, absolutely, yes.

**GH: Well, that's interesting because I've been able to identify a few key concepts, if you like, that are used in the literature to identify strategic importance, so I just wondered whether there are particular things on this list that you could say: yes, that's what happens at the Business School or, perhaps, some that don't?**

B: I think... traditionally... and, I'm probably going back... not counting the last eight months, I would suspect... before the last eight months, I don't think there was any... um... particular strategic direction as far as corporate business was concerned in terms of defining which client we wanted to do business with. If anybody came along, then most of the time... you know... we would try and develop that and the resulting business. I suppose now we are becoming a lot more strategically focused... mainly down to the fact of resources required, because the Business School has a short resource. I think it also comes back to this client management... as we don't have a lot of people that have those client management skills. You know, we do try every so often and we put somebody new on a programme but, invariably, we get poor feedback... the particular person hasn't managed it in the right way and, so... you know... we're back to square one again. Age of relationship? I think... I think, yes, that does count but, I think, increasingly so, it will still be attached to profitability and the sales volume. For instance, in the [XXXX], we've now been with them for nine years... not exceedingly lucrative, but they are constant. They are an accreditation, which means that they are tied in and there is less risk of them just buying into one programme and then moving on.

**GH: The last point there: subjective judgment of the key account manager... is that a criterion that's used here in the Business School? Do you just decide instinctively whether something is a good relationship to pursue?**

B: Er... I would say, no... now. Maybe it was... previously... where there was a lot more autonomy as far as the client managers were concerned. Increasingly, we are taking more control of the accounts... and particularly my role is more around

evaluating current clients and relationships. So, I would say: yes, it was but... not now.

**GH: OK. So, it sounds like there is a move to take a more strategic approach to building relationships with corporate clients?**

B: Yes... and we have to... because of the resource base we have in the School and the cost base that we're now working.

**GH: So, on a scale of 1 to 10... if 1 was actually having no system at all... or no structure at all... and 10 was having a real excellent structure... what figure would you give the Business School, at the moment, in terms of its strategic approach?**

B: I would say probably 6, but increasingly... and I think... you know... that will get better as we... as we get hold of accounts more and we are... and, I suppose, there is less autonomy for people to go out and do just what they want. I suppose, before... it goes back to your other point... it was not just subjective judgment by key account manager, but subjective judgment of other academics in the School. He'll have a personal interest in things... and they think that they should just go out and be allowed to pursue it. And, I think now... because of the financial grip and the resource viability that now we are taking a lot more interest in what people are doing and things are being... turned round.

**GH: So, it sounds like one or two techniques and tools are being used in the strategic approach. I just wonder whether you'd look at card number 4 there because those are again some issues that occur in the literature... to suggest that an organisation is taking a strategic approach to key account management. So, I just wonder whether some of those things are currently being used or maybe not... as the case may be?**

B: I think all of them are... all of these points that you have on here are currently built into the plan for corporate business. I don't think any of them are... fully up and running... maybe it has senior management support, but I think the implementation of these is slowly happening. But, again, that comes down to Business School resources and...

**GH: What about the key account manager's status within the organisation? Is it reckoned to be an important job or... or not?**

B: Mmm... no, because I think there is a misunderstanding of what key account management is, and I think it's only a handful of us that would actually describe it as that role... and there lies the inherent problem in terms of customer development is that most people that run corporate programmes are running them as programme leaders, not as client managers... not key account managers.

**GH: Right. Right. So, academics versus key account managers?**

B: Absolutely. And... and, we're not saying that academics haven't got the account management skills... what we're saying is that some of them probably have, but

choose not to have them... or choose not to want them. They don't see it as their job in terms of... key account management in terms of developing the client and business development.

**GH: Right. So, status is developing. Responsibility and authority? Is that something going with the position?**

B: Er... not at the moment, no... only in terms of programme manager or programme leader in terms of the usual academic responsibilities allowance. But, I think, again... again, it's one of the inherent problems is around this... attempt to manage corporate programmes on the same model that we manage normal programmes on... and there is a key difference.

**GH: OK. If I can just move on to card 5 now, because I'm trying to get some idea about the structure in place for managing relationships in this kind of environment... and there's a kind of continuum that the literature offers from no identifiable system of key account management almost, if you think, right through to a kind of national account division... which is a kind of separate, fully self-standing and self-supporting unit. So, on that continuum, where would you put the Business School at the moment?**

B: Er... part-time system.

**GH: So, key account managers have other jobs as well? So, the academic job plus key account management...**

B: They are not key account managers. They're just programme leaders of corporate programmes... that involves the client. So, you wouldn't... I don't think anybody would define them as key account managers. Maybe [XXXX] would. Maybe I would. But, that's only in terms of our intentions to where it should be.

**GH: Right. So, you're saying that, although at the moment, it's a part-time system that is identified... in the fullness of time, there could be a move to possibly a full-time system operating?**

B: Yes... and, I think, in terms of being able to maximise those clients... it is a different role in terms of that key account management and being able to move that account on... but, unfortunately, it needs... maybe not unfortunately, but it does need to have somebody with an academic background to be able to do that because, again, we're coming back to educational programmes that people need to understand in terms of how they work and how they operate.

**GH: OK, good. Well, one more thing on structure then before we leave it and move on to something else. I've got a number of slides just to... to show you here. These come from MacDonald and they identify, again, some different structures... (explanation follows of cards 6-10)... So, looking at that continuum there... where would you say the Business School is at the moment?**

B: Depends on the client... for certain ones, at the moment, we are moving towards this model (card 9)...

**GH: So, the integrative model?**

B: Yes... where someone would have an overview of a bunch of clients... but the relationship will operate... depending on what the query is...

**GH: Would those clients be those we've had a relationship with for a period of time or...?**

B: Yes. Yes, but... and they are clients that have... have problems... so, that would be the move for them. In terms of the [XXXX], that is more reflected by this integrated model... and that's my role with the [XXXX], but that is a very different programme in terms of accreditation. They have their own qualifications team... we've worked with them for nine years and they know a lot about how the programmes should operate in terms of our QA, in terms of assessment and all of those sorts of things. So, my role is more of a... programme director role in terms of managing that relationship, overseeing the whole lot and making sure...

**GH: But both organisations actually very much operate together in developing that programme?**

B: Absolutely. And, we have to because it's our award... but they run it, they deliver it... but it has to be on our terms. But, that is a very efficient system...

**GH: Right. OK. Any other examples of these types of relationship in evidence?**

B: No. Most of them are then probably this... the exploratory one in terms of early relationships... er... I think, with [XXXX], we're looking to move towards this... the co-operative one... but, the majority of others will be based around this. But it does... as I say, it does depend on the product that they're buying. If they're buying a... off-the-shelf... postgrad [XXXX], that we do all the delivery, we do all the assessment, then it's very much this. But, that's it. If we're looking at accreditation, and where they are doing a lot of the delivery, then you're looking more towards these...

**GH: I'm just interested to see that the Business School is operating different kinds of relationship with different clients, so it very much tailors the key account management approach to specific clients...**

B: I think it depends on the size of the organisation... you know, where you've got [XXXX], you've got a lot of different departments... got a lot of people that have... some attachment to the programme... so, in which case, you know, we're dealing with quite a few people. So, it doesn't... it's not a simplified structure. As I say... the [XXXX]... that is just down to the nature of the programme... and how that programme actually operates.

**GH: Right. Let's move on from structural matters then and focus on the key account manager themselves. First of all, I'm interested in what you think the role of the key account manager is? What is the role... or perhaps the multiple roles that the key account manager incorporates?**

B: Er... again, I think it depends on the client... I think, if you look at the existing... the existing model, the role of that person is to a) be the programme leader... deal with all the routine stuff around programme management, programme leadership... b) is to be the key point of contact for the client, given any issues, problems, questions... and, thirdly, is to be a business development point. You know... if that client has any other needs then, initially, it would be that person that would go in and do that...

**GH: So, we're talking about a multiple role here really? There's not one single, identifiable role?**

B: No.

**GH: OK. Well, if I can just refer you to card 11 now... there are some other roles that have been identified for the key account manager... I just wonder whether you think those are relevant to Nottingham Business School... or not?**

B: Er... yes. I'd say all of them are. Your biggest... as I say, your biggest problem is, is that currently... the pool from which we recruit corporate account managers is an academic pool. And, mostly... they want to perform an academic role only. But, clearly, the requirement for programme leaders and programme management, client managers... in corporate... requires the ability to be able to do all of those two.

**GH: So, promoting the concept in your own organisation... is that something that you're aware of happening or should there be more promotion of key account management as a concept?**

B: I have had some talks with [XXXX] around staff development for people that are interested in getting more involved in corporate work and I've said... you know, I take it as a given that most people know how to run an academic programme. That's fine. But, in addition to that, we want them to know about how to manage clients, the concept of customer service... the concept that you are not just dealing with students and what you say goes... you are actually dealing with clients and their students, that are corporate people... quite often senior people within organisations that demand and expect a slightly different service to what you would perhaps give your undergrads.

**GH: You say now [XXXX]'s role perhaps... should it be the role of the key account manager to... you know... to promote the concept themselves?**

B: Er... they can't promote it themselves if they've not got it... and the majority of the people that we have aren't aware... that they have it. I think... I think it's purely by luck that we have people that are happy to get more involved in that and recognise that a separate skill set is needed. But, we don't actually go out and physically recruit because the problem is we can't... we don't want to put anybody that isn't an academic in charge of a programme, because they need to be an academic too. So... you know... it's quite a challenge finding somebody that can do both of that. The only reason it came up in conversation with [XXXX] was because I'm on [XXXX] and he's being asking for ideas about staff development. So, that's the only reason it's come up. You know... you can tell them about stuff until your blue in the face, but... you know... give them something else. We need more people in corporate work, but we need the right people...

**GH: But, you're promoting the concept of key account management to [XXXX]?**

B: Absolutely... through his responsibility to provide staff development. So, not for him to go out and do the staff development, just publicizing what we need...

**GH: OK. So, we've got some idea about the multiple roles of the key account manager. What about the skills and qualities that you think that the key account manager needs to possess... because you've got this problem of academics having to do this... this job... so, they need some skills and qualities?**

B: Most of them probably have the skills and qualities, it's the desire, enthusiasm and motivation to be involved in corporate work... and that is the key... the key driver, I think. You know, I'm... I would suspect a lot of people out there - a lot of the academics - do have in them but, quite frankly, some of them aren't interested: 'I've been employed as an academic, that's what I want to do. I don't want to be involved in corporate work. I don't want to be schmoozing around clients, taking them out to dinner and that sort of stuff. I don't... I don't want to do that.' And, that's fine...

**GH: If they did want to do it, what skills and qualities would you like to see in these people?**

B: People that are quite enthusiasm... that have... enthusiastic, should I say... people that have... are externally focused... that recognise that there are different types of business out there and not just ours here... that have some concept of customer service and... and that accept that... you know... that they are required to act and behave in slightly different ways and... you know... be at that client's beck and call, to a certain extent, I suppose. They need to know how to price programmes. They need to know the rest of our corporate provision and be knowledgeable about corporate work... and be able to go out there and confidently sell programmes, I suppose... and negotiate programmes.

**GH: Well, let's have a look at a few points here on card number 12... because these are some issues that have been raised. So, if you'd like to cast your eye down the list and see whether you agree with these things and... or not, as the case may be. Do you think these are important skills and qualities that a key account manager must possess?**

B: Absolutely. I suppose... I suppose the only one I might question was 'high level management skills'. But, again, that would be dependent on the client. Talking [XXXX]... yes. If you're talking [XXXX]... somebody like that... probably not.

**GH: So, you're saying that bigger corporate clients probably would like to see key account managers coming from a... a senior management background to give them that confidence?**

B: Yes. I think... well, not necessarily the confidence, but I think also the... I suppose it would... it conveys some sort of commitment in terms of the size of [XXXX] and... and the potential, I suppose, to do a lot more business within that organisation. So... yes, a difficult one that, I think... I suppose it depends on how you're defining high level management?

**GH: Er... I think it's anybody coming from a management background.**

B: I wouldn't say it's essential, no...

**GH: OK, That's fine.**

B: ...because they expect you to know about education.

**GH: Right. OK. Integrity?**

B: Er, yes. Confidence? Yes. Selling skills is a difficult one... er... I think one of the tricky things about education is, is that it is difficult to sell. It's not like buying tins of beans. It's a very intangible, very difficult thing to define. I think... perhaps what it's more about is being able to... listen to the client and be able to piece together... well, maybe do training needs analysis... and that sort of thing, because it's not... I don't think it's selling per se... I think... well, I think it comes through negotiation, it comes through persuasion, it comes through integrity, it comes through... a high degree of knowledge and understanding about education and how education works. So, I don't think selling is...

**GH: Not as important as...?**

B: Not for key account management. I think, if you're looking for a business development person to go out there and sell... and stand on a stand, then it's slightly different.

**GH: That's fine. You're touching on this business of 'knowledge' now... and, on top of all these skills and qualities, key account managers need knowledge of certain things... if you can just clarify what kind of knowledge you think the key account manager should have?**

B: Well, I think they need more knowledge about generally what we do, not just about the programme that they're actually running because, if you think again about a big organisation like [XXXX], like [XXXX], like [XXXX], [XXXX]... they are huge entities that have a very wide variety of training and education needs. So, I think the person whoever is managing that account needs to be able to know what else we can offer... as opposed to just knowing about their programme. I think, increasingly, we are... being asked for bespoke awards and accreditation. So, I think they need to know a little bit about how that works... and, if that's possible... I'm not saying they should know the ins and outs of that, but they need to know how to then actually progress the enquiry... and that's about as much as I think we could ask them to do, because we don't expect everybody to be an expert on everything, but we need them to know where to go and find the information.

**GH: Right. Well, have a look at card 13 then and comment on the kind of knowledge that... is being shown here and see whether these are pre-requisites for a key account manager doing an effective job?**



B: Er... all of the first ones, all of the knowledge of our company, our School. Knowledge of the customers? Er... are you talking about knowledge of the customers once the account is established or from... new?

**GH: I think it's knowledge of the customer's business, really... just... just...**

B: No, but from a new client or from an existing client?

**GH: I think it doesn't matter... it's either.**

B: Well, I think from a new business, I don't... I don't think you could be expected to know all of that. And, that would be fair...

**GH: And, that's something which would develop as part of the relationship...**

B: But, as a key account manager, I would expect that person to be developing all of that so that they can understand the client's business and can actually be in a position to offer new products and services that can ultimately lead to...

**GH: So, this business about understanding the customer, I think, goes back to what you were saying about some of the customers perhaps operating integrated key account management approaches with them... so, there's that closer relationship and much more knowledge... instinctive knowledge about how the other organisation's performing. So, I think that's what that really is driving at there.**

B: Yes, and I would agree with it in that respect... but, if you're talking about for a brand new client... no, I wouldn't expect him to share.

**GH: So, it's much more important to get the knowledge of your own company and its own products...?**

B: Yes, I'd expect them to maybe do all of that if they're maybe putting in tenders and proposals and stuff like that but... not at the start, no.

**GH: We've talked a lot about skills and qualities... a lot about knowledge... anything else you think a key account manager should ideally possess to do the job effectively? Any other qualities or... characteristics?**

B: Erm... I should say one, but... whether I'd commit it to tape is another question (laughs)... is around presentation and dress sense. You know, there are some academics that again you would not put in front of a corporate client... because they're not presentable enough. But, how we actually deal with that... again, in this sort of environment, is quite tricky. But, I think there are some ideals and there are some standards as far as how... how people should present themselves.

**GH: Well, the reason I ask is because, if you look at slide 14, there are some other requirements on top of all the other things we're expecting a key account manager to do. So, I just wonder whether you'd think these are OK or whether there might be some contentious issues there possibly?**

B: Educated to graduate level? Yes, definitely. Fully trained marketer? No... what's your reason for that?

**GH: Erm... I think the only reason is a marketer, in theory, should know about the customer... should have an innate sense of the customer's needs and everything relating to the customer.**

B: I don't think you need to be a fully trained marketer to do that. I think any... any programme manager with the potential to manage corporate programmes will instinctively recognise that customer service and the ability to manage customers and treat them as customers is enough. I wouldn't expect them to know much more than that because, I think, you're not here to do that... you are here to manage that programme and make sure that that client is happy and that they stay in business with us. That is their key... fundamental role, yes? General management experience? Maybe... I think, in terms of... I think management... I think programme management experience is probably critical because again I would not expect somebody to manage a corporate programme who doesn't know the academic system and who doesn't know everything that needs to be in place to run an academic programme. Broad experience of other business areas? Probably not essential. Age? Erm... what do you mean?

**GH: Well, I just wondered whether age might be something which confers status and authority possibly? Some corporate clients might prefer to deal with slightly older people?**

B: Not through my experience. I think it's more to do with being confident and being able to speak knowledgeably... and confidently about what we do... and know what they're doing. Previous key account management experience? Possibly... it would depend on the client again, I think. Length of time in previous account management roles?

**GH: On the basis of you being in the business... in that kind of job for maybe 10-15 years... that would convey a certain sense of authority and responsibility and status?**

B: In my experience, I don't think any client has ever asked me... or asked me about anybody else that I'm putting in charge of a corporate programme how long they've been doing the job. Experience of moving in senior management circles? Again, I think it depends on which relationship you're looking at... if you're looking at the independent/dependent one... and the integrated one possibly... I think it depends what the point of that is... is whether or not it's... it's to be able to publicise the client's programme and business with our senior managers?

**GH: Partly... it's again this confidence thing, I think... this air of authority that you exude if you're moving in senior management circles all the time.**

B: Possibly. I think... on a day-to-day basis probably not, though. I think, if we're looking at graduation ceremonies that we organize for clients and things like that, then we would pull people in to do that anyway. So, it's more the ability to be able to bring in senior management, I suppose, in that respect.

**GH: Right. Moving on to the final part of the interview then... I want to move towards remuneration, without giving any pounds and pennies away. I want to ask you some general questions about how you think key account managers are currently remunerated or rewarded here at the Business School. So, how are you rewarded?**

B: Well, I'm on a normal academic salary. Mine's an academic post. Erm... I'm also quality and product manager. I also 'key account' some of these but I don't get any responsibility allowances or anything like that. That is just as it is. None of the programme leaders in corporate work do get any responsibility allowances. They just get the hours... as anybody else would. So, they are not remunerated in any...

**GH: So, are you satisfied with the way in which you're remunerated... for the job that you're doing?**

B: Erm... personally, I am... but mine is perhaps a slightly different case in terms of additional responsibilities that I have taken on since people have left... but, I know there is a bit of... erm... upset, I suppose... or disgruntledness, I suppose, in certain circles. I think the issue is... I think the point is that people are not... are not remunerated for client management. We are paid in the same ways as to programme lead any other academic programme. So, in which case, why would people actually think about developing that account or going beyond the normal programme leader's role?

**GH: I think it's an interesting point you make. So, if you were to really support this key account management concept in the Business School, how would you see the pay package or the remuneration package change?**

B: Maybe there needs to be some annual PRP or annual bonus based on the turnover of the unit... or something like that... or maybe there could be an individual one. The problem is... is because people are employed on an academic contract, business development is not built into that. So, they will do exactly what it says 'on their tin' and just do their programme management role... apart from the odd few that are quite motivated to do that.

**GH: OK. If I pass you card 16, it gives you some idea about ways in which key account managers could be rewarded, and I just wondered whether you think some of those would be relevant to your position in the future or some which might not be?**

B: I think... enhanced basic salary... it's a difficult one in terms of... because, by doing that, you're changing the roles. OK... you are... on one arm, you're saying that you're client manager... so, in which case, we're going to take you off an academic contract and put you on a professional managerial one, OK? On the other hand, if you're an academic, you're still on your academic contract, OK? But, an academic contract does not allow you to be paid any bonuses. If you go on professional and managerial... yes, you can... you do 37 hours a week, no flexibility and all the rest of it, but we can perhaps think about maybe adding in some bonuses. And therein lies the difficulty in that people inherently do not want to give up their academic contract.

**GH: So, you don't see that changing in the short- to medium-term perhaps?**

B: Not if we're going to carry on employing from the same pool. I think if, in terms of long-term, maybe as far as in-company programmes are concerned, maybe the role and the job description has to change so that we are employing people with business development and relationship development as part of their contract, in which case then... but the only problem with that is that they're coming in on a professional and managerial, which is not as well protected as an academic contract. But, anybody new coming in probably wouldn't have a problem with that.

**GH: OK. But, looking at card 16... looking at some of the more qualitative factors... would those be relevant to your current position or...?**

B: Mine? Here?

**GH: Mmm... things like promotion and status within the organisation?**

B: I suppose mine is a very... er... individual case and I don't think there's many... there's not many like mine. Mine's the only post in the university... and, as a result of the route that I've come, I suppose I have seen a lot of promotion... from business development to an SL to a PL and now this [XXXX]. So, I have seen quite... but I think that is by virtue of my knowledge and understanding that's been accumulated over the years. The niche position that I employ, or that I take on in terms of accreditation and those sorts of things... so, I suppose I've enjoyed that and with that has come enhanced salary and all the rest of it. But, there is still no bonuses and there is still no additional related financial incentives, so they're just lucky that I'm happy with what I've got. For me now, it's around my own personal development. I suppose I know as much as there is to know about corporate business in here but, for me, now... it's what do I do? I've finished [XXXX] and that was what was keeping me for the time being because I needed to finish that and get that under my belt. But, that has gone now... and now I suppose I'm looking and seeing what's going on around me... and, you know... I'm now in a position where... yes, OK, you could give some more and all the rest of it but, to be honest, I don't know whether or not any of that would make any difference to me... but, if you're talking about a normal programme leader, I would suspect all of them... maybe not involvement in the strategic planning, I don't know. Profit share? Bonus related? Yes, I'd say most of those but I think the key one that you're missing, as far as NBS is concerned, is car parking... (laughter)... but, which is critical from a client management perspective because we are expected to use our own cars. I spend a lot of time in and out of the car park, trying to get to places and all the rest of it... because we don't get company cars. So... you know... that is a key issue. And, I think, in terms of enhanced basic salaries, if you talk to a lot of people... if you talk to [XXXX], she'll say, give me a car parking space and I'll be happy for another... it's a simple as that, Gary. But, it is those hygiene factors possibly that might make a bigger difference... (laughter)...

**GH: Closely linked then to salary and remuneration is performance measurement. Are you currently measured on your performance every year? Or, is it something...**

B: Only through the normal PDR process. There are no key performance indicators... they are just objectives that I've put together...

**GH: Are you happy with that outcome? Would you want your performance to be measured properly?**

B: Well... it doesn't make any difference to me. I suppose I know that I do what I do... I do well. I think... people would let me know if it didn't... if it wasn't working.

**GH: So, how would you judge whether you were doing well or not? In particular, what specifically would indicate that you're doing well?**

B: For me, I suppose it's in terms of the amount of work that I'm getting through. Again, because of business development and changes in structure and the amount of people leaving and all the rest of that, you know, my workload has just gone, you know, straight up through the roof... and has continued to do so. I think, with [XXXX] coming in as an outsider... again, with little knowledge, you know, I end up taking on a lot of... a lot of the stuff there as well. So, I think for me, at the moment, in terms of reward it's around work-life balance. Yes, I want to do less than more...

**GH: If I can just show you card 17, with some suggestions about how performance could be measured in key account managers, would you think any of those would be relevant to the Business School...?**

B: Well, as far as corporate work is concerned, the top three most definitely. Supervision by senior managers? What do you mean by that?

**GH: Part of the annual appraisal.**

B: What... what do you mean? Those three?

**GH: When you reflect on the year that's gone and look at the things that you've been involved in and whether you've done them successfully...**

B: Well, we do that... we do that... yes, we do do that. Client satisfaction? Yes, we do that.

**GH: Is that something which is measured annually perhaps or regularly?**

B: No, no. Mind you, saying that we don't... we do it through the teaching elements of the programme. We don't actually write to clients at the end of each year and say: 'What did you think about [XXXX]? Has she done a good job, blah di blah di blah...'. I think it's more informal and it comes through clients when they come to events like graduation and stuff like that. Number of new accounts set up? Yes. Again, I think the problem you've got with a lot of these comes again back to the definition of the role. The way programme managers are and the way corporate business is set up at the moment, is that they are all academics. So, you wouldn't be able to do these because they are not part of the academic contract.

**GH: Just not suitable for an academic?**

B: No. If we move the contract, and people are employed on this hybrid contract, then there could be more of these in. But, at this moment... OK, you could give [XXXX] a target to set up five new clients this year... what would she say? Sorry. Go away. I'm, already up to my 1575... in fact, I'm already up to 1875. I don't care whether you want me to set up five accounts, two accounts or ten accounts... it's not going to happen, because I'm up to 1575... unless you're going to pay me over-contract and you go back into the normal argument.

**GH: Excellent. OK. Well, thanks for your thoughts on that. Just to round off now because... I just want to move on finally to the kind of barriers that might get in the way of key account management happening in this kind of context. So, can you see any barriers in the future that might stop the Business School introducing this concept in a more formalized way?**

B: Mainly because of the academic contract... it doesn't fit... it doesn't fit with the way corporate programmes have to be managed. Or, what you do is change the model whereby corporate programmes are just led by a programme leader and then there is an overall key account manager that manages a whole variety of clients, in which case, that person could then be changed onto a slightly different contract that would allow these indicators and... measures to actually be brought in and introduced into that... but, you can't change that academic contract. And, it just doesn't fit what we do.

**GH: If I ask you to look at card 18... one or two thoughts there from the literature about barriers that could stop key account management developing... do any of those chime with the Business School experience or possibly get in the way?**

B: I think... the corporate culture... there is around certain aspects of it, but only for those people that are employed in corporate work. I mean, you know... we've got all the ATLS... all the programmes have been assigned to ATLS at the moment, but... there is still a lack of buy-in to corporate programmes. Mainly because they're too busy doing everything else and have got problems resourcing their own existing programmes without having to think about corporate programmes. So, I think... even though there is a desire to implement the right corporate culture, there is a lot of tension around how that's going to be done... mainly from a resource perspective. I think there is senior management commitment to it... mostly. The planned approach? I mean, that is intended and it is planned but it's not... it's not been put into practice yet... and, again, mainly for a lot of the reasons I've already said around academic contracts and getting the right blend of person to do that role. Proactive approach? I think there is a proactive approach to it but again, as above, it's just not... not been put into practice. Key account management champion? I think [XXXX] because of the background is... to buy into that concept, but it's struggling with how we actually put it into practice... and the barriers that need to be overcome are bigger than her... and bigger than [XXXX]... and bigger than the university because generally they're down to the union... (laughter)... Inadequate financial reward? Yes, there probably is, I would say. I think, if you're looking for people to go out there and develop business then...

