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**MBA Quality: An Examination of Stakeholder Perspectives**

**Tony Gibbs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The research project is set within the context of the ongoing debate regarding the quality of MBA programmes in the UK and contextualizes and articulates the concerns regarding the quality of MBA programmes emanating from within and outside the teaching profession.

The MBA environment in the UK is examined in detail and both typologies of MBA programmes and the strategies of MBA providers are discussed. The provision of the MBA in the UK is set within the context of the wider higher education quality debate.

The relevance of prevailing quality theory and commercial quality models as ways of enhancing MBA programme quality are evaluated, and quality perspectives of key MBA stakeholders are compared. There is also an exploration of the means by which MBA Directors exploit the notion of quality in order to achieve their personal organisational goals. The notion that quality theory can best be understood as a form of anxiety relieving, 'religious' phenomena is discussed.

The ontological and epistemological position taken within the study is explained and the issues surrounding the measurement of attitudes are examined. Three groups of MBA stakeholders: MBA Directors, prospective MBA students and practising MBA students are questioned with regard to their views on MBA quality using a mixture of interviews and critical incident technique. The resulting data are subjected to content analysis.

The contribution to knowledge can be seen in terms of the results that indicate that individual MBA Directors operate a variety of quality perspectives, depending upon the particular circumstances, and use different ways of communicating their quality vision and ensuring programme quality. Prospective students undertake programmes for numerous reasons, and make their final programme choices in line with the way in which their expectations meet their perceptions of the programmes they are considering. The findings also indicate a strong relationship between satisfaction and expectations with regard to practising MBA students.

In conclusion, the various stakeholder perspectives are compared and a series of 'quality gaps' are presented and discussed. Suggestions are subsequently made regarding possible future research.

## **KEYWORDS**

MBA, MBA Quality, MBA Stakeholders, Quality Theory, Magic-Religious phenomena.



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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH AIMS**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter one provides a discussion and explanation of the context and background within which the research project was devised, as well as describing the approach that has been taken. It provides a rationale for both the nature of the research focus and the approach and goes on to detail the specific research objectives. Finally, this section briefly outlines the individual dissertation chapter contents and highlights the significant themes that have emerged as a result of the research that has been undertaken.

Concerns regarding the quality of MBA programmes in both the United Kingdom (UK) as well as the rest of the world are being increasingly expressed from both within and outside the management education profession (Cameron, 1997; Louw et al, 2001). A review of the debate indicates that much of the criticism regarding the quality of programmes in the UK, the focus of this research project, is based upon anecdote or is inferred from factors such as the rapid expansion of the MBA market or the lack of an MBA regulatory body, rather than as a result of nationwide systematic programme evaluation.

It is also important to note that the growth of interest in MBA quality is, in part, a function of the wider quality debate. Such a debate is presently and continually taking place throughout the commercial world and the public sector as well as within the narrower areas of higher education and management education (Schuller, 1995; Taylor, 2001).

Within the commercial manufacturing and service sectors, the significance of high quality standards as a means of gaining competitive advantage has long been established (Feigenbaum, 1989; Oakland, 1994; Peters and Waterman,

1980). The means by which quality can be conceptualised and high levels of quality consistently achieved has received considerable attention in the last two decades, with the initial emphasis being placed upon the establishment of general quality principles and practices within the manufacturing sector (Crosby, 1979; Deming, 1981; Juran, 1981).

In common with other areas of management theory, the notion and scope of quality management has been steadily broadened and continually divided into discrete blocks of manageable and marketable knowledge (Berkley-Thomas, 1993). Evidence of this can be seen both in terms of the different economic sectors that are now studied from a quality perspective as well as a growth in sector specific and generic theoretical quality models. As a result, there are now, in addition to the more traditional manufacturing quality focused works, substantial bodies of quality related literature dealing with the provision of commercial services (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). At the same time as this development has been taking place an increase in interest in quality with regard to the provision of the public services can also be detected (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994; Newton 2002, and Poister and Streils, 1999).

Quality theories and quality models have been, and are continually being developed. They focus upon concepts such as the role and nature of customer satisfaction (Emery et al 2001), the role and significance of quality expectations and the relationship to quality perception (Zeithaml et al, 1993), delivering service quality (Bethencourt and Gwinner 1996) and the importance of quality leadership (Dering 1998) among many others. There has also been a tendency to integrate quality management issues into other areas of management theory such as employee empowerment (Bowen and Lawler 1992; Moss-Kanter, 1983), business process re-engineering (Champny and Hammer, 1993), the influence of organisational and national culture (Espinoza 1999) and the relationship between quality and the learning organisation (Coopey 1996 and Senge, 1990), amongst others.



With regard to the nature of the quality theory both previously and presently being generated, it is important to recognise that a substantial proportion of the writing is designed to support the marketing of quality management training materials and consultancy services (Kennedy, 1991). In addition, much, but by no means all, of the published quality work falls into the category of what Abrahamsson (1996) identifies as 'technically oriented how-to publications', and this is an issue that is addressed within the research study in terms of the nature and credibility of the quality theory being created and its usefulness for both practising managers and academics.

The decision to make use of the notion of the 'stakeholder' within the research project is driven by the recognition of the concept's growing use and acceptance as a means of understanding more about those diverse groups that have a legitimate interest in the higher education process (Bauer and Henkel 1999). For Dearlove (1995) the active management of stakeholder interests is key to the way universities are increasingly managed and the 1997 Dearing report makes numerous references to stakeholder interests. As Macfarlane and Lomas (1997) rightly state,

Acknowledging the claims of stakeholders is part of the new lexicon of higher education management (p77)

Such a 'stakeholder approach' offers considerable potential for research activity because, not surprisingly, it is likely that key higher educational stakeholders will operate different quality perspectives based on their diverse needs and objectives (Harvey and Green 1993). A variety of studies have employed such an approach within the area of higher education, for example it has been used to examine the changing role of the academic manager (Middlehurst and Barrett, 1994), the changing status of the academic professional (Becher, 1999) and the impact of educational consumerism on the higher education process (Ritzer, 1996), among many others.

## **1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

A central element of the research project is the investigation into the manner in which MBA programme quality is conceptualised by key stakeholders. From the results obtained through the investigation an analysis of the impact that the process of quality conceptualisation has upon the behaviour of the major MBA stakeholders is conducted. Flowing from this broad area of interest, the following specific research objectives were derived.

1. To inform the ongoing MBA quality debate, referred to above, and in doing so, to contribute to the wider management education and higher education quality debates.
2. To evaluate the relevance of prevailing quality theory and commercial quality initiatives and models as a means of enhancing MBA programme quality.
3. To compare and contrast the quality perspectives of three groups of MBA programme stakeholders:

MBA Directors

Prospective MBA Students

Practising MBA Students

4. To explore the way in which MBA Directors exploit the notion of quality, using it as a power lever for political ends.

The research process begins from the premise that there is no single, accepted view of what quality in higher education is, and therefore within the sector what counts as quality is contested. As a result of this situation, the research topic can be seen as offering the potential for the generation of rich data because if each stakeholder in higher education sees quality and its outcomes from a different perspective, different methods and approaches may be adopted by them to measure quality.

### **1.3 CHAPTER CONTENTS**

#### **Chapter 2: The MBA Environment:**

This chapter examines both the internal and external organisational environment within which the various stakeholders referred to above are currently operating. The significant factors driving and shaping MBA environmental change are identified and the responses of the organisations that provide MBAs in the UK are described. The history of MBA provision in the UK, and where relevant the rest of the world, is outlined and the various typologies of MBA programmes are examined and related to the various strategies of the MBA providers. These are identified as;

Price-Based Strategies,  
Differentiation Strategies,  
Focused Strategies.

This is followed by a brief summary of the types of research taking place in the field of the quality of business higher education. A number of influential higher education quality models are explored, namely;

The Transformation Model  
The Engagement Model of Programme Quality  
The University of Learning Model  
The Responsive University Model

Such theoretical approaches to higher education quality precede an examination of the Quality Assurance Agency's business masters benchmark statements.

#### **Chapter 3: Quality Management Theory:**

In order to understand the theoretical context within which quality theory has developed this chapter begins with an overview of the nature and growth of more general management theory. A number of different approaches to management research are examined, and the manner in which these

approaches shape both research outcomes and the notion of management theory itself are discussed. The impact of positivism and nominalism on the nature of conceptualisation is explored and the relationship between management theory and management practice is evaluated.

The contradictions and difficulties of quality theory are demonstrated with particular reference to the influence and legacy of both the Japanese approach to quality and the role of the western and Asian quality gurus. The issue of quality conceptualisation is examined and its impact upon quality outcomes is explained, with particular reference to the way in which such concepts can be manipulated within the organizational context in order to assist the achievement of micro-political ends.

In order to better understand the multi-dimensional nature of quality, a variety of quality perspectives are presented including;

The Transcendent Approach to Quality

The Product-Based Approach to Quality

The User-Based Approach to Quality

The Manufacturing –Based Approach to Quality

The Value-Based Approach to Quality

The importance of the concept of customer satisfaction within the quality literature is highlighted and the relationship between customer satisfaction, service quality and customer expectations and perceptions is discussed. This is followed by the presentation of a quality expectation model (Zeithaml et al 1993) that is subsequently revisited in the final chapter.

#### Chapter 4: Research Design, Methodology and Methods:

This chapter explains the ontological and epistemological position taken in this study with reference to both the specific needs of the research project and the researcher's personal view of the nature of social reality. The issues and difficulties surrounding the measurement of attitudes and beliefs are discussed both in general terms and with particular reference to the

gathering of primary data as a means of enabling the achievement of the research objectives set out above. This discussion is set within the context of an examination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and their advantages and disadvantages.

The manner in which the research samples were selected is explained in detail including issues such as sample size, sample type and the establishment of a sampling frame. There are three separate samples based on three distinct groups of stakeholders;

The MBA Directors,  
Prospective MBA Students,  
Practising MBA Students.

The two data collection procedures employed, semi-structured interviews and critical incident technique, are outlined and the multi-method approach adopted justified. This is then followed by a section that describes the manner in which the analysis was undertaken including elements such as the coding process, the unit of analysis adopted, the levels of generality claimed and the nature of the 'evidence' that subsequently emerges from the process. Finally, what are considered the limitations of the study are presented.

#### Chapter 5: The Research Findings:

The research findings chapter begins with a restatement of the research objectives followed by a discussion regarding the ethical issues relating to the collection and analysis of the research data. The research findings are then presented and discussed in the light of prevailing quality management theory. These findings are initially analysed separately in the three stakeholder groups;

The MBA Directors,  
Prospective MBA Students  
Practising MBA Students.

The major themes that emerge from the analysis of the separate groups of stakeholders are set within appropriate theoretical criteria and examined in the light of the theory. These separate findings are then drawn together and compared and contrasted. A series of conclusions with regard to the different perspectives of the three groups of stakeholders are then drawn. These are placed within the context of a further reflection on some of the limitations of the research programme.

#### Chapter 6: Conclusions:

As with chapter 5 the concluding chapter commences with a restatement of the research objectives. A discussion of the research findings in the light of the relevant management and quality management theory is preceded by a more general discussion as to the political nature of quality. Particular attention is given to the way in which the criteria for effective quality leadership and management, and the service quality model can be used to contextualise the findings.

A number of suggestions are made with regard to possible further research with particular emphasis given to how 'Strategic Quality Management' (SQM), the development of an MBA curriculum and 'Best Value' approaches might provide useful insights into the MBA programme quality process.

Having broadly outlined the research project the work now focuses upon the environment within which MBA education is taking place.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE MBA ENVIRONMENT**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter examines both the external and internal organisational environment within which MBA programmes are presently operating. The most significant factors driving MBA programme environmental change are identified, and the responses of MBA providers to those changes are described. Typologies of UK MBA programmes are presented and key MBA provider strategies are identified. Contemporary research into the quality of business education is discussed and various theoretical higher education quality models are explored, these are followed by an outline of the approach taken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to the provision of business programmes at Masters level in the UK.

The focus upon MBA provider reaction towards environmental change is central to an understanding of the situation that currently prevails within the MBA market. This is because in the period 1985 to 1995, British higher education underwent a profound reorientation leading to an increasingly dynamic operating environment, the effects of which are still being felt today (Holley and Oliver, 2000). Higher education institutions were forced to respond to these changing conditions and in many cases it was these institutions' business schools that were at the vanguard of such responses. As is the case with such open systems, the organisational responses that take place generate their own momentum and lead to still further reactions and counter reactions in which a degree of environmental uncertainty becomes accepted as the norm.

#### **2.2 THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**

Accommodating expanding student numbers is not a new experience for those working and studying within the higher education sector in the United Kingdom (Sallis 1996, Welsh and Suklen 2002). However, the recent growth in the numbers entering higher education should not be viewed as a simple extension of the patterns developed in previous decades of expansion

(Ghosh and Rodgers, 1999). A fundamental break with the patterns of growth established in the past can be identified in three areas:

- 1 The ending of the long established higher education binary system in 1992. This development has led to a significant increase in the number of institutions including the word 'university' in their title as the old polytechnics applied for and achieved university status, becoming generally known as the 'new' or post-1992 universities.
2. Changes to higher education funding arrangements that are intended to improve the financial performance of higher education institutions by making their funding depend more upon their ability to attract students in competition with each other rather than in terms of the traditional block grant approach to funding that previously prevailed (Mackinnon, et al, 1995; Ossed-Asare and Longbottom, 2002).

One of the major results of the creation of such a higher education 'market system' has been much greater media interest in the relative performance of institutions in the sector. This has manifested itself in a variety of ways such as the creation of university league tables and the growth of the publication of university consumer guides. As a result, the issue of university quality, however defined, has become part of the public arena as never before.

- 3 A significant decline in the level of higher education government funding in real terms and a shift of some of the burden of that funding from the taxpayer system towards the individual student in terms of student loans and the direct payment of fees. This development has been further added to by the stated intention to allow higher education institutions to charge differential fees, and is a good example of the nature of continuous change that characterises the sector (Fletcher 2003).



The full organisational implications of the developments described above are as yet unclear, not least of all because of the manner in which the changes that take place are often followed rapidly by further developments. However, a number of writers have commented on the negative effects on higher education teacher's and manager's morale, particularly because of the impact of working in a system that is now mass in size but still elite in terms of many of its dominant systems, structures and values (Scott 1995, Simkins, 2000). The increasing evidence of the growth of a staff and student culture of both alienation and cynicism towards the expansion suggests that while the changes after the 1964 Robbins' Report took place in a mood of optimism and confidence about the future, the recent changes have been accompanied by a mixture of pessimism and gloom (Tonks and Farr 2003). In the period since 1995 higher education has continued to receive funding below the level of inflation, estimated by Universities UK to be in the region of a £7 billion shortfall (Fletcher 2003), with anecdotal evidence suggesting some difficulty in attracting suitably qualified staff, and retaining existing staff, in certain subject and geographical areas (Pidcock, 2001; Trowler, 1998).

At the operational level, the organisational responses, as opposed to individual responses, are more readily identified. In terms of attempts to reduce costs and increase efficiency, they have included a rationalisation of the courses offered by institutions, including the withdrawal of some institutions from entire fields of study, the modularisation of teaching programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, a reduction in course length and a reduction in both staff/student ratios and contact time (Baimbridge, 1997; Lomas, 1999). There have also been moves towards the 'rationalisation' of the academic year, with the replacement of the traditional three terms with two semesters. This is designed, in part, to reduce the pressure upon administrative systems and maximise the potential for conference lettings and summer schools but might also be the first step in the process of reducing the amount of time taken to achieve a university first degree by introducing a 'three semester year'.

At the same time as institutions have attempted to increase efficiency and reduce the cost of the programmes they deliver, there has also been a variety of attempts at generating increased revenue. These attempts have included the development and provision of 'full cost programmes' and the increased recruitment of 'full cost' international students. The ability to carry out such revenue-generating initiatives is not spread evenly across university faculties and departments. As a result, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of university business schools that exist, and, this has been accompanied by a rise in the number of business related programmes being offered at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In particular, a significant expansion in the number of UK MBA programmes available has been witnessed (Lomas, 1999; Yucelt, 1997).

Given the conditions described above, it is not surprising that concerns regarding the higher education sector's commitment and ability to maintain the quality of educational provision have emerged from within the system itself (Bamber and Tett 1999, Welsh and Suklen, 2002). However, it is not simply the sector wide concerns of education professionals that have led to an increased focus upon higher-level business and management education quality and the methods by which the quality should be assessed and measured. Indeed, the last decade has seen a shift in emphasis away from the internal, professional measurement of educational quality, and towards a much more influential group of external organisations operating their own quality related measurement and assessment systems and processes (Greensted, 2000).

The external organisations that have become increasingly involved in the assessment of the quality of higher education, and therefore the contribution to the higher education quality debate, can be classified into three distinct types (Greensted, 2000).

1. Those external organizations that focus upon subject-specific quality issues.

2. Those external organizations that focus upon the accreditation of specific business programmes.
3. Those external international organizations that focus upon the quality of the business school as a whole.

It is worth discussing the way in which these types of organisation operate in some detail and highlighting the potential strengths and weaknesses of each type of approach both in general terms, and in terms of the manner in which they impact on the MBA market. In this way, both a useful insight into the broader ongoing higher education quality debate and the context within which the more specific MBA programme quality debate is being conducted is provided.

1. External organizations that focus upon subject specific quality issues. This category includes institutions such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), dealt with in much greater detail in section 2.8 below, and the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE).

A major criticism of the approach taken by these types of organisation is that the single subject quality assessment process they engage in, for example in areas such as Business and Management, Accounting, Marketing or Economics, fails to provide the necessary view of the business school's performance as a whole. As a result of this approach, any potential business student, be they postgraduate or undergraduate, who is seeking to make use of such information will only be provided with a partial insight into the quality of the programme. If they rely solely on this type of assessment they may receive a distorted view of the quality of the programme they intend to undertake.

For example, while the QAA assessment might provide positive feedback with regard to a particular subject area, the complete programme might be of variable quality in terms of the many individual components and subjects that make up the total 'package'. It is also possible that even those business

schools that obtain high quality ratings in all subject areas might fail to produce a cohesive and integrated programme that reflects the multifaceted nature of management in the modern business world. Given the multi-disciplinary nature of many business programmes, and this is particularly the case with the MBA, such an approach to quality assessment can therefore be seen to have its drawbacks, particularly for those seeking to use the information to make very practical decisions such as where and what to study.

The research assessment exercise (RAE) has also attracted criticism because of the relatively narrow approach it adopts to its quality assessment procedures and the lack of practical use the assessment rating is to those seeking to judge the quality of the business programmes they might be considering embarking upon. Of particular note is the lack of reference that is made to the dynamic and practical nature of the business environment and the over-emphasis placed upon peer-reviewed academic journals. The length of time academic journal articles take to be published, examples of one to two years from writing to publication are being not uncommon, casts serious doubt upon their usefulness in certain very dynamic and fast changing areas of business and management and reflects the fact that this procedure has been copied from the one used in other academic subject areas where longer lead times may be of much less significance, such as within the arts or natural sciences (Whittington 1997).

A further criticism of this approach is that the academic journals that carry the greatest weight with regard to the RAE quality assessment process have a relatively small and narrow readership. The nature of the journals offers little scope for a multi-disciplinary approach to be taken to business and management issues, and this lack of relevance is compounded by the fact that the majority of the journal's audience is unlikely to be made up of those working in business and management (Collett 1998, Tranfield and Starkey 1998).

As well as the broader 'philosophical' issues relating to the quality assessment approaches discussed above there are also considerable practical and logistical problems associated with the quality assessments. A good example of these problems can be seen in terms of the manner in which the QAA assesses teaching quality in higher education. The limited resources available to the QAA means that an individual business school may only have one or two individual subject areas assessed at any one time, there then being a gap of two or three years before other subject areas can be assessed. It can therefore be argued that such a series of quality 'snapshots' may not provide a true and valid picture of teaching quality at any one time and this can lead to professional resentment regarding the credibility of the process.

Such resentment is fuelled by a feeling that the QAA is not really measuring the quality of teaching and learning taking place within the business schools, but rather, checking a paper trail of QAA procedures and processes. As Greensted (2000, p5) comments:

The latter [the paper chase] does not necessarily lead to the former [the measurement of teaching quality] the jury will be out for some time on the validity of the process.

It is also debatable as to whether the obvious advantages of raising the profile of the issue of quality within a School, which inevitably takes place prior to a QAA or RAE assessment, are subsequently outweighed by the diversion of resources away from programme delivery which then results as schools strive for a 'good score' in the assessment.

2. External organizations that focus upon the accreditation of specific business programmes. This category of organisation would include the Association of MBAs (AMBA) or professional bodies such as the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA).

As will be shown in section 2.4 below, the accreditation of an MBA programme to outside organisations or bodies can form a key part of some

business Schools' marketing strategies. However, in order to make use of such relationships within the marketplace, educational 'quality' as perceived and prescribed by such outside bodies, must be shown to exist within the programme that is accredited. In order to be satisfied that such prescribed quality elements do exist a system of inspection and periodic re-inspection needs to be undertaken by representatives of the accrediting organisation.

There is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that while many of the quality elements prescribed by outside bodies are generally seen as valid and credible, others do act as a cause for concern among certain academics and business people (Henkel and Kogan (1999)). For example, in some cases, gaining AMBA accreditation requires a shift in assessment patterns towards the use of examinations and away from the use of coursework. The clear message here is that examinations are, from a quality perspective, intrinsically of greater value than assignment based coursework, and yet there is little evidence to suggest that this is the case (Morris and Hayes 1997). Similar anxieties exist with regard to the often seemingly arbitrary setting of MBA programme student entry requirements. Again, certain types of student are seen as being of MBA calibre, while others who do not fit the prospective student template are not. For practicing educationalists this raises issues of equal opportunities and equality of access.

Another problem facing business schools seeking to accommodate outside interests with regard to quality stems from the tendency for them to be 'pulled in different directions' by different bodies with different interests and approaches. Many of these bodies are, to some extent, competing with each other. This fact provides them with little incentive to work together to find a unified approach to quality assessment. Some work has also been undertaken in this area however, and discussions continue between AMBA and the Association of Business Schools (ABS) and the European Quality Link (EQUAL) in order to produce a general set of guidelines with regard to MBA quality, but at the time of writing, it is not possible to be clear as to the significance of this quality initiative.

3. External international organizations that focus upon the quality of the business school as a whole. Examples of this type of organization would include the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS).

Again, as with the AMBA/ABS/EQUAL initiative described above, it is too early to be clear as to the impact such international organizations will have on the MBA market in the UK. The AACSB has stated its intention to develop its operations beyond the USA, but this development is at an early stage and it is not yet clear whether applying criteria drawn from the US business School model will be appropriate within the European setting and therefore how attractive membership of such a body would be to MBA providers in the UK.

Similarly, the impact on the UK MBA market of the EQUIS scheme, involving high profile business schools such as the London Business School (LBS), INSEAD in France, IMD in Switzerland and Bocconi in Italy, has yet to be fully felt. However, a discussion of the major features of the EQUIS approach to quality assessment does provide a further useful insight into many of the major quality issues prevailing at this time.

The objectives of EQUIS are:

1. To provide business and management education market information to students and employers.
2. To provide an instrument for comparison and benchmarking between business and management education providers.

Both objective 1 and 2 above are principally designed to create a less 'imperfect market' for business and management education in general, and MBA education in particular, by providing greater information to existing providers, potential consumers and other MBA stakeholders such as employers.

3. To promote MBA programme quality improvement throughout Europe.

As with objectives 1 and 2, this objective relates to the notion of imperfect and perfect markets (Lipsey 1989). The rationale for the link between perfect markets and improved quality is that when information relating to the quality of business and management education is more freely available to the potential consumer and other stakeholders, the provider has a much greater incentive to be responsive to the potential changes in demand generated by that information by improving the quality of the product they offer (EFMD, 1997). In imperfect markets, potential consumers find it much more difficult to make informed choices and therefore there is less incentive for MBA providers to disturb the status quo.

The processes by which the three related objectives set out above are to be achieved include:

1. An intercultural and international approach to business school accreditation that is not based upon the imposition of one national model or template.
2. The development of accreditation criteria that reflect the major characteristics and dominant values of European management education as a means of counter-balancing the traditionally influential American MBA model.
3. The encouragement of a responsive stance from programme providers to corporate/employer concerns and the development of closer links between programme providers and business organizations as a means of taking greater account of the needs and views of this major stakeholder.
4. An increased emphasis on the individual student's personal, as well as professional, development, with particular emphasis being placed



upon the encouragement and development of entrepreneurial skills reflecting the increasingly dynamic nature of the modern business environment.

5. The setting up and maintenance of an international forum designed to define relevant MBA quality criteria. In this context, it needs to be stressed that EQUIS does not seek to provide a 'blueprint' for the MBA, but rather, that the individual School is free to define its own MBA mission and develop ways of achieving that mission.

The EQUIS model shown in Figure 2.1 below provides a useful guide to the many issues, components and stakeholders that make up the major MBA quality environment.

**Figure 2.1: The EQUIS model for quality in Business Schools**

Finally, it is useful to build upon the EQUIS model shown in the above diagram by briefly describing the assessment criteria specified by EQUIS regarding School accreditation. These criteria are useful in that they indicate the major elements that are generally held to determine the quality of MBA education.

The EQUIS Assessment Criteria are:

1. **Context and Mission:** This criterion focuses upon the business school's stated mission and vision and the manner in which this relates to the school's strategic positioning, strategic objectives and corporate governance.
2. **Students:** In this context, the School's stated student target profiles are examined, as are the ways in which the student selection criteria, programme preparation and progression, and career placement procedures support these targets.

Having undertaken an assessment of criteria 1 and 2 above, the compatibility of the School's stated strategy and mission with the approach taken to student recruitment is evaluated. The aim is to assess the internal logic of the school's position and the consistency of the position, rather than to make judgements as to the intrinsic value of the position being adopted.

3. **Programme Quality:** The manner in which the School's programme has been designed, its content, stated methods of delivery, student assessment processes and procedures and the nature of the programme evaluation is assessed

Again, the elements that make up programme quality must not only be valid in terms of prevailing educational standards, they must also be credible in terms of the way they 'fit' with the organisational strategy and student profiles that were previously set out by the institution.

4. **Student Personal Development:** The organisation's formal student support and counselling services are assessed, as is the personal effectiveness of the students and the ability of the students to apply the skills they have learned in a competent manner.
5. **Research, Development and Innovation:** This criterion measures the quality of the faculty's research output and the contribution to knowledge being made. Also of importance are the links being made between the research being undertaken and teaching. In this context, the impact upon teaching quality and innovation in learning delivery is of particular relevance.
6. **The Contribution to the Community:** This stresses the importance of the school's external relations, the level and quality of its social and economic consultation, the extra-curricular activities it engages in and services to the wider education community.
7. **Faculty:** The nature of the school's teaching faculty, its size and composition with particular reference to the academic qualifications held and level of relevant business experience. In this context, the business school's staff development policy is evaluated, as is the implementation and management of the staff development process.
8. **Resources:** The institution's financial resources, systems and management. The level of equipment available to the school, including library, computing and research facilities. The quality of the school's premises and general infrastructure, and the level and quality of administrative and ancillary support.
9. **The school's connections with the corporate world:** The institution's policy on developing and maintaining corporate links, as well as evidence of the impact of these links in terms of the school's curriculum, research and teaching activities.

Of particular interest is the input the corporate world has in terms of course design and delivery, overall planning and the level of direct input into the educational process (guest lectures, case studies, etc.)

10. **International Issues:** This criterion evaluates evidence of international relationships and the degree to which the school exhibits an international dimension in terms of both its perspective and activities. Examples might include the school's collaborations with overseas institutions, student and staff exchanges, and the establishment of joint research projects.

As previously stated, the effects of the EQUIS initiative are yet to be felt in the UK MBA marketplace, but the issues the initiative identifies are those which correspond to the components that make up the ongoing quality debate to which the MBA programme providers must respond. The EQUIS initiative is also important because it stresses the holistic nature of higher education quality and the need for institutions to exhibit internal consistency in dealing with quality issues. The various quality components identified above are important individually, but a major concern needs to be the linkage between the components and whether or not they add up to a credible package taking into account the school's stated objectives and the measures taken to achieve those objectives.

At the same time as the higher education professional is experiencing the various formal quality pressures described above, there is increasing evidence of the development of more informal pressures, in the form of growing 'educational consumerism'. A number of factors can be seen as driving such a tendency (Bailey and Dangerfield, 2000; Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994; Poister and Streils, 1999). They are:

1. The active promotion by successive governments of a consumer-orientated public service culture. Evidence of this can be seen through the development of initiatives such as the Citizens' Charter

(HMSO, 1991) and leading subsequently to more sector-specific Students' and Patients' Charters among many others.

2. The increasing generation and dissemination by the media of quality-related statistics as a means of differentiating and ranking universities as with the *Times* University league tables, and the growth in popularity of consumer guides such as *The Good University Guide* and *Which Degree?*
3. The adoption of a more professional, and often more aggressive, marketing approach designed to attract students, particularly with regard to the post-1992 universities. Evidence of this includes the creation of university and business school public relations and marketing departments, and the use of external student recruitment agents, particularly with regard to the lucrative international student market.
4. The increasing financial cost of higher education to both students and their families. This process began with the introduction of student loans in 1991, which were intended to gradually replace the system of student grant payments. In 1998, some United Kingdom students became liable for the payment of a proportion of their tuition fees for the first time, a proportion that the National Committee of Inquiry on Higher Education (Dearing, 1997;) envisages will increase in the future.

The factors outlined above combine to form the wider context of higher education within which the providers of all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes must operate. However, there is also a more specific MBA environment in which factors particular to this aspect of management education are relevant. These sector-specific features will now be examined, beginning with a history of MBA provision. This will be accompanied by an evaluation of the various strategies adopted in response to these

developments by the competing providers that collectively constitute the United Kingdom MBA market.

### **2.3 A HISTORY OF MBA PROVISION**

The first MBA programme was introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, USA, and although the Harvard Business School did not introduce the MBA until some years later in 1908, it was the Harvard approach that was to become the model from which many modern programmes can be traced. It was not simply the programme content, 'business administration', which was new to the academic world. Individuals such as Edwin Gay, the first Dean of the Harvard Business School, and Arch Wilson, the founder of what was to become *Business Week*, were also introducing through the MBA a new approach to the way in which learning took place.

Known as the 'problem method' and later the 'case study method', the Harvard Business School programme rejected the notion of simply lecturing students in favour of contextualising learning through the presentation of what they regarded as 'real world' business scenarios. MBA students were encouraged to analyse the case study material, particularly in a quantitative manner, and then to draw conclusions from this analysis. Regarded as a highly controversial teaching and learning innovation at the time, it was the first, but by no means the last time, the MBA would draw criticism from the wider academic and business community. It can be seen as representing the first example of a type of criticism that would subsequently reappear on a cyclical basis and, in doing so, help to form an ongoing pattern of MBA 'disquiet'.

Falling into two distinct categories, the first focus of disquiet tends to emanate from what could be described as conservative forces within the academic and business communities reacting negatively to what they generally perceive as MBA learning and teaching innovations lacking sufficient academic rigour.

Such disquiet can focus upon the particular teaching and learning style being adopted, as with the case study approach described above, or, it can focus upon additions to the MBA programme content, which may be deemed not worthy of serious academic study. An example of this type of conservative criticism was levelled at the second Dean of the Harvard Business School, Wallace Douhan, who together with Elton Mayo, created the 'Human Relations School' at Harvard in 1919. At a time when the 'Fordist' approach to manufacturing increasingly dominated the business world and the scientific classical model dominated the academic world almost to the exclusion of all other perspectives, the notion of 'human relations' as a legitimate topic of inquiry was anathema to many.

At the other end of the 'critical spectrum' is what could be described as 'radical criticism'. Broadly, this can be seen as representing a situation where some within the business and academic communities feel that the providers of the MBA are not being innovative enough and, as a result, are failing to keep pace with changes taking place in the wider business world and accordingly not preparing their students sufficiently.

An example of this type of debate took place in the USA in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Two reports '*Higher Education for Business*', (Gordon and Howell, 1959) and '*The Education of American Businessmen*', (Pierson, 1959) pointed to the lack of integration within programmes and the omission of some 'key' subjects from their content. As a result, subjects such as managerial economics and planning in the business environment were introduced, as was business policy, the latter designed to draw together the various strands of student learning. Further developments took place in the mid-1960s, when 'long-range planning' was devised in response to the recognition of the increasingly dynamic business environment.

The history of the MBA in the USA is of significance to the development of the MBA in the UK as well as within the rest of the world. This is because the MBA was first taught in the United Kingdom in the mid-1960s and the earliest programmes offered were, to a large degree, an import of models

being developed in the USA. Consequently they were strongly influenced by the Harvard Business School MBA programme, with particular emphasis being placed on strategic planning, developed through the exploration of case study material (Benwell and Gibbs, 1996). Initially, the number of institutions involved in delivering the MBA was relatively small; in 1964, there were only two United Kingdom providers, and a broad similarity of approach was maintained in the early years of programme development, through reference to the original North American formula.

The situation in the 1960s can be seen to contrast sharply with that of the present-day, where there are now over 120 different MBA programmes in the UK delivered through a wide variety of formats. Throughout the world, it is estimated that over 100,000 students are engaged on an MBA programme at any one time, at over 800 business schools or university departments. Inevitably, such growth has not taken place without attracting adverse comment with regard to the 'industry's' ability to maintain quality standards. There has also been an increased questioning as to what actually constitutes an 'MBA' and whether the qualification should be regarded as denoting anything like a common educational standard (Cameron, 1997).

The changing MBA marketplace that has been described above is not simply a function of the developments taking place within the higher educational environment, however. It is also, in part, a reflection of the fact that the working environment to which MBA graduates ultimately return has also altered significantly since the 1960s (Belbin, 1996; Bennis, 1997; Handy, 1994 and 1995). As we shall see below, some of these developments have been so profound that they have led commentators from both within and outside the management education profession to question the position and relevance of management education in general, and the flagship MBA programme in particular (Crainer, 1997; Neelankavil, 1994).

It was the large multinational corporations that dominated the market for the early United Kingdom MBA graduates. Often divisional in nature, with tall, multi-layered hierarchical structures and overseas subsidiaries, these



corporations represented an organisational model with clear and well-understood management career pathways (Probst and Buchel 1997; Starkey 1996). Graduates often entered the system with the expectation of life-long employment and the possibility that they might be identified as organisational 'high flyers'. Part of this recognition might well include company sponsorship on what was often seen as an MBA 'sabbatical' and, in this sense, there was little confusion as to the role MBA programmes were to play in the management development process.

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the MBA in the UK was characterised by its homogeneity. An educational qualification designed for a relatively well-defined corporate elite, it focused upon the acquisition of knowledge that was principally 'hard' in nature. What skills components there was, tended to receive descriptive treatment, rather than being competence-based, and analysis tended to be 'taught' at the strategic level.

A useful insight into the approach that was being taken by business schools can be seen through a reading of the influential texts of the time, for example, Argyris (1960) *Understanding Organisational Behaviour*, Chandler (1962) *Strategy and Structure*, Watson (1963) *The Ideas that Helped Build IBM*, and Drucker (1967) *The Effective Executive*. It was the era in which large companies such as General Electric developed strategic planning departments, and it was into such departments that MBA graduates would be guided, given their grounding in analytical detachment.

Successful MBA graduates were likely to return from their programmes to the security of their sponsoring organisation, having received exposure to outside ideas, albeit on a limited scale, and also having developed a potentially useful network of fellow fast track corporate executives. However, such organisational certainties were beginning to be seen as increasingly untenable during the later part of the 1970s (Kakabadse et al 1987). Ever more dynamic business environments driven by rapid technological innovation, increased economic competition from the Asian economies, successive oil crises and the unprecedented changes in social attitudes

placed the once-dominant western multinational corporation in an increasingly vulnerable position (Argenti, 1980; Ohmae 1985). From a management education perspective, these changes also called into question the analytical approach upon which the MBA was based.

Consequently, the business environment of the 1980s and 1990s into which potential managers were now emerging was one of much greater uncertainty, where chaotic and discontinuous change became viewed as the norm for many organisations (Peters, 1988). Among other effects, this development was to have a significant impact on the relationship between the modern corporation and its employees. Corporate responses to the changing business environment included such things as downsizing, delayering, management buyouts, mergers and de-mergers and when taken in conjunction with, company, and even industry collapse, removed the notion of job security and management careers for life, as well as changing the nature of the manager's work itself (Deal and Kennedy, 2001).

A reading of the influential business and management books of this period, for example, Peters (1988) *Thriving on Chaos*, Ohmae (1990), *The Borderless World*, Senge (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* and Champny and Hammer (1993), *Reengineering the Corporation*, demonstrates the dramatic shift of emphasis that had taken place when compared to the 1960s. The planned route for the young executive was no longer clear, and writers such as Handy (1989; 1994; 1995) began to point to a confusing organisational future of 'Shamrock' and 'Doughnut' structures being accompanied by 'empowered' (Moss-Kanter, 1989) and 'liberated' (Peters, 1992) organisational cultures. In this era, the once dominant corporate strategic planning departments looked archaic and were being disbanded. Decision-making was being devolved downwards into the now much flatter and leaner organizations. Modern managers were now expected to be much more 'hands on', flexible and entrepreneurial.

The series of events described above did not lead to the contraction of demand for the MBA, but rather an expansion. Along side the traditional

MBA students a new type of MBA student began to emerge, often self-financed, rather than company sponsored, and, in many cases, undertaking part-time and open learning programmes with the post-1992 universities. Motivated, in part, by the need to distinguish themselves from the ever-growing number of business undergraduates entering the job market, and not being members of a 'fast track' executive elite who used to form the principal MBA clientele, these students were, in the main, using an MBA as a means of helping them compete in an increasingly competitive and volatile labour market.

The new, more heterogeneous MBA student cohorts now tended to find employment in a much wider variety of organisations than their traditional predecessors, including many small- and medium-sized commercial companies. There were also increasing numbers entering areas such as the health service and local government as these sectors came under government pressure to adopt more commercial and entrepreneurial approaches to the provision of more customer-oriented services. The graduating MBA students were also, as we shall see below, returning from programmes that, in many cases, were very different from the original United Kingdom programmes which had been based on the traditional Harvard MBA model.

The growth of MBA programmes in the UK was given further impetus by the publication of the influential report *The Making of British Managers*, (Constable and McCormick, 1987). The report estimated that over 2.75 million people were engaged in 'management' in the United Kingdom and that 90,000 new managers entered the 'occupation' each year. The report's authors concluded that the management education being provided in the United Kingdom at the time was often inadequate, both for the individuals concerned and for UK industry generally, in a number of important respects. A significant expansion in the provision of management education was regarded as necessary in order to help remedy this situation, as was the development of new styles and methods of programme delivery and assessment. As the distinction between manager, entrepreneur and

employee became less relevant, so the MBA became an option for many more practising or aspiring managers. As a consequence, the exclusivity of the qualification became more difficult to maintain.

The 'Constable Report', as it came to be known, suggested that there should be an annual enrolment of 5,000 students on the United Kingdom-based MBA courses by 1992 and that this should rise in stages to 10,000 per annum by the year 2000. Such unprecedented growth in student numbers would be achieved within the context of a more general expansion of management education opportunities at all levels and the establishment of clear management education pathways.

Of particular relevance to MBA providers was the focus on the development of two new sub-MBA programmes, the Certificate in Management Studies (CM) and the Diploma in Management Studies (DMS). These would both be regarded as accepted qualifications in their own right but would also, where the level of student attainment was appropriate, feed into existing and new MBA courses. This additional route into the masters programme would further increase the diversity of potential students to include those without the more usual formal entry qualifications, for example, first degrees.

Constable and McCormick (1987) recognised that attempts to expand MBA student numbers significantly, and to broaden the student base would need to be accompanied by an examination of existing postgraduate management education teaching models and practices. They went on to identify a number of important new approaches to programme provision that they felt would help to facilitate the transition. These new approaches included:

1. The modularisation of MBA programmes into discrete, self-contained topic areas. Adopting the modular approach would have a number of advantages, for example, it would enable students to adopt a more flexible approach to MBA study by increasing the possibility of entering or temporarily withdrawing from programmes at various points in the academic year. Modularisation would also allow for

greater student specialisation outside a common core curriculum so that MBA programmes could be tailored more closely to individual student needs or the needs of groups of students. It would enable MBA programmes to offer 'specialisms' in functional areas such as accounting, marketing or human resource management or to cater for particular economic sectors such as banking or the public sector. Such an approach would also facilitate the development of organisation specific MBA programmes and make it easier for students to undertake projects, dissertations and assignments of practical relevance to their sponsoring organisations.

2. An expansion in the number of part-time and open learning MBA programmes. Although being offered in a variety of formats these programmes would represent the equivalent of one year's full-time MBA study. This, more flexible approach to MBA delivery would allow students to remain in full-time employment while undertaking an MBA programme and enable the distinction between learning and work to be narrowed. The importance of work experience as an integral part of the learning process could be emphasised, reinforced and supported through work-based assignments and dissertations. If this were accompanied by the modularisation process described above, it would also enable students to transfer between full-time and part-time modes of study, if their professional or personal circumstances were to change.
3. The report also recognised that greater emphasis should be placed upon the enhancement of the individual MBA student's interpersonal skills. To a large extent this requirement can be seen as reflecting the changing nature of the manager's role within organisations where the ability to create, motivate and lead effective teams, for example, is as important as the manager's more traditional supervisory, control and monitoring functions. The acquisition and improvement of such skills would form part of the wider notion of individual personal development. Such a developmental process was viewed as being

crucial if the student is to be able to adapt to rapidly changing and highly unpredictable working environments. Under such environmental conditions, 'bodies of knowledge' can quickly become obsolete, and as a result, problem-solving and decision-making skills and competencies are much more likely to be the qualities that lead to both managerial success within the organisation and personal career advancement.

The new approaches described above can be regarded as an example of a more competence-based management education perspective. Such a perspective was given further impetus by the publication of Charles Handy's (1987) *Making Managers* and the Management Charter Initiative (MCI). Building on the sub-MBA competence-based work undertaken by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), the MCI is now the lead body within the national vocational standards setting process, and recognises three levels of standard (M1, M2 and M3) reflecting the three levels of management identified by Constable and McCormick, (1987) namely, junior or supervisory management, middle management, and those in senior general management.

As with the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), the MCI standards must be demonstrated in terms of measurable competencies capable of assessment in the workplace. The question as to what the nature of the relationship should be between the MBA as a qualification and the MCI competence-based standards approach is the subject of ongoing discussion (Burgoyne, 1994; Cameron, 2001). The issue of the relevance of the MCI approach to such an area of postgraduate education is, however, unlikely to be satisfactorily resolved in the short term. In part, this is because an initiative of this type brings to the surface the conflicting philosophical and pedagogical stances that underpin management education, but also it is because the position of competencies constitutes only one strand of a much wider 'MBA debate'.

As yet, academics and other interested parties have failed to reach a consensus in a number of areas that are of fundamental importance to the provision of high quality management education programmes. The role that the qualification should play within the wider management education process is still unclear and unproven, as is the nature of the contribution, if any, the MBA makes to the effective practice of management (Byrne et al, 2002, Novicevic et al 2003). Arguments as to the most relevant ways of assessing the learning of those students undertaking MBA are also no closer to being resolved, and questions as to what should actually constitute an MBA programme still remain (Bickerstaffe, 1995; Cameron, 1997; Cremer-Price and Manneh, 2003).

There is also little evidence that any of the theoretical differences described above are being addressed 'on the ground'. The failure of the UK's two most influential MBA-related bodies, the Association of Business Schools (ABS) and the Association of MBAs (AMBA), to reach an agreement over a joint MBA programme accreditation scheme in 1997 is a case in point. The failure of negotiations of this type is characteristic of outcomes which are likely to occur when a small number of powerful groups emerge within relatively underdeveloped market sectors and pursue their own 'narrow' agendas based on organisational self-interest.

For groups such as AMBA or the ABS, the development of the MBA market on a coherent basis is often very much their secondary concern. The actions that such groups take to strengthen their own, and their members', competitive market positions may actually serve to confuse potential MBA students and significantly reduce stakeholder confidence in the award. As a consequence of actions taken to provide short-term advantage, medium and long-term market growth is likely to be inhibited (Crainer, 1997).

The increasing competition between United Kingdom business Schools for students has also tended to further polarise attitudes and sharpen divisions within the profession. Such tendencies provide a further useful example of the market development scenario described by Crainer (1997) above. In

recent years, an increasing number of articles has appeared in the popular press, written by notable professors and heads of prominent business Schools expressing concern over the general level of MBA quality in the United Kingdom. However in many cases, these articles represent little more than a means of promoting the MBA programmes and institutional approaches with which the individual writers are associated. They contribute little to the furtherance of the MBA quality debate in any meaningful way, but may serve to seriously undermine the confidence of potential students with regard to the ultimate value of the qualification they are considering. The credibility of such articles are further compromised by the fact that they are often accompanied by advertisements for the author's particular programme or institution in the publication in which they are writing.

In the period between 1997 up to the present day the growth and development of the MBA market in the UK has continued. Cameron (2001), summarizes the impact of these developments to give an insight into the situation at the present time. The features she identifies are:

- 1 A still growing number of MBA providers and programmes, albeit with a slowing in the growth.
- 2 A growing division between full-time generalist strategically focused MBA programmes and part-time, more practical skills-based MBA programmes.
3. Increased demand for both types of programme but with much greater growth in the demand for the part-time programmes.
4. A third, much smaller group of specialist MBA programmes, either subject-specific, such as in areas of marketing or finance, or sector-specific, such as the public services. These types of programme have not seen growth in recent times.



5. An increased focus upon the importance of information technology in all areas of provision.

## **2.4 TYPOLOGIES OF MBA PROGRAMMES**

Attempts to rank MBA programmes have taken place but as with all rankings, the criteria used are not objective in a scientific sense. They are based upon a series of subjective, and often unexplored assumptions, as to the relative value of particular educational approaches. Such criteria often implicitly place a higher value on particular types of 'knowledge' than others and will to a very large extent 'automatically' favour some types of MBA programme over others. Notable examples of such rankings include *The Financial Times 50 Top Business Schools*, *Business Week's Top 25 Schools*, *The US News and World Report Top 300 MBAs*, and the *Economist MBA Handbook*.

There is no clear evidence to suggest how influential such rankings are, and there are, for the reasons given above, concerns as to their credibility as indicators of educational quality. For example, there is often confusion as to whether it is the quality of an MBA programme or the wider business school is being assessed and to the relevance of such criteria as 'research' and number of faculty with a 'PhD' (Golzen, 1999). Such concerns centre on issues such as to what extent does the holding of a PhD positively impact on the quality of teaching and to what extent do a faculty's research activities feed into the educational process?

Notwithstanding such confusion, what is clear is that the demand for MBA programmes and MBA graduates is still rising, and while this is the case, business Schools will continue to expand their activities in this very lucrative area (*Financial Times*, September, 1999). It is also clear that as the market becomes more competitive, business schools are increasingly likely to adopt more professional approaches to the marketing of their programmes and will seek to refine their approach to the particular market segment within which they seek to operate.

At least one published attempt to classify prospective MBA students exists (Golzen, 1999). Based upon criteria such as individual student motivational factors, personal characteristics, student background and experience and personal circumstances, it led to the development of eight categories of MBA student upon which the notion of various types of MBA market segment can be built. The eight categories of MBA student are as follows;

1.    The Big Game Planner: These individuals tend to describe themselves as 'highly-driven'. They view undertaking an MBA as a means of acquiring key business skills and a potential network of useful similar 'high flying' types. They have clear, well thought through career aspirations, and are extremely ambitious and self-motivated. The big game planner has a very positive self-image and set high standards for themselves and others.
  
2.    The Natural Next-Stepper: Similar in some ways to the 'big game planner', the 'natural next stepper' often works in an area where the possession of an MBA is seen almost as the norm for those at executive level, for example, investment banking or management consultancy. Alternatively, these prospective MBA students may seek to move into such sectors and hold the view that the MBA offers the key to this. Both the 'big game planner' and the 'natural next stepper' can be seen as equating to the more traditional MBA student that dominated the intake in the 1960s and 1970s in the manner described above.
  
3.    The Disillusioned Functionalist: The major motivation for this type of prospective student is to enable a shift of career focus from functional areas such as engineering and operations management into more general management. This can be seen as both a positive reaction to greater business uncertainty as students seek to make use of the opportunities presented by de-layering and the breakdown of traditional functional barriers, but also as a defensive reaction brought about by decreasing job security and the need to be multi-skilled. It

also reflects a greater awareness of the multidisciplinary nature of business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

4. **The Searcher:** Unlike the three types of prospective student discussed above, these individuals have no firm career strategy. Their expectations of the MBA are still high, but the MBA is seen as a way of exploring a range of possibilities, only some of which they might actually be aware of at the time of embarking on the programme. For these types of prospective student, the MBA represents a process-orientated journey rather than a destination-orientated journey (Oswick and Grant, 1996). Personal development and greater self-actualization are regarded as the main benefits for this type of prospective student but with the added benefit of enhanced career prospects.
5. **Moving up at 35:** These prospective students perceive themselves to be at a crucial stage in their career. They are seeking to reinforce and supplement existing skills and will often opt for part-time or distance learning MBA programmes. Individuals within the 'moving up at 35' group may often have risen to a reasonably high level in their organization, but feel under increasing career pressure from younger business graduates. As the number of undergraduate business programmes increases and the number of business undergraduates entering the market rises, a masters degree in business can be seen as one way of maintaining personal competitive advantage.
6. **The 'Copout':** The copout might be described as the perpetual student. They are unlikely to experience much difficulty with the intellectual elements of the MBA programme but lack personal and professional direction. Ultimately they may not enter a business field or directly use the qualification to obtain employment. For this group the MBA is seen as a means by which a career decision can be postponed rather than progressed.

7. The Self-Developer: These prospective students seek an MBA for its own sake rather than as a means of changing or accelerating career prospects. In many ways, their approach is similar to that of 'the searcher' with the prime motive for attendance on the programme being an interest in the subject area.
8. The Victim of Downsizing: In this case, redundant managers will often opt for an MBA as a means of improving career prospects, enhancing their skills and raising or restoring their self-confidence. They will often be older than the average MBA student and view self-employment, teaching or consultancy as a more realistic career aspiration than re-entering their previous field at or above their previous level of seniority.

Classifications of the type described above are not intended to provide a definitive list of reasons why individuals opt for an MBA. Neither should they be seen as a way of categorising all prospective students. However, classifications of this type do allow us to focus upon the issue of student diversity and help to explain both the steady growth in demand for the MBA over the last 15 years and the considerable diversity in the type of programme presently on offer. Within the context of this growth, it is possible to identify a number of dimensions along which programme diversity can be characterised and measured.

The first dimension on which a typology of programmes might be built is that which distinguishes between the relative emphasis being placed within the programme upon the student 'acquiring knowledge', compared with the emphasis being placed upon enhancing 'student development'. A review of MBA prospectuses and promotional material demonstrates that a considerable contrast can be found between those programmes that primarily aim to implant knowledge and understanding and those that base their teaching and learning strategy upon experiential learning and personal developmental processes.

The second dimension reflects the considerable distance some MBA programmes have travelled away from the generic form inherited from the original Harvard MBA model. It has now become possible to receive an MBA qualification of a highly specialised nature. Students can concentrate to a significant degree upon a given economic sector, such as the health service or banking, or upon functional business areas such as marketing, finance and accounting or human resource management. At the opposite end of the spectrum is what could be described as the more 'traditional' MBAs that offer a programme that is broad or generalist in nature. In between these extremes, a range of variants can be found in which features such as 'electives', projects and dissertations allow for a limited degree of student specialisation, and, as previously stated, the opportunity to apply management learning in a very focused manner.

A third dimension of differentiation recognises the degree of flexibility offered by the mode of study upon which the MBA is based. It should be stressed that notions of flexibility and inflexibility are not being applied here in a pejorative sense. However, it can be assumed that the greater the degree of flexibility, the more open a programme becomes to a wider range of potential students. Such openness can be measured in a variety of ways, for example, in terms of the level and nature of student attendance required, the points of student entry onto a given programme throughout the year, and the ease with which a student's participation on a programme can be temporarily suspended, among others.

All other things being equal, the least flexible MBA programmes can be seen as those of a non-modular, full-time nature. Usually of one year's duration, they require continual attendance and are based upon systematic linear progression. Entry onto the programmes would normally be at one point in the year, and the nature of these types of courses can make it difficult to break off from study for work-related or personal reasons without retaking the entire programme.

The modular full-time programme is similar to this in many respects, but the fact that the programme is divided into a number of discrete modules enables the possibility that partial exemption can be granted to students for past experience or previous courses that have been successfully completed. As modules begin at different times throughout the programme, often operating independently of each other, breaking off from study and rejoining at a later stage is sometimes possible.