**GH: But, we're still stuck on the academic contract?**

B: Yes. You expect the rewards to be able to go with that... and they expect cars and they expect car parking... they are bound to be... they're a business development person... I'm going to get a BMW or something like that, I'm going to get private medical insurance, I'm going to get a car, I'm going to get a nice phone... it's understanding the business that they want to be in, I think, and actually supporting the people to do the job that they want them to do in the right way. Staff turnover? That was the key problem in terms of we didn't have enough people but... erm... and, even now, we've employed a lot of sessionals and part-timers which again are not the answer. They cannot take on corporate work because they are not here. Bureaucracy? No, I don't think it's an issue.

**GH: Finally, then... just to round off the interview... have you got any personal concerns about key account management and its future? Any other concerns from a personal perspective?**

B: I think most of those that I've said were my own personal ones anyway. I suppose, with being so close to the business... I think the biggest concern is... the biggest challenge is that they've either got to go one way or the other... but, I think the biggest problem with that is the fact that the clients do expect an academic a lot of the time... even though they perhaps sometimes think: 'Ah, they're only an academic. They don't know our business blah di blah di blah...'. On the other hand, because we're a university, they actually have a bit of a fondness for an academic and expect an academic... do you know what I mean? Because, what I'm saying... they seem to be incongruent but, at the same time, you know, they do respect the fact that they are an academic and they are from the university. And that is the difference, I suppose, between them buying training and buying education... and, at the end of the day, we supply education, we don't supply training.

**GH: Right, card 19 then... just to finish with a few extra concerns perhaps that have been voiced in the literature... I just wonder whether any of those have some currency in the Business School?**

B: Yes. Lack of trust in senior managers, I suppose. You know... I think there are cases where people have been promised over-contract money for doing things in terms of clients and... things haven't been paid and things have taken for ever to get paid... Not being given enough time? No, probably not. Having to manage too much? Yes, it's an issue... and again tied to the academic contract. Lack of status? Potentially, because I think the fact is that, you know, people do take on extras but... they don't get thought of any better for doing that.

**GH: They're never thought of as being a key account manager either?**

B: No absolutely... not treated any differently... it's just: 'Well, thanks for doing it.' And, that's the game... Yes, poorly defined job description... but again linked to an academic contract. Yes. Relationship with the customer being closer and stronger? Yes, that could be an issue and I think that is probably... supports the argument for having, or for retaining, normal programme leaders but putting a client manager above the programme leader to ensure that that objectivity remains, because it sometimes... you know, we have had issues in the past where prices haven't been put up for years because the programme leader gets on very well with that client...

**GH: So, divided loyalties, really?**

B: Yes: 'I don't really want to put the price up: they're happy, I'm very happy,' and, on it goes... So, there have been issues there which, with a key account manager overseeing it, and not being so involved on a day-to-day process, probably would alleviate some of those issues. Telling clients that they are key accounts? I don't think anybody uses that term. It's not a term that is used very often.

**GH: But, would it be a problem perhaps to identify the fact that they are an important client? And, would that give them any extra...?**

B: I think if you tell them... I don't think... I don't think they should be told. I think they should just be treated... it's not like I'm telling them that: 'You're a very key account!' They know that they are a key account by the way that I deal with them... and the fact that they have my personal mobile. Again, we don't have mobile phones but we are expected to be contactable. So, I think it's the relationship that you develop with that client that actually provides the perception... that gives them the perception that they are a key account.

**GH: Good. Well, that comes to the end of the interview, thankfully. So, thanks very much for agreeing to do that for me.**



# **Appendix 6**

## **Interview 3 transcript**

### DBA Interview 3

**GH: Well, I suppose a good place to start, [XXXX], would be to get you to tell me a bit about the corporate clients you deal with...**

C: The ones I currently deal with?

**GH: Yes.**

C: I've got [XXXX]... I've got a [XXXX] and a [XXXX]... so [XXXX] and [XXXX]. I've got a consortium [XXXX]... I'll have another consortium [XXXX] at the end of this month. I look after [XXXX]. They've got a [XXXX] at the moment, then they have a [XXXX] and an [XXXX]. And I look after [XXXX], may I be... anyway... we've just had some workshops... we provide workshops for them. So, they're not certificated. And, then, I look after [XXXX]. So, they have a [XXXX], a [XXXX], a [XXXX] and then the final year... that is a [XXXX].

**GH: So, some challenging corporate clients, by the sounds of it?**

C: (laughter)... they all have their own... I mean, they're all very different and they all have, if you like, different cultures really, so...

**GH: OK. So, moving on from that... just to think about these corporate clients... I mean, does the Business School have a particular way of referring to these corporate clients? Does it have a particular structure in place for dealing with these corporate clients?**

C: I mean, we just call them corporate clients. In terms of how... in terms of the structure that we've got... our department used to be fourteen people, it's four now! So, what used to happen is we all used to have, you know, one or two... and, of course, as people have dropped off the edge and gone to higher and better things, the four that are left just get more and more and more. So, the structure basically is just to keep the whole thing in the air... to keep it all going basically. I mean... in as much as there's a structure, there's [XXXX], who's [XXXX]... and then there's [XXXX] who looks after... she looks after a lot of validations, but she also looks after [XXXX]. [XXXX] looks after [XXXX]. [XXXX] looks after [XXXX] and [XXXX] and [XXXX]. Then, I look after that lot... So, if any other corporate clients came along, they would just be divvied up to whoever... hadn't sunk beneath the waves, basically. There isn't a logic to how it works. There's no point pretending there is a logic, even though management might say there is... there isn't. It's like: 'Who can do it?'

**GH: OK. We can explore some of those issues later on, that's fine. I'm interested in this term 'key account' and 'key account management'. Are those terms that are used in the Business School?**

C: The terms that [XXXX] thinks are used, because she comes from the commercial sector... and, I think, [XXXX] thinks are used... but, we don't use them. So, we will say things like: 'My corporate client is [XXXX] and I'm their programme leader.'

Whereas they would say... And we go: 'No, no, no. It's not like that, [XXXX]. We are not...' To some extent, we would act as a first contact. So, if [XXXX] wanted to do an [XXXX] they would come to me. If they wanted to do something else... I can't think who does do different things... [XXXX] also work with [XXXX]... but I've got no idea what [XXXX] does... so, if they wanted something in the direction of ??? they would go to [XXXX]. And, if they wanted something that... a [XXXX], [XXXX] or [XXXX] they would come to me. But I don't think they think we're key account managers... they just think we're programme leaders.

**GH: Right. OK. Is that a problem because we're essentially academic staff perhaps as opposed to out and out business people?**

C: Well, I think the thing is... I would think that the [XXXX] and the [XXXX] of this world think that key account managers go and sell but, of course, we didn't self-select to sell. So, we don't acknowledge that that's what we do. We acknowledge that if the client wants something else we will help them, but we don't see it as our job to go in there and say: 'Well, what about this and what about that and what about the other?' You see, there's a contradiction in the way people see what we do. And they start to talk about something like... I think the latest buzzword is... something like 'educational intervention' or some gobbledygook. What on God's earth are you talking about? I don't know what it is, do you?

**GH: Yes. I noticed that in the latest strategy document.**

C: Perleeze... we don't know what it means. And they don't know what it means either but they use it because it's a 'buzzy' word. And, because I think what they think is that we shouldn't be selling courses, we should be selling solutions. And, not only that... they're the people who think that we should be offering solutions but they're the people who are 'sell, sell, sell'. But, if you see them with a client, they are always, but always trying to push things down the client's throat, but maybe clients will just walk away...

**GH: I can detect some tension here... some conflict, possibly?**

C: Well, there is. I don't think it's conflict, I mean. I just think it's a different... they are different ways of doing things.

**GH: Different mindsets?**

C: That's right. Yes. So, they see themselves as salespeople... not that they've brought in a sale yet, but there you go.

**GH: You obviously know about this concept of key account management, because you look like you know it. So, to you, what is key account management? Could you define it for me?**

C: Well, I mean I don't... I'm not sure that the term has a place in a university actually... I don't really because I think the term sits within a sales mindset... and I'm not sure that we have that mindset. So, I think if you were a customer... I've worked with [XXXX] and people like that, they have key account managers. So, for them, a

key account manager would look after major clients. So, you might have somebody in [XXXX], as a key account manager, who would look after the [XXXX] account or would look after the [XXXX] account or whatever... so, they would be the people that [XXXX] would come to first. So, that's why I think a key account manager is...

**GH: OK. Well, I've got a definition here, which is a fairly standard definition from the literature. So, if you'd like to have a look at that and see whether you think that would be a suitable explanation or...**

C: I would say... Yes, yes. Yes... yes.

**GH: So, no particular problems with that... I know it's not a revolutionary definition...**

C: No, it's not, no. I think one of the... one of the problems here is... what you might argue in terms of key account... if we went back to [XXXX] and, say, their key account manager is working with [XXXX]... well, [XXXX] has a never-ending demand... and their customers have a never-ending demand for [XXXX], don't they? It will never run out... whereas what we are providing, to some clients, does run out. So, eventually... like with [XXXX], you've trained so many people, you meet them coming backwards. So, our clients, I don't believe, have an unending relationship with a university. So, for instance, with [XXXX], we did fifteen [XXXX]... well, if you've got 24 people on 15 [XXXX], you've got hundreds of people with [XXXX] in [XXXX]... and there's nobody left to do a [XXXX] because they've all got one. You know... so, I mean... I think that is the difference. I think the other thing that happens... whether it happens with other things other than education is that, if you get a change in management in a... within a client... they immediately, in our experience, want to do something different. So, although the last person has been happy working with Nottingham Trent for however long, sometimes new people come in and say: 'Well, I've always worked with Leicester or whatever' and you think that's the way it is...

**GH: So, it is the biggest suppliers... perhaps the most important suppliers at a particular point in time?**

C: Yes, yes... although... you would argue that most of ours are equal size, actually, most of our clients. I would say yes. So, most of our clients will have one or two courses. I mean, you might look at the numbers and the finance, I'm not sure...

**GH: OK. That's fine. So, how does the Business School go about identifying these key accounts... these strategically important customers?**

C: (laughter)... they don't, because all you've got is... if you say: 'How many clients have we got?' ... this is in the Centre for Management Development... I mean, I don't think I can speak for the whole of the Business School... you know, you might say: 'Well, we've got ten clients and all of them are key', because all of them are giving you one or two courses. So, none of them are more important than the others. As to how we get clients, that's a different thing. We get clients by them coming to us invariably. Now, [XXXX] and her ilk think that it should be the other way round. They think you can cold call and sell courses... or interventions or solutions or

whatever... but, my experience... I've only been here eight years... mind you, I have run 40 postgraduate courses in eight years, with 700 students going through, so I've got a bit of experience!

**GH: I'm interested to talk about that because this business about 'key account', I think, raises some interesting issues. I mean, we obviously are aware they are important customers... we'd like to be doing business with them, but it begs the question how do you determine whether they are strategically important... I think a number of criteria which might be used perhaps to judge their strategic importance to the Business School?**

C: Well... I think, knowing about, or having a view on strategic importance... it's a luxury. And, sometimes, you don't have that luxury... sometimes you just need to survive. And, so it doesn't matter how strategically anything they are... you need the clients! So, you know, there might be clients, that you think, like [XXXX]... I wouldn't touch them with a barge pole, if it was left to me... they're horrendous to work with... but, if you have an awful lot of clients, you could say to some of them: 'I don't think so.' But, we don't have the luxury of making strategic decisions about who we work with, I don't believe... but they might think differently. But, we will take whatever we can get...

**GH: If I can show you card 3 then... from the literature, I've discerned a number of criteria that might be relevant to organisations in selecting strategically important customers. I just wondered whether any of those might be relevant to the Business School or currently used by the Business School?**

C: You mean, if we were in the position of being able to select between rather than having to take everybody that turns up?

**GH: Yes.**

C: I think they would probably say... they would say attractiveness of links with the customer, but underlying it actually is the profitability.

**GH: Right, because you talk about clients like [XXXX] and [XXXX]... they would seem to be prestigious clients to be dealing with?**

C: They seem to be prestigious but... and the perception is that they are... but, with [XXXX], we run 2 two-day modules with them... well, that's nothing! And, with [XXXX], we've got 5 students on a [XXXX]. It is nothing... but people talk up...

**GH: The perception is that we're dealing with...**

C: The perception is that we're huge, big partners in [XXXX]... well, what five students on one [XXXX]... I don't think so! It's nothing, is it? But, it's the perception that people have here... what is that all about?

**GH: So, the attractiveness might be a criterion that you could use but you think, underlying everything, it's profitability then?**

C: Yes, because we've got to get 50%... and, I mean, the argument is that with big clients they pay the bucks anyway... we tend not to get very, very small companies because they've never got enough people to put on a cohort, you know, by themselves... that's where the consortium people come in, but that's a bit like the open programme where we get ones and twos.

**GH: You notice, at the bottom of the sheet there, it says 'selective judgment of the key account manager'... obviously, that's not happening from what I can detect from you then... it's very much we'll take everybody that shows an interest in the programmes?**

C: Yes. I mean... I think, if you talk to [XXXX] or somebody like that, they might say, you know: 'We want to get more into the public sector because we've got people with those specialisms and expertise.' Well, that's fine... so, you've got the public sector and then everybody else... and we'll go for the public sector and everybody else. I'm not sure...

**GH: Right. So, there could be more of that in the future then possibly?**

C: Yes, I think so. Yes. But, I mean... I think the 'in' to get into the public sector will be through the finance people here like [XXXX] and so on...

**GH: So, let's try and consolidate all this and talk about whether the Business School does take a strategic approach to its corporate clients. On a scale of 1-10 where, say, 1 is 'disorganised' or 'totally ad hoc' and 10 is 'planned' or 'managed', where would you put the Business School on that scale then of 1-10?**

C: I'd go for 1 or below 1 actually... because it's a scattergun approach. I actually don't believe there is anything wrong with it but people think you should have a strategy, don't they? They think it's like, if you haven't got a strategy you're going out naked... but, I think this is a wrong thing. I don't see why you have to have a strategy. It's because it makes people feel as if they're in control... and they feel like, if they're in control then they're in control of their own destiny.

**GH: So, would a more planned, strategic approach actually favour a bigger department, if you like... a bigger group of key account managers actually doing a key account management job?**

C: I don't think so, because I don't think the strategy actually... I don't think just because you've got a strategic plan it means everything gets delivered. We've had [XXXX]... and [XXXX] came in [XXXX]... and [XXXX] has been here [XXXX]... and they have not brought in one single piece of new business... not one! So, you can talk all you like about strategic plans and having people in place and business development this and strategic that and the other... but that, in itself, doesn't bring in business. So, I don't see the point... I mean, people think if you've got a strategy then ergo you are clever and better and you know where you're going and all that... but it doesn't work like that because people come to us through word-of-mouth. And you never know how they've heard about you. So, you know, I get a student from a serious organised crime agency in London to do an [XXXX] because she has met [XXXX], who used to be in [XXXX]... and he used to be in charge of the fleet in the

[XXXX] and who subsequently worked for us... well, what strategy would deliver that?

**GH: Well, the scale of 1-10 is one way of looking at it. I suppose if I show you card 4... these are some other suggestions that could be used to identify whether a strategic approach is being taken. So, I just wonder whether you think any of those are relevant currently or actually could be relevant in the future?**

C: Right. Since we're not key account managers anyway, then you can't... we don't act as key account managers. So, what we do is... the only person who's proactive actually is [XXXX]. [XXXX] is really proactive... he will phone people up within a supply chain and say: 'Do you want to come on board with the course?' The rest of us, to be fair, wait until... because we're so busy... we wait until people get in touch with us and then we are very reactive and very responsive and all the rest of it.

**GH: Is that roughly because it's an academic job essentially... it's got all the teaching side of things and the preparation side of things to think about really?**

C: It's because we're so over-worked... because I am 1300 hours over contract. The full-time contract's only 1500. I haven't got time to be proactive. [XXXX]'s the same... because there's only four of us... and there used to be fourteen. And, so... I don't know how [XXXX] finds the time to do it but anyway... [XXXX] is probably more proactive than the rest of us put together...

**GH: I'm talking to [XXXX] on Wednesday, so I'll look forward to that...**

C: He will have a different view... So, we're not adequately resourced. But, one of the contradictions we have is that... we're supposed to have somebody in charge of commercial strategy and all that stuff ([XXXX]) and we're supposed to have [XXXX], who is supposed to be the key account manager... well, he doesn't do anything... and, we haven't got the time to do it. So, we just keep going... I suppose we're aligned with corporate goals in that, you know, we try and work with the great and the good. If we are key account managers, we have got senior management support... [XXXX] keeps saying how wonderful we are... nice to hear, isn't it? Customer portfolio analysis? Well, to some extent, it doesn't actually take a lot of analysis because we've only got a list of ten clients. But, I think what [XXXX] has started to deliver, give her her due... she's looked at all the overseas clients... if you asked her for the breakdown... have you talked to [XXXX]?

**GH: No, I'm talking to her on Wednesday.**

C: If you asked her for the breakdown, she'd give you a spreadsheet about how much money we get back... so, she does do that. The regular planning meetings? We don't... well, I don't hold them with customers... only inasmuch as we have course committee meetings.

**GH: But, there is a contact obviously during the course of the year?**

C: Yes, yes. We're always in contact with them. The key account manager has status? Perlease... I'm an SL.

**GH: Would it be something in the future to consider? Would it be important to the future?**

C: To be a key account manager?

**GH: To have status?**

C: I don't know... I think status comes from within, doesn't it, because what you don't do, or what you learn not to do at work, I believe, is you don't give authority to the people who don't deserve it, do you? So, it doesn't matter where you are in an order, you only give authority to those that you think earn it, don't you? So, I think people think I've got authority over them when I haven't... as I'm always saying 'please' and 'thank you'... 'You owe me a favour, don't you?' (laughter)... We've certainly got responsibility... we haven't got any authority. The only authority we have is in, I suppose... when we timetable courses. We will select who we know will deliver and then... well, this is how it's supposed to work: we're supposed to say to the long-suffering ATLS: 'I'm going to run these courses, can you resource them? What is happening?' And then they ignore it. So, in the end, you don't do it like that, which is how it's supposed to be done. In the end, you give them a timetable and you say: 'Can I ask these people to teach on my courses?' So, in that situation, you have... we choose who teaches on our courses... and, if people want to teach on corporate courses, then... they're going to have to go through us.

**GH: But, limited authority, by the sounds of it?**

C: Limited authority, for what it's worth (laughter)...

**GH: Right. Fine tuning, then... there are some ways of looking at structure for key account management in organisations and this is like a continuum where, on the one side, you've got no identifiable system at all... and then going through various stages to the other side, where you've got a really fully-integrated, self-standing national account division almost, in some of the big, blue chip, multinational organisations. So, on that scale, where would you currently see Nottingham Business School fitting?**

C: Well, we would probably be... corporate level system? Or between full-time and corporate level? And, the other thing is... what we do is... our jobs are integrated inasmuch as we are... the client contact. And, if you're calling that a 'key account manager' then, so be it... but, in addition, we then deliver our own courses, teach on other peoples' courses and organise an awful lot else besides, if you see what I mean?

**GH: OK. It seems there's some structure here, some system in place, whether you call it key account management or whatever?**

C: Yes. We know how it works.

**GH: OK. Let's build on that then and look at a number of cards here... I'll explain these as I go through... because it's another continuum... (explains next five cards)...**



C: We're definitely not that one...

**GH: Definitely not the 'integrated'?**

C: No... and, we're definitely not this one because... because none of our divisions or departments, or however you want to call them, operate in that way.

**GH: You haven't got that kind of close relationship then between divisions or departments?**

C: No. no. I mean, you can argue that our administrators talk directly to their administrators, but the administrators don't come through me. So, they talk to each other...

**GH: But, that would be on a 'need-to-know' basis possibly?**

C: Yes.

**GH: OK. If it's not that then... we'll move backwards.**

C: Well, the thing is... with this model here, where you're talking about the cooperative thing... where you're saying a key account manager here enables things... the only thing that we're doing is education, isn't it? So, there's only one thing that we're doing... and we're not doing it with lots of different people, if you see what I mean? We tend to work with the HR departments... and the HR departments then work with their departments. So, that's how it works.

**GH: So, possibly, it's not that then? It's possibly getting to that stage, in some senses, you're suggesting?**

C: Well, it is. I don't know if it ever... if it ever would... and I'll tell you why... because the HR people are usually the people with the budgets for training and development, so they're the people who will say to, like the [XXXX] division: 'You can put four people on this course' and to the [XXXX] people: 'You can put four people on the course'. It's unlikely for the [XXXX] division to come directly to us because they would naturally go through their central HR to organise it... I think that's how it would work.

**GH: OK. Fine. So, if it's not that then, are we talking about a basic relationship, where it just is the one-to-one relationship with the key contact in the corporate client?**

C: I would say... yes.

**GH: Is that a problem?**

C: No... no, I don't know why... no, I don't... I don't think it is a problem.

**GH: Works quite happily at the moment?**

C: Yes. Yes... I mean, what you might argue is somebody like, let's take [XXXX] who have got 17,000 people working for them... and, at the moment, they have one [XXXX] with us, but they'll keep... they will keep coming back, so they put... probably put about 25 on a year... then [XXXX] does something somewhere else with them... so he runs... I don't know what [XXXX] does... he runs some other course for them. So, out of 17,000 people, we might be training between us 50 a year... but, they're all middle managers... and then things get cascaded down.

**GH: But, it's not the key account manager doing the facilitation of that relationship... building that network, in that sense?**

C: No, we just have... we've just worked with them for years and we just operate the relationship as we think the client would like the relationship. So, some clients, we need to tell them this, that and the other... it's Monday today, and all that sort of stuff... and, other people, you just talk to them every now and again and it works. So...

**GH: Fine. That's good. That's the structural side of things. I think we can move on now to look at the individual doing this job of key account management. So, I just wonder what role you think this individual has... or multiple roles the individual has?**

C: Well... I mean, I think if you insist on calling us key account managers... we're not... we see ourselves as programme leaders. So, obviously, on academic contracts...

**GH: Your principal role is a programme leader?**

C: Yes... who happens to be the client contact. You will find very rarely that there's one client contact and then people running programmes below them, because there isn't the volume of work. So... so... I mean, our role is to see what the client wants and then deliver it... so, if sometimes they do just want a [XXXX]... with [XXXX], theirs is a bespoke [XXXX], it's written with the university and with them. With [XXXX], it was a big validation. With [XXXX], they just want these two day workshops...

**GH: Any other roles that you can see the... the role or roles of the key account manager?**

C: Well, what we do is, we... we listen to what the clients want and then we design and deliver programmes around what they want. Occasionally... occasionally, we might do what they might call 'intervention'... like with [XXXX]... I used to look after [XXXX]... with [XXXX], they wanted [XXXX], who they thought walked on water... it was hysterical... they wanted him to go in and do some work on 'change management' with their senior management but, actually, they went directly to [XXXX]. So, I haven't got a problem with that... yes, so he went and spent a day with them.

**GH: In terms of the role of the key account manager, this is what the literature says could be the role or the roles of the key account manager, so perhaps if you**

**look at those on card 11 and see whether you think any of those chime with what you're doing?**

C: Well... I mean, I think the argument would be that we should grow the accounts. Our argument is we weren't employed to grow accounts, thank you very much... we're employed to run programmes. And, the other thing is that... to some extent, if the client just wants a [XXXX], what else are you going to do? And, because we're actually not... we're not consultants... you might argue that we should act as consultants and then go in and see, you know, what they want... Coordination and tailoring of offering? That doesn't work because there isn't any coordination and tailoring to do because they only want one or two things at a time, I would say. [XXXX] has different relationships with his... he probably does a bit more of that than I do. I mean, we do facilitate multi-level and multi-functional exchange processes because... [XXXX] would come to me and they would say: 'We want people to come and work with our senior executive... I mean, in which case, I put them in touch with [XXXX], who has done something similar with [XXXX]. So, I mean... we do do that, when it's asked for. I don't know what an alliance manager is? I don't know what a knowledge manager is?

**GH: Well, an alliance manager is just managing the alliance between two organisations. It's actually acknowledged perhaps as an alliance between two organisations... and that manager has that position of managing that alliance.**

C: I don't think we have alliances. I think we're just...we're providers to them, I think... I mean, I think [XXXX] has more of an alliance with... or did... with [XXXX], you see, until they sold and then they get a new HR guy in. The existing HR person gets sidelined and you're back to where you were in the first place.

**GH: This knowledge manager concept is about managing all the knowledge that flows between the organisations...**

C: What sort of stupid idea is that? How can you do that? You can't... that is an impossibility. One person can't control... or be the funnel for all the knowledge, can they? Whoever wrote that?

**GH: Well, this is one of the theoretical approaches that could be adopted to key account management... and this is why I'm trying to find out more about this.**

C: I mean, the way knowledge moves between our organisations is through, obviously, the setting up of the programmes. But, the other way is in the delivery of the programmes themselves. So, the people who are teaching them are constantly getting flows of information about that organisation and by so and so...

**GH: So, you're not a knowledge manager in that sense, but you're taking advantage of information or knowledge that comes...?**

C: But, the only reason to do it is actually so that you enhance your teaching next time round... so that you can talk about...

**GH: The last point here ‘promoting key account management concept in your own organisation’... is that a part of the job you should have... to promote key account management?**

C: No, because I don’t believe that key account management exists in the university... and, so, I would never promote it.

**GH: But, if it were to exist, would it be something that you think would be the role of the key account manager to constantly reinforce it within the organisation?**

C: Not for me, it wouldn’t be... no. No... definitely.

**GH: But, it could be for some people?**

C: But, I don’t know for what purpose? Only for self-aggrandizement, isn’t it? I don’t know why you would do it...

**GH: An interesting problem for now... in terms of the skills and qualities then of these people like yourself, dealing with corporate clients, what skills and qualities do you think you should bring to bear on the job?**

C: I don’t know... I mean, I suppose you’ve just got to be... you have to be a good organiser and you have to be able to deal with uncertainty and you have to try not to flap and panic too much. I actually think you have to get on well with people because you are always asking for favours. You’re always saying to people: ‘Please can you teach on my course?’ And, you know as well as I do, that they can just look in an empty diary and go: ‘Busy!’ So... so, the skill... I suppose it’s a... the skill is in manipulating people for your own ends so that your damn courses run and you’ve got people standing in front of them.