Part-time study has obvious advantages for those students who, for example, need to remain in full-time employment or have family commitments. The problems that part-time students can face when trying to balance master's degree level study and full-time work are well known (Cameron, 1997). However, part-time MBA programmes should not simply be viewed as the next best alternative available for those students who cannot undertake full-time study. There are a number of reasons for this;

The combination of parallel work and study offers considerable opportunities for the part-time student to apply the newly acquired understanding of business and management theory and any other problem-solving techniques they may have learned, on an ongoing basis. For the full-time student, the chance to apply certain types of knowledge may not come until some considerable time in the future, if at all.

Such programmes can also afford part-time students advantages in terms of enhancing their ability to undertake work-based assignments and projects, electives and MBA dissertations. Full-time students, particularly those from overseas, often find gaining access to employers problematic during the course of their study. This fact may considerably delay the completion of electives and dissertations.

Groups of part-time students` are often made up of students with considerable practical experience. Such a peer group can offer the students within it a valuable range of business and management insights. This is often not the case with some less experienced full-time MBA groups.

The traditional part-time MBA programme is usually of between two and three years' duration and often requires student attendance on, for example, one afternoon and one evening per week for three terms or two semesters a year. It may also include a residential element. Institutions often seek to run their full-time and part-time programmes in a manner that provides the possibility for the student to switch between modes if changing circumstances dictate. A variant on the traditional approach is the part-time 'executive' MBA that is based upon attendance that is divided into sessional blocks or weekends. Aimed at those students who cannot commit themselves to attend on a weekly basis, it also tends to attract students who welcome more concentrated periods of study activity. There is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that both full- and part-time MBA programmes are being compressed in terms of time. Greater self-financing and the need to get back into fast moving business environments quickly have added to the pressure for shorter programmes.

The distance learning MBA programme could, in principle, be regarded as the most flexible of all the possible modes of study. However, the difficulties students may encounter when working in greater isolation should not be underestimated and the non-completion rate for those students undertaking this mode of study can be relatively high. The distance learning approach often requires very minimal face-to-face contact with course tutors, and usually takes place over a three- to five-year period. Students will often undertake a number of residential weeks/weekends and be allocated a personal tutor for each module they undertake.

Based on the provision of highly structured course materials such as workbooks and study packs and, increasingly making use of computer software, distance learning programmes can be seen as an extension of the correspondence programmes which have been established for well over a century in the United Kingdom. The growth of the use and availability of the Internet has greatly increased the potential for this mode of study, particularly in terms of speed of communication between student and tutor, both

nationally and on a global scale. The largest providers of distance learning MBA programmes in the United Kingdom are Heriot Watt University and the Open University Business School with nearly 3,000 students between them in the period 1999 to 2000.

Given that the United Kingdom MBA market now operates the full range of options on the dimensions outlined above, it is probably correct to suggest that the MBA is not now one single qualification or standard but represents a variety of different means of satisfying diverse and disparate groups of students. The adoption of the 'Constable' recommendations for growth and flexibility has led to the situation where different MBA providers are targeting different market segments and charging very different programme prices. A good indication of such market segmentation can be seen through a survey of the marketing and promotional material generated by the providers. When read in conjunction with the student typology presented by Golzen (1999) described above 4 MBA market segments can be identified as follows:

1. The market segment principally made up of those students for whom the MBA qualification is an initial stepping-stone to middle management. These programmes seek to provide an induction point to management and are recognisable by the relative youth of the student intake and their junior or low-level management inexperience. This version of the MBA can be seen as an applied, vocational programme that in many respects resembles the typical MSc or MA in management.

The lack of student higher level management experience tends to result in the programme's emphasis being placed upon the acquisition of general management knowledge and understanding within the context of the business organisation, together with the development of techniques used in problem-solving and key forms of analysis. Those students buying into such programmes are often doing so at an immediately post-first degree stage of their career, and are almost invariably self-funded. The most popular programmes of this type are



usually full-time and last between 12 and 18 months. They are often made up of a high proportion of international students.

2. The second market segment at which the MBA is aimed targets those students who are taking time out from middle or senior management careers to enable a period of reappraisal and reflection. MBA programmes of this type tend to emphasise the developmental aspects of the learning process. In many ways, this style of MBA represents a consolidated version of the open general management programmes that have always been available for senior management development. This type of programme is likely to offer mode choices and the part-time courses can be extremely flexible. The students undertaking such programmes will tend to be older than those comprising market segment 1.

For those students who remain in full-time employment, the programme can be wholly or partly, sponsored by the employer. Many programmes will explicitly use an employer-based mentor with an experiential-based learning approach. Work-focused projects and analysis tend to form a substantial component of the programme, reinforcing learning and providing a vehicle for student assessment. In recent years, these types of MBA have tended to attract increasing numbers of students from the public sector; such as local government or the National Health Service as such areas become increasingly 'commercial'.

3. The third segment sets the MBA programme within an individual organisation's management development pathway (known as the company or consortium MBA). As would be expected, this type of programme has a wide range of versions, but in all of them, there will be a strong link with the sponsoring/client company and the provider, often with senior members of the client company within the teaching/curriculum development panel. The placement of these programmes upon the management education/ management

development dimension will vary, the variation depending, to a large extent, on the culture of the client organization, and the stage within the student's management career at which the programme is being undertaken.

4. The final market segment, served by the MBA programme aimed at the student seeking personal career development, is perhaps the least specific and most widely offered MBA models. The clients are typically self-sponsored individuals, with more experience than those students found in market segment 1 but less senior than those catered for in segment 2. They often regard themselves as being at a significant change point in their management careers.

As with all producers seeking to serve particular market segments, problems are faced in terms of identifying their particular market niche and of separating such segments if they intend to operate in more than one market at the same time (Fitzsimons and Fitzsimons 2000). It is crucial that clear strategies are developed and implemented if such an approach is to be successful (Davido and Uttal 1989; Heskett 1986), and it is to these issues that we now turn.

## **2.5 STRATEGIES OF MBA PROVIDERS**

Within the MBA market in the United Kingdom it is possible to identify a range of market strategies that are being adopted by providers, which broadly correspond to those, cited by Porter (1985). The three generic competitive strategies he outlines (cost leadership or price-based, product differentiation and focused strategy) represent the main pathways by which an organisation may try to cope with the forces in a competitive environment. Research indicates that it is possible to find examples of each of these three strategies in current business School behaviour (Benwell and Gibbs, 1996).

The strategies themselves can be seen as a response to the increasingly competitive management education environment and a function of the individual institution's internal variables such as organisational culture and

structure and the institutional strategic capability (Johnson and Scholes 2002; Mintzberg et al 1999). The wide variety of MBAs on offer in the United Kingdom at the present time is, to a large degree, a reflection of the enormous differences that are to be found among the providers in terms of these internal variables as well as the increased differentiation within the MBA market.

Those charged with the role of devising an MBA strategy, or simply with selling an existing MBA programme, must seek to find a tenable market position for their programme or programmes. Such a process is undertaken by matching the institutional resources available to the environment, customer expectations and the expectations of those who formulate organisational policy (Grant 2002; Mintzberg, 1994). Within the context of the MBA market, the various responses to this task can be seen as falling into the following strategic types.

#### **2.5.1 PRICED-BASED STRATEGY**

This approach has been adopted by many of the newer entrants into the MBA market. Attention is focused upon price sensitive customers who are making the judgement that the MBA they will opt for will be the one they can afford, and not necessarily the one they would choose without such a resource constraint. As the providers of such programmes are not forced to conform to externally generated quality standards (they are unlikely to be accredited by outside bodies), there is little to discourage the development of such a market approach provided that they are able to attract enough customers over the long-term (Grant, 2002; Womack and Jones, 1996).

Programmes developed for delivery at low fees may often be able to raise marginal revenue without incurring large increases in cost because they make use of their existing infrastructure, buildings, staff, library facilities, etc. Typically, they do not provide an MBA environment substantially different from that of other parallel masters', or even undergraduate programmes. Such a strategy gives the opportunity to increase full-cost funding and raise the institution's profile in the short term, without undertaking any substantial

financial risk. This is because even though few barriers to market entry exist and, as a result, new market entrants regularly appear, there is evidence that a large proportion of customers for this type of offering tend to be geographically immobile, even for many full-time courses. Therefore, business schools of this type are able to tap their own local MBA markets on an ongoing basis.

The long-term sustainability of such a strategic approach remains in question, however, because, as we have seen, there is some concern being voiced with regard to the credibility of some of these programmes. If such concerns subsequently impact negatively upon the marketability of their graduates, new student numbers may begin to decline in line with the fall in the provider's credibility. It is unlikely that providers adopting this type of strategy directly threaten those business schools that are positioning themselves differently within the market. However, in the longer term, problems may arise for all providers if the qualification was to become generally devalued.

### **2.5.2 DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY**

This type of strategy entails the provision of MBA programmes of perceived added value (Lynch 2003). Such programmes are charged at premium prices of up to six times those charged at the lower end of the market. Such MBA programmes tend to be delivered by the more established institutions, which often have an international reputation (although the MBA programme itself may be a relatively new addition to the institution's portfolio.) Such institutions are almost certain to employ highly qualified, specialist staff, and have administrative structures, teaching resources and teaching premises dedicated solely to the provision of the MBA programme. As a result, they will incur considerably higher costs than other providers.

To succeed with such a strategy, these institutions must be perceived by their customers and potential customers as unique, and this often entails a marketing approach based around the concept of the high quality brand (Crainer, 1997). The student will often be 'buying' the institution as much as

the MBA programme, and relying on the reputation of the provider as an indicator of the programme's quality (Benwell and Gibbs, 1996).

Even new providers that are associated with the 'correct' brand image can aim to directly enter this sector of the market (Harrison 2003). Examples of this within the field of MBA provision are the relatively recent emergence of the Cambridge MBA provided by the Judge Institute and the Oxford MBA programme at the Said Business School, which is one of the newest and yet the most expensive programmes on offer. Such institutions identify their potential customers carefully and need to employ transparent and very selective recruitment procedures in support of their market position (Court et al, 1999).

If institutions adopt such a strategy, any fall in the number of appropriate student applications must be accompanied by a reduction in student numbers rather than a drop in course fees or a 'dilution' in student selection criteria, if market position is to be maintained. However, in the light of such a downturn in market conditions, some institutions have responded by adopting a more flexible approach with regard to the duration of their programmes, which, in general, are becoming shorter (as has already been stated), and with regard to the timing of their student intake. To successfully maintain this strategy in the long term, business schools must constantly re-evaluate their programmes and be able to maintain their reputation by demonstrating high levels of research and consulting skills on the part of their faculty. As a result, such a market strategy is open to few providers (Athiyaman, 2001; Weigel and Camerer, 1998).

### **2.5.3 FOCUSED STRATEGY**

Although clearly positioned at opposite ends of the price spectrum, both of the strategies discussed above have a clearly specifiable target participant base. From this perspective, they present fewer problems than exist for those providers who have chosen Porter's (1985) third approach, focused strategy. Such a strategy is characterised by provider attempts to identify

and address a particular market niche (Kotler and Armstrong, 1991; Tucker, 1995).

Within the MBA market, there are a significant number of institutions that are unable to charge premium prices but have an institutional cost structure that does not allow them to compete purely on price. It is probably correct to suggest that the ability of these providers to market their programmes effectively and differentiate themselves from other producers has been hampered by the great explosion of MBA programmes that has taken place and the impact this growth has had on the ability of potential students to keep pace with the developments (Cameron 1997). To overcome this problem, such institutions may seek one or more forms of external recognition of quality, for example through AMBA membership or through joint accreditation with professional institutions such as the Institute of Marketing or the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants.

Another response of providers within this strategic group has been to focus activities within programmes in order to create a more specialised MBA. The company or consortium MBA represents one form of this type of approach (already discussed above), and a further variation on this theme is to link the MBA with a particular academic field in which the School has a reputation for expertise, such as financial services or marketing or to make a link with a particular service area such as health management. There is some evidence of consumer resistance to this type of approach, as some potential students are concerned that this type of programme will limit their options, particularly if they see an MBA as a means of changing career path.

## **2.6 RESEARCH INTO THE QUALITY OF BUSINESS HIGHER EDUCATION**

A number of academic studies have been undertaken into the nature of business higher education quality. Those studies summarised below represent a variety of approaches and research questions deemed of relevance to this research study. They provide an insight into the theoretical and methodological perspectives that frame the business higher education

quality debate, and as such the ideas and issues that have shaped this research.

As early as 1992, Rigotti used a version of Servqual (subsequently developed and modified by its creators and discussed in more detail in chapter 3) as a measuring instrument to focus upon service provider gaps in business Schools. The conclusions reached focused upon the techniques itself rather than the original research question, and it was felt by the author of this report that while the portrayal of the 'student as customer' and the 'business school as service provider' did pose some problems in terms of providing a basis for an analysis of the quality of MBA programme provision, it was also a useful line of inquiry.

Specific elements of the service quality equation have also been the subject of research. These include studies of MBA expectations (Louw, 1999; Yucelt, 1997), managerialism and the declining influence of the academic (Exworthy and Halford, 1999; Scott, 2001) and total quality management initiatives applied to the educational setting (Kanji and Tambi, 1999; Montagu and Utter, 1999; Sallis, 1996). Also of interest to the work of this study is the work of Emery et al (2001), which discusses the notion of student as customer or product, Bailey and Dangerfield (2000), who distinguish between market driven and customer-led approaches to Business School strategy, and Lawrence and Dangerfield (2001) who analyse the benefits of using external quality award initiatives as a means of 'leveraging' quality in higher education.

## **2.7 HIGHER EDUCATIONAL QUALITY MODELS**

Evidence of the use of business related quality models within higher education have been provided above, but this should not be taken to imply that such an approach is universally accepted as appropriate. There does exist a number of higher education quality models generated from within higher education itself, as opposed to being 'borrowed' from the business world, and it is to a discussion of these that we now turn.

Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) regard the adoption of business quality models within academe as relatively superficial, a viewpoint supported by Birnbaum and Deshotels (1999). They identify alternative models emphasising quality in education and believe them to be of greater significance than the business related approaches as they emanate from within higher education itself. It is worth briefly outlining these models as they provide a useful insight into important quality related higher educational issues and approaches.

### **2.7.1 THE TRANSFORMATIONAL MODEL**

The transformational model emphasises an educational process that enhances the participants, adds value to participant's capabilities and as a result, ultimately empowers them, see Harvey and Knight (1996). The organisational quality policies and quality assurance methods that such a model rests upon are seen to be intrinsically superior to many of the existing policies and methods because they

have to be learning-oriented and should be centred on the student experience, whereas in contrast, the quality assurance methods practised by funding bodies merely leads to compliance. (Srikanthan and Dalrymple 2002, p217)

One of the great advantages of such an approach to quality in higher education is that, in essence, the introduction of such a quality model requires a shift from a focus upon 'teaching' to 'learning'. Higher education becomes, as a result, essentially, 'a responsive process that is explicit, integrated and based on dialogue' (Harvey and Knight 1996 p 40 – 41).

The model's major contribution to the higher educational quality debate is that it directs our attention to the need to base quality assurance and measurement processes around the student's development, rather than towards the measurement of indirect factors such as the level of resources available, teaching staff qualifications or faculty research levels. All of these will, of course, will impact on the student's development, but they are by definition not the same thing as the student's development.



## **2.7.2 THE ENGAGEMENT MODEL OF PROGRAMME QUALITY**

Developed by Hanworth and Conrad (1997), the engagement model of programme quality is based on,

the central idea of student, faculty and administrative engagement in teaching and learning, (Hanworth and Conrad 1997 pxii).

Within the model, five 'clusters of programme attributes' are identified,

1. The quality of the stakeholders themselves.

The quality of this cluster of attributes would be related to the experience, qualifications and motivation of students, teaching and administrative staff as well as all other relevant stakeholders.

2. A participatory culture.

This relates to the manner in which the programme ethos allows for the various stakeholders to engage with each other in a frank and honest way.

3. Interactive teaching and learning approaches

This cluster builds upon, and is to a large extent dependent upon the quality of the first two clusters, and refers to the extent to which the approach taken towards teaching and learning enables students to express their ideas and develop their creativity and in doing so provide a means by which innovative approaches can be taken to management problem solving.

4. Connectedness in terms of programme breadth and depth.

This cluster refers to the manner in which the programme's curriculum is organised and co-ordinated in order to ensure that the student experience is viewed holistically. The aim is to provide a programme that is integrated in terms of the various components, and graded, in terms of the increasing demands it places on students as they progress through the system.

5.     **Resourcing.**

The Engagement model explicitly recognises the need for an appropriate level of resource input in order to deliver the requisite level of educational quality outcome.

Such an approach to higher education quality is useful as it allows us to focus upon those factors that have the most significant impact on educational programme quality. The significance of the model for Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) is that it,

advances a perspective of programme quality that emphasises student learning as the primary purpose of higher education and highlights the pivotal role the academics, administrators and students play (in achieving this purpose) p217.

**2.7.3 THE UNIVERSITY OF LEARNING MODEL**

The university of learning model 'examines the organisational characteristics of higher education from a pedagogical perspective' Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) p217. The creators of the model identify 'learning' as the core activity of a university and indicate that,

quality in a university context has a lot to do with the quality of learning and the quality of learning has a lot to do with the qualities of different ways of seeing (Bowden and Marton, 1998, p219).

The authors believe that the quality of university education is a function of the university's ability to give the learner greater future options for action. This, they suggest, is achieved by enabling the learner to see the same phenomena from a variety of perspectives and then to choose the most appropriate option/action in the light of their knowledge. For Bowden and Marton (1998) the ability to see 'variation' and to apply 'discernment' constitutes the foundation of learning, and the characteristics an organisation requires in order to facilitate this include;

1. The establishment of academic teams that operate as 'networks', rather than as individuals who operate in academic 'subject isolation'.

2. An approach to teaching that is holistic and views the educational process from the student's perspective rather than from a series of single academic subjects.
3. The establishment, by the team members, of a collective consciousness of what is common and complementary within the programme.
4. A policy that encourages and enables uninhibited communication between team members regarding differences and similarities of approach.

#### **2.7.4 THE RESPONSIVE UNIVERSITY MODEL**

Based on the work of Tierney (1998), the aim of the responsive university is to create a model of excellence through restructuring for high performance. The model is founded on the premise that the public will judge the university in terms of the relationships it builds and the quality of the outcomes it generates. It highlights the need for the university to be responsive and service oriented, which in turn requires the development of effective internal partnerships as well as the more obvious external partnerships. Responsiveness comes from,

a focus on customers; this means being student centred in programmes, community centred in out reach and nation centred in research, (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 1998, p218).

In order to create such responsiveness the university must;

Regularly review its subject offerings in the light of student demand,

Reallocate university resources in line with the changing patterns in demand,

Appropriately reward its academic, administrative and management staff members in the light of agreed performance targets,

Accept that appraisal and evaluation form a core element of university culture.

For Tierney (1998), creating such a model will transform the university so that it 'will be more a network than a place' (p170).

The models cited above have been presented because they provide a variety of ways in which higher education quality issues can be approached. It can be seen that the models contain commonalities and differences and it is not intended that they should be viewed either as templates, or in competition with each other. Rather, it is suggested that they should be seen as providing a range of insights into higher education quality and the problems associated with its conceptualisation and delivery.

## **2.8 QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY (QAA) MASTERS QUALITY BENCHMARK STATEMENTS**

An examination of the QAA MBA benchmark statements provide further insights into the various issues and difficulties associated with the development of appropriate quality standards in the area of business and management education at masters level. These include;

1. The problem of determining workable objectives for Masters programmes in business and management.

The QAA subject benchmark statements for Masters awards in business and management state that, Masters programmes in business and management have an over-riding objective of helping to improve the quality of management, leadership and business practice in organisations (QAA 2004).

If we accept such a statement of objectives it is clear that the many and varied MBA curricula and methods of delivery that exist could be evaluated, in the first instance, in these terms. For example, an individual programme's objectives could be assessed in accordance with its relevance for the development of students along the lines of those indicated in the quote above. In this way the individual programme's objectives are being matched to those that are deemed to be the most appropriate and legitimate.

However, in terms of assessing quality, this is very much a starting point, and while the establishment of legitimate objectives is important, it is the means by which these objectives can be realized that requires the greatest attention. If a package of benchmark content, competencies and skills could be agreed as best fitting the achievement of the stated objectives two further problems immediately arise.

2. The problem of framing a series of benchmark statements that takes into account the dynamic nature of the business and management education environment.
3. The problem of assessing the nature of the contribution the programme makes in terms of the development of the students in achieving the desired objectives.

The QAA tackle problem 2 by developing benchmark standards which are 'not overly prescriptive', but, sufficiently detailed to enable institutions to develop a range of individual programme specifications which could easily be identified as being in line within one of the categories within the overall standards (QAA 2004)

The aim of such an approach to the development of benchmark standards is to enable the wide variety of institutions that offer Masters programme in business and management the flexibility to develop programmes that are differentiated, and can accommodate different institutional philosophies and different student needs. However, without the existence of an independent

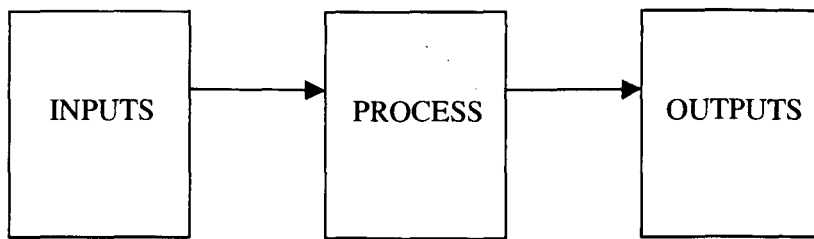
organisation able to monitor and regulate a potentially wide variety of offerings, it becomes difficult for prospective students to determine whether or not they are, in fact, 'in line' with the overall benchmark statements. Put simply, at what stage does the variation become unacceptable, who decides what is unacceptable, and how is this communicated to the relevant stakeholders?

Such an observation is not intended to be a criticism of the QAA and the Association of Business Schools (ABS) with which it has worked to draw up the quality benchmark statements. Rather, it is an example of the difficulties and contradictions inherent in producing quality standards that can both act as a yardstick of quality and yet accommodate significant degrees of variation around such a yardstick. The problem is further compounded because of the lack of a regulatory body in the field. In areas such as the financial services such regulatory bodies are able to investigate and adjudicate cases in which a provider might have delivered a service that falls short of the standards deemed generally acceptable within the industry, but in the area of management education no such body exists.

The third problem associated with the development of quality benchmark statements is to find a way of accurately determining the degree to which the educational programme has added value to the process of helping to improve the quality of management, leadership and business practice in organisations (QAA 2004)

The concept of the 'transformation process' (Mullins 2002) is one often used to understand the role of business in creating the goods and services that characterise modern daily life. The diagram overleaf shows the transformation process in its simplest form.

Figure 2.2 The Transformation Process



Although the transformation process is a very simple model it does allow us to focus upon the various stages of the creation of goods and services. If a problem with the final product (the output) is detected it should be possible to discover the source of the quality problem by retracing the steps involved in the output's transformation process in order to determine if the fault occurred within the manufacturing process, or at the design stage (process) or with the quality of the raw materials or labour used (inputs).

As with many quality assurance procedures, this approach works well when the final product has clear and simple quality attributes and the transformation process takes place in distinct, discrete stages, for example with the production of mass produced furniture. If we leave aside the aesthetic nature of the furniture then the inputs, wood, resin, varnish, labour etc will be transformed into a final product. If the product falls short of the quality standards that have been set, the 'batch' can be identified and a diagnosis take place to determine where the fault lies which will then lead to remedial action in order to ensure that the problem does not recur.

However, with the provision of services rather than tangible products, the process of setting quality standards, assessing them, diagnosing the fault and taking remedial action is more difficult, with management education being a case in point. If we think of the MBA student at the start of a programme as a major input and their ability, at the end of the course, to lead and manage business practice as an output the question becomes 'to what extent did the programme transform the student?' If, as stated in the QAA

quality benchmark statements, managers and business people benefit from professional education and development in this subject area in order to be more effective and enterprising and to assist their organisations to be competitive in knowledge based global economy (QAA 2004), and this is the 'transformational value' of the programme, how can we measure the 'value added'?

The simple answer is we cannot measure it in the precise manner described in our manufacturing example above. To do this we would need to be able to measure the MBA student's ability to undertake the tasks described above on entry to the programme and compare and contrast it to their ability, having successfully completed the programme. As no generally accepted way of doing this exists we either do not measure it, or we rely on a series of proxy measures to estimate it.

The proxies might include the student's ability to find employment or the increase in salary they obtained on completion of the course. The rationale for such an approach is based upon the notion that employability and salary increase represent the employer's estimation of the contribution that the student can make to the business. Such measures are often used by business schools for marketing and promotion purposes and while they are perfectly valid in themselves, they could only be described at best as crude measures of the achievement of benchmark statements, at worst, no measure at all.

An alternative method of approaching the issue of value added in terms of quality benchmark statements is to undertake an examination of the content of the programmes to determine whether the programme knowledge base, its methods of delivery, the student experience and skill development and methods of assessment are likely to achieve improvements in the areas designated as the legitimate objectives of an MBA programme. To a large extent this is the route taken by the QAA who state that graduates are expected to be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive and intellectual skills



together with techniques specific to business and management and that they should also demonstrate relevant personal skills (QAA 2004).

A full list of these skills can be seen in appendix (A). They are intended to develop in individuals an integrated and critically aware understanding of management and organisations and include areas such as;

- Critical thinking and creativity
- Problem solving and decision-making
- Personal effectiveness
- Effective performance in a team environment

At the same time as acquiring important skills MBA students are also expected to gain knowledge and develop understanding (see appendix B for a full list) in a variety of areas such as,

- The impact of contextual factors
- Markets, customers and other stakeholders
- Financing of business enterprises
- Business policy and strategy

There can be no guarantee that a student whose knowledge base and range of personal and professional skills can be developed in the areas identified will become a better or more effective manager. However the expectation is that this will be the case and if this is accepted as likely it is possible to move forward by focusing upon the various MBA programmes' learning, teaching and assessment strategies.

The QAA indicate that a programme should have a learning and teaching strategy which makes demonstrable and explicit the appropriateness of the learning and teaching methods used in relation to the expected learning outcomes and skills being developed, linked to the mode of delivery and the student profile and that this should be accompanied by an assessment strategy which makes explicit and demonstrable the appropriateness of the

assessment methods used in relation to the learning and teaching strategy adopted, and, to the anticipated learning outcomes and skills being developed. The strategy should also reflect the varied backgrounds of the participants and the characteristics of each type of course (QAA 2004).

Both of the strategies identified above as key elements of programme quality will then be made a reality through the curriculum, learning activities and assessment activities. These can then be monitored both internally and through the use of the external examiner system in order to determine that both the assessments are appropriate and that the students are being awarded appropriate grades at Masters level. The standards of achievement are laid down by the QAA (see Appendix C) and are intended to reflect the 'masters' element of the programme that have to be 'advanced' in terms of study, and include areas such as;

- Conceptual understanding

- Critical awareness

- The ability to deal with complex issues

- The ability to integrate theory and practice

By taking such an approach the QAA has developed a logical and self-contained system. By defining what is appropriate in terms of outcomes and by stating how it is likely that such outcomes might be achieved, a coherent approach to programme quality has been produced. Similar approaches are used in other areas where the maintenance of high quality is imperative, for example aircraft manufacture. Here it is not feasible to await problems with quality outcomes, as the consequences would be catastrophic. Rather, manufacturing quality processes are devised and tested prior to the aircraft flying and provided these are based upon the appropriate engineering science and implemented to the requisite standard, a large measure of confidence in the quality of the output can be achieved.

## **2.9 CONCLUSION**

As can be seen, although there is a general sense in which the MBA can be viewed as a qualification representing a particular standard, there are a number of forces at work in the higher education environment that exert a conflicting influence on MBA programmes and their development. These forces arise from variations inherent in the particular modes of study offered, sponsor expectations, National Vocation Qualification policies and the price and mode sensitivities of prospective students. It could be suggested that the desire for the MBA to conform to a particular standard is dated and a throwback to the times when it was regarded as the preserve of a small elite.

The multiplicity of modern influences has resulted in a situation in which providers are developing approaches specifically designed to differentiate rather than standardise, and as demand for the MBA fluctuates, we may expect to see still further moves away from a single standard. The ability of the qualification to 'adapt', and in doing so, to remain relevant might be regarded as a great strength, rather than a weakness. This is particularly so if quality is regarded from the consumer's perspective rather than the perspective of the producer. Under these circumstances quality, in terms of 'fitness for purpose' or 'value for money', become more relevant than conforming to a particular model or standard. It is to issues of this kind we now turn by examining in detail prevailing quality management theory and the relationship of such theory to the way in which quality management takes place.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **QUALITY MANAGEMENT THEORY**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter the various strategies of MBA providers were outlined and the relationship between these strategies and MBA quality discussed. It has been clearly shown that the higher education sector has both developed its own quality models and approaches, drawing heavily upon its own experience and competencies, and has also adopted and adapted quality approaches that have their roots in the business world. The influence of what has become known as 'quality management theory' has had a significant impact upon the way goods and services are produced, the relationship between supplier and consumer and even on the way in which organisations are perceived. This impact has been felt in both the private sector and the public sector.

This chapter explores the nature of quality management theory and the relationship between such theory and quality management practice in both the private and public sector. In order to undertake this task, it is necessary to examine and discuss a number of approaches to management research and the manner in which these approaches shape not only research outcomes but also the notion of management theory itself.

The tension created by the interaction of varying ontological perspectives is investigated and the possible impact on the practising manager is assessed. Also included are sections dealing with the nature of 'conceptualisation' and the way in which the ability to manipulate quality concepts can be used as a micro-political tool to further sectional interests within the organisation.

#### **3.2 THE GROWTH OF MANAGEMENT THEORY**

Whilst writers such as Taylor (1947) and Weber (1947) developed insights into life in organisations that are still relevant today, it is Henri Fayol's work, *General and Industrial Administration* (1930) that is generally held as being

the first attempt at a comprehensive view of the management process. (See Dixon 1991 and Pettinger 1994). In the years since this work was published, a huge quantity of management-related literature has been generated, so that there are now few perspectives from which the subject has not been examined (Greenwood, 1985; Tinker and Lowe, 1982).

This expansion in output can be seen to be driven, in part, by what Pascale (1990) calls the 'ascendancy of professional management', which diminished the reliance upon 'up from the ranks' managerial wisdom which had previously been developed and subsequently passed on within organisations. In the same vein, it is possible to point to the emergence of a set of general concepts and generic principles which are intended to be applied to a wide range of different organizational and management circumstances (Whetton and Cameron, 2000). The development of such 'universal ideas' tended to encourage managers to turn their back upon their own experience or that of their colleagues and in doing so prepared them to become consumers of the mass-produced and the mass-marketed managerial techniques and approaches we know today.

The growth of quality-management-related literature can be viewed as a function of both the perceived failure of improvised in-house approaches to quality management and the implicit assumption that general quality management concepts and generic principles can replace many of the quality techniques traditionally applied within organisations (Oakland, 1994; Samson and Terzovski, 1999).

The sustained long-term growth in the volume of management theory could only be maintained by the continual fragmentation of the subject into a series of functional specialisms and increasingly narrow conceptual areas, of which quality is but one example (Whitley, 1984). This process has also taken place within the natural sciences and social sciences. It is possible that the large and wide-ranging body of knowledge which has emerged could make any notion of management theory as a cohesive entity unrealistic (in the

same way as 'science' beyond the elementary level is a generic term rather than a unified set of laws and principles) and, therefore, render any subsequent proposition regarding relationships between theory and practice untenable.

However, having surveyed the diversity of theoretical and practical approaches to management, Gill and Johnson (1991) contend that there exists an inextricable relationship between management as a function and the control of the behaviour of subordinates. Such control is designed to ensure that the workforce accomplishes particular tasks, the identification of which is a prime responsibility of management (Cardona, 2000).

It therefore follows that if the control of behaviour is a fundamental element of the manager's formal role, the manager will wish to act in ways that achieve that control. It is the process by which managers seek out and determine appropriate courses of action that provides the link between theory and practice, for as McGregor (1960) indicates, every managerial act rests on theory, - this is to say 'theory' in terms of managerial assumptions, generalizations and propositions. These assumptions may be implicit and unconscious, but nevertheless, they link the behaviour of managers to the predictions managers make about various courses of action and their outcomes. In this way, theory and practice are linked in a very real sense (Bedeian, 1984; Ralph, 1986).

An investigation into the assumptions, generalizations and propositions that generate various quality management strategies and actions reveals that a number of widely-accepted ideas and notions have emerged. The latter enjoy a level of credibility that does not stand up to rational evaluation (Drummond, 1994). The popularity of such 'theory' rests more upon its appeal to our common sense view of the world, and our need to have something which makes sense of an otherwise chaotic set of circumstances, than reference to a rational and systematic review of the evidence (Sureschchandar et al, 2001).

The concept of management theory, the place of management theory within the social sciences, and its relationship with management practice are often more contentious issues than is the theoretical content itself (Berkley-Thomas, 1993). Of particular significance is the debate surrounding the positivist and nominalist approaches to the management research process. This can ultimately be seen as a debate about what it is that actually constitutes 'acceptable' knowledge (Berger and Luckman, 1967).

### **3.3 POSITIVISM AND NOMINALISM**

Situated at one end of the theoretical spectrum is what has become known as classical theory or positivism. This approach emphasises the centrality of the application of rigorous scientific methods to that which can be unproblematically observed. Such a methodological stance focuses upon the production of outputs that correspond to a particular notion of what can justifiably be held up as 'theory'. In order to contribute to greater understanding, only explanations based upon definitions of theory that tie together significant knowledge will be acceptable (Koontz and Weihrich, 1988).

Any research-based academic work that does not conform to the type of ideological template described above would not be regarded, by positivists, as credible in the theoretical sense, and although it may be both of interest and use, it would not be accorded the title of 'theory' by them.

Positivism as a methodological approach emphasises the broader adoption of methods already being applied, as a matter of course, within the natural sciences. As a result, it is an epistemology which limits the conception of what can be regarded as valid knowledge. Sometimes referred to as the correspondence theory of truth, the positivist methodology is based on the principle that the world can be observed neutrally, according to accepted methodological procedures that have been rigorously applied. A further set of 'accepted' analytical techniques can then be employed to create 'laws'

within the relevant subject discipline that can in turn be used to describe relevant properties. On this basis, theorists can then go on to predict behaviour.

As will be seen below, many of the founding fathers of what became known as 'the modern quality movement' (Drummond, 1994), for example, Deming, Juran, Crosby and Shingo have adopted an approach to the collection and analysis of research data that is broadly in line with the positivist tradition (Oakland, 1994). It is a methodological legacy with which many subsequent writers and researchers in the field of quality have struggled, particularly as the subject has spread out from its manufacturing-based origins and into the commercial and public service sectors.

These conceptual and methodological difficulties have not, by any means, been confined to the area of quality-related research, and, as might be expected, there has been a long tradition of scepticism within social sciences of what Casti (1992) calls the 'searching for certainty'. Simon (1947) is often regarded as providing the first comprehensive criticism of the positivist approach, with other notable contributions from Child (1969), Morgan and Smircich (1980) and Woodward (1958), among others.

The main thrust of the criticism made by these writers and others, is that such a positivist approach to theory tends to ignore the reality of both the management process and the management research process. Fundamentally, this criticism is derived from the recognition that the basic 'raw material' of both management and management research is people (not objects) and the arena in which people are managed and studied is the organisation (not the laboratory). If one of the prime objects of management theory is to link the management researcher and the practitioner, then theory must be able to accommodate the nature of organisational life with all its complexity and uncertainties, and this must cast doubt upon both the feasibility and desirability of the production of a set of universal laws that can be used to predict behaviour.



People differ from objects primarily because people experience the world in which they live and react to their experiences, whereas objects can only 'behave' in the world without reference to past experience (Laing, 1967). Within organisations, individuals and groups seek to use their resources of power and influence to further what they regard as their own interests. As a result of such micro-political behaviour, in order to better understand how people operate in organisations, it is necessary to be aware of the power/knowledge relationships that exist within these organisations, and how such relationships are played out on an everyday basis, in small scale but very numerous and widespread social interactions (Lin et al, 2001).

The 'micro-political' dimension described above has been demonstrated in numerous fields of the social and management sciences (Berkley-Thomas, 1993), and its existence is very apparent within the area of quality management, as we shall see. Examples are particularly prevalent with regard to the introduction of quality initiatives, such as new quality assurance mechanisms and techniques within organisations, and the subsequent negotiations and manoeuvrings that surround them. It can also be seen clearly with regard to the interactions that take place between service employees and their customers, as well as between customers in service transaction arenas (Wallace, 1999). It is clear that even initiatives regarded as politically neutral are likely to have unintended organizational consequences. Such consequences can go well beyond the sphere within which the initiative was intended to operate.

The power and influence of any philosophical approach to research, of which positivism is an example, is considerable. Such academic subcultures serve to prescribe 'legitimate' research goals, establish available and permissible means and methods, and determine 'appropriate' research subject matter. Checkland (1981) regards the positivist subculture as being responsible for the relative failure of management research and management theory, as it fails to deal with the complexity of management problems by seeking to

apply scientific methods to what are essentially social problems. He indicates that it is misleading to refer to the classical theory of organisations because this implies a settled doctrine expressed in formally accepted terms. In reality, one of the difficulties with 'classical' theory is that no definitive version actually exists.

There has, at times, been a tendency for those who promote quality theories and techniques to present them in similarly strident terms (often in order to sell their particular consultancy or other services). The implication is that various quality approaches and solutions to quality problems are the result of objectively established fact (Crosby, 1988; Garvin, 1988). In reality, research into the methods by which such theory has been generated indicates that there is often little hard evidence to support or justify the claims being made or implied by the authors.

Positivism then, can be regarded as representing one 'extreme' view of what constitutes both valid knowledge and 'accepted' reality. At the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum are those that take the perspective that a more realistic view of management theory is to accept that no single best approach can be applied to every research situation (Giddens 1978; Kuhn 1970). Instead, what is required is the application of a range of phenomenological approaches and techniques that seek to 'get inside' given situations and actively involve the investigator in the flow of everyday life.

The aim of this type of research process is not to produce a grand theory made up of universally generalisable laws, but rather, its role is to produce 'quasi-casual' accounts of phenomena, because as Fay (1975) suggests, we tend to act in ways which are not governed by external conditions, but rather in ways which are responses to those conditions, and the manner in which we perceive them. This type of behaviour is one that would more closely match and characterise much of a manager's everyday working experience.

Such an approach can be said to represent a shift from positivism to nominalism. At the centre of the nominalist perspective is the notion that if such a phenomenon as social reality does actually exist, it is little more than a network of assumptions and inter-subjectively shared meanings (Berger and Luckman, 1967). As Burrell and Morgan (1979) state, to accept this proposition is to accept that the ontological state of the social world is questionable and problematic, which is again a type of world much more familiar to the modern manager.

The idiosyncratic and problematic nature of the social world as represented by such a view of social reality should not be seen as an interesting sideline to the social research process, but rather as a central element of it. As a result, nominalism views the management research process (and the management process itself) as being most usefully characterised as a messy, subjective, value laden political process, rather than in terms of a set of discrete, rational, objective, goal-directed activities.

In such a world, social researchers are not able to claim the role of impartial observer, as might a scientist, although Kuhn's work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), casts serious doubt on the credibility of even this claim at times. Rather, the activities and approaches of the social scientist are governed by what Habermas (1974) refers to as the horizon of perception. There is considerable literature regarding the influence of prior belief on the research process, for example with reference to the operation of paradigms and the problems posed by paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1970), the inability to reflect upon theoretical assumptions, and the effect of social and cultural factors (Law and Lodge, 1984), among many others. As a result, many would agree with Gadamer (1975) who indicates that the role of the impartial observer can be seen as little more than a fiction, often generated and perpetuated by the observers for their own purposes.

The credibility, reliability and validity of theory that emerges from research based upon the nominalist perspective needs to be judged in terms that are

very different from those operating within the positivist paradigm. What then emerges as important in this context is the theory's 'practical adequacy' (Sayer, 1984) and its 'workability' (Law and Lodge, 1984). This being the case, any resultant theory should be viewed as 'truthful' in the pragmatic, rather than the absolute sense. If the theory 'works' on a regular basis, it can be regarded as 'true', even though it might not work in every conceivable set of circumstances. This would be a view that is in total contrast to that taken by positivists.

Such an approach serves to help break down the possible barriers between the management theorist and the practitioner because social actors tend to operate on a daily basis in the manner described above. For example, on a day-to-day basis, managers are continually, either explicitly or implicitly, recognizing causal relationships and acting on this information accordingly. However, if anomalies in such causal relationships begin to appear, the manager will reorder this tacit knowledge to take into account the ebb and flow of situations. As a result, the criterion for evaluating knowledge does not relate to some quest for absolute truth, but rather to the way knowledge serves to guide and shape us as managers and more widely as human beings. The view of reality was not wrong in the past, but things are different now and might be different again in the future (Morgan 1983).

Traditional positivist theory has tended to treat social and organisational conflict as a pathological condition that upsets the management equilibrium (Lawrence and Elliott, 1985). To some writers and practitioners, even to accept the existence of organisational conflict is to encourage it through legitimisation, whilst for others organisational conflict represents something that should be recognised but subsequently actively suppressed. This view of conflict has significant implications for those managers operating in what Harvey and Brown (1996) call 'turbulent times'. By classifying conflict as unnatural, we immediately limit the range of possibilities open to those who seek to harness the energy it generates and instead use up time and energy in its suppression (Griffin and Parker 2003).

A more useful approach would be to take a dialectical view of organisations, a view that is committed to the concept of process where social arrangements which might seem fixed and permanent are, in fact, both temporary and transient. As a result, any observed social pattern is regarded as one among many different possibilities. In this case, a useful area of attention might be the manner in which transformation takes place from one set of social arrangements to another. Any new information which does not fit with our existing view of social patterns should be seen as evidence of the 'natural order of change'.

As a processual perspective, dialectical theory seeks to offer an explanation of the manner in which organisational forms develop, change and are replaced by other forms. The management theory that emerges is, therefore, aimed at yielding insights into human behaviour rather than in terms of large scale, all-embracing theories. Under such circumstances, these newer forms of 'theory' are likely to be as diverse as the human meaning they seek to explain (Greenwood, 1985), but this makes them more, not less, useful.

To be meaningful and relevant, management theory needs to address the essentially micro-political nature of organisational life. Organisations need to be seen as comprising networks of relationships made up of individuals and groups acting and reacting to each other and events. As such, these organisations are in a constant state of becoming. Such an approach is simply not compatible with the ideological quest for social order, particularly in the light of the era of new competition, with organizations needing to be both more creative, innovative and entrepreneurial, and, to pursue continuous improvement in terms of both output and process. Such a micro-political perspective can be seen as reconceptualising management so that it is seen as consisting of a plurality of competing groups or coalitions. These groups will come into conflict at various times and are likely to 'resolve' issues through the exercise of power in one forum or another (Reed, 1989).

'Theories' are those ideas or hypotheses which enable us to recognise and cope with the multiplicity of possibilities rather than remove them.

However, such a stance should not be taken to mean that organisations are simply anarchies doomed to descend into chaos, and of which nothing can be usefully said because, as Bacharach and Lawler (1980) indicate, organizations are neither the rational entities celebrated in management theory nor arenas for apocalyptic chaos. Rather, they are somewhere in between the two and can be seen as a politically-negotiated order where protagonists often recognise that ultimately their interests are inextricably linked to the continued existence of the organization.

Such a micro-political perspective has governed the approach of this research in terms of both the methodology employed and the outcomes sought. The aim is to examine the various interactions which take place between the MBA programme stakeholders, to analyse the motives and interests that underlie these interactions, and to produce a series of conclusions and recommendations as to how the quality of the experience of all those involved might be improved.

### **3.4 THE NATURE OF CONCEPTUALISATION**

The creation of concepts enables individuals to analyse different social phenomena and, having undertaken this analysis, to communicate meaning relating to the social phenomena to others. The act of conceptualisation involves processes of classification of both those events that can be directly observed by individuals along with those that cannot be directly observed, and must therefore be inferred by them (Stevenson 1993). As we shall see, however, the distinction between the two types of conceptualization may not be as clear as the previous statement suggests.

One reason why the distinction described above is problematic is the difficulty that exists in determining the degree to which what we 'see' and what we think is inherited. While the creation, application and

communication of concepts primarily takes place as a result of an individual's thought processes, it is recognized that what constitutes 'meaning' for the individual will be, to some extent, culturally dependent (Berger and Luckman 1967, Tyler 1978). Add to this the notions of a wider 'collective unconscious' that pre-exists any individual's personal experience and, therefore, the possibility of an individual psyche which inherits the collective experiences and impressions of ancestral humanity (Jung, 1943, Stevenson 1993), and it is clear that, in creating concepts, individuals do not begin with a blank sheet of paper.

If we think of concepts as the 'smallest unit of thought', it is clear that concepts can be combined to form propositions (Carruthers 1998). It can be misleading to think of concepts purely as mental images, rather they should be regarded as a form of complexity-revealing terminology. This being the case, understanding the link between conceptualization and language is central to the understanding of what concepts are, and can do (Stevenson 1993)

If a conceptual distinction is to be made, the machinery for making it is language. If a distinction cannot be made linguistically, it cannot be made conceptually. Understanding the relationship between language and concepts and the effects of this relationship upon the individual are key to understanding how we live (Tyler 1978). The concepts people live by are derived from perception and language and, since the perceptions are received and interpreted only in the light of earlier concepts, we come close to 'living in a house that language built.' The limits of language are, to a large extent, the limits of our world (Roche 1973)

Concepts can also be thought of as 'tools for thought'. In common with the use of other types of tool, the process of using them competently, is a developmental one (Montgomery 1995). In the initial stage, that is learning concepts, a 'mechanical' process of getting hold of basic ideas is required. This involves skills such as internalizing definitions and being able to

recognise correct terminology. As time goes on, we move to a second stage. Concepts become much more familiar as we operate them less consciously. They become taken for granted ways in which we 'normally' classify events and approach solutions. The more ingrained they become, the less we think about them. (Downes 1998).

Being able to use concepts in the manner described above, and to communicate them to others has obvious advantages for the creation and transfer of knowledge (Blalock 1982). This has most notably been the case within the natural sciences. Here, paradigms are developed which define what the important questions are and the methods by which scientists should seek to answer them. They are extremely useful in focusing research and, without them, a systematic approach to problem-solving would not be possible (Kuhn 1970).

Their great disadvantage, however, is that conceptual paradigms become inflexible and inward-looking. As Kuhn (1970) demonstrated, paradigms are useful because they provide a way of seeing, but they can also become a way of not seeing. Data that fits the scientist's expectation are included but what does not is likely to be rejected or simply not noted. Only when the evidence running contrary to a prevailing paradigm becomes so great that it can no longer be ignored, will a paradigm shift take place. What was once outlandish and absurd can become the new orthodoxy and the process begins again.

Kuhn's ideas have been applied by management writers to the field of business decision-making (Handy, 1996) and used to explain why organizations are often slow to change, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that they should do so. The concepts that have become part of the way one normally thinks about events determine the way those within organizations normally respond to those events. When the same conceptual tools are being employed by individuals throughout an organization, the



organization is likely to run smoothly, but there is the danger that it will become rigid and lacking in innovation (Brooks 2003).

In some cases, strong organizational cultures will be created which become a significant barrier to change (Denison 1990). The socialisation process perpetuates the problem as conformity and harmony become the over-riding organizational concern (Janis and Mann, 1977). In contrast, when competing sets of conceptual tools are operating, innovation and greater flexibility can lead organizational conflict to occur.

Take, for example, a concept as 'straightforward' as organizational structure. Historically, notions of organizational structure have been dominated by mechanistic metaphors with comments such as 'the office runs like a well oiled machine' being commonplace. Having its roots firmly planted in the theory of writers such as Taylor (1947) and the practice of industrialists such as Henry Ford, its language was one of rationality, control, planning, efficiency and goals. The advantages are obvious and it is clear that some organizations have had spectacular success using such a mechanistic model (Morgan, 1997a). However, the success is usually confined to organizations operating under a particular set of environmental conditions.

These conditions include that only relatively straightforward organizational tasks need to be performed, that business environments are relatively stable and undynamic, that the goods and services being provided are standardized and most importantly of all, that the 'human part' of the machine is compliant (Morgan, 1997). Under these conditions, any organizational problems that occur can be 'fixed' by replacing or repairing a component, and/or speeding up or slowing down the 'machine'. The ability to manipulate the manner in which the organization is conceptualized so that it becomes the 'normal' way to think about it legitimizes the division of labour, changes in shift patterns and downsizing, among many other organizational activities.

An examination of the parallels between the processes involved in the conceptualization of 'organization', and the conceptualization of 'quality' forms a significant element of this research, because to control the manner in which quality is conceptualized provides the manager with similar power (Dale and Cooper, 1994; Dering, 1998). If managers can manipulate the way in which other stakeholders 'normally think about quality', they can set a quality agenda that logically flows from it. The actions the managers then take to inspect, control and assure quality are consequently legitimized as a direct result of the common view of what quality is. In essence, it is the way in which the theory is applied which may become an issue, not the theory itself. The manager's quality agenda can then be carried forward without the existence of that agenda being formally recognised or explicitly stated (Prabhu and Robson, 2000).

### **3.5 APPLYING MANAGEMENT THEORY**

In professions such as medicine and engineering, a symbiotic relationship exists between theory and practice (Koslowski 1996). For example, understanding the science on which modern medicine is based acts to improve the medical professional's problem-solving ability, and this, in turn, enhances his or her status within the community. At the same time, those engaged in scientific research gain credibility and tangible support from the community by being able to demonstrate the practical benefits that the application of science can bring in improving the quality of life (McGinn, 1991).

Traditionally, such a relationship has been assumed not to be as strong within the field of the social sciences because the practical benefits of the application of these subjects are not as widely recognized or easily demonstrated (Atkinson 1987). For example, in the field of management studies, many practitioners are thought to resist the notion of management as a science, preferring to regard management as an art. Under these circumstances, it is the personal skills and qualities of managers that enable

them to be effective, and the experience they gain is more important than the theory they have learned (Berkley-Thomas, 1993).

However, these assumptions are based upon a particular view of what theory is. It can be argued that if theory is seen, not in terms of the development of general laws and propositions, but rather in terms of practical adequacy, then rather than being rejected by practitioners, its use is so widespread and natural that it is an integral part of coping with daily life. Increasingly, we live in a world where those in positions of authority must be able to justify their actions, rather than simply impose their will on others, and as a result, the ability to appear objectively rational has many advantages for the practising manager (Handy 1996).

The degree to which customers or employees regard a particular management action to be rational depends to a large degree on the manner in which their conceptualization of the issues involved corresponds to those of the managers. The more these groups are in tune with the prevailing 'theory', the more likely they are to see a particular course of action as inevitable or 'simply common sense'. If managers can supplement this common sense approach with formally 'written down' justifications, then better still.

The demand for such 'justifying theory' fluctuates, and in order for it to be influential, timing is important. For example, two works which, in their time, had an enormous impact on management theory were Ouchi's *Theory Z* (1981) and Pascale and Athos' *The Art of Japanese Management* (1981). They covered ground already well-trodden by writers such as Drucker 'What we can learn from Japanese Management' (1971); Kahn 'The Emerging Japanese Superstate' (1970) and Vogel 'Japan as number one; Lessons for America' (1980), but their time had not come and the 'market' was not yet ready for their ideas.

As with any product or service, success will bring with it imitators as well as those who genuinely seek to improve and extend the original offerings. Managers seeking to draw on published work in order to solve practical problems must distinguish between a plethora of competing material of varying quality. Business fads have always been with us but the sophisticated marketing machines that support them and the relative ease of communications made their scale and influence an increasing issue.

There is a real danger that such an approach to the development of management theory does not simply fail to make a positive contribution to the process, but that it can actually become counter-productive. This is because, as Hilmer and Donaldson (1996) point out, the shortcuts and simplifications offered tend to undermine and trivialise the task of effectively managing large and complex organizations in increasingly dynamic business environments. They add to a feeling of cynicism that can create a negative attitude towards attempts to find solutions to management problems. The cycle described above is set to continue because the nature of organizational life in capitalist economies, coupled with the information gap between business academics and managers, will ensure that management fads will be with us for the foreseeable future.

An unprecedented degree of uncertainty and ambiguity now prevails within the business world and this situation is not likely to stabilise in the near future (Belbin, 1996; Handy, 1995). Such a climate has led to the popularity of works which aim to reduce uncertainty and provide reassurance that chaotic situations can be managed, for example, *Competing for the Future* (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), *Thriving on Chaos* (Peters, 1988), and, *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990). The importance of these writers, and other management 'gurus' is significant as they have not simply informed much of the subject's content, but also serve to signal many of the contradictions and difficulties that arise when managers seek to implement management models within their organizations.

### **3.6 THE CONTRADICTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES OF QUALITY THEORY**

The paradox between the rational and magico-religious can be found in varying degrees in many areas of management theory and is particularly prevalent within the quality movement because at the heart of the quality paradigm lies the assumption of organizational rationality. That is, that the organization is often viewed as an instrument designed for the realisation of the goals of a particular group (Abrahamsson, 1993). This mechanistic view of organizations can be seen to have its roots in the era of the great industrialists and systems builders such as Henry Ford.

An essential part of the process of reinforcing the notion that certain quality-related ideas or actions are rational is through the management of organizational culture. The culture is supported through the organizational structure, recruitment and socialisation processes, and systems of reward and sanction. In this way, it is possible to govern the fields of attention of members of the organization and also define the criteria for how members of the organization are intended to act. This can be seen as a recurring theme in much of the prevailing quality literature where, for a number of writers, 'quality' must be the fabric of the organization (Bounds et al, 1994; Crosby, 1988).

Quality initiative failures can often be explained, in part, by the lack of attention given to the development and management of appropriate organizational culture. Attempts to 'force fit' quality techniques, particularly those originating in Japan, onto western organizations 'in isolation' have been shown to produce disappointing results (Drummond, 1994). It is clear that an initiative such as quality circles must be supported by a culture in which individuals feel free to make suggestions or criticisms without fearing the consequences (Brooks 2003).

However, a more fundamental criticism of quality theory is the tendency of writers to ignore the internal politics that inevitably accompany organizational

life. As Morgan (1995) explains, managers and writers on management often try to override complexity by assuming that organizations are ultimately rational phenomena that can be understood with reference to goals and objectives. Such an approach often gets in the way of realistic analysis. He goes on to suggest that to truly understand organizations, it is best to start with the view that they are complex, ambiguous and paradoxical (Robbins 2003).

Such a paradox can be seen with the use of the following example: A major theme of quality theory is the essential requirement for the commitment and involvement of senior management to quality initiatives (Deming, 1981). They are in a prime position to recognise such a 'quality imperative', and, as a group, might rationally be seen as having a good deal to gain from an organization that survives and prospers due to the improved quality of output. However, as Ross (1995) points out with regard to Total Quality Management (TQM), the rational perspective will not suffice, because senior managers must personally change in order to instil a total quality environment, and it is they who may have the most to lose. They are likely to have risen to senior positions because they have succeeded in the existing culture, a culture that has rewarded them and that they are being now asked to turn their back on (Dering, 1998).

Discussions of this type of micro-political issue play very little part in the majority of quality-related literature. The possible reasons why such a lack of critical analysis exists are discussed below, beginning with the nature and role that has been played by a small group of individuals who have become known as the 'quality gurus' (Drummond 1994).

### **3.7 THE QUALITY GURUS**

The quality movement has been driven by a variety of forces (Garvin, 1988). The quality gurus have provided an important area of input, with founding father status being ascribed to Deming (1981 and 1986) and Juran (1981, 1986). Their personal influence has been enormous (Kennedy, 1991) with

much of their kudos drawn from their association with the resurgence of post-war Japanese manufacturing industry (Eberts 1995). As we shall see below, such a manufacturing legacy has created considerable tensions within commercial service industries and the public sector as attempts have been made to adopt and adapt ideas and techniques with such a genesis (Newton, 2002).

Prior to their associations with Japan, both Deming and Juran spent their formative years at the Bell Laboratories where they were involved in developing and testing statistical control techniques (Wadsworth 2002). Their subsequent writing reflects their production backgrounds. Of his approach, Deming has said that if he had to reduce his message to just a few words, it would be that it all has to do with reducing variation.

Juran's approach is regarded as less process- and more people-orientated but it is, nevertheless, primarily concerned with issues such as measurement and conformance (Lengnick-Hall and Hartman, 1995). As we shall see, much quality theory subsequently operates, often subconsciously, within the parameters initially established by Deming and Juran (Gronroos, 1994).

It is not simply the backgrounds and perspectives adopted by prominent quality writers that have negated interest in the complex, ambiguous and paradoxical nature of organizational life (Collard 1989). The manner in which quality-related theory has been packaged and presented also plays a significant part in the process, for as Kennedy (1991) explains, everything in the 'west' has to be marketed before it is taken seriously, and this includes 'the management improvement business'. The term 'management improvement business' is a useful one, because so much quality literature can be seen to fall into the category of what Abrahamsson (1993) calls 'technically oriented, how-to publications'.

When such work succeeds in capturing the corporate imagination, it can bring success on the grand scale, as with, for example, Crosby (1979 and

1988); Moss-Kanter (1983 and 1989); Peters (1985 and 1988), among many others. Guru status can be attained, bringing with it considerable financial and professional rewards (Bendell 1995). Such a situation rarely comes about by accident and requires a number of important elements for success. These factors include:

1. **Timing:** The work must strike a chord with the prevailing corporate mood (Brindle 2001). For example, much of the interest in the work of the quality gurus followed a period of relative corporate decline in the USA and Europe and was heralded as an answer to the threat posed by the Japanese (an issue expanded upon below).

2. **A Gift for Self-Promotion:** Writers such as Peters and Moss-Kanter have been able to capture media attention due to their charismatic style of lecturing and consulting (Collins 2000). They are closely personally associated with their work, rather than being detached from it, and promote their ideas in a forceful, rather than traditionally, academic, manner.

3. **An Appeal to the Instincts:** Much of the work of the gurus is not based on the systematic gathering and analysis of evidence. Rather, as has already been stated above, it owes its success to its ability to connect with the instincts of managers about what is wrong and how to fix it (Hilmer and Donaldson 1996). Ideas such as 'empowerment' or 'sticking to the knitting' encapsulate and provide legitimacy for managers who already saw such approaches as the way forward for their particular organizations.

It is unlikely that an approach to the improvement of quality that stresses the ambiguous, paradoxical and complex will achieve high levels of recognition and acceptability in a market traditionally favouring the establishment of simple rules of action and the application of what can be presented as 'tried and tested' techniques (Stacey 2000). This again reaches back to the corporate West's 'Fordist' legacy. The notion of the existence of a 'market' for quality theory is useful, because to fully understand the nature of quality



theory, it is important to focus upon the factors that shape the demand for such material, as well as upon those factors that shape its supply.

In *Images of Organization*, Morgan (1997a) proposes the metaphor of the organization as 'psychic prison' where individuals become trapped in webs of their own creation. For Morgan, organizations can be viewed as essentially psychic phenomena in the sense that they are:

ultimately created and sustained by conscious and unconscious processes, with the notion that people can actually become imprisoned or confined by the images, ideas, thoughts and actions to which these processes give rise. (Morgan, 1997, p.215)

The concept of the psychic prison can be used as a means of explaining why the commercial world is not only receptive to the role of the guru, but actually demands that such status can be conferred upon individuals (Shapiro 1996). The vision of the leader who will come to lead us 'out of the crisis' has a long historical tradition in western culture (Peters 1985; Taffinder 1995). The tendency for the modern media to focus attention upon particular individuals who are often portrayed as synonymous with companies (e.g. Bill Gates or Richard Branson), political parties (e.g. Margaret Thatcher) and even nations (e.g. Fidel Castro) fuels this notion of the importance of individuals (Bennis and Manus, 1985; Tait, 1995).

Such 'cults of personality' are often at their strongest at times of perceived threat, which may be either real or imagined, and are particularly potent when such threats are seen as emanating from 'outsiders' (Storr 1996). In the case of the quality movement, it is the Japanese who have taken on the role of the enemy at the gates (Franko 1983). Given the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not surprising that the psychological impact of Japanese economic success was felt most keenly in the USA (Kunkel 2003). The shock to the American national system was compounded by the fact that it was within the automobile industry that the results of the competitive gulf between the two countries was first recognised (Mashahiko, 1996; Shapiro and Harris, 1987).

Both the economic and psychological importance to the nation of the four main US car producers should not be underestimated. In 1980, they employed 4 million US workers directly. In addition, their combined spending of over \$40 billion on equipment and materials created another 20 million jobs throughout the rest of the economy. However, just as significantly, these companies also epitomised the confidence, power and approach of corporate America, their final product being as much a part of national folklore as a simple means of transport (Rubenstein 2001 and Shimokawa 1994 ).

As a result, the psychological and economic impact of the events that took place between 1978 and 1981, a period when the industry was forced to shed over 400,000 workers and General Motors made its first loss in 60 years was felt far beyond the US car industry, spreading quickly to the entire western capitalist system (Shapiro and Harris 1987). Successive reverses in the US domestic car market culminated in unprecedented financial losses (for the four main producers of over \$4 billion in 1980 alone) and forced these symbols of free enterprise and competition to accept loan guarantees from the federal government and a voluntary agreement from Japanese manufacturers to restrict their exports.

Such humiliations were to lead to the development of a siege mentality within much of western industry, and it was in such an atmosphere that the modern quality movement was born (Scott-Stokes, 1999). These circumstances help to explain the enormous importance attached to the issue of quality, for it was the superiority in the quality of Japanese manufacturing output which was seen as the root cause of their competitive success, and the fervour of those who preached the 'quality gospel'. In this context, a number of writers (Cleverley 1971; Gimpl and Dakin 1984), have focused upon the similarities that exist between the principles and practices of both magic and religion and those of science and management (Tambiah 1990).

Magic and religion are portrayed as similar to each other in that they represent a means by which human beings seek to cope with the uncertainty that they feel surrounds their existence. Magic can be seen as a narrower concept than religion, representing a body of techniques intended to afford the users control over their environment (Cunningham 1999). It is based on the assumption that, provided procedures are followed correctly, desired outcomes will occur (Beals and Hoijer 1971). In contrast, religion provides the believers with a broader, overarching meaning to human existence and relies upon a mixture of ceremony, ritual and symbol in order to achieve this purpose (Berkeley-Thomas 1993).

Science and management are, in part, intended to serve the same functions and can be viewed as 'systems of belief' (Berger and Luckman 1967). These are, of course, very different systems of belief, but they are similar in that they make use of experts whose role it is to define belief and error and to make predictions and provide explanations. The experts have different titles – scientist, priest, manager, consultant, guru – but their job is to apply their expertise in order to make the complexity of experience bearable.

The more important, uncertain and complex the issues and circumstances seem to individuals and groups, the stronger the belief system is likely to be and the greater the recourse to appropriate ceremony and symbol (Malmowski, 1982). As has been demonstrated, the circumstances that prevailed at the time the modern quality movement emerged were perceived as both highly uncertain and fundamentally important, and the zeal with which quality theory has been embraced has, at times, taken on a religious tone. We are presented with 'quality bibles' (Martin, 1986), and 'quality gospels' (Penzer, 1991). Some texts are ascribed almost mystical status, for example, *The Sayings of Shigeo Shingo* (Shingo, 1987), and others are often interpreted in the form of 'commandments', see Deming's 14 universal points (1986), Juran's 10 steps to quality improvement (Juran, 1986), and Feigenbaum's (1989), 7 keys to constant quality.

It should not be assumed that all quality literature and its interpretation falls into the category described above, for example, Neave (1990) sees the development of the quality movement as a vehicle for opening the mind to new thinking and to the fact that it might be possible to pursue radically different and better ways of organizing people rather than a set of prescriptions to be followed. In practice, such an approach is rare as hard-pressed practising managers look for specific answers to their quality problems rather than for an opportunity to explore broader questions and prevailing paradigms, areas which they feel are too academic, time-consuming and remote from their daily working lives.

Andreski (1974) addresses the issue of faith across a broad range of social science activity and the effect that it has in embroiling the faithful in what he calls the 'sorcery of the social sciences'. He justifies such a term on the grounds of the lack of hard evidence that exists to support many of the techniques of analysis, prediction and control being both taught in business schools and employed throughout the business world. Ample examples can be found within the field of quality management theory to support such a view, see critical evaluations of quality circles, zero defects, and TQM, for example (Dawson, 1994; Drummond, 1994) but irrespective of the tangible results that may or may not occur, the practice of such techniques can provide considerable psychological comfort for both 'priests' and the 'congregation'. As Gimpl and Dakin (1984) suggest, such activities are, to a large extent, a manifestation of anxiety-relieving, superstitious behaviour designed to promote reassurance.

In the event of the techniques yielding poor results, management can attempt to ward off criticism if it can be shown that they applied the best available techniques in areas where knowledge is imperfect (Pattison 1997). Similarly, and this has many parallels with the magico-religious sphere, failure can also be blamed upon any inauspicious circumstances that prevailed when the techniques were applied, rather than on the techniques themselves. Individual 'priests', be they managers or consultants, can also

escape criticism for the failure of initiatives in other ways. For example, they may simply not measure the results either because they do not see this as a necessary part of the process, or because they have no time to measure them, having moved on to another stage in the initiative (Schwartz 2003).

The occupational mobility found in the West also means that they may have physically moved on, and hopefully 'up', before the measuring stage has been reached. Ironically, such an approach to quality management does not indicate a rejection of rationality, for as Berkeley-Thomas (1993) suggests, these activities can be viewed as magical rites that take a rational form. He goes on to suggest that

Futhermore, managerial faith in the possibility of the control of uncertainty presented by human involvement in organsiations reflects reverence for the sacred symbols of rationality and professionalism. (p.79)

The issue of rationality within non-rational systems of belief has been explained by Meyer and Rowan (1977). They view the pressures placed upon managers to adopt the perspective of instrumental rationality to be considerable, a pressure that has increased in the last two decades (Bennis, 1993) and also applies to doctors, teachers and politicians among many others. However, they suggest that the information available to the manager in order to realise this ideal is often insufficient for the tasks that confront him or her.

In response to such a shortage of 'hard fact', managers adopt a policy of 'ceremonial conformity' as a means of bridging the gap between real knowledge and the variety of stakeholder expectations that they must address (Pattison 1997). As a result, many management techniques can only be fully understood when viewed as symbols denoting adherence to the values of instrumental rationality, rather than as a means of achieving stated goals (Ackoff, 1961). From this perspective, quality management can be seen as an example of a 'secular religion' (Collins, 1982), for, while

supernatural forces are eschewed as a belief system, the symbols of such a system remain as a means of coping with an uncertain world.

### **3.8 THE PROBLEM OF JAPAN**

The environment of uncertainty has been heightened by the fact that Japan, the country that has so radically influenced western quality thinking, represents such a markedly different structural and cultural order to that which is to be found in Europe and the USA (Hendry 2003 and Preston 2000). Even if we accept that explaining the success of Japan became an American national pastime (Wheelwright, 1981), the fact is that a consensus as to the nature of the Japanese quality legacy and its contribution to Japanese economic growth has still not emerged (Scott-Stokes, 1999).

The quality literature spanning the period of most Japanese economic growth indicates that a mixture of anger, fear, grudging admiration and perplexity with regard to Japanese economic achievements exists (Kakabadse et al 1996). Jackson (1994) does not find this situation surprising, believing that Japan is very different from other industrial societies and that many of the social forces that Americans and Europeans take for granted operate in very different ways in Japan.

It is not just western writers who have commented upon the extent of the differences between the two cultures and the depth to which such differences run (Ishihara, 1991; Ohmae, 1990 and 1995; Ouchi, 1981). Matsushita (1994), reflects on these differences and asserts that they tend to operate in Japan's favour because of the paradigms operated within the west. Paradigms that, he concludes, we can do little to change.

Whether or not Matsushita's prognosis is fully justified remains open to debate, but the general recognition of the real differences that do exist (Hendry 2003) has, in turn, led to the widely-held view that attempts to simply transplant Japanese quality procedures and practices onto western

organizational cultures and structures will not prove a panacea for American or European industry (Eberts 1995; Hickson and Pugh, 1995).

### **3.9 THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES WITHIN QUALITY THEORY**

In order to make sense of the enormous volume of quality-related literature now available, it is necessary to find a means of classification and categorisation (Dale 1998). A number of writers have attempted this in a variety of ways, depending upon their particular backgrounds and perspectives (Bendell 1995). Garvin (1988) identified 'five principal approaches to defining quality', and an examination of these provides a useful insight into the main philosophical ideas that underpin the notion of quality. As we shall see, the manner in which quality is initially perceived in terms of its defining characteristics will, in turn, go on to determine the way in which processes and procedures for their measurement, control and assurance are devised and implemented.

### **3.10 GARVIN'S FIVE DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY**

Garvin, (1988) recognised that considerable ambiguity exists with regard to the notion of what the term 'quality' actually means and attempted to refine the concept by distilling the host of competing perspectives, each based on a different analytical framework and employing its own terminology. The five perspectives are:

1. The Transcendent Approach to Quality
2. The Product-Based Approach to Quality
3. The User-Based Approach to Quality
4. The Manufacturing-Based Approach to Quality
5. The Value-Based Approach to Quality

It is worth examining these different approaches to quality in greater detail, because, individually and collectively, they yield insights into the many commonalities and contradictions that pervade the subject area, both theoretically and in terms of practical application. It should be stressed that

the object of such an examination is not to determine the superiority of any particular perspective, but rather to establish the relative merits and problems associated with each approach.

By combining these findings, it is then possible to form a multiple perspective. In order to achieve this, the approaches are viewed as complementary to each other rather than in competition with each other and, can be used to gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the notion of quality, in the same way Morgan (1997a) combines organizational metaphors to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of organizations.

#### 3.10.1 The Transcendent Approach to Quality

Such a view equates the notion of quality with that of 'innate excellence'. Even though it may prove impossible to accurately describe the precise qualities of an experience or object or explain why it produces such a positive response within us, in the words of Pirsig (1974), 'You know what it is when you see it.' Indeed it is often the elusiveness and intangibility of the final product when compared to the ordinariness of the ingredients that enhance the aura of special quality. Under such conditions, attempts at analysis may often be regarded as counter-productive, irrelevant or impertinent, when faced with items of such universal and timeless appeal.

Attempts to unravel the mysteries of how such 'masterpieces' are created often focus upon the nature of the creators of the work, their backgrounds, personal qualities, lifestyles, work patterns and techniques. However, in doing so, the intention is not to be able to produce a template by which others may, in turn, produce work of the same quality. Indeed, it is part of the 'value' that this cannot be done. Copies and imitations are simply that; they cannot replace the original. Quality perspectives of this type have their roots in the ancient Greek ideas of beauty, which held that understanding could only come about through continued exposure to objects that displayed



the relevant characteristics, rather than through an analysis of the processes and procedures involved.

Although the ethereal nature of this type of approach to quality may at first seem irrelevant to those who practise modern, rational management, the commercial potential of items of transcendent quality is clear. The enormous demand evident for the 1996 Degas exhibition at the Tate Gallery and the 1999 Monet exhibition at the Royal Academy, and the successful merchandising programmes that accompanied them, demonstrates the high levels of public interest that can exist in areas that were once the preserve of a relatively small elite.

Advertising and marketing strategies which stress the 'timeless' or 'classical' nature of goods or services can also be seen as attempts to draw on such notions of quality. There is considerable evidence to indicate that corporations increasingly recognise the importance of brands that are perceived in this way, and that they will pay a large premium to acquire them (Gregory 2003). This is often not simply for the commercial value of the particular brand, but also for the wider kudos that the ownership of the brand brings (Aaker, 1996; Crainer, 1997; Hague, 1994).

### 3.10. 2 The Product-Based Approach to Quality

In some ways, this approach to quality can be seen as being at the opposite end of the spectrum to the transcendent approach described above. Here, difference in quality can be seen to amount to differences in some desired ingredient or attribute contained within the product. Quality now becomes a precisely measurable variable, and goods and services can consequently be ranked in terms of the amount of the desirable attribute they possess.

Elements of this approach can be found within the German laws governing quality standards of food and drink. For example, the 'Reinheitsgebut' specifies precisely the contents of what can be sold as 'beer', and there are similar rules with regard to meat products, chocolate etc. Using such a

principle, Garvin explains that a carpet's quality would be judged by the number of knots that went to make up the carpet, while ice cream could be ranked in terms of butterfat content.

While the objective nature of the approach can be seen as possessing important strengths, it is also clear that it has severe limitations as well. A one-to-one correspondence between product attributes and quality does not always exist, and differences in attributes might reflect the fact that the products are simply based on different concepts or are catering for differences in tastes such as with 'rag rugs' and low fat ice creams.

When producers adopt such an approach, they often make two implicit assumptions, which may or may not be true. First, the quality of products and the cost of those products are seen as directly related and, as a result, improvements in quality are only seen as possible if the costs of production rise. Any attempt to improve quality must therefore result in either a fall in profit margins or an increase in price, or both. Secondly, quality is seen as something that is found inherently within products, rather than being something ascribed to them by consumers. It is to this perspective, known as the user-based approach to quality that we now turn.

### 3.10.3 The User-Based Approach to Quality

Probably the most famous definition of the user-based approach to quality is Juran's (1981) 'fitness for use'. The quality of a good or service can be seen as directly proportional to its ability to satisfy consumer wants and, quality becomes a subjective, almost idiosyncratic concept (Shaw and Ivens 2002). Managers are faced with the task of ascertaining individual consumer wants, which may differ to varying degrees and then aggregating them in a manner that allows for goods and services to be produced on a profitable scale (Shaw and Ivens 2002).

The relative simplicity of such an approach can be seen to have wide, almost unquestioned, appeal within the commercial sphere to the extent where the

pursuit of profitable customer satisfaction is written into many company mission statements (McKenna 2002). Phrases such as 'the customer is always right' have extended far beyond their narrow commercial origins to become part of the vocabulary of daily life, and there are probably few managers operating in highly competitive and crowded business environments who would not agree with Tom Peter's (1985) contention that if you satisfy customers, you will make a lot of money.

However, as is sometimes the case with such perceived wisdom, deeper analysis reveals that the user-based approach does have a number of major difficulties and inconsistencies associated with it. As we shall see below, issues such as the nature of customer satisfaction and its link to customer expectations, the relationship between the marketing function and the creation of unrealistic customer expectations, the problem of imperfect customer knowledge and expertise, the particular problems of delivering consistent customer satisfaction within service environments, and the role of the consumer within public services, all present a range of theoretical and practical problems which cannot be ignored (Kristensen et al, 2001).

#### 3.10.4 The Manufacturing-Based Approach to Quality

This approach identifies quality in terms of the degree to which finished products conform to a particular design or specification. Crosby's (1979) definition, 'conformance to requirements' is probably the best known, and most often quoted example of such an approach. As might be expected, this perspective was initially predominantly concerned with manufacturing and engineering processes. However, the notion of meeting specifications consistently over time is now also seen as a major issue for managers within the commercial service sector (Zairi, 1996a and 1996b), and the public services (Nwabueze, 2001).

Once a design or specification has been established, any final product that deviates from that specification is seen as being of inferior quality. The greater the deviation, or frequency of deviations from the specifications that

occur, the poorer the product quality. Excellence is equated therefore with 'getting it right first time' and producing 'zero defects' (see Shingo, 1986; Taguchi and Clausing, 1990). Any reworking that is required is regarded as wastage and, an unnecessary cost of production. Conversely, any improvements in quality processes or procedures that reduce wastage should lead to a reduction in the costs of production (a situation that contrasts to the view of costs inherent in the product-based approach described above), hence Crosby's (1979) protestation that 'Quality is Free'.

For the organization then, the advantages of being able to consistently meet specifications are clear and the relative inability of western corporations to match Japanese standards in this area is seen as contributing to their lack of market competitiveness (Jackson, 1994; Morita, 1994). Attempts in both the USA and Europe to introduce lean production methods, for example, the adoption of techniques such as 'Just in Time' (JIT), have required considerable attention to this area of quality, not simply at the manufacturing stage but throughout the whole organization and the entire supply chain (Penzer, 1991; Ross, 1995).

This approach to quality often ascribes a relatively passive role within the quality equation to the consumer, and can foster a somewhat paternalistic attitude on the part of the producer. The interests of the customer are held to be wholly compatible with those of the firm, as the benefits of both improved product reliability and the possibility of lower prices are passed on to them. Even though the degree to which the benefits are passed on will depend to a large extent on market competitiveness, the quality initiatives that take place will often be undertaken in the name of increased customer satisfaction.

However, in order to bring such a situation about, there is a tendency for managers to focus on internal quality-related factors, such as manufacturing processes or buying procedures (Bohinger 1993). Should this perspective come to dominate an organizational culture, it is possible that, over time, it will lead to a failure to keep pace with market trends such as competitor

product development and changes in consumer tastes and fashions (Kent, 1993; Zikmund, 1991). As will be seen below, this is not a criticism that can be levelled at the value-based approach to quality (Cook 1997).

#### 3.10.5 The Value-Based Approach to Quality

Using this type of approach, quality can be viewed as a degree of excellence at an acceptable price, and the control of variability at an acceptable cost (Garvin, 1988).

From the demand perspective, it is based on the underlying economic principle that for almost all groups of customers, the ability and willingness to purchase given goods and services is related to both the level of real income (the income effect) and the relative prices of perceived alternatives (the substitution effect) (Fuller, 1991; Lipsey, 1989)

This can be explained by the fact that, for most consumers, real disposable income is limited in relation to their economic wants and, as a result, they are forced to make a series of choices (Gwartney 1997). Individuals will continually balance the price of a given good or service with the satisfaction its consumption will yield. They may be well aware that superior quality products exist, but this does not prevent them from buying and gaining satisfaction from other less expensive alternatives, a process Garvin calls 'affordable excellence'.

From the supply perspective, this approach would accept the premise that quality can be continuously improved, but it recognises that there will be occasions when the costs of quality improvement are deemed too great in relation to the benefits that will accrue (Dale and Plunkett 1995). An assumption implicit in such a notion is that quality is not always free, but can have both a financial and opportunity cost which managers must continuously balance for fear of being 'priced out' of given markets (Nicholas 1998).

When combined rather than presented as competing concepts, the different approaches to quality set out above are able to provide a richer view of the notion of quality than that which would be gained from reliance on any single perspective (Kelemen 2002). This broader understanding enables us to begin to shed light on the rationale for particular management initiatives, practices and procedures and also helps to provide an insight into why, within organizations, very different views of quality and how to improve it often emerge (Beckford 1998)

### **3.11 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION**

In order to provide a still fuller theoretical context within which MBA programme quality can be evaluated, a number of the quality issues raised in the above discussion need to be drawn out and examined in greater detail. Of particular interest are:

The nature of customer satisfaction and its relationship to quality within the service sector, (Chiu, 2002; Denton, 1989).

The relationship between customer satisfaction and customer expectations (Hill, 1996; Sureshchandar et al, 2002).

From the outset, it needs to be stressed that it is not always clear who, within given service environments, an organization's customers actually are (Chakripani 1998). While, at times, the distinction between a customer and consumer may be little more than semantics, for example, when an individual purchases and then personally consumes a good or service, the distinction becomes much more real in other situations (Widrick et al, 2002). This is particularly true when the customer does not pay directly for the product, or pays only a proportion of the product's real cost (for example, with much in-service training). In these circumstances, the producer may clearly see it in its longer -term interests to address the sponsor's issues of concern, in preference to those of the consumer, if a divergence of expectation arises. Under such circumstances, it would be the satisfaction of those paying the

bills which is seen as of greater importance than the satisfaction of the user (Barsky, 1995; Kanji and Tambi, 1999).

There is also the possibility that organizations are unable to satisfy two paying customers because their individual satisfaction is ultimately incompatible (McDonald 1998). For example, the student who fails to reach a given standard and, consequently, is unable to gain a qualification, is likely to be dissatisfied with the outcome of the service transaction. However, it is precisely this maintenance of the appropriate standards that contributes to the value of the qualification for those who have been able to pass. If everyone passed, the qualification would be of little use to the holder of the qualification (Scott, 1998; Wallace, 1999).

While these issues, and other issues like them, do need to be addressed by service providers to varying degrees, they should not be seen to seriously undermine the importance of customer satisfaction as a way of conceptualising and implementing quality approaches and initiatives within organisations, both commercial and non-commercial (Cartwright 1997)

Customer satisfaction can be seen as a post-consumption evaluation (Kristensen et al, 1999). Such an evaluation is dependent on a number of factors such as perceived quality or value, expectations and confirmation/disconfirmation (Bou-Hasar et al, 2001; Peel, 1987). The degree of discrepancy between the actual and expected quality can be seen as the factor that determines the eventual customer satisfaction (Anderson et al, 1994).

Despite the real problems associated with its use, customer satisfaction is seen as a key element within the quality equation for a variety of reasons, (Kristensen et al, 1999; Lele 1987). Its function as an indicator of actual purchasing behaviour (Anderson et al, 1994) elevates it from something that producers might regard as 'desirable' to something which is essential, having a direct impact on both organizational revenue and profit (Samson and

Terziorski, 1999). Not only do consumers reporting high levels of satisfaction remain more loyal to that particular product (Anderson and Sullivan, 1983), they are also more likely to buy other products made by the same company (Reichfield and Sasser, 1990), and are less affected by increases in price than other consumers (Bou-Hasar et al, 2001).

While only a small proportion of customers articulate their feelings directly towards the service provider, whether those feelings are positive or negative (Singh, 1990), there is evidence to suggest that they are more likely to communicate those feelings to other potential consumers (Murthy 1999). The general feeling that dissatisfied customers are more prone to making their opinions known than satisfied ones has been supported by a number of studies (Albrecht, 1989; Gronroos, 1994) but also, it should be said, contradicted by others (Anderson, 1998; Bitner, 1990; Reichfield and Sasser, 1990).

There are a number of factors that act to motivate consumers to share their experiences with others. These include a genuine desire to inform and, in doing so, to help others, or a need for self-aggrandizement, stemming from a wish to enhance one's status by seeming knowledgeable and well informed. There are also more complex reasons, for example, as a means of defending one's own ego, particularly if unsatisfactory experiences were not resolved, and, as a way of reducing cognitive dissonance by verbally 'working through' confusing and conflicting emotions (Horovitz 1992; Kristensen et al, 1999)

There is some debate as to what precisely is being communicated by the consumers, however. In some instances, it is clear that the consumer has isolated a particular segment of the total service provision and is focusing either very positive or negative responses towards that component. In cases such as this, a single factor or event can shape the overall perception of the experience, for example, 'The weather was terrible and totally ruined the holiday' (Laws 1997). At other times, consumers will focus on the total service package being offered by the producer and make a broad-based,



global judgement as to their satisfaction, 'The weather was terrible, but there were lots of indoor activities laid on by the hotel staff, who, did their best'. Ultimately, this process may be extended so that the position is reached where the consumer shifts his or her focus away from the product altogether, and subsequently addresses his or her comments towards the organization as a whole.

As has already been shown, the quality and marketing-related literature demonstrates a clear and growing recognition of the commercial importance of customer satisfaction, both in terms of the impact on individual purchasing decisions, and on the information-passing process. The research in the field is supported by anecdote and populist sayings such as 'the customer is always right' (attributed to Gordon Selfridge, the founder of the London department store) and this is reinforced by our desire as customers for it to be so (Miles 1998). This can be seen in terms of raising the general level of expectations with regard to customer satisfaction rather than specific expectations focusing upon a given good or service (Baudrillard 1998). In this sense, the term 'customer' takes on a meaning which is greater than simply 'one who buys something' and confers a degree of status within the commercial relationship (Lele, 1987).

In some cases, according to Gummesson (1994), the overriding desire to focus on the customer has led to 'service marketing myopia'. This can be seen as a situation in which managers become completely preoccupied with the needs and wishes of their customers, and consequently fail to reflect on wider issues, such as the effects of management decisions on their employees, suppliers, the wider community, etc (Dale and Cooper, 1994; Dering, 1998). As we shall see below, given the nature of service provision, such an approach can have commercially detrimental effects in the long run, in areas such as education, health and other public services (Bauer and Henkel, 1999, Henkel and Kogan 1999; Brown and Swartz, 1989; Newton, 2002).

The reliance upon customer satisfaction as a prime management information and decision-making tool is made more problematic due to the difficulties inherent in accurately measuring the concept. Garvin, (1993 p.89) states that:

Managers have long known that 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it'. This maxim is as true of learning as it is of any other corporate objective.

The criticisms made by Garvin with regard to a concept such as 'organizational learning' could also be made towards the notion of quality in general, and customer satisfaction in particular (Ovretveit 1993). Garvin points to the need for organizational learning to be made more than a vague aspiration through the application of the 'three Ms', i.e. meaning, measurement and management, and while in this section, the focus rests upon the 'measurement' component, the analysis section will seek to integrate all three factors as a means of offering a critical evaluation of the processes found within the area of MBA provision.

A variety of customer satisfaction indices have been developed (Anderson and Fornell, 2000; Kristensen et al, 2001) the most well known and influential customer satisfaction survey is the JD Power Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) which provides a good example of the type of processes involved in collecting customer satisfaction responses. Initially applied to the automotive industry in the USA, it is now widely used in Europe, and its importance in both markets has grown as the commercial threat from Japan was recognised. It is a composite of the perceptual satisfaction of automobile customers and is divided into the following areas:

- 1 'After delivery quality'. This included such elements as the number of times the vehicle required remedial service, and the extent of the quality problems. It also takes account of the number of times the vehicle was subsequently returned to the dealer due to unsatisfactory remedial service performance, and the length of remedial service delays experienced at the dealership.

2. 'Service advisor promptness'. This focuses upon the dealer's understanding of the customer's problem, and the perceived importance given to the problem by the dealer and/or manufacturer.
3. 'The overall consumer experience'. Here, aspects such as the perceived 'fairness' of dealer, and manufacturer fees, ease of obtaining an appointment, cleanliness of service facilities, availability and type of 'courtesy car' offered, and the explanation of costs and technical problem are included.

The need to produce both a large quantity and large range of customer-generated information which will prove comprehensive enough to provide a relevant insight into the many related customer satisfaction issues which make up the car-owning experience, naturally leads to problems of 'information overload'. As a result, the question arises of how to communicate the survey findings to the relevant stakeholders (customers, prospective customers, manufacturers, dealers, the media) in an understandable manner. As Probst and Buchel (1997) indicate, while there is an initial requirement to build up a considerable knowledge base, there is also the need to examine and restructure this knowledge so that 'capacities for action' can be created.

In order to create insights that can, in turn, help to facilitate the development of such capacities for action (an issue which will be dealt with in considerable detail within the final chapter in relation to MBA programmes) CSI was devised. The index provides an overall car manufacturer customer satisfaction ranking as well as rankings within each of two key service areas, the technical ranking and the people ranking. To a large degree, these distinctions correspond to the service dimension approach found in more 'academic' attempts to understand the components of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, for example, with the service gap models explained in more detail below.

Each of the three indices reflects the weighted average of the scores making up the variables within each area, the overall score than being represented in terms of 100. As would be expected, any result less than 100 reflects a lower than average customer satisfaction rating, and any result above, a better than average rating. While it is clear that considerable debate may take place as to what satisfaction variables should be included within the index, and at what relative weighting (as with any index) the CSI is universally operated and quoted within the automobile industry, because it allows manufacturers to see where they stand relative to the competition and where to concentrate their efforts in the future (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996).

As with other forms of ranking (most notably in education 'league tables' and, more recently, within the health and police services), if misgivings about the credibility of the CSI do exist within the industry, the index cannot be ignored. The fact that the media, and through the media, the consumer, are aware of its existence means that any quality issues raised by it, have to be addressed. The increased interest in benchmarking (Zairi, 1996a) can be seen, in part, as an attempt to improve relative quality by adapting and implementing processes found outside the organization (most usually with those organizations with higher quality ratings) (Jarrar and Zairi, 2001). There is also evidence that those producers who score well in the index make use of it for marketing purposes. This is a trend also seen within the higher education sector in the United Kingdom where some institutions have taken strategic decisions to focus upon improving their position within the rankings, irrespective of their views on its educational merit.

### **3.12 THE NATURE OF SERVICE QUALITY**

A service can be seen as an activity that is more or less intangible in nature and normally takes place in interactions between the customer and service provider's systems and/or employees. The service is provided in response to customer needs or problems (Gronroos, 1990).

Oakland (1994), adopts a similar approach, as do many other writers on the subject. However, he adds to our understanding of the nature of the consumer's motives for entering into the service transaction, referred to by Gronroos in terms of 'solutions to customer problems', by focusing attention on the types of benefits consumers hope to derive. These he divides into the explicit service or sensual benefits, and the implicit service or psychological benefits (Oakland, 1994).

As we can begin to see, the nature of both services in general and the service transaction means that they have inherent within them a set of characteristics which often makes the delivery of consistently high levels of quality a more difficult task than is the case with the provision of high quality tangible goods (Gabbott and Hogg, 1998). It is also the case that within many service transactions, both tangible and intangible elements will play a role in determining satisfaction, with the relative importance of the two elements depending upon the nature of the service and the preferences of the customer (Swartz and Iacobucci 2000).

A variety of attempts have been made to examine the significance of the mix between the tangible and intangible elements of service provision (Gabbott and Hogg 1998, and Palmer 2001) and to discuss the relationship between these elements and the subsequent effects that they have on the determination of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Hoffman and Bateson, 1997 and 2002; Johnston, 1995).

The approach of Hoffman and Bateson (1997), represents a particular strand of service quality theory in which writers seek to 'deconstruct' the provision of services as a means of analysing the individual components that comprise it (Dabholker et al, 2000; Robinson, 1999). The notion that a service is the sum of its parts informs many of the customer satisfaction surveys found in everyday life, for example, hotels, transport and leisure provision, (Lowe, 1997), but as we shall see below, there are some who suggest that this represents an oversimplification of the service quality equation.

For example, 'intangibility' can be seen to refer not so much to the various components of the service, but to the perception of the service by the customer (Babin 1998; Pine and Gilmore, 1998). It represents a feeling towards the complete service experience that can only be verified after the purchase and consumption. Elements of this approach can also be found in use commercially and will often manifest itself in customer surveys which ask for the overall service experience to be rated (Fraser-Robinson 1997). This issue is also discussed in more detail below, and does serve to highlight the complexity of the relationship between service provision and customer satisfaction, both in terms of delivery and assessment.

Such complexity is not simply because of the intangible component of the services themselves, but also because of the high levels of consumer/employee interaction which are often necessary during the service delivery (Sturdy 2001), and the mixture of sensual and psychological responses consumers may experience (Bitner et al, 1994; Gurry, 1992).

The interactive process referred to above has become known as the 'service encounter', which can be seen as the dyadic interaction between a customer and the provider of a service (Chenet et al, 2000; McCallum and Harrison, 1985). It is a component of the service that has drawn increasing attention in recent years (Jenkins, 1997; Schneider and Bowen, 1993). Although the interaction will usually be in the form of a person-to-person event, it does not have to include the service provider's employees. It can take place between the customer and the service provider's system, such as with the development of home banking and is also increasingly occurring through the interaction of customer and various organizational intermediaries, such as subcontractors and agents (Bongiorno, 1993; Dall'Olmo et al, 2000; Serwer, 1995).

Whatever form the interaction takes, and it may take multiple forms over a period of time, it is clear that the manager's ability to control the outcome of

such 'moments of truth' (Carlzon, 1987) through direct 'real time' supervision is often very limited (Bateson, 1985; Nwagwueze, 2001). The problem this presents is compounded by the fact that, by definition, any remedial action that then takes place does so after the consumer has experienced quality deficiencies (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). This is not the case within the manufacturing sector, where quality inspection and reworking procedures should protect the consumer from substandard products, if quality control and assurance procedures fail (Tennant 2001).

Managers may often attempt to initiate improvements in quality in both the medium and longer term by collecting and evaluating consumer and employee/intermediary feedback (Kuan-Tsae and Yang 1999). However, the ability to assess accurately the quality perceptions of those involved in previous, and often multiple, service interactions is often considerably more difficult than is the case when measuring the perceptions of the quality of tangible products (Bitner, et al, 1994).

'Measurement' can be seen as that by which something is computed, estimated, judged, or regulated, or with which something is compared in respect of quantity or quality (Brown, 1993). For this type of approach to yield meaningful data, common quality standards and generally accepted criteria of quality measurement must exist. However, identifying such standards and criteria when services are regarded as a means of providing 'solutions to customer problems' by satisfying a mixture of 'sensual' and 'psychological' needs has proved difficult to achieve (Buttle, 1996; Fornell, 1994).

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (1996), this inherently difficult process is not made easier by the fact that even experienced practitioners and theorists often tend to adopt an imprecise and simplistic use of quality terminology. For example, they make the point that terms such as 'service quality' and 'customer satisfaction' are often employed interchangeably. In fact, they are not synonymous, as 'service quality' is a comparatively narrow and

increasingly well-defined concept that focuses upon the consumer's assessment of various dimensions of service, such as service reliability and the responsiveness of the producer. In contrast, 'customer satisfaction' is a much broader and less well-defined concept, and may incorporate factors such as the price of the service, and the consumer's relationships with other customers during the service interaction, as well as those dimensions that constitute service quality (Cronin et al, 2000).

Various attempts have been made to bring greater consistency to the process of the evaluation of quality within the service sector, and a group of often-cited pioneers within this field have been Parasuraman et al (1985 and 1988). It is worth exploring the approach they have taken as well as some of the problems and criticisms associated with the approach, as it provides a useful insight into the difficulties inherent within service quality management.

In 1985, the writers produced a 'conceptual model of service quality' based on ten inter-related service quality dimensions:

1. **Reliability:** This represents the extent to which consumers believe they can depend upon both the physical delivery of the service and the ultimate quality of that service. Customers need to be assured that the service will be 'right first time', and, to a large extent, the provider's ability and willingness to make good any shortfall in quality will be seen as irrelevant. Such a dimension would be of particular importance in service areas where the consumer believes that the 'moment of truth' is also a 'moment in time' which can never be repeated satisfactorily, for example with regard to the provision of a professional wedding photographic service.

2. **Responsiveness:** This refers to the service provider's ability and willingness to deliver the service within what the consumer feels is an acceptable time frame. In order to meet this type of expectation, dentists for example, will often leave a number of appointment slots free in order to be able to accommodate emergencies. However, the ability to respond to one



group of consumers in this manner is not without cost both to the producer and to other consumers (Lovelock, 1992).

In our example, if there are no emergencies on a given day, under-utilised capacity and loss of revenue will result, as this type of service cannot be stored as would be the case with manufactured goods. The adoption of such a policy also entails a less immediate and less flexible service for the majority of patients who require routine, non-urgent treatment, than would otherwise be the case. The need for both 'capacity management' (see Lovelock, 1994) and 'compatibility management' (see Martin and Pranter, 1989) to reduce the negative impact different types of customer can have upon general levels of profitability and service quality will receive greater attention below.

3      **Competence:** The consumer's or potential consumer's perception that the provider is in possession of the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver the service at an appropriate level is of particular importance in areas where customers lack the confidence or ability to make a judgement about the actual quality of the service (Bitner, 1990). For example, with regard to personal investment advice, customers will often seek to ascertain an individual advisor's length of service, past record or affiliation to relevant professional bodies, etc.

In these types of service area, personal recommendation and referrals may be of enormous importance in determining the final purchasing decision, even though the prospective customer accepts that they are ultimately no guarantee of high levels of service quality (Keller, 1993). In some instances, customers can be seen to be substituting this type of 'knowledge' for their lack of sufficient technical knowledge in order to feel that they are still making a 'rational' purchasing decision.

4.      **Access:** This involves both the perceived approachability of the service provider's personnel as well as the issue of direct access to the given

service. This dimension is of particular relevance within some areas of the public service sector because consumers do not always pay directly for the service but may feel that they have a right of easy access to that service. In contrast, public service employees, who are often 'professionals' may feel it is their duty to ration the service for the common good (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994).

5.     **Courtesy:** This involves the perception of the personal respect consumers feel they deserve compared with the level of respect they are actually receiving. It can be particularly important in service areas such as hospitality management and the airline industry (Jacob, 1994). The relative price of services (Ernst, 1994) and the level of service promises (Hart, 1990) can significantly influence the level of customer expectations in this area.

6.     **Communication:** Keeping the customers informed in a manner which they can understand and appreciate. For example, explaining why airline flights are delayed and updating passengers with regard to when flights will be taking off, what is being undertaken to rectify the problem etc, can considerably reduce customer dissatisfaction in the event of delays (Clemmer and Schneider, 1993).

7.     **Credibility:** This dimension refers to the general trustworthiness of the provider, as opposed to its technical or professional competence. In fields such as the provision of financial services, the perception of the integrity of the organization being dealt with can be of paramount importance in determining the consumer's purchasing decision. The ability of well respected 'brand names' such as Marks and Spencer and Virgin to successfully enter fields such as home banking, household insurance, and personal lending, without previously directly-related experience, is an example of the importance of this service dimension (Bhat and Reddy, 1998).

8. Security: Here the customer's major concern is that the service is delivered in a manner which reduces personal risk to a minimum. Obvious examples would include air travel and also the provision of child-care facilities. Even in many highly-developed areas of service provision, such as the airline industry or automobile industry, security 'scares' can impact heavily on demand if, for example, there is adverse publicity regarding a particular airline's security procedures, or the safety of a particular model of car.

9. Understanding: In order to deliver to this dimension, producers must be able to demonstrate that the individual customer's needs are understood and are being addressed. For the consumer, evidence of understanding might include being recognised as a regular customer and being offered 'the usual', or being provided with some form of 'special treatment' in recognition of their particular requirements, such as a vegetarian meal option. As can be seen from these two examples, in many cases, the degree of variation from the standard service might be very small or even involve no increase in marginal cost at all.

The ability to respond effectively to this dimension will often require cultural as well as structural changes, that is, an organizational re-orientation towards a customer focus (Grant et al 2002). Although it may be possible to serve a number of market segments, managers will need to determine which ones can be served profitably and in a manner which is consistent with the organization's objectives and resources (Kotler, 1994). There is considerable evidence that this type of decision needs to be made much more frequently than in the past as service markets continually fragment and consumers become increasingly demanding.

Producers are also driving the fragmentation process as a means of gaining competitive advantage, and some companies have responded by extending segmentation to its limit by developing a process known as mass customization. This approach seeks to organise the production of services in

such a manner as to reduce market segments to the size of each individual consumer and, in doing so, provide a uniquely individual service for each customer (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). A variety of mass customization techniques can be employed including:

#### Customising the Individual Service Around a Standard Core

This is particularly prevalent within such areas as hospitality management and has led to hotels developing a range of different facilities and price packages designed to appeal to specific segments such as business people, single travellers, families, groups of elderly people, etc (Pine 1993).

#### Creating Customisable Services

Increasingly, individual customers are provided with the opportunity to have a greater individual input into the development of the service. For example, in the field of DIY, in-store facilities allow consumers to mix their own colours from a range of standard paints and also to 'design' their own kitchens using computer graphics. Within restaurants, self-service salad bars provide a similar customising function (Nilson 2003)

#### Combining Standard Components in Unique Ways

For example, 'modular' university degrees, pick-and-mix salad bars or confectionery displays in supermarkets (Betts 1998).

#### Point of Delivery Customisation

This option allows the consumer to communicate their particular preferences at the point of service delivery, and the employee can respond in 'real time', as is the case with most personal services (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). The extent to which producers can profitably develop a mass customisation approach, and the types of technique employed will vary between the different service sectors (Cliff 1993). However, a common factor in determining the success of the customisation process is the producer's ability both to collect accurate information regarding customer needs and

preferences, and to translate that information into the services which the customer values (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). The basic tools and techniques for measuring customers' views fall into five categories: standard customer complaints procedures, customer surveys, focus groups, critical incident analysis and flow process analysis (Anderson and Fornell, 2000; and Babin 1998). Issues related to these and other analytical techniques will be examined in greater detail below.

10. Appearance (Tangibles): Shostack's (1977) tangibility spectrum places a range of goods and services within a continuum in relation to the degree of tangibility that is inherent within them. Bateson (1995) suggests that such an approach oversimplifies the relationship between tangibility and intangibility, and points to a 'goods/service dichotomy' that he feels is increasingly evident. Such a dichotomy is brought about as the producers of what are traditionally regarded as 'goods' seek to gain a competitive advantage by supplementing their products with related services, for example, car manufacturers' warranties, low cost car insurance, etc. At the same time, the suppliers of services are increasingly aware of the importance of tangible items in terms of determining customer quality perceptions.

Two different types of tangible dimension can be seen to exist. The first relates to the physical products that may often accompany the service, and may be regarded by the consumer as an integral part of it, for example, lecture handouts. The second tangible dimension, termed by Bitner (1992) the 'Servicescape' focuses upon a broader range of less direct environmental factors.

The servicescape can influence customer satisfaction in a number of related ways. Initially, it may provide the consumer with considerable 'clues' as to the potential quality of the service (Kristensen et al, 1999). It may then contribute to the ultimate level of customer satisfaction by enhancing or reducing the consumer's ability to make the most of the service being offered

(Bitner, 1990; and Hoffman and Bateson, 2002). For example, within an educational context, a modern well-equipped lecture theatre may raise the students' expectations with regard to the quality of the forthcoming lecture, but poor acoustics may prevent the student from hearing the lecture properly.

There is also evidence that the wider tangible environment can have a significant effect on service employee morale and motivation that, in turn, affects the quality of service they deliver (Bitner et al, 1994). Rosenbluth (1991), and Schlesinger and Heskett (1991) characterise the relationship even more strongly and suggest that without high levels of service employee morale and motivation, high levels of customer satisfaction will be impossible to achieve. Schneider and Bowen (1993) indicate that the quality of physical environment forms a major component of the 'service climate', along with human resource management policies and practices, and that a positive service climate plays a central role in the delivery of high levels of service quality.

Bitner (1992) has identified three key inter-related elements that make up the servicescape. Ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality; signs, symbols and artefacts. Each dimension may affect the overall perception independently and/or through its interactions with its other dimensions.

There is some evidence that consumers attach the greatest importance to the tangible dimension if they feel they lack sufficient knowledge and experience to make judgements with regard to other, more intangible aspects of the service (Clemmer and Schneider, 1993). For example, in evaluating an educational seminar, students may focus upon the way in which the overhead transparencies were presented, or the quality of the furniture in the seminar room if they feel unable to make an informed comment upon the subject content.

These ten service quality dimensions were subsequently used to form the basis of Parasuraman et al's (1988) assessment tool 'Servqual'. The

intention was to create a technique by which both customer expectations and customer satisfaction could be measured in the service sector. In the period since its inception, the scale 'has undergone numerous improvements and revisions' (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996) and is now based on a 22-point questionnaire around five broader service quality dimensions, namely:

Reliability, Responsiveness and Tangibles, which correspond to the dimensions previously described above,

Assurance, from the original dimensions of competence, courtesy, credibility and security, and,

Empathy, made up of access, communication and understanding.

Considerable research has been undertaken using Servqual, both in terms of the use of Servqual as a means of assessing service quality and also as a means of determining the validity of the technique itself. As would be expected, it has both its supporters and its critics, being seen as valuable (Buttle, 1996; Chui, 2002), but also problematic (Espinoza, 1999; Hill, 1996).

Further critical evaluation of both the conceptual basis and implementation of the Servqual model can be found in works by Carman (1990); Cronin and Taylor (1992); and Sureschandar et al (2001). However, the Servqual model is by no means the only approach to defining and measuring service quality that has been made, and although it is true to say that they have received less attention, it is worth briefly summarising some of the more important examples.

Gronroos (1988) identifies a number of dimensions of service quality, including:

**The Technical Quality.** This is best described as the outcome of the service, and could include the customers' perception of how well their hair was

actually cut, or how much knowledge or skill the student felt he/she had acquired during the seminar.

**The Functional Quality.** That is the manner in which the service interaction took place, for example the friendliness of the hairstylist, the relationship that developed between the students, or between the class and the tutor.

**The Corporate Image.** The global view of the provider as perceived by the customer. This may well be built upon the provider's reputation and/or the customer's past experience of the service provider.

Gronroos draws upon these dimensions to identify the notion of the 'service offering' that is composed of two items. First, there is the basic service package that he calls the 'service product'. This can be seen as the core service being delivered to the consumer. Secondly, there is the 'augmented service offering' that represents the totality of the interaction between the service provider and the customer.

Lethinen and Lethinen (1991) identify three service dimensions related to the service product:

**Physical Quality.** This can be seen as being comprised of the physical support, the environment, and the equipment necessary to deliver the service and the physical product, which is any physical item integral to the service and transferred to the customer as part of the transaction.

**Interactive Quality.** The interaction between service provider and customer at 'the moment of truth'.

**Corporate Quality.** This concerns developing a history of contact between the service provider and the customer, and is concerned with the manner in which the consumer perceived the provider's image and profile.



To this, they then add two further dimensions related to the augmented service offering:

**Process Quality:** This can be regarded as the consumers' evaluation of the role that they played within the service interaction. The significance of the consumers' role may be considerable, as with some forms of home retailing or banking, or minimal. In all events, the perception of it will be based on subjective judgements of their personal experiences.

**Quality Output:** This refers to the personal evaluation of the outcome of the service interaction. Third parties may also seek to judge the outcome of a given service interaction as a means of determining their own purchasing decisions and/or future service requirements. The service quality judgements made by these third parties may, in turn, influence the original customers' quality perception if it is communicated to them either directly or indirectly (Martin and Pranter, 1989).