**GH: At the end of the day, you know that you are going to be responsible for that programme, aren’t you... it’s got to run?**

C: I mean, I don’t actually think the skills are... I find the skills easy, probably because I’ve always run courses and I know how courses work... and I know about the complexities of things like timetabling and assessment and keeping everybody sweet... that’s what you have to do... and not get people jittery. And they’re the skills... I suppose the other skill is you manage expectation. You soon learn that you don’t say to people we’re going to deliver... you say, you know, these are the outcomes that we think we’re going to get and we work for it... so, I think they’re what skills there are.

**GH: Well, card 11 actually pulls together some of the qualities... card 12, sorry... some of the skills and qualities from the literature... and this is what key account managers could or should have.**

C: I have every one of these... You have to be able to work on your own initiative. You have... you have to have confidence actually. I don’t know about the selling skills... well, persuasion, we do but not a lot... Our commitment to the relationship? I

mean... [XXXX], at one point, said we ought to move round as programme leaders every now and again and we all went: 'Oh, no... I don't think so! I've got them where I want them'... (laughter)... because you have a long-lasting relationship with them... and I know how my clients work. I don't think: 'Oh, God. Here we go, [XXXX] from [XXXX] again!'

**GH: It almost becomes a kind of personal commitment then between the two of you?**

C: Yes. It is. Yes. But, the other thing is... I mean, I took over [XXXX] and I just said... because [XXXX] moved on to better things... and I said to [XXXX]: 'You shouldn't really put me with a [XXXX] because I think they're too stuffy and they're not my type of organisation... but, somebody had to do it. There was nobody else, so... I'm better with [XXXX] and [XXXX]... and people who come out of the leisure stable really.

**GH: OK. Fair enough. So, looking at the list there, you reckon everything there applies, but possibly not so much the selling skills?**

C: Yes.

**GH: OK. Interesting. Moving on from skills and qualities... talk about the knowledge that you ought to have in this position... knowledge of what? What do you need to be knowledgeable about, would you say?**

C: You have to be knowledgeable about what the Business School can offer... and so, somebody came to me... [XXXX], that's right... and they're interested in talent management... now, of course, I knew that [XXXX]... so, I was on the phone and she came and did a session on talent management when we launched their programme to the senior managers. So, what you have to do is... you have to understand how the Business School works and who can do what and where the specialisms are... so, if somebody comes... that's right, somebody was talking to [XXXX] the other day about... coaching... coaching managers and both of us looked at him and went: 'That ain't our forte! We are not in the coaching field.' You'd be hard pushed to find somebody here who could coach, really. And, so... it's knowing what we could...

**GH: Knowing your strengths and weaknesses, basically?**

C: Yes, that's right. So, you have to know who can deliver what... which, actually, I needed somebody who... an HR person... who was good at... I don't know, it's just gone! Anyway, I asked [XXXX] and he said: 'We haven't got anybody that does that.' And, I thought about it... he's not right there. So, I asked [XXXX] who happened to be next to me that day and she said: 'Oh. This is who you want.' So, sometimes it's not... it's knowing...

**GH: It's knowing people?**

C: That's right... and when people say: 'No, we don't do that,' you think: 'I'm sure somewhere somebody does that'. It is an understanding of how the Business School works... with the exception of economics... (laughter)...

**GH: Well. Moving to card 13 then... this again is some suggestion of key account manager knowledge. So, I wonder what you think of that and whether there are some additional points on there that ring true?**

C: You have to know all of these except that, don't forget, the business philosophy and mission... the only road to strategy when EQUIS was on the horizon... and that has been widely circulated or debated... we only got a copy to keep us quiet. Anyway, you need to know all of the top lot... and then you do need to know about the customers... well, to some extent you do. You can get away with knowing very little about a client actually... you can, but...

**GH: Would that be on the strength of the personal relationship perhaps?**

C: Yes, but what tends to happen is because you're talking to... because you're teaching the students, they tell you about the business environment... and the other thing is, you need to keep your eye open in the paper... so you need to know when mergers and acquisitions have happened... when [XXXX] were taken over by [XXXX]... so, you sort of need to know that. In terms of senior managers, obviously you need to know who the HR people are and you need to be able to bandy the Chief Exec's name around from time to time... to look as if you know what you're talking about.

**GH: Well, that's some idea about qualities and knowledge and things like that. Anything else do you think key account managers should have? Anything we haven't discussed yet on top... the icing on top of the cake... any additional pieces of qualification, if you like, for the job?**

C: Bizarrely, you have to have experience. I know that's a paradox because, what happens is, you go round the block once and you think: 'Don't do it that way!' And, so, there are things that you wouldn't do, things like timetabling people on an Easter Monday, which has been done... and, things like knowing that this particular client is going to be busy in December... and so you do need... experience is helpful... and, if you're going to run it by yourself, you probably need someone saying: 'Don't forget, you need to that... and don't forget, you need to talk to the students now or they will all go up the wall.' And, I think, a lot of it is being proactive inasmuch as you give them information before they need it... well, when you run courses that's what you normally do anyway... is give them the information before they start asking for it, because then they'll go: 'OK. Fine. We know where we're up to!' But, if you wait until something goes wrong, then it's hell breaks loose.

**GH: So, you try to keep ahead of the game then?**

C: Yes.

**GH: OK. Well, on card 14, these are some additional qualities or requirements, if you like, that key account managers should or possibly could have. What do you think about some of these then?**

C: Well, I actually think you would need... you do need to have an academic qualification, and the reason for that is because... I think one of the problems we have

with the likes of [XXXX] is that, although he is educated to degree level, he doesn't have the knowledge of the Business School. He doesn't know how programmes run, he doesn't know how they're designed... so, he doesn't carry... so, you don't need to be a fully trained marketeer. You actually don't need general management experience... you don't need broad experience of... well, I'm one and I haven't got any of these. I'm old. Age isn't... you don't need to be of an age.

**GH: So, you don't feel that age confers status and reliability and respectability?**

C: Well, it might do only... only inasmuch as you've run programmes before and you can talk with knowledge about them. But, you could do that, say, you'd been doing that for five years and you were thirty... well, fine. I mean, I think anybody who can run courses could do what we do in the CMD. I mean, to be frank, we just run courses for corporate clients. We don't do anything different to anybody else... and, I don't know about the experience of moving in senior management circles. I think the main thing is not to be intimidated by them.

**GH: Stand your ground?**

C: Oh, yes. I'd go: 'No. If it were me, I wouldn't be doing it that way'.

**GH: Interesting. Well, moving into the last part of the interview now, I want to move on to possibly some contentious matters and want to talk about rewards for people in key account management... not to get any pounds, shillings and pence discussed, but general feelings about how you're rewarded. So, are you satisfied with the current reward system for the job that you do?**

C: No, I'm not! I'm an SL. I manage five or six postgraduate courses. There's about... currently there'll be about a hundred people on my course... perhaps not that many. And other people are running one postgraduate programme with eighteen people on it and they're PLs. This is a great source of contention. So, I mean... I mean, I think I definitely should be a PL.

**GH: So, that's definitely one solution to the situation. Any other ways in which you think you could be, or should be, compensated for the job that you do?**

C: No, not really because, what you can't do... you can't start tagging it to any sort of income... and related to income... because it is luck of the draw. So, for instance, when I was running [XXXX], at any one time they had two [XXXX] on the go, with 28 on each. They had two [XXXX] on the go, with 25 on each... and I think [XXXX] ran an [XXXX] for them. Now, it was just luck that I was asked to look after [XXXX]. Somebody else might have been asked to look after [XXXX], with 20 students... and nothing that you do, bizarrely, by and large, will grow the business...

**GH: So, lack of transparency possibly?**

C: Well, what happens is, we all know what each other does... in our department... so, we all whinge openly and together, so... we know that [XXXX] is a PL... [XXXX]'s a PL because she'd said she'd walk if she didn't get a PL... plus [XXXX] was poaching her. [XXXX]'s an SL, I'm an SL, [XXXX]'s a PL... and that's a bone

of contention because he's a PL...but, I certainly wouldn't do anything to do with performance-related pay of any sort, because the way you end up running courses is happenchance. You know, I've got [XXXX]. Now, it sounds... five students for God's sake... but it sounds great doesn't it?

**GH: Well, I'm glad you talk about things like performance-related pay, because the literature again gives some ideas about possible reward systems or structures for this kind of position. So, have a look at some of those and see whether you think any of those might be relevant to you in the future.**

C: I think, what we would be doing is... most of all, [XXXX] and I are pushing for PLs... you need to keep that moderately confidential... you know what it's like when you're jockeying for a PL... anyway, I'm jockeying for a PL... and so is [XXXX].

**GH: Join the club!**

C: And, the other thing is, it's all mixed up with the National Framework and all that sort of stuff... I mean, I would be personally... I would be quite happy with what you were talking about... promotion... so, it's responsibility with authority, which we've got. I definitely wouldn't go down the financial incentives because it's just fraught.

**GH: And, you say it's more luck really that finish up with particular clients?**

C: It is, yes. Yes. I mean, I've just ended up with these clients... and, whether you think they're prestigious or not, like [XXXX]... well, that sounds great but it's a load of trouble that is... [XXXX] is five students, but it sounds great, you know, because in theory I look after a [XXXX], a [XXXX], a [XXXX] and then the [XXXX]. Well, at the moment, it's all gone quiet on the Western Front... well, they're talking about putting a hundred people on the [XXXX]. I mean, if that kicks off, great... but, it's nothing to do with me... it's just what they've decided. Full access to senior managers? Well, we get that anyway... inasmuch as you can get them. I don't know why you would want access to senior managers... because they're all fruitcakes, aren't they?

**GH: Well. Some people might suggest that if you're mixing in senior management circles there's a kind of kudos or status attached to that really?**

C: Well, the only senior managers that we've got are the ATLS, aren't they? There's not a lot of kudos in mingling with that bunch, is there?

**GH: [XXXX] perhaps?**

C: Yes, [XXXX]. I'll get him to teach on my courses... I think you must be stupid! It gives me power over him...

**GH: Any kind of bonus payment-type system?**

C: No. I don't believe it would work because of the serendipitous nature of what we do... and people don't believe it's like that... they don't look... I've been here for eight years... I know how it works... sometimes you're twiddling your thumbs and



you think: 'Uh ho. I'm going to be out of a job!' And, the next minute, you've got so much doing, like, you don't know whether you're coming or going.

**GH: In terms of your performance, is it currently measured in any way or not?**

C: Well, as you know, they've all been trained, haven't they... in the noble art of personal development review (otherwise known as the stupid appraisal system)... so, they've all been through that... so, they're now all doing what they happily think are performance... personal development reviews. The only way you can measure what we do is if the course is run successfully and there isn't a big fuss... because that is a success measure, isn't it?

**GH: So, it's client satisfaction, via the feedback then, which really is the main thrust of performance review?**

C: But, even then, they don't... and they wouldn't dare, because that would cause more chaos... they don't ask the client if they're satisfied with us, because that wouldn't work... because the client would get really jittery and go: 'Well, why wouldn't I be?' Or: 'What are they supposed to do that they're not doing?' And also the client sees us, and not anybody above us, as the university. So, the only way they'd measure our performance... I would say, is whether the course...

**GH: Well, here are some suggestions then on card 17 for measuring key account manager performance, perhaps some of those might excite you perhaps?**

C: Well, profit targets? No, you can't do that. I mean, the only thing we do is... when we do a budget, we try and get 50%. But, since you never get a report on how your budget's gone... or, when you do get it, it's full of zeros... there's no point. So, they never measure performance against budgeted cost.

**GH: So, just... organisationally, it's impossible to do that at the moment?**

C: Yes... if you put in a budget of 50%... to get 50% profit, in effect... and then you could spend it all and they wouldn't twig! Performance against jobs? I suppose that's basically our... the annual appraisal? Well, we're having that. Client satisfaction? Well, we get student feedback all the time... written down. Annual client audit? I don't know what one of them is. Number of key accounts? No, we don't do that. Number of strategic important...? All of ours are moderately strategic important because we've got so few, you know? Relationship length? Well... well, you could measure it but it isn't a measure of anything. If you take [XXXX]... he's worked with [XXXX], the [XXXX]... and he had a cracking relationship with [XXXX], who was the HR Director. Then, [XXXX]... the guy who owned it... he owned 95% of it, he flogged it for £750m and, of course now it's owned by investors or whatever... and the guy that he was in a close relationship with has been sidelined and they've brought in another HR one. So, what you can't do... you actually can't... so through no fault of [XXXX]'s, the relationship he has with [XXXX] is now shaky... and that's just the way it is. And, unless managers... they don't acknowledge that... we're on a loser because they set up false expectations and we don't know... If you walked on water... if you get in somebody new, sometimes you're lucky and they go: 'Yes.

We'll carry on as we were.' Mostly, they want to change things... that's what new people do isn't it?

**GH: So, age of relationship then wouldn't be a suitable criterion?**

C: No. Added value? No, none of us know how to measure the added value. The only way you can do it... in [XXXX], before they come on, they have this... the students sit down with the line managers and agree objectives for the course. So, from that perspective, [XXXX] actually measure what they get. Nobody else does. Well, the intimacy of the relationship? Well, you can't measure it... I don't know why... well, people think they ought to measure things, don't they? What's the point? You think the only things that are important to us are that you can measure...

**GH: Control, I suppose, isn't it? The feeling of being in power?**

C: Yes, that's right. Yes, whereas the most important things are the things that we can't measure...

**GH: Just to try and round up now... just one or two outstanding issues, I suppose... if relationships with corporate clients (or key account relationships, if you want to call them that) are to develop into the future, are there still some barriers that might get in the way of that happening in an organisation like this?**

C: Well, I think one of the things that's stopping us... well, me anyway... developing deeper and better relationships with corporate clients is that I'm just so overworked. So, instead of being able to deliver what I know I should deliver... and, I said to [XXXX] the other day: 'I'm on thin ice... and I'm only holding it together because of my experience'. You know, so... it's just little things like this [XXXX] course I run, on two occasions... and the other thing is, the administrators are under pressure... and so, twice, although the [XXXX] assignments had been marked on time, they sat on an administrator's desk for three weeks. Now, that is enough to incense a whole group... you can lose a group with that little thing. So, one of the things that stops us being more proactive and sending reports or whatever is just time... we're just too busy.

**GH: On card 18 here, a few ideas of potential barriers... any of these strike a chord with you?**

C: Well, I mean... I think... I think what it is is... the conflict, at the moment, of what [XXXX] and [XXXX] think should happen. They think we should be key account managers and we think we shouldn't be. We think we should be what we are... or what we perceive we are at the moment... and that is a barrier... plus the fact that, what does a key account manager do? They go in and they say to a client: 'Do you want this course?' They can only do that if they've got the experience that we've got. So, it becomes, you know... [XXXX] can't go in because he hasn't got an idea. And, [XXXX] is saying: 'Well, go in with [XXXX]'. And, you go: 'Just a minute. That's what he's paid for! What's the point of having him if two of us are going in? Why can't I just go in by myself and sort it?' Anyway...

**GH: Interesting. Anything else on the list?**

C: I mean, I just think... that the whole thing about having a key account manager is something that people are trying to bring in from industry which does not resonate here, because it ain't how it works basically. I know experience can change... but that isn't how universities interact with their clients... they just don't do it like that. They don't call them key account managers. And the thing is... if you're only doing that then who sets up the courses that you've just been talking about? Well, you've got to do it, because you're the only person who knows how the conversation went.

**GH: But, could it work in the future then? Could there be a role for this kind of position?**

C: Not unless you had one client who was giving you enough work. Do you see what I mean? Say, for instance, we went with a client who wanted multiple programmes... they wanted a programme on, I don't know... let's say they wanted an [XXXX], for a for instance, right... and they wanted an [XXXX] and they wanted a [XXXX] and they wanted something else and they wanted something else... in that case, you might argue that one person might be able to do it... but, then, they'd be fielding back to these other five people... and the five people actually need to have the first-hand conversation in order to deliver what they are delivering.

**GH: But, it's reliant on that big client that you have?**

C: Yes. So... and that's why I just think it's a ridiculous concept. I know you're writing 5,000... 20,000 words, but it ain't going to work.

**GH: I'm just here to test whether it is a possible format, that's all. I've got no preconceived ideas about it.**

C: And, as I say... the other thing is that the assumption there is that a) you'll have a relationship with the client forever and b) that you can always deliver something for them.

**GH: And the reality is very different?**

C: Of course.

**GH: Fine. Last, but not least then... these are just one or two sort of personal concerns, I suppose, that some key account managers have voiced in the literature... I just wonder whether some of these are concerns that you might share?**

C: No. No. I think the major concern for us would be that key account managers would be seen as a selling job. Now, people who move into teaching, self-select for not having selling skills. You know, when I was leaving college, I was being courted by [XXXX] and [XXXX] and all that because I was in [XXXX]... just selling in, yes... and I thought: 'Do you know what? I don't want to sell. I like working with people and helping people'. And, so, what you're likely to find is that the people here, who are doing my sort of job, like the job as it is now and they didn't come into it to sell.

**GH: So, you would personally then feel a bit worried about moving into a job that had an element of selling attached to it?**

C: Well, yes... well, I wouldn't feel worried, because I wouldn't do it in the first place.

**GH: Right. It would definitely put you off the job then?**

C: Well, yes... yes, because I actually don't... I don't believe that... I don't think that's our role is to sell. I think our role is to work with organisations. I mean, because I've said to organizations: 'Well, no, we can't do that. Try somebody else' ... you know, because we can't do that...

**GH: Other things here like lack of status within the company... is that a personal concern? Do you want the status?**

C: Do you mean here in the Business School?

**GH: Yes.**

C: I've got whatever status I deserve or I want. I'm not fussed. I'm not fussed about status because one of the reasons is I have worked with so many people over a number of years that I believe that they have respect for me, otherwise they wouldn't come on my course all the time, would they? If people didn't want to deliver or work with me they would just go: 'I'm sorry. I'm busy' ... and you've got nothing then. You know, so the only way it works is by... generally, you can phone up most people in the Business School and say: 'Oh. Go on... do us a favour?' They are either feeling pathetically sorry for me or they think: 'Oh, go on... she's alright!' So, I mean, my perception is that I think people think I'm alright. Whether they do or not, I don't know.

**GH: It says here 'having too many accounts to manage'?**

C: Tell me about it! That is the problem... it's running too many accounts, but sometimes I'm just... if you saw my 'to do' list... and, then, sometimes you get unsolvable problems and you just think: 'I just don't know how I'm going to get this sorted?' But, at the moment... well, before Christmas, I was just juggling so much, it was ridiculous... and there, but for the grace of God, it didn't fall apart... but it was touch and go. I thought: 'God, if one more client... one more stupid... whatever?'

**GH: Any other thoughts on the card 19 there?**

C: I mean, I think... genuinely... what [XXXX] tried to do was to have a key account manager... [XXXX]... and then that hasn't worked, because he doesn't know how it works... he doesn't know how the university... he doesn't know how the Business School works... she doesn't either, to be frank. She's nice and funny and personable but... she's a busy fool. And so, although they talk about strategy and all the rest of it, it's just a scattergun approach... but, people look busy, don't they? They're not doing anything, but they look busy. So, what I think she thought is... she thought: 'Well, I know how key accounts work' ... well, she does from a [XXXX]... from a [XXXX]

or whatever perspective, because she used to work there, didn't she? So, she knows that you have a key account manager and you flog loads of [XXXX] to [XXXX]... and that's how it works, because [XXXX] will always want [XXXX]. But, it doesn't work like that for us... and that's the contradiction that we have. So, what happens is we just nod and ignore her. Her latest feeling... have you talked to [XXXX]... she sits close, so she gets all the inside information. Apparently... now this is the latest theory, but we don't know... and, again, this is moderately confidential... we think that [XXXX] is going to go. The conspiracy theory, which is put round by [XXXX] at the moment, is that since [XXXX] and [XXXX] haven't delivered anything, [XXXX] will be the fall-guy. Once he's gone... whether it will happen or not, I don't know... then we will be asked to start to take on some of this key account... because, what [XXXX] said in this personal development review: 'Well, we could do a client service review'. And I go: 'Well, what's once of them, [XXXX]? What are you talking about? Do you mean you want to talk to [XXXX] of [XXXX]... is that what you want to do?' 'Yes'. 'Well fine. I'll set you up for a meeting'... (laughter)... What she wants is, I think... this is what [XXXX] thinks is going to happen... is that they'll try and lessen our load so that we've got more time to do this sort of thing and we're all going: 'Uh, ha. Look at my contract... we're not up for that... I'm not up for it. I'm really happy... I love running courses... I'm good at it... it's my strength... I like working with people and I ain't going to go selling'... (laughter)...

**GH: Fair enough. That's comes across very strongly. That's good. I think I've asked all the questions I need to ask now, so if you feel there are no further comments you'd like to add, I think we'll end the discussion today. Thank you very much for taking part.**

C: You're welcome.

# **Appendix 7**

## **Interview 4 transcript**

## DBA Interview 4

**GH: Right, thanks for coming to talk to me then, [XXXX]. Perhaps a good place to start would be to find out from you the corporate clients that you deal with at the moment... to get some idea about the kind of job you have.**

D: Er... corporate clients at the moment? Well, hard corporate clients - the ones we've got and we're working with - include [XXXX] and their supply chain... includes [XXXX] and its supply chain. [XXXX] obviously is a [XXXX] company and [XXXX] provider. Supply chain is those that supply it. [XXXX] is a [XXXX]... is a building company from [XXXX] that's doing renovations on council houses, has a massive portfolio... winning all the contracts in major cities... has until 2011 to get this... is winning a lot of the contracts... and we're working with them and some of their suppliers. Also, [XXXX] the... just say [XXXX] for the moment... and who else? Well, in addition, I think it's fair to say that we're working with a series of smaller companies. So, we're working with consortium groups that include smaller companies that don't have programmes exclusively for themselves such as [XXXX] ([XXXX] in Yorkshire), [XXXX] (in Yorkshire), [XXXX] down in [XXXX] or [XXXX]... [XXXX], out by the motorway. I think... I'm sure there's a lot of other companies I work with...

**GH: A large spread then of corporate clients?**

D: There is, but what I would make the point of saying is that, unlike an [XXXX] programme which I've been familiar with, we've taken the [XXXX] and its suite of programmes and we've differentiated that. So, we have a suite of programmes... some clients like [XXXX] will come to us just for a [XXXX]. That's all they want. We know there's an opportunity there for us to develop that relationship into a [XXXX]. So, they've done three or four [XXXX] with us - that's the equivalent of 60-70 students -let's say some leave, but there's probably a nucleus of 30-40 there... now we're in that network, we're going to start negotiating and talking to them about the second stage in the award. With other companies like [XXXX]... they're not the biggest [XXXX] company in the world, in the [XXXX] industry... they're not even in the Top Twenty... but they've still got a sufficient number of people to have had two programmes with us already and we've gone back to that company and said: 'Look, we know we've tried to meet your needs, is there anything else you'd like us to...'. And they said to us: 'Well, look. We would like (it was partly our suggestion but we gelled on this)... we'd love to look at our supply chain more'. And we said: 'Well, why don't we try and have a programme where we invite your supply chain to come and work with you? And, if there's anything we've done over here...'. I mean, I think we have done right things with the [XXXX]. We've differentiated it so that a company like [XXXX] can have a [XXXX], a [XXXX] and an [XXXX] exclusively to them. [XXXX] can have a [XXXX] exclusively to them. [XXXX] can have programmes exclusively to them, as indeed can other companies... but, what the next stage is then for them to come in with another partner. So, the way you can differentiate it is twofold... you could have a partner like [XXXX] and one other big partner (as we started with [XXXX]: it was [XXXX] and [XXXX])... [XXXX] learned loads from [XXXX] because [XXXX] were a client of ours in early 2001/2002. And then, of course, you can differentiate even further where you've got a consortium. Now, a consortium may be made up of unfamiliar companies with one another that they're

going to learn from each other... from different industry sectors... and we have that... and, then, the most interesting one we've got at the moment, which is built off this [XXXX] supply chain is... we went down to [XXXX] and spoke to the CEO at [XXXX] about something... and he was not interested.. so we said: 'Let's change the subject. How would you like to have your supply chain coming together for a couple of days?' He said: 'I'd love it'. And, I said: 'How would you like them to come together for a couple of days every six months?' He goes: 'I'd love it'. And they got their Purchasing Director to contact us. And the outcome of that was a Forum that we held at the Bass Management Centre. And an invite went out from us and [XXXX] to their suppliers saying: 'Please come in for the Forum'. And, we had the Board Room set aside for 30 people and we got 50 people coming. So, we had to move across to the Lecture Theatre... not the best place in those circumstances... but, we told them about the opportunities... it was a clean sheet of paper... we contextualized it so that certain things they all do will be primary knowledge, primary information to the client. I have to put my hand up here and say that it's important that we are distinct and clear when we're telling the client what we perceive will happen, because one of the clients like [XXXX] will say: 'I've not seen anything yet. Where's the benefit? I've not seen it yet'. And we need to think that through because he's out there actually said that: 'What are the benefits?' And it's only been six months into the programme... and there's immeasurable benefits so far... immeasurable, but they're all non-tangible because the tangible ones come when all the work that they're doing comes in. I don't know if I'm drifting too much about this? So, what I'm saying is that, while I'm talking and have got a network of a heck of a lot of programmes, what we've taken is some traditional [XXXX] that we had, that worked very, very well in the university up to the 2000s... and we kept it in a form that is tiered so that we're meeting the various needs... and different needs of the corporate clients. Is that alright?

**GH: Fine. That's good. Yes. So, it sounds to me like most of it revolves around dealing with these corporate clients in one way or another?**

D: Well, this is where the university is all... it doesn't look right... it's not right, because I think the way in which we treat our corporate clients... it's a new way that I never saw when I was in the other side... I won't say above or below... the other side of the Business School. You know... and if you see the things that we do with the other side of the Business School and the way we do things with corporate clients, I think this is a wonderful way that should go across the whole of the Business School, in fact the whole university... and we treat students the way we treat corporate clients. Unfortunately, I think what has happened is the way it has gone the other way. We've has a VLP set up, we've had undergraduate-related practices and techniques that people think will just naturally extend into the postgraduates and the corporate side. It's absolutely silly... you know, it's ridiculous... and even... you know, you just talk to some of the guys... even the support that we get is very... I'll give you a great example. We had [XXXX] in for the very, very first module... the very first module... Bass Management Centre... if a group sees the Bass Management Centre first they want to be in the Bass Management Centre, but they're over here. They haven't seen... they might have seen, but they're over here. They're quite content. The overhead projector is failing... it's gone purple. So, the screen they see is purple... it's going more and more purple. The natural thing is to move into another room. Of course, you can't move into another room because they're all being booked



somewhere else... no problem. So, you call up the IT people and they register it, they'll get to it. They'll get to it in a week's time! Corporate clients are in at 10 o'clock in the morning... they're going to be there until six... and for the next three days, can't get it done... can't change the rooms. And, the other difficulty is that when we have a corporate client in, we do work... we put work on the wall... we take photographs of the work, put it on bespoke websites for them so that they've got everything they need... and we have to take it down every night and take it to another room ten yards away because we can't put... I mean, can you see... the university is focused... I beg your pardon... I think what I'm aware of in the Business School on part of it... is focused... is still focused on semesters, of teaching two or three hours a week a module for 15 weeks and then an exam in January and February. What we've done is something that is, again, developmental... different... where the client doesn't want delegates to come for 15 weeks... for three hours a week for 15 weeks... it takes too long. They want their people to be improved and made better managers... informed managers... and so they come for blocks. And those blocks are either two days or four days. But, to get a block, in a building, of a room is a nightmare and the people downstairs that do a lot of that booking... you know, the things they do... and I can't repeat it... the things they do to get the room for two consecutive days defies exaggeration...

**GH: Is that a problem then with trying to operate along business lines in an academic environment?**

D: There's a conflict. There's a conflict. Don't get me wrong... we add value. We add value infinitesimally. The company would prefer not for us to teach at their premises. Their preference is for their people to come to an academic arena, if you like... and they value that and will pay for that. And we'll give them the quality service such as the meals... and the comments coming back from the delegates invariably are: 'Great facilities!' If they did happen to start or go to the Bass Management Centre, they like that. There's a strange irony there because... I always thought that the Bass Management Centre was superb for corporate clients. The reason for that is because they were within an environment which was exclusive to them, but they were with other students, undergraduate and postgraduate, so they felt the academic flavour. Now, when we came over here or whatever, it was onto the other hill of Nottingham, which is mostly the professional hill, and there's no interaction with undergraduate students, if they wanted to... where the other students - like the MSc ones coming from China - I envisage, coming from China, they would want the professional side of it... and we should have the Bass Management Centre. Nobody can see the logic of that... (laughter)...

**GH: But, next year, they might be...**

D: I'm sure they will.

**GH: To focus in on these corporate clients... we use the term 'corporate clients', you're talking about 'customers' as well... are there any particular terms that the Business School uses to refer to these clients? 'Key accounts' or 'key customers'? What's the terminology being used currently?**

D: Well, my interpretation of it is quite clear... there's customers and there's consumers... and there's a big difference. The customer is [XXXX]. Each of the individuals that are a part of [XXXX] are the consumers. So, the customer's paying, but we've got to give that service to the consumers. Can you see where I'm coming from? And the same goes with the [XXXX]... and I was just talking to [XXXX] today... we tried to envisage if we are giving them what they want. It's the old SERVQUAL thing, you know... I think we're giving them what they want but, maybe, there's things they want from us that... the one point we were talking about is, you know, we've got a website specially for them... we've got their pictures on there, it's very personal to the group... you've got to get a code to get into it... very bespoke to them. We even put the customer... the client logos on there. If it's a consortium, we put all the client logos on there and it is a secure site for them. And, with some companies like [XXXX], we will send to them a register of the delegates that have attended because we know that they want that. Now, with [XXXX]... and it's right, because we should as well... with [XXXX], there's four or five from [XXXX] and then one from fourteen different companies. Now, I don't think... I don't think - and, that's probably my fault - we do the same... and, if I was the boss of, let's say, [XXXX] who have three people on that programme... and I'm putting it in their position... I think he'd want to know that their delegates had actually attended and maybe have... maybe have a copy of their grades to date. Now, I said [XXXX] because they've got three people but, then, there's the Managing Director, the Finance Director, of one company, one person... who do we send that one to, if he's a senior director? Little things like that, which I regard as value-added... now, I can see you coming to this account management thing.

**GH: I'm just trying to identify whether you identify some customers as being important or key customers... key accounts maybe? Whether you use those terms?**

D: No, I never use those terms, I'll be honest... we don't... and I'll tell you why. [XXXX]... I don't know if you've spoken to [XXXX]... [XXXX] and I work quite closely together. [XXXX] will run some programmes which you're referring to as key accounts, I think... and, I'll run some others. So, [XXXX] will run some consortium ones and it happens that I run the ones that maybe we've just acquired. Without disrespect to [XXXX], a lot of them are stragglers from key accounts we've had in the past. They haven't got enough for a full programme for themselves but... and we've done a consortium with them... but now there's one or two that may want to do it... [XXXX] really mops them up very well. For myself, what happens is that it's through contacts where we go into the business... we go into the business, we talk to the people, make the network, make the connections... and there's no particular time when you know you've landed it, but you get... I mean, there is no contract signed... but we put a programme to them and things start to happen. And, that's maybe where the feeders come in for other parts. So, [XXXX] could go onto a [XXXX], if you know what I mean? And not only that... [XXXX] and I both look after modules as well. So, I've got [XXXX] that we do on an [XXXX]... it's ridiculous... it's ridiculous. So, the idea of 'account manager' where somebody works for [XXXX], and is the key account manager for [XXXX], is a very nice idea. We haven't got the resources for that. It's just absolutely farcical. I would make a comment though... in regards to something I've observed... and that is, if we did have people - and, we do, of course, [XXXX] looks after [XXXX] and I look after [XXXX], so there's that

issue... the question I am asking is - and I don't have an answer to it - do you continue to look after it for so long, for ever? Or, would it be better to rotate me somewhere else... and, someone else to people I look after? So, there's a question I have no answer to because you can have... you become friendly and things like that...like I've done with the people at [XXXX]... but, I just wonder if maybe somebody else should take over [XXXX] and I move on to somewhere else or somebody else in order a) to keep it fresh, b) to extend our network so that they're meeting other people... do you see what I'm saying? And, I don't know if there's articles written about whether you should rotate key account managers - I know some places do and some don't...

**GH: Well, we'll find out as we go on. So, you're definitely aware of this notion of 'key account management'. So, if I could pin you down, how could you define 'key account management', in your words? How would you define it?**

D: Erm... key account managers... (long pause)... I'm making the assumption it's an individual, though I'm not sure that it's exclusively an individual because there's all the support team behind them, including the [XXXX]s who deliver part of the programme. It's a manager of a programme that is regarded as key... oh, God... how simple is that?

**GH: Well... interesting you should say that because, if you look at that definition there... that's a standard definition of 'key account management'. Is that something that you feel...**

D: The biggest and most important of one's customers and offers specialist treatment...

**GH: There's no such thing as a standard definition in the literature... this is about as close as perhaps you might get...**

D: And I'm sure there's twenty definitions of it... and I'm not going to say that this is a perfect one. It says: '...aims to be the biggest'. Now, what do you mean by... I mean, the question is what does it mean by 'biggest'... does it mean turnover, does it mean employees, does it mean profit?

**GH: Well. That's what I want to move on to as well, because what do you reckon is key? What makes a client important to the Business School?**

D: Well... what makes it important to the Business School is, without doubt, its contribution towards turnover... the contribution it provides to us is immense. And I think it's easier to say... it's been very interesting this because [XXXX] might be bringing in 42%... this is confidential, remember that... [XXXX] might be bringing in 42%, [XXXX] might be bringing in 50% and then we go and do something with [XXXX], which is not a single company... so, we're actually looking at bringing in over 50% in there... so, I'm very concerned...

**GH: So, it's an association between clients?**

D: Yes, absolutely. And, therefore, I think the understanding of the word 'biggest' is important because while it's... we don't look above more than twenty people on the programme. So, the number of people that come on the programme is not an important... but, if there's only ten on the programme, it won't be proportional... it'll still be above proportion... do you know what I mean?

**GH: Yes. I do. Any other... any other factors then that the Business School might regard as a criterion for choosing an important customer?**

D: We don't choose the customers. Crikey... we cradle them! And it's just opportunities that we find... and, as the Equis guy from Spain commented, when we told him... he actually said to us: 'Do you mean you go out to customers?' And, we said: 'Of course we do!' And he goes: 'I'm going to do that!' You know, the idea of a university approaching somebody that never has thought to have been approached is a... is quite amazing to a lot of organisations because they wait for the customer assuming that they would come to a university.

**GH: OK. Well, if you look at card 3 there, [XXXX]... got a few ideas there that the literature suggests are ways of identifying strategic importance in customers. So, you've mentioned sales volume and profitability... any other factors there that are relevant to the Business School at the moment or could be in the future maybe?**

D: That relates to the clients that we get? I don't know... are you asking is there a client that we would turn down... (laughter)... because the university has got a strategy for... has a strategy... and all the university, in its research, has focused itself in selected areas. And what we don't do well enough... what we don't do well enough is integrate the area that we research in into the research findings of those people with the corporate clients that out there exist. And, if we had the resources... which we don't have... you knew [XXXX]? [XXXX] was a salesperson that went out and he could... he really was somebody that was an incredible person, but I wouldn't say he was above any academic... he was to the side of academia and realized that academia exists and we could add things but he could also provide... so, I would argue that there are connections that don't exist that should be there... some linkages. And, the research areas that we do, they should be incorporated into what we deliver and, ultimately, in what we go out and tell those people about. The trouble is, we have nobody that goes out as a sales...

**GH: Like [XXXX] used to do...**

D: ...like [XXXX] used to do. Now, I'm saying it's a skill and a half to do that. We do have people in place... and I think that I do a little bit alike, but nowhere near as well as [XXXX] did.

**GH: Interesting. If you look on the list here, it's got things like 'attractiveness of links with customer'. Certain customers might be perceived to be high profile... and the client a reputation that the Business School might want to associate with. Is that something that is taken into account?**

D: Well... you've probably been familiar... I don't know if you have been... with the [XXXX] issue? We've been delivering to [XXXX] out in [XXXX] for a number of years... what a fantastic relationship to have! And we go and find that it's not bringing in the required 42% or whatever and we're thinking of dropping it! I do think it's imperative that we maintain the image and identity of the Business School which, unfortunately, has been very, very significantly depleted over the last five years, where it was relegated behind Nottingham Trent University. So, the Nottingham Business School does provide us with a value that is above something that probably Nottingham Trent University would have provided us with. And I think that also goes with some of the clients we work with as well. And we utilise their logos as they utilise ours.

**GH: But, essentially, we're still being held back by contribution, profitability, whatever you like to call it... that's the chief criterion for judging...**

D: ...the bottom line... the bottom line... a fundamental criterion.

**GH: So, to that extent, the point on card 3 says 'subjective judgment of the 'key account manager'... so, is that not relevant then? We just take business from whoever comes along... and the key account manager... or the key account manager's feelings or judgment about whether that's a good partner to be doing business with is irrelevant?**

D: Well, you're sticking with this... whatever the definition of 'key account manager' is. I think you're... and subjective judgment... you're suggesting, if you're defining me as a key account manager, it's wherever I think the business will come in... well, it's not, it's wherever I can get the business. But, having said that, there is... I will go back to one thing that... I don't want to... the research that I personally do into the most admired companies... the research into the most admired companies has, I'm sure, led to many of our chief clients: [XXXX], [XXXX], [XXXX] and the others... have all been on the back of what university people here... researchers... would regard as non-academic research. But, because it's published in [XXXX], company contacted us: 'Could you talk to us about this?' We go and see them... our conversations go a little bit further and it's: 'We can do them'. And it starts like that... by networking.

**GH: That's fine. Thinking about whether the Business School takes a strategic approach to building relationships with key customers, would you say it does build... take a strategic approach to building relationships? And, if so, what evidence is there to suggest that it is taking a strategic approach?**

D: It hasn't, in the past. I think we have... now... resources that have been brought in ([XXXX] and [XXXX]) that does provide us with an approach that is strategic. And I think that they are looking, rightly so, at the areas where we do the research and I can see that there are these Venn diagram circles or ellipses that are coming together that are identifying two or three areas that we... if we are able to... to focus ourselves in those particular areas. And I think there's some evidence of that... we go to some of the... we have been up to some of the annual conferences of various industry institutions, do you know what I mean?

**GH: Yes, fine. OK. If I show you card 4 very quickly, this is what the literature says are key points of evidence that an organisation is taking a strategic approach to dealing with key accounts... do any of these seem familiar with the job that you do and what you perceive around you in the Business School or not?**

D: Well, the first one, 'planned and proactive'... it is proactive, yes... and there's a loose plan. We have got resources now to make this a little bit more proactive. Adequate resources? We're not adequately resourced but they are improving. Are aligned with corporate goals? I think we are actually aligned with corporate goals and hopefully leading some of the returns for corporate goals... corporate goals being a sustainable, non loss-making and profitable university. Senior management support? Yes, it does. Customer portfolio analysis is undertaken? It is... it is... I think we are on the lower end of the scale of this but we are actually on the scale and we do know what we are trying to do in terms of customer portfolio... and we are developing that area. I think the fact that we've got a couple of people that have come in is helping us but, effectively, we are under-resourced on this. And we don't have the... we possibly don't have the required skills to take us to where we need to be.

**GH: OK. On a scale then of 1-10, you talk about being sort of fairly low down on the scale... if 1 is having no strategic approach at all and 10 is having an excellent, you know, totally integrated strategic approach... where would the Business School be on that scale of 1-10?**

D: Well, that's an absolutely redundant question unless you compare it with other places... giving you a figure of 1-10 on its own is meaningless. But, if I was to compare it with other universities, I'd say that we are in the top half of that 5-10. If you compare us to other universities like... I don't know... we're way up. If you compare us to, like, the local universities around here, we have a plan, we have an idea, we know what we're good at... and we just lack some resources potentially... and we can... we are up there, I think, with the top 5 or 6 which is, again, a compliment for what we do.

**GH: That's just the subjective judgment I wanted from you. Another way of looking at it is to say there could be a continuum of structures or systems for key account management which start with no identifiable system, on the one hand, and actually working through part-time system and full-time system right through almost to a self-standing and self-supporting national key account management division perhaps, in a larger multi-national type organisation. So, just... what's your feeling at the moment about the Business School... what kind of system has it got according to that grid?**

D: I think it's fair to say that it's a part-time... in terms of those grids... I think it's a hybrid of part-time system, where we have other roles... we run modules... and also we are looking at a Centre for Management Development - we are a corporate area - and so, I would say, of those two areas, the part-time system and the corporate level system are the two areas that I think are where we're at.

**GH: Right. So, you see some definite change, if you like, in the way in which things are developing? It's moving further up the...?**

D: Yes, I think so. Yes, I think so. Yes. Yes.

**GH: If I can then show you something else, which again is like a kind of continuum... and there are five slides here... (there follows an explanation of cards 6-10)... so, where would the Business School perhaps fit on that kind of...?**

D: I'll give you an example, because I can see where it fits... and I can see where it's moving from and where I perceive it moving to... this is where... with [XXXX], we're here [exploratory]... we're here. I met the Director of Procurement and, with him, we had the forum... invited them in... we have a programme up and running. [XXXX] over the last year, has gone through a tremendous difficult time with the floods. I know [XXXX] has sent a letter (because I wrote the letter!)... he sent it to the CEO, inviting the CEO to come up to the university... and the CEO's accepted and said: 'We'll come up in the New Year'. Because, I think the way we move forward... we're already starting to do this... we've moved from this already... [XXXX] has got a programme that has got something which we can add value to [XXXX]. [XXXX] think it's a great idea. They want to take it forward... that's moving forward. My hope is that when the CEO comes up to visit [XXXX] there'll be a lunch with the Heads of School. And we're going to say...we should say to [XXXX]: 'We've got nine Heads of School here at your disposal. We can help you and we want you to come to us if you want help'. So, it goes from there very quickly to where I see it as... probably here [inter-dependent] or here... one of those two.

**GH: Interesting.**

D: I mean... this is where I view it at the moment... that's where my imagination is, at the cooperative stage... and we are beginning to cooperate... and I think we've gone from there to there quite quickly because the supply chain are all working together. The idea is to go to those two there. I can see that very clearly.

**GH: Is that the same for most clients or do you think it's done on a client-specific basis?**

D: No. Client-specific basis. It's not done for most clients. I mean, we'd like to do it for most clients... and with new clients I think we will do that... and I think it's fortuitous that [XXXX] have gone through a difficult time that we can offer it a service such as scenario planning, which is superior to what they've got already. And we're even going to suggest to them they can lead the industry, because they have a strapline saying they want to be the best. I'd like to put... I've put it to them already... they can lead the water industry in terms of working with us.

**GH: Let's move away from structure then and talk about the individual who is acting as a key account manager... what sort of role do you think that individual is playing within the Business School? Role or roles maybe... might be multiple roles that that individual is fulfilling?**

D: They're playing multiple... if the interpretation of what you cast as a key account manager is someone like myself or [XXXX] or something like that... they're doing multiple roles.

**GH: OK. So, what about those roles then?**

D: Their role is partly a key account manager... it's communicating with the client. It's periodically communicating... periodically visiting the client. It's hosting the client if they're coming up to visit. It's inviting the client to come to course meetings... all of those things. But, in addition to that, the key account manager is doing the work here, arranging for people to be in the class at the right time, finding the classrooms, which is a whole network of people behind them. Do you know what the most complicated thing is? That the ATLS do not understand that. They don't understand it. If I'm out for a day up at [XXXX], they say: 'Well, what've you been...?' I say: 'Well, trying to get some business'. They just don't understand the hours associated with managing... go on.

**GH: If I show you card 11... that's what the literature says are the role or roles of key account managers... anything there strike you as being problematic or unusual to the kind of job you do?**

D: I think... I think we do all these. We know these, yes. Yes, I've no problems with that. I think that we do all those... alliance manager? Yes. Knowledge...? Yes. Promote concept in your own organisation? Yes.

**GH: As you suggested just a few moments ago, it's a multiple role that you believe the key account manager...**

D: Yes, it is. I've no problems... I can see that. I think I'm a key account manager.

**GH: What about the knowledge then that the key account manager should have? Are there particular kinds of knowledge that he or she should have?**

D: Well, yes. You've got to know about the client and that's somewhere where we trip up...

**GH: What about the client should you know?**

D: Well, I believe, when we started with [XXXX], a group of us went down to [XXXX] and visited to see them. Get them to go down... we can't get people to get together for just a meeting let alone go to [XXXX] and see them... and [XXXX]... [XXXX]... I have to be upfront and be honest about this... [XXXX] is unique in the industry ([XXXX]) where they have amps... that means, in a year's time, all the suppliers apply to get... because the money comes out in a year's time etc. And half the people on the course because... and we've had a comment in one of our committee meetings that said lecturers aren't familiar with the industry. And that's very concerning. I mean, what can we do? We could take people down. We've got videos from [XXXX]... we can give them out to people. We can show the video... they can't come to these meetings they're so busy... we've actually had four pages written up with... in colour... identifying each of the twenty companies that are there. And that's gone out to everybody. So, I do see there's lots of things that we have to do in that context. And that is an area that we are not best at.



**GH: OK. If I show you card 13 there... obviously there is some knowledge about the company that you should have there... but other things as well, like knowledge of your own organisation. Anything there strike you as...?**

D: Up until... up until... two or three years ago, I wasn't as clear about what our products and services are as I am now and... I know pretty much about the services that we've got now... but also I think the idea is we're also looking at opportunities. So, it's not just the service we offer, it's how we can provide a service to them that we probably don't already offer them. We've got an example where a company might want to put people into some of our [XXXX] classes just for them to hear the lecturers talking... and not do the assignment. How do we apply that? So, these are opportunities we've got we have to address in that context. And, finally, about the philosophy of our place, it's crystal clear... in the sense of the Management Development it's very clear. Processes and systems are problematic. I know our senior... part of our senior management team is crystal clear about where we're going and the other part, I don't think, is.

**GH: What about the skills and qualities then a key account manager should have? Are there particular...?**

D: Multiple... got to be good at everything! And I'm not very good at communication. I'm not a very good salesman. I can't sell like [XXXX] could sell. I can't finish something like [XXXX] could finish it. I went with him once or twice... it's brilliant the way he finished it. And I said once... I spoke to him and said: 'I'd love to have some training in this context.'

**GH: You talk about communication... it's on the list there. That card there, card 12, is some indication from the literature about the skills and qualities a key account manager should have. Do you possess those?**

D: The selling skills and the negotiating skills probably... I think the others are fine because... I feel like I'm on a frontier... I'm really out on a frontier. And, I think with some of the people we're out on... we're talking with... they're on a frontier as well. And I think the way in which we communicate with them is imperative... and I see all the things you're suggesting down here, I've got most. As I've just said, I'm not the world's greatest seller...

**GH: Selling skills... which is not your strongest...**

D: No. I can talk about opportunities... and, if something comes from that, I rejoice. You know, fantastic.

**GH: OK. Just to add on to that then one or two other requirements perhaps for key account manager... noticeably, things like being of a graduate background... fully trained marketer perhaps... would you take issue with some of these ideas or would they seem to be plausible?**

D: Well, I think some of our clients that we've got are very manufacturing based... I'm talking about [XXXX]; I'm talking about [XXXX]... maybe... and so they're coming from a very manufacturing... and [XXXX] ... very manufacturing base. And,

what they increasingly are finding is that they're moving into a world that is more marketing-orientated and that's why the meeting I've got at 11.00am is with [XXXX] to talk about this particular issue. Fully trained marketeer? No. No. I don't think it's important. I mean, educated and knowledgeable? Absolutely. General management experience? Age?

**GH: Some clients might prefer to deal with an older person... or perhaps more experienced person?**

D: Yes. Possibly.

**GH: You don't sound convinced?**

D: Well, I'm that aged person... (laughter)... I'm not being... I've some experience, yes. Yes. I see that... but that raises the question I started with you... should account managers stay with the client or should they be rotated after a period of time? And I don't have an answer to that and I haven't done the research.

**GH: Right. In the last two or three minutes then I want to move on to something contentious... and that's the payment and reward system for key account managers. How are you currently rewarded for your job as a key account manager? Are you satisfied with the way in which you're paid or rewarded?**

D: Look, I think... I would say this to many managers that might appreciate... I love the job I do. I think it's great. And I'm doing multiple things... I'm looking at moving forward; I'm looking at opportunities and, on the edge, I really enjoy it. I think there is a number of people here, that are number crunching, that are saying: 'Well, hold on. Where's his 1500 or whatever?' So, I'm not well paid... I'm not fantastically paid, but I enjoy what I'm doing...

**GH: The dealing with the clients, yes?**

D: And the teaching... to some extent... and dealing with the clients... the networking, the meeting and going to... seeing how industry works and things like that...all that. What I'm also disappointed with is that there are different treatments of different people in the same situation... some people getting substantially greater amounts of money because it's something they've negotiated with ATLS against something that's not been negotiated with ATLS. So, I could go down that mardy route, if you like... and: 'Oh, it's not like that.' There is no consistency in that context. They tried to bring it in by doing it quantitatively... quantitatively... but that is totally inappropriate when you're talking to a business client.

**GH: OK. That's fine. There are one or two suggestions here on card 16 for how key account managers could be paid or rewarded... do some of those perhaps strike you as being potentially interesting for the Business School... or possibly not?**

D: I do remember [XXXX], towards the latter part... he was wanting to go and renegotiate... and he was wanting to get a percentage of his salary based on the contracts he brings in to the university. I don't know if he ever did that? Would I like

to do that? Well, I'm never certain I'm going to ever bring... I'm never certain I'm going to bring anything in. So, that's why I'm very appreciative of the salary I'm getting and for what I'm doing. But I re-emphasise the fact that the enjoyment of the job, without the burden of having a monkey on your shoulder about people looking at you all the time, is a great satisfaction. And, if I bring a corporate client in, or we bring a corporate client in, I'm over the moon about it for us all. Now, if there was some reward, it shouldn't be for that one person, it's for the whole system that works. But, you do see a promotion there... and I would like to be a professor... and I think it would help as well. Relationships? There's an interesting concept, do you get on better talking to them if you're Billy No-Name or...

**GH: If you've got that extra kudos of a title?**

D: Yes, because what I talk about... there is much goes back to the perceptions and reputation of the company that gets me interested...

**GH: OK. Last thing then on this... you talk about you enjoy doing the job without having a monkey on your back looking at what you're doing... so, does that suggest that you're not being monitored... your performance is not being monitored or measured on an annual basis?**

D: No. It's bloody... it is measured on an annual basis because the ATLS have got to go to their bosses and identify the 1570 hours. What's happened, of course, is because they've found out there are people that are doing way more than they're actually... that, what was originally prescribed as the hours for something, has just fiddled out. We were told 50 hours for running a module, for example... oh, it's down to 4 or 5 hours for running a module! But, is that the way you run a business... by, you know, putting rules and regulations in that are so stringent as that and are inflexible when you're out in a market that is changing all the time?

**GH: So, do you see it... do you think it's important to measure this performance then on a regular basis... or not?**

D: I think... I think the Business School and the Centre for Management Development should stand on... should attempt to stand on its own feet. And we suffer... I mean, good Lord, we was fourteen of us before... there was four of us at Christmas... just before Christmas... still doing the job... and still getting corporate clients in and...

**GH: So, how would you want to be measured on your performance? Number of clients you get in? The satisfaction of those clients? Or, what criteria would you want to use?**

D: I think that's right. Well, there's multiple... not an individual one... I want to be part of a successful Centre for Management Development... number 1... part of that. I'd be an important part of it... a valued member of it. I'd love that to be recognised, you know, with a professorship perhaps... I think, obviously, the bottom-line is vitally important but I think it's also the rewards that we get from working with high profile clients as well. And so much so that the media are coming to us when they

hear about the innovative new programmes that we're running. So, I'm... I just... I want to be a ???? Is that right?

**GH: Yes. That's fine. Good. OK... just to finish with then... any particular problems you can see in the future that might prevent the Business School from improving its relationships with key customers?**

D: I think the problems we've got at the moment is... is resource issues... practices and processes potentially. I don't feel... I think there's been a dip in our quality and how we treat our clients and that is because... exclusively because of people leaving. And they haven't been replaced. Various people are multi-tasking now... it's problematic and yet they're expecting us to move things forward. We've got to have those resources there. Now, don't get me wrong... I think they realise there's a lot of those things that are there... there are those limitations... and there is moves, and I'll be upfront and say there has been moves - and I appreciate those - upfront to move these forward.