A number of other writers have developed insights into the nature of service quality using a variety of perspectives, for example, Dabholkar et al, (2000), Sureschandar et al, (2001 and 2002) and Zeithaml and Bitner, (2000). From their works a number of important ideas emerge, for example the existence of a hierarchy of service quality elements, such as:

**Attractive Quality Elements:** This would include attributes whose presence gives satisfaction, but whose absence is accepted without causing dissatisfaction. For example, a London Underground passenger might welcome a seat on the train but as he or she is travelling for 'one stop', will stand without a feeling of negativity. It can be seen that the same response might not be exhibited if the same passenger was making a much longer journey.

**One Dimensional Quality Elements:** An attribute whose presence causes satisfaction and whose absence causes dissatisfaction. For example, an elevator in a multi-storey car park.

**Must Be Quality Elements:** This would refer to an attribute whose presence is expected by the consumer without creating satisfaction. However, the absence of such an attribute would cause customer dissatisfaction. For example, the absence of bath towels in a four star hotel.

**Indifferent Quality Elements:** There are some service attributes that are simply not relevant to given customers. As a result, their presence or absence causes neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. For example, an hotel gym or swimming pool.

**Reverse Quality Elements:** The presence of certain service attributes can actually cause dissatisfaction and, consequently, their absence would cause satisfaction. For example, piped music in hotel elevators or 'ritualised' courtesy from service employees.

Such service quality elements can be seen to impact upon customer satisfaction in terms of the degree to which they are absent or present, and classified in terms of the way in which the service delivers satisfaction in the areas of:

**Performance:** This can be described as a 'results orientated' evaluation of service quality which is a function of both those elements which the consumer perceives to be central to the service, and an assessment of whether or not the customer believes that his or her personal aims have been achieved in terms of those core elements. For example, the student may evaluate the quality of the education offered by a college solely in terms of their own performance in the final examinations. Such an instrumental approach to service quality appraisal is more likely when the service being

offered is viewed by the consumer as part of an ongoing process rather than as an end in itself.

**Assurance:** As with the performance dimension, the consumer continues to focus upon what he or she perceives to be the core elements of the service. However, the quality evaluation he or she is making is in terms of process rather than a particular functional outcome. In this case, the student might be interested in the quality of the learning experience, class interaction or learning activities.

**Completeness:** Beyond the core services, there will often be a range of peripheral activities and facilities which will be of varying importance to the consumers, depending upon their own personal circumstances and interests. For example, the existence and quality of college sporting and social opportunities contributes to the overall quality of student life and adds to the 'completeness' of the student's experience and personal development. However, peripheral services should not be seen as substitutes for the core service areas and high quality peripheral services will not normally compensate for perceived shortcomings with regard to the core.

**Ease of Use:** The accessibility of important features of both the core and peripheral services. It may include the perceived availability and willingness of the academic staff to discuss a student's assignment problems, a core service quality element, or the opening times of the sports hall, a peripheral service quality element.

**Emotion/Environment:** This can be seen as the sense of wellbeing or satisfaction felt by the customer in response to his or her experience of the service and/or the service provider. Pursuing our educational example, this might manifest itself in terms of an internal, emotional response by a student to 'his or her college' which goes beyond a judgement of the manner in which the educational service was provided and involves feelings of belonging and

loyalty (Dabholkar et al, 2000; Kristensen et al, 1999; Sureshchandar et al, 2001).

As can be seen, although the issue of service quality can be developed using a variety of perspectives, it derives from customer expectations, customer experiences and the resulting satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The experiences themselves are relatively intangible, so that measuring and controlling them is difficult.

Bateson (1995) and Davidow and Uttal (1989) draw similar conclusions, and identify the importance of the role played by customer expectations within the service quality equation, an area to which we now turn.

### **3.13 CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS**

To a significant degree, customer satisfaction will be determined by the relationship between customer perceptions and customer expectations, and the contradictions that arise between them at the various moments of truth (Bitner et al, 1994; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). Customer perceptions can be seen as subjective assessments of actual service experiences, while customer expectations are the standards or reference points for performance against which the service experiences are compared (Craven 2002). The expectations are often formulated in terms of what a customer believes should happen (Babin, 1998).

Customer expectations can be seen as an amalgam of beliefs regarding service delivery, with the sources of such expectations deriving from marketer-controlled factors (such as pricing, advertising and sales promises) as well as factors that the marketer has limited ability to affect (innate personal needs, word of mouth communications, competitive offerings) (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996).

A number of writers have offered frameworks designed to explore the nature of customer expectations, for example, Hoffman and Bateson (1997);

Schneider and Bowen (1995); Zeithaml et al (1993). An analysis of the various approaches indicates three main areas of interest and activity:

1.     **Expectation Type:** Developing greater insights into the different types of customer service quality expectation.
2.     **Expectation Determinants:** Increasing the level of understanding regarding the factors that determine customer service quality expectations.
3.     **Methods for Analysing Expectations:** Using the above information in order to provide insights into customer service quality expectation processes, these three areas are discussed in more detail below.

#### 3.13.1 Types of Customer Service Quality Expectation

Two distinct but inter-related types of customer service quality expectation are identified within the relevant literature (Davido and Uttal, 1989).

**Desired Service Quality Expectations:** This can be seen as corresponding to the level of performance or outcome the customer would ideally wish to experience as a result of any given service transaction. It is this type of expectation which is often central to the customer purchasing decision (Gronroos, 1988). For example, for a potential MBA student, the desired service quality expectation might be the 'ideal job' he or she hopes will result from the successful completion of the MBA programme. This could be described as an 'output quality' desired expectation (Martin and Pranter, 1989).

**Adequate Service Quality Expectations:** Which refers to the outcome the customer will accept if the desired service quality proves unobtainable. For example, if the ideal job is not forthcoming, the MBA student might be satisfied with a 'better job' than the one he/she had before embarking on the course.

Between these two levels of expectation is the 'zone of tolerance' that can be seen as the variation between what is hoped for and the minimum standard deemed acceptable (Brown and Swartz, 1989). In our example, the closer the 'better job' to the 'ideal job', the smaller the zone of tolerance (See figure 3.1).

The size of the zone of tolerance will depend upon a variety of factors such as the individual customer's personal circumstances and the significance each customer ascribes to the different 'service. For example, an MBA student may exhibit a wide zone of tolerance with regard to tangible aspects of a programme, such as teaching rooms or computer facilities, but a much narrower zone of tolerance with regard to empathetic service dimensions such as student/tutor relationships.

#### 3.13.2 Expectation Determinants

Figure 3.1 shows the various factors that determine both desired service quality expectations and adequate service quality expectations.

### **Figure 3.1 Service Quality Expectations: The Determining Factors**

**Derived Service Intensifiers:** An individual's desired service quality expectations may be further fuelled by the influence of other stakeholders. Known as 'derived service intensifiers', they serve to generate additional quality expectations (Cadotte et al, 1987). For example, the MBA student being sponsored by an employer may have his or her personal programme expectations supplemented by the employer's view, either explicit or implicit, of what the student should gain from the programme and subsequently contribute to their organization on their return.

**Personal Service Philosophy:** Important contributory factors would include aspects such as an individual's personal service philosophy and those underlying generic attitudes regarding the proper conduct of service providers. Within the educational context, this might include a student's preconceived ideas as to the 'proper' role of a course tutor and the 'correct' manner in which education should be conducted. These will subsequently form the basis of more specific programme expectations and responses to service interactions, Lovelock (1988).

Cultural factors can play a considerable part in shaping personal service philosophy and may be of particular relevance when service providers are seeking to accommodate groups of consumers made up of many different nationalities.

**Enduring Service Intensifiers:** Operating in conjunction with the individual's personal needs are what is known as the 'enduring service intensifiers'. These can be seen as those factors which have been shaped by previous experience and serve to heighten an individual's sensitivity towards a given service (Davis et al 1979). For example, regular air travellers may have developed a series of preferences with regard to seating arrangements, lateness of check in, or amount of permissible hand luggage.

**Personal Needs:** These are seen by Zeithaml and Bitner (1996), as the single most important element in the service quality equation, and comprises physical, social, psychological and functional needs. For example, the MBA student with high social and dependency needs may have relatively high expectations of the extra-curricular activity programme. The student's perception of how well this personal need has been satisfied is likely to play a large part in determining how satisfied he or she is with the overall programme.

**Desired Service Quality.** As can be seen, a variety of factors will contribute to the level of service quality which an individual desires.



**Adequate Service Quality Expectations:** The factors that influence adequate service expectations are generally regarded to be more volatile in nature than those that drive desired service quality expectations. They include:

1. **Transitory Service Intensifiers:** Those temporary short term factors that can make the customer more or less aware of the need for a service. For example, as an assignment submission date draws closer, a student may have a much greater sense of the importance of having easy access to his or her project tutor and will correspondingly be much less tolerant of a tutor's failure to keep an appointment. Once the assignment date has passed, the issue of access to the tutor will be likely to fade in importance and the zone of tolerance expand.

2. **Perceived Service Alternatives:** The availability of alternatives to any given service will also influence the level of adequate service quality that the customer is willing to accept. There is an inverse relationship between the number of perceived substitutes and the tolerance level to the customer (Bowen, 1989).

For example, a prospective part-time student, tied closely to a particular geographical area, will probably be more willing to compromise on the number of features within a given educational programme, as being unable to travel, he or she may perceive few alternatives. In contrast, the perfectly mobile student, with consequently many more programme alternatives available, will be likely to have a reduced zone of tolerance and relatively high levels of acceptable quality service expectation.

As would be expected, a key factor in determining the number of perceived alternatives will be the price of any given service relative to other services, and also the price relative to the consumer's disposable income (Fuller, 1991; Lispsey, 1989).

3. **Self-Perceived Service Role:** In many service encounters, customers may recognise the role they themselves must play in determining the quality of the service outcome. For example, students who feel they have not played their part in a given class session is likely to be less critical of the outcome of that session than the students who felt that they had made considerable efforts to prepare, but were let down by others in the group. There is evidence to suggest that mature students, in particular, have a heightened view of the role they feel they, and other students, should play within the educational process (Wallace, 1999).

4. **Situational Factors:** As has previously been demonstrated, the delivery of services is more prone to disruptive situational factors than the delivery of tangible goods. However, this fact is often well understood by the customer for whom knowledge of the relevant situational factors will serve as a mechanism for the adjustment of the level of service quality they expect (Aaker, 1996; Shostack, 1985).

For example, if a course tutor was suddenly taken ill and another member of staff covered his or her class at short notice, students would be likely to make allowances for this situation. However, if the absence were prolonged, the student expectations would be that the faculty should be able to make adequate alternative arrangements. By the time of the next session, when sufficient preparation time was perceived as being available, the standard of acceptable service expected would be likely to have risen considerably.

5. **Predicted Service:** The quality of service that the customer deems adequate will, in part, be shaped by the quality of the service they themselves 'predict' is likely to result from the service transaction. Such predictions will be influenced by information derived from a variety of external sources as well as from the consumer's own past experience (Dabholkar et al, 2000).

An important source of external information includes informal 'word of mouth' criticisms or recommendations. As we have already seen, this type of personal reference is of particular importance when 'assurance'-related service quality features dominate the consumer's quality perspective (Zeithaml et al, 1993). There is evidence to suggest that many producers either fail to recognise, or are reluctant to acknowledge the importance of this type of referral process, and prefer to concentrate their efforts upon the development of more formal information channels (Kristensen et al, 1999).

These informal information channels can be seen to include both explicit and implicit producer service promises. They include elements such as service guarantees (Hart, 1988; Hart 1990), dedicated advertising and promotional activity (Gardial et al, 1994), 'servicescapes' (Bitner, 1992) and product pricing (Zeithaml, 1988).

In employing some or all of the above as a means of developing and implementing a service marketing strategy, the producer must balance the short term benefits of raising consumer expectations as a means of encouraging an initial sale, and the longer term impact of failing to meet unrealistic consumer service predictions (Cadotte et al, 1987; Gardinal et al, 1994). The notion of the gap between expectations and perception, and the consequent effect on levels of customer satisfaction has played a considerable part in the development of models of consumer satisfaction, an area to which we now turn.

### 3.13.3 Methods for Analysing Expectations

A variety of expectation process insights have been developed including those of Gutman (1982) Hoffmann and Bateson (1997); Sirgy (1984) Westbrook and Reilly (1983). Gap Analysis (Zeithaml et al, 1990) is a useful example to explore in more detail as it has received a considerable amount of academic and practitioner attention, and encompasses many of the major features and themes found in other writings.

### **3.14 THE GAPS BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS**

Gap Analysis: This is a method used to explore the reasons for the divergence between customer expectations and customer perceptions of the quality of service they receive. It is an approach that has been used to investigate quality issues within higher education (Gaell 2000) and it is seen as a useful way of providing insights into student satisfaction/dissatisfaction issues. The 'usefulness' of the approach is qualified by problems associated with measuring attitudes of this type (Munz and Munz 1997 and Pate 1993). As can be seen in Figure 3.2 overleaf, the gaps between perception and expectation can occur at different stages within the service delivery process and are divided into five categories:

Provider Gap 1: Not knowing what the customer expects.

Provider Gap 2: Not selecting the appropriate customer-driven service standards.

Provider Gap 3: Not delivering to appropriate customer-driven service standards.

Provider Gap 4: Not matching service performance to quality promises.

Provider Gap 5: The overall service gap comprising the cumulative effect of Provider Gaps 1, 2, 3 and 4.

### **Figure 3.2 The Gaps Model of Service Quality**

Source: Zeithaml and Bitner, (1996)

#### **Provider Gap 1: Not Knowing what the Customer Expects**

Within the service quality model, the 'provider' can be defined as anyone within the organization who has the ability to create or modify service policies, systems and standards (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996).

In the context of an educational programme, this can be seen to include course directors, the teaching faculty, external examiners and assessors,

and support and administrative staff. However, it is clear that the ability of each of these groups of stakeholders to create or change policies and procedures will vary between different institutions and within institutions over time.

Primarily, such a service gap occurs when there is inadequate provider interaction with customers regarding their expectations and the necessary information simply does not exist. However, it is possible that accurate information has been generated, but is 'locked up' within the organization. This situation can occur for a variety of reasons, for example, if individuals or groups are aware of such expectations but are either unable (Moss-Kanter, 1989) or unwilling (Coopey, 1996; Keenoy, 1990) to communicate them to others within the system.

There has been increasing interest in the problems associated with the creation, use and transfer of knowledge of all types (not simply consumer-based) within the organization. The various strands of interest within this field of study have been drawn together through the use of the metaphor of the 'learning organization' (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Garraat, 1987; Pedler et al, 1991; Senge, 1990).

Writers have tended to focus upon particular themes within the broader area of the learning organizations, such as the distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1991), the relationship between organizational learning and innovation (Tushman and Nadler, 1996), or the need for greater employee empowerment (Moss-Kanter, 1989), etc. A survey of the various approaches indicates a common concern, however, and that is that, at the present time, many organizations are not creating the organizational climate in which customer expectations (and many other forms of important data) are being translated into 'useful meaning' and utilised to 'modify individual and organizational behaviour' (Starkey, 1996).

There is also evidence to suggest that even when organizations make systematic efforts to capture and transfer information regarding customer expectations through the use of techniques such as customer surveys, complaint systems or customer panels, the quality of the resulting data is often questionable (Kotler and Armstrong, 1991). This is particularly the case in service markets where customer expectations rapidly change, due to the influence of service competitors etc, where consumers find it difficult to articulate their expectations, or when service markets are prone to rapid and repeated segmentation (Lovelock, 1992).

#### Provider Gap 2: Not Selecting the Appropriate Customer-Driven Service Standards

Knowing what the customer expects can be seen as the first stage in the process of delivering a quality service, and without such knowledge, it is highly unlikely that expectations can be met consistently over time (Tepstra and Sarathay, 1994). However, even the most accurate understanding of customer expectations will not lead to customer satisfaction unless service managers are able to translate those expectations into service quality specifications and performance standards as a means of enabling a transition to the next stage of the quality delivery system.

Provider Gap 2, therefore, can be seen as representing the difference between the provider's understanding of customer expectations and the ability and willingness to develop customer-driven service design standards based on those expectations. The use of performance standards is a well-established practice within many areas of the service sector. However, customer-driven standards need to be distinguished from conventional performance standards which are usually provider-driven and focus upon issues such as productivity and efficiency (Drummond, 1994).

For example, telephone operators might be expected to handle a given number of calls within a given period of time, however, the number of calls they are expected to deal with may still leave customers waiting for a

considerable length of time. Therefore, achieving the performance target (producer-driven standards) may not satisfy the customer who expects to be connected to an operator immediately (customer-driven standards). Even when performance standards are 'quality driven', they may, as we have seen, be based upon producer generated manufacturing or product definitions (Garvin, 1988) and as a result fail to satisfy the customer or potential customer.

Provider Gap 2 may exist for a variety of reasons and its existence is often associated with the professional's evaluation of those expectations (Bowen and Lawler, 1992). For example, it may be that service providers believe that customer expectations with regard to outcomes are unreasonable or unrealistic, as with a disappointed student's assignment grade. There is also the possibility that an element of paternalism will exist where the service provider believes that the customer does not know 'what is good for them', and therefore delivers service standards that they deem to be appropriate. Customer-driven standards and producer-driven standards are often in a state of tension. This is, in part, because such standards can reflect different sets of values, philosophies, and interests.

Such tensions may be exacerbated if the provider perceives that high levels of variation are inherent within the service, and that, as such, the service defies standardisation. There may also be a genuinely held belief that 'spontaneity' adds to the quality of the service and that this element would be lost if external standards were imposed, no matter from where such standards originated (Norman 1994).

Even in those instances where managers do acknowledge the need to close Provider Gap 2, they may not be able or willing to make the sustained effort required to bring this about (Pascale, 1990). Other considerations, particularly those of a short term nature, may have to take priority as managers struggle to balance their day-to-day commitments with the need to take a longer term focus (Handy, 1994; Mintzberg, 1994). Managers may



also be unwilling to confront established, and often culturally-embedded operating procedures and standards, if influential individuals or groups within the organization are likely to oppose any necessary organizational changes that may result as a consequence.

#### Provider Gap 3: Not Delivering to Appropriate Customer Driven Design Standards

Provider Gap 3 can be seen as the discrepancy between the development of customer-driven service standards and the actual service performance being delivered by the organization. As Zeithaml and Bitner (1996) point out even when standards accurately reflect customers' expectations, if the company fails to provide support for them, if it does not facilitate, encourage and require their achievement, standards do no good. When the level of service delivery performance falls short of the standards, by definition, it falls short of what customers expect.

In order to 'facilitate' the appropriate service quality standards, the organization must be willing and able to draw upon the necessary human and physical resources, and possess the management systems that enable these resources to be effectively utilized. There will also be a need for the development of employee reward and sanction policies, which are based upon the performance of the employees in terms of the delivery of such standards, as a means of both 'encouraging' and 'requiring' their achievement.

Efforts made to close Provider Gap 3 are often hampered because of the existence of 'critical inhibitors' (Parasuraman et al, 1985). These include:

**Personal Role Conflict:** Employees do not always clearly understand their role within the service delivery process. They may also be confused with regard to the role of other service employees, and their relationship to these employees within the service delivery system (Magjuka and Baldwin, 1991).

**Stakeholder Conflict:** Appropriate customer-based service standards may not be delivered because employees feel that they conflict with the needs of other key stakeholders such as colleagues, managers or other customers. In this instance, employees may seek to balance the needs of these 'competing' groups by modifying the service provided to the customer (Bounds and Pace, 1991).

**Inadequate Role Design:** Here, the individual service employee or team may lack sufficient power to deliver the appropriate level of service.

**Inadequate Human Resource Management (HRM):** As has already been indicated, many services comprise a series of 'service encounters'. Given that the service employee plays a central role in determining the outcome of such multiple service encounters (Johnson and Zinkhan, 1991), the HRM function can be seen as a critical, if indirect, element in the process of meeting customer-based service standards. Effective recruitment, training and compensation policies are essential in order that highly motivated employees with the 'correct' personal and technical skills are in place to deliver the service to the standards expected by the customer.

**Technological Inadequacy:** Bounds et al (1994), identify technology as a vastly important component of strategic systems for customer value. They identify studies undertaken by consultants Ernst and Young, which show that, increasingly, many service companies are primarily motivated to introduce improved technology to meet customer service expectations rather than as means of specifically reducing their operating costs.

It is generally held that, in practice, the problems caused by the technological or structural barriers to meeting customer-based service standards are often more successfully overcome by managers than the behavioural and cultural inhibitors (Harvey and Brown, 1996). For example, human resource policies concerning issues such as staff recruitment and retention, development and appraisal may pose formidable barriers towards the delivery of service

standards in line with customer expectations, but such policies may often fall outside the service manager's direct control.

The problem of lack of managerial control of key variables is likely to be exacerbated if intermediaries such as agents, franchisees, suppliers or subcontractors make a major contribution to service provision (Lovelock, 1992). Rather than reacting to this situation by increasing traditional command and control procedures, Probst and Buchel (1997), focus upon the need for increased capacities for organizational learning as a means of addressing such issues, particularly in dynamic business environments. This, in turn, they argue, requires the development of a new approach to both internal and external organizational relationships that increase the organization's 'ability to act'. Such an ability to act can only be increased where people work together on problems, sharing solutions, information and technologies, and where autonomous units provide necessary freedom.

Such an approach to organizational design is gaining increasing acceptance with both theoreticians and practitioners (Starkey, 1996). However, in the context of Provider Gap 3, the variable which is often most difficult to control is the actions of the customer themselves, rather than those of the various providers. This is of considerable importance because, with regard to the provision of services, the customers' own contribution to the service process may have a significant impact on the level of their own satisfaction. The extent and nature of the contribution required depends to a large degree upon the type of service being offered (Hubbert, 1995), and at given times within the service encounter may be critical to the outcome.

The nature of this process and the interactions involved have been characterised by Grove et al (1992), as a form of drama in which the service employees and customers act out roles of varying importance to the quality of the service outcome. In some service areas such as higher education, the customers are seen to play a central or 'mandatory production role'. To a

large degree, the success of such 'dramas' will be dependent upon three key factors:

1.     The Customers' Understanding of their Role: The greater the understanding customers have regarding the role they need to play in order to facilitate the service transaction, the more likely they will be to successfully carry out that role. Understanding their role may be particularly problematic for those customers who are new to the particular service or in areas where the service process has fundamentally changed. In such circumstances, service providers may often attempt to 'educate' customers to their role.

2.     The Customers' Ability and Willingness to Play their Role: Even when the customer is aware of the role they need to play, they may lack the ability and/or willingness to play it. A variety of reasons can be put forward to explain this situation. For example, a customer may not be convinced that the benefits of their efforts will accrue directly to them or feel that they are being asked to take on too great a role. They may also feel that other customers are benefiting from their input without contributing sufficiently themselves.

3.     Third Party Interference: It is possible that third parties, for example, other customers, may inadvertently or intentionally 'interfere' in the drama at crucial 'moments of truth', and as a result reduce the quality of the service provision. (Bowen, 1986; Carlzon, 1987)

The extent to which customers can play a part in the provision of their own services and, as a result, have a positive affect on organizational productivity is well-established in service areas such as banking and retailing. Traditionally, the contribution made to the generation of improved service quality is less well-understood and, as a result, service managers have often sought to minimise customer contribution in this area in order to reduce the degree of uncertainty and unpredictability they feel may result from 'too much' customer involvement.

However, within some organizations, the customer is increasingly being regarded as a 'partial employee' with a legitimate and valuable role to play because it is understood that actively involving the customer in the service provision process has a number of advantages. Involvement can be increased in a variety of ways, such as encouraging the customer to provide information, to ask questions, make complaints or even actively share in the physical delivery of the service (Goodwin, 1988), and it has been shown that the more satisfied the customers are with their own 'performance', the more likely they are to be satisfied with the service generally (Kelley et al, 1992).

For some customers, active participation is seen as a key service attribute and is a strong motivation for purchase (Bateson, 1983). There is also some evidence to suggest that the greater the customer's contribution to the service provision, the less likely customers will be to blame the provider if the final service outcome falls below that initially expected (Bitner, 1990; Folkes, 1988).

**Provider Gap 4: Not Matching Service Performance to Quality Promises:** Provider Gap 4 represents the difference between the actual service performance as perceived by the customer and the promises made to the customer by the organization. Such promises can be made formally or informally, and may be either explicit or implied (George and Berry, 1981). These promises, which can be made through a variety of personal and/or impersonal media, will serve to shape both customer expectations and the standards by which the quality of the service will subsequently be judged.

Provider promises are often of greater significance within the service sector because customers find it more difficult to evaluate the quality of services before purchase than is the case with tangible goods that can often be seen, touched and demonstrated (Nelson, 1970). There is also evidence that the consumer finds it more difficult to determine service quality through the use

of relative pricing compared with the use of this technique in the area of manufactured goods (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996).

The existence of Provider Gap 4 can be seen primarily as a function of initial producer over-promising. There are two main reasons why such a situation might arise:

1. **Management Policy:** Organizational policy may explicitly promote over-promising, or more likely, cause it indirectly. For example, appraisal and reward systems which drive employees to seek to maximise sales revenue in the short term will tend to lead to exaggerated claims as to the benefits of the service to the consumer. Unrealistic customer expectations are then created which can not be met and dissatisfaction results.

2. **Poor Internal Communications:** Alternatively, unrealistic consumer expectations may be created unintentionally and derive from poor internal communications. For example, if the organization's operations and marketing departments fail to communicate effectively, genuine misunderstandings as to the ability to deliver a given level of service might occur, and these misunderstandings may then be forwarded to the customer. A similar problem may result if those making quality promises lack sufficient operational experience.

**Provider Gap 5: Closing the Overall Provider Gap:** While writers such as Cronin and Taylor (1992), focus upon the ways in which the approach of service quality managers needs to differ in emphasis between different service sectors, a number of common themes involved in closing Provider Gap 5 can be identified.

For example, while, as previously explained, the specific search, experience and credence qualities of various services will be very different in scale and relative importance, the principles which their existence raises are universally relevant. As a result, the key factors leading to the various provider gaps

can be used to provide the foundations from which service quality improvements can be built in all service areas (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996).

Whatever the service sector, the overall service provider gap remains a function of Provider Gaps 1 to 4. Any attempt by service managers to close this overall service gap, and therefore increase customer satisfaction, will require them to address all of the individual gaps.

Managers will often be aware of the sequence of distinct activities that constitute the actual service, the production scripts, and attempt to deal with the 'most urgent' production script problems first. For example, the most urgent problem may be defined by the manager as the area where the largest gap is evident and action will be taken to remedy the situation as quickly as possible.

However, the existence of gaps within the process needs to be addressed by managers in the same sequential order (1 to 4), as they have been presented in the text. The reason for this is that unless customer expectations are understood by managers at the outset, what follows in the service process, however well it conforms to predetermined standards, may be dependent upon an inadequate knowledge base. The most urgent gap, therefore, may not be the most important.

As has been previously stated, the issue of conformance of output within the service sector is often much more problematic than with the output of manufactured goods. Services are essentially produced by people who are much harder to control than machines.

This situation requires service managers to adopt a much more holistic approach to the issue of quality and to focus upon issues such as motivation, micro-politics and organisational culture. Frameworks such as the one presented by gap analysis are not intended to provide a service quality 'template' but rather a conceptual model implying 'a rich agenda for further

research' (Bateson, 1995) and a means by which a common service quality vocabulary can be utilised. Gap analysis has been applied in a variety of settings, including the 'professions', (Brown and Swartz, 1989), as well as within the provision of commercial services (Chenet et al, 2000).

### **3.15 RESEARCH INTO HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY**

Section 2.6 above outlined the ongoing research in the field of business and management higher education quality. There has also been increasing amounts of research into higher education quality and the use of accepted quality approaches and techniques. A variety of research themes have been developed including;

The use of the Baldrige Award criteria (See Appendix D) as a means of leveraging quality in the classroom, and the impact of quality management thinking within the classroom. There has also been considerable interest in the relevance and implementation of total quality management (TQM) in higher education (Coate, 1999; Grant et al, 2002; Kanji and Tambi, 1999). Comparative quality studies within higher education have also been undertaken (Brennan, 2001; Kanji and Tambi, 1999; Scott, 1998).

### **3.16 CONCLUSION**

It is clear that ancient civilizations appreciated the importance of quality. We see in buildings and other artefacts that have passed down to our own time, that they also understood how to manage quality even though they may not have explicitly recognized the concept. The industrial revolution, with the emphasis upon mass production, shifted the focus towards issues of efficiency and productivity, but during the late 1970s, renewed interest in quality pushed the issue to centre-stage, where it remains.

Be it within the fields of manufacturing, the provision of commercial services or the provision of public services, the 'issue' of quality can be divided into three separate but related areas, they are:



What does 'quality' mean?

How can it be measured?

How can it be managed?

As we have seen in this chapter, these three questions can be approached from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives can be viewed as competing or complimentary but ultimately but irrespective of the approach taken the same three questions need to be addressed. In the following chapter the research project's design, methodology and methods are discussed as a prelude to investigating how these questions are answered within the area of MBA provision in the UK.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

In chapters 2 and 3 the nature of the MBA environment and the relationship between quality management theory and practice have been discussed in broad terms in order to provide a context within which the approach to the primary research can be placed. Having undertaken this discussion it is now possible, and necessary, to narrow the research project's focus towards the primary research, beginning with an explanation of the methods and techniques that have been employed in order to generate the primary data.

Bell (1997, p. 155) describes the rationale for the methodology chapter in a thesis in terms of its ability to:

Explain how the (research) problem was investigated and why particular methods and techniques were used.

Hussey and Hussey (1997) develop the approach offered by Bell and distinguish between 'methodology', that refers to 'the approach to the entire process of a research study' (p. 20) and 'method', which they describe as 'the various means by which data can be collected and analysed' (p. 19). They add that in order to provide a full account of the methodological process, the researcher is required to explain why the data were collected and its sources, when and how the data collection took place, and how the data were analysed. These can be seen as the aims and objectives of this chapter.

#### **4.2 THE ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITION TAKEN IN THIS STUDY**

In order to understand the rationale for the various data-related processes and procedures adopted within this study, it is necessary to understand the ontological position taken by the researcher (Clough 2002). This is because the manner in which the essence of phenomena and the nature of their existence are perceived will determine both what is looked for and how it is

sought. When stating our own personal ontological view of the world, we are, in effect, describing the way in which we view, as individuals, the nature of reality (Welman 2001).

Morgan and Smircich (1980) classify the various stances taken as to what constitutes reality into a six-component continuum ranging from the extreme objectivist view, where reality is seen in the form of 'concrete structure', through to the highly subjective notion of reality as a 'projection of human imagination.' Within this study, the 'social constructionist' view of reality is taken (see Berger and Luckman, 1967) in which:

social reality is not out there, waiting to be experienced by social actors, even though it may often seem as though it is. Instead, we actively create (or construct) social reality through social interaction. It then takes on the appearance of existing independently of us, and is perceived as influencing our behaviour from outside. (McNeill, 1995, p. 120)

This means that social reality is inter-subjective, existing in the shared consciousness of actors based on shared meaning and interpretations rather than in the form of an independent objective truth that can be discovered (McQueen 2002). Such a view of reality, as with any given view of reality, quite obviously impacts upon what is regarded as valid knowledge. The resulting epistemological stance in turn reflects, not only the data gathering and analysis techniques that will subsequently be employed within the research, but also the role of the researcher (Gummesson, 2000).

When, as in this case, the position is taken that reality is socially constructed rather than objectively determined, it is clear that the role of the researcher:

Should not be to gather facts and measure how often certain patterns occur, but to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place on their experience, (Easterby-Smith et al, 1996, p. 241)

Indeed, it could be argued that given such a view of reality, the existence of 'facts' in the sense of something that is 'true' is in itself problematic. As a result, the notion that the researcher can gather facts raises as many questions as it answers (Flick 2002). As a result, in order to undertake the

role of the researcher in the field of educational quality expectation and perception, it is necessary to appreciate the different constructions and meanings stakeholders place on their experiences by finding ways of measuring and analysing individual attitudes and beliefs, rather than gathering facts (Cooper and Schindler, 1998).

#### **4.3 MEASURING ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS**

The different types of data that can be collected using interviews and questionnaires has been grouped by Dillman (1978) into four distinct categories:

1. **Attitude:** This refers to those responses which record how respondents feel about a particular issue, for example, whether or not a respondent likes or dislikes something, or feels that one particular MBA programme is superior to another.
2. **Belief:** This can be characterised as those responses that indicate what a respondent holds to be true or false with regard to a particular issue. For example, that 'education' is a valuable and important part of personal development.
3. **Attributes:** The respondent's formal characteristics, for example, age, gender and status.
4. **Behaviour:** The actions that respondents are presently taking or may have taken in the past. For example, attending a university/business school open day.

It is generally held that data focusing upon an interviewee's behaviour and attributes is less problematic to collect than data concerning attitudes and belief (Robson, 1993). However, it is clear from the quality management literature that an understanding of stakeholder attitude and belief is central to an enhanced understanding of the nature of service quality, and therefore, where the main thrust of this research study lays. A major reason for this is

that the behaviour of the individual, for example to enrol upon a particular MBA programme, is a function of his/her beliefs as to the value of business education and the attitude towards various competing programmes.

The problems associated with the measuring of attitudes and beliefs are well documented Summers (1977) provides a useful summary of the issues that can be classified under five main headings.

1.    The Issue of Intangibility: Attitudes and beliefs are essentially intangible and even though particular attitudes and beliefs, for example, tolerance, may be professed by the respondent, it may be difficult to provide evidence that they are actually as stated. It could be argued that they may only be truly discerned by indicators that measure their outward effect and physical manifestations.
2.    The Issue of Multi-Dimensions: Attitudes and beliefs are often multi-dimensional. For example, the respondent may be tolerant in a particular set of circumstances but much less so in others. In order to overcome this difficulty, the researcher may need to ask a range of questions that test an attitude or belief in a variety of different ways.
3.    The Propensity for Change: Some attitudes and, to a lesser extent some beliefs, are prone to change in an often apparently idiosyncratic and irregular manner. This being the case, it could be argued that the value of measuring attitudes at a single point in time is limited. For example, exposure to a certain series of events may make an individual more, or less, tolerant.
4.    The Heightening of Awareness: The act of measuring an attitude or belief may well contribute to a change in that attitude or belief. For example, once the issue of tolerance in a given circumstance is raised in the interview, the respondent may feel inclined to reappraise a given attitude having explored the nature of the circumstances more

carefully, and now feel that 'tolerance' is now an issue whereas before it was not.

5. The Relationship to Behaviour: The measurement of an attitude or belief may not be significant in terms of behaviour, if the respondent does not feel particularly strongly about the issue. The respondent may register an opinion if pressed, but it may have no tangible effect on outcomes. His or her level of tolerance or intolerance with regard to a particular circumstance may be of no significance therefore.

At every stage of the primary research process, design, implementation and analysis, efforts have been made to address the issues outlined by Summers (1977) by focusing upon how attitudes and beliefs can change over time, the factors that can cause attitudes and beliefs to change and the relationship this can have to particular sets of behaviour (Ezzy 2002)

#### **4.4 QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS**

The view of the nature of reality taken within this study places it squarely within the phenomenological paradigm, where meaning rather than facts, are of prime concern (Patton 2002). In an effort to better understand how social actors experience the world and subsequently ascribe meaning, Bryman (1988), among many others, stresses the advantages of the qualitative, rather than quantitative approach. As Dey (1993, p. 28), indicates:

The more ambiguous and elastic our concepts, the less possible it is to quantify our data in a meaningful way.

For many writers, the logical consequence for those researchers that take the phenomenological approach is the utilization of a qualitative methodology (see Gill and Johnson, 1991; Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Van Maanen (1983, p. 9), describes the methods used when a qualitative methodological approach is undertaken as consisting of:

An array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the

meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world.

A number of established qualitative research models were considered at the outset of the project, particularly those put forward by Lindlhof (1995) and Morse (1994). From these models, the following general research procedures were developed and implemented.

The analysis of data was conducted on a continuous basis throughout the research project. This approach allowed a variety of issues to be generated and explored in order to identify which should be followed up and concentrated upon as well as enabling the development of a 'conceptual framework to guide subsequent work'. (Saunders et al, 1997, p. 349). The research project did not, therefore, begin with a predefined theoretical framework but rather with a predefined research purpose (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Data reduction has also been a continuous process at both the empirical and conceptual level. Data reduction is described by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 11) as,

A form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, disregards and reorganizes data in such a way that final conclusions can be drawn and verified.

For the purposes of this study, data reduction involved categorising, prioritising and inter-relating data on an ongoing basis in order to draw out themes at a variety of levels and in a variety of contexts (Bryman and Bell 2003).

The generation of themes and their placement within an appropriate context, in turn, allows an explanation to be put forward as to 'what is actually happening', and from there, for the 'constant development and manipulation of malleable theoretical schemes until the best theoretical scheme is developed' (Morse, 1994, p. 32). In other words, an attempt is made to make

sense of what is actually happening and present this in the form of recognisable and credible patterns.

Finally, re-contextualisation has been attempted. This can be seen as the process of generalisation that enables the theory that is emerging from the study to be applied to other settings and populations. Existing theories have been revisited in order to place the results of the study in context and establish new linkages with these theories (Creswell 2003).

Implicit within this study are a number of assumptions associated with the use of a qualitative approach and the phenomenological paradigm (Gummesson, 2000). According to Hussey and Hussey (1997, p. 290), such assumptions provide a 'platform for writing, and a rationale for the chosen methodology' and it is useful to view the rest of this chapter within the context of these assumptions.

First, as already stated, the focus of this research project study is essentially subjective meaning, that is the manner in which individuals make sense of their experience and express them in words. This approach was taken in favour of one that focussed upon the frequency of a given social event, which would be expressed in numbers and might, given a different methodological approach, be presented as 'the facts' (McClelland 2002; Zikmund 2000).

Secondly, throughout the research process, an approach has been adopted with the aim of enabling 'general inferences to be induced from particular instances' (Gill and Johnson, 1991, p. 165). Such an inductive method facilitates the development of appropriate conceptual frameworks (Allen, 1990; Saunders et al, 1997) and provides research outcomes that should not be portrayed as either true or false, but rather, as more or less useful (Silverman, 1993). In this context the researcher needs to be aware that the usefulness of such outcomes is, in part, a function of the quality and credibility of the inductive process (Neudendorf 2002).



Finally, the research data that were generated took a non-standardised form, and this needed to be classified and categorised. As a consequence of this, the validity and reliability of the research needed to be ensured through the use of more than one research method (Cresswell 2003; Jankowicz 1995).

## **4.5 THE SAMPLE**

### **4.5.1 ESTABLISHING THE SAMPLING FRAME**

The primary research process has focused upon three groups of stakeholders: MBA programme Directors, prospective MBA students, and practising MBA students. The design of the research programme, and the choice of population from which the sample was ultimately drawn, can be seen as a response to a number of key issues arising from the review of the quality management literature presented in chapter 3.

Influential theorists such as Crosby (1979); Deming (1986); Juran (1986), among many others, stress the central role of senior management in both determining the nature of quality initiatives and providing the means to enable their success. Without such a commitment, an organization's employees may still deliver a high quality output. However, as has been shown, such quality may be highly variable over time, being the result of individual effort rather than the creation of effective high quality generating systems. For this reason, the decision was made to commence the research process by interviewing the group of stakeholders most closely correlating to senior management, namely, MBA programme Directors.

Having identified the key role played by senior managers in the delivery of high quality services, the relevant literature also highlights the growing importance of the customer as the arbiter of service quality, both in the private and public service sectors (Cartwright 1997, Laccabucci et al, 1994). Given, as has previously been demonstrated, that both expectations and perceptions form a large part in determining customer satisfaction (Chakripani 1998), potentially all of the past and present MBA students represent the sampling frame, along with prospective MBA students, and it

was from this very large sampling frame that the samples were subsequently chosen.

#### **4.5.2 SELECTING THE SAMPLES**

As has been demonstrated in chapter 2, there has been a significant recent growth of MBA programmes in the United Kingdom. This has provided a relatively large number of potential respondents from which to draw for research purposes. In order to achieve the necessary focus for the study, a number of sampling techniques were considered (Clegg, 1989; Vogt, 1993).

With regard to the MBA Director interviews, the aim was to speak to anyone from the population who was willing to be interviewed, and who could be interviewed, given budget and time constraints. Such an 'opportunity sample' (Bell, 1997), or 'convenience sample' (Saunders et al, 1997), is regarded as a generally acceptable approach within the field of qualitative research, as it seeks to deal realistically with the issue of accessibility (Gummesson 2000).

##### **4.5.2.1 The MBA Directors**

Thirty MBA Directors were contacted in writing and asked for interviews. 13 of these either did not respond or were unavailable. The remainder agreed, in principle, to an interview, and subsequently nine interviews took place. The respondents represented the entire range of programme/institution type identified in chapter 2, ranging from full-time programmes in well-established institutions to part-time programme providers within the new university sector. Table 4.1 shows a more detailed breakdown of the nine Directors interviewed.

For analytical purposes, no attempt was made to divide the sample into subgroups such as respondents' age, gender, types of programme or institution represented, but rather the sample has been regarded as one distinct target group. This is because it was felt that any of the subgroups that emerged would have been too small to represent any meaningful patterns of behaviour or opinion (Gill and Johnson, 1991; Russell 2000).

**Table 4.1 MBA Directors Interviewed (Classified in terms of type of MBA programmes for which responsible)**

<b>(1) Interviewee referred to in text as:</b>	<b>(2) Type of MBA programme for which responsible</b>	<b>(3) Range of modes of study offered</b>
A (m)	Focused Strategy	FT/PT
B (m)	Focused Strategy	FT/PT
C (m)	Priced-based Strategy	PT/DL
D (f)	Differentiation Strategy	FT
E (m)	Differentiation Strategy	FT
F (m)	Price-based Strategy	FT/PT
G (m)	Price-based Strategy	FT/PT/DL
H (m)	Focused Strategy	FT/PT
I (m)	Price-based Strategy	FT/PT

(m) denotes male, (f) denotes female

**Notes to accompany Figure 4.1**

- (1) Where direct quotations are included in the analysis section, the programme Director concerned is identified using a letter of the alphabet (for example, Director D).
- (2) The types of MBA programme for which the Directors are responsible fall into the three categories identified in chapter 2.5. These are:

PBS: Price-Based Strategy: Here the MBA programme is focused upon price-sensitive customers. Adopted by the newer entrants into the MBA market, the students tend to be relatively geographically immobile.

DS: Differentiation Strategy: Programmes designed for customers able and willing to pay premium prices for courses perceived to be of substantial added value. These tend to be delivered by established institutions with international reputations.

FS: Focused Strategy: In this case, MBA providers seek to address a particular market niche or offer 'value for money'. They are unable to charge premium prices, but have cost structures that prevent their competing purely on price at the lower end of the market. They will often seek 'outside' accreditation from professional or other bodies.

(3) Indicates the various modes of study offered by the Institution:

FT = Full -time

PT = Part-time

DL = Distance learning

As can be seen, some institutions may offer more than one mode. Where Directors made comments that were specifically focused upon one mode, this has been indicated. Where general comments were made it is assumed all modes were being referred to.

#### **4.5.2.2 Prospective MBA Students**

With regard to the prospective MBA student sample, the population could be said to potentially include any individual with the relevant qualifications and experience to gain access to an MBA programme. However, it is clear that such an approach to constructing a sample would be both unsatisfactory and unworkable, and, as a result, the population was identified as being made up of those individuals who were "actively seeking an MBA programme". The criteria for this designation are described below.

Prospective students were interviewed at a major MBA Fair in London in 1996. Entry to the Fair was free to the public by ticket only, and these tickets had to be obtained by post in advance. As a result, it was felt that those individuals attending the MBA Fair would be likely to be more 'genuine' prospective students than if access to the Fair could have been obtained on a more casual basis. Their attendance at the event was the result of two related decisions, the first to apply for the ticket and the second to subsequently use it.

The interviews were undertaken entirely by the researcher and a quota sampling technique was used (Creswell 2003), and was entirely non-random (Gummesson 2000). Thirty-seven individuals were approached in order to find 20 who were considered to be actively seeking an MBA programme. This process was undertaken by the use of three screening questions.

Question 1: Would you say that you were seriously considering taking an MBA?

This question was designed to remove from the sample any individual who might be at the Fair for reasons other than that of actively seeking a programme. Disqualifying responses included 'accompanying a friend', 'just curious', and 'picking up programme information for someone else'.

Question 2: Are you likely to embark on an MBA programme within the next 18 months?

Although the figure of 18 months is arbitrary, it was felt that a degree of urgency was required to denote seriousness, but the degree of urgency needed to be balanced with the practical time-consuming process involved in selecting a programme and making the financial and other arrangements necessary to embark upon it. If respondents were relatively vague as to when they would embark on a programme, for example, 'at some time in the future', or 'when I can afford it', they were not included in the sample.

Question 3: Apart from attending this MBA Fair, have you been involved in any other activity designed to gain more information regarding MBA programmes?

In this case, an 'acceptable' activity would include sending for a prospectus, buying a book on the subject, consulting the internet or visiting an institution open day. It would also include activities such as discussing the matter with programme staff or others who are professionally associated with the area, either in person or on the telephone. It would not, however, include undertaking general discussions with friends and partners.

In order to reach the next stage of the interview process, individuals were required to 'successfully' answer all three questions. Not only did this screening process remove from the sample those individuals who were not actively seeking an MBA programme, it is felt that it also resulted in a relatively homogenous interview group, in terms of their interest in the qualification, and the behaviour that such an interest had subsequently stimulated.

As with the MBA Director interviews, the prospective students were not subdivided into groups based on gender or age, but regarded as one distinct target group.

**Table 4.2 Prospective MBA Students**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
1	Female	31-40
2	Male	31-40
3	Male	Less than 30
4	Male	31-40
5	Female	31-40
6	Female	Less than 30
7	Male	Less than 30
8	Male	31-40
9	Male	Less than 30
10	Female	Less than 30
11	Male	31-40
12	Male	Greater than 50
13	Female	Less than 30
14	Male	Less than 30
15	Female	Less than 30
16	Male	Less than 30
17	Female	Less than 30
18	Male	Less than 30
19	Male	Less than 30
20	Male	Less than 30

#### **4.5.2.3 Practising MBA Students**

One business school's entire intake of 57 practising full-time MBA students made up the respondents of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) component of the investigation. The business school forms part of a 'new' university with a strong and growing reputation and relatively high number of student applications per place available. The school's programme was selected as the sample for a number of reasons:

First, there is a rigorous application of the stated entry requirements. Students have to have at least three years' work experience at management level and the appropriate educational profile. The relatively large number of applications means that these standards have not been compromised in order to make the programme cost-effective and, as a result, the students can be regarded as representative of the type of students that the MBA was designed for.

Secondly, the school was able, as a result of the popularity of the course, to maintain a balanced student profile in terms of gender and nationality. Twenty-six nationalities were represented and 17 of the 57 students were female. Again, even though no claim to statistical significance is made (Easterby Smith et al, 1996) a reasonably balanced group of respondents can be seen as more representative than a group totally dominated by one gender or nationality. Tables 4.3 and 4.4 provide information regarding the nature of the sample group.



**Table 4.3 Practising MBA Student Profile**

<b>Student No</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Years of work experience</b>
1	M	Pakistani	41-50	More than 20
2	M	Israeli	31-40	6-10
3	F	Chinese	Below 30	6-10
4	M	French	Below 30	3-5
5	M	Mexican	31-40	6-10
6	M	Indian	Below 30	3-5
7	F	Thai	Below 30	3-5
8	M	Kenyan	31-40	11-20
9	F	Swiss	Below 30	6-10
10	M	Italian	Below 30	3-5
11	M	British	Below 30	6-10
12	M	Russian	Below 30	3-5
13	M	Egyptian	Below 30	3-5
14	M	German	31-40	11-20
15	M	British	41-50	More than 20
16	M	Indian	Below 30	3-5
17	M	Russian	Below 30	3-5
18	F	U.A.E	Below 30	3-5
19	F	British	41-50	11-20
20	M	German	31-40	11-20
21	F	Israeli	Below 30	3-5
22	M	Tanzanian	31-40	11-20
23	M	South African	31-40	11-20
24	F	Bulgarian	Below 30	6-10
25	M	Swiss	41-50	More than 20
26	F	Ugandan	31-40	11-20
27	M	Chinese	Below 30	6-10
28	F	Chinese	Below 30	6-10

29	M	Chinese	41-50	More than 20
30	M	Greek	31-40	6-10
31	M	Indian	Below 30	6-10
32	M	South African	Below 30	11-20
33	M	Pakistani	31-40	11-20
34	M	American	Below 30	3-5
35	F	Japanese	Below 30	6-10
36	M	Spanish	Below 30	3-5
37	M	Greek	31-40	6-10
38	F	British	41-50	11-20
39	M	Greek	31-40	6-10
40	M	Indian	Below 30	3-5
41	M	Indian	Below 30	3-5
42	F	Thai	Below 30	6-10
43	F	British	Below 30	6-10
44	M	Swiss	Below 30	3-5
45	F	Bulgarian	Below 30	6-10
46	M	Chinese	31-40	11-20
47	M	British	Below 30	6-10
48	F	British	Below 30	6-10
49	M	Greek	Below 30	3-5
50	M	British	Below 30	6-10
51	M	Yemeni	Below 30	6-10
52	M	Indian	Below 30	6-10
53	F	South African	Below 30	6-10
54	F	Chinese	Below 30	6-10
55	M	Austrian	Below 30	6-10
56	M	Brazil	Below 30	6-10
57	M	British	Above 50	More than 20

**Table 4.4 Practising MBA Student Profile by Nationality**

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
British	9	Brazilian	1
Chinese	6	Egyptian	1
Indian	6	French	1
Greek	4	Italian	1
South African	3	Japanese	1
Swiss	3	Kenyan	1
Bulgarian	2	Mexican	1
German	2	Spanish	1
Israeli	2	Tanzanian	1
Pakistani	2	UAE	1
Russian	2	Ugandan	1
Thai	2	USA	1
Austrian	1	Yemeni	1

**Table 4.5 Practising MBA Student Profile by Age Range**

No.	Age Range	Number of Students
1	Below 30	37
2	31 – 40	13
3	41 – 50	6
4	Above 50	1

**Figure 4.6 Practising MBA Student Profile by Length of Work Experience**

Letter	Category	Number of Students
A	3 – 5	16
B	6 – 10	25
C	11 – 20	11
D	More than 20	5

As can be seen from the tables, a wide range of nationalities is represented in the sample, with the largest group, the British, accounting for less than 16% of the total sample. The largest four groups of students make up around 44% of all students and, as a result, it is reasonable to conclude that no single national perspective dominates the findings. A further analysis indicates that 45% of the students are European, 30% Asian, 10% African, 9% from the Middle East with 6% originating in the Americas.

With regard to age range of the sample group, the spread is less even, with 65% being below 30, 23% aged 30 to 40, just over 10% being in the 41 to 50 category and only 1 student older than 50. As a result of this age profile, the students tended to fall into the lower ranges of work experience categories, with 28% having between 3 and 5, 44% between 6 and 10, 19% between 11 and 20 and 9% having more than 20 work experience. Nevertheless, bearing

in mind that no statistical significance is being claimed, the sample group can be regarded as providing a broad spectrum of views and insights. In order to respect the wishes of the students, individuals have not been identified.

## **4.6 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

### **4.6.1 THE MULTI-METHOD APPROACH**

This multi-method approach can be seen as a means of reducing individual method bias (Brewer and Hunter, 1989) and militating against the unique weaknesses inherent in each particular data gathering technique (Smith, 1975). It is an approach often known as 'triangulation' and as McNeil (1995, p. 123) suggests:

means simply that you get a better view of things by looking at them from more than one direction.

It is clear that research which focuses upon qualitative data, attitudes and beliefs will benefit from a variety of data gathering techniques, for as Saunders et al (1997, p. 80) point out:

There is an inevitable relationship between the data collection method you employ and the results you obtain. In short, the results will be affected by the methods used. The problem here is that it is impossible to ascertain the nature of that effect. Since all different methods will have different effects, it makes sense to use different methods to cancel out the 'method effect'. That will lead to greater confidence being placed in your conclusions.

There is sometimes a tendency for 'triangulation' to become an end in itself, as researchers automatically adopt a multi-method approach in order to be able to claim greater methodological validity for their studies irrespective of its necessity. Within this research project, care has been taken not to employ different techniques for the sake of doing so, but rather, to employ them because, in this particular study, multi-methods were deemed 'especially appropriate' (Gill and Johnson, 1991, p. 152), due to the variety of stakeholders being studied and the nature of the issues being investigated.

When selecting the actual techniques to be employed, the advice of Bell (1997, p. 63) was taken, when she says:

The initial question is not 'Which methodology', but 'what do I need to know and why?' Only then do you ask, 'What is the best way to collect the information?' and 'When I have this information, what shall I do with it?'

In outlining the particular methods employed below, care has been taken to establish what knowledge was sought and how the technique employed flowed from that initial premise. Time and trouble has also been taken to investigate the data gathering techniques themselves, and in doing so, isolate them from the situations in which the researcher may, or may not, ultimately use them. In this way an understanding of the principles and details of experimental design and obtaining responses, which are meaningful and informative, has been achieved as a prerequisite for the use of the techniques.