**GH: Good. Right, that's it then for me. So, unless you have anything else to add at this stage, [XXXX], I'd like to thank you for talking to me.**

# **Appendix 8**

## **Interview 5 transcript**

## DBA Interview 5

**GH: Thanks, [XXXX], for coming to talk to me. I suppose a good place to start would be to just identify whether you are aware of this term 'key account management'?**

E: Yes.

**GH: OK. Good. Nice start. So, how would you define it, if I could push you into a corner and...?**

E: Well, for me, it's about the strategic relationship between an organisation and their clients or customers. And it's about knowing who is important in terms of your strategy and it's about developing an approach with those clients... not to... with those clients. So, you become important to them as well. So, I see key account management as a two-way process... so we each recognise that we are important to each other's business. On a practical level, I think my mantra is that resource has to follow strategy... we're in a limited resource. We need to concentrate where we get best impact and best effect... and key accounts are... and maybe they could be important in many different ways: they could be important because they actually may not have a high value, in terms of monetary value, but they might have a high status. So, they might suit your brand development strategy... that you have them on your books. But the ideal key account is not only somebody that you particularly want to associate with, but you benefit from that association... but also provides you with monetary return - both revenue and profit - as well as something else which is an intangible return... where you're learning from each other, because we're in a university, we're a business school, we're in an educational environment. So, that's my understanding of key accounts.

**GH: OK. First of all then, let's just show you card 1. It's difficult to find a standardised definition of key account management, so I just wonder what you think of this and whether you think it's in keeping with the kind of activities the Business School undertakes?**

E: I don't think it's about special treatment actually. I think you can offer, if you like... put it this way... you can have an equal relationship with a number of different clients, but some are more equal than others. I actually come from a School where... I'll give you a practical example: if you get a phone call from a client or a potential client - an existing client, say - I don't think you should have a different standard of reply. So, in other words, you shouldn't have... key accounts shouldn't come up through a 'hot line' and be answered in three rings, everybody should be answered in three rings. So, I think there are certain standards that you apply. So... and I don't think it's aimed at the biggest either. And, like I say, who defines 'important'? That's one of the challenges in key accounts because... certainly, from my previous background, which is luxury consumer goods, you can actually... what's important to your field sales manager may be different to your retail sales manager or even your sales administration manager... or even your Board or your shareholders.

**GH: OK. So, building on that then, from a business school perspective, how does the Business School identify who its key accounts are?**

E: Funnily enough, I think... in an ad hoc way. And, part of the problem of this is... I think we've got to go back a little... a step behind. I think one of the reasons that we haven't got such a clear view of who our key accounts are or how we should manage them... two different problems... is the way we've developed business. So, one of the things I didn't say is, I see key account management as part of a business development function. We've developed business historically by being reactive and so, if you like, everybody's a key account because they are a new business. So, I think now... and we've done that in a particular way... and we did it... I guess we also became all things to all people. So... and we did it in the absence of an overall third stream or commercial strategy. One of my roles has been to develop a commercial strategy in association with my colleagues and a consequence of that is a switch from reactive business development to proactive business development. And, in that case therefore, key account management becomes crucial.

**GH: What criteria would you use to identify a key account then... for the future?**

E: I think there's a few standard... I mean... let me just... I don't think you can do it as easy as a) to e) but I think fundamentally you can say: 'Is this a client that would add value to my brand positioning?' So, at best... and at worst, that won't detract from my brand positioning. 'Has this client got the potential to be profitable? Has this client got the potential to be, if you like, high revenue?'... although, you can have a profitable client without high revenue. 'Is this client somebody that the university is interested in and the university as a whole can benefit from? How easy is it to deal with this client?' And then I think the other aspect would be: 'Does it hurt my competitors?'

**GH: So, it seems to be a raft of quantitative and qualitative factors... so, quite a complex situation? If I can just show you card 3 here... picking around the literature, this is an indication of some of the criteria that are used to identify strategic importance in customers... some of those obviously you have referred to already... some here you haven't... so, I wonder whether you'd pass any comments on...**

E: Well, 'age of relationship' is a good one, it was an easy miss. I also think, by implication of what I said first about how important we are to a key account, I think that covers 'share of customer purchases'. I think the 'access to new markets'... that's... in fact, I can actually take that a step further because it's about taking a position. If I expand on the, you know, 'who you're associated with'... often... because the business we're in is a high credence service, and a lot of the business we will get will be by personal recommendation because people are looking for quality signifiers... so, actually, one of our best tools is to deal with X company, the top company in a particular sector... so, one of the things that I would have down as a definition for key account management would be... or determine the strategic importance... would be exactly that, in terms of... what is their value in terms of what does it say to other people in that sector? So, you go... so, in retail, we've got [XXXX] and [XXXX] and [XXXX]...

**GH: So, it's attractiveness of dealing with certain kinds of customers and what it can do for you?**

E: Yes, I think so... I think so. 'Subjective judgment of the key account manager'? I think that's the challenge. I don't think we have that challenge as much as we have in a commercial environment, where you have much more established relationships with clients. It's much more than 'nature of the business'... this isn't our main function here... and it's much easier for a key account manager to actually nominate a key account and to subvert an overall key account management strategy. I think that's less likely here... I really do... because we have so few.

**GH: Talking about the approach then that the Business School takes to key account management, would you say it's a strategic approach? On a scale of 1-10, say... just an arbitrary scale: 1 is no strategic approach whatsoever and perhaps 10 is a very sophisticated strategic approach... just as a feeling...?**

E: I think we're at 3½... but, I think... well, I say 3½... that's probably 12 months ago. I think part of my remit is to develop an approach. So, I'm hoping I have improved from 3½ and I would say maybe we're up to about 5... or 4¾... but we're not where I'd like us to be.

**GH: What about the indicators then of this strategic approach... what could you point to to say this is evidence of a strategic approach that we're now adopting to key account management?**

E: I think the first indicator is that there's a wider acknowledgement of who our key accounts are. So, if you asked somebody... say, in the School Exec... or if this came through the EQUIS accreditation process when they interviewed quite a high proportion of the Business School, you know: 'Who are the most important accounts for the Business School?' if there was some commonality there. That's quite easily measurable. You could do a little survey. I actually think it's more about one of the things that you would measure... you could measure... would be the process by which you take on a new account. If that had the criteria we've just described, in determining strategic importance, then I think that would be a good signal. And I'll give you an example of where I think it's particularly relevant: we've recently had to stop a development internationally which, I think, has caused quite a lot of problems. I don't think it was an easy decision, but one of the decisions... I think we used... I would say we used the criteria: is that relationship... so, a key account can be a relationship with another institution, say, in our context... is that relationship of strategic importance? Does it tick those boxes? So, that was an example of something we've stopped because it didn't match up to our definition of what could be strategically important in this partnership. And I would also say that we're starting to be choosy about how we deal with enquiries. We had an enquiry which was obviously a turn-down from somebody else... you could tell... it had it written all over it... and we just batted it away, because we thought: 'Well, it's not... it's not going to help us and we haven't got the resource to deliver it.'

**GH: So, the feeling I get from talking to people is that, in the past, the Business School would have taken it because any business was business to be had.**

E: Yes, that's right. I think that... I would say that we're on a key account management journey. And, I mentioned I gave a presentation on this to the [XXXX] after I joined and... my premise was that it's quite straightforward to introduce key



account management within a business school if your academics are involved in business development because the culture and the skills and attributes of a key account manager and an academic - if you map them against each other - there's actually quite a lot of similarity. I mean, it didn't go down very well as a proposition but I still believe that.

**GH: OK, we'll come onto that in a few moments actually, but lets' just nail down the strategic approach to key account management and this is what the literature is suggesting are key pieces of evidence that would suggest that a strategic approach is being adopted. So, I just wonder whether these are currently in use within the Business School or perhaps some of them aren't?**

E: Well, we're just starting what I call service review meetings to support our regular planning process... that really has just started. We have done some elements of customer portfolio analysis... and that's also just started. I would say the key account manager hasn't got a status as a position, I think... but, after saying that, because we have got... have nominated academics, as what we've called 'third stream dominant' academics... they are key account managers in my head. And I also think some programme leaders are key account managers but they don't realise it.

**GH: I went away from a conversation with [XXXX] this morning: 'I'm a key account manager now!'**

E: Course he is! Course he is... in every sense. I would say that we're starting to plan... and proactive activities are a key element of our business development approach. I would say we're not adequately resourced in key account management because the business development element of an academic contract isn't... there isn't an element that says 'business development'. But, I have... I raised this very early on... I raised this last April and said we needed two elements within the academic contract: one was around business development, the other one was around product development... programme development. So, that's being picked up, but we're nowhere near. I would say... funnily enough, despite the reactive nature of our business development and our client acquisition - though some of the work we're doing is aligned with corporate goals - so I think we can tick that box... and more than anything else. And I think they may not call it key account management, but a new approach to business development... so, proactivity definitely has senior management support... and, by that, I mean through the Business School, through the College, to the University. So...

**GH: Interesting. Right, carrying on with the structural aspects here... I've got a continuum of states, if you like, or systems within an organisation: on the one side, you can identify those organisations that have no identifiable key account management system at all... and that will range through an organisation with a part-time system right through perhaps to a fully devolved self-standing, self-supporting divisional unit.**

E: I mean, I think a lot of this is product-driven, you know, rather than service... I'm not convinced that the service sector has got this sorted, but anyway... I would say that we actually had a full-time system at operating unit level when we had the Centre for Management Development as an independent unit, but it wasn't sustainable

because it didn't... well, for two reasons: it wasn't future-proof because it didn't take account of all of the needs of potential clients and it also didn't take account of the capability within the Business School. That's why we've developed a new commercial strategy. And, so, we've unpicked that and I would say that we've got... I wouldn't say ... I'd add a sixth: which is a 'developing system'. I can't say we haven't got an identifiable system... I think it's developing and it probably has elements of all of those. And, I think, what we're going to end up...having come from industry and having come from a business development function over many, many years... I think we're going to end up with something different. I recognise both the corporate and the national account division and the full-time. So, I recognise that in my experience and I can imagine that we'll have something that's different.

**GH: So, would you say it's fair to say there's an aspiration to become more sophisticated in the kind of system that's operating?**

E: Oh, yes. Not only an aspiration... it's part of the implementation plan to the commercial strategy. So, I'll give you an example: one of the 'hows' to turn into a proactive business development is a CRM system. And that only really makes sense when you've got a decent sized and important account.

**GH: Well, in terms of structure, just one more thing and I want to show you McDonald's approach to this... there are five cards here (explains cards 6-10)... so, where would the Business School fit on that kind of continuum?**

E: Well, I actually went to this model when I was thinking about this ABS presentation. I was also thinking about how we might frame a key account approach and, again, the earlier levels of McDonald's model don't encapsulate what business we're in. We're in a high credence service business and the business development process isn't linear. It isn't somebody going out with a kitbag of samples and seeing a purchasing manager and selling it. And I see business development in very simple terms... it's about emerging opportunity and, by that, I mean... if you have... if you can identify opportunity and emerge it and respond to it, you will develop business. And we have an advantage over a product-driven (-led) company in that our relationships are on a very, if you like, intimate level with our potential customers. So, for instance, we can have a relationship as a tutor to a senior manager. We can have a relationship again to a student that has been through our... who's had the life-changing experience here as a young person or even as a life-long learner. And we can have an intimate relationship with a business through research and consultancy. And, so, to put all your business development eggs in the key account manager's basket wouldn't account for that capability or that connection. So, in my ideal model, everybody has the potential to emerge opportunity. So, you have to set it up so that whoever has... whoever's on point in terms of turning that opportunity into reality, has an understanding of that network. If I can give you an example of another constraint we have in our business: academics have a passion about particular subjects... and one of the things I've observed is, in an interaction between an academic and a potential client or potential business opportunity, the opportunity gets narrowed down very quickly. So, somebody who's interested in public sector will automatically talk about the [XXXX] when, in reality, the solution could be an in-company [XXXX]. So, I guess the key account manager's role therefore is to make...

I suppose, guide... that the opportunity can be broadened not narrowed. So, back to McDonald's model...

**GH: So, it would probably fit around here quite comfortably... this cooperative approach?**

E: Yes, I think so, because it's... I don't think we can be in an integrated relationship. Instinctively, I don't think that works because we're not in a supply chain in the conventional way... and I think that's often driven by supply chain connection. The interdependent relationship, although it is important that we are important to each other, again I don't think that can work because there isn't an easy map-up... you know, we don't have the level of sophistication in operations management that a company like [XXXX] might have. So, there's no potential match-up anyway. So, I agree with you... I think it's something around the cooperative relationship and, I guess, that's... yes... I think that's the one I ended up feeling most comfortable with. So...

**GH: So, do you feel that's relevant to the Business School currently or has the Business School actually started to move into that kind of situation from a more basic...?**

E: I don't think it's a move from a more basic relationship. I think it's always been there. I think the issue's about recognising whether... recognising that as a key account management relationship rather than a relationship between academics and particular individuals in organisations.

**GH: Fine. Excellent. Well, that's structure dealt with then and we can move on to something more interesting perhaps... talking about the role or the roles of the key account manager. So, what do you see the role or the roles of the key account manager being?**

E: Well, it's back to emerging opportunity... matching capability. I think that's it really. I think the other aspect of it is - and this is going to sound a little bit unkind - it's to offer a professional approach because again I think, having seen evidence of business development by academics, you can have a power and an emotional connection with that development, but sometimes you can miss the basics... some of the basics around closing the sale or agreeing the next action or covering all the bases or making sure that you understand the real company needs and how the company's structured. So, I see a key account manager having... or key account managers... having more of a professional sales/business development approach. But their real role is emerging opportunity and matching capability, I think.

**GH: OK. Let's do another comparison with the literature and looking at card 11... this is what the literature says are the typical roles of the key account manager. So, cast your eye down that, if you would, and see whether you agree or possibly disagree.**

E: Well, it's very interesting. I think... certainly... it doesn't go without saying because I didn't say it... but, certainly, in terms of growth... yes, of course... aligning growth to business objectives is a key role. And, again, coordination and tailoring of

offer... I think that's an additional level to emerging opportunity and matching capability, is what I said. I don't think about this... I think facilitating multi-level exchange processes... that's almost as if they're the only ones that can do that. And I think it might... facilitating is a bit strong for some key accounts because... actually it might just be recording them or mapping them or knowing about them...

**GH: Or just putting people in contact with the right person?**

E: Yes. I think that's right. Facilitating is a bit strong because I don't think it's... they're not just the pivotal connection. Definitely not an intermediary. Definitely not an intermediary. I think that, for me... it's a real challenge, you know, for a business school - an organisation like this one - to develop a structure that does all the things that we need it to do in terms of business development. If you have an intermediary station, that's actually quite... that's probably, if you like, the easiest call. You can say: 'Everything has to go through this person regardless. If you deal with [XXXX], you must deal with [XXXX]'. And I think that restricts opportunity. And, also, it doesn't really take account of our sophistication or, really, the changing world that we live in. So, again I go back to another word which is about 'enabler'... so, because an intermediary can also be a 'blocker'. So, I think the key account manager is like the grease in the wheel. So, knowledge manager? No, because I think the knowledge is held... it depends what you mean by knowledge actually? I think knowledge of the current state of play with the key account. So, for instance, who's doing what, where... what's going on in terms of the offer... who's involved, yes. But, in terms of knowledge around what this account means to us and the level of our connection, that should be held as an organisation rather than a manager. Promoting the key account concept? I think that's the role of senior management... in the Business School at least.

**GH: Even if they don't know anything about the concept... it needs a champion somewhere perhaps to...?**

E: Well, I see myself as... I see myself as the champion, as being the commercial cuckoo in the nest. But, a key account manager themselves has got to understand their role... and, if we're talking about academics, then they need to understand it, then promote it. But, yes, I guess... yes, I suppose they are promoting it.

**GH: You touched on this idea about knowledge and what the key account manager should know... and should know a lot about the other organization possibly... what other knowledge do you think the key account manager should have to do the job effectively?**

E: I think there's two issues there: I think you need... we need to talk about process and systems to capture and store and disseminate that knowledge, so we're looking at a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system. I would like to think... if I go back to my previous experience... and I think about [XXXX]... I probably knew - and people in my team knew about - they knew the type of customer that [XXXX] attracted. They almost knew enough about ... as much about [XXXX] as [XXXX] themselves... and, in some cases, more. So, in simple terms, they should know who the key buyers are, they should know how the company's structured, how does it structure itself to do business. They should know about the environment in which

they're working. They should know about the pressures and tensions of dealing with a company of that type. But, particularly, they should know what the key strategy of that company is and what their needs are in terms of what we've now coined 'educational intervention'. So... and then they should also know, I guess, what is known by the Business School already... so, the historical relationship, if you like. So... it's almost as if a key account manager can sit at a Board meeting and know enough to answer a question.

**GH: OK. Well, if you look at card 13 here, there's some identification of things that the key account manager should know about the organisation that they're dealing with, but also some internal... your own company's processes and procedures possibly... so...**

E: Yes, I've missed that. That's very true. I think the other thing I would add... because a lot of this is... I keep having a vision of a key account manager with a kitbag, you know, with a pilot's case... going in. And, you know, having done it, it's quite a comfortable vision. But this is different and I think what is missing here is about... it's not just about products and services, it's about what might be possible. And that's where a network inside the Business School's crucial. You have to connect with your colleagues... and so much is done in, if you like, in fast thinking - in making connections - and so it's beholden on the Business School to have a cadence (?)... to have a way of exposing those opportunities that everybody can take part in - which we've developed. I mean, one of the things that I introduced... well, [XXXX] introduced the cadence (?)... but the meeting that's mine as part of that cadence (?) is the commercial strategy... [XXXX]... and there's a standing item of that agenda which is 'Current Business'. And we do... I think we should add, when we've identified our key accounts a bit better, where we're up to in terms of service reviews. But, if you don't have that... if you don't have that, if you like... how do you describe it... mechanism to expose connections and opportunities for a high credence service then, you know, you might understand what the current products and services are, but... hey!... you wouldn't understand how you can connect up.

**GH: So, it's the knowledge of internal company processes and procedures and the products or services being offered?**

E: Well, it's not just products... it's opportunity. So, for instance, it's about me having a conversation with [XXXX] this morning (or this afternoon!) who's a new professor - not quite joined - and understanding that she has a passion for [XXXX] developments. So, it's just that... and then it's logging that so, when I'm next in front of a client that wants to open a plant in [XXXX] and they need some research... now, that's very, very difficult to capture and, so, what you need in a business school like this is a culture where business and the development of business is at the forefront... is something that you talk to somebody in the kitchen over coffee about.

**GH: A sharing of ideas and opportunities, as you say?**

E: Yes. And it's just in the same way as you have a sharing of student experience and what you might do to improve a student experience, you say: 'Oh, by the way, did you get that call from so and so?' And I think it's... it is about a cultural shift here. I have to say there's a big section of the Business School - I'd say a discrete section of

the Business School - that have been extremely active in business development and that's their dialogue. And the challenges - and part of my role which is to integrate across the piece - is to make sure that dialogue doesn't just get restricted to the few... it gets spread out. And it's starting because people are... people are starting to talk in those terms.

**GH: Well, moving onto the skills and qualities then of key account managers, what skills and qualities do you see them ideally having?**

E: I have them all written down... let me just... let me see...

**GH: There are many of them presumably?**

E: Well, this is... this is my slide which I'm going to refer to because I did some thinking about this before. I think successful marketers... I didn't call them key account managers because... but that's what I meant because it says 'key account management' in the title... are client-focused, have the right knowledge, understand the client problem and the client, follow through and go above and beyond. And some of the characteristics that enable them to be successful are their above-average intelligence, they're motivated by achievement and recognition, they have an interest in and an ability to solve problems, they have communication skills, organisational skills, integrity, empathy and a desire to be autonomous or self-starting... and they're corporate players. Now, my premise was: all of those you could say about an academic... and I think, even the corporate player, you could. So, in terms of the skills required to be a key account manager, those are the... that's, if you like, the attitudes around...

**GH: It's a fairly big list, isn't it... and some of those obviously come up on card 12. So, I just wonder whether there's anything there that you think we've missed or....?**

E: Yes, yes... that's right. That's right... I missed selling skills. Probably, yes...

**GH: That's interesting because I think it throws up potential problems for academics who don't regard themselves perhaps as salespeople. They worry about that skill perhaps not being there.**

E: I think... and I think they're right to, because... not because there is a... look, for me... I don't think you... where shall I start? In terms of selling skills, OK, you can read a book and you can learn how to be a double glazing salesman quite easily... and you can read your script and you can do a fast close, or whatever they're called... and, in my experience, having never had sales training in my life... actually, if you're interested in people and you can communicate ideas, and you have those qualities that are described, you can actually do all the things that are necessary to sell. And selling has always had a bad name because you often get... its almost an approach, it's sort of a push approach rather than a pull approach: you know, I've got this in my kit and you're going to buy it whatever, you know, whatever happens. And academics are right not to wish to associate themselves with salesmen. I don't associate myself with a salesman but, what I would say is that, with a few pointers and a bit of opening of mind about opportunity, academics make excellent salespeople because they have one

thing that the double glazing salesman doesn't have: and they have credibility. And, in terms of negotiation, the other thing I think that... the reason that academics don't like negotiation... and they don't, as a rule... is because they haven't got the parameters in which to work. If they understood that, you know, you couldn't offer a consultancy project for less than £1500 a day and then you could go: 'Well, actually, that's our guidelines and we need to do that for full economic costing blah, blah, blah...' If they had the justification... and I think part of the problem is that university business schools are not set up to negotiate... they haven't got all of the bits of toolkit that you would have taking tableware to [XXXX].

**GH: So, negotiation almost happens in isolation sometimes?**

E: Yes. I think, for me, there isn't anything to stop an academic being good at negotiation... they may need to call it something else. I think there is a fear... and this came out in an incident yesterday. I did a presentation or a workshop with the HRM Division and somebody I respect enormously was talking about the difference between academic and commercial... and this has come across before... it's almost as if 'commercial' is a dirty word... and I think it's that they can't value what they do in monetary terms. It has to be valued in higher level terms. My response to that is very simple: we are actually not a profit organisation - we don't have shareholders. We are a charity by Act of Parliament. So, the higher cause in negotiating the best deal is that, if we make more surplus, it gets reinvested in the student experience and our personal development. And, so, that's all they need, I think... they need a higher cause.

**GH: OK. Interesting. You talked earlier on that key account managers should be well-educated perhaps...**

E: Yes, I did.

**GH: ... and articulate. These are some other requirements that I've identified in the literature. Perhaps one or two here might be a little bit contentious maybe?**

E: You know, I think... I'm going to use a very old-fashioned word and it's not... it's not meant to have a value attached to it... the thing about a key account manager in our sector in terms of - as I keep going on about this high credence service - is they've got to have class. And, what I mean is... I probably mean credibility and the ability to work across all levels. So, that isn't just about, you know, being able to hold your knife and fork in the right way, it's actually about having, I don't know, an approach to people that I think you can only describe as 'class' really which is... you know, they treat them as people, they can work with people... that you can put them down in a miners' gala in World's End or wherever they've got mines left and, you know, a black tie event in Mansion House. That's what I mean.

**GH: Is that something which comes with age and experience possibly... or not?**

E: I've had some very young key account managers who had that in spades and they weren't that old. They just had that as part of their skill set. I think you need to be... I think intelligence is really important. I really do. I think it's... but, for us, what's more important is credibility. You know, when you talk about blended learning you really have to know what it is. You really do, I think, and...

**GH: So, do you think the academic side of us adds to that credibility?**

E: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I think the... for us, broad experience helps because we are working with such a diverse group of key accounts. It's not like a manufacturer working with a retail distribution channel where you've got... where there's a lot of similarity between how organisations are structured and the type of people we deal with. For us, we can be one minute in Canary Wharf with [XXXX] and the next minute we can be in, I don't know, [XXXX] or [XXXX] or we can be in an SME. So... oh, we can be with [XXXX] or whatever, but, I mean... this is straying off the point slightly but I think, yes, having a broad experience... but it's more than that. It's also about having business experience... knowing what they mean by 'lean enterprise'... you know, understanding some of their issues. Maybe that does come with experience and age, but I do challenge that. Marketer? Can be a hindrance actually... (laughter)... it depends which side of the marketing mix they're concentrating on...

**GH: It sounds like people are constantly identifying that this might be a slightly contentious issue... so you don't need to be a marketer to be a key account manager?**

E: No. I don't think you do, to be honest. I am one but again, in my experience, if you've worked at the wrong end of the mix it can actually be a hindrance. Yes, I think that covers it.

**GH: Well then, moving on to the last part of the interview... it's around reward and remuneration for key account managers. So, currently, is there a particular system of reward and remuneration in operation in the Business School?**

E: No... and it's absolutely essential! I'll tell you what there is: there is a reward and remuneration by default... or even by stealth. And I'll tell you what it is: it's called over-contract payments... and it's called negotiation for time. So, I think I said that earlier... one of the things I highlighted with our [XXXX] team very early on was the need to have a budget for business development and a budget for product development. There is talk... not just talk... there is a proposal at [XXXX] here, at the university level, on incentivisation for academics and I think that's long overdue. I don't think it's around the conventional incentivisation in terms of you get X amount of sales and you get this bonus. I think one of the things that would drive... improve our take-up of key account management would be if academics could really see that it would help them develop their careers and that it would have an equal status to perhaps research or publications. And I think that needs to be recognised at university level. I don't think the Business School can change the culture.

**GH: So, it's not just financial...?**

E: No. Definitely not.

**GH: ... there are a lot of qualitative factors... personal...**

E: Yes. And I think the other aspect of it is that if you scratch an academic they're either a teacher or a researcher. Some are both but, if you do, you can do that... they



either want to communicate and teach or they want to research... and action is a high motivation in having contacts with clients. And that's particularly true of a former polytechnic like us where our DNA's work-based learning. So, if you are a teacher that is in tune with our DNA, the thing that you really want to do is get onto that factory floor. And, if you're a researcher, you want to talk to the people that are running the factory. So...