The choice has also taken place within the wider context established by Raimond (1993, p. 55) who notes that:

methodology needs to be seen for what it truly is, a way of preventing me from deceiving myself in regard to my creatively formed subjective hunches which have developed out of the relationship between me and my material.

#### **4.6.2 THE MBA DIRECTOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

The semi-structured interview was chosen as a means of investigating the views and action of MBA Directors because it is a method that provides an opportunity for the ideas and issues generated by the respondents to be probed and developed in what Robson calls 'real time' (Robson, 1993). The technique also allowed the interviewees' motives and feelings to be investigated with the aim being to create a conversation between interviewer and interviewee with the purpose of eliciting information from the interviewee.

The semi-structured interview format utilised allows the interviewee to help to set the research agenda, because it enables the investigator to find out what is happening and to seek new and fresh insights that might not otherwise have emerged (Robson, 1993). This data gathering technique was used at the start of the primary research process (not including the Critical Incident

Pilot which did not deal with the issue of MBA programme quality) as a means of establishing issues that were of relevance to those 'in the field'.

Such an approach to data gathering is seen as a particularly appropriate technique if, as in this case, the research programme is initiated without a firm hypothesis to test (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991). However, while such an approach brings advantages in situations where research questions are deemed to be complex and open-ended, and the logic and ordering of the questioning may need to be varied (Jankowicz, 1995), it was felt necessary to impose a general interview framework in order to make data analysis manageable (Yin, 1994). As a result, it was the intention to strike a balance between interviewee-generated issues and those broad areas of interest indicated by the relevant literature.

In this instance, an interview question framework based upon Kotler's (1994) 'Services Marketing Triangle', was devised as it was seen as representing three key quality related senior management functions. Fig 4.3 below shows the relationship between these functions.

**Figure 4.1 The Services Marketing Triangle**

As a result, three broad areas of interest were probed throughout the interviews, as a means of establishing context, namely:

1.     **Setting the Quality Promise:** This can be seen as any direct or indirect senior management approach or action which helps to create student, and to some extent employee, expectations regarding the nature and quality of the MBA programme for which the senior manager is responsible. In this case the senior manager being the programme Director.
2.     **Enabling the Quality Promise:** This comprises those activities for which the senior manager (programme Director) is responsible which take place in order to facilitate the fulfilment of the expectations that have been created. It is, in essence, the creation and maintenance of a quality infrastructure including relevant structures, cultures, systems and procedures.
3.     **Delivering the Quality Promise:** The influence of the senior manager in the many and varied 'moments of truth' (Carlzon, 1987; Gremler et al, 1994), which combine to make up the complete service encounter (Shostack, 1985), which includes the direct and specific actions taken to resolve issues or problems which may arise.

The semi-structured, or focused format devised ranged approximately midway on Grebenik and Moser's (1972) 'continuum of formality'. In common with standard practice, the interviewees were allowed considerable latitude for interpretation within the interview framework that was set (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991; Jankowicz, 1995).

The format used can be seen in Table 4.7. overleaf



**Table 4.7 MBA Directors Semi-Structured Interview Format**

Question 1	Could you briefly describe your position?
Question 2	Please describe the nature of the MBA programme with which you are involved.
Question 3	With regard to the MBA, what is your definition of quality or your understanding of the meaning of the term quality?
Question 4:	How have your views on quality been transmitted to the MBA staff, individual learners on the MBA, potential or prospective MBA customers?
Question 5:	Could you briefly outline your strategy for ensuring quality?
Question 6:	How do you measure quality?
Question 7:	What factors drive the need for high levels of programme quality and quality improvement?
Question 8:	Can you identify any future developments that are likely to take place within the field of MBA quality management?
Question 9:	Are there any final comments or observations you would like to make?

Where possible, comments were recorded in full. However, following the advice of Bell (1997) among others, a shorthand system was also used throughout the interviews to record the information being given. On every occasion, notes were written up immediately after the interview and before the journey home. In four instances, respondents were contacted again in order to verify a number of responses they had given. It is highly unlikely that rigorously structured interviews or questionnaires would have yielded the necessary insights into the attitudes and beliefs that emerged (Healey, 1991).

#### **4.6.3 PROSPECTIVE MBA STUDENT INTERVIEWS**

These interviews were conducted in line with the principles established for the MBA Director interviews described above. The aim of the prospective MBA student interviews was to investigate three main areas of interest.

1. The individual student motivation for actively seeking an MBA programme. The interview question being:

What are your main reasons for wanting to undertake an MBA programme?

2. The means by which the individuals concerned were assessing MBA programme quality in the 'pre-purchasing phase' of the decision-making process. The prospective students were asked:

How do you know if an MBA programme you are considering is of high quality?

3. The quality expectations and perceptions that would be likely to determine the individual's final choice of MBA programme. Using the question;

What are the key factors that will determine your final choice of MBA programme?

These questions can be seen as consistent with the ontological and epistemological approach described above and were designed to produce responses that shed light upon individually constructed, quality-related attitudes and beliefs. The questions also sought to explore the buying behaviour that such quality constructions are likely to lead to, although no subsequent buying decisions were monitored as part of this research project.

#### **4.6.4 PRACTISING MBA STUDENT CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE**

Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is an inductive grouping procedure (Hunt, 1983), which can be used to collect those observations that the respondents feel are most significant to them. The written observations have been analysed using content analysis which is a diagnostic tool used by qualitative

researchers. It is particularly useful when qualitative researchers are faced with a mass of open-ended material that they need to make sense of (Mostyn, 1985). This research method is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded material and it is a form of data analysis that is regarded as having the advantage of being unobtrusive, because the creators of the material do so without the researcher inadvertently influencing the text (Hussey and Hussey, 1997).

It is seen to be particularly useful when used as a component in multi-method studies (Brewer and Hunter, 1989) and was utilised in this context as a means of supporting and enhancing other research techniques. The process involves classifying the contents of communications in such a way as to bring out their basic structure and in doing so illuminate the issues under study (Abercrombie et al, 1988).

As a data-gathering tool, CIT has been found to be both reliable and valid (White and Locke, 1981). The method draws heavily upon the concept of Personal Construct Theory (PCT) developed by Kelly (1955) and has been employed in a variety of fields (Easterby-Smith et al 1991).

PCT was developed from the concept of 'man as scientist' with individuals seen as constantly trying to understand and predict the world around them. They do this by classifying their experiences into recurrent themes so that events that take place today can be fitted into the mould of previous experiences (Berger and Luckman 1967; Morgan 1997a, 1997b). However, such themes are not 'found' in the real world. On the contrary, they are invented and then imposed on the real world by the individual. This does not mean that we exist in a constant state of delusion, out of touch with reality and objectivity, but we do experience the world through our own constructed reality. It is this type of subjective reality that is at the heart of service quality.

If we accept the notion of personal construct theory, it follows that the same class activity, item or course material or tutor/student interaction is likely to be interpreted differently by different MBA students as the event passes through

the filter of individually constructed reality. CIT and content analysis were, therefore, used to collect these individual and highly subjective observations and classify them in order to try to make them useful to the researcher.

Notable examples of the use and development of CIT include the work of Flanagan (1954) and White and Locke (1981). It was felt that, in principle, such a technique was particularly useful as a means of exploring the notion of customer satisfaction and service quality that represents a set of very personal responses to events and circumstances Hale (2000). However, as the technique had not been used by the researcher before, unlike both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, a pilot study was initiated as a means of increasing familiarity with the operation of the technique and to provide some assessment of the questions' validity and the reliability of the data collected (Saunders et al, 1997). A brief description of the pilot study can be found in Appendix E

For the purposes of informing the main CIT study, the technique itself was seen as a very useful way to gain information deemed important to the interviewee rather than have issues suggested to them by the interviewer.

However, the pilot did highlight a problem with regard to the subsequent use of the student response sheet. Some students completed the form in such a way as to make it difficult for the researcher to interpret the meaning of what was being written. As a result the main CIT approach was modified. The question, 'why did you decide to undertake this particular MBA programme?', was asked to the students in groups of 4 or 5, and it was then possible to note down and clarify the responses as the session progressed.

The students were not allowed to ask any questions as to the nature of the investigation in order to facilitate the greatest possible range of student response. Again, a mixture of direct, 'longhand quotes' and shorthand notes were used to record the responses.

The aim of this question was primarily to help develop an understanding of the prime motives for undertaking a particular MBA programme and, from this, to develop insights into the most important student expectations and perceptions with regard to programme quality. By adopting this approach, it was intended to discover that the most relevant quality-related issues for each student, as identified by each student, rather than providing a list of researcher-generated quality attributes on which each student would comment whether or not they actually influenced their behaviour. In this way, it was hoped that the problems associated with measuring attitudes as identified by Summers (1977) could be addressed.

The responses were analysed (the analytical and coding processes are outlined below) and subsequently discussed with the students in small groups in order to develop issues arising from the analysis and clarify any ambiguities. These groups were not the same as those who undertook the initial interview. Rather, they were random groups based upon the availability of the students, although they were the same body of students who had taken part in the initial CIT investigation. The discussions, as will be seen in chapter 5, centred upon the extent to which quality expectations had been met, and, the levels of student satisfaction/dissatisfaction that resulted.

#### **4.7 ANALYSING THE DATA**

This section begins with a description of the underlying principles by which the process of data analysis took place. It explains the nature of content analysis and the coding process. The manner in which the Director interviews, prospective student interviews and practising MBA students critical incident technique responses were analysed are then outlined. This is followed by an explanation of how the three sets of data analysis are drawn together and the 'evidence' subsequently generated and presented.

For the purposes of this research project, 'analysis' has been taken to mean the process by which a phenomenon (in this case, MBA programme quality) is conceptualised, in order that it can be separated into its component parts,

so that the relationships between those parts can be better understood and subsequently related back to the whole (Gill and Johnson, 1991).

A review of the data analysis literature confirms Robson's (1993, p. 370), view that, with regard to qualitative data analysis, there is:

no clear and accepted set of conventions for analysis corresponding to those observed with quantitative data.

However, even if this is the case, it is also clear that a variety of techniques and approaches have been developed, and that even though,

reports of successes and problems with attempts to collect and analyse qualitative data in practice are not often published (Jinkerson et al, 1992, p. 273),

it is possible to replicate generally accepted and well-used qualitative data analysis approaches in a systematic and transparent manner.

#### **4.7.1 CONTENT ANALYSIS AND THE CODING PROCESS**

Content analysis is described by Mostyn (1985, p. 117) as:

the diagnostic tool of qualitative researchers, which they use when faced with a mass of open-ended material to make sense of.

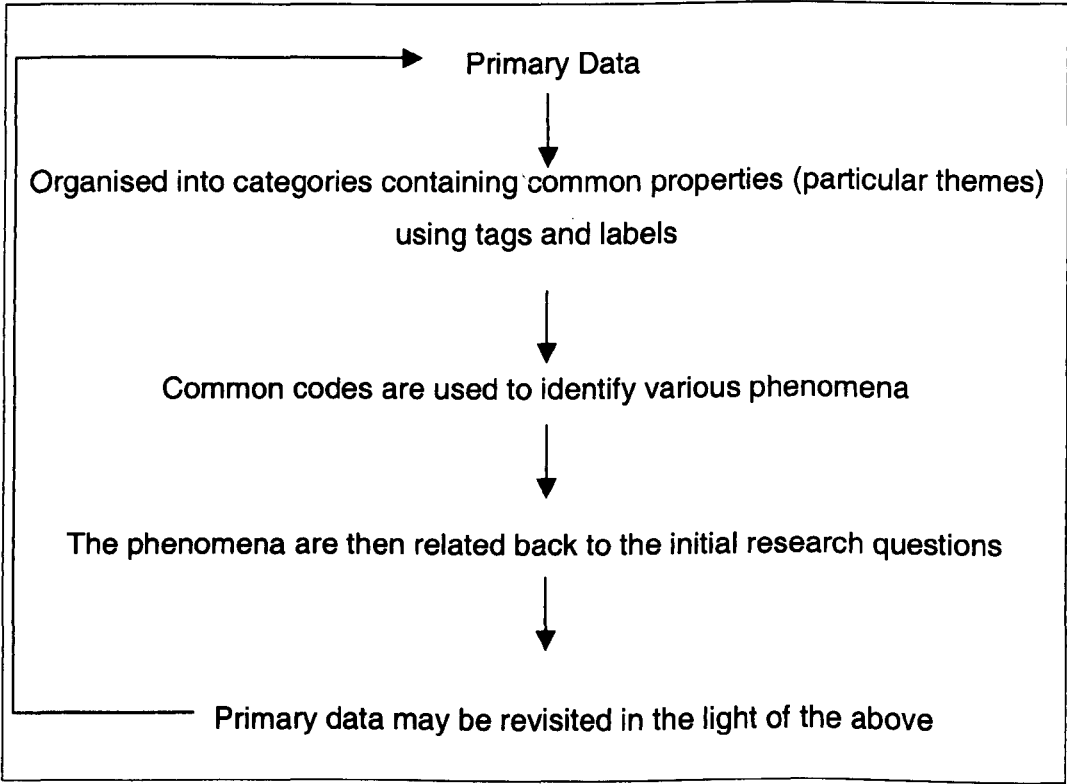
In order to analyse primary data of the type described in Mostyn's quotation, it is necessary to organise the data into categories that contain common properties, that is, to code the data in terms of particular themes. The aim of the categorisation process is to establish links between the textual material produced through the primary research and the theoretical concepts on which the research project is based (Krippendorf, 1980).

In order to achieve the necessary coding, tags and labels are attached to relevant chunks of data ranging from single words through to entire paragraphs (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As a result, it becomes possible to develop various areas of meaning that could then be differentiated and clustered into segments for further consideration and reflection. At this stage, the coding process represented a simple form of content analysis in

which the data were first stripped down to their bare bones, with the addition of broad categories enabling the identification of simple conceptual themes (Krippendorf, 1980).

The approach described above enables common codes to be retrieved from the mass of research text, which, in turn, allows relevant phenomena to be initially noticed. Examples of the phenomena can then be collected and the phenomena subsequently analysed. As this process continues, the results of the analysis can then be related back to the initial research questions. In this way, various patterns, structures, commonalities and differences emerge, which can then be used to inform the research findings. The coding process in generic form can be seen in Figure 4.2 below.

**Figure 4.2 The Coding Process (Generic form)**



Examples of the coding process in action within this research study can be seen in section 4.7.2 overleaf.

However, this technique should not be seen as a simple data reducing process. Rather, it can also be regarded as a means of discovery, because the codes being generated do not serve solely as denominators of certain phenomena, but also as heuristic devices for discovery. There exists, therefore, an inherent paradox with regard to the process of content analysis, in which data are both simplified and complicated, being at first reduced to a series of common denominators, and then subsequently expanded, transformed and reconceptualised in order to open up analytical possibilities (Strauss, 1987).

Tesch (1990) provides an analysis of the processes described above, making use of the concepts of 'decontextualisation' and 'recontextualisation'. At the decontextualising stage, she sees the textual data as being 'sliced' into segments, with each segment needing to be both comprehensible in itself and large enough to have stand-alone meaning. These segments will then be organized by the researcher into 'pools of meaning' (Martin 1986); a process Tesch (1990) calls recontextualisation. The textual data can, therefore, be regarded as having two separate but related contexts:

That context from which they were originally taken,

The new pool of meaning (or context) to which they have subsequently been assigned, (Martin, 1986).

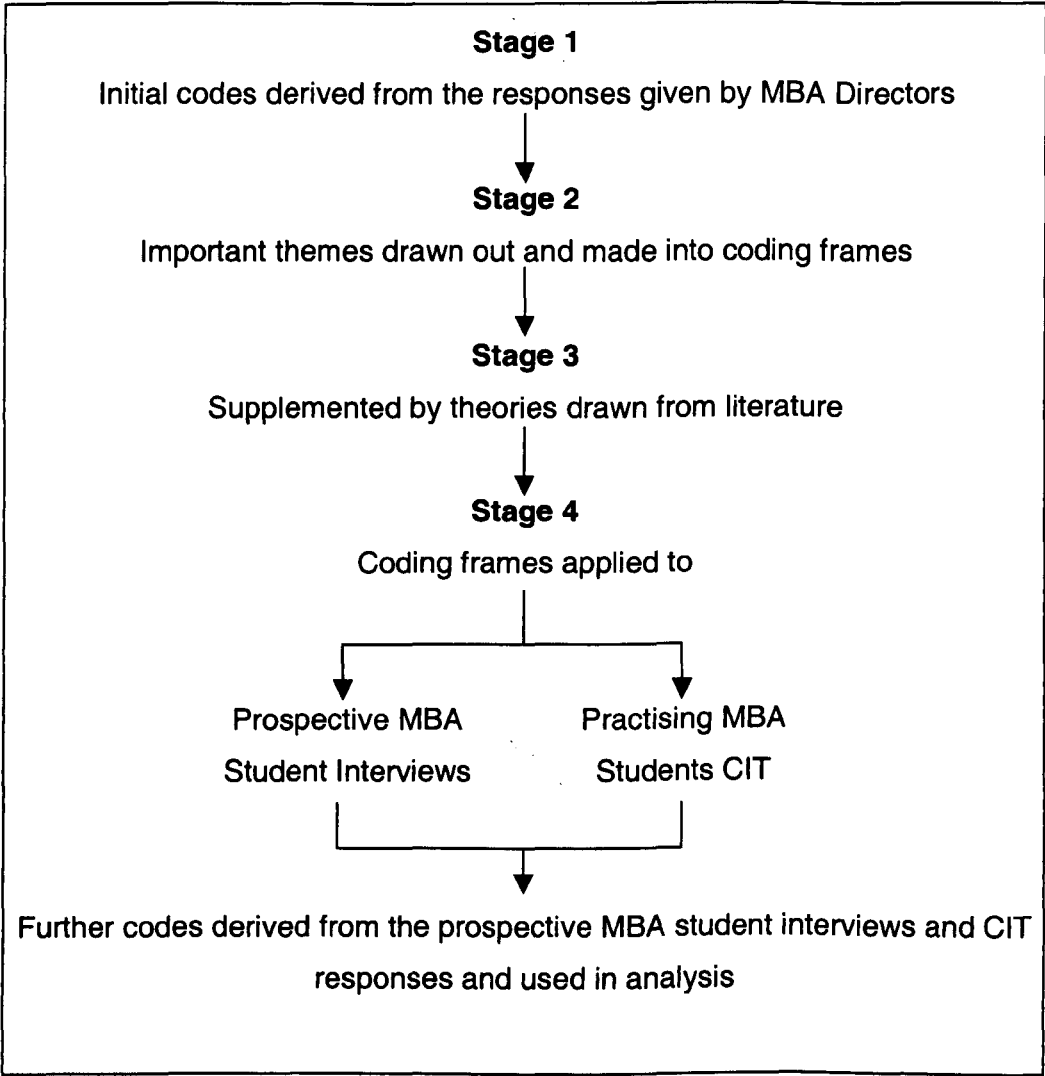
#### **4.7.2 THE NATURE OF THE CODING EMPLOYED**

In the pilot CIT programme, and with the MBA Director interviews, the initial coding was derived from the responses given by the respondents, and can be seen as a form of open coding (Saunders et al, 1997, among others). Attempts were made to draw out important themes that were then used to make coding frames. With both the prospective student interviews and the practising student CIT investigation, coding frames were designed based upon key variables and concepts found in the quality and organizational behaviour literature, and as a result of the researcher's reflection on the MBA



Director interviews. See Figure 4.3 below. A more detailed explanation of this process can be found below in sections 4.7.3, 4.7.4 and 4.7.5.

**Figure 4.3 The Nature of the Coding Employed**



As reading of the textual data progressed, other key areas of interest emerged and were subsequently formed into codes. It can be seen, therefore, that both theoretically constructed codes and vivo codes, that is those codes derived from the language used by the respondents, operated simultaneously (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Such an approach is based upon the belief that codes are organizing principles that are not set in stone. They are our own creations in that we identify and select them for ourselves.

They are tools to think with. They can be expanded, changed or scrapped altogether as our ideas develop through repeated interactions with the data.

Codes representing different degrees of generality were employed so that data retrieval could take place at different levels. At this stage, it is useful to explain this process in more detail, with the use of an example of the coding process in action:

Stage 1: Initial codes derived from the responses given by MBA Directors.

The reading of MBA Director interview transcripts identifies customer satisfaction as an important element within the MBA quality process. For example,

It is important to try to understand the student's (customer's) concerns and address them wherever possible. (Director I)

And,

I regularly ask the students how they are getting on, read all the feedback sheets, and discuss course issues with reps. (Director C)

Even though customer satisfaction is not mentioned directly (although Director G, not quoted here, did explicitly use the term) it is clear that it is important to the Directors that students' opinions are canvassed, and their concerns addressed. In the initial reading of the transcripts, any indication of a 'customer satisfaction-based approach' would, therefore, be coded. These can be seen as codes, and formed part of the initial open coding process. There would, of course, be many other open codes at this stage.

Stage 2: Important themes drawn out and made into coding frames

The relationship between quality and customer satisfaction was so strongly represented within the transcripts that it was regarded as, an 'important theme', which needed to be drawn out and focused upon. At this stage, the transcripts can be seen as being de-constructed, but this is not the only purpose of the coding process. If the work is to be 'recontextualised', as described by Tesch (1990) above, new pools of meaning must be generated which required re-visiting the literature.

Stage 3: Supplemented by theories drawn from the literature

Issues relating to customer satisfaction are reconsidered at this stage, and related to issues, such as other quality perspectives (Garvin, 1988), measuring customer satisfaction (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), dimensions of service quality (Gronroos, 1988) among many others. This process, having been undertaken for transcripts, is then re-read in order to try to discover 'new', more complex relationships, in terms of the nature of customer satisfaction and quality. As a result, Stage 2 of the process is repeated.

Stage 2 (repeated): More important themes drawn out and made into coding frames.

Issues such as competing quality perspectives, and the dimensions of service quality and their relationship with quality and customer satisfaction, were then detected in the transcripts, for example:

However, there are other considerations [apart from the student's views] and standards must be maintained in order to ensure the reputation and credibility of the course.  
(Director B)

And,

Students do not always know what to expect. They are often not sure what an MBA programme should contain. They take cues from a variety of sources, not always to do with the real quality of the teaching. They don't always understand the substance, how can they? (Director E)

Such quotes, among many others, indicate a greater 'richness' in terms of the data than discerned at the initial reading. For example, it is clear that competing perspectives of quality do operate, such as a producer-related perspective, 'standards must be maintained' (Director B), and that because the MBA is an unfamiliar service, students may not always find it easy to judge quality in a way which might be easier with a tangible product with which they have past experience, 'they don't always understand the substance, how can they?' (Director E)

At this stage, the possibility of still more codes emerge, particularly the notion that the Directors might be taking a paternalistic attitude towards the students, 'How can they?' (Director E), and, that the multiple perspectives being operated might allow Directors to manipulate the quality issue to further their own personal agenda and enhance their own power within the organization. These issues would then be investigated through re-reading of the transcripts. As a result, a series of coding frames were developed and applied to the prospective MBA student interviews and the practising MBA students' CIT investigation.

#### Stage 4: Coding frames applied to prospective MBA student interviews and practising MBA students' CIT investigation

Following on from the process described above, one major area of investigation with regard to prospective students was their ability (or inability) to assess programme quality; an issue, raised both in terms of the Director interviews, and the prevailing literature. As a result, the prospective students were asked, 'How do you know if the MBA programme you are considering is of high quality?' The answers that they gave generated the formation of two new codes focusing upon programme breadth: that is what subjects the MBA programme contained, and, the programme depth: that is the level to which such subjects were taught. Both of these issues were then discussed with the practising MBA students in terms of their impact on quality and student satisfaction and, as a result of these discussions, new codes were added to reflect positive or negative interaction with tutors and the changing nature of student quality expectations during the course, among others.

The dense coding patterns, or code maps, that emerge from the type of multi-coding process described above can be seen as the natural consequence of such a qualitative methodological approach. It can also be viewed as the necessary stage between the creation of primary data and their ultimate analysis and interpretation. While summarising the findings can be a useful step towards interpreting them, it is accepted that it is important not to present these types of data as if they were the actual analysis.

With this constantly in mind, attempts have been made to generalise and theorise from the coded data by systematically interrogating the data with the intention of creating 'pathways' through it. In order to develop such pathways, categories need to be generated, which in turn, allow textual patterns, contrasts, irregularities and paradoxes to be established.

The purpose of the coding practice is to relate emotional content from respondent's answers to the critical incident question, and to isolate the particular emotions that cause customers to distinguish satisfactory service encounters from less satisfactory ones.

A much more detailed exploration of the codes derived from the MBA Director interviews, and of the two other areas of primary research (see 4.7.4 and 4.7.5 below) can be seen in chapter 5, as they are responsible, to a large extent, for informing the research findings.

The MBA Director interviews provided clear evidence of the existence of the use of multiple quality perspectives and the tensions that this created. All references to the student as a 'customer' or to the delivery of 'customer satisfaction' as a measure of quality were coded as a form of customer-generated quality driver. Competing drivers were also coded, for example the need to maintain 'acceptable professional standards' or the need to provide the business world with graduates of a particular standard. When examples of how such competing perspectives caused tension were indicated, a new code was created, for example, responses such as 'this is not a five star hotel' or 'students don't actually know what they want'. In this way layers of codes were developed. As will be seen in chapter 5, other codes included Director frustration at their lack of control of important quality variables, the problems of balancing very different student 'types' and the importance of managing student expectations over time.

Examples of codes 'brought forward' from the MBA Director interviews are that of the operation of multiple quality perspectives and the tensions this

creates, and the need to balance different student 'types'. This information was then integrated into the findings emanating from the analysis of the prospective student interviews. For example, the notion of the different student 'types' became clearer when the interview revealed very different perspective student needs. Codes were created which classified such needs, for example, 'the student's personal needs', 'work needs', among others and these were then related to the student 'types' as indicated by the Directors so that a correlation could be made between them. Other codes can be found in chapter 5 relating to areas such as distinguishing between programme quality depth and breadth, the perceived ethos of the provider, and the nature of the fellow students' profiles.

Again, the codes were brought forward from both previous stages of the primary research process. New codes, particularly relating to student expectations, changing expectations over time, peer group interaction and relationships with staff, were added and these were used to reflect both on the previous primary research analysis, the quality theory and on the MBA stakeholder relationship.

#### **4.7.3 THE NATURE OF THE 'EVIDENCE'**

Such a hermeneutic approach to both the data gathering and the interpretation results in a significantly personal view of the processes taking place. The focus is, therefore, clearly centred upon what individuals think of 'things', rather than how those things actually are. That, such personal views are often, to some extent at least 'socially mediated', is an issue which is also developed as the results are analysed in greater depth.

At no stage throughout the research has evidence been presented in the form of 'proof' in a way which may be appropriate to a deductive positivist approach. Rather, 'evidence' has been put forward as a means of supporting various arguments and contentions as they are developed. This approach reflects the researcher's previously stated view of the epistemological nature of the social sciences and management, and is consistent with the qualitative

data gathering and inductive data analysis techniques that have been employed.

#### **4.7.4 THE ANALYTICAL APPROACH**

As has already been mentioned, in order to analyse the emergent raw data, it was first necessary to categorise and classify the various respondent-generated texts. Also, as has previously been explained, while it is clear that such activities are an integral part of the analytical process, they should not, in themselves, be seen as an 'analysis'. This is a significantly broader and more complex concept, which can be seen to equate to the representation and reconstruction of social phenomena.

In adopting such a stance, it is clear that simply reporting interview findings will not yield sufficient insights to constitute an analysis of such findings and, therefore, the aim must be to extend this process so as to create versions of both the social world and the actors within it. This involves an interpretation of the collected texts, as represented through the codes, classifications and relationships found within those texts (Flick, 2002).

#### **4.7.5 THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS AND THE UNIT OF NARRATIVE**

The basic 'raw materials' upon which the interviews and CIT analysis are built are the responses of the individual interviewees. However, although such a unit of analysis was regarded as the most appropriate tool of investigation at the initial stage of the analytical process, the textual data themselves have not been presented in the form of detailed accounts of individual actions and attitudes, etc. (Lawler, 2002).

Rather, a unit of narrative has been selected which shifts the focus away from the individual and towards MBA Directors, practising MBA students and prospective MBA students as distinct social groups. The events that are then judged as being of significance are those that indicate recurrent patterns, attitudes, actions and descriptions. The use of such a unit of narrative can be regarded as better facilitating an exploration of the various cultural systems, group norms and dominant values that these 'significant events'

represent. The adoption of an individual unit of narrative would be likely to greatly inhibit such an exploration.

#### **4.7.6 THE LEVELS OF GENERALITY**

In conceptualising and expressing the analytical findings, the issue of what constitutes different acceptable levels of generality was addressed (Vogt, 1993). The extent to which the researcher's claims to be able to generalise are seen as credible, depend upon a variety of factors. Such factors include, the skill and experience of the researcher, the quantity, nature and quality of the textual data derived, and the aims of the research programme.

The various 'levels of generality' that are possible are as follows:

**Level 1: Universal statements:** This can be seen as all-encompassing writing about social actors. It would include comments upon their behaviour, culture and environment.

**Level 2: Cross-cultural descriptive statements:** This involves statements about two or more social groups, including statements that are true about some, but not all, social groups.

**Level 3: General statements about a social or cultural group:** This includes statements that combine generality with specificity, making some general points about a specific cultural group.

**Level 4: General statements about a particular cultural scene:** These statements are still of a general nature, and they are able to capture some of the major themes of a particular social scene.

**Level 5: Specific statements about a cultural domain:** This involves the ability to make statements about how various social actors use linguistic devices and folk terms to describe a variety of given events, objects and activities.



Level 6: Specific incident statements: These can be seen as writing that takes the reader immediately to a particular behaviour or particular event, and is able to demonstrate cultural knowledge in action.

The level of generality 3, that is 'statements that combine generality with specificity, making some general points about a specific cultural group', was seen as an appropriate research objective. In this context, the 'cultural group' was seen as comprising MBA Directors, MBA students and prospective MBA students. Claims towards levels of generality beyond level 3 are not made.

#### **4.7.7 THE CREATION OF 'THEORY'**

In order that analysis can progress beyond the simple 'manipulation of data stage', the data must be interwoven with the ideas being developed by the researcher. In this way, it becomes possible to find different and fruitful ways of thinking about the subject matter (Silverman, 1993). In undertaking such a process, substantive theory is created, which can be seen as an idea about how other ideas can be related (Dey, 1993).

The objective of the creation of substantive theory is to proceed beyond the data and engage with formal ideas and issues. Only in this way is it possible to make sense of a particular social context (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Such 'theory building' takes place as the categories and concepts drawn from the coding are brought together and relationships emerge. Identifying relationships and mechanisms that go beyond simple association is a key aspect of this process (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The relationships that emerge from this type of analysis are not always causal in nature. They may take the form of what is known as 'ideal type relationships', demonstrating patterns that are more in line with the spirit of interpretation than formal explanation. This can be seen as an approach consistent with the ontological and epistemological stance taken within the research study and described above.

Such an approach is closely related to what Gubrium and Silverman (1988) call 'articulative ethnography'. In this context, the object of analysis is not primarily to explain why social actors take particular decisions in terms of formal generic theory. Rather, the prime goal is to see those actions in terms of the knowledge and skills that the actors brought to bear in those situations. Again, this perspective can be regarded as in line with the social constructionist view of reality previously developed.

The advantage of such an analytical stance is that it enables the production of accounts which are 'conceptually dense' in that they incorporate a variety of concepts and multiple linkages, and that are grounded in actual social interactions, contexts and processes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). They emphasise the role of social settings, local cultures and the view that social actions are essentially meaningful to the actors that take them.

The ideas with which the data are intended to engage have been generated through a process known as 'abductive reasoning'. Also known as 'abductive inference', the analyst is required to begin by identifying a particular phenomenon to broader concepts, that is, the formal ideas. Such ideas can originate from a variety of sources such as the researcher's 'stock of knowledge' or other phenomena, as shown in the textual data. The ultimate aim of the analysis is to locate such phenomena in explanatory or interpretative frameworks and, in doing so, to generate new configurations of ideas of substantive theories regarding the subject matter (Huberman and Miles, 2002).

#### **4.8 THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The ability of the Directors to influence the quality agenda and to use quality issues as a means of achieving their political goals depends to a large degree upon:

*The Director's individual, personal position influenced by factors such as their personal and professional status, general academic credibility, personality and management style.*

The situationally derived personal factors influenced by the status attributes and personalities of other key MBA stakeholders.

These two factors also influence the manner in which information regarding quality issues are communicated within the organization.

While the interviewees often made passing reference to these issues, they were not developed fully within the interviews. This is because the interview had not been designed to develop such issues and, also, it was felt that to explore such issues in more detail would have required wider access to other MBA stakeholders within each Director's business school. This had not been agreed upon prior to the interviews, and it is unlikely that it would have been subsequently. It is also the case that while it would have been an interesting area to develop, it was not a major aspect of the research project's aims.

Other weaknesses within the research study include not having access to representative samples among all three groups of stakeholders. As a result the work cannot be said to be representative of these groups. Similarly, while both the MBA Directors and prospective MBA students are drawn from the full range of MBA programmes on the market, that is focused, price-based and differentiated, the practising students are all drawn from a single intake of students undertaking a price-based programme. Given an ideal situation, all the groups of stakeholders would have been drawn equally from each sector but access to these groups was not evenly available.

With regard to data collection, the practising MBA students proved the most problematic. The pilot CIT study indicated that individual response sheets were difficult to interpret because students had misunderstood the question or responded in a manner that was not possible to understand. The alternative method adopted in the main study overcame these problems, but then raised other issues. In using a group interview technique it was clear that some students within the groups held stronger views than others and that for cultural and language-related reasons, articulating issues was easier

for some students than others. While every effort was made to encourage all students to contribute, it is not clear to what extent that the individual responses provided were influenced by the rest of the group.

In a similar vein, it was not possible to ignore the possibility that MBA Directors were conscious that as the researcher is a member of a business school, replies needed to be given which would be regarded as 'acceptable' within the academic community. Even though assurances were given regarding anonymity and the purely academic purpose of the interview, professional credibility and rivalry may have influenced the responses.

With regard to the analysis of the interviews, two potentially interesting areas could have been developed relating to the communications channels and relating to national culture.

Where the same quality vision is being transmitted but different communication channels are used, the impact of the message is likely to be different. This aspect of the research was not developed in any detail, again because it would have required access to stakeholders from all the various schools represented by the Directors interviewed.

Another limitation of the research study was the lack of emphasis placed upon the influence of national culture in determining student satisfaction. Keegan (1984) and Usunier (1993) have investigated this issue with regard to customer satisfaction in the commercial sectors, and given the increasingly international nature of both management and management education, it is an area worth developing.

Three other important questions are not directly addressed within the research project. They are important questions because they are often at the centre of conflicts within business schools. The questions are;

Who should define quality within business schools?

How should conflicting quality views be reconciled?

Are any particular views of quality intrinsically superior to others?

While the research findings laid out in the next chapter shed light on such questions they do not provide definitive answers to them and the research project never envisaged that they would.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The analysis of the research findings is presented broadly in accordance with the outline provided by Hussey and Hussey (1997); and Rudestam and Newton (1992). As a result, the aims of the chapter can be seen as:

1. To present a general overview of the significant findings: This will comprise three separate sections corresponding to the three areas of primary research.
2. To examine the findings in the light of prevailing quality theory: This will initially take place within the three sections but then be drawn together and considered collectively.

However, before this is undertaken, it is worth briefly restating the purpose of the research and the research questions as, 'these should underpin and direct your analysis and discussions' (Hussey and Hussey, 1997, p. 292).

#### **5.2 A RESTATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

As was indicated at the outset of the research, the main aims of this thesis are:

1. To inform the ongoing MBA quality debate, and in doing so, to contribute to the wider management education and higher education quality debates.
2. To evaluate the relevance of prevailing quality theory and commercial quality initiatives and models as a means of enhancing MBA programme quality.

3. To compare and contrast the quality perspectives of three groups of MBA programme stakeholders:

MBA Directors

Prospective MBA Students

Practising MBA Students

4. To explore the way in which MBA Directors and course managers exploit the notion of quality, using it as a power lever for political ends.

Throughout this chapter, 'analysis' has been taken to represent:

The process by which a phenomenon is conceptualised so that it is separated into its component parts and the inter-relationships between those parts, and their contribution to the whole, elucidated. (Gill and Johnson, 1991, p. 164).

### **5.3 ETHICAL ISSUES RELATING TO THE ANALYSIS**

It is accepted that a great deal of trust is placed in an individual researcher's integrity and every attempt has been made to avoid misrepresentation and inaccuracy. It is also recognised that confidentiality is a particularly important issue at the reporting stage (Wells and Willis, 1994), and every effort has been made to ensure that the guarantees given with regard to complete personal and organizational anonymity have been met. This has involved both the avoidance of any direct naming of participating individuals and institutions and also by taking care that identities are not revealed by a process of 'piecing' together' seemingly unrelated information (Saunders et al, 1997). MBA Directors' comments are indicated in terms of a letter of the alphabet corresponding to Table 4.1. Comments made by prospective MBA students are given individual identification codes (PS1 to PS20), while practising students are denoted by the prefix ST, but not individually identified. While the practising students were prepared to have their general characteristics recorded (see tables 4.3 to 4.6) and were also prepared to allow quotes to be reproduced, they did not want the quotes to be attributed to individuals. This wish has been respected.

## **5.4 PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The research findings are initially presented in three distinct sections and in each of these sections the manner in which the different individuals within the groups conceptualise quality is a key focus of attention. This is followed by a comparison of the three sets of findings in the light of prevailing service quality theory on the basis of which a series of conclusions is drawn. These will then form the basis of chapter 6, in which a set of broader conclusions are made, drawing upon the entire research project.

## **5.5 MBA DIRECTORS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

The manner in which the MBA Director sample was constructed and the semi-structured interview format that was used have been described in chapter 4. In broad terms, the main areas of research interest were:

The manner in which MBA Directors perceived MBA programme quality.

The ways in which the Directors' views regarding quality were transmitted to other key MBA stakeholders.

The strategies and systems that operate within the Director's organization in order to measure and ensure MBA programme quality.

The factors that are perceived by the Directors to drive the need for high levels of quality, now, and also in terms of future quality developments.

### **5.5.1 THE MANNER IN WHICH MBA DIRECTORS PERCEIVE MBA PROGRAMME QUALITY**

An analysis of the research findings indicates that multiple perceptions of quality exist both among the group of nine MBA Directors interviewed, and for the individual MBA Directors. This being the case, it is still possible to identify three common themes that did emerge from the subsequent analysis. They are;

Quality perceived as a marketing tool,

Quality perceived in terms of student satisfaction,



Quality perceived as a power lever.

#### **5.5.1.1 Quality Perceived as a Marketing Tool**

Those Directors representing what could be described as the more established MBA providers perceived their programmes as being of particularly high quality. They saw quality as a competitive weapon and a powerful means of achieving product differentiation over their competitors. Their notion of quality could be characterised, to a large degree, in terms of Garvin's (1988), 'transcendent approach', in which they believed potential students and employers recognised the 'innate excellence' of the provider institution, without actually analysing the course components in any great depth or detail. As we have seen in chapter 3, research evidence does suggest that potential customers often do employ 'surrogate' quality cues when they have little or no experience of the actual product on offer.

It was felt by this group of Directors, that the relatively high price of their programmes, in some instances nearly six times the cost of programmes at the lower end of the MBA price scale, indicated, to the consumer, the programme's high quality status. The often stringent entry requirements which accompanied the high price also reinforced the 'superior quality' perception for potential students, who, it was thought, had little detailed knowledge of the nature of the MBA programmes or the ongoing management education quality debate. The MBA Directors indicated that these potential students expected them as providers to be aware of such issues and to incorporate best practice into the programmes they presented. For example,

As one of the leading MBAs in Europe, we are expected to provide a programme of the highest quality. It's this that attracts the students to us (Director E).

Again, both quality theory and marketing practice would indicate that 'exclusivity' could be used successfully as a way of establishing the high relative quality of a good or service in the marketplaces. Both high prices, and restricted access to the product are two key accepted methods of

positioning such brands (Baudrillard 1998). The association of a relatively new product (MBA education) with traditional educational institutions can be seen as a prime example of the notion of brand extension (Berry and Yadar 1996).

For those MBA Directors whose programmes could be placed in the middle and lower end of the MBA price scale, 'quality' was marketed in a variety of different ways. Value-based perceptions (Garvin 1988) were seen as important and often a 'degree of excellence' was offered at, an 'acceptable price'.

We think this is one of the best MBAs you can get for the amount you have to pay. (Director B)

It was recognised that, in all cases, both more expensive and less expensive programmes were available to students, but their particular programmes were presented as offering the best value for money in the marketplace. Such an approach clearly falls within the value-based approach to quality outlined in section 3.9.1.4.

A high quality programme was presented as being offered, but students were not being expected to 'pay for the name', as with some of the older, more-established business schools. Accreditation to outside bodies, particularly if the more expensive alternatives were also accredited to the same outside bodies, was highlighted by these Directors as an example of the value for money these programmes offered. The academic and career successes of past students was also highlighted as a means of demonstrating the relevance and usefulness of their qualification, and the tracking and use of alumni was seen as an important element within this process. In order for this strategy to be successful, programmes need to have existed for long enough for past students to have made significant career progress. For example,

We are well regarded within the marketplace. We have a good track record and a good name. (Director A).

With such a stance, we can see how 'a degree of excellence at an acceptable price' (Garvin, 1988) forms a central part of the Director's 'selling proposition'.

Product-based quality perspectives (Garvin 1988) were also strongly in evidence, (section 3.9.1.2.). Certain types of programme feature, which catered for specific personal student circumstances and requirements such as flexibility, degree of specialisation and 'ease of access', could be satisfied by the existence of particular MBA programme qualities. This perspective also merges with the user-based approach (Garvin 1988), (section 3.9.1.3), with some Directors tending to switch emphasis from the programme's particular attributes to the perceived needs of the students,

Many of our students have partners, children, travel a lot, etc. This is the only way they can get an MBA (Director C).

The 'product attributes' mentioned, included elements which had been purposely built into the courses, such as the ability to switch from full-time study to distance or part-time learning modes if the need arose, and, the existence of sector-specific MBAs (such as those in health care or banking and finance). From the Director's perspective the student's needs are then perceived as being met by such programme quality attributes. In taking it upon themselves to articulate such needs, we can see the first example of quality being used as a political power lever (an issue dealt with in more detail below).

The business school's geographical location was also seen by some as an important product attribute, particularly with regard to overseas students and home-based, mature, part-time students,

Our part-time market is fairly tied to us. There are other courses available, but they are not as conveniently placed, or in our price-range, (Director I)

As well as catering for students' individual requirements, this approach was also seen as representing a higher level of general customer focus. It was used to indicate willingness by the institution to treat students as individuals

in a wider sense and, as a result, to be likely to be more responsive in areas not strictly related to the programme, features that were initially attractive to the prospective student, 'We are relatively small and friendly. For some students, this is important' (Director B) .

It was felt that this would be particularly attractive to students who themselves worked in areas where high levels of customer service was increasingly the industry norm. It also enabled providers to differentiate the Masters degree offering from undergraduate provision, 'As a business school, we are able to offer an executive atmosphere' (Director E).

The ability to 'customize' what are essentially mass produced products does form a growing area of interest for both 'quality marketing' theorists and practitioners (Gregory 2003). As such, this approach can be seen as a reflection of a much wider tendency within the commercial and public sectors where the ability to accommodate greater individual choice profitably is seen increasingly as a 'critical success factor' (Martin 1986).

#### **5.5.1.2 Quality Perceived in terms of Student Satisfaction:**

All of the MBA Directors interviewed made reference to the link between programme quality and student satisfaction. The unanimous inclusion of the term 'satisfaction' in relation to the term 'quality' can be seen as a reflection of the way in which the two terms are linked within both the quality literature and the manner in which commercial organizations, in particular, approach the delivery and measurement of quality.

The bottom line is customer satisfaction. (Director F) (and) With a local market, word of mouth recommendation is vital. (Director I)

The two terms, 'quality' and satisfaction, were not seen as synonymous, however, which is, sometimes the case, within highly competitive commercial sectors (Drummond, 1994), where the aim is often to simply find out what matters to the customer and 'deliver it' (Edvardsson, 1988). In general, the

approach to customer satisfaction by the MBA Directors is represented by the following quote, 'The students recognise they can't always have what they want,' (Director A). However, having said this, the link between satisfaction and quality was still regarded as a very strong one.

A number of factors tended to promote the quality/customer satisfaction link in the minds of MBA Directors. Such a link, however, was not always regarded as positive. The factors that tended to reinforce the link between the quality of the programme and student satisfaction included the following:

1. **The Growth in Student Self-Funding:** The large proportion of self-funded, or partly self-funded MBA students, in every MBA cohort represented in the sample strengthened the notion of student as customer.

The days of companies paying for MBAs seem to be coming to an end. They might make a contribution, but it's not usually much.  
(Director C)

As well as the direct financial costs, many students were seen as having taken the risk of giving up work and, therefore, as being keen to obtain a significant return on their personal 'investment'. In many cases, students did not pay the fee in one lump sum, but rather in a number of instalments, 'This type of approach is pretty standard now.' (Director I)

The system of ongoing payment tended to strengthen the relationship between student cost and benefit and enhanced the feeling that a financial transaction was taking place, 'A full-time MBA is not cheap', (Director F). Again, the idea of the increasingly discriminating and assertive customer, willing to complain and switch provider does find a resonance within the prevailing literature, both in terms of the general level of consumer behaviour and more acutely with particular types of customer (Jacob 1994). Here the literature forms a link with the second factor that tended to promote the quality/customer satisfaction link in the mind of the MBA Director, namely, the nature of the MBA student.

2. The Nature of MBA Students: MBA students are, by definition, older and more experienced than the average undergraduate and, therefore, are more likely to expect to be treated as customers, or at least partners, by business school staff when compared to their generally younger student counterparts, 'Many of our students are already pretty senior within their organizations,' (Director D).

As has already been mentioned, many have worked, or in the case of part-time students are actually working, in highly competitive, customer-focused organizations and, as a result, have well-developed views regarding the nature of customer care and the role of service providers, 'Students are increasingly demanding, right across the board,' (Director C).

There was absolutely no evidence to suggest that Directors felt that students expected to receive unrealistically high grades for work, or have marks changed because they were paying directly for their education, 'They know they [students] can't buy a qualification,' (Director H). However, there was a tendency for students who were experiencing difficulty with the programme to be dissatisfied with teaching staff who were 'expecting too much from them' or not providing them with the 'right type of support'. One Director summed up the situation in the following way:

Most students like to be treated as customers in terms of being consulted and kept informed. When things go wrong, particularly, they want to be treated like adults. A small group of students go further and expect you to take responsibility for their learning. This is where we draw the line and the notion of the student, as customer tends to fall apart. (Director G)

With regard to satisfaction, a main area of student concern was consistency of treatment. However, as one MBA Director commented:

Students often fail to distinguish between input and output. They often feel if they have worked hard, or harder than a colleague, they should be rewarded for effort. We [the teaching faculty] tend to be more concerned with output (Director A).

Research within the field of travel and tourism and high profile cases in the media involving, for example, airlines and hotels, provides examples where producers, airlines and hotels are prepared to draw a line beyond which certain types of customer behaviour are deemed unacceptable. The payment of a fee, be it for a flight or a hotel stay, does not provide the customer with the right to 'have everything they want' for the duration of the transaction. As customer satisfaction has grown in importance the role of customer expectation has received greater attention, as has the manager's role in managing such expectations. As we shall see, some Directors were very aware of their role in undertaking this.

3. Quality Theory: MBA Directors made the link between the quality management theory and marketing theory being taught within the MBA curriculum and the moral obligation this placed on them as service providers to deliver a programme broadly in line with the principles being presented to the students. It was not only the teaching faculty that recognised this link, 'the students made the connection, too' (Director E). It was suggested that pressure from students for an approach to this type was much less likely to exist in other 'non-business' education areas where 'customer satisfaction' did not form part of the subject's academic content. 'It is a subject area in which they are often very interested' (Director E).

The following comment from one interviewee usefully encapsulates the general view of the programme Directors:

We have to be consistent in terms of what we do and what we say. It's not just in terms of quality. There's also communications, organization, general management and so on. Basically, if they feel we can't manage ourselves, we end up looking stupid (Director G).

Standards found in highly commercial service sectors were not being regarded as the benchmark. For example, as one interviewee commented: 'We are not running a five star hotel', (Director A). However, certain levels of service standard above that provided at undergraduate level was expected. The Director continued, 'but this is also not a school' (Director A).

4. The Interviewees' Personal Educational Philosophy: It was clear from the interviews that some of the individuals responsible for the senior management of MBA programmes held the view that higher education has historically been too oriented towards the needs and concerns of the producers. As a result, they saw the development of MBA programmes as offering the possibility for the creation of a more balanced producer/consumer educational model that could, in time, be applied more widely within the sector.

We offer a type of programme much more in tune with high-level management training. This does not always fit in with the more traditional university ethos (Director D).

Research undertaken with regard to the provision of services within a variety of public services support this reflection. It has been shown that the 'ethos', more often described as organizational culture, can be a major barrier towards the delivery of customer-focused services (Jenkins 1997). This is particularly relevant with regard to the barriers to change and the management of change (Oswick and Grant 1996).

The ability of the MBA to act as a catalyst for change within higher education was a major motivating factor for a number of course Directors and a means by which they, as individuals, felt that they could make a wider contribution to the change process within business schools and universities. Again, this is reflected in the literature where many organizations seek to promote change through the use of 'agents of change' (Harvey and Brown 1996). These agents of change may be individuals, projects or departments that act as role models for other parts of the organization. Part of their ability to do this came from their view of the importance of the MBA, both in financial terms, and, as a flagship for their institutions, 'The MBA is extremely important to both us, [Business School] and them [the university],' (Director A).

Reward and appraisal systems are used within the commercial sector to drive change. However, this has proved considerably more difficult within the public sector where national or regional pay scales often operate. In



some cases, this type of approach allowed MBA staff to fill the gap between a commercial ethos, in which they had worked, but had never been fully personally comfortable, and an academic culture that they felt 'needed improving. My commercial background means that my views are not always shared by my colleagues,' (Director D).

It should be stressed that the degree of acceptance of the strength of the linkage between programme quality and student satisfaction varied widely between different MBA Directors, and also, on an individual basis, with regard to different programme quality issues. As we shall see, such an inconsistent approach to quality does leave itself open to the charge of 'organizational politics'.

The interviews provided evidence of a number of factors that can be seen to be operating to militate against the existence of an explicit link between programme quality and student satisfaction. These factors include:

1. A Reaction to the Growth of 'Educational Consumerism': Evidence of a genuine unease among MBA Directors, regarding what was perceived as the growing trend for consumerism within higher education, led some of them to 'play down' or actively discourage the notion of the link between programme quality and student satisfaction.

Students are not buying a guarantee that at the end they will graduate. Some fail and, of course, are not happy. Others don't fail, they drop out. The commitment required on their part is made clear. (Director H)

The need to 'make clear' the role the customer themselves needs to play within the service delivery process, and therefore the management of customer expectations has, as already indicated, been the subject of considerable theoretical and practical activity (Hansen and Danaher 1999; Murthy 1999).

A number of reasons were put forward to support the 'reaction to educational consumerism'; the most fundamental being that, quite simply, students were not in a position to evaluate the true quality of the programme they receive. Their lack of pedagogical knowledge and expertise often made them unable to make valid, informed judgements, and this was regarded as particularly evident in the case of methods of programme delivery. A typical comment on this aspect of the problem of student satisfaction can be seen in the extract below:

At times they want to be 'spoon fed' and this means they often rate tutors who challenged them to think in a relatively low manner. They also tend to rate those who provide tangible items such as overhead transparencies or handouts highly, often focusing upon the presentation not the content (Director H).

Often, students failed to understand that, at times, the learning process was necessarily painful and this aspect was a key element in their own personal and educational development. As a consequence, there was a view among some Directors that, on occasions, the students themselves had significantly contributed to outcomes they deemed unsatisfactory by failing to play their full part in what was essentially an 'educational transaction'. Another extract from an interview makes this point well:

They [the students] sometimes think that if something is difficult it's because the teacher doesn't know their stuff or is not well organized. The reality might be that a great deal of effort has gone into making it challenging and thought provoking, that is, difficult. Ironically, it's the weaker students who not only fail to understand the content; they also don't understand the approach (Director H).

It was also contended that students, as a means of evaluating the MBA, tended to draw upon their past experiences as undergraduates, and also, their experiences of various management training courses. They therefore tended to be confused as to the aims and processes involved in what are essentially very different activities and, consequently, held unrealistic and unhelpful expectations about what MBA sessions were intended to deliver. For example:

They tell me they often felt they know less now than when they started. We try to reassure them by telling them that's a good thing; it's part of the learning process. They may be more comfortable with the 4Ps or the 7Ss, but the real world is not that neat. It's the messy nature of business that they find hard to accept (Director F).