**GH: If I show you card 16, these are some suggestions for how key account managers could be rewarded or remunerated... perhaps there are some things here that we haven't talked about yet that could be...?**

E: I think, for me... if you like, I see salary as a hygiene factor. I think it's one of those things... it's not the deal breaker... and I see it in terms of equality. So, in other words, that... and that's been a big issue here... it's becoming less so. So, in other words, in terms of payment and reward structure, what you want is a clear, transparent grade. So, if you're a key account manager, then you're on X grade. That's the first thing. I think the other incentivisation which isn't on here - which is unusual for an academic institution - you need the tools and kit to do a key account manager's job. So, it's things like having a laptop computer and a mobile phone and things like that. I think there is a sort of barrier to whether they'll... whether academics will be able to be key account managers because they think they'll need some training. So, I mean, I think that's... that's not conventional training, they just need to be made aware of where their skills actually do map to a key account manager and add a little bit. Yes, I think the biggest thing that... again if I think about having run sales teams in the past... the thing that probably undermines good quality key account management - one of the things - is that if they make a decision in the field that then isn't backed up, because then you loose face... and I don't think anybody's come across that yet except in the international arena. But, yes, I would imagine they need responsibility with authority. Status/recognition, I've discussed. Promotion, I've discussed because that's part of the same thing. Involvement in the strategic planning process? I think that's a given because, if you are a key account manager, you should be contributing to thinking around, you know, service. Full access to senior managers? I think they'd have that anyway. And bonus payment related to reduction in key account management costs? I think what we need is a bonus structure within the Business School full stop. I don't think it should just be for key account managers because I don't think they're the only contributors... the drivers of success... for the Business School. So, that covers that. I think I added one and covered it with the rest.

**GH: Following on hot on the heels of payment and reward structures, which I suppose is a kind of performance measurement... so are key account managers currently measured in terms of their performance? If, so, how?**

E: Well, can I just... we've just started this actually. I'm used to a performance review process as being a key element of implementing strategy. And I'm used to a goals and objectives approach: quarterly reviews leading to a 12 month review. And what I've done... and it really has just started... the people that are directly reporting to me - so, I'm directly line managing - I have performance-reviewed and we've set goals and objectives against business development, strategy and planning, process improvement, personal objectives and any others. And the third-stream dominant academics we've started to do joint PDRs with the relevant ATL. So... and I've done

three so far. So, yes is the answer. The missing gap is... reward, because we can't link reward to the PDR process here, but there are two ways that I would seek to add reward in: one is around the personal... really beefing up the personal development objectives and the support in personal development... that's number one. And number two is around over-contract payments. If I can use the over-contract payment as an incentive, I will. But, I have to say, the biggest impediment, I think, to having academics really go for it is the academic contract... but, I mean, I think you know that... (laughter)...

**GH: In terms of measures of performance, I've got card 17 here, with an overview of the key issues that crop up in the literature... and some of which we've discussed again already... any additional thoughts on some of these?**

E: Well, I've... I've got a variety of some of these within the individual PDRs, but the one that's through all of them is performance against job specification. And I've added in a few around account setting up and number and strategic importance of key accounts. And we have a measure that we're going to introduce against our commercial strategy which is around repeat business and keeping existing clients... but that isn't individual measures, that's a sort of joint measure. But I'd say, for individuals that are acting as key account managers at the moment, the key one is performance against job specification. And there's also... it's not here... performance against strategy. So, the strategy is mapped into their PDRs... and none of the others, really... but, it's very early days. We will be getting there but it's very early days.

**GH: You definitely feel the need to opt for multiple measures of performance as opposed to one overriding...?**

E: Yes, I do. Do you... do you know why? Because I think people are different and I think the roles... although they're adopting the same roles, they're doing it in slightly different ways and they're at slightly different stages. But, most importantly, I think it allows me to set objectives... it allows me to implement the strategy if I set objectives and, by then setting objectives, I'm measuring performance. So, yes... I wouldn't... it's very tempting to say 'profit per member of staff', but I think we're in such a complex business - at the moment anyway - and there's so much we don't know that I think you have to have that multiple approach... multi-faceted approach.

**GH: Well, just to round up then... I think we've covered most issues... but I just want to tease out any last remaining obstacles or barriers that might get in the way of key account management becoming a useable system or technique in the Business School?**

E: I think, for me, there's... I mean, I've mentioned the academic contract... and it is a barrier. It really is a key barrier because it uses up academics' time on a metric that, in some respects, isn't very fair. So, I'll give you an example: if somebody's a module leader or programme leader they can rack up time, if you like, against them being a module leader or programme leader. There's no incentive for them to improve what they do. They could be the type of programme leader that hasn't... that digs out the notes from 1963. And, at the same time, a programme leader that is really actively developing business can be probably doing more hours than they are able to claim. So, I think that, for me, is the key impediment. I think there is still a bit of a cultural

barrier. I really do, because I think sales in itself and business development and negotiation and all of those things are kind of... not... it's almost as if they attack academic integrity. However, having come from a Russell Group university - I had four years at [XXXX] - it's a much stronger barrier up there than it is here... that's for sure... even in the Business School. And I think the other barrier really is the allocation of resources to support key account management, all of which I think we're addressing. And I guess that's it, I suppose... for the moment.

**GH: Well, card 18 picks up on one or two of those things, obviously, but there might be one or two other barriers there that you can identify.**

E: I think, for me, we've... the cultural thing I think I've covered. I think we have got a commitment to key account management. It depends... it depends... how far that's embedded beyond the senior management is difficult to say. We're starting to get a planned approach... I wouldn't say we've got there, as you know... and we are starting to be proactive but, you know... it's almost acorns. I think I'm the champion, but I think I have others. I think the people that have worked in the corporate arena... people like [XXXX] and [XXXX] and [XXXX]... they may not call themselves key account managers but they are champions of that approach to life. No, I think... I don't think about the... I think we haven't really structured... we haven't really bottomed out our structure to key account management but, again, I don't think that's far away. I think it's more... instead of being inadequate financial rewards, it's resource allocation to it. And that... I really mean it in simple terms, you know... what the University doesn't have is they don't have a policy on cars. So, you've got quite a lot of people doing quite a lot of mileage... and, yes, they can claim it by miles but, you know, in industry you'd have a car allowance and also you would... you would have all the kit and caboodle: you would have the laptop and you would have the, you know, the PDA and I think that's...

**GH: The parking?**

E: Yes, exactly... parking! I could do 45 minutes on that alone!

**GH: What about staff turnover... and key people disappearing at inappropriate moments in the development of a relationship?**

E: Well, do you know... I think we've had... we've done that... been there, got the t-shirt! I think one of the reasons we had a freefall in commercial income, which we did until [XXXX] joined and I joined [XXXX], was because key people had left. You know, it was like the Marie Celeste at Park Row... it really was, I mean. Now, I think it will be less of a problem. I think there would... there is almost now... the reason it would be less of a problem is almost now an aspiration among other academics that a) they want to and b) they can join this party. I think prior to that, with the way it was structured in CMD, that it was almost a closed shop. I don't think that's the case anymore. So, I think, prior to the changes that we've undertaken, yes, we probably were hurt by a couple of losses and we were very lucky that [XXXX] [XXXX] and [XXXX] stayed... in particular those three in particular. But, obviously, no. You know, I don't see it. I will see... I think process is what enables you to do your job. And I think the biggest problem we have here is not bureaucracy, it's lack of process.

**GH: Right. OK.**

E: So, a bit of ad hoc-ness.

**GH: Any remaining personal fears or concerns about the long-term viability of key account management in an academic environment?**

E: I think of... for me... it's a well-trodden path for me in my career to date. I spent four years at [XXXX], part of which was looking at branding in services... marketing in services and higher education in particular. There's nothing I've seen here that suggests that a key account management approach will not work. My fear is that we won't get, I guess, the recognition that it's important because that will limit its effectiveness. If I can get the academics... if I can get it recognised as a key part of the academic progression - career-progression - then I think we're in business.

**GH: Well, finally, then these are some of the fears and concerns that key account managers themselves have expressed... so, I wonder whether any of those might strike a chord?**

E: I think 'lack of status within the company' and I think 'poorly defined job description'. I don't think 'poorly defined'... I think we just need... we just need to balance what a programme leader does against... yes, I think we just need to have it a little bit more explicit. No, I don't see the trust issue as being a problem either on client or senior managers. Again, I think there may be a little bit about being given enough time to build relationships, but I think that's... I think we have a fast route to depth. You know, if I compare this with the commercial world that I've been working in... you know, it takes a long time to build up the depth that somebody can get within a week here. 'Having to manage too many accounts'? I think that can be a problem when you've got only so many people that are able to do it... but I would imagine some people would say that here. I don't think... I think the relationships are close with customers - with clients - not because they are managing them as key accounts but just because of the nature of the beast. But, again, I don't think that's a fear... I think that's just... and it is a given. That's about it really. That's my take on that.

**GH: Super. Anything else to add before we finish?**

E: No, except that when I gave this presentation to a group of fellow business schools there was quite a lukewarm reception to whether we could introduce key account management within a business school. But it didn't... it hasn't actually deterred me.

**GH: Thanks very much for your time, [XXXX]. I appreciate it.**

# **Appendix 9**

## **Interview 6 transcript**

## DBA Interview 6

**GH: Right, thanks for coming to talk to me, [XXXX]. Please, just start off by telling me something about your job... a typical day in your job.**

F: Well... first things first. I am - whether you know or not - currently, I've been with the university for [XXXX]. So, out of higher education... I came from a [XXXX] background and, sort of, sales, key account management, business development... that's been my background, if you like. So, relationship building and trying to maintain that in different markets: [XXXX]... things like that. So, the transferable skill is in talking to people about a product or service of some description and hanging on to that concept and going from there. In terms of a day in the life of the role, that's difficult to quantify at the moment for two different reasons: one because I'm discovering it and two because it's evolving a little bit too, as a university - as a business school. We've got... I mean, I don't know exactly where you fit in *per se* in terms of what you do. Obviously, we've got a commercial strategy, headed by the [XXXX], [XXXX]. And I work closely with her - or under her - very specifically really to try and implement that strategy throughout the Business School. As we speak, much of my role is actually understanding the gravitas of that and what that means and it's actually the difference between me being at the coalface in my old account management/salesman head and me being at a sort of higher strategic level looking at how we can look at different markets... you know, how to get into those different markets. So, that really is the premise of the role.

**GH: Right. So, your role then is largely looking at building up relationships with external clients?**

F: Yes, but corporate external clients specifically.

**GH: Is that a term the university uses: 'corporate clients'? Or do you look at them in different ways?**

F: It's a term I use. And, yes... it is a term the university uses. Yes, I mean... we talk about 'in-company'. And, you know, for want of a better word, that's exactly what it is. We've got a range of clients that we, you know, want to deal with and, obviously, there are certain clients that we... let me put it another way... we've got a range of clients that we do deal with and a range of clients that we want to deal with. And it's making that distinction between keeping those, from an account management perspective, happy and a result of that at the moment, for example, is me trying to undertake a number of service reviews, for want of a better word, of those key accounts to find out how they've been operating, whether those customers are happy in those scenarios that they've been, you know, operating under... whether there's - from the back-end anyway - anything we can be doing to enhance that relationship. And also, just perhaps something that hasn't come to light prior to that meeting, is whether there are any other opportunities that will be in the forefront because that's something that, you know, certainly me as an individual - or my role really - is designed to constantly look at what's next and what's really potential. So that's, kind of, again another key objective.

**GH: Right. So, we're talking about 'corporate clients', 'in-company'... does the Business School use the term 'key account' or 'key account management'?**

F: Yes, it does. I mean... when we say the 'Business School', one thing I've been very aware of in my joining the Business School... certainly prior to Christmas - and it feels like we've only been back for a week although it hasn't been, you know - but certainly prior to that, is that [XXXX]'s kind of role - and what that means to this Business School - is change. And, however we may have thought about things in the past and however... let's skip that I'm actually using 'we' in this context quite naturally now... but, you know, the fact is that, however it may have been considered in the past... and I get the impression, you know... and I'm being very flippant when I say this kind of stuffy public sector, you know: 'What are customers?' You know... that kind of attitude. And we've gone from whatever that may have been into a very, very specific: 'These are the companies that we should be looking at. This is the area that we want to be working in. We need minimum order value of this and... you know... and we've got to be here by 2010, you know'. So, it's very much more targeted, much more specific, much more structured in terms of objectives and outcomes.

**GH: OK. So, what would you say this thing 'key account management' is all about, if you were to offer a definition of it... a thumbnail definition? What would you say 'key account management' is?**

F: OK. For me... and I hope this doesn't differ from what my colleagues would believe... key account management, first and foremost, is about... if we look at the element of 'key account', it's about establishing which of your accounts are the cash cows, if you like... from my point of view. And therefore that is really what identifies those as being the key accounts that you have. On a softer level, maintaining that relationship between those accounts and continuing that relationship over a longer period and looking for future things and keeping soft things and... you know... really interacting with them on a slightly peripheral level, if you like, is really, really important... in a much more specific way than your average 'one-hit wonder' type deal that comes along such as a research project that may have a beginning, a middle and an end, you know. We're talking about customers who... let's take a very specific example like [XXXX] or [XXXX], the [XXXX] chain. You know, these are key accounts... these are accounts that constantly provide a revenue stream for the university but have management structures that we need to become close to to understand the changes that take place with them...

**GH: OK. If I could show you card 1 here... this is a standard definition - or as near as you can get to a standard definition - I just wonder what your thoughts are on that particular definition? Do you think it's suitable to the kind of job that goes on around here in the Business School... or do you see problems with it?**

F: No. I don't see problems with it... let's break it down... key account management is aimed at the biggest and most important of ones customers? True, in my opinion. Offers special treatment in the fields of marketing, sales and service administration? Now... that's the only hazy bit, isn't it? Offers special treatment? It depends on what one calls 'special treatment' because, in actual fact, in my view, if you've got a... if

you develop a core competence that involves the treatment of your key account... your key customers... or your key accounts... then what becomes special should be transmitted across all. Therefore your new... and this is maybe a bit academic even though I don't have the right to be perhaps from, you know, a university standpoint but, you know, it's about best practice, isn't it? And if you develop a way in which you can deal with customers that makes them feel special, this is where you get your hook from your sale. So, for example, I had a conversation - to be specific with [XXXX] this morning - about a student that we had... well, actually, it wasn't about a student, what it was about was a new opportunity. I saw an opportunity to find out who the right people were to talk to about management development programmes specifically... and tried to demonstrate how we'd worked with them in the past. And, in order to do that, I had to talk about other clients that we'd worked with because they had no experience of me personally or of that situation. So, to bring it back to this definition, they aren't a key account but, if we can demonstrate to them how we would treat them in the event of them being an account of ours then hopefully they'll see that synergy.

**GH: OK. That's fine. So, thinking about something you touched on just a few moments ago, that there are some companies that you do business with and some companies that you'd like to do business with... I think that raises the issue because, if you think about what is a key account, I think it begs a number of important questions... how do you determine a key account? What criteria might you use to say: 'That company there is a key account and that company's not.' So, from your experience so far of the Business School, what criteria do you think it uses to identify key accounts... either current or potential?**

F: There's no question that... unfortunately that question has been answered quite specifically by 'revenue'. You know, we're not talking about targets as in a target customer... we're talking about a key account. And, in that way, you know... in the strictness of this definition... we would have to say that the key accounts would be broken down very simply by what they've spent with us and how important, financially, those particular accounts are to us in terms of maintaining the same level of revenue moving forward. There may be other circumstances where we can see that a particular customer who we feel should be a key account but just doesn't happen to have spent a great deal of money with us... and therefore we look at ways in which we can strengthen that relationship.

**GH: I notice you mentioned 'softer' issues earlier on... hard issues and softer issues... would some of those softer issues be important in determining whether somebody's a key account or not?**

F: Yes... I don't know. We might go off track a little bit in that regard though because, for me, when I say softer issues, what I'm thinking of actually is not missing the bigger picture with specific individuals because, obviously, we're talking about relationships. Now... if I'm aware that such and such's child's just broken their arm or something, you know... then it wouldn't be a harm to mention that to find out how they're getting on as opposed to being Mr. 'Corporate and Not Caring'. That's a softer issue... I don't know if that's necessarily in the books but it's certainly something that I think is important to do with rapport building with individuals. Now, outside of that, it may be that, in exploring those softer issues, you then find that you've got things in



common with that particular client that you didn't realise that you had. And it could eventually be those things actually that keep you in the right place than your corporate ethos together.

**GH: Interesting, because if I could show you card 3 here... this is what the literature on key account management suggests are typical criteria for determining whether an account is strategically important. So, I just wonder whether you'd like to have a look at those and cast an opinion on those. Certainly, you mentioned 'sales volume'... you know, sales and revenue as being an important issue...**

F: OK. So, the question here is what? Do I agree with these statements?

**GH: Do you think any of these are currently being used by the Business School or they have potential to be used possibly?**

F: Yes... absolutely. I think all of these are very relevant to the Business School if I think of any of a number of accounts. You know, sales volume is important. The level of profitability that we're going to get from those future clients is important. Resources? Yes. Age of that relationship can be very important... you don't want to destroy... but in my case, very specifically, you know, I've come along here... so, these have already been in place, so I don't want to come along and then offer a completely different, you know, outlook perhaps. Suppliers share of customer's purchases? Not sure I necessarily understand that?

**GH: Well, it's just if the Business School represented a significant part of the business that a customer did... was a major part of the customer's portfolio to do business with the Business School.**

F: I see. I'm struggling to think of an example that currently exists of that although I know that, you know, in terms of future opportunities I know that there was talk - for example, [XXXX] - they have a requirement... now, I can be talking out of turn here and I'm not the right person to be specific about this...but, in a round ball park kind of way, they have a requirement to do scenario planning, you know, for disasters and so on... and they've probably been very poor at that in the past. I think there's good evidence of that. One of our Doctors, if you will, has suggested looking at that very specifically and trying to do something about that, you know... and therefore we might approach that management structure to discuss that. And that in itself could turn into a new revenue stream and something very significant will come from it.

**GH: So, [XXXX] would appear to regard Nottingham Business School as a significant partner, if you like, in its portfolio?**

F: I'm sure we'd like to think so and that would be a place that we would desire to be, you know... and the way we would do that, one would think, is by demonstrating our value to them. So, if we put significant management through our particular form of management training - and that's had some sort of profitability for them - then you'd think the proof would be in the pudding there.

**GH: OK. Fine. Things like the attractiveness of links with certain customers... is that a criterion that's used or could be used?**

F: I think so... mostly for making lateral connections in my case than new opportunities. Again, in the same circumstance where I was talking to [XXXX], if we had [XXXX] as a very strong customer of ours then you would think there would be certain connections between the two... synergies that we might have shared or experiences that, you know... we wouldn't need to reinvent the wheel as such... that isn't the case unfortunately. So, yes, there is a certain level of attractiveness of links with certain customers... it would be good for us, for example, to have... I don't know... you know, the Bank of England, for example. It would be a thing that separates us as it does with the likes of Warwick and Nottingham Business School, you know, in terms of the public perception of the quality of that particular place.

**GH: Sure. The last point there is about the key account manager and whether key account managers have sufficient autonomy, if you like, to go with the gut feeling... a subjective judgment about whether a key account is right to deal with. Has that traditionally been the case here or could you see that becoming the case?**

F: It's very difficult for me to answer that question... just because of my lack of experience here... but, I would say though... I believe it is... I would like to think that it is possible for me to have, you know... let me start again. I've come from an environment, in many of the roles that I've had in the past, where I've learned very quickly that you have to earn the right to have an opinion. And, in the same way, my judgment about what I do with my time and whom I target is mine... within the constructs of our strategy. So, it would do me well to concentrate on where we're trying to be than spending time where we aren't trying to be. However, if I were to make a link with an organisation by the by that I felt could be nurtured and turned into something else then it wouldn't harm the Business School, in my view, for me to spend a little bit of time trying to cultivate that. The way that that manifests itself actually is that every new contact that I speak to I treat as though they are a potential new opportunity... and that's not, you know, business development 101... that's just, you know, how I approach everything because you never know... and I'll give you an example of that too: I had a conversation because of some... a lean leadership seminar that will be taking place next week whereby we were talking to certain local government organisations, if you can call them that, about the invitations that had been sent and trying to find out if they were coming along and things like that... no, they weren't coming in this particular case, but whilst I'm at it let me talk to you about what you currently do, I'm curious. And that's led to a meeting whereby we can sit down and talk about that in more full detail. Now, if I had the attitude that I was just there for that singular purpose then that's the end of it and there'd be nothing more to talk about. So, that's only a part of, you know, the future of key account management.

**GH: Sounds good. Talking about the approach that the Business School takes to key account management... it seems that in your appointment, in the appointment of [XXXX], for example, that it's starting to pick up some momentum, if you like... what other signs could you look at to say that the Business School takes a more strategic approach to building relationships with**

**external clients? Are there criteria that you could put your finger on... and that would say that that's evidence for a strategic approach to building relationships?**

F: Yes, I'm afraid there probably are many and, when I'm more on my game, I'll wax lyrical about these for sure. But I think that, in the short-term, where we place ourselves in the public persona, I think, is the most immediate and obvious one. I've noticed other universities advertising on television, for example. Now, we don't, as far as I know. But, also, I appreciate that, having a look at the way we look from a corporate brochure perspective but where those... where that material's marketed and who we find ourselves, you know, getting out to and what networking events we can be associated with... I'd better make clear of that now that I've said it... because I've forgotten to make a contact call to a networking organisation that I have been meaning to get back in bed with for some time... because in that circumstance you find yourself around a number of people from industry who just happen to have, you know, all sorts of other concerns of their own. And, to learn about their concerns, it may actually throw up something that we can do about that. We're in the business now, here, of educational intervention which... I don't know how much of this you will have assimilated... and, if I take that on board fully, is the difference between what I'm doing now compared to where I was in the past, then that really does mean that we're going in to try and solve these problems of business and understand what those problems are in order to come up with solutions. I hope that answers your question.

**GH: OK. It partly answers it because, if you look at card 4, again those are criteria that suggest an organisation is adopting a strategic approach to key account management. So, which of those is currently being incorporated into the Business School approach or which are not?**

F: OK. Let's look at them. Key account management is planned and proactive? Definitely planned... most certainly proactive because we're not waiting for business to come to us. Adequately resourced? That's a bit of a 'how long's a piece of string?' there really. I'm a resource... difficult for me to answer that but, you know, there's a start. I think, from an overall university perspective, yes, there is resource there. Whether it's adequate or not... I'd like to have a golf day at the Belfry and invite everybody that I can think of... but, you know, could we pay for that? Goals aligned with corporate goals? Certainly... it's the only way that I can prove my worth. Has the senior management support? Most certainly. Customer portfolio analysis undertaken? Much more so actually than perhaps previously. It's one of my personal goals really to break down a lot more profiling. And, if there was a bit more resource, I think I'd be spoilt and say, you know: 'Wouldn't it be great if I had somebody that could do that for me?', because, you know, it's not my forte and, so, you know, how much can you really get done in a day? A gripe! Anyway... regular planning meetings held with customers? In the process... and everything that's to do with the account management - certainly new business - and, maybe this is specific to your research and we're talking very much specifically about account management here... but it's an area of my role and not *the* role, otherwise I'd be an account manager or a sales rep and that would be the end of it. So, regular planning meetings are planned, scheduled and, sort of, occurring all the time frankly. I've got another one tomorrow. Key account manager position has status? Yes, certainly... because I've heard a great deal here about how we need a business developer... we're not business developers, you

know. Actually, people don't realise... they are business developers; but they just don't see themselves as business developers. You know, I've sat in meetings with an academic and I've seen the value that I have in the room by asking just one or two questions that either are missed or are not being asked for reasons that are above and beyond me. Yes? Confers responsibility and authority? Yes, I guess so. That's for somebody else to say but I think so. I mean, I haven't actually taken that on board as much as I should here, frankly, I'm told, but, you know... I always think, like I said, earning the right to have an opinion means proving the proof's in the pudding. Five months in, I'd like to be saying, you know: 'I brought this in.' Therefore I can say... yes, that deserves some respect. At the moment, you know, I'm looking at accounts that have been set up and I'm, trying to operate them...

**GH: Well, talking about this strategic approach then that the Business School is taking, if you have a scale of 1-10... say, 1 was no system at all... no strategic approach at all... 10 was having a wonderful, sophisticated approach... on that scale of 1-10 where would you put the Business School at the moment?**

F: I'd say 5, yes? Now, I could say more... and I could say less, but it depends on who I'm comparing myself with. And, since I've got no comparator, in the context of your question, I would say 5 because they are... there are things in place... we have got direction and we are trying to achieve those goals. I only say 5 and not 6 or 7 because how close we are to achieving those goals depends on so many other different things that perhaps haven't been as well thought out as the strategy... as how what we want.

**GH: OK. Yes. That's fine. If I could just talk about or two other structural issues then before leaving it... this is one particular take on the structure of key account management within an organisation and works like a kind of continuum, if you can identify that, at one side of the continuum there's no identifiable system of key account management in place... then running through a part-time system where perhaps key account managers have other jobs to do - apart from key account management - right through to perhaps a national account division, which is a kind of self-standing, self-supporting unit of its own... a kind of business unit within the company. So, on that scale, if you like, from no identifiable system up... where would you rate the Business School at the moment?**

F: Very good. I say very good because it can't be 1... we do have an identifiable system. I'm not part-time, I'm full-time in this scenario and so we get into that realm. Corporate level system/centralised function? Yes, I think that's right where we are... actually... because we are... we don't have a national division as such. But, then again, we do because obviously we communicate with five hundred organisations in the world and across forty countries, which is what we predominantly talk about. That being the case, then... you know... how we develop business doesn't necessarily change... and how we communicate what we do...it's communicated to all of them. So, we are a national, in that way... but again it's not, you know... it's not immediately per se the main crux of it but we certainly...

**GH: But there's certainly been some movement on that scale more towards the top end?**

F: Yes, for sure.

**GH: OK. Just one other structural thing then... I want to show you five cards now, to pick up a model from McDonald... (explanation of cards 6-10 follows)... now I know that it's difficult to try to identify what's happening with the Business School and its relationships, but - on that kind of 5 point scale - where would you see the Business School fitting in to the kind of key account management relationship?**

F: Interestingly, Gary, it's not as hard as you think. The reason why is because on Friday I had this very conversation in that this is probably where I see myself... (basic relationship)... and shouldn't, yes? Now, this is me being completely honest and open with you in the context of your research... I've come from this. This makes sense to me.

**GH: This is a one-on-one situation where everything you need to discuss, you discuss with that one individual...**

F: Because you control it, you know... like the examples I've given. You've identified a potential opportunity and you've tried to nurture that and you are looking to see where you can take it. Where we desire to be is here... where I will very quickly need to be... (integrated model)...