There are many organizational examples of attempts to 'educate' the customer about the good or service on offer, as opposed to providing education as the service (Pullman and Moore 1999). In its 'neutral form', this can be regarded as a positive development as customers and potential customers are provided with greater information regarding the vast array of new products (Particularly IT based) and services on offer. However, there is also the possibility that such 'education' is more concerned with extolling the virtues of a particular product or enabling premium prices to be charged.

As well as a somewhat naive expectation that the MBA would provide all the answers, the MBA Directors also felt that some students tended to make programme quality judgements 'too early'. It was found that students subsequently revised their quality evaluations upwards as they discovered 'the point' of a particular session or subject with which they had originally voiced dissatisfaction. It is interesting to note that in describing this type of scenario, course Directors seem to subconsciously become more favourably disposed to the notion of programme quality in terms of student satisfaction when the students express increased satisfaction with elements of the programme.

Gradually they [the students] begin to see what we are trying to do. They then become more comfortable with the processes involved and happier about what is being delivered. It is then we can have a more mature dialogue as to the quality of the course (Director F).

The interviewees made a clear distinction between the needed to deliver acceptable general levels of student satisfaction and the ability to remove all forms of individual student dissatisfaction during the entirety of the

programme, 'When I look at the programme as a whole, I genuinely think it is not easy (for the students to cope)' (Director B).

It was recognised that MBA cohorts are often relatively diverse in terms of student nationality, intellectual ability, age, type and length of previous management experience, and motivation. As a result of this situation, it was generally felt that it would never be possible to satisfy all the participating students all of the time and, therefore, an element of individual dissatisfaction was the 'natural' consequence of such diversity and should not be seen to reflect adversely upon general programme quality, although this was qualified to some degree,

Again, when I look at the programme as a whole, we could do more to even out the workload. I have taken this on board. (Director B)

The following example helps to explain the reaction voiced by the MBA Directors. Those students originating from specialist finance or IT background might become frustrated, and then dissatisfied, by what they regarded as the relatively slow pace or lack of depth of a particular finance or IT module. Such dissatisfaction would be characterised as 'normal', and the price that must be legitimately paid for catering for the large majority of those students who were comparatively new to these subject areas. Opportunities for specialists to produce work of greater depth was often available in the form of programme features such as electives, projects or dissertations, and it was also possible to exempt students from parts of the course in certain cases. With regard to the ability to focus, faculty expertise is essential, as one Director commented:

The quality of the staff is vital. We are able to provide expertise which enables high level specialisation to take place. (Director E)

The 'natural' or normal nature of this situation would lead in some instances to students being advised that they were not undertaking specialist Masters programmes, or consoled by being told that other students would also experience the same type of dissatisfaction in HRM or marketing modules.

At times they don't seem to fully appreciate the range of skills this will be called on to master. They are bound to like some parts more than others. (Director G)

It also became clear in some of the interviews that there was an assumption that certain individual students could not be satisfied. In some cases, this was explicitly stated, for example:

Occasionally there are just difficult attention seekers who always complain about something and tend to have problems with everyone including their fellow students. (Director I)

2. The Notion of the Student as a Product: A number of MBA Directors characterised their commitment to high quality student education as being of an indirect nature. In these cases, the duty that they felt to provide a high quality education for the student did not arise from a specific obligation to an individual student or group of students. Rather, the obligation was owed to the wider business community and to the maintenance of high professional standards, 'The maintenance of a high standard is crucial, not simply for us, but for the credibility of the MBA' (Director D)

The student was, therefore, being seen as the MBA product, and they as producers, were ethically bound to provide this product to the market in a form that met 'acceptable' standards. Such an approach is exemplified by the following quote:

Employers need to know what they are getting, and, that what they are getting [the student] is of an appropriate quality. This is also in the student's interest in the long term, as well as ours, and the company (Director A).

The medical and legal professions, among others, also refer to their duty to a wider community than the individual with whom they might be presently dealing. Again, as we shall see later, while such a viewpoint may be ethically quite justifiable, it also provides the professional with a considerable

power level in their dealings with a wide range of stakeholders, not simply the consumer.

Directors who adopt this approach should not be seen as necessarily rejecting the notion of customer satisfaction, but rather the notion of the student as the customer. Even though MBA students may be paying the business school directly for their education and, are quite obviously the 'consumer' of the course in the first instance, once graduated, they themselves become a marketable commodity. 'Every student who leaves here with an MBA will, in effect, represent the course' (Director A).

While the moral and ethical credibility of such a stance is open to debate, it is clear that shifting the focus away from the student as customer, and replacing it with the view of the wider business community as the customer, provides a number of potential operational advantages for those managing MBA courses.

Firstly, it becomes much easier for the Directors themselves to make assumptions as to what the business community want or need in terms of student competencies, knowledge and skill. 'We are trying to create individuals who can make a real contribution.' (Director H) These assumptions may be drawn from information that they have derived from a variety of sources, such as national and international management and management education reports, as well as from various forms of direct and indirect contact with the business world and relevant professional bodies.

The accuracy of such assumptions is impossible to verify and, therefore, difficult to dispute. It cannot be regarded as an objective account of the needs and wishes of the business community, and there is clear evidence that the programme Directors filtered the feedback they did receive from potential employers in terms on their own management experience and general feelings about the subject, for example:

It's important that we [the business school] are seen as credible within the business world. This means that firms must

see our students as being able to make a valuable contribution from day one. It is also important for the qualification. The key concern is relevance (Director H)

Secondly, there can be little doubt that the use of a vague and, in many ways more distant, notion of the customer helps to alleviate the day-to day pressure on programme Directors to be responsive to the needs of other MBA stakeholders, such as students or business school staff. Indeed, it can be viewed as a potentially useful device in terms of providing a rationale for those MBA Directors seeking to pursue their own personal management agendas. Again, this is an issue dealt with in more detail below.

There must be considerable doubt as to whether there is such a thing as the 'business world' or 'business community' in any meaningful, unified, sense. However, even if the existence of such a coherent entity was accepted, knowing what was actually wanted and needed is another matter. That MBA Directors would have, at best, only an imperfect knowledge and understanding of these needs must be highly likely, and an element of bias or misunderstanding must call into question any attempt to satisfy these perceived needs.

Those MBA Directors adopting the quality perspective described above did not feel that this made them indifferent to student interests. This is because they believed that their approach was in the long-term interests of the students, as it resulted in a qualification of a high and internationally recognised standard and, therefore, something of value to the successful student when entering the job market. This was particularly relevant if the programme had formal recognition from the wider business and academic community.

For overseas students [international recognition] is of particular relevance. Director D) and AMBA accreditation is also useful. For some students, its an essential kite-mark. (Director A)

By characterising quality in such a manner, programme Directors are arming themselves with a useful bargaining tool in terms of their negotiations with students, business school staff, the wider institution etc.

Part of my job [as Director] is to manage the various groups who make up the course. For example, students who don't always get on, teaching staff, secretaries, libraries etc (Director F).

When MBA Directors see their role in the terms described above, quality sometimes becomes used as a means of managing rather than a goal of management. It is, therefore, possible to identify a third quality perspective, namely quality as a power lever.

#### **5.5.1.3 Quality Perceived as a Power Lever:**

In conjunction with the perceptions of quality as both a marketing tool and as a form of customer satisfaction, be it student-centred or otherwise, there is also evidence to suggest the use of quality as a power lever (Kakabadse et al, 1987). If we think of power as the potential ability to influence behaviour, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do, a power lever can be seen as the source of that power and the mechanism through which it can be exerted.

In this context, MBA Directors can be seen at times to manipulate the notion of quality as a means of bringing about changes in working practices, curriculum content and delivery methods, as a bargaining tool in negotiations with other MBA stakeholders, and finally, as a means of rationalising and justifying particular management actions and decisions they might take. 'Part of my job is to balance the needs of different groups' (Director F).

In order to successfully implement a micro-political strategy of this type, MBA Directors can be seen to be making use of quality issues in order to develop and maintain three different types of inter-related quality power levers, that is,



Expert Power,  
Information Power,  
Connection Power,  
(Kakabadse et al, 1987).

Expert Power: Claiming expertise in the field of MBA quality does not require detailed knowledge of all the curriculum subject areas within the programme. Rather, the expertise should be seen in terms of a claim to a detailed understanding of postgraduate management education quality in general terms. For example:

My role [MBA Director] is to try to ensure that in its entirety, the programme is of an acceptable standard, this is in terms of the range of subjects involved, the level of teaching and learning and the appropriate style of teaching and so on. It is the overview, seeing it in its entirety (Director H).

This role is often portrayed as complex and multi-dimensional, requiring awareness of, 'recent trends, the competition, employers, AMBA, etc.' (Director F) As Kakabadse et al (1987, p. 221) suggest:

The profitable application of expert power depends a great deal on who is seen as an expert at the time and for what reasons. An individual is only seen as an expert until a better 'expert' comes along.

As one Director commented:

Students are to a large extent dependent upon us to ensure their programme conforms to the required standards. Teaching staff can be seen as responsible for their subject areas, whereas I am responsible for taking a wider perspective in conjunction with professional bodies, employers etc. In this context, I provide a liaison role (Director A)

As a result, within the context of the MBA, this type of power lever is often dependent upon the ability of the MBA Director to control the flow of information within the institution, and is therefore, closely linked to information power. There is also a sense in which it conforms to the quality literature that stresses the importance of the role of the leader in terms of the

delivery of high quality goods and services in a profitable manner (Kotler 1994 and Sturdy 2001). Given such a link, it is interesting to note that the growth of academic interest in 'leadership' has paralleled the increasing interest in 'quality'.

**Information Power:** Information power does not simply relate to the power to control access to information, although this is an important aspect of the Director's role, 'I co-ordinate all the various elements of the course. I have an overall picture and I am able to take a wider view' (Director C) and provides clear advantages for them; it is also both more subtle and far-reaching. They have considerable latitude to determine what type of quality information should, or should not be, regarded as legitimate, actionable or confidential. 'At times, I provide appropriate feedback to staff or students'. (Director I).

For example, when informal student comments are made regarding a module or tutor, a Director can often decide to ignore such information, treat it as hearsay or present it as representative feedback which requires the implementation of formal quality procedures and processes. Their ability to generate and present programme quality 'facts' is enhanced by the central role they often play in collecting, analysing and interpreting quality-related data. 'For examiners' meetings, quality reviews, course meetings.' (Director C)

The Directors are often, in effect, determining what passes for quality 'knowledge', and the power to do this enables them to influence significantly the direction in which the MBA programme is likely to develop. As Nonaka (1996, p. 29) comments:

Another way top management provides employees with a sense of direction is by setting the standards for justifying the knowledge that is constantly being developed

For example, when a Director says

I often mediate between students, who are concerned about particular aspects or classes and the staff involved. (Director H)

The mediation may take the form of the imposition of a rule or standard as to appropriate behaviour. Considerable research has been undertaken with regard to the use and misuse of management information (Starkey 1996). This can be seen as a function of a variety of factors, not least of all the enormous increase in power of information gathering techniques and the growth in the means of disseminating such material within, and outside, organizations. It reflects a movement away from the more neutral approach to the issue of knowledge management to a more critical appraisal of the shifts in power that the 'new technology' is bringing, both within organizations and the wider community (Garvin 1993; and Nonaka 1996).

The mediation process referred to by Director H can then create 'knowledge' which may enter the public domain partly due to the Director's unique ability to move between the various groups of MBA stakeholders. This 'ability' is now explored in more detail below.

**Connection Power:** The position of the MBA Director within the institutional hierarchy often allows for relatively easy access to key groups of MBA stakeholders, such as students and teaching staff, and also to other influential decision-makers, both within and outside the business school. 'An essential part of my job is to be available to all those involved in the MBA, no matter what level.' (Director C) Within the context of the MBA programme, Directors had the right to attend almost all, and in some cases, all, the course-related meetings that took place, from senior management committees to student committees.

As well as being able to use this position in order to pursue their own personal agenda in the various forums, this also allowed some to take on the role, often self-appointed, of the 'representative' of various groups of stakeholders who were not entitled to attend all the meetings and committees. The following extract describes this role:

I [the programme Director] act as a link between the students and staff and senior managers. I also represent the programme in external examiners meetings and other management committees within the university (Director B).

In following up this type of response, it became clear that a wide range of quality issues were being addressed in this manner, including, negotiations regarding curriculum development, general programme management, student-generated quality problems and external examiners' quality comments. 'It's how things get done at a university of this type.' (Director B). Much of this interaction was informal and did not take place at meetings initially, often the more formal meetings were used to give authority to decisions which had already been made using the informal networks.

The fact that no other single individual has the same level of connections within the MBA structure potentially allows the Director not only to influence outcomes directly at the various meetings and committees, but also to more subtly influence the quality agenda. This can be achieved through the way in which quality issues are framed, interpreted and communicated, both before and after decisions have been reached.

A variety of factors will determine the Director's ability to utilise the three types of power lever described above effectively. One group of such factors derive from the 'individual personal position' of the particular Director. In this respect, the individual Director's personal and professional status, general academic credibility and personality are of prime importance in terms of the potential success of such a strategy.

Compare these two comments:

I was instrumental in setting up the MBA and was closely associated with it from the start (Director D), (with), Being new means I am still learning how things work. I am getting an overall picture, but have not really got to know everyone (Director B).

In addition to the individual personal positions described above, other situationally derived personal factors will then impact upon the success of such a strategy. These include the generally perceived professional status, personalities and attitudes of other key MBA programme stakeholders, such as teaching staff and students. The third element in the 'equation' are the institutional factors which provide the arena for the various micro-political activities. These include the history, structure, procedures and culture of the particular MBA programme and its provider institution. 'The ability to get things done does seem to be more cumbersome here than at my last institution' (Director B).

The variables described above are also important in determining the manner in which the communication process operates within given institutions. It is an aspect of this process, namely the manner in which the Director's quality vision is transmitted to other stakeholders, to which we now turn.

### **5.5.2 THE WAYS IN WHICH MBA DIRECTORS TRANSMIT THEIR QUALITY VISION TO OTHER STAKEHOLDERS**

As has been demonstrated in chapter 3, the prevailing quality management literature indicates that if quality initiatives are to be successful, senior managers within the organization will be required to play a central role in terms of the initiative. Of particular importance, in this respect, is the willingness and ability of senior managers to develop a consistent and actionable quality vision, and to effectively communicate that vision throughout the organization.

I am there to maintain a central theme with regard to what we intend to do, what we stand for. (Director D), (and), I was brought in to give the MBA more direction. I clearly have my own ideas on where we need to go (Director B)

A major aim of the Director semi-structured interviews was to investigate how this process takes place in terms of the provision of the MBA programmes being studied and to analyse and evaluate the interview findings in terms of Guirdham's (1995) communication model, which has

been described in more detail in the previous chapter and can be summarized in the diagram overleaf.

### **Figure 5.1 Guirdham's Communication Model**

As has already been explained, individual MBA Directors can be seen to operate multiple quality perspectives simultaneously. As a result, there is little evidence to suggest that clear and unambiguous quality visions (corresponding to 'formulating the idea' in the above model) were emanating from these senior programme managers even though, as seen in the quotes above, it is regarded by some of them as part of their job. Indeed, in some instances, it was felt that to do so might have been deemed inappropriate by colleagues, given some of the strong organizational cultures that existed,

based as they are on academic freedom and professional independence. For example, a number of respondents made similar points to the one shown below.

I [the MBA Director] don't get involved in the teaching aspect to any great extent. I'm not qualified to do so in terms of much of it. There is a huge variety of teaching approaches being taken. I'm not a line manager (Director E).

Another factor that can be put forward to explain the lack of a single, overriding quality vision (or idea) was the fact that a number of programme Directors had 'inherited' the MBA programmes for which they were responsible. As a result, they had not been involved in the initial development of the programme, and needed time to establish themselves. Some were in the process of substantially changing various aspects of the programme, while others felt that the broader university or business school systems and procedures would not allow much scope for such an activity, at least in the short-term, as typified by comments such as:

I am not always able to do what I would like to do, even in areas that fall squarely within my field (Director F).

However, lack of quality leadership was by no means always absent, and when a clear quality vision was discernable, the following factors were relevant:

1. The Promotion of Objective Rationality: Attempts were made to remove the notion of subjectivity from the quality vision and, as a result, the vision was often presented, not as the Director's view, but rather as 'the accepted' vision of quality. In these circumstances, the Director's communication role was to 'educate' the students and staff as to the nature of the quality vision and to reinforce the rational nature of such an approach. In order to do this, reference would be made to outside bodies such as AMBA, institutional quality initiatives, educational trends or competitors' best practice, and the term 'my' would be replaced by 'the' when discussing quality processes or procedures.



It is important to maintain standards, which are acceptable to the profession and to business. This is a constantly evolving process. Being aware of what is going on elsewhere is a key element in keeping us up-to-date (Director H).

2. Reassurance: Having established the vision's validity and objectivity, the next stage necessitates that the stakeholders are continually reassured that the programme does actually conform to the accepted model. Such reassurance could be seen to take place at the pre-purchase stage, during the act of programme purchase, and then at key stages throughout the duration of the MBA course. As would be expected, different modes of communication were in evidence at different stages of the reassurance process.

I attend MBA fairs (Director A) I write the MBA prospectus (Director D) [I] undertake regular subject meetings (Director B) [I] personally run the induction (Director C).

During the pre-purchase phase, prospectuses and other course material were used as a means of providing both general information and an overall quality 'feel' to a large number of potential students. However, these sources of information were regarded as primarily concerned with the marketing of the programmes, and seen to be of only limited value in terms of conveying quality-related detail.

They are glossy brochures and, as such, are treated a little like holiday brochures. I don't really like them much, but they are necessary (Director I).

At times, they were seen as being counter-productive as they tended to 'oversell' the programme, and, in doing so, raise student expectations unrealistically.

A number of interviewees commented upon the considerable time and expense that had been devoted to improving the physical quality of the prospectuses in order to create a 'high quality' and 'professional' image for the programme. They indicated that a conscious effort was being made to

produce marketing literature and other publicity-related material of a comparable nature to that found in the business world, rather than with the more traditional university prospectus. As Director C explained:

The first thing I did was to upgrade our course material [publicity-related material]. We used to produce it 'in house', and it simply looked amateurish. You can't sell the notion of quality to business people if they are going to laugh at your scrappy leaflets.

Even though considerable effort had been made to improve materials, the commonly held view was that it was the personal contact that took place between the programme Directors and other staff members and prospective students, which was by far the most important element in conveying a quality vision.

Responding quickly to enquiries, answering the phone, knowing about the course, all send the right, or wrong, message. It's surprising how important little things are in terms of conveying the right, customer-orientated message. Students tell you this time and time again (Director F).

and

Students, in my experience, don't choose a course based on a prospectus (Director I).

Once the students had been recruited on to the MBA programme, the Director's role with regard to the communication of a quality vision changed, principally from one of expectation creation, to one of expectation management.

3. Moulding Expectations: Induction programmes were seen by Directors as combining a number of functions. Traditionally, an important means of both introducing programme information to the new students and also of introducing the new students to each other, they can also be seen as the ideal situation for shaping student quality expectations. With regard to providing programme information, the emphasis was placed on outlining the course aims and objectives, and giving a description of detailed curriculum

content and method of delivery, rather than the presentation of a quality vision.

In some ways, the induction programme provides a bridge between the act of raising student expectations and the process of introducing a sense of realism with regard to what can be provided. As one interviewee commented:

Inductions are tricky. Students come from all over the world and many are nervous and lacking confidence. You need to get the balance right. On the one hand, they will get your support but you will also demand a great deal of input from them. The right tone must be set. They must know what you expect from them (Director G).

Attempts to create 'realistic' student expectations involved both explaining the programme's limitations and stressing the key role that the students themselves must play in determining the success of the educational process. The importance of peer interaction, group work and personal research is highlighted and the role of staff as facilitators rather than just providers of knowledge is also emphasised. A key element at this stage is to contrast the nature of the MBA experience with previous undergraduate study.

Ultimately the success of the course depends upon the students. If they have been recruited properly, they are each other's single most important resource. If they don't gel and support each other, it's an uphill task. We continually tell them they are not competing with each other (Director G).

Directors voiced concern that many business school staff had little detailed knowledge of the processes described above, as they did not, in the main, attend induction programmes, nor did they read MBA prospectuses or other marketing literature in a systematic manner, 'We work in a very segmented system.' (Director B) Regular staff meetings and course review meetings did offer the opportunity to discuss quality-related matters formally, but there was a tendency for these to focus upon specific student or external examiner concerns, rather than broader quality visions. There was also a continual

informal dialogue between course managers and the teaching and support that has already been demonstrated in a number of quotations cited above.

Some MBA Directors expressed the opinion that the vast majority of students primarily viewed the MBA programme as a means of addressing particular career issues and problems, rather than as an educational experience in its own right.

They like to know how well past students have done, where they work and, of course, how much money MBAs can make (Director C).

Gaining the qualification was regarded as a way to increase their future earnings potential, enhance their promotion prospects, and widen the scope of career options. As a result, it was assumed that the instrumental nature of such motivation made the notion of a broad quality vision irrelevant to all but a few students. This extract typifies the general feeling regarding this issue:

The students tend to view quality from a subject perspective. Do they get on with the teacher, and will they pass the exam? To a large degree, the teaching staff adopts the same subject-specific approach; their main concern is to update the content and develop the delivery. They can be quite cynical about managers and management visions. They see me as someone who can help them, not their boss. Many of us [Programme Directors] were, or are, still teachers (Director B).

Evidence to support this type of viewpoint was gathered during Director/student and Director/staff interaction as the course progressed, and also through contact with prospective students at MBA Fairs and student visits. It led Directors to conclude that both students and prospective students, generally failed to appreciate the significance of such direct reference to quality, and were much more likely to be receptive to more indirect indicators.

If they visit, they like to see rooms, libraries, etc. They like to know where they will stay. They don't ask detailed questions about course content, apart from particular areas of their special interest (Director A).

The most important of these indirect quality signals were seen to be the price of the programme, the reputation of the institution delivering the programme, and accreditation to professional bodies like the Association of MBAs. 'Without doubt, it is the university's name which attracts them' (Director D). However, the importance of these indirect signals lay in their ability to assist prospective students to differentiate one MBA programme from another, rather than in terms of registering innate programme quality.

The five-stage communication model presented in the previous chapter and outlined in Figure 5.1 above can be used as a means of analysing the manner in which the MBA Directors' quality visions are communicated to the various MBA stakeholders.

**Formulating the Idea:** At the most fundamental level, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the 'idea', in this case the quality vision, is not always being clearly or coherently established in the minds of the Directors. There are a variety of reasons for this because, as has already been demonstrated, at times, Directors do not feel it is their role to create such a vision. They do not feel such a quality vision is appropriate in the educational context, or the Directors prefer to make use of a variety of quality visions as different situations dictate. Whatever the reason, under such circumstances, what results is that there is no possibility that progression to the coding stage can take place, and the first breakdown in the process can be identified.

**Coding the Message:** In order to be of practical use, those quality visions which are established in the minds of the Directors must be translated into a form which can be communicated outwards to the other MBA stakeholders. The semi-structured interviews yielded little evidence to suggest that such a necessary coding process was being developed. For example, where the notion of 'student satisfaction' formed a central characteristic of the Directors' quality vision, it was not possible to identify the development and

communication of specific quality characteristics and standards which often MBA stakeholders could translate and use on a daily basis.

Students do not know, in detail, what to expect, and teaching staff do not know what they are expected to deliver in order to satisfy students outside of knowing their subject and being able to teach. Not only does the failure to code the message create the potential for misunderstanding and subsequent student dissatisfaction, it also makes attempts to measure quality difficult, if not impossible. As has been shown, this may be intentional, either because it enables the Directors to shift the focus of quality as and when it is particularly advantageous, or reduces the potential for organizational conflict. By coding the message in generalised form, the various stakeholders are free to interpret meaning in their own way and negotiate on an issue-for-issue basis. The power of the Directors may then be further enhanced as they act as 'honest broker' when other stakeholders cannot reach agreement.

**The Channels of Communication Used to Transmit the Message:** Within a business school context, a variety of methods can be used to transmit the quality vision, and it is clear that this will have an impact on who receives the message and upon the emphasis placed upon various aspects of the message.

The research indicates that business school staff that are teaching on the programme, are not always aware of the 'vision' being communicated to the students. Many of the staff do not attend student induction, play little or no part in student recruitment or receive marketing or other material. It is, therefore, quite possible that 'mixed messages' are being sent to the stakeholders, or that no message is being received at all.

Where the same message is being sent, it might be through different channels, and this, too, can have an impact. When an interviewee comments that they might have 'a quiet word with a colleague' (Director C) regarding a particular issue, it is difficult to determine the impact or status of

such a communication method, when compared to the same message delivered in written form or in a formal meeting.

**Decoding the Messages and Feedback:** Considerable evidence has been provided from the Directors to indicate that students do not find it easy to decode quality-related material other than in terms of relatively tangible ones, such as prospectus quality, institutional reputation and faculty empathy. This leads to Directors justifying not providing the message in particular forms, as it would be 'wasted' upon the students. Student feedback was sought on a regular basis, but it tended to be focused upon specific course issues rather than upon a general quality vision. There is no evidence to suggest that stakeholder feedback played a direct part in modifying the Director's quality vision, although it may play a limited role in determining the manner in which it is implemented.

### **5.5.3 THE STRATEGIES AND SYSTEMS DESIGNED BY MBA DIRECTORS TO ENSURE PROGRAMME QUALITY**

Having investigated both the various notions of quality held by those responsible for the management of MBA programmes and how these notions were communicated to students, prospective students and business school staff, the next stage in the research process involved an examination of the systems and procedures which were put in place in order to deliver them. The aim was then to evaluate these procedures both in terms of the stated aims and objectives of the various programmes and also in the light of prevailing quality theory.

As we have seen in chapter 3, it is generally held that if organisations are to both maintain high standards of quality and continually improve quality an understanding and commitment from senior managers to the establishment of organizational roles and patterns of behaviour, stakeholder responsibilities, and performance and delivery standards are essential. It is also seen as vital that they establish and implement quality measurement and assurance techniques in order to determine whether the standards are being achieved as a basis for further quality improvement initiatives.

In commercial service organizations, the prevailing quality literature presented in chapter 3 indicated that senior management should define and determine quality strategy and key quality characteristics, ensure that these quality characteristics are translated into quality standards, and enable operational staff to internalise these standards and find ways of delivering to the standards. Within the context of the business school, MBA Directors felt that establishing such relationships was much more problematic for them as senior managers than was the case with commercial service providers, such as within hotels and insurance companies for a variety of reasons, for example,

The academic environment is very different from that of a commercial organization (Director D).

(And)

Many of the quality-related mechanisms are based on the needs of the undergraduate system rather than the MBA (Director A).

The quality of the programme's teaching staff (the operational staff referred to in the section above) was generally regarded as the single most important ingredient in the provision of high quality programmes. However, in many cases, MBA Directors felt that they did not have sufficient power to effectively control this vital determinant of quality. They found it personally difficult to insist upon particular quality-related approaches because of the tradition of academic freedom and independence that often prevailed within institutions, and, because of their own lack of expertise and confidence in many subject areas.

In extreme cases of poor quality, the senior managers' ability to remove weak performers from programme delivery was more limited than they would have wished. A variety of reasons were put forward to explain the situation, such as internal politics, 'unhelpful' organizational structures and cultures, and the difficulty of amassing tangible evidence of the poor performance.

An academic system does not lend itself to 'quality management' in the same way as in industry. (Director G)



It was generally held that the chain of command as found in commercial service organizations in the form of the line management function simply does not exist in the same way within business schools. As a result, attempts to implement quality control and assurance procedures that rely upon the traditional line management structure and its inherent system of sanctions and reward, and are implicit in much of the commercially oriented quality literature, were not seen as appropriate by them. 'Changing things is not easy.' (Director B)

When Directors were able to encourage and support improvements in tutor performance, there was evidence to suggest that this was often only effective in the short-term as entrenched behaviour often reappeared.

The academic cycle means that problems constantly re-appear then disappear. You move onto the next stage and forget until the next time. (Director I)

The main reason for this can be seen to stem from the tendency for the staff concerned to characterise the cause of problems in terms of the personalities and abilities of particular MBA students and groups, or a specific piece of work such as an assignment, rather than in terms of more general and longer-term quality-related issues related to their general approach, or more fundamental long term issues.

Much of the quality assurance actually takes place through the tutor. They act as a filter and have their own views about various quality issues (Director G)

When programme Directors regarded the removal of staff from the programme as the only feasible response to persistent under-performance, it was usually only possible during the next academic cycle. As a result, problems were often allowed 'to run their course' which would be of little or no benefit to practising students (the students who may have been responsible for communicating the difficulties).

Sometimes staff did not want to take on the role next year, if they felt things had not gone well. If this was the case changes to the timetable can be made (Director F).

In this type of instance the MBA Directors might be able to persuade the tutor that 'things had not gone well' and suggest timetable changes, without the power to insist on such changes.

A similar situation arises when programme quality assurance measures are organized in such a manner that staff performance problems are not detected until the completion of a course component, as with module feedback forms and course review questionnaires, 'And by then, the course might be over.' (Director I) Within the quality theory literature such an 'after the event' screening process is seen as less useful than 'formative' on-going quality assurance procedures.

But it's a traditional form of assessing quality at a university. Take, for example, the main quality assessment procedure of all exams! They set the tone for much of the wider approach. (Director A)

Quality inspection is regarded in both quality theory and quality practice as the starting point for quality improvement rather than the end point as suggested by Director A's comments (Tennant 2001). Even the most basic quality system would normally require remedial action to be taken once a quality problem had been identified with a final product. In the manufacturing sector, the problem would be traced back through the process so that it could be fixed, that is, quality control mechanisms would be instituted and the faulty products would be repaired or scrapped. The nature of services makes this an inadequate response because often the quality problem has been experienced and cannot be recovered or 'repaired' (Vandermerwe and Lovelock (1994).

In more sophisticated manufacturing quality processes, quality assurance procedures are instituted to make sure that the original problem does not reappear after a period of time. Continual checks on systems and processes are made in order to be assured that they meet specified standards. This is also an approach utilised by commercial service providers and is a system favoured by the process-driven QAA.

However, the great flaw of such an approach is that it assumes that the standard which is being reached is one which the customer values and will subsequently be valued by employers, or is generally agreed as being of value by the wider academic and business world. It is the conclusion of this research that no such agreed standards were articulated by programme Directors, nor were they referred to as existing as a point of general reference. It is clear that if a tutor does not 'turn up for sessions', forgets his or her notes or is confused about the content they are presenting, quality problems exist, and these need to be addressed. However, if a member of staff does none of these things, is what they are teaching actually of any 'use', and if so, what should that 'use' be?

Such quality issues are addressed within the commercial sector by raising customer satisfaction up to a level so that it replaces 'use' with fitness for purpose, that is, the consumer's purpose (Prokesch 1995). If programme Directors do not accept such a substitute, what needs to be put in its place? An answer to this questions forms part of the issues for further research section in the final chapter.

The intellectual ability of the students, their length and type of previous management experience, and their motivation were regarded by programme Directors as second only in importance to the quality of teaching in determining the overall quality of the MBA programme. This was because peer group interaction was regarded as a vital component of the student's learning process, and often allowed the tutor to take on the role of facilitator rather than teacher.

However, the Directors sometimes felt that they were unable to apply the appropriate student entry requirements because they were under pressure from more senior managers to raise preset levels of revenue in the form of full-cost student fees. Indeed, in some institutions, it was suspected by MBA Directors that, for some of their colleagues, the only rationale for the MBA was the raising of revenue.

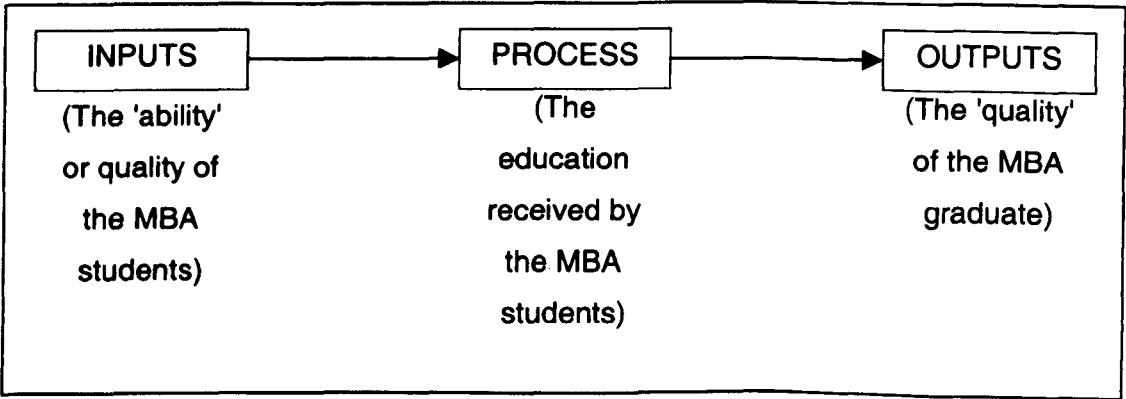
There is a constant balancing act between quality of student and the viability of the programme (Director G).

(And)

The revenue that the MBA brings is a key resource for us, and, I know, for many other universities (Director H).

For the more able MBA students, this issue was cited by the Directors as a continual source of dissatisfaction and often forced tutors to adopt a much more teacher-centred approach to the programme than they felt was appropriate at MBA level. In this respect the MBA programme can be seen as a transformation process, which is a commonly used model with the commercial world (Slack et al 2001) and can be seen in the diagram below.

**Figure 5.2 The Transformation Process Applied to MBA Education**



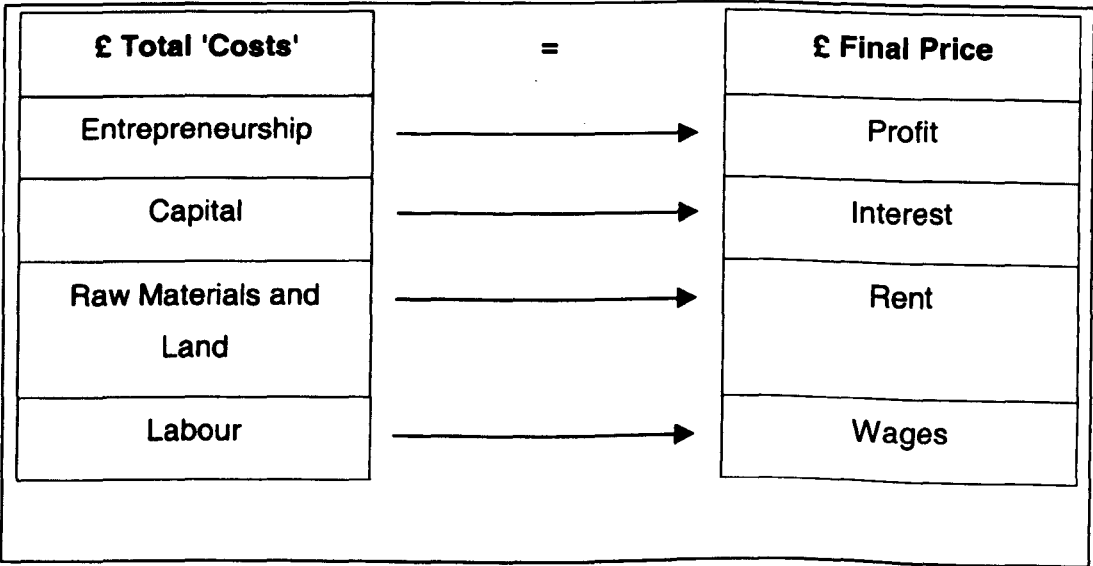
Not only does this model allow us to see the relationship between the 'final product' (the MBA graduates), the educational process and the 'raw materials' (the MBA students), it also highlights the need to adapt the 'process' (the way in which the programme is delivered) to take into account the nature of the initial inputs.

This quality issue was seen by Directors as much more relevant in the context of educational provision than in the case of some other services, where the role that customers play in determining their own satisfaction and the general quality level is much less pivotal.

We apply rigorous entry standards. I am not sure how some other programmes operate. We turn away students who then find other programmes. (Director E)

Directors indicated that the price of their programmes was a guide to the programme's quality. However, their interview responses did not explain in detail how the higher price charged was being reflected in superior programme quality attributes. There was no evidence presented that the more expensive programmes consisted of better qualified or motivated staff or had within them more quality control procedures or other quality-related inputs when compared to less expensive courses. This is because the prices of the programmes being offered are not the sum of the costs being incurred, as might be the case with an approach that made use of the concept of the factors of production. Here, as can be seen in figure 5.3 below, the final price (excluding taxes) is made up of payments to the providers of the factors of production.

**Figure 5.3 Equating final price and costs within the commercial sector**



One of the 'issues for further research', in the final chapter, is the proposal that an MBA programme, 'costing model' might be developed based on the 'Best Value' principle which would enable the comparison between the price of MBA programmes and the 'costs' of those programmes to be made. It might then be possible to estimate how much of the programme's final price was reflected in the cost of the delivery of the programme, and how much 'profit' or 'surplus', as it is known in the public sector, was being made. Such a model might then be used to determine if premium pricing was justified on a cost only basis.

For those Directors in the sample associated with the most expensive programmes, one aspect of superior quality that was repeatedly stressed was the personal attention that could be given to each MBA student's individual needs and progress.

We are not involved in mass education as is the case in some universities (Director D).

(And)

I know every student well. I have the time to relate to them as individuals (Director E).

However, no evidence was provided to justify the contention that either higher levels or high quality of student/tutor contact was more likely than in other programmes. Indeed, in some of the less well-established programmes, the relatively low student cohort numbers indicated that greater levels of personal service might even be possible.

Contrary to some other research findings (see Shostack, 1985) programme Directors often found non-person-to-person contact quality problems more difficult to resolve than person-to-person contact problems. 'Libraries and computer facilities are a constant headache.' (Director F) There were a number of reasons for this. Non-person-to-person contact problems, such as student difficulties with computer services, student frustration with administrative procedures or library facilities often took place 'out of hours', were reported to MBA Directors more slowly than other types of quality

issue, and the MBA Director often had little direct control over these variables. The results of the interviews suggested that the MBA Directors' inability to influence the level and suitability of tangible quality aspects such as computers, libraries, lecture and seminar rooms was much greater in universities with large undergraduate numbers than in those institutions dedicated solely to the provision of management education at postgraduate level.

The nature of the semi-structured interviews indicated to the researcher both that the Directors held a genuine concern for student wellbeing, and also that they believed that the business school staff for whom they were responsible shared this concern. It was also assumed by them that the vast majority of MBA students and prospective students accepted that this was the case,

There is a real sense of community. This was one of the first things that struck me (Director B).

As a result, the greater level of trust that was presumed to exist between producer and consumer led the Directors to conclude that the quality assurance procedures found in the commercial service sector, where the general level of trust was seen to be lower, were less relevant to them.

In essence, the need for systems of customer protection was regarded as less of an issue. MBA Directors were often well aware of the existence of service quality improvement techniques such as staff quality training, a customer service focus, blueprinting, benchmarking or quality performance-related reward systems. However, as such techniques, principally developed in the private sector, were regarded as heavily resource intensive, it was contended that, if such an approach were applied in the business school context, it would ultimately divert resources away from the students' education and lead to a reduction in quality, 'In the main, our standards are high. I don't go looking for problems' (Director C).

It would also distract staff from the job of delivering high quality education, a job to which they were both committed and already well trained for. The view can be summed up by the following interviewee comments,

In most cases people did not come into management education to do a bad job, or would be in it if they did not like students and have their best interests at heart (Director G).

(And)

When things go wrong, it is the staff who want to change them, and often drive the change. I am not there with a big stick (Director C).

In taking this view, quality deficiencies are, to some extent, being characterised by the Directors as the consequence of malicious intent and insufficient motivation on the part of the provider, rather than being seen as due to lack of competence or a failure to understand and deliver to consumer needs and expectations. This view represents an example of the way in which the multiple quality perspectives that the Directors operate can lead to inconsistencies in terms of how they subsequently ensure that a high quality programme is delivered. The commercially orientated definition of quality, that is customer satisfaction, is espoused and seen as relevant, but the various means that the commercial sector develops as a way of ensuring the delivery of customer satisfaction are seen as unnecessary because quality problems are a consequence of factors such as malicious intent and incompetence, and these to a very large extent, do not exist. If everyone works together to improve quality there is no need for a system; indeed, 'a system' might actually get in the way of such a process.

Again, in chapter 6, issues for further research include the setting up of a basic MBA programme quality assurance process or system. This would provide the confidence that MBA programmes conformed to minimum basic requirements in terms of quality inspection, control and assurance.

The issue of the relevance of commercially generated quality control and assurance procedures in such a family atmosphere, and the perceived lack of the institutional resources available to implement them, are not the only reasons why they are absent from the quality management approach



adopted within the business schools surveyed. The majority of the Directors interviewed believed that they did not possess sufficient power to introduce necessary changes, even if they wished to do so. With regard to the quality assurance system referred to above and described in chapter 6, the issue of whether or not the power to implement such a system was vested in the MBA Director would be an important one.

The programmes for which the MBA Directors were responsible often formed only a very small part of the institution's wider postgraduate and particularly, undergraduate provision. As a result, school policies and procedures were often made with the needs of the majority of students in mind and not the relatively small number of MBA students. As well as the resulting incompatibility of some of the undergraduate and MBA approaches to quality (due to different tutor/student ratios and relationships, the nature of the respective students and the different demands of the various programmes of study), MBA Directors also recognised that there was, at times, considerable institutional resistance towards the development of specific MBA quality processes and procedures. This was, in part, due to the resentment towards what might be construed as MBA 'special treatment', and the creation of an elite that would be to the detriment of the non-MBA students and staff. However, these are precisely the type of issue that institutions seeking to offer MBAs need to address. If they do not adopt a quality assurance system because it would prove institutionally or culturally difficult, the question as to whether they should be offering an MBA at all is a pertinent one.

Evidence of this resentment and mistrust could be seen when negotiations over areas such as timetabling, room allocation and staffing took place,

The programme delivers high levels of revenue, but is also quite resource intensive. It is an issue. (Director G)

The situation was often not helped by the fact that in many of the organizations surveyed, the MBA programmes, and some of the staff connected with it, were relatively new to the institution, while the more

traditional postgraduate and undergraduate provision was already well established.

The Directors felt that the traditional role of the university academic and the prevailing 'culture of the professional' within the public sector was significant and brought with it advantages for the delivery of superior quality, such as high levels of staff commitment to both their students and their 'subject'. Any new quality initiatives that damaged the 'collegiate spirit' were regarded with great suspicion as they could produce a barrier between staff and students and be counter-productive in the longer term.

Indeed, it was seen as ironic that many of the 'newer' private sector initiatives were designed to create a 'quality culture' which already existed within higher education, such as team-working, increased employee participation and personal responsibility. As a result, it was suggested that any management-driven quality initiatives that were imposed upon the existing good practice might have the opposite effect to that intended by disrupting a system that was actually working well.

On a more pragmatic level, it was also understood that any such initiatives could meet with considerable resistance from both the teaching faculty and, to some degree, the students, who often valued the close relationship between themselves and the teaching staff more highly than their more distant and formal relationship with the business school or university, 'It is important to take everyone with you if you are going to succeed' (Director E).

The ability of the staff, and to some extent the students, to resist change was seen as much greater within the higher educational context than in many other areas of service provision and, as a result, the issue of stakeholder reaction to change was much greater than might otherwise be the case.

You need to know what students and staff want out of the course  
(Director G), (And)

I have found to make changes you need to build a broad consensus  
(Director B).

By anticipating the reaction of two key groups of MBA stakeholders, that is the teaching staff and the students, the course Directors can be seen to be making assumptions with regard to the two groups' motivation, preferences and expectations. Other instances of assumption-based policy-making have already been described in this chapter. The justification that Directors use for taking such an approach is made in a number of ways.

In most cases, the course Directors did not make a distinction between themselves and the MBA teaching staff in terms of motivation and quality expectations because they often personally taught on the MBA programme and/or were from teaching backgrounds. They had continual formal, and as importantly, informal contact with other staff members and did not feel that the management/employee distinction was relevant in the same way as within other commercial service sectors. In essence, they were viewing themselves as part of the staff stakeholder group, albeit with an additional administrative and management role.

Obviously, such a claim of group membership could not be made with regard to the student body. However, most MBA Directors had been MBA students in the past and drew on their experience as students as a means of justifying their assumptions. They also relied upon their close and ongoing contact with the present students to keep their 'finger on the pulse'. However, as has been demonstrated, a comprehensive, systematic and transparent procedure for gaining data regarding student expectations and perceptions cannot be said to exist, and therefore much of the 'evidence' on which Director's assumptions are based is best described as anecdotal.

It is for this reason that the quality expectations and perceptions of both MBA students and prospective students formed the focus of the remainder of the primary research programme.

## **5.6 THE PROSPECTIVE MBA STUDENT INTERVIEWS**

After the initial screening questions (described in chapter 4) had been asked the prospective student interviews focused upon three main areas of interest. They were;

To understand the individual student's motivation for seeking to undertake an MBA programme.

To determine the means by which individuals assessed MBA programme quality at the pre-purchase stage.

To explore the quality expectations and perceptions that would determine the prospective students' final choice of MBA programme.

#### **5.6.1 THE STUDENT MOTIVATION FOR UNDERTAKING AN MBA PROGRAMME**

The results of the interviews indicated that the motivation of students to undertake an MBA programme is driven by a variety of inter-related factors:

1. The Student's Personal Needs: As would be expected, many prospective MBA students regarded themselves as having reached a career crossroads. For example, 'I need an MBA in order to progress [within my career]' (PS 11). More surprising was the extent to which the prospective students saw themselves at a personal and social crossroads, and cited this as a main reason for seeking an MBA programme. For example, 'The MBA will give me something to do.' (PS 3) They saw the MBA as an opportunity to make new friends, with whom they felt they were likely to have a considerable amount in common, 'I don't get a chance to meet similar sorts of people as myself outside of a work situation' (PS 10). No discernable difference could be detected between prospective full-time and part-time students with regard to this motivating factor.

As well as offering the opportunity to interact with others, there was also a drive for individual personal development. Students expressed an interest in the subject of business and management and believed that the MBA would

provide a chance for them to develop both their business knowledge and their confidence 'I've a lot of useful experience which I want to build upon.'  
(PS 1)

This was almost always expressed in terms of filling gaps within their existing knowledge base, particularly in areas such as accounting and finance and information technology, rather than in terms of being able to undertake in-depth research in a particular area.

In order to fulfil these personal needs, students were seeking reassurance that programmes would be of sufficient breadth, in terms of a wide variety of subject areas covered, rather than depth in terms of specialist electives and dissertation opportunities.

An MBA offers the full range of subjects. I don't want to specialize in one particular area at this stage (PS 7).

(And)

I am seeking to move out of finance and into senior management (PS 9).

They were also keen to confirm that the student profile would be compatible with their social aspirations and that there would be a sufficient number of students 'like themselves'.

2. Work Needs: Closely related to the notion of personal needs and personal development was the fact that the prospective students felt that an MBA would enhance their employment prospects. 'Without an MBA, I will probably end up stuck where I am' (PS 4). Specifically, this would be seen in terms of an increase in their earnings potential, offering the opportunity to undertake more interesting work and to enhance status and promotion prospects,

I am keen to move into the private sector and a more dynamic environment (PS 10).

(And)

I've gone about as far as I can go and this seems a way to move up or out (PS 8).

However, the respondents were quite realistic in reflecting that an MBA was not a passport to success in itself because of the growing number of MBA graduates on the market. 'In some ways, it's [having an MBA] becoming quite common. Its certainly not unusual' (PS 2).

For a significant number of prospective students, the opportunity to broaden their range of skills was vital, as they were actively seeking promotion into new business areas. This was particularly so of those currently working in the public sector and retail banking. 'The prospects in my area [banking] are not good long-term.' (PS 2) An opportunity to 'move into' consultancy, investment banking and the 'City' were the most mentioned career destinations but there was also a sense in which it would generally improve job prospects. For example 'It will increase my marketability' (PS 13) and 'It will increase my options' (PS 10). Subject-specific MBAs, such as those related to the health service or education, were not popular with those already within these sectors or with those currently employed outside, reflecting the perceived unattractiveness of these occupational fields in terms of pay and conditions.

I made a mistake with my original career choice [social work] I am looking to move out of the area (PS 14).

There was also a widely held view that the public sector was becoming much more 'business-like', which made non-sector-related programmes more relevant to those presently employed there,

Within my field [museums], there is a constant pressure to adopt commercial techniques (PS 17).

The non-sector-related programmes were also seen as having greater status and marketability in the future.

The prospective MBA students' self perceived needs, as described above, are not the only factors that determined the manner in which they approached the selection of an appropriate MBA programme. Another

important consideration was the students' individual personal circumstances, and in particular their ability to fund the proposed study.

3. **Personal Financial Circumstances:** The manner in which the proposed study was to be funded influenced both the students' motivation for undertaking the programme, and the type of programme they were looking for.

I am genuinely shocked about the cost of a programme; even part-time courses work out at over £100 per week (PS 5).

Some of the respondents had secured a commitment from their employers with regard to the provision of financial support, while others were in the process of negotiating various levels of contribution,

They will pay all my fees because they see the benefits to them (PS 6).

Ironically, given the expressed lack of desirability of the public sector, this was seen as the area where employer sponsorship was most likely in terms of both full-time and part-time courses,

There are a certain amount of bursaries, which you apply for once you've been there [health service] for four years (PS 11)

It was perceived that there was almost no prospect of sponsorship on full-time MBA programmes for some of those already in the private sector and only limited opportunities for sponsorship for part-time study. None of the prospective students working for large private organizations felt that they were likely to receive any 'significant financial assistance' with their MBA study or be provided with leave in order to undertake a course.

A number of reasons were put forward to explain this, including the cost, the possibility that the employee would leave the sponsoring company on completion of the programme and the increased organizational preference for shorter, more company- and job-specific business education and training methods,

The climate is not right for this sort of thing. I am not even going to tell people at work about it (PS 8).

It might also be the case that this survey method failed to incorporate the large private sector companies which might be dealing with business schools directly rather than indirectly through their individual employees at an MBA fair open to the general public.

By relating the method by which an individual's programme is being financed to the desired programme attributes it is possible to identify four distinct categories of prospective student. That is, those for whom the MBA is primarily a reward for past service, those for whom it can be regarded as one among a number of alternative opportunities, a third group who consider the MBA as a form of leisure activity, and finally, those for whom an MBA represents a substantial financial investment.

1. The MBA as a Reward: Some public sector employees, and those from smaller firms in the private sector saw their MBA sponsorship primarily as a 'reward' and did feel that, while it was a sign of recognition, it would not lead directly to promotion or higher salary. They were very unlikely to leave their present organization on completion of the programme and were keen to 'repay' their sponsor by finding an MBA that would allow them to improve the performance of their organization, and in doing so, raise their personal status and credibility,

I was encouraged to take it on, they've [media company] been very supportive. (PS 6)

Many in this group expressed an interest in the subjects that constitute an MBA curriculum but would not have undertaken a programme if they had been self-financing. This group were primarily interested in those part-time and distance learning MBAs which were flexible, did not take up 'too much time' and were not too intensive,

It is very much secondary to my job. I am really going to have to monitor whether I can balance both things (PS 15).



This can be seen as recognition of the heavy organisational workload and commitment they would maintain for the duration of their study.

While this group clearly recognised the personal advantages of full-time study such as quicker completion, more time available to study and a break from 'work', their organizations could not afford to replace them during the study period and so distance learning or the part-time mode were their only realistic options,

In an ideal world, I would like to really take time over it. It would be nice to be a student in the real sense and be able to devote all my energies to it (PS 18).

It was also clear that the MBA was of secondary importance when compared to their work, with which it would not be allowed to 'interfere' to any great extent. A substantial proportion of this group felt that they would not have taken on a full-time programme even if it had been a viable option, for example,

I wouldn't want the luxury of a full-time programme. I don't want to be a student again. (PS 15)

2. The MBA as an Opportunity: Some prospective students, mainly younger ones from overseas, had the opportunity 'to study' and wanted to do so in the UK, (In some cases, the USA and Canada were also being considered),

My family will pay for me to study a business masters and I feel I am at the right stage to benefit from it (PS 16).

For this group, the prime consideration was geographical location, with London, Oxford and Bath the three main areas of interest. The ability, as full-time students, to remain in the UK was important, and some hoped for employment in the UK upon completion of the programme

I am interested in working in Europe or the USA for some period after graduation (PS 13).

The reason an MBA was chosen in preference to an MA or MSc was because it was seen as less specific, more relevant and carrying greater status. Even though MBAs could almost always be undertaken in their own countries, obtaining a qualification from a British institution was seen as having greater status and therefore providing enhanced employment prospects. For example, 'Being educated in the UK is seen as very prestigious' (PS 16).

3. The MBA as a Leisure Activity: Within the group described above, it was possible to identify a sub-set of respondents for whom an MBA could best be described as a 'leisure activity'. They would continue to gain financial support from their family (in some cases, they were financially independent) while they 'did something worthwhile', but did not see the MBA as a qualification for a job, and were not concerned about enhancing their employment prospects,

I am interested in business and want to study at a high level in Britain (PS 19).

(And)

I am not really interested in getting a job in business, but I am interested in the subject from a human relationship perspective. My first degree is in psychology, and I would like to try to apply it in some way (PS 20).

There was no evidence at this stage to suggest that these prospective students would be less motivated than other types of student. This sub-set contrasted sharply with the largest group of prospective MBA students, that is, those for whom the MBA was regarded as an investment.

4. The MBA as an Investment: Self-financing, these students were making a considerable financial sacrifice to undertake a programme, particularly in terms of taking out loans and/or having a partner support them. Student estimates of the real cost of a full-time programme averaged

£35,000 a year if lost earnings were taken into account. 'If I go full-time, I am taking on considerable financial outlay' (PS 9). For them, enhanced future employment and promotion prospects were the rationale for undertaking the study, and obtaining the 'best course' for the money spent was crucial, 'I am looking for a substantial financial reward at the end [of the programme]' (PS 14).

The best course was characterised as the one that made them the most attractive in the future employment market,

At my age, I am taking a gamble. I intend to use it [the MBA] (PS 12).  
(And)  
I may not be able to afford it in the future. It's now or never in terms of career, and in terms of financing it. I think it's the optimum time (PS 7).

Given that the results of the interviews described above reveal that prospective students have very different needs and personal circumstances, it is possible to conclude that there is no such thing as a typical MBA student. It should also be stressed that some of the prospective students interviewed did not fall neatly into the categories described above, but rather exhibited a range of 'cross boundary' needs and personal circumstances.

Such a degree of market complexity calls into question the notion that customer satisfaction is a realistic aspiration and a meaningful measure of quality unless individual business schools recognise that market segmentation exists and seek to cater for specific target groups. For example for the group of students in category 4, 'the MBA as an investment' careers planning and placement activities are likely to be of much greater importance than for those in category 3, 'the MBA as a leisure activity'. If not, it may be the case that the various groups of students prove to be incompatible and reduce the quality of experience for each other (as can happen in other service areas such as tourism). In highly competitive markets such as the MBA, producers may be reluctant to turn away students who may not be compatible with the main student body. If this is the case, it falls to the

prospective students themselves to select the most appropriate programme for their needs. It is to their ability to do this that we now turn.

### **5.6.2 ASSESSING PROGRAMME QUALITY AND THE QUALITY EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS THAT DETERMINE FINAL CHOICE**

A large proportion of the prospective students interviewed admitted that they simply did not know how to determine the quality of an MBA programme and were therefore going to take prospectuses and other promotional material away with them from the Fair as the first step of their programme search. 'It is impossible to differentiate by simply talking to people at the stands' (PS 4).

However, the vast majority of these indicated that they would not make a final decision based upon a prospectus or other publicity-related material alone,

It's a gradual process. Gaining initial information about the MBA generally, then narrowing down the choice and looking at specific universities (PS 7).

Those prospective students who are further forward in the course selection process, that is, already having obtained programme literature and who are at the Fair mainly to meet business school staff tended to divide quality into two distinct areas: Programme 'breadth', which can be seen as the main subject areas that the programme would cover, and programme 'depth' seen generally as the level of teaching and learning that would take place.

**Programme Breadth:** It was felt that in terms of 'breadth', the content of the large majority of programmes was broadly similar, and almost certain to contain all the major functional areas of business such as accounting, marketing and human resource management.

It's a bit like cars. They all have broadly similar features, just packaged in different ways. (PS 3)

These individual subjects would subsequently be integrated in the form of case studies and projects, and there would normally be the opportunity to specialise through a dissertation or extended essay. As well as this, a range

of non-core subject options was likely to exist in the form of 'electives'. No respondent indicated that the range of options available would be a significant factor in determining their ultimate choice of programme, although for some prospective students. 'The dissertation is a worry' (PS 5).

In the context of quality in terms of breadth, prospective students were reasonably confident that they could, if necessary, identify differences between programmes. The prospective students undertook this process by initially scanning a variety of prospectuses and noting any omissions from what they held to be the norm, but there was no evidence to suggest that the norm itself was being evaluated by measuring the nature of the MBA curriculum in terms of other academic qualifications such as the MSc, their own personal experience or work needs. The general consensus seemed to be that quality in terms of breadth was an issue of little relevance or importance because as one student remarked,

The 'BA' element of the MBA seems relatively standard across the board (PS 12), (although as one prospective student commented); the names of the subjects are slightly different (PS 17).

**Programme Depth:** With regard to the notion of quality as a function of a programme's 'depth', two distinct groups of prospective students could be identified. There were those who took the view that, if a course had the right to use the term 'MBA', the level of teaching and learning would reach a given minimum standard. 'I assume that you can't just call something an MBA' (PS 1). As a result, the various programmes would be broadly similar in terms of basic standards and although some faculties would be more able or interesting than others, a course at 'masters' level would have to meet minimum requirements. These standards could not easily be quantified by the prospective students themselves but were known to faculty members and outside scrutiny by professional assessors would help to maintain the required quality. 'There must be a system of inspection' (PS 10).

The second group of prospective students believed that programme quality, in terms of depth, was likely to be extremely variable, both with reference to

the minimum standard attained, and in terms of the highest level of potential learning experience. 'Some MBAs are not worth the paper they are written on' (PS 20) and, 'Where you get your MBA is vital' (PS 2).

There was considerable suspicion that some institutions, particularly those from overseas based in the UK and some of the 'newer universities', simply did not have the ability to deliver to master's level. Both groups felt that it would not be possible to be sure of the true quality of the teaching and learning until they were actually taking part in the course; 'You will not be fully sure until you are there' (PS 11), but this second group had identified a number of possible means by which they could attempt to reduce this uncertainty.

These methods included canvassing the views of past and present students. 'I have spent a lot of time asking around' (PS 6). In this context, personal recommendation was regarded as by far the most important factor in determining the final choice of programme other than price for full-time students and location for part-time students. For example, 'I know someone on the course. They are very keen' (PS 18). Other non-personal quality indicators involved noting the standing of the institution within various university league tables and identifying those institutions with accreditation to outside professional bodies and AMBA. For example, 'I would not consider any non-AMBA course' (PS 4). The price of the programme was also seen as an indication of its 'seriousness', as was the student entry requirements in terms of age, educational qualifications and, particularly, previous management experience. For example,

It seems that anyone can get onto to some MBAs. It's simply a matter of paying. (PS 20)

The business school prospectuses and other publicity material were not regarded as an indication of programme depth, although some prospective students were interested in staff qualifications and experience (although this was not seen as synonymous with the ability to teach), computer and library facilities and the general infrastructure. They found the reflections of past

students interesting and the information regarding their post-MBA job destinations valuable, 'Although I am not sure how representative they are' (PS 12).

It was understood that literature of this type was primarily a marketing tool, designed to show the providers in the most favourable light, but this was not seen by the prospective students as a problem because they were accustomed to this type of approach in other areas of their daily life as consumers. The presentational quality of the literature was seen as an indication of both the 'seriousness' of the provider, in terms of the level of resources being devoted to attracting students and an example of how professional the various schools' business approach was. As one prospective student commented, 'How can a college teach marketing if it can't market itself?' (PS 5).

All the respondents had made use of the prospectuses, primarily to help narrow down their choice, and all intended to either visit the institutions they had short listed and/or discuss the programme with faculty members. 'Given the cost of the course, and the level of commitment, you really have to get it right' (PS 9). This should not be seen as a surprise as it can be assumed that those who were not positively motivated by the prospectuses were much less likely to attend the Fair. With regard to this next stage of the programme selection process, the main areas of prospective student interest were as follows:

1. **The Nature of the Student Body:** There were two different reasons to explain this area of student concern. For some of the potential students, it was important to confirm that their peer group were likely to possess knowledge, skills and levels of work experience at least equivalent or even superior to their own in order to help to provide a positive learning environment. These prospective students were aware of the importance of group interaction and its role within the learning process. They were, in



effect, equating the quality of the MBA student intake with the likely depth of their own subsequent learning experience,

I am very keen to make useful contacts. To learn from the experiences of others. I have been told this is the most important aspect of the course. (PS 8)

However, members of another group were keen to ensure that they, as individuals, would not be out of their depth and were seeking reassurance that some of the students would be like them,

It's important that I feel comfortable with the other students (PS 12).

(And)

I hope there will be other international students, particularly from Asia (PS 13).

Not wishing to feel out of place was particularly important in terms of student age range, where potential students did not want to feel too old or too young. Not being the only overseas student was also a consideration, as was establishing that not all the students would have already undertaken an undergraduate business degree.

2. The Prospective Student's Personal Circumstances: A number of the potential applicants intended to use the Fair as an opportunity to explain their own 'unusual' or 'difficult' work or personal circumstances to faculty members and to try to confirm that a given programme was flexible enough to accommodate them. These students had already screened out those courses that, in their opinion, would not suit their particular work or social arrangements. For this group of potential students, programme flexibility was a major quality feature and a key determinant in selecting which course, if any, they would be able to undertake.

This type of approach is an example both of the way in which the individual critically evaluates the claims made by the provider before making a final purchasing decision, and also, of how students differentiate between those programmes that they might ideally follow and those that they can

realistically follow. This second feature of the student decision-making process can also be seen in the next issue of student concern, namely the financing of the proposed study.

3. Financial Arrangements: Both the high cost of programmes and the large cost differentials between different programmes had initially surprised the majority of students attending the Fair, and they wished to find out why such differentials existed and if financial support or payment plans were available in order to help them finance the course. The unexpectedly high cost of the programmes had served to raise the issue of price to the top of the student's selection criteria, so that all the students questioned were operating a cut-off price above which they were not willing or able to pay, for example, 'It's like anything. There's a limit. You might go beyond it a bit, but not much'. (PS 14)

Once the going rate within the market had been established by the prospective student, a view developed that some of the course prices seemed 'very low' in relation to others and this was the object of some suspicion. Described by one student in terms of minced beef in a butcher's, 'If the price was too low, you would wonder what was wrong with it' (PS 20), it does provide evidence of the difficulty prospective purchasers have in determining the way in which the costs of services are made up. If they have little experience of buying in a given area and, unlike fast-moving consumer goods, may purchase only once in a lifetime, these problems are increased,

It is difficult to see why the prices vary so much. To some extent, you are paying for the name (PS 9).

As we have already seen, the issue of the pricing of services has received considerable attention in the literature (Hoffman and Bateson, 2002). Of particular relevance is the notion that pricing can communicate value to the customer (Berry and Yadav, 1996), and the degree to which the potential

customer is price sensitive with regard to professional services (Hoffman and Turley, 1999).

Lack of experience in terms of buying this type of service makes it more difficult for prospective buyers to estimate relative value for money. It also helps to explain why other external factors such as the institution's reputation or a personal recommendation play a more important part in establishing quality in the mind of the potential applicant than might be the case with more familiar tangible goods.

4. Provider Ethos: It can be seen that most of the questions being asked by potential students can be classified in terms of their need to gain various forms of reassurance. In this context, prospective students were keen to establish 'the feel of the place' as a means of giving credence to the replies they received from business school representatives, and thus, the extent to which they were subsequently reassured. Establishing a degree of trust was therefore vital and this, in turn, was derived from the nature and friendliness of the faculty members they met and their perceived future understanding and approachability. 'They [the staff on the stand] seem OK. They seem to understand my position.' (PS 15)

Not one prospective student could name a faculty member who they had heard of prior to reading a given prospectus, nor whose reputation or work had influenced their choice of programme at this stage. While faculty members are therefore important in determining the prospective student's choice of programme, it seems that it is their personal rather than academic qualities which are important. Again, this may show how prospective students seek to make judgements in those areas where they feel more able to do so. They are aware that faculty members are important to the quality of the programme but feel unable to make judgments upon their academic credibility, and so select an area in which they have a lifetime of experience, namely that of building personal relationships. For example, 'I don't want it to be like school.' (PS 7)

It is evident that most prospective students initially consider a large number of potential business school offerings as a means of establishing 'industry norms'. However, by the time they are more proactively involved in the decision-making process, a relatively small set of alternatives are being considered, based on the cost (which includes the programme's price, living expenses and loss of income), geographical location and programme flexibility.

The actual number of perceived alternatives will depend upon factors such as the individual's past experience and personal and financial circumstances. Once this stage has been reached, those who intend to embark on an MBA programme must take a final decision. It is the third stage of the primary research process, which sought to investigate how the final choice is made from the student's shortlist and the implications of this for quality management.

## **5.7 MBA STUDENT CIT RESPONSES**

The CIT investigation was initially based upon the single question:

'Why did you decide to undertake this particular MBA programme?'

The responses to this question were used to develop a series of general student expectations that were subsequently discussed with small groups of students in order to try to measure the manner in which such expectations had been met. The students' perceptions of the way in which their expectations had been met by the programme were then discussed and used as a means of both evaluating the degree of student satisfaction that existed, and, exploring the usefulness of student satisfaction as a means of defining and measuring quality within the educational context. As already stated, comments that were made are not attributed to individual students.

### **5.7.1 STUDENT EXPECTATIONS**

As was the case with the responses of prospective students, programme price and institutional location were major factors in determining programme choice, and, by definition, all the participating students questioned had been able to finance their studies up to the point of the interviews. However, because the financial burden tended to be more substantial than they had initially budgeted for, particularly the cost of living, getting a good job at the end of the course in order that their investment would 'pay them back' had risen to be the major student expectation. For some students, the programme's location was a key element because of family or other personal arrangements and therefore cannot be linked to expectation, but for others, there was an expectation that the location would be 'an exciting place to live as a student' (ST).

Such expectations can be regarded as emanating from the individual student's personal needs (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), and form the most important components within the programme selection process. As was the case with the prospective MBA students, they inform the 'provider shortlist' into which other important factors and criteria are then incorporated. The most significant of these was the belief that whilst undertaking this particular programme, they would be treated as individuals and that their individual needs would be recognised and taken into account. 'You don't want to be a number.' (ST)

This type of expectation can be seen as equating to that of 'empathy' as described by Zeithaml and Bitner (1996), and was identified in those student responses which highlighted the expectation that they, as students, would be able to communicate easily with academic staff, gain access to the appropriate staff as necessary, and be treated with understanding by them if problems arose. It has also become a major concern of service providers in both the public and private sector falling under the general heading of 'customization' (Gilmore and Pine, 1997), which is seen as a key element in the field of service design and development (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000; Pullman and Moore, 1999).

Another reason for the choice of programme was the feeling that it was taking place within an institution of 'high quality'. The student may not have been sure of what to expect in terms of programme detail, but there was a feeling that the reputation of the provider would lead to a high quality experience. This 'experience' depended upon the ability of the teaching staff, the manner in which the course was organized and resourced, the general infrastructure (including computing and library facilities and accommodation) and the motivation and experience of the other students. 'The place has a good reputation.' (ST)

All of the components identified above were expected to be of relatively high quality because it was thought that the institution's reputation was built upon them and would only be maintained through them. This type of determinant can be regarded in terms of the notion of 'corporate image' as identified by Gronroos (1988), and 'corporate quality' (Lethinen and Lethinen, 1991). This can be seen as a key element within the field of 'brand building' (Mitchell, 2001).

The final category of expectation was based, not upon a series of objective or comparative standards, but rather upon the feeling that the particular course was the right one for them. There may be, and probably were, 'better' programmes but for a variety of reasons, this programme was best for them. Factors which led the students to believe that this would be the case included personal recommendation from past students, the fact that past student profiles were similar to their own and they would therefore be likely to 'get on with, and have things in common with other students', (ST) and the building up of a rapport with staff members during the programme selection process. 'I got a feel for the place when I visited.' (ST)

In respect of 'fitting in', it was clear that some students would have been prepared to drop out of the course at an early stage if they had felt uncomfortable and referred to examples of students or their cohort who had done so. However, by the time the CIT investigation had taken place

students felt it was too late to take this option as too much time and money had been invested.

### **5.7.2 STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE MANNER IN WHICH THEIR EXPECTATIONS WERE MET**

The students who took part in the CIT investigation were more than halfway through their yearlong full-time programme. The group discussions which followed highlighted a number of issues which need to be explained before the stated expectations can be matched to perceptions.

First, some of the factors, which had led the students to undertake the course, had, in their opinion, now declined in importance as the programme had progressed, while others had grown considerably in significance. Also, during the year, new quality expectations had emerged, and these were seen as constantly developing. The phenomenon of shifting student expectations can be traced to a number of sources such as:

1. The influence of other MBA students undertaking the programme, particularly those with different personal service philosophies, from different cultural backgrounds and with different levels of work experience (the derived service intensifiers explained in chapter 3).
2. The existence of particular MBA programme work and assignment patterns within the course, which led to a far greater reliance on other members of the cohort than previously thought (transitory service intensifiers).
3. The student's continually increasing experience of the MBA programme and a growing appreciation of the nature of management education and the management education process (enduring service intensifiers).

As well as the complicating factors described above, it was clear that some of the expectations could not, as yet, be met, for example, 'I won't actually

know if it was worthwhile until I try to get a job' (ST). It was agreed by the students that this type of expectation might take a number of years to evaluate, and, that it was unlikely that they would be able to make an unambiguous link between attaining the MBA qualification and their subsequent rate of career progression. This type of issue can be seen as an example of the concept of 'credence qualities' described by Darby and Karni (1973), which is also set out in chapter 3.

During the group discussions, it was clear that an extremely high degree of satisfaction was derived from what was described as almost 'chance encounters' (ST) between school personnel and students, a situation which the vast majority of students welcomed, and often encouraged. By getting to know the staff 'on a one-to-one basis' (ST) outside of the formal teaching programme, be it as a school-or student-organized social event, 'by the coffee machine' (ST) or when discussing work-related issues such as assignments, a number of the stated expectations were perceived as being met. Such fulfilled expectations included:

1. A feeling that they did 'fit in' and therefore had made the correct choice of programme for themselves. In essence, that they were liked by the staff and that their participation on the MBA programme was not regarded by staff as simply a service transaction. Students realised that it was likely they would have 'fitted in' in other similar organizations, but this did not reduce the satisfaction felt, 'This is certainly a good place for me. I'm having a great time.' (ST)
2. That they could, as hoped, both communicate with and relate to the business school staff on an informal and equal basis. Numerous examples were given to provide evidence of this, but it was clear that a small number of staff provided the main source of satisfaction here. Some staff were not accessible but this was not a problem, provided enough staff were. 'I get on better with some staff than others.' (ST).



3. Very importantly, that they were being treated as individuals when the circumstances made that appropriate. Again, as long as some staff were approachable, this was enough.

Such empathetic treatment was a major cause of student satisfaction and a measure of programme quality. There was also a sense in which students who had not developed this type of easy staff/student relationship were held by others to be at least partly responsible for that situation. They were seen as having 'made little effort to meet staff halfway' (ST). It was also clear that some students did not wish to have this type of relationship and that therefore, it was not a quality expectation for them. There was no evidence to suggest that students who had sought such interaction had been disappointed by tutor response, provided the 'right type' of tutor had been approached, 'It's a relatively small course. You get to know people very quickly.' (ST).

It is ironic that within the commercial sector, many managers are often keen to reduce the type of chance encounter described above because of the perceived reduction in worker productivity and the increased uncertainty it can generate. The underlying assumption here is that quality is a function of standardization (Czpeil et al, 1985). There has, on the other hand, been a tradition of such relationship building within higher education, and this may be responsible for the resistance shown towards the greater use of commercially generated systems and procedures within the sector (as described in chapter 2).

The direct personal encounter, of which the chance encounter is one type, is by far the most important source of student satisfaction. Formal teaching and learning sessions represent the other major element of direct personal encounter, but unlike the former, this was also a source of considerable dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction. A number of factors contribute to the sense of student dissatisfaction, the first being a sense of service unreliability. 'The moment of truth' is also a 'moment in time' (Carlzon 1987), and, therefore, a teaching session that is regarded as poorly planned and

executed, is lost forever. It is seen essentially as a waste of the student's time. The way in which students make this evaluation is by comparing one session with another, and one tutor to another. Desired levels of provision, the valuable and interesting sessions, become the yardstick and if other sessions fall outside the zone of tolerance (Davido and Uttal, 1989), dissatisfaction is the result,

Some sessions are great. Others are badly organised. At the end, you think what a complete waste of time (ST).

Considerable research is now being undertaken which stresses the vital importance of the service encounter (Hansen and Danaher, 1999), the role played by the customer in determining satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000), and the relationship between management control, employee empowerment and customer satisfaction (Bethencourt and Gwinner (1996); Malone (1997); Tansik and Smith, 2000).

If a complaint is made, a sympathetic response from the tutor or Director will not remove the feeling of dissatisfaction and unless it leads to a sustained improvement in performance (as perceived by the student), the negative feelings will actually intensify and detract from the corporate quality image,

Sometimes it goes from bad to worse. We just stop going. At times, there's only 6 or so in a class. (ST)

In this context then, empathy is no substitute for delivering customer satisfaction first time. The group discussions revealed that there was also no evidence to support the contention that a dissatisfied customer who has his or her complaint addressed will be more satisfied than the customer who felt no initial dissatisfaction. Some research, for example, Johnston and Hena (1997), does suggest the opposite, that is, that customers who have problems satisfactorily resolved are more positive towards the service provider than customers with no quality issues. There is also research evidence to support the findings of this research project, which indicates that the notion of 'service recovery' and a means of ensuring customer

satisfaction has been overestimated and that, in fact, its value is limited (Bowen and Johnston, 1999; Brown et al, 1996)

Damage to the image of corporate quality was also caused during unsatisfactory non-personal interactions. In this context, problems with the general level of, access to, and support by library and IT provision were the major issues. This can be seen as a form of the 'must be' quality elements. These facilities are assumed to be an integral part of the provision of a postgraduate business programme; their existence brings little satisfaction, but their absence causes real discontent,

The librarians are very unhelpful. At times, they are rude. They don't seem to know their stuff. (ST)

Students evaluated these 'must be' features in a number of ways, particularly in terms of instrumental and comparative means. While it was agreed that facilities would not be industry state of the art, they should be at least comparable with facilities in other similar educational organizations. This was 'known' by talking to family and friends at other institutions, or by comparison with other institutions visited or attended. It was also not seen as acceptable when these types of facilities were of insufficient quality to allow the student to carry out work set by tutors during the programme. 'It's a good thing I've got my own computer.' (ST)

Two factors heightened the perception of poor quality. This was particularly so in circumstances where the problems encountered were perceived as being a result of facilities that were primarily aimed at satisfying undergraduate needs rather than their needs as postgraduates. This was seen as an example of the provider's failure to address two different market segments, and therefore, as essentially one of school mismanagement. Such mismanagement was also seen as being responsible for the lack of co-ordination of assignment deadlines, which then led to an overload of demand for computer and library resources during peak times. Such problems can be seen to be the result of poor service design. This is seen as an area of increasing importance with regard to the quality of service

provision (Clark et al, 2000; Pullman and Moore, 1999), and shifts the focus away from the service encounter to the pre-encounter process.

With regard to course content, a number of features caused student dissatisfaction. That the programme did not cover some of the subject areas expected, or to a level expected, was seen as a result of individual interests and personal need, and no consensus as to what should be included and to what depth was formed during the group discussions. However, there was near unanimous agreement as to the unacceptable level of repetition within the programme and a general feeling that a failure to place the modules in a broader context existed. This was seen as a problem of communication, course management, planning and co-ordination.

To a large extent, students evaluated the MBA programme in terms of their personal experience as course consumers and by comparing these experiences to their personal needs and expectations, a process described in chapter 3. They did not make judgements as to the quality of the programme based upon more externally generated, 'objective' standards and criteria. For example, there was no attempt to relate the course curriculum content or types of programme delivery methods to wider educational issues or to the ongoing debate as to what the role, aims and objectives of modern management education should be.

When students possessed considerable personal knowledge or experience within a particular field, for example, such as accounting and finance or information technology, they were, in the main, willing to accept that other students in their group would require the tutor to proceed more slowly than they might feel appropriate for them. This, in itself, was not regarded as a sign of poor programme quality and had, to some extent, been expected. However, there was potential for this situation to lead to dissatisfaction, 'At times, it gets a little boring. I don't go sometimes. There are other things I can do.' (ST)

For example, if it seemed to the student that the subject tutor did not recognise or formally acknowledge that this situation had arisen, dissatisfaction would result. If it were recognized, then some attempt to customise provision would be expected, even if only to a relatively minor degree. Both of these examples indicate an assumed level of professional competence and an ability to 'manage' the situation. If a module exemption request had been made by the student, but refused, the dissatisfaction would be increased.

Similarly, if the students felt that, in certain instances, some of their fellow students were 'generally too inexperienced to benefit from most elements of the programme' (ST) and therefore held back the pace of the course in every subject area, this was seen as problem of student recruitment and, therefore, a programme quality management issue. It was also felt that those students who made little or no contribution to group work and class activities and discussions could also have been managed better by business school staff, as other students had no authority to deal with this type of issue,

Some students make no contribution to course work. But, they get the same mark. I have refused to have two people in my group. Then I find one of them has been put in my group because no one will have him (ST).

Again, these findings find an echo within the service quality literature where the issue of managing quality when faced with considerable customer heterogeneity is seen as an increasingly important service management skill (Danaher, 1998).

Finally, during the group discussions, students indicated that they had personally, informally evaluated the MBA programme on an ongoing basis from the day it began. They pointed out that their impressions of its quality had changed constantly and, therefore, they felt that the stage at which they were asked questions about the quality of the programme would significantly affect the answers they gave. 'At the end of the first term, I hated it. Now

I'm much happier.' (ST) As suggested earlier, they also felt that they might not be able to fully appreciate the quality of the education they were receiving for some years, if at all.

They believed that their varying perceptions of programme quality related, in part, to the nature of the learning process but also to their own emotions and moods. Positive moods made them contribute more readily to the educational activities, and, in doing so, to help the activities succeed, whereas as would be expected, negative moods had the opposite effect. Moods also were important in terms of the student's evaluation process. Knowles et al (1999), have investigated the link between customer 'mood' and response to services, and support the findings that this can have a significant impact on customer evaluation of service quality. This factor, along with the other issues, developed within the analysis of the three areas of primary research are now drawn together, and further analysed and evaluated in terms of prevailing quality theory, in chapter 6.

## **5.8 A COMPARISON OF THE QUALITY PERSPECTIVES OF MBA DIRECTORS, PROSPECTIVE MBA STUDENTS AND PRACTISING MBA STUDENTS.**

Before any quality perspective comparison between the stakeholders can take place, it is important to recognise a number of important issues.

1. The research undertaken has not been able to identify a single, homogenous quality perspective that can be seen as representative of the entire group of either MBA Directors, prospective MBA students or practising MBA students. While some members of each group do share similar views with regard to MBA quality, it is also clear that considerable differences exist within each stakeholder group. This can be seen as a finding clearly in line with a wide range of quality-related research in a variety of fields (Phillip and Hazlett, 1997; Walker and Baker, 2000).

2. Individual members of the different stakeholder groups do not exclusively rely on any single quality perspective. While some individuals may tend towards a particular perspective they will often employ multiple perspectives simultaneously, again a finding supported by research evidence (Berry and Lampo, 2000).

3. The quality perspectives of individual members of each stakeholder group will also change over time both as their experience of the MBA programme grows, and as they are influenced by interactions within and between the three stakeholder groups, and the wider educational, social and business environment (Hansen and Danaher, 1999).

The method by which the comparison has been undertaken was to use the comments made by the MBA Directors as the initial points of reference. These reference points were then grouped into a number of broad categories and compared and contrasted with the views put forward by the prospective MBA students and practising MBA students. When a prospective student is being quoted, the initials 'PS' has been used for the purpose of identification. In the case of practising students 'ST' has been used.

The categories were devised using content analysis, as described in Chapter 4. The process involved the continual re-reading of the texts of the Director interviews until categories emerged from the texts based upon keywords or phrases. Once the categories had been established in this way further re-reading of the texts was undertaken using the categories as a point of reference. The order of the eight categories shown below is not of significance.

1. The importance of relative MBA quality
2. MBA quality as a function of programme attributes
3. MBA quality in terms of student satisfaction
4. MBA quality: The student as product not consumer
5. MBA quality: The need for an holistic approach

6. MBA quality as a function of the factors of production
7. The role of quality leadership within the educational setting
8. MBA quality problems as a function of poor communications

As will be seen, some of the categories indicated above are further sub-divided to reflect different aspects of the broader heading.

### **5.8.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIVE MBA QUALITY**

This category examines the notion of MBA quality not in terms of intrinsic worth, but rather in terms of relative worth, that is by viewing the quality of any given MBA programme not by how it might compare to a particular management education ideal or model, but rather by how it compares to other MBA programmes within the market (Karmarkar and Pitbladdo, 1995; Prokesch, 1995). This broad category can be sub-divided into a number of sub-sections.

#### **5.8.1.1. MBA quality in terms of value for money**

Director comments such as 'We think this is one of the best MBAs you can get for the amount you have to pay.' (Director B) clearly shows that the Director believes a relationship exists between the quality of his business school's MBA programme and the quality of other MBA programmes. It also indicates that the Director believes that the price of the other MBA programmes is also important and that value for money is being seen as by prospective students as a key factor in terms of differentiating between alternatives.

There can be no doubt that prospective MBA students are keenly aware of the high cost of MBA education and that for some this realisation came as something of an unpleasant surprise,

I am genuinely shocked about the high cost of a programme; even part-time courses work out at over £100 a week (PS5),  
(And)  
If I go full-time I am taking on considerable financial outlay (PS9).



The evidence indicates that 'value' is an issue for prospective students, but not relative value. They are concerned with value in terms of the financial rewards that successful programme completion will bring, set against the financial cost of the programme, an attitude expressed explicitly by PS14 who says, 'I am looking for a substantial reward at the end [of the programme]'. Given such a finding, it is clear that MBA Directors might be better advised to stress the 'investment' nature of the MBA, rather than the value in relation to competing programmes.

Part of the emphasis programme Directors placed on the importance of value related to the increasing trend they had noted for students to finance their studies themselves,

The days of companies paying for MBAs seem to be coming to an end. They [the companies] might make a contribution but it's not much (Director C).

Evidence from prospective students does seem to support this view that students increasingly finance their own studies, 'the course was within my price range' (ST10) and that the price of the programme provides the starting point for programme selection, for example PS14, 'It's like anything, there's a limit, you might go beyond it a bit, but not much'.

However this should not be taken to mean that prospective students necessarily believe, 'the cheaper the better'. Comments such as, 'If the price was too low, you would wonder what was wrong with it' (PS20) do indicate that a link is being made between quality and price. If the product is regarded as well below the market norm there are two potential problems. Firstly, the components required to deliver the programme might simply not exist, and secondly, the reputation of the programme (a point dealt with in more detail below), and subsequent marketability of the successful student would be relatively low.

In summary, it can be seen that while programme Directors are correct to assume that 'value' is a useful point of reference, the notion of value is perceived in different terms by their potential customers.

#### **5.8.1.2 MBA quality and institutional/programme reputation**

The perceived importance of the quality of a given MBA programme compared to others is similarly reflected in the comment 'We are well regarded in the marketplace. We have a good track record and a good name.' (Director A). The distinction between this comment and the one made by Director B in the section above is that while relative quality is set against price in the first instance, in the second case, the key to quality differentiation is reputation. Director E also makes a similar point when he remarks, 'As one of the leading MBAs in Europe, we are expected to provide a programme of the highest quality'.

There is considerable evidence to support the view that reputation is an important quality issue. Some prospective students and practising students make the point explicitly, for example, 'Where you get your MBA is vital', and, 'They have a good name'. (PS2) For others the issue of reputation is wider than any particular institution and reflects factors such as the country of origin, 'Being educated in the UK is seen as very prestigious' (PS16). The importance of where, both in the narrower and wider sense, you obtained your qualification has probably grown in importance as the market for MBAs has opened up,

In some ways, it's [the MBA] becoming quite common. Its certainly not unusual...where you get your MBA is vital (PS2)

As well as being a positive reason to seek out particular programmes, reputation, or lack of it, can be seen to have a negative dimension, 'Some MBAs are not worth the paper they are written on', (PS20).

#### **5.8.2 MBA QUALITY AS A FUNCTION OF PROGRAMME ATTRIBUTES**

In the previous section, examples were given of the way in which MBA Directors, prospective students and practising students were, to a greater or

lesser extent, focusing upon the quality of one programme in relation to that of another. While it is clear that some MBA programmes will have more quality attributes than others and comparisons between the attributes could therefore be made, in this section the attributes are focused upon because of their perceived intrinsic worth, that is, in terms of the benefit they are seen as delivering to the student.

#### **5.8.2.1. Quality in terms of external recognition**

The issue of reputation, explored above, is to some degree linked to an individual programme's external recognition. While this does relate, in part, to 'relative quality' described above, it also has an extra dimension. This is because while an institution that is a member of AMBA or associated with professional bodies is likely to have marketing advantages compared to those institutions who are not, it is also seen as impacting on an a programme's intrinsic worth, particularly in terms of the student's future prospects.

For example, 'For overseas students [international recognition] is of particular relevance' (Director D) and 'AMBA accreditation is also useful. For some students, it is an essential kite mark' (Director A). In these quotes, the 'particular relevance' and 'essential kite mark' refer to the future marketability of the student. The Directors feel that for the student, this external recognition is a real advantage when applying for jobs, and it is clear that, for some prospective students, this is the case. 'I would not consider any non-AMBA course.' (PS4). However, for others, such recognition was not an issue because it was assumed that a regulatory authority existed, 'I assume you can't just call something an MBA.' (PS1), and, 'There must be a system of inspection.' (PS10).

#### **5.8.2.2. MBA Quality in terms of ease of access**

For some Directors, a major MBA quality attribute was the programme's ease of access. In some respects, this could be seen as the essential quality requirement. If a student is qualified to undertake a programme and has the means to finance it, all other quality considerations are irrelevant if

the manner in which it is designed and constructed prohibits his/her attendance on that programme. For example, the comments,

Many of our students have partners, children, travel a lot etc. This is the only way [flexible multi-mode study] they can get an MBA (Director C).

(And)

Our part-time market is fairly tied to us (Director I).

Clearly, ease of access is regarded as an essential quality attribute by some MBA Directors.

The prospective student interviews confirmed this view for would be part-time students. For some, part-time programmes offered the only chance of MBA study even though a full-time course would have been preferable,

In an ideal world, I would like to really take time over it. It would be nice to be a student in the real sense and be able to devote all my energies to it (PS18).

For others, ease of access was broadened to ease of maintenance,

It's very much secondary to my job. I am really going to have to monitor whether I can balance both things (PS15).

### **5.8.3 MBA QUALITY IN TERMS OF STUDENT SATISFACTION**

Many of the Director-generated responses either explicitly or implicitly equate MBA programme quality with student (customer) satisfaction. When Director F says, 'The bottom line is customer [student] satisfaction', the implication is that it is the overriding consideration. This is seen as a vital consideration, not simply for the maintenance of a successful and 'happy' programme in the short run, but also in terms of the programme's long-term viability, 'With a local market, word of mouth recommendation is vital.' (Director I)

Both the prospective and practising student interviews confirmed that word of mouth recommendation played a part in the decision-making process for a number of students. 'I have spent a lot of time asking around.' (PS6), 'I

know someone on the course; they are very keen.' (PS18), and, 'I know previous MBA students.' (ST).

#### **5.8.3.1 Delivering Student Satisfaction**

For some Directors a key element with regard to delivering student satisfaction is responsiveness,

Most students like to be treated as customers in terms of being consulted and kept informed. When things go wrong, particularly, they want to be treated like adults (Director G).

Although the 'common sense' view would be that this must be the case, no evidence was forthcoming from either set of interviews to support it. Similarly, not one prospective or practising student explicitly mentioned the Director's ability to solve problems as an important element of customer satisfaction, even though some Directors often saw their role in terms of solving quality problems,

I often mediate between students, who are concerned about particular aspects or classes and the staff involved (Director H).

However, when 'things' do not get better, clear dissatisfaction was evident,

Sometimes it goes from bad to worse. We just stop going. At times, there are only six or so in the class (ST)

It might be the case here that while solving problems will not cause satisfaction, failure to do so will cause or increase dissatisfaction.

In order to carry out such a 'fire fighting' function, good communication and accessibility are seen as essential. 'An essential part of my job is to be available to all those involved in the MBA, no matter what the level.' (Director C). Not one prospective or practising student highlighted communication as an area where they felt satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Again, as with the 'problem-solving' issue discussed above, such considerations may not consciously register until a particular incident arises which focuses attention on communication problems.

### **5.8.3.2 Limits to the Student Satisfaction Perspective**

Even for those Directors who espoused the notion of quality in terms of student satisfaction, there were clear limits regarding how far such a perspective could influence the running of the course. There were two main reasons for this. First, some Directors believed that the students themselves realised there were 'satisfaction boundaries' which could not be crossed. 'The students recognise they can't always have what they want.' (Director A). Secondly, there was also the feeling that students were not always in a position to make 'reasonable' quality judgements. Director A felt that,

Students often fail to distinguish between input and output. They often feel if they have worked hard, or harder than a colleague, they should be rewarded for effort. We [the teaching staff] tend to be more concerned with output

In a similar vein Director H commented,

At times they [students] want to be 'spoon fed' and this means they often rate tutors who challenged them to think in a relatively low manner. They often tend to rate those who provide tangible items such as overhead transparencies or handouts highly, often focusing on the presentation not the content

The implication of the above is that 'teacher knows best' and that unless the student's quality requirement conforms to that which the Director feels is acceptable, it will be ruled 'out of court'. This type of response is sometimes broadened by some Directors and reflects a more general lack of sympathy with the notion of student satisfaction stemming from what could be described as 'educational consumerism'. This is evidenced by remarks such as,

Students are increasingly demanding, right across the board (Director C), We are not running a five star hotel (Director A), and Students are not buying a guarantee that, at the end, they will graduate (Director H).

The Director antipathy displayed to what could be described as general levels of educational consumerism was also expressed with regard to

individual students who were simply seen as 'difficult'. As Director I indicates,

Occasionally there are just difficult attention-seekers who always complain about something and tend to have problems with everyone including their fellow students.

Such types of student were recognised by practising students, commenting that, 'From the start, two girls were unhappy; they left' (ST) and with regard to the same students remarked that both had left the programme 'having made little effort to meet the staff halfway' (ST).

#### **5.8.4. MBA QUALITY: THE STUDENT AS A PRODUCT NOT A CUSTOMER**

An interesting variant of the customer satisfaction approach to quality can be found with regard to the notion of the customer as the wider business community and the student as the 'product'. Director A states this explicitly when he says,

Employers need to know what they are getting and that what they are getting [the student] is of an appropriate quality. This is also in the student's interests in the long term, as well as ours and the company's.

Director A is voicing the opinion that such an approach is of benefit to all the main MBA stakeholders in the longer run. Director H focuses on the benefits for the employer, the school and the credibility of the qualification itself,

It's important that we [the business school] are seen as credible within the business world. This means that firms must see our students as being able to make a contribution from day one. It is also important for the qualification.

This notion of student as product does have the effect of making the student dependent on the provider to a much greater extent than if they are taking the role of the consumer. As Director A indicates,

Students are to a large extent dependent on us to ensure their programme conforms to the required standard,

(and as Director H explains the Director's role can be seen as pivotal)

My role is to try to ensure that in its entirety, the programme is of an acceptable standard.

The key term here is 'standard' prefaced by 'required' (Director A) and 'acceptable' (Director H).

In the practising student interviews, such dependence was noticeable, for example, 'I won't know if it was worthwhile until I try to get a job' (ST), a comment which also implicitly recognises the need for the qualification to be attractive to stakeholders other than the direct consumer. Without wider acceptance within the business community, the whole purpose of attendance on the programme is called into question; 'I need an MBA in order to progress' (PS11), 'Without an MBA I will end up stuck where I am' (PS4). As a result there is a continual trade off between wanting to achieve the best possible result for oneself and maintaining generally high standards that might mean that some 'consumers' have to fail in order to reassure 'outsiders' as to the quality control procedures.

#### **5.8.5. MBA QUALITY - A HOLISTIC APPROACH**

A number of programme Directors stressed the need to view the MBA as a 'whole', rather than in terms of a series of related, but independent parts. They see the Director's role as being vital in terms of, 'seeing it [the programme] in its entirety.' (Director H) and 'I have an overall picture and am able to take a wider view' (Director C). Such a role distinguished them from the course tutors,

Teaching staff can be seen as responsible for their subject areas, whereas I am responsible for taking a wider perspective (Director A),  
(and),

The students tend to view quality from a subject perspective. Do they get on with the teacher and will they pass the exam? To a large degree, the teaching staff adopts the same subject specific approach; their main concern is to update the content and develop the delivery (Director B).

To some extent both prospective students and practising students saw the programme holistically, in terms of wanting to 'fit in' and to find a



course that had 'the right feel'. They were also keen to ensure that the programme they were considering contained the relevant breadth, with regard to course content. However, the greatest focus of student satisfaction was often subject or tutor based rather than, with the programme as a whole.

#### **5.8.6. MBA QUALITY AS A FUNCTION OF THE 'FACTORS OF PRODUCTION'**

When discussing the quality of the MBA programme for which they were responsible, some Directors made reference to the quality of the inputs that were available to them, and the relationship between the quality of those inputs and the final product. The three factors of production referred to most often were the quality of the teaching and support staff (labour), the quality of the infrastructure (capital) and the quality of the students (raw materials).

##### **5.8.6.1 The quality of the MBA staff**

'The quality of the staff is vital. We are able to provide expertise which enables high level specialisation to take place' (Director E). This is particularly important because 'managers' recognise that they do not possess the expertise to involve themselves directly in the various subject areas and must therefore rely on the teaching staff,

I [the MBA Director] don't get involved in the teaching aspect to any great extent. I'm not qualified to do so in terms of much of it. There is a huge variety of teaching approaches being taken. I'm not a line manager (Director E).

Not surprisingly staff quality, or lack of quality was a major concern of practising students, both at the pre-purchase stage, 'When I visited I liked the rapport with the staff' (ST) and through ongoing interactions as the programme proceeds,

Some staff are much more organised than others, I can't see why this should be the case (ST).

(And)

Some sessions are great, others are badly organised. At the end you think, what a complete waste of time (ST).

It is interesting to note that both students make reference to 'good' sessions in terms of sessions that are not so good. Not only are the sessions unsatisfactory learning experiences in themselves, the dissatisfaction is compounded by the fact that they are also relatively unsatisfactory.

It is not simply the academic or teaching ability of the tutors that matters. Motivation is also important, Director C,

When things go wrong, it is the staff who want to change them, and often drive the change. I am not there with a big stick  
(and)

[In most cases] people did not come into management education to do a bad job, or would be in it if they did not like students and have their best interests at heart (Director G).

Such staff 'goodwill' was a factor of significant importance to practising students, the following quote summing up the feelings of many,

Meeting them [the staff] on a day-to-day basis is the best part of the relationship. It's more satisfying than the formal classes (ST)

The students expect interaction with the staff on a formal basis but see personal contact that goes beyond that as evidence that the MBA programme is not simply a financial transaction.

It is not just the quality of academic staff that has an impact on the quality of the programme, particularly in terms of providing a quality image for students (customers) and potential students (potential customers),

Responding quickly to enquiries, answering the phone, knowing about the course, all send the right, or wrong, message. It's surprising how important little things are in terms of conveying the right, customer-orientated message (Director F).

This type of quality measure was seen as important because this type of service quality was an area where the students almost certainly did have

previous experience, compared to Masters degree education, where direct experience was much less likely. There was, however, no explicit mention of this issue by any individual in either the prospective student or practising student groups.

#### **5.8.5.2 The quality of the institutional infrastructure**

The quality, or in some cases evident lack of quality, of the institutional infrastructure has an obvious impact on the quality of the programme, 'Libraries and computer facilities are a constant headache.' (Director F) and,

If they visit they like to see rooms, libraries, etc. They like to know where they will stay. They don't ask detailed questions about course content, apart from particular areas of their special interest (Director A)

These issues were seen as relevant by both prospective and practising students. Frustration with library and IT facilities was particularly noticeable with regard to the practising students.

#### **5.8.5.3 The quality of the MBA students**

All the programme Directors mentioned the way in which the quality of the MBA programme was dependent upon the quality of the MBA students. The following quote typifies the generally held view,

Ultimately the success of the course depends upon the students. If they have been recruited properly, they are each other's single most important resource. If they don't gel and support each other it is an up hill task (Director G).

Discussions with the Directors revealed that the 'quality' of the students was seen as a function of their intellectual ability, their practical business experience (both in terms of duration and level of seniority), their maturity and their motivation. Practising students echoed these sentiments

Being able to draw on others' expertise has been very important... others [students] help you and you return the favour. (ST),

and,

I now realise the importance of experience [in terms of fellow students] in learning in groups. (ST).

Some prospective students were also aware of the need for classmates of 'quality',

I am very keen to make useful contacts, to learn from the experience of others. I have been told that this is the most important aspect of the course (PS8).

For others, classmate issues were centred more around compatibility,

I don't get a chance to meet similar sorts of people as myself outside the work situation. (PS10).

For the institution, maintaining the quality of the student comes at a price however,

We apply rigorous entry standards. I am not sure how some other programmes operate. We turn away students who then find other programmes. (Director E).

The last sentence of this quotation expresses a sentiment echoed by a prospective student, 'It seems anyone can get on to some MBAs. Its simply a matter of paying.' (PS20).

The MBA Directors were keenly aware of the dilemma, student as essential resource or means of raising revenue?

There is a constant balancing act between the quality of the student and the viability of the programme. (Director G)

and

The revenue the MBA brings in is a key resource for us, and, I know, for many universities (Director H).

#### **5.8.7. THE ROLE OF QUALITY LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING**

There is clear evidence that Directors felt that the role of quality leadership was vital in raising standards,

I am here to maintain a central theme with regard to what we intend to do, what we stand for. (Director D)

and,

I was brought in to give the MBA more direction. I clearly have my own ideas on where we need to go (Director B).

This issue is seen as important by practising students, as when poor leadership results in action not being taken with regard to those students who 'free ride' in group work situations, or in terms of poorly organised programmes, 'At times, many of the difficulties are completely avoidable which makes it [dissatisfaction] worse.' (ST)

#### **5.8.7.1 Educating about quality.**

Another aspect of quality leadership can be seen in terms of the view held by some Directors that part of their role was to educate, not simply with regard to management education, but also in terms of what quality management education actually is,

They [the students] tell me they often felt they know less now than when they started. We try to reassure them by telling them that's a good thing; its part of the learning process. Gradually they begin to see what we are trying to do. They become more comfortable with the processes involved and happier about what is being delivered. It is then we can have a more mature dialogue as to the quality of the course.

(Director F)

Evidence of the developmental nature of the student's needs and expectations can be seen in the practising student interviews shown above, for example, 'I am not absolutely sure why I wanted to study here, but I am pretty sure my motives have changed.' (ST)

Educating about quality, as part of the quality leadership role, was not always easy. For example, the induction programme was regarded as a useful medium from which to begin this process but it was a process that needed careful handling,

Inductions are tricky. Students come from all over the world and many are nervous and lacking confidence. You need to get the balance right. On the one hand they will get your support but you will also demand a great deal of input from them. The right tone must be set. They must know what you expect from them (Director G)

There is also the problem of the theory being taught that may run counter to the experience of the student. As one prospective student commented, 'How can a college teach marketing if it can't market itself?' (PS5) Such a comment reflects the way in which a mismatch between what is being 'said and done' undermines the programme's credibility, as does the practising students' comments regarding poorly organised events and lack of coordination.

Other aspects of the quality leadership role were also problematic. For example, with regard to the teaching staff Director B commented,

They [the teaching staff] can be quite cynical about managers and management visions. They see me as someone who can help them, not their boss.

There was no evidence to suggest that such cynicism had been transmitted to the practising students however.

The 'system' was also seen as inhibiting quality leadership being highly 'segmented' (Director B) and 'not lending itself to quality management in the same way as in industry' (Director G). As a result, for a Director trying to take on a quality leadership role, 'changing things is not easy' (Director B).

Many examples of this type of problem can be found with the student responses, such as,

The librarians are very unhelpful, at times they are rude. They don't seem to know their stuff (ST).

and,

Some students make no contribution to coursework, but they get the same mark. I have refused to have two people in my group. Then I find one has been put in my group because no one will have them (ST).

#### **5.8.7.2 QUALITY PROBLEMS AS A FUNCTION OF POOR COMMUNICATIONS**

Quality problems caused and/or exacerbated by poor communications featured in a number of MBA Director responses. In part, the concern regarding effective communication flows from the need to be able to 'practice what you preach', already discussed above in relation to the MBA curriculum, and, in terms of the need to 'educate about quality', a topic also referred to previously.

However, this concern also stems from the co-ordinating role often played by the MBA Directors, because in such a role, practical communication problems and issues are more likely to be highlighted. Then problems manifest themselves in a variety of ways, for example when Director B says, 'when, I look at the programme as a whole, we could do more to even out the workload', we can identify a breakdown in communication between MBA staff which manifests itself in terms of too many assignments being bunched into too small a time frame. For students there are more basic co-ordination and communication problems, 'We've been shown the same video three times, totally unacceptable' (ST).

The difficulties of ensuring good communications within higher education have already been discussed. Similar problems have been addressed in terms of 'managing professional intellect' (Quinn et al, 1996), and in terms of the impact of 'culture and internal politics' (Stuart, 1998).

As with the mismatch between theory and practice described above, such obvious forms of poor management serve to undermine credibility in the eyes of the students.

Attempts to overcome these problems formed quite a large part of the MBA Director's role. It was clear that a variety of techniques were employed by them, 'At times I provide appropriate feedback to staff or students' (Director C). Such communication might be formal, but may also be informal, where 'a quiet word with a colleague' (Director C) was more appropriate. Whilst the Directors can do their best to improve 'downward' communication, they can not always be sure about the accuracy of the upward communication with regard to the quality of the programme because MBA staff can 'act as a filter' (Director G) for the students' feelings regarding various aspects of the course.

The ability of the staff to act as a filter is, in part, reduced if the Director is willing and able to take a proactive role with regard to student communication. As Director D indicates this depends upon the size of the course and the other demand placed upon him or her, 'I know every student well. I have time to relate to them as individuals' (Director E). Such an approach can create the feeling of a 'community' (Director B) with obvious benefits for the quality process and student satisfaction as evidenced by these quotes,

You don't want to be a number. (ST), and, The course was not so big that you might feel lost. This is particularly important for me, as I am not from a large town. (ST), and, It's a relatively small course. You get to know people very quickly. (ST)

For some Directors acting as the communication link is vital,

I [the programme Director] act as a link between the students and staff and senior manager. I also represent the programme in external examiners meetings and other management committees within the university. (Director B)

External communication is also important, 'Being aware of what is going on elsewhere is a key element of keeping up to date.' (Director H)

It is fair to conclude that from the perspective of the three groups of stakeholders, the creation of 'relationships' that go beyond the traditional customer/service provider relationship is a major source of satisfaction.



## **5.9 CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter set out to present an overview of the significant findings, to examine those findings in the light of prevailing quality theory and to compare and contrast the perspectives of the main groups of stakeholders. In undertaking this, the aim was to move towards the research objectives, namely to inform the ongoing MBA quality debate, to evaluate prevailing quality theory, and to examine the use of quality as a political tool.

Having presented these findings, it is clear that the provision of MBA education presents the same challenges for managers, as does the provision of other services. The same can be said for prospective customers in terms of understanding quality issues and practising customers (students) in terms of understanding the roles they play in the delivery of the service and their contribution to their own satisfaction and the satisfaction of others.

Even though the length of the time of the 'transaction' (from one year to three years in terms of part-time programmes), the nature of the educational process, the history of academic freedom and the dynamic nature of the higher educational environment, all impose their own particular set of 'MBA peculiarities', the provision of an MBA is not unique. Rather it is different in terms of the degree to which particular quality issues may, or may not, affect it.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this final chapter, the major issues arising from the research project are identified and discussed and a series of conclusions are presented. A number of suggestions for possible further research are also made on the basis of the analysis of the research findings. Throughout this chapter, the original research objectives are revisited and used as a framework for the discussion that takes place, they are:

1. To inform the ongoing MBA quality debate and in doing so, to contribute to the wider management education and higher education quality debates.
2. To evaluate the relevance of prevailing quality theory and commercial quality initiatives and models as a means of enhancing MBA programme quality.
3. To compare and contrast the quality perspectives of three groups of MBA programme stakeholders:  
MBA Directors,  
Prospective MBA students,  
Practising MBA students.
4. To explore the way in which MBA Directors exploit the notion of quality, using it as a power lever for political ends.