**GH: That's obviously the ideal?**

F: It is the ideal. I believe that what is achievable between the two, however, is something of either the interdependent or the co-operative... as opposed to the fully integrated because there's lots of constraints, I think, in the grand scheme of things, that sometimes make it not so possible for us to be as integrated with an organisation as you could be... maybe I'm adding things that don't need to be there to over-complicate that? I'm just thinking out of the box... this model of interdependency, I think, is really, really, really good... it's a place where I'd want to be, from the business development perspective. And actually, moving away from this, this is what will actually now begin to happen. This is the viewpoint that I now... imminently... need to adopt in order to be successful within this role. But the co-operative actually is the one that probably appeals to one's nature more because it means that we're able to, sort of, be facilitators. That goes for, you know, if I look internally as well as externally. Do you understand what I mean? I mean, this is actually because of me trying to pull together all of the different areas within the university that could be of use to a potential client. Then this is actually physically how my job role needs to work in order to get to this particular outcome.

**GH: That's fair comment. You talk about facilitating there, so it leads me rather nicely onto the next section of the interview which is really to try to identify what role or what roles you think this key account manager should be performing in this kind of environment. So, you could think about one or two things there that might suggest the typical role or roles?**

F: Well, I took the liberty of bringing along my job description... and it really alludes to... and I appreciate that you've got some time constraints here... but I think that as

well as relationship building, as well as networking which are key areas or elements of the role one has to also think about the business of reporting and being able to quantify that, being able to demonstrate results and actually - more importantly, I think - just being able to, sort of, stay in touch with the end game, you know... because you've got a strategy, you can plug away... I mean business development's an endless chasm of activity. But, actually, if there aren't any outputs coming from that, then it's very, very difficult to measure what you're doing. And, so, being able to report that in such a way that it can be used is really important as well.

**GH: So, it looks like a multiple role for the key account manager... it's not one particular thing only, it's a number of different roles that they play? OK. If I can just show you card 11 then... this is what the literature has identified as typical roles of the key account manager. Anything on the list that strikes you as good or not relevant possibly?**

F: No. I think that's very accurate... or reasonably accurate. I don't... even though I'm possibly not, I should give myself more credit... but I'll say it how I mean it. Maybe I'm not astute enough at this moment to pluck out the things that are missing... to be honest, there needs to be two hundred things on this list... maybe one day I'll be one of those guys. But, for now, this certainly encapsulates that thinking. I can't disagree with any of these.

**GH: Is the concept of key account management being promoted strongly enough within the Business School? Do people know of its existence, its relevance, its usefulness?**

F: I think that probably could be more widely distributed... I think that could be done more effectively because actually each of those individuals within the Business School could actually be a source of help to me... to a business development manager or a key account manager for want of a better word, yeah... because they... especially, you know, programme leaders, academic team leaders and the like... they have a wealth of knowledge about the clients that they deal with, about the students who work for those clients, without realising it. You know, it's not a question of them being snitches, it's a question of them assisting people like myself to make the lateral connections that give us an in. So, effectively, it comes back to this business of the co-operative model in that, hopefully, by doing that, we'll be able to more effectively operate as a university. Somebody has a lesson; they have a word with somebody else about something that some manager is trying to achieve which, you know, translates somehow into a conversation a little bit later on. And I've proved that within the context of this role already.

**GH: Good. Excellent. What about the skills and qualities then of this key account manager? What skills and qualities should they possess?**

F: Tenaciousness, courage... certainly, I think, you know... I appreciate 'tenaciousness' kind of does say 'having a thick skin' but I think that that can't be over-emphasised because, you know, unlike the American 'no means no', actually sometimes 'no' doesn't mean 'no'. It just means: 'Try again another day, I'm really cheesed off and I don't want to talk to you today!' Or, it might mean: 'I don't have the budget today but I'd love to work with you... you know, I just don't like your

organisation'. Or: 'I don't like the sound of your voice but, you know what, your organisation's great and...' So, there are a myriad of things that can be within that so I think you need to have certain skills to be able to identify that. I think you need to have rapport building skills. You need to be able to talk and communicate with people fairly easily. Hopefully, I demonstrate those things. I don't know whether you need to have a certain level of vision as well? You know, for... and confidence, of course. Above all things... confidence, in fact.

**GH: OK. Well, if I can show you card 12... again, a series of skills and qualities identified as being appropriate to key account managers...**

F: Damn. I missed 'high level management skills'. Yes... 'co-operation' and 'facilitation'... 'ability to work under own initiative', 'integrity'? Yes... very important one that was missed in mine. I do deserve a slap for that. Integrity is very, very important. I'm glad to see 'confidence' is in there, although lower down on the list... but I think integrity actually - I'm going back to the list - as being huge... huge... because, if you can't demonstrate integrity with the smallest of things then you fail... in every way, both internally and externally. So, if: 'Yes, I'll have it by three' means you'll have it by three and, you know: 'Yes, client... I'll e-mail you with said contract' means that's what's going to happen. If that doesn't happen it's, you know... it starts that rocky road of: 'I can't trust this guy!' And, of course, all the rest is as per... you know, 'communication skills' is essential. 'Selling skills' is an unquantified thing that people say but that could be... there's a book somewhere you know, for that.

**GH: Do you think that key account managers should have selling skills? Is it a prerequisite to doing business?**

F: Absolutely. Absolutely. And the reason why I say that is because, if by when we say 'selling skills' we mean 'negotiation skills' and we mean 'integrity' and we mean 'confidence'... because actually they're all a part of that selling skill to me... and the commitment to a relationship and being able to spot an opportunity and being able to shut up... crucially. You know, toning is the language of the phone... being able to hear that and know what that means. These things are crucial to your ability to sell. And, if you go in and you have these people call you: 'Hi, (Mr. Harden, is it?)... Hi, Mr. Harden' and ... (constant noise)... you know, you just can't get a word in edgeways... and you wanted to tell them: 'No, actually, you wanted John Thompson, not me!' and you didn't get a word in edgeways, that's what some people think selling is. It's: 'I've got this thing, let me tell you all about it! I tell you, it's great...' And they do this without thinking, actually: 'So, tell me... what is it that you wanted? You know, it's interesting that you should say that... what exactly could we do for you then because we do this, this, this and this...? Is there some synergy in that?' These are the things that I think are important about selling and it also leads, of course, into negotiation because, if you haven't got that, then... 'OK. Well, let's not fall out of bed quite yet. Let me see if I can get it for you?' That's to me what the essence of selling is.

**GH: What about the knowledge then that key account managers need to have... knowledge of what, knowledge of whom?**

F: That's the bane of my existence at the moment. You know, that's the thing that is the difference between whether I'm good at my job and can keep it or I'm crap and I'm fired. I need to demonstrate knowledge of my organisation and its intricacies, its ability to deliver in the circumstances I talk about, otherwise I fail on the integrity. And I also fail on the confidence and I also need to be able to really highlight where the strengths are and, without any of those things, I can't.

**GH: OK. Interesting thought there because if I just show you card 13... these are elements of knowledge that key account managers should possess.**

F: Right... knowledge of their own company? Of course. Product/services, business philosophy, mission, ethos? Yes. Systems, similarities? True. Knowledge of customers? Business environment, markets, product/services? Senior management? Resources? Yes... and I think actually, in terms of the customer one, the one that looks almost separate for me, is the one that talks about need/resource requirements because that's actually the thing that we tend to go in with. We discover all of the other stuff as we go along.

**GH: That's fine. Now, we've expected a lot of the key account manager so far... is there anything else still that you think the key account manager should possess? Any other qualities or qualifications or attributes?**

F: Yes... I guess, you know... I mean I'm a degree-educated individual... you know, I've come from [XXXX] through a degree route and, you know... so on. I'd love a postgraduate qualification. I think that helps just to put you on, not a level playing field, but allow you to continue with your confidence in any field you like... sit at any table. There's one thing doing that anyway... which is where I'm at... or there's another thing being able to say, you know: 'Ah, yes... this is McDonald's version of...' and actually really appreciate and understand the theory behind that. That is possibly a missing factor from some account managers.

**GH: Anything else?**

F: Yes... I guess there should really be an innate desire to win as well. I don't think there's much emphasis on that but I think you need to have some sort of a winning instinct.

**GH: If I show you card 14 then... this is a list of other skills or qualifications or requirements that key account managers might be expected to have... you've talked about 'educated to graduate level or beyond'...**

F: I'm not sure what one means by 'age'? But, I suppose I can see that, you know, when I talked about sort of being able to, for want of a better word, rap on any table. Then yes... I think that sometimes age can be a factor where...

**GH: It may indicate experience... it may indicate a certain kind of seriousness or gravitas?**



F: That's right, although... you know... clearly it's not always the case. And I think that knowledge that one has of a business can demonstrate that equally well. So, it depends. But, yes... I'd agree with a great deal of this... in fact, all of it.

**GH: OK. Right, let's move on then from the key account manager and perhaps tackle something slightly more contentious... and that's the system of payment and rewards for key account managers. So, thinking about your particular role here, would you regard it as being adequately remunerated?**

F: Yes, actually... yes... yes... and I think I say that for different reasons. I say that because of where I'm coming from and how inadequate I felt that reward was for what is the same... for what is the same attributes we've been talking about... you know, and if I say to you that I originally - not most recently - but I had also come from a recruitment background where one is still a key account manager, although the account tends to be a human being and the client tends to be an account also. So, it's very difficult and different to quantify. But, in that circumstance, one works very, very hard for very little. I mean, it's all about bonuses and all that kind of rubbish so that somebody can have a yacht. Now, when you're in this circumstance, then it's much more strategic, it's much more aligned to taking us as a Business School to a different place in society and being able to help specific organisations. You know, if I can come back to where you are... and if you get paid well enough to do that, then yes. I think that... certainly.

**GH: So, you're talking, I suppose, about other factors that could have a part to play in the satisfaction that you feel for the job?**

F: Undoubtedly... undoubtedly. I mean, don't get me wrong... I could always... there is many a Monday morning when I wish I played the Lottery and sod work... no question... and it has a lot to do with, you know, the people you work with and the management team and so on... and whether they make you feel happy and comfortable within the role. But, yes...

**GH: OK. I want to show you card 16 then... and without asking you to divulge any particularly personal details... do you think any of those approaches to payment and reward could be appropriate in this environment?**

F: 'Enhanced basic'? Yes... appropriate. 'Additional performance-related financial incentives'? Absolutely appropriate. It doesn't exist at the moment. It would, you know... maybe it's because of the nature of this organisation and how to demonstrate that. My success, for example, with any one account or new business opportunity would not necessarily be mine alone and, therefore, sharing that success in some form of bonus-attributed way is difficult. For the management... it's not difficult for us to perceive... it's difficult for them to...

**GH: Is there something in academics themselves, thinking about that kind of performance-related incentive... is it difficult for them to adjust to that kind of payment system?**

F: It's not difficult for me. I mean, it might be for them perhaps because they're not used to that. So, maybe... I mean, I really couldn't say. Maybe, your research in

speaking to them and feeding similar questions that if you ask them, for example, I'm sure that they would have extremely different responses... and I think... I don't know if there'd be a certain level of hostility towards what would be deemed as these account managers, these business developers who don't think they are.

**GH: I think you're right... there is!**

F: And, I'm amazed by it... because I'm not sitting here in front of you as some guru of business development. I am simply somebody who has the sole key... core competence, if you like, as far as relationship development is concerned within the constructs of the specific strategy. So, am I paid well to do that? Yes, OK... for now. You know, if a year from now I'd done amazing things for this university and was still on the same money and was struggling at home, then... you know... I'd be talking about bonuses and I'd be wanting a little bit more out of life, at least. If not that, I'd want a few extra days so that I can play golf or something at least, you know... just because I'm sure the stress of trying to maintain that... so, you know, there's all sorts of things I'm saying, but there's a whole different conversation that I'd love to be on top of as far as where academics really see account management... because I think there's... maybe because of change and what's happened, you know, I often feel like I'm one of [XXXX]'s minions, unfortunately, as far as the academics see it when, in actual fact, I'm sort of really here to be a facilitator - a conduit - between what she needs and what they want... which is a stupid place to put oneself, to be honest, but... anyway. 'Responsibility with authority'? Yes... well, yes... to a degree. I mean, there's only so much responsibility you want before you really want more for it. 'Promotion'? Not interested in that at the moment, I have to say, because to be promoted means to have [XXXX]'s job, I would have thought. I could be wrong but... maybe... I didn't even say that! But, you know... I wouldn't want her job... not right now. And I wouldn't be capable of it at the present either. 'Status and recognition within the organisation'? Yes... yes, but for the right reasons actually... as opposed to: 'This is the business developer... you know, love him'. Actually, no: 'This guy, he did this, this, this and this for us last year as a division, for me personally... he's a good guy'. That is what I want. You know... forget the money... well actually, not forget the money because I'm raising a child but, you know... that's what I want out of this role. And 'involvement in strategic planning process'? Goes without saying... because it just is. 'Full access to senior managers'? Is good because it's there... and it's essential in the role, I think, as well. And 'profit share'? Great, yes... 'Bonus payment related to reduction in KAM costs'? Not sure how to take that one? Not sure how you'd reduce key account management costs? Although, saying that... I can see... I can see where that's coming from but I'm not sure that they'd turn that back into paying us more. You know... I think they'd turn that back into sort of trying to find new accounts.

**GH: OK. Fine. You mentioned the issue of performance measurement earlier on as well to say that, you know, you're measured on your performance... how do you feel you're going to be measured on your performance? How are you measured on your performance in this environment?**

F: I need to be diplomatic in the way that I put this... and assuming our conversations are confidential... as I'm sure they are, to a degree... but, then again, coming from a School where you never tell anybody anything you wouldn't want everybody else to

know... then I would say to you that at present I'm very much in the throes of needing to measure very specifically my performance... based on the principle that... you know, I still have an appraisal and... what do you call it... a probationary period within my role, which isn't up yet. But the point is that I'm looking quite closely at exactly what areas of my role provide outputs at present and trying very cautiously to concentrate on exactly how to demonstrate those outputs because, as I explained earlier, there's a great deal one can do in trying to, you know, generate new business rather than key account management.

**GH: So, what would you try and use then as an ideal measurement of your performance? What criteria? What approaches?**

F: I can tell you the measures and approaches that will be used such as my ability to process/map very specific strategic objectives for the Business School that help us to streamline our processes towards being able to develop business better. That would include, for example, our ability to not only generate opportunities but also to respond to requests and things of that nature. Also, clearly, the targeting ability to bring in a certain amount of revenue over a period... but, more importantly, demonstrating how that will be done... so, things of that nature.

**GH: OK. If I can just show you card 17... those are some typical performance measures being suggested by the literature... some of those you've referred to already... any other additional items there that you might find useful in this environment to use to measure performance of key account managers?**

F: I'm not sure that either the 'relationship length' or 'intimacy of relationship' necessarily have their place on this list, in some way. They are subjective in that kind of 'Ooh that's not quite right' way in a university environment. In the private sector, sure... here you know... you know... do you know the manager better than you know that guy over there... you'll get a little bit more and everybody'll know about it... that kind of thing. Here, that's not really the same. And, so... certainly... whether I've added value to the university... or the client... whether I've... I keep coming back to the customer satisfaction... the client satisfaction survey, formal feedback... probably quite relevant. But, actually, they tend to look at us as a business school as opposed to me specifically. I'm actually a facilitator role for that at the moment, so it's a tool we're using right now actually to find out a little bit more about we are perceived with the client and also to try and look at the opportunities with that client whilst showing that we care and we're interested in those views. So, it's actually a tool. Now, I can see how that measure, if it was applied to me, would also be useful for, you know, internal purposes. But, if you asked the same question of academics at the moment, I'm not sure that... do you see what I mean... compared to the managers?

**GH: Yes. That's fair comment. Right... just to round up now and bring things to a conclusion... thinking about barriers or obstacles that you perceive might get in the way of the Business School adopting key account management as a process or an approach? Can you see anything that might be an obvious barrier or obstacle to key account management developing in this environment?**

F: Yes... lack of co-operation from either the academic team, who I would see as a support in my role. Lack of co-operation from the management team in their speed of

response to any issues that were brought up as a part of trying to do the role because, you know, if I were to come up with a scenario that I thought in the context we were talking about earlier that was something that I felt could work, but it was quickly slapped down, then at least I know there's going to be nothing happening with that and I can concentrate on something else. That can have a detrimental effect if you really believe that there could be something there... in which case, you know, that support needs to be there. And you need to have a certain amount of autonomy to be able to develop that rather than, you know, you might just as well become a telesales person or something of that ilk... not that there's anything wrong with that role but... you know...

**GH: If I show you card 18... again, some barriers to key account management being introduced into organisations... what do you think of those?**

F: 'Lack of appropriate corporate culture'? Could be a barrier... to clients... because it would be transmitted that we'd be a bit fragmented and so on... and also, internally, and to be honest, we're not a million miles away from that in some ways because the culture here, I think, is under review or under change and therefore... you know, I came along and I didn't... I wasn't able to go: 'Oh, so these are our clients then?' I had to kind of find them and put them together very much... be a facilitator of a database and try and commit to them. 'Lack of senior management commitment'? I don't have that problem, although I can see how tremendously difficult that would be if I did: I wouldn't be here anymore. 'Lack of coordinated and planned approach'? No... that's predetermined in many ways but I'm really trying to plug into that. 'Proactive approach'? Yes... that would be a huge problem... you know, you can't sit there and wait for this stuff to happen... it just isn't going to happen. It just doesn't happen. And, even if it does, there are so many other opportunities for them to deal with somebody else that is twice as attractive as you. I mean... just looking at Porter recently... I think it wouldn't help us at all, would it, really? We'd all just push the prices up of everything, sitting there waiting... rather than going out. 'A champion'? 'Improved profile'? Yes... yes. I mean... [XXXX], at the moment, is meant to be that guy, isn't he?

**GH: Is he, yes?**

F: Effectively... you know, he's got business experience out there in industry specifically that means really he commands a certain level of respect... certainly, from us internally... and hopefully from external clients. But, I haven't personally got that much experience of that because... you know... I'm not operating within that circle, although I'm reportedly meant to be in some way... not that that's a problem... you know, I'm busy enough trying to do what I do, but I'm sure there will be a time when I'll be quite happy to say that [XXXX] and his presence will hopefully bring some alliance where there previously wasn't. 'Confusing the appointment of key account managers with doing strategic key account management'? That's a very, very subjective and difficult one to deal with. I think that, I'm afraid, is a whole different question.

**GH: Fair enough.**

F: 'Adequate financial rewards'? 'Staff turnover'? And, I don't mean that to sound like I'm the best well-paid person ever, just that I think as I've said to you already, one has to deserve... earn the right to have... I think if I were two years in, talking to you about what I'd done in my first year compared to now then things would be different. At the moment, it is as much about me understanding the role of my role as it is actually doing it.

**GH: Any other concerns then about the future of key account management in this environment? Anything left unsaid?**

F: Concerns about it? Not sure if I'd say they were concerns about it? Concerns for me personally? Yes, because there are... there is an 'old school' vibe that is wafting around the place generally, where it's difficult to... and that's my colloquial language if you like, but sometimes it just feels too difficult to do simple things... and one would hope to have a little bit more co-operation as time goes on. And I think that will only be demonstrated by my willingness to be open and be good with people generally. I think that there could be a situation really where... maybe we're at the end stage of that where all of the perceived dross that I keep hearing about is no longer here, but I'm afraid that subjective mentality that... as I say, I've not come from this industry... so, it sometimes it feels a little bit like swimming through treacle, do you know what I mean?

**GH: Last slide then, number 19... these are some fears and concerns that key account managers have been suggesting in the literature. Any of these have a relevance for you?**

F: It'd be more relevant to say 'lack of trust *from* senior management than *in* senior management'. That could be more detrimental... in some ways because it would lead to a lack of support in other things that come with it: trust and confidence in your abilities and so on... and I wouldn't have a job if that were the case. 'Lack of trust in the client contacts'? I think that's really... not this key account manager's concern... you know, maybe it's somebody else... I don't know what business they're in? 'Not being given enough time to build relationships'? You can build a relationship in a lift, you know... or you can take them out to dinner. It depends on what sort of business you're in but... not by whom. That's a difficult one. 'Have to manage too many accounts'? Yes, that can be a problem... definitely, actually. There's a slight feeling of 'you're all things to all men'. Actually, there's only one of me and... Christ, you know, I suffer from the same problems everybody else does. I don't know if it's possible... I'm just trying to know, you know. 'Poorly defined job specification'? I cannot... unfortunately I cannot argue with that. Unfortunately, I've a very detailed job description which I'm being held accountable for. 'Lack of status within the company'? That's a subjective one that's... it's a beacon that's shining a light on this very page at the moment because actually my status within this organisation at the moment really is down to me. It's been identified... it is what it is... but actually I just think it comes back to me getting everyone to prove the proof of the pudding. It feels like early days for me. My gripe is that actually... probably the reality is I can't... and that's bonkers, but that's not for me to whinge about really. I can just keep plugging away. 'Relationship with customers becoming closer... stronger'? No, that's not a fear or a concern. I think that's a great by-product, becoming closer and stronger than internal nonsense with your customer. I think that's brilliant. I think, unfortunately,

that's the problem that the University faces probably with some of our, you know, key accounts... in that, it isn't the University that they're interested in, it's the actual academic that's doing the stuff they're interested in. I think that that can become a problem for the University... which is where I come in and do a service review and things of that nature. It's not to chop the legs out of us, it's to understand that relationship and to make sure that we're capitalising and making the best of it... because, as I said to you earlier, you'd be amazed you're in a room, and it's all going on and I'm surprised by what isn't said, not what is said. So, in that circumstance, I'd make a comment on things. And 'telling clients they are key accounts'? Not a fear... not a concern. It's not a problem telling a client they're a key account but I think that you tread a fine line when you do things like that. As I said to you earlier, one... this one anyway... likes to try and have that kind of... you know... we're all... that's where we heading... you're all... it's about quality and we're trying to push... you know, promote that quality as a core throughout. Poncey as it may sound, if one operates with that level of integrity, now I'm back on the 'integrity' word, that's good.

**GH: So, does it have a future then in this kind of environment, key account management?**

F: Yes, I think it... yes. Yes... in a word, yes. But, to expand on it, for the purposes of giving you something more fruitful than that, I would see this organisation suffer without it. And I've seen how it has suffered without it... prior. I've had circumstances here... even if I'm not here in six months' time... where I know that, had somebody not mentioned something to me about some lateral connection they didn't make, but it turned into a conversation that's been better for them than if I wasn't here. I think that's useful.

**GH: Well, thank you very much indeed, [XXXX], for talking to me. It's much appreciated.**

F: That's no problem at all.

# **Appendix 10**

## **Nottingham Trent University/ Nottingham Business School overview**

## **Nottingham Trent University: an overview**

Nottingham Trent University (NTU) is a large, diverse and vibrant modern university. It acquired university status under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Its origins can be traced to the Nottingham Regional College of Technology, the Nottingham College of Art & Design and the Nottingham College of Education. Trent Polytechnic was established in 1970 and renamed as Nottingham Polytechnic in 1989. The University has three sites. The City campus and the Clifton campus are within the city of Nottingham and are about four miles apart. The third site, the Brackenhurst campus, is just outside the picturesque town of Southwell.

NTU typically has some 26,000 students, of whom around 7,500 are part-time. Undergraduates account for approximately 20,000 students and postgraduates for 6,000. A significant proportion of the University's income is non-HEFCE generated and there is a broad and distinctive range of non-standard programmes including professional and in-company schemes. The University has over 2,500 staff.

The University is led by Professor Neil Gorman, who began his term of office in October 2003.

NTU is a national and international player with a real commitment to the regional agenda. NTU works actively with its regional community, supporting local priorities such as urban regeneration. Through a widening participation strategy, links have been established with schools and colleges across the East Midlands in order to improve the proportion of young people staying in education after the age of 16 and progressing to higher education. For example, over 32,000 pupils, parents and staff participated in widening participation activities in 2005/06. NTU hosts the Aimhigher (Nottinghamshire) team and is a key partner in their work across the county.

NTU attracts students from all over the United Kingdom, and a significant number of students from other EU countries. The recruitment of students from outside the EU was identified as a particular area for further development. In 2002, only 4% of NTU students came from outside the EU, yet some parts of the University had been extremely successful in international student recruitment. In the autumn of 2004, the University formed a partnership with Kaplan Inc, one of the world's leading education companies and a subsidiary of the Washington Post Company, to form Nottingham Trent International College (NTIC). NTIC prepares international students for advanced entry to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The College welcomed its first student cohorts in September 2005.

HESA performance figures demonstrate that Nottingham Trent University is in the top three universities for graduate employability in England and Wales. In 2006, 97.5% of graduates with first degrees from full-time study were employed or engaged in further study or pursuing another ambition within six months of graduation. The employability of NTU graduates is one of a number of indicators that serve to highlight the standard and quality of the University's provision and have enabled it to maintain a consistent position in league tables and against HEFCE performance indicators. Entry standards, student success rates, and Quality Assurance Agency ratings of teaching quality also score highly.



Professional programmes - both general and bespoke - are a particular strength of NTU. In its approach to professional training, NTU aims to equip professionals to achieve higher and earlier in their career. NTU has a strong track record in designing and delivering education and training that meets the specific business objectives of corporate clients. A key element of programmes is the recognition that sponsoring companies expect concrete benefits - in terms of the performance of the individual, the team and the overall organisation.

**NTU Mission:** To deliver education and research that shape lives and society.

**Aims:**

1. To develop confident and ambitious graduates equipped to shape society
2. To provide education that promotes both intellectual initiative and the highest academic standards to prepare students for life and career
3. To be the university of choice for business, industry and the professions in our areas of expertise
4. To be recognised both nationally and internationally for the effectiveness of our teaching and the relevance of our research
5. To transform the learning and working environment to create an inspiring and innovative culture
6. To have the courage and the will to implement change

**Nottingham Business School (NBS)**

Nottingham Business School is a full-service business school, which integrates research, education and consulting in partnership with leading companies and organisations across the world. Within the context of the University's mission to deliver education and research that shape lives and society, Nottingham Business School's specific mission is: "Advancement of business and industry by development, application and diffusion of innovative business practices for growth."

The outstanding reputation of NBS as an effective partner for the business community has been built on the application of its core values in a competitive business environment. These core values are **accessibility**, **responsiveness** to customer requirements, **flexibility** in approach, development of **practical solutions** which are **business-focussed**, underpinned by intellectual **rigour** and organisational **integrity**.