#### **6.2. A DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS IN THE LIGHT OF PREVAILING MANAGEMENT AND QUALITY MANAGEMENT THEORY**

In this section, the research findings described in chapter 5 are discussed in the light of the management and quality management theory presented in

chapters 3, 4 and 5. Oakland's, (1994) 'criteria for quality leadership' and Kotler's, (1994), 'functions of quality management' are used as a framework for exploring the nature of the management role within the provision of the MBA and the service quality model developed by Zeithaml et al (1990) is used to broaden the scope of the investigation, incorporating the results of both student and prospective student feedback. Other 'themes' from the quality management literature are introduced as and when appropriate.

### **6.2.1.THE POLITICAL NATURE OF QUALITY**

Throughout this chapter the term 'theory' is being used in its widest sense, in line with the views put forward by McGregor (1960) and Ralph (1986) in chapter 3 above. Theory is, therefore, seen as being made up of those assumptions, generalisations and propositions that make comprehensible, past and ongoing events, and enable predictions to be made and courses of action to be plotted. Before the gap analysis and quality leadership models are examined in the light of the research findings a more general discussion as to the role of theory within the management of MBA programmes is put forward as a means of establishing a broader context with regard to the relationship between theory and practice.

One of the objectives of this research project was to 'inform the ongoing MBA quality debate', the rationale for such an objective being a response to the disquiet being expressed as to the quality of some MBA programmes, and the fear that these concerns would subsequently damage the qualification's credibility and reputation for all providers. The findings of this research provide clear and unequivocal evidence of the awareness of such concerns by all three groups of stakeholder respondents. However, even though this situation poses a potential 'threat' for the credibility of the MBA as an award, it also offers considerable opportunities for those institutions that are able to differentiate themselves as high quality providers within the market place.

The position of the MBA Directors within their respective institutions had also been enhanced to some degree as a consequence of the general MBA quality concerns being expressed, and the resulting media and consumer 'disquiet'. With an increasing number of business schools relying on the revenue that the MBA brings, any adverse publicity regarding the quality of their programme has potentially disastrous results. This had therefore helped to increase the influence of the MBA Directors within their organisations, and was, to some extent being used as a power lever by them, in order to gain greater levels of resources and change existing systems and structures.

From a marketing point of view, MBA Directors had also seen another unexpected advantage. Those students who had graduated were often very keen to promote their course, and qualification, in the best possible light to 'outsiders'. Having invested considerable amounts of time and money in order to widen their career options, increase their potential earnings and accelerate their career path, successful graduates have a vested interest in the image that the programme has in the wider world in a way that consumers of many other products simply do not.

This finding reinforces a theme that will be repeated throughout this chapter, namely the political nature of quality. A practising student might seek to accentuate quality problems while undertaking the programme in order to achieve a particular goal, for example negotiating an assignment deadline extension because of inadequate tutor briefing, but when applying for jobs they would be likely only to focus upon the positive aspects of programme quality for obvious reasons.

Another objective of the research project is 'to evaluate the relevance of prevailing quality theory and commercial quality theories and models as a means of enhancing MBA programme quality', and in this context the problems associated with quality theory's manufacturing legacy has been discussed in both chapters 2 and 3. While the problems of adapting such

theories to the field of higher education will be discussed in more detail below there is also evidence of an unexpected advantage of the legacy that can be explained as follows.

The increased focus upon quality issues within the commercial manufacturing sector and its subsequent spread to the commercial service sector has legitimised the focus upon quality in higher education in general and the MBA in particular. For prospective and practising MBA students, many of whom have worked in the commercial world, being concerned about quality is seen as 'natural'. The concern does not necessarily stem from a perceived problem with existing quality but rather from the desire to constantly improve quality and to view quality as a competitive weapon in the same way as price or productivity. Prospective students are not surprised about the provider's focus on quality nor are they perturbed with regard to the degree of market segmentation that exists in which quality and price are linked, be it explicitly, or indirectly.

Whereas the academic community might exercise itself with issues such as whether it is morally justified for MBA programmes to vary to the extent they obviously do (Benwell and Gibbs 1996) prospective students, taking a value-based approach to the 'product' (Garvin 1988), have no such qualms. As with the vast majority of goods and services they purchase in their daily lives, it is perfectly natural for a range of offerings to be available satisfying different market segments at different prices.

The closeness of MBA Directors to the market in which they are operating, due to their role in interviewing prospective students, attending MBA fairs, conducting induction programmes and networking with other professionals in the field, allows them to use this way of conceptualising quality when they perceive it to be in their interests to do so. However, it is also clear that the Directors will make use of other ways of conceptualising quality, such as the transcendent approach, the product based approach or the user based

approach (Garvin 1988) when these are seen by them as more effective power levers.

The third research objective, 'to compare and contrast the quality perspectives of three groups of stakeholders' is a recognition of the growing volume of literature that points to the increased importance of the stakeholder approach to educational provision. Much of this literature emanates from one particular group of stakeholders, namely academics, and often takes the form of a defence of their traditionally held power and status in the face of growing influence from educational managers, central government and students among others.

The research findings do confirm that the position of MBA Directors, who although originally all academics now have a principal role as educational managers, has benefited from the rise of the stakeholder approach to educational provision. The benefits have flowed from the Director's position within the MBA educational system, as their central role allows them to shape the interactions between students, outside bodies, employers and administrative and teaching staff, playing the part of the 'honest broker' at the hub of the process.

Being placed at the hub of such a process allows the programme Director not simply to control the flow of information but also, very importantly, to shape the manner in which quality is conceptualised, the way quality is perceived and what should or should not be legitimately expected.

For example, the programme Director interviews provide evidence that the Directors will 'promote' a particular quality perspective, be it customer satisfaction, conformance to requirements or value for money as they feel conditions dictate. In this sense, the ability to draw upon 'quality theory' can be seen as playing an important role with regard to the achievement of the MBA Director's goals, rather than in terms of informing behaviour. Theory

can be seen, as a result, as part of a post action justification process being used for primarily micro-political reasons.

The notion that the manner in which quality is perceived will determine the way, in which quality will subsequently be measured, controlled and assured is supported, in part, by the evidence that has already been presented. However, the research findings also indicate that such a causal relationship needs to be qualified and set within a much more dynamic and fluid micro-political dimension if it is to be fully understood. As a result, an MBA programme's quality measurement, control and assurance systems can be principally viewed as an initial framework that is related to that programme's stated quality philosophy, but that the reality of quality perception, assurance and control, its emphasis, timing and the nature of its implementation will depend to a large extent upon the agenda of the MBA Directors and the preferred outcomes they seek.

The ability of MBA Directors to shape stakeholder expectations with regard to the quality of the programmes is confirmed by the results of the practising student interviews. The prospective student interviews also lend support to this finding as they show that there exists a range of different quality expectations within the group of respondents and the general lack of clarity in terms of what constitutes a high quality programme. As the students undertake the programme it is clear that they 'learn' about quality and incorporate a variety of factors into the quality equation. as the programme unfolds. This latter point is seen as a form of 'natural progression', and as such, part of the process of personal development. Specifically, the students learn that;

1. They, as individual students, are to a large extent responsible for the quality of their educational experience and that they will also influence, and in turn be influenced by their fellow students in this respect. This realisation, continually reinforced by MBA Directors, has the effect of shifting the focus for quality away from the formal provider.

2. The learning process can be a difficult, if not painful process and that this difficulty and pain should not automatically be associated with poor programme quality. As a result, their perceptions of a particular tutor or subject may change with the realisation that they are working towards a particular outcome over time and that such a process legitimately requires them to struggle with issues or problems in the earlier stages of a given project. As they 'succeed' in this type of endeavour they tend to become more used to it and accepting of it, and as a result are less likely to rush to judgement about it.

3. As the consumer of the MBA they are legitimate arbiters of quality but they are not the only arbiters of quality. Other stakeholders such as external bodies and employers, among others, also have a legitimate interest in the way in which MBA programmes are structured and managed, and, on the standards that are being set.

4. That it is not in the long term interests of students to project a poor quality image of the programme from which they are graduating, a point dealt with in some detail above.

The rationale for a general discussion regarding the role that theory plays in enabling a greater understanding of various MBA programme quality issues, such as expectation, perception, design and implementation of MBA programme quality is to establish a broad theoretical context from which a specific investigation into the applicability of a number of quality models and approaches can be undertaken. This having been completed it is to these specific models and approaches that we now turn.

#### **6.2.2. THE CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE QUALITY LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

The importance of effective organizational and institutional 'leadership' as a means of developing and improving quality in manufacturing, the commercial



service sector and, the public services is now well established in a wide range of the prevailing literature (Cardona, (2000); Dale and Cooper, (1994); Dering, (1998); Prabhu and Robson, (2000).

Oakland, (1994), sets out five main criteria for effective quality leadership.

They are:

1. The development of clear, documented quality corporate beliefs and objectives.
2. The creation of a clear organizational strategy to support the stated quality mission.
3. The identification of critical quality-related processes, systems and procedures.
4. The establishment of an effective quality management structure within the organisation.
5. The promotion of quality-related empowerment, where relevant, throughout the organization.

Kotler, (1994) complements the criteria set out by Oakland by establishing three key functions of quality management, namely:

1. The making of quality promises
2. Enabling the quality promises
3. Monitoring the delivery of the quality promises.

It is both Oakland's and Kotler's contention that consistently high levels of quality will only be possible if leaders with the ultimate responsibility for

quality (in this case MBA programme Directors) effectively undertake the roles and functions described above. Although the approach of both writers is different in terms of its emphasis, their views can be seen as generally compatible and, when possible, they are integrated and discussed together.

The making of quality promises can be seen as a logical extension of both the development of quality corporate beliefs and the creation of a clear strategy to support the quality mission, and the evidence drawn from the MBA Director interviews casts doubt, in a variety of ways, upon the manner in which these functions are carried out. For example, the use by MBA Directors of multiple, and often operationally inconsistent quality perspectives and definitions means that clear quality visions are unlikely to exist in reality even though they may be formally stated as doing so. Even when dominant 'themes' such as 'customer satisfaction' consistently emerge, the meaning, the scope and the practical implications of such themes can be very different for different Directors.

When, 'the customer', can be taken simultaneously to be the individual student, the student body, the sponsoring organization if applicable, the business world or even society in general as any given situation dictates, the question must be asked 'to whom are MBA quality promises to be made?' This is because the interests of these different groups may be perceived as being different and the programme Director may then choose to satisfy those customers whose needs and expectations are most compatible with his or her own.

If we draw upon Pfeffer's, (1981), definition of organizational politics as,  
those activities taken within organizations to acquire,  
develop and use power and other resources to obtain  
one's preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is  
uncertainty (p.7),

we can see that it may be in the interests of the MBA programme Director to encourage some uncertainty with regard to who the MBA customer actually

is, in order to use their power and other resources to achieve their preferred personal or organizational outcomes.

Even when the notion of the customer is more narrowly defined and explicit quality promises are made to them in terms of student satisfaction, attempts to develop and implement a strategy to support such a mission can lack both credence and conviction. The reason for this is that many such strategies must be set against both the educational profession's generally negative reaction to what is regarded as educational consumerism and the underlying belief that students are often unable to make meaningful quality judgements (Grant et al, 2002).

As a result, the student's long term 'satisfaction' may be pre-determined by the Directors themselves in terms of the outcomes that they perceive as ultimately best for the student, even if the student does not know it or appreciate it at the time. As has already been shown, this type of approach can significantly increase the power of the programme Director who can take action 'in the name of the student'. Again, from the political perspective, the Directors can be seen to be building 'alliances', not formally, and perhaps not even with the knowledge of the 'ally', but importantly from the perspective of other third party stakeholders.

Enabling the delivery of such a quality promise is also made more difficult within the context of the MBA programme because of the perceived variety and incompatibility of the student body. The programme Director's relative inability to segment the MBA markets, and the sometimes held view that the students were often themselves at least partly to blame for their own dissatisfaction, due to a failure on their part to engage actively in the educational process, has led some programme Directors to try to replace 'getting it right first time' with a quality strategy based on empathy and 'fire fighting'. As has been shown in chapter 5, there is clear evidence from practising MBA students that such a policy is to a large extent unsatisfactory as far as they are concerned.

There is also some evidence to suggest that, at times, MBA Directors actually sought to reduce, rather than create, quality-related empowerment in response to a perceived threat from the culture of academic freedom and close student/teacher relationships that may serve to isolate them and reduce their power to manage. Attempts to standardise aspects of MBA programme delivery and reduce variation in the name of improving reliability, which as we have seen is a genuine student quality concern, can have the effect of reducing the ability of the teacher to innovate and improvise, and, as a result, reduce his or her power to deliver what they regard as the highest possible quality.

From the perspective of the MBA Programme Director, this may also have the not unwelcome side effect of increasing his or her influence at the expense of the academic staff. Both Antony, (1994) and Guest, (1991), have explored the way in which managers extend their 'right to manage' as a means of developing their power and increasing the range of activities over which they have 'legitimate' influence. By expanding the area of 'management prerogative', they legitimise their activities in new aspects of the production process. The use of 'rules to declare the knowledge of some groups more valid than others', (p.71), is seen by Gaventa and Cornwall, (2000), as a major means of extending influence.

The advantage for the manager, in this case the MBA Director, is the relatively impersonal nature of the technique. The evidence from practising MBA students was that along with interaction with fellow students, interaction with staff was potentially the most rewarding part of the programme. It could be argued, therefore, that attempts to increase the potential for interaction should be considered, not, as we have seen, initiate reductions in such contact.

The inability of MBA Directors to fully control the allocation of resources was also cited as a major impediment towards the establishment of quality

control and assurance procedures when compared to managers in the commercial sector. Particular examples of this included the inability to insist on the inclusion or exclusion of certain staff members on course teams and the existence of a department matrix structure that proved difficult for them to manage. The chain of command assumed in much of the quality management literature does not always exist within the academic world, and, among other things, this makes it difficult to deal effectively with under-performance (Stuart, 1998).

These difficulties are exacerbated if the business school has a large undergraduate commitment and forms part of a university or other larger institution, and if other non-quality-related considerations take precedence, such as the urgent need for the institution to raise full cost revenue. As in all organizations, there is always the question of internal politics and the existence of cultures which are resistant to change, but the fact that programme Directors find it particularly difficult to establish agreed management responsibilities within higher education and break down entrenched bureaucracies and traditional boundaries means that they feel less able to introduce new initiatives and changes in working practices than might their colleagues in the private sector.

It is evident that quality-related mission statements do exist and are presented in prospectuses, validation documents and other programme material. However, MBA Directors produced no evidence to show that these were systematically translated into more specific quality targets, set against student needs and expectations or communicated formally to teaching and administrative staff. Prospective students made no reference to this type of information when seeking to evaluate the quality of competing programmes and practising students did not use it as a means of evaluating the quality of the programme they had decided to undertake. This, in some part, can be seen to be the result of management's failure to establish a clear MBA programme-wide working definition of quality that was understood and agreed by all the major MBA stakeholders. It may also, in part, be due to a

degree of cynicism that exists with regard to such statements, and the belief that such statements are more concerned with the marketing of programmes than the real delivery of quality.

During the interviews, MBA Directors were able to identify a set of priorities for their programmes, but tended to focus upon the programmes in a non-process-orientated manner. Individual problems would be addressed, for example with regard to a member of staff who was failing to deliver a particular programme to accepted standards. However, there was little recognition of the positive contribution being made by individual parts of the programme to the overall outcome. The nature of the whole educational package being offered to the students and where the critical elements were within this process seemed not to form a major part of the Directors' mindsets.

All of the potential problems described above contribute to the difficulty MBA Directors said they encountered in terms of monitoring programme quality (a major consideration of both Kotler and Oakland). These difficulties were further complicated and compounded by the relatively intangible nature of much of the educational process, the fact that the process is composed of multiple moments of truth, and that programme Directors often felt unqualified to intervene in subject areas outside their expertise.

Evidence from both programme Directors and practising students indicated that student satisfaction was often monitored in an ad hoc, and at times, contradictory manner, and there is little evidence of the results of student satisfaction surveys being reported back to the students and acted upon in a systematic manner to generate new procedures and approaches. Often such student satisfaction surveys were conducted by the staff themselves and then summarised for the Directors or for programme committees and reviews. While there is no suggestion that teaching staff sought to manipulate or modify the results of such surveys, the system does make itself vulnerable to such activities.

Formal student complaint procedures did exist but students were either ignorant of them, or ignored them, opting instead to use informal communication channels. To some extent this can be seen to reflect the close relationships built up between MBA students and business school staff. It may also reflect the fact that during the practising student interviews, no student indicated that they had encountered a major problem or issue that might warrant initiating a formal complaint.

The external examiner procedure was seen as providing safeguards in terms of minimum basic academic standards. The external examiner does provide the possibility for a given MBA programme to be benchmarked against others, particularly as the 'externals' are often drawn from practising academics working on other MBA programmes. However, the external examiner approach is often very much a subject specific quality evaluation, rather than an holistic one.

MBA Directors did not see the motivation of staff as a major element of their role. This was, in part, because they often regarded their function as largely one of co-ordination and overseeing a system in which lecturers have considerable power to develop and adapt course materials and teaching styles. It also reflected a realisation that they had very limited scope to reward high levels of quality in financial terms and that there was little incentive for good practice to be disseminated by individual staff members.

In some cases, the school's structures and procedures actually inhibited this process on all but an informal level. This finding runs counter to the models of leadership put forward in the literature where motivation, reward and effective communication are seen as key qualities for the effective leader in terms of his or her ability to improve organizational quality.

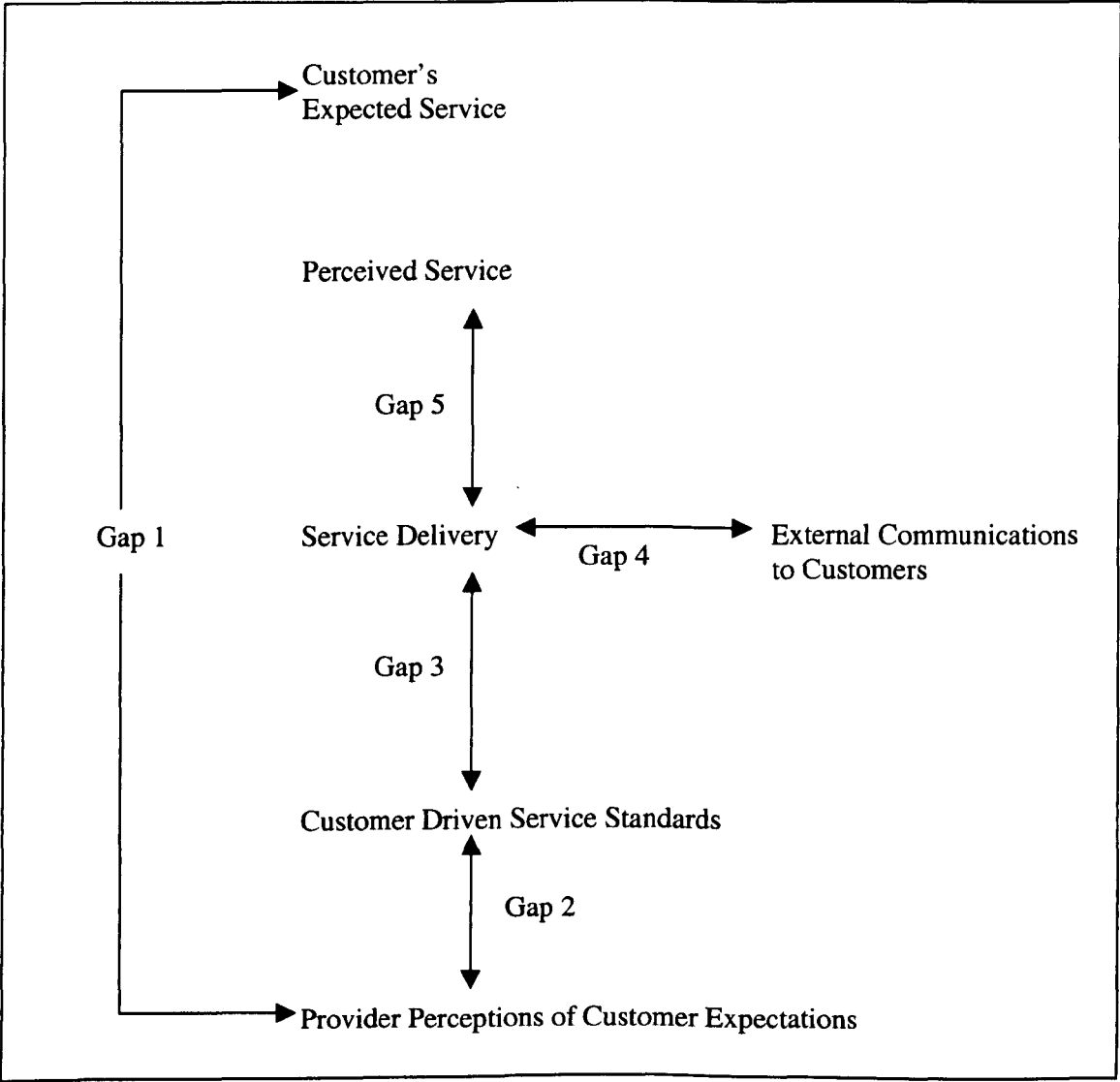
### **6.2.3 THE SERVICE QUALITY MODEL APPLIED TO THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The nature of, and relationship between, the various service quality gaps established by Zeithaml et al (1990) are set out in the diagram (6.1) below. In this section, the notion of the service gap is used as a framework by which to analyse a number of aspects of the research findings and in doing so to contribute to the achievement of the research objectives set out at the beginning of this chapter, particularly in terms of evaluating the relevance of the model to the MBA process in particular and higher education in general.

At the heart of the model is the assumption that the customer is the arbiter of service quality and that any gap between what the customer expected and what the customer perceived they received amounts to a 'quality problem'. It therefore follows that in order to deliver high levels of quality the provider must close the gap between student expectation and student perception.



**Figure 6.1 The Gaps Model of Service Quality**



**6.2.3.1 GAP 1: NOT KNOWING WHAT THE STUDENT EXPECTS**

The research findings indicate that considerable barriers exist with regard to the ability of the programme provider, in this case personified in the MBA Director, in terms of knowing what the potential and practising student actually expects from the programme. One such barrier can be seen to reside within the prevailing professional educationalist paradigm that stresses the paternalistic nature of the student/teacher relationship and the

'blindness' that this creates in terms of genuinely understanding student expectations (Stuart, 1998).

Even under those circumstances where MBA Directors are receptive to the notion that student wants and expectations are an important element in the quality equation, the research findings indicate that there is the very real possibility that the students do not actually know what to expect in any detailed sense. As a result, the students' wants may be so broad, for example, 'a good job at the end of the course', as to be of little practical use in terms of development of the service model. The student may get a good job at the end of the course, but this may have little to do with the quality of the service being delivered. In terms of a detailed knowledge of the way in which the programme should be taught, its content and structure there is no evidence that practising or prospective students have strong views or expectations of a specific, detailed nature.

Students may have general views as to how they should be treated as individuals, and how personal relationships between themselves and teaching and administrative staff should be conducted, but these cannot be seen as the same as a specific set of customer quality related expectations.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that very different types of students undertake MBA programmes and, as a result, they may have very different individual needs and expectations, which may even be incompatible, (Danaher 1998; Gilmore and Pine, 1997). Such 'wants' may range widely between the students and as we shall see below this may make it difficult to develop a general response to meet them. Alternatively staff may be more attuned to 'knowing' some students' wants than others', based on their own experiences, culture and personal preferences and characteristics. They may also respond more readily in relation to the students' differing ability to articulate and communicate their wants through the system.

Given the above, MBA Directors may be more attuned to avoiding what students do not want, rather than seeking to deliver what they might want. This is because it is almost certainly easier for students to articulate their specific dislikes regarding an experience they have had than to formulate expectations prior to the experience. It may be possible for Directors to translate such dislikes into a series of future student expectations, but there is plenty of evidence within the commercial world to indicate that organisations that adopt such an approach can quickly lose touch with the next generation of customers.

Another approach that has become evident is the MBA Directors' attempts to persuade students that the programme they receive is the one they should expect. Therefore, rather than being aware of student expectations, they seek to shape them, and in this way close the gap, not by responding to customer needs but by creating expectations in line with the service they provide. We have also seen evidence that Directors initially raise expectations in the pre-purchase stage, and then seek to lower them during inductions, and at other stages throughout the course.

Formal student quality evaluation programmes attempt to address the issue of knowing what students liked, rather than what they expected, although it is clear from the quality literature in Chapter 3 that these two are connected. If the results of such an 'after the fact' approach is systematically fed into the programme at the next stage of the academic cycle it might be construed as a component of building up a picture of expectations in the long term but the evidence is that this is not the case. A number of reasons can be put forward to explain this.

The evaluations students make are often not regarded by MBA Directors as being representative of all the MBA students undertaking the programme because of the manner in which the feedback is collected, or because of the manner in which they have been completed by the students. In this context

remarks were made by Directors as to lack of seriousness that some students portrayed with regard to the feedback process.

The feedback may be seen by MBA Directors as representative of a particular individual or group situation, but may not be regarded by them as applicable to future groups of students or situations. MBA Directors did characterise some quality issues or problems in terms of, 'personality clashes' or, 'particularly difficult students', rather than in terms of signifying more fundamental quality concerns.

Even if MBA Directors did seek to use student feedback in a formative way, it is clear that it may not be possible to relate the student feedback provided to student expectations and therefore not possible to construct a set of expectations from the remarks being made. For example, student feedback regarding a particular class may be completely contradictory, with some students feeling that the tutor 'went too fast' while others indicate that they 'went too slow'.

There may be no organisational system or structure available that enables the student feedback that has been obtained to be translated into the necessary changes in the way the programme is devised and/or delivered to meet the expectations. Even if such systems or structures do exist, the organisational culture may inhibit their effective operation. This is particularly evident when MBA Directors feel reluctant to 'interfere' in areas associated with academic independence.

As MBA programmes are by their very nature cyclical and one year's intake is unlikely to have much contact with another, (even on two-year part-time courses), MBA Directors can commence each academic year without reference to previous year's problems if they wish. There are few repeat purchasers who might otherwise be able to focus upon failures to align output with expectations and prospective and even practising students do

not have access to previous written student feedback or the minutes of relevant meetings or committees as a matter of course.

Given the nature of this finding, plus the comments previously made above, it is clear that the use of the notion of the gap between provider perceptions of customer expectations and the expected service as a means of understanding and improving quality within the field of the MBA does have some serious problems and deficiencies.

#### **6.2.3.2 GAP 2: NOT SELECTING THE APPROPRIATE STUDENT-DRIVEN STANDARDS**

The professional educationalist paradigm discussed above may also lead to a reluctance to deliver to student wants (selecting appropriate student-driven standards) if such standards are regarded as in some way inappropriate by the Director. An obvious example of this type of situation can be seen with the issue of 'spoon-feeding' the students. The Director's rationale that learning can be a painful process, at times, acts as a means of subordinating student-driven standards, often characterised as wanting an 'easy life', for producer-driven standards which the producer believes will benefit the student in the long term.

It was also felt by Directors that it was not always possible to set meaningful standards (student driven or otherwise) with regard to many important areas of educational provision, particularly in terms of the classroom, and non-classroom, related 'moments of truth'. There was little evidence of the setting of quality service goals with regard to areas such as classroom presentation and levels of preparation, or in terms of how business school staff should relate to students outside the classroom. Such an approach is likely to be deemed as totally inappropriate within the setting of higher education, while being an essential part of staff training in areas such as hospitality management.

Where attempts were made to set common standards, the focus tended to be more in terms of the development of student workbooks, overhead transparencies and other tangible items. One reason for this emphasis is quite simply that it is a quality process that is easier to implement and monitor.

#### **6.2.3.3 GAP 3: NOT DELIVERING TO APPROPRIATE STUDENT-DRIVEN STANDARDS**

A major source of dissatisfaction among students was the variable quality of the programme teaching. The management response to this was to develop a strategy based on empathy, rather than proactive quality control and assurance. Believing they lack the power to ensure quality conformance, a strategy of sympathy and compensating in other areas of provision was used as a means of trying to overcome such difficulties.

Given that students 'come and go' but colleagues, sometimes in senior positions to the MBA Director within the wider school structure, need to be dealt with on an ongoing basis, it is tempting for them to take the line of least resistance. This involves placating the dissatisfied student without dealing with the underlying cause of the problem and hoping that next time it will not recur.

This type of policy can also be seen to be operating in some areas of hospitality management. For example, some tour operators will repeatedly make use of hotel accommodation that they know will cause customer dissatisfaction. They are prepared to endure the customer criticism and provide customer compensation because they calculate that ultimately relatively few customers will seek compensation and that there will always be new customers in the next cycle.

#### **6.2.3.4. GAP 4: NOT MATCHING PROGRAMME PERFORMANCE TO PROGRAMME QUALITY PROMISES**

There is no evidence to suggest that MBA providers failed to deliver the promises made to students in prospectuses and other promotional activity with regard to curriculum content or class contact time (which could be regarded as basic quality promises of the product-based type). However, as has been shown, the students also often have a 'general feel' as to the overall quality of the institution without having a clear and specific understanding of what this will mean.

There is some evidence to suggest that the practising students had made a number of quality related assumptions such as the quality of IT resources, access to library facilities or peer group interaction, and the expectations that derived from these assumptions were often not fully met during the programme. Even though business schools may not have made explicit quality promises regarding these aspects of the programme, some practising students felt that they were implied within the schools promotional literature or at the interview stage.

As we have seen, if failure to live up to implied quality promises did cause dissatisfaction MBA Directors would, at times, try to compensate the students in other areas or shift the blame for such failures to others such as the wider school or university, students in general or the individual dissatisfied students themselves.

### **6.3 CONCLUSIONS**

A major aim of the initial MBA Director interviews was to establish the way in which MBA Directors conceptualised quality in relation to the programme for which they were responsible and to try to determine whether the quality perspectives being used by them could be described as predominantly internally- or externally-focused. Such a distinction was made by Garvin, (1988), and has previously been discussed in Chapter 3.

The starting point for this part of the investigation was the question, 'With regard to the MBA programme for which you are responsible, how do you define quality?' The response to this question did not necessarily require a formal definition, although these were sometimes provided, but rather was intended to generate a broader discussion in terms of the perspective being taken. The clear result was to show that MBA Directors initially perceived quality in terms of student satisfaction, that is, from the basic premise that the student was the prime arbiter of quality. However, such an assertion was almost always immediately qualified in a variety of producer-led ways.

For example, the students were often asked to comment on quality issues using a variety of formal and informal methods. However, such student satisfaction surveys were almost always based upon those quality issues generated by the provider. Comments made by students regarding other areas of programme quality that fell outside the prescribed agenda would often be deemed inappropriate. The fact that individuals were almost always self-financed or partly financed by their organisations meant that the MBA Director often felt obliged to champion the use of what was regarded as a commercial quality perspective, but then qualified this with a paternalistic, public service style overlay. The constant contradictions and inconsistencies between the espoused aim of student satisfaction and the ability and willingness to deliver to such a concept can be seen to be a major theme of the research findings.

It is clear from the results of the primary research that a key barrier to the improvement of MBA programme quality is the problem that MBA Directors have in terms of defining and operationalising the notion of educational quality in terms of student satisfaction. This finding confirms similar studies that have taken place in various areas of the commercial services (Vandemerwe and Lovelock, 1994; Wright, 1995). As a result of this, MBA Directors may find it difficult to develop valid measures of quality, a phenomenon also found in research undertaken within the commercial sector (Schneider and Bowen, 1995).



There is some evidence to suggest that the 'problem' of defining and operationalising quality may actually be a situation that suits the objectives of the Directors interviewed. By not operating clear quality measurement criteria, MBA Directors are able to shift the quality focus when it is politically desirable to do so.

Edvardsson et al, (1997) and Morrison, (1997) among many others emphasise the key role of employees in delivering high levels of service quality, a fact borne out by the results of the practising students' CIT investigation which placed a very high priority on satisfactory interaction between business school staff (particularly teaching staff) and themselves.

Despite a considerable and growing literature on the subject of how to manage the human element to improve quality, (Lewis and Gabrielsen, 1998; Heskett et al, 1994), little serious attempt seems to have been made to adopt systematic programmes of staff training and development in this area. In fact, there seems to be a growing tendency to limit the scope of the teacher to interact through a process of proceduralisation and codification of the teaching process.

These procedures may be implemented in the name of the students but there is little evidence to suggest that they originate from them or that they play any part in their on-going implementation. Rather, they can be viewed as another useful method of increasing MBA Director power and influence at the expense of the teaching staff.

#### **6.4 ISSUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Given the findings presented in Chapter 5 and the conclusions drawn from them and set out above, three areas for further research are now suggested. The areas for research relate to the major 'quality problems' identified as a result of this research project and are linked to three existing frameworks within which the research might be set.

1. The usefulness of a Strategic Quality Management (SQM) framework should be investigated with the aim of relating the framework to the MBA education process. This might enable the possible establishment of an accepted quality management procedure that would give greater confidence that minimum quality process standards were being employed.
2. Research should be undertaken into the feasibility of establishing an accepted MBA curriculum as a means of establishing the necessary 'breadth' of programme. This would be linked to the 'depth' of the programmes through a series of MBA graduate competencies and agreed assessment criteria.
3. The work being undertaken in the field of Best Value in public services should be investigated in order to assess 'best value's' viability in terms of its application to MBA programmes. The main purpose of research in this area would be to seek to establish a means by which all providers could 'identify and move towards the standards reached by the best providers' (Johnson and Scholes, 2002, p. 201). The aim here would be to introduce the 'costing' of programmes as an element linking the price of an MBA programme to quality and value for money.

These three areas of possible research are developed in greater detail below and related specifically to the quality problems identified in the research project.

#### **6.4.1 STRATEGIC QUALITY MANAGEMENT (SQM)**

The notion of Strategic Quality Management within education is not new.

SQM is defined by the Training Education and Enterprise Directorate (TEED)

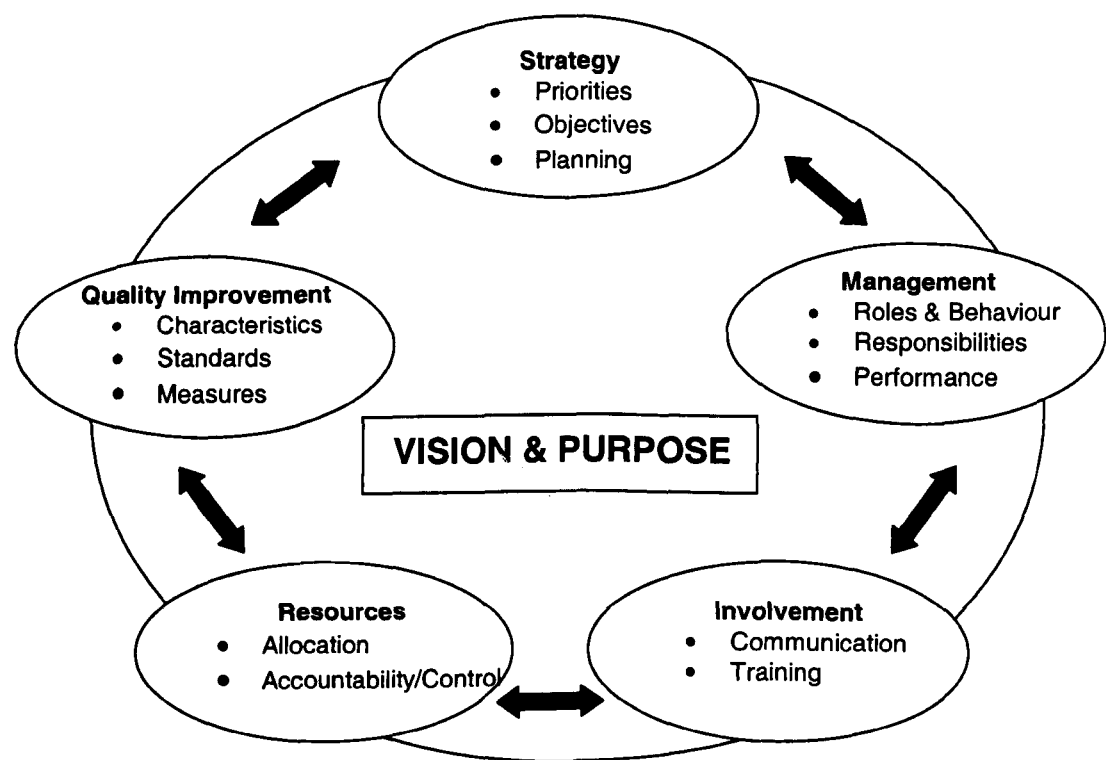
as,

the focused effort of everyone in the college, teacher, support staff, manager, governor, to place at the centre of their individual and corporate concerns the needs and requirements of the learner (Innis and Miller, 1992, p9)

and can be seen as a means by which the problematic nature of ‘customer (student) satisfaction’ as a method of measuring quality with the educational setting can be addressed.

Figure 6.2 indicates the ‘key linked processes’ that need to be adopted in order to make SQM a reality.

**Figure 6.2 Strategic Quality Management**  
(Adapted form Innis and Miller 1992)



The rationale for suggesting further research in this area is that it might be able to provide a framework for more systematic investigation of the quality management inconsistencies identified in these research findings.

The exploratory nature of this research project identified various quality problems associated with delivering MBA programmes. In this section and the two that follow these quality problems are set within the context of

established quality assurance processes that are not traditionally associated with MBA education.

The questions asked relating to the SQM model shown above could be as follows'

**Vision:** Does the MBA programme explicitly express a view that puts the student at the centre of the programme concerns?

**Strategy:** Can a set of programme priorities be identified that ensures that this student orientation will be achieved in a systematic manner?

**Quality:** Do clear programme statements exist, identified as characteristics and standards, which will allow students to understand what undertaking an MBA means in practice?

**Management:** Is the programme managed in such a manner as to ensure that these standards of performance are achieved and improved upon?

**Involvement:** Do all the staff involved with the delivery of the MBA both understand and commit themselves to the vision and strategy?

**Resources:** Are the resources available to the MBA both adequate and configured in a manner that will allow for the achievement of the stated vision and strategy?

The nature of the answers to the above questions would help to shed increased light on the manner in which MBA Directors organise, allocate and control resources in line with their strategy for delivering quality. If such a framework were generally accepted as relevant to the production of high quality MBA programmes it might also form the basis for programme development and self-analysis. It would also enable programme

benchmarking and comparative studies by providing criteria through which comparisons could be made.

#### **6.4.2 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN MBA CURRICULUM**

The second area of suggested further research focuses upon the content of the MBA curriculum, both in terms of content breadth and content depth. The research undertaken within this study indicates that no generally agreed MBA content exists but that in practice a core of subjects can be detected, and was detected by prospective students. Content analysis of the readily available MBA prospectuses should reveal to what extent a 'core' can be identified. These could then be set against the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) 2001 'Subject Benchmarks for Masters Awards in Business and Management' (see Appendix A to C) and gaps in the breadth of provision could be assessed.

However, further investigation would then be needed in order to assess to what extent the formal statements with regard to MBA content were being translated into the teaching and learning process at individual programme level. It would then be possible to establish whether gaps existed between what was being promised and what was actually being delivered. This would also help to address the issue of unacceptable overlap identified by practising students.

From here, the research could then be extended to a more detailed analysis of specific MBA programme's learning outcomes, assessment criteria and methods of assessment in order to establish if the depth of study is likely to deliver outcomes in line with the QAA's 'Standards of Achievement' on graduation as well as allowing for comparative study.

Such research might later form the basis of longitudinal research studies that could then focus upon the QAA's standards of achievement, 'once in professional practice', as a means of establishing the relevance of such standards of achievement to the world of work.

The nature of the MBA curriculum could also be set against the quality of MBA student intake. This would allow for the relevance of the curriculum to be assessed in terms of the needs and ability of the students themselves.

#### **6.4.3 MBA BEST VALUE**

The third framework for further research seeks to tackle the issue of relating the price of any specific MBA programme to the value for money that programme represents, value having been shown to be a quality perspective used by both providers and prospective consumers. The basic principle that lies behind the 'best value approach' is that it raises the visibility of performance standards to users and in doing so guides organisations towards the standards reached by the best providers.

Best Value can be defined as,

a duty to deliver services to clear standards-covering both costs and quality- by the most effective, economic and efficient means available (Leigh et al 1999, p1)

The best value approach is now an accepted part of the way in which local authorities, health authorities, the fire service and police forces review and develop their services (Filkin 1999). Its relevance to the provision of MBA education might well be worth exploring, as many of the issues raised in this research are broadly similar to those faced by the providers of these public services. The objective of Best Value is to promote and ensure better quality services in local government and to develop services that are responsive to the needs of stakeholders. It also provides a mechanism for benchmarking both the quality of output and the cost of services by encouraging transparency and balancing the quality of provision with the cost of provision.

In the context of this research project it is evident that relative quality is an issue for both providers and consumers, but that prospective consumers in

particular were not able to assess the degree to which higher programme prices reflected genuine differences in quality driven costs. The Best Value approach is by no means without its critics, (Parker 2001) and there is evidence of variable results with regard to its application, (Filkin 1999). However in these respects Best Value is no different to other quality related initiatives such as Total Quality Management (TQM).

The evidence of this research project suggests that a number of issues highlighted within the Best Value approach might be of relevance to MBA quality debate, and might provide a useful framework for further research. These are;

1. The linkages between an institution's stated mission and vision and, the quality of service the institution provides.
2. The mechanisms by which the institution seeks to turn its vision into reality.
3. The manner in which institutions set and measure their performance standards.
- 4, The degree to which stakeholders have an input into the process of service development and delivery.
5. Service performance review procedures.
6. Internal management processes.
7. Performance data collection procedures and measurement procedures.

At the present time, it can be seen that an ad hoc approach is often taken towards the improvement and maintenance of MBA quality. Best Value,

along with SQM and the development of an MBA curriculum represent a variety of ways of establishing a set of frameworks that might help to reduce some of the inconsistencies that have been identified within this research. Their adoption could also enable greater transparency both within and between MBA programmes and in doing so reduce the use of quality as a political lever.



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## **Appendix A:**

### **QAA Masters Quality Benchmark Statements; Skills**

Graduates are expected to be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive and intellectual skills together with techniques specific to business and management. They should also demonstrate relevant personal and interpersonal skills. These include:

- a) **critical thinking and creativity:** managing creative processes in self and others; organising thoughts, analysis, synthesis, critical appraisal. This includes the capability to identify assumptions, evaluate statements in terms of evidence, detect false logic or reasoning, identify implicit values, define terms adequately and generalise appropriately.
- b) **problem solving and decision making:** establishing criteria, using appropriate decision techniques including identifying, formulating and solving business problems; the ability to create, identify and evaluate options; the ability to implement and review decisions
- c) **information and knowledge:** scanning and organising data, abstracting meaning from information and sharing knowledge.
- d) **numeracy and quantitative skills** including the use of models of business situations; qualitative research skills.
- e) **effective use of Communication and Information Technology (CIT);**
- f) **two-way communication:** listening, negotiating and persuading or influencing others; oral and written communication, using a range of media, including the preparation of business reports.
- g) **personal effectiveness:** self-awareness and self-management; time management; sensitivity to diversity in people and different situations; the ability to continue learning.
- h) **effective performance within a team environment** and the ability to recognise and utilise individuals' contributions in group processes; team selection, delegation, development and management
- i) **leadership and performance management:** selecting appropriate leadership style for situations; setting targets, motivating, monitoring performance, coaching and mentoring, continuous improvement.

- j) ethics and value management: recognising ethical situations, applying ethical and organisational values to situations and choices
- k) ability to conduct research into business and management issues.
- l) learning through reflection on practice and experience.



## **Appendix B:**

### **QAA Masters Quality Benchmark Statements; Knowledge and Understanding.**

Graduates should be able to collect relevant information across a range of areas pertaining to a current situation, analyse that information and synthesise it into an appropriate form in order to evaluate decision alternatives. Within the broad framework of organisations, their external context and management, it is therefore expected that graduates will gain knowledge and develop understanding in the following areas:

- a) the impact of contextual forces on organisations including legal systems; ethical, economic, environmental, social and technological change issues; international developments; corporate governance
- b) markets and customers: the development and operation of markets for resources, goods and services; expectations of customers and equivalent stakeholders, service and orientation
- c) the concepts, processes and institutions in the production and marketing of goods and/or services; the management of resources and operations
- d) the financing of the business enterprise or other forms of organisations: sources, uses and management of finance; use of accounting for managerial and financial reporting applications
- e) the management and development of people within organisations: organisational theory, behaviour, industrial/employee relations, HRM, change management
- f) the uses and limitations of a range of research methods/techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, and an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses for providing information and evaluating options in an uncertain organisational environment
- g) the development, management and exploitation of information systems and their impact on organisations
- h) the use of relevant communication and information technologies for application in business and management within a global knowledge based economy
- i) the development of appropriate business policies and strategies within a changing context to meet stakeholder interests

- j) a range of contemporary and pervasive issues which may change over time. Illustrative examples may include innovation, creativity and enterprise; e-commerce, knowledge management; sustainability, business ethics, values and norms; globalisation.

## **Appendix C:**

### **Masters Quality Benchmark Statements; Standards of Achievement**

Masters degrees in the business and management field are awarded to students who have demonstrated during their programme:

- a) a systematic understanding of relevant knowledge about organisations, their external context and how they are managed
- b) application of relevant knowledge to a range of complex situations taking account of its relationship and interaction with other areas of the business or organisation
- c) a critical awareness of current issues in business and management which is informed by leading edge research and practice in the field
- d) an understanding of appropriate techniques sufficient to allow detailed investigation into relevant business and management issues
- e) creativity in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to develop and interpret knowledge in business and management
- f) ability to acquire and analyse data and information, to evaluate their relevance and validity, and to synthesise a range of information in the context of new situations
- g) conceptual understanding that enables the student to: evaluate the rigour and validity of published research and assess its relevance to new situations and extrapolate from existing research and scholarship to identify new or revised approaches to practice.
- h) ability to conduct research into business and management issues that requires familiarity with a range of business data, research sources and appropriate methodologies, and for such to inform the overall learning process
- i) ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing, using a range of media.

Once they are in professional practice, Masters graduates should be able to:

- j) consistently apply their knowledge and area specific and wider intellectual skills

- k) deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to a range of audiences
- l) be pro-active in recognising the need for change and have the ability to manage change
- m) be adaptable, and show originality, insight, and critical and reflective abilities which can all be brought to bear upon problem situations
- n) make decisions in complex and unpredictable situations
- o) evaluate and integrate theory and practice in a wide range of situations
- p) operate effectively in a variety of team roles and take leadership roles where appropriate
- r) be self-directed and able to act autonomously in planning and implementing projects at professional levels
- s) take responsibility for continuing to develop their own knowledge and skills.

## **Appendix D:**

### **The Malcolm Baldrige Awards Criteria**

#### **Introduction.**

The principle aim of the Baldrige award is to increase awareness and understanding of the importance of quality as a form of competitive advantage within both the private and public sectors. Awards are made to organisations in three different categories, they are;

Those organisations that are primarily involved in the manufacturing process (based on percentage of total sales)

Those organisations that primarily provide services (again based on percentage of total sales).

Small businesses. These are defined as those organisations which are independently owned and employ less than 500 people.

As well as being the basis for bestowing the award, the Baldrige award criteria are intended to;

Improve organisational practice and performance and in doing so act as a means of enhancing organisational capability.

Facilitate communication and the sharing of quality best practice both within organisations and among organisations, and, as a result, raise awareness of key quality performance requirements.

Provide a framework through which managers can better carry out their quality management function in terms of quality planning, control, assessment and training.

Enable organisations to provide better quality and value for their existing and potential customers.

## **The Criteria.**

### **Senior Executive Leadership.**

This criteria focuses upon the manner in which an organisation's senior management develop and implement quality strategy and create organisational systems and structures to support the strategy. The quality strategy needs to be able to accommodate the legitimate interests and needs of a variety of relevant stakeholders rather than simply focusing upon one group at the expense or to the exclusion of others.

### **Information and Analysis**

The availability of high quality information is recognised as a key component of the quality improvement process. The information should be of both a quality and quantity that supports the organisation's quality strategy and facilitates its effective implementation. The information needs to both accurate, relevant and timely.

### **Strategic Quality Planning.**

This criteria focuses upon the way in which the organisation can translate its' quality strategy into workable and integrated business plans. At the heart of the planning process should be the recognition of the importance of the linkages between an organisational wide customer centred focus and the organisation's operational performance.

### **Human Resource Development and Management.**

A high performance work place is an essential element with regard to the delivery of high quality goods and services. Human resource management policies and practices are examined in order to evaluate their degree of alignment with the prevailing quality strategy and the positive impact they have on the delivery of the strategy

### **Management of Process Quality**

A central requirement of those organisations that deliver high quality is that they operate effective quality processes. This entails the development of processes that are well designed, prevention oriented, linked to suppliers

and based on the principle of continuous improvement. The organisation's supply chain and the entire organisational transformation process needs to be included within the scope of the quality processes being developed.

### **Quality and Operational Results**

The quality process improvement techniques developed and implemented by the organisation need to be translated into positive tangible outcomes. Therefore, the results of the organisational efforts need to be measurable and measured in order to justify their positive impact on organisational performance. The quality and operational results criteria recognises that quality process improvement is not an end in itself.

### **Customer Focus and Customer Satisfaction.**

It is acknowledged that there is a variety of ways in which the quality of goods and services can be both conceptualised and measured. The customer focus criteria emphasises the central importance of the customer's quality perspective. It stresses the importance of the collection and dissemination of information regarding the market place, including customer expectations, perceptions and behaviour. This information needs to form the basis of the organisation's quality priorities.

## **Appendix E:**

### **Critical Incident Technique Pilot Project**

The pilot critical incident technique (CIT) interviews took place in order to provide insights into the potential problems associated with the practical implementation of the technique. A decision was taken not to make use of MBA students as respondents but rather to find a group of individuals with broadly similar educational backgrounds. This decision was taken because the focus of the pilot was the use of the technique irrespective of the context rather than the information gained from its use. Access was gained to students undertaking a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) at a UK university who had recently undertaken their main teaching practice. They were given the task to,

Describe in detail the single incident on your teaching practice that caused you the most difficulty.

The two main aims of the question were to assess,

1. The degree to which the information gained would be able to be analysed.
2. To what extent the critical incident technique used would yield information that might be 'surprising' to the course tutors.

The issue of 'tutor surprise' is an important one because the research technique is intended to focus upon those issues of importance to the respondents not to those of the interviewer, who might, using a different technique, suggest categories of issues for the interviewees to respond to. It was felt that responses that were surprising to the tutors, who work most closely with the students on teaching practice, this would be evidence of the value of the technique.

The pilot project provided valuable lessons with regard to the issue of ease of analysis. In order not to unduly influence the respondents or to allow the students to influence each other the students were given the response sheet



with a brief oral description of what they were required to do. They were allowed to ask questions at that point but from then on were not allowed to communicate with the interviewer or other respondents.

The responses that resulted fell into two distinct categories. There were those who had provided a detailed account of a single incident in the form expected. A single incident had been selected and the 'history' of the incident described from its beginning until its resolution, or non resolution. Throughout the incident the respondent had made comments about their feelings towards those involved and provided insights as to their motivation and the motivations they ascribed to others. They had also explained why the incident was seen as important and why it had qualified as the incident that had caused 'the most difficulty'.

This group of responses was 'usable' from the point of view of analysis and formed the basis of a published article entitled 'When the trivial becomes confrontational' (1992). The responses were also useful as they contained elements of surprise for the programme tutors who had expected issues such as widespread class disruption, or aggressive pupil/teacher confrontation to form the basis of most difficult incidents for the trainee teachers rather than the relatively seemingly 'trivial' incidents that were actually identified. These seemingly trivial incidents often included students whose disruptive action was very unexpected, because of their previous very good behaviour, or because the behaviour took the form of 'low level' non cooperation, rather than hostile or aggressive confrontation. While the PGCE students had generated ways of dealing with 'persistent offenders' or aggressive confrontations, situations falling outside that which was expected proved to be significantly more problematic for them.

In conversations with the tutors it became clear that they had focused their teaching practice preparation with possible large scale disruption in mind and had ignored the 'quieter', less obvious incidents. As a consequence of the findings of the pilot CIT interviews course tutors discussed the need for

greater 'minor incident' preparation with the PGCE students who confirmed that such a need existed.

The second, smaller group of responses were much less useful in terms of their usability. They proved very difficult to analyse and it was not possible to draw meaningful conclusions from them. There were a number of reasons for this. Some respondents had focused upon a single incident in a very factual manner. They had described the incident in some detail but had not made any comment regarding issues such as why it was regarded as difficult, the possible motivation of the individuals involved etc. Little information was provided in terms of the background to the incident or to the events that took place after the incident.

As the interviewer, it became clear that I had a preconceived notion of what 'describe in detail' meant and that, when the same perspective was shared by the respondent, analysis could take place. When the interviewer's perspective was not shared by the respondent, no mechanism had been put in place to encourage a more detailed response. As a result the manner in which the main CIT research was conducted was modified and can be seen in chapters 4 and 5.