**Education** – educational programmes are designed to create and develop a graduate and professional workforce for employers and enhance career opportunities for employees and executives through enriched and innovative instruction, project work, and work-based learning.

NBS is also at the forefront of talent development and capacity building in order to solve problems within partner companies, by delivering corporate management and specialist education to underpin company strategy and organisational learning, tailored to suit specific need. This is delivered in many countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. As a member of the European Foundation for Management Development and

the Association of Business Schools, NBS is committed to playing a leading role in developing management and business education in the UK and internationally.

**Consultancy** – The aim of NBS consultancy work is to help private businesses to grow and to be more successful, and to help public organisations to increase their efficiency and public value. NBS has a distinctive reputation for professionalism and integrity in advising private and public organisations on how to improve performance and adapt to change.

The hallmarks of NBS consultancy work are: working with companies to develop and implement practical improvement strategies with a deep understanding of specific business sectors, provision of insight, and assisting companies to innovate. By applying research-informed expertise to find the best solutions for clients, NBS helps them grow and compete more effectively. NBS staff are committed to delivering practical consultancy and advice that make a difference for the client.

**Research** – To fulfil its mission, Nottingham Business School focuses on applied research. Working with leading companies and organisations, NBS generates new knowledge and insights for business through a rigorous, independent and connected approach. NBS excels in a number of areas which are at the forefront of modern business and management thinking:

Applied Economics and Policy;  
Finance, Risk and Investment;  
Public Service Management;  
Human Resource Management; Organisational Development; Talent  
Management; Reputation Management; Management Learning;  
Innovation and Technology Management; Operations Management; and  
Marketing and Retail Management.

Expanding ESRC-accredited PhD and DBA programmes constitute a significant international contribution by NBS to research. This position is also strengthened by its strong associations with industry and international business, and professional bodies such as the CIM, CIPD, CIPFA and others, servicing all major industrial and business sectors – automotive, transport, energy, banking and finance, retail, leisure retail, service and public service.

*Source: adapted from the Nottingham Trent University Strategic Plan 2004-2010.*

# **Document 6: A Reflective Journal**

## ***‘Surviving the doctoral journey’***

**A personal perspective on the DBA  
research process**

*by*

**Gary Richard Harden**

*In part-fulfilment of the  
Doctorate in Business Administration  
(2002/2005 cohort)*

**Nottingham Business School  
Nottingham Trent University  
Nottingham  
England**

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## **Introduction**

Personal issues of one kind or another were very important from the outset in deciding whether to undertake the Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) at Nottingham Business School (NBS): personal and professional development, personal learning style and preferred research approach. In all honesty, I had to be certain that the DBA would offer a style of learning that would suit the kind of person I know myself to be.

My interest in the DBA was initially sparked by the fact that the overall aim of the programme is not necessarily to enable the individual to achieve the highest degree of intellectual scholarship for its own sake. Rather, it attempts to improve business practice amongst professionals and managers through a process of intensive study and reflective thinking that encourages individuals to re-evaluate their current approach to managing organisational challenges (Nottingham Business School DBA Handbook 2002/5). In other words, the DBA offers the opportunity to apply knowledge and understanding of different philosophical perspectives, any one of which has the potential to influence behaviour in the workplace. Whilst not denying the value of hypothetico-deductive research, the DBA programme team stresses the importance of adopting a more holistic and rationalist approach to analysing organisational and managerial issues. As such, it is accepted that interpretive methodologies may figure prominently in the final document (Nottingham Business School DBA Handbook 2002/5). So far, so good...

From my perspective, the following additional benefits made the DBA a more attractive proposition than a traditional PhD:-

- I believed that the DBA would engage me actively in 'cutting edge' marketing thinking. As such, this would be likely to challenge my current views of marketing dogma and inform key areas of my marketing teaching.
- The DBA has a strong marketing practitioner 'edge' that matches my own long-held view of the practical nature and relevance of marketing to organisations. At the very least, the DBA would force me to frame my research around a set of dynamic marketing challenges currently facing my employer.

- The staged structure of the DBA seemed to offer the best opportunity to deliver publishable material in the short to medium-term, in much the same way as was experienced during the MSc Marketing Management that I completed in 2000.
- The fact that the DBA could be completed within a three-year period (although this subsequently turned out to be a false hope!) seemed to provide clear targets and a definite completion date. Initially, this was a strong motivator.

In reality, the ethos of the DBA encourages students to embark on a journey of self-discovery during which the individual is able to develop a heightened sense of self-awareness and critical self-analysis. For example, the programme is intended to challenge existing personal beliefs about both research philosophy and the role of the researcher and this is stated explicitly in one of the programme learning outcomes:-

*“To help participants develop as reflective practitioners who have the intellectual and personal adaptability to be able to deal with organisational change and ambiguity.”*  
(Nottingham Business School DBA Course Handbook 2002/5:10)

The notion of the *reflective practitioner* appears to be central to the DBA programme and, as such, is worth examining in more detail.

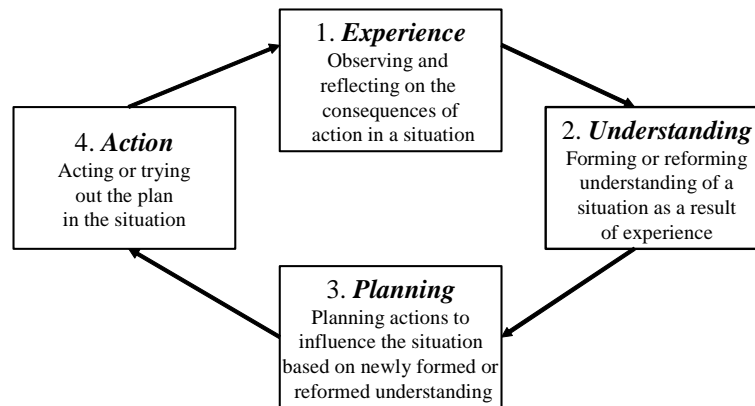
### **The process of reflection: an overview**

Reflective learning has figured prominently in diverse bodies of academic literature for more than two decades (see Moon, 2003) - the concept of the *reflective practitioner* having been introduced by Schön (1983). Reflective practitioners can be defined as professional people who systematically improve their understanding of the commercial world around them through reflecting on their business activities (Fisher, 2007). As McGill and Bealy (1995:21) comment: “...*reflection is a necessary precursor to effective action and that learning from experience can be enhanced through deliberate attention to this relationship*”.

McGill and Bealy draw heavily on the seminal work of Kolb (1984) whose ‘learning cycle’ model emphasises that learning from experience is not a static process but a continuous cycle of improvement. This notion is further developed by Pedlar *et al.*

(1986) whose adaptation of the ‘learning cycle’ is particularly appropriate to business management (see Figure 1). In short, they suggest that reflecting on an outcome helps an organisation to make sense of the experience in a new way, leading to better understanding. This, in turn, can generate insights which encourage the formulation of revised plans, strategies or behaviour. Finally, the implementation of these plans or behavioural changes can be evaluated in order to set the cycle in motion once more.

## The learning process



**Figure 1**

Source: Pedlar *et al.* (1986)

The personal effectiveness literature echoes this sentiment. For example, Honey and Mumford (1990) suggest that individuals should remain open to *learning opportunities* as part of their self-development. Typical of the benefits that can be derived from engaging in the learning process are that the individual develops a thirst for knowledge, can hone personal skills, communicate a new world view to others and keep abreast of change. Equally, Honey and Mumford (1990) go on to propose that individuals have a preferred learning style that tends to colour the way they approach the completion of a given task. Their research identifies four major preferences in individual learning styles; the *Activist* prefers to get on with the job and will try anything once; the *Reflector* will spend a lot of time thinking about what has to be done; the *Pragmatist* is happy as long as things make practical sense; the *Theorist*

likes to analyse situations and behaviour and make sense of them. Whilst these categories are not mutually exclusive, it is nevertheless possible for an individual to favour more than one of these learning styles. However, Honey and Mumford (1990) are keen to point out that one particular learning style tends to dominate.

From a personal perspective, the DBA research process has provided an ideal opportunity to reflect on my own learning style and I must confess to being a *Reflector*. However, whilst there is nothing intrinsically wrong with being a *Reflector*, there is a danger that excessive reflection may sometimes hinder me from achieving everything that needs to be done within the given timescale. Consequently, there are times when I have felt that adopting a more pragmatic approach to problem solving would be beneficial to both me and those around me. Nevertheless, being a *Reflector*, would suggest that I may be well suited to the process of reflective learning.

Reflective learning encourages individuals to broaden their learning through constant reflection on their activities in relation to the learning aims of their programme of study. Generally speaking, reflection is a standard feature of academic study. For example, reflecting on the learning process is considered an opportunity to focus on personal strengths and weaknesses, to question assumptions made, challenge existing feelings, thoughts and actions, and finally identify areas for improvement (Mansourian, 2008). However, the DBA aims to broaden this process by including socio-political issues and challenging individual values and philosophical assumptions. Indeed, this type of critical reflection is considered entirely appropriate for adult education, in general, and management education in particular (Sambrook and Stewart, 2008).

A convenient method of reflecting on the learning process is to encourage students to keep a learning diary or reflective log. These logs provide a suitable audit trail or record of personal reflection on the different learning activities experienced (Mansourian, 2008). The biggest advantage of such logs is that they are personal and are developed and written in the individual's own words. Equally, they can be simple printed notebooks, files stored on computer or even recorded audio accounts (Mansourian, 2008). In theory, the personal nature of these logs should help to generate greater commitment to the process of self-reflection.



It is interesting to note that the source material for this DBA document derives from a paper-based reflective log. Document 6 is actually referred to as a 'reflective journal' (Nottingham Business School DBA Handbook 2002/5:23) and is explicitly intended to shed light on a number of issues: the student's reflections on the process of doing research; changes to personal values and understanding relating to either the subject of the research or the process of doing the research; comments on intellectual development during the programme; a summary of what has been learned from the overall process of studying at doctoral level (Nottingham Business School DBA Handbook 2002/5:23). These issues will provide a convenient framework for the second half of this document.

However, reflective logs are not without their problems. For example, it is acknowledged that keeping a diary requires a great deal of time and personal commitment. Research has also shown some participants give up keeping records within a short space of time whilst others fail to record any detailed description of their experiences (Mansourian, 2008). In all honesty, whilst I started out with enthusiasm for this task - and kept meticulous records of my experiences and feelings for over a year - the reflective log ultimately faded into the background. However, many of the subsequent events and experiences are nevertheless still etched indelibly on my mind and have all been part of the rollercoaster journey that I have experienced during the DBA.

Although recent research has started to cast doubt on whether critical reflection should really be what the DBA is awarded for (Sambrook and Stewart, 2008), reflectivity is generally considered a crucial part of any research degree, particularly at doctoral level (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998). It is something that I feel has benefited me immensely during the DBA research process.

### **Personal reflections on the research process**

In the personal effectiveness literature, self-management is generally considered to be central to the development of good business managers and an essential element of the personal learning process (Murdock and Scutt, 1997). However, personal experience of the DBA would suggest that the researcher also needs to possess significant self-

awareness and self-management, particularly when faced with lengthy periods of intensive self-directed study and potentially complex organisational research contexts. As an academic, I have always considered myself highly self-critical, feeling it important to understand my own strengths and weaknesses. By the same token, in order to be an effective researcher, the DBA has reinforced my view that it is necessary to be aware of personal strengths and weaknesses. Rather than being viewed as an admission of personal shortcomings, heightened self-awareness should, for example, enable academics to identify strengths and weaknesses in others and help them address their own self-development needs. This is a particularly useful outcome for those who, like me, intend to go on to provide supervisory support to future PhD and DBA students. Without the ability to manage oneself, the task of directing others is likely to become difficult, if not impossible. However, it is helpful to explore this notion of self management in more depth:-

*“The key to self-management lies within your ability to identify and manage your own stress levels, your time and the functional and behavioural aspects appropriate to your job role.”*  
(Murdock and Scutt, 1997:180)

Although stress has not been specifically addressed during the programme, it has nevertheless been a regular by-product of the research process. This has partly been the result of the exacting assignment schedule but largely the consequence of the major research study expected in Document 5, which is intended to be the culmination of the individual’s long research journey. Whilst the idea of completing such an exacting piece of research should not necessarily worry a seasoned academic of some twenty years’ standing, by far the most stressful aspect has been the problem of balancing work, personal, domestic and research needs. On the journey there have been, for example, significant changes of work role, which have been good for me professionally but have taken up inordinate amounts of my time and energy on the way. Equally, persistent health problems, bereavement and major building works to the family home have all added an extra dimension to the research process. I remember attending a seminar shortly before starting the DBA that was delivered by an NBS colleague who had recently completed her PhD. The seminar was a personal reflection on coping with the many work and personal problems encountered in the doctoral research process. In all honesty, I was astounded by the tales of woe that

were related and the emotional turmoil that had so obviously been experienced. However, despite the gentle - but clearly heartfelt - warnings from said colleague, I viewed the DBA process very much as a rite of passage - something that had to be done. Equally, I thought somewhat naïvely that similar experiences could never happen to me. With the benefit of hindsight, however, I now know differently. Indeed, there have been times on the DBA journey when I have considered the experience as very much akin to *“the triumph of adversity over hope (sic)”*...

Stress is inherently wrapped up with issues of time management. The way in which the individual manages his time can have a significant effect on the amount of stress experienced. If time is well managed then the workload becomes more bearable. When time is, or at least is perceived to be, limited then the pressures of the research workload become almost unbearable at times. Murdock and Scutt (1997) summarise the major problems with time as:-

- Procrastination
- Insufficient time for planning
- Having to work long hours

Throughout the programme I have been acutely aware of the need to manage my time more effectively. Working on Document 5 in particular has brought this sharply into focus because of the self-directional nature of the research and the time scale involved. Indeed, I have felt the need to tap into significant reserves of self-discipline and self-motivation. Nevertheless, the experience has presented an excellent opportunity to analyse how my time is currently spent and the nature of the demands on that time. A particular problem that has been identified is the ease with which work (or, in this case, research) life can intrude on private/domestic life. This is an area where I feel I can improve considerably in achieving a better work-life balance. It is, however, heartening to note that other people have experienced similar problems:-

*“I suppose the most essential part of the struggle is the management of one’s time, and here there are a number of key things that can be done. I have always believed that when I am at work I should work as hard and effectively as I can, all the time that I am there, but that*

*equally, when I am not working there should be a clear line between the two experiences.”*  
(Harvey-Jones, 1988:288)

In short, the often painful truth learned is that I need to prioritise tasks more effectively. Equally, I could make better use of slack time and deal more convincingly with the many temptations and diversions that threaten to derail my research. For example, one of the biggest problems is that I have regularly been forced to sacrifice time initially set aside for DBA research in order to cope with work-related ‘crises’ of one kind or another that inevitably have taken precedence given my new divisional management role. However, whilst accepting that time management is an important skill for the researcher, academic and manager alike, perfection is almost certainly impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, to one who is critically self-aware and prepared to learn from his mistakes, it does reinforce the value of engaging in a process of continuous self-improvement.

In terms of identifying a suitable research topic, my DBA journey has been relatively painless. On the one hand, it was clear from the outset that I would be restricted to investigating an issue of relevance to Nottingham Business School which was, after all, funding my studies as part of my personal and professional development package. Equally, the good thing about being required to draft a rationale to justify my inclusion on the DBA programme was that it forced me, at a very early stage, to consider a suitable research focus. On the other hand, the choice of Key Account Management (KAM) seemed to be a natural progression in my research within the broader areas of business-to-business marketing (B2B) and relationship marketing (RM). Thus, the DBA provided a convenient opportunity to investigate something that would be of distinct relevance to my teaching.

Again, the general ease with which the research was mapped over the various DBA documents was also somewhat surprising given my experience of the dissertation on the MSc Marketing Management in 2000. Here, I found a great deal of difficulty choosing both a suitable topic and research approach and found surprisingly little enlightenment and support from my erstwhile supervisor. On reflection, it may well be thanks to these ‘negative’ MSc Marketing Management experiences that my approach to the DBA has become more mature and self-supporting.

This self-supporting (or ‘go-it-alone’) stance may also have resulted partly from the fact that, as an academic with twenty years’ experience - and having supervised countless students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in that time - I have the necessary confidence to pursue a particular research path, a heightened sense of what needs to be done and how to do it. Indeed, the dissertation process *per se* is very much second nature to me. However, as a reflective practitioner, it is fair to argue that my confidence could occasionally be construed as arrogance and short-sightedness. Regrettably, such a charge would be difficult to refute totally. Equally, my emotional misgivings about fully engaging in the supervisory process possibly owe much to my experiences of completing my dissertation for the MSc Marketing Management. Without wishing to descend into intimate detail, it is sufficient to say that my experience was less than positive and that discussions during the course of supervision meetings were less than helpful to a fledgling researcher. Understandably, this has left a significant impression on me.

In all honesty, I admit that my self-supporting approach to my DBA research has meant that I have probably failed to take full advantage of the supervisors that have been available to me. On reflection, this has possibly been a mistake, particularly if I think about the invaluable insights that could have been derived and the motivation that preparing for supervisions would have given me. Nevertheless, I know from experience that highly motivated and able students do not necessarily feel the need for regular support from their supervisor. Very often, all that is necessary is to know is that a supervisor is there if needed.

### **Personal reflections on the knowledge gained during the research**

The DBA has contributed significantly to my knowledge on two fronts: first, it has given me both a broad appreciation of how Key Account Management (KAM) has evolved from a number of business contexts and a deep insight into specific KAM issues such as remuneration and performance measurement. Second, my knowledge of research philosophy and strategy has benefited immeasurably from exposure to other lecturers with different ontological and epistemological stances, wider reading and engaging in discussions with fellow students on the programme.

In terms of subject knowledge, KAM has become something of a *cause célèbre* for me in recent times. Indeed, I have been able to incorporate a good deal of my exploration of KAM conceptualisation and implementation into guest lectures at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The topic has been in demand because it represents activities that normally take place behind closed commercial doors in the business-to-business (B2B) sector. In a sense, it provides a useful counter-balance to the bulk of lecture content that tends to adopt a business-to-consumer (B2C) focus.

The fact that KAM has its origins in a number of business disciplines has made the research process painfully slow at times and linkages have sometimes been slow to emerge. However, it is noticeable that in the past eighteen months, the various pieces of the KAM 'jigsaw' have begun to slot into place in my mind, allowing a more critically evaluative approach to the concept to surface in my most recent writing. An indication of how my view of KAM has been evolving was evident in a recent series of seminars that I conducted with some final year undergraduates. In particular, the focus of the discussion in the final set of seminars was a detailed critique of the KAM concept. Both the nature and length of the ensuing conversations with students suggested, first, that I had managed to capture their imagination about the concept and, second, that I had the confidence and the supporting knowledge to be able to explore the concept in depth.

I would now expect to take this knowledge of KAM and translate my DBA research into a number of conference papers and journal articles. This is an exciting prospect particularly since the way in which I developed the interview guide has enabled me to derive multiple angles from my single data set. The main downside, however, has been the somewhat laborious transcription process. However, since I now have first hand experience of the process, I feel less guilty about recommending interviewing to my own dissertation students.

In terms of my knowledge of research philosophical issues, the DBA has certainly led me to new pastures. Whilst it is fair to say that I developed a broad appreciation of such matters during the MSc Marketing Management programme, it has only really been as a result of the much wider reading on research philosophy, the lecture content of the taught DBA sessions and the exposure to an assortment of people with different

ontological and epistemological perspectives that the full relevance of research philosophical issues and the nature of their impact on the practical aspects of data collection have fallen properly into place.

On reflection, a particular experience that I found extremely useful was that the staged nature of the DBA forced me into adopting both positivist and interpretivist perspectives. For example, whilst Document 3 required an interpretivist response to the topic under investigation, Document 4 provided a positivist counter-balance. In all honesty, the latter probably represented the one element of the DBA process that I found the most challenging both intellectually and emotionally. The main reason for this is probably my traditional preference for qualitative research based on my interest in the 'softer' issues of what people say and think. To me, the interpretivist stance has always seemed the most natural approach to adopt when engaging in the research process. Consequently, the research in Document 4 took me out of my personal comfort zone. Whilst the experience has undoubtedly been beneficial - I certainly have a heightened awareness of the way in which hypothetico-deductive research studies are structured, a working knowledge of multivariate analysis and an appreciation of the enormous contribution of statistical software packages such as SPSS - if it has done anything, it has probably confirmed my belief in the fact that interpretive research is more suited to the kind of person I am and the nature of the research problems that I prefer to explore.

Equally, in terms of my role as an academic, the process of undertaking research from two radically different philosophical perspectives has, at the very least, helped me to appreciate that perhaps more care needs to be exercised in future in guiding my dissertation students down a research path that is more suited to their own personal styles and preferences rather than my own. Certainly, pangs of professional conscience occasionally cause me to reflect on the extent of the influence of my own personal choices on academically impressionable students.

Overall, participation in the DBA programme has sharpened my skills as an active researcher because it has immersed me in the research process on three separate occasions. The very fact that a structured approach has been necessary for Documents 3, 4 and 5 has forced me to decide on and justify three separate research designs and

then reflect critically on the process once completed. Whilst each of the studies has been notably different in emphasis and outcomes, the repetition of broadly similar steps in the research process has nevertheless been an invaluable learning opportunity.

### **Personal reflections on my intellectual development during the research process**

As has already been stated, the overall aim of the DBA programme is not necessarily to enable the individual to achieve the highest degree of intellectual scholarship for its own sake. Rather, the focus is one of promoting and fostering the development of independent thinking and intellectual capability in order to become better managers in the workplace - in other words, people who can appreciate different perspectives in complex organisational situations and arrive at suitable solutions to the problems faced through a process of careful scrutiny of the evidence to hand. However, such managers need both the confidence and the intellectual capability to be able to achieve this successfully. Indeed, in this respect, managers are broadly similar to academics who aspire to being published in the very best journals. In other words, individuals will develop into autonomous or authentic writers only when they learn to think for themselves and break free from conventional and rigid system of beliefs and values (Badley, 2008).

My experience of the DBA process would suggest that it attempts to provide a suitable environment and the necessary tools with which to break free from conventional viewpoints and systems of belief - albeit once these have been explored and subjected to critical evaluation. For example, my faith in the relevance of interpretivist research, in general, and the empirical value that it brings to marketing research, in particular, has been cemented by the iterative process in Documents 3, 4 and 5. Whilst this process has inevitably taken time, I feel clearer in my mind about the need to break free from the conventional and rigid positivist dogma that seems to have held sway in marketing research for so long. Indeed, qualitative enquiry should be viewed as a process of emergent, iterative learning and, as such, does not naturally lend itself to externally imposed rules and constraints (Keegan, 2009).

Further intellectual stimulation during the DBA has been provided by meetings of my Action Learning Set (ALS). The ALS is an interesting feature of the DBA at



Nottingham Business School and was designed specifically with the intention of encouraging critical reflection (Sambrook and Stewart, 2008). Members of an ALS are free to convene at any stage during the DBA programme for the purposes of mutual support and discussion in an intimate and non-threatening environment. Indeed, the majority of meetings of my ALS took place over a convivial lunch in a nearby hotel with rooftop views over Nottingham. The initial meetings of the ALS were extremely useful for the development of possible themes for inclusion in Documents 1 and 2. There was also a good 'feel' about the group with people happy to offer constructive criticism of ideas.

However, the use of these meetings for sharing ideas on approaches to specific Documents inevitably evolved into something else because individuals ultimately progressed at different rates. For example, around the time of the taught blocks on ontology and epistemology, whilst group conversations were (fortunately!) not entirely confined to intellectual matters, members increasingly embraced philosophical issues and the merits and demerits of the various philosophical stances. Whether it was the result of the growing confidence of group members on their respective DBA journeys, or whether people were generally feeling at ease in one another's company, these conversations were stimulating and intellectually challenging and contributed enormously to clarifying some of our early misconceptions about aspects of research philosophy. Regrettably, these meetings came to an end around December 2004 for a variety of reasons but, on reflection, our ALS had outlasted most other groups from Cohort 4.

Although my ALS eventually folded, I was very fortunate in being able to continue DBA-related discussions with a colleague from NBS, Tony Woodall, who also happened to be in Cohort 4. This was made all the more convenient by the fact that we shared an office. An abiding memory for me will be the many times that we would break off from mundane matters such as lecture preparation and exercise our latest ideas and rationale for Document 5 research design. Indeed, it was useful to have somebody to bounce ideas off in a completely spontaneous and informal way and I believe this has probably helped me to grow intellectually more than anything else.

## **Conclusion: a final word on the experience of studying at doctoral level**

In addition to enhancing intellectual capability, the DBA provides a welcome backdrop against which individuals can begin to re-evaluate their performance in the workplace. However, the pursuit of managerial effectiveness is likely to come only with experience and acceptance of the principle of lifelong learning and self-improvement. Whilst not perhaps a revolutionary assertion, it is nonetheless an honest and frank personal view based on some twenty five years of academic and managerial experience. The particular path that my own career has taken provides me with an intuitive sense that personal development is an on-going process that is constantly evolving as the individual's working, intellectual and emotional lives unfold around them. Sustained and intensive programmes of study like the DBA go some way to providing the intellectual tools necessary to help people make sense of the different philosophical perspectives and human behaviours around them. Thus, programmes like the DBA are more than capable of making a positive contribution to the development of more effective managers and, indeed, researchers.

Personally, I have found that the DBA has offered a number of appropriate intellectual tools and approaches that can be applied to the kind of organisational situations that I would normally encounter... and much more besides! Indeed, the overall experience has been thoroughly stimulating despite the frustrations encountered along the way. Although progress on the journey has often been painstakingly slow - and occasionally uncomfortable - the physical time and mental effort exerted in the process of exploring both KAM and research design issues have certainly not been wasted in a practical sense. Indeed, the knowledge gained has already impacted substantially on my teaching, not just in terms of the breadth and depth of material covered but more particularly in terms of the confidence and added gravitas with which I now feel able to impart material.

Within NBS, doctoral status should also represent - in my eyes, at least - the necessary seal of approval and respectability that will help consolidate my position. At the very least, it is also proof - if, indeed, proof is needed - that I have survived a sustained and intensive process of critical reflection and self-development. However, despite the slightly giddy feeling of relief and exultation, as I near the end of this

particular stage of my journey, the DBA has taught me a sense of personal and intellectual humility and an acute awareness of the fact that my personal learning journey is actually far from over.

